The British Museum

Zār: Spirit Possession and Resistance in Nubia

Object in Focus Exhibition
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Zār: Spirit Possession and Resistance in Nubia.

Zār is a healing practice that has been recorded throughout north-east Africa since the 1800s. It is used to cure physical or emotional illnesses among women possessed by spirits. The term refers to both the ceremony itself and the harmful spirits it seeks to appease. Although the musicians accompanying the ceremony are men, Zār is led and attended by women. Zār believers are mainly women of low social status or descendants of enslaved people.

The objects attached to the lyre, which would have been used in Zār ceremonies, show its long usage. They are offerings to either the spirits or the musicians in the performance, which was characterized by singing, clapping, chanting and feasting.

The Zār ceremony is rooted in pre-Islamic life in Africa. However, during the 1800s Zār practices accommodated Islamic tradition, including avoiding the ceremony during the holy month of Ramadan.

In the patriarchal society that dominates this region, Zār is a form of resistance, allowing possessed women who take part in the ceremony to express themselves publicly and transgress expectations.

An artistic illustration of a Zār Ceremony by Pinky ITP 2024

Lower Nubia (modern Egypt). Photo by Gustavo Camps

Zār Lyre
1800s
Nubian Region

This Lyre (known as a kissar or tanbura) is a seven-stringed musical instrument with a circular-shaped resonator covered in animal skin. Played in a spiritual healing ceremony known as Zar, it is richly decorated with cowrie shells, coloured beads, amulets and coins (mostly from Cairo but also Great Britain, Yemen and Sumatra), reflecting the region's importance in

International trade and pilgrimage networks.

Donated by Thomas Lea Southgate
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