M.Sc. Social Anthropology

2009-2010

Transcending the Physical and Social Body:

A reevaluation of the *zār* using a quaternary model of androgyny

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Word Count

9,916

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Abstract

The female shamanic practitioner is one of exceptional liminality in that she is often both physically and socially barren, a gender liminal and socially excluded actor in her society. In Third World contexts, and especially Hofriyat, gender as a socially defined category is often based on notions of fertility, whereby the infertile woman is rendered a physically and socially androgynous character. She looks to the *zār* ceremony to effect a cure, which involves possession by co-gendered spirits, often leading to cross-gender behavior and dress within the ritual context. In deliberation of Boddy's (1989) ethnography, I contend that a historical and spatial investigation of female practitioners reveals a distillation of four general characteristics that typify the ritual woman: physical androgyny (infertility), social androgyny (gender liminality and anti-sociality), spiritual androgyny (possession by co-gendered spirits), and ritual androgyny (cross-gender behavior and dress). The manifestations of androgyny are often transitory for attendees, but in the case of the *zār* practitioner (*shaykha*), it is permanent and can result in a change of social gender status. This quaternary model posits androgyny as an optic through which to view and analyze the ritual women of the *zār*; a purposeful pursuit as Boddy entirely disregards shamanic theories paralleling the co-gendered nature of the *zār*, emboldening narratives that endeavor to construct a distinction between shamanism and spirit possession.

1. Introduction

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre insists that the body equates to the *self*, "the body is what I immediately am … I am my body," whereas Descarte claims it is "the mind by which I am what I am" (Synott 1992:80, 110). In line with Levi-Strauss and Douglas, Alfred Kinsey contends that it is the human mind, not nature, which categorizes (Herdt 1994:15). Gender is one of such authoritative constructions, and Descartes could therefore be read as "I am a woman [or a man]; therefore I am" (Ramet 1996a:xii). Yet the classification of gender manifests both in the mind and society, for "the social body constrains the way the physical body is perceived" (Douglas 1996[1970]:69). In line with Sartre, when society determines one's being, it can conversely effect tumult into nothingness. It is only when one transcends these notions of the physical and social body that selfhood and existence will be sustained.

This paper began as an exploration of gender in relation to shamanic practice, a subject matter that generally rouses little anthropological interest (Perruchon 2003:28). Where the study of "gender transgressive" behavior (Blackwood 2005) in male shamans has been broadly examined, little attention has been paid to gender bending in female practitioners[1] (Tedlock 2005:252; Kharitonova 2004:259). This investigatory exclusion may be inadvertant and attributed to notions perpetuated within the field of post-Eliade anthropology; namely, the gender-delineation of spiritual proclivities in the form of the unequivocal and universal *male* shaman versus the passive *female* spirit-possessed victim (Atkinson 1992:317-9; Tedlock 2005:63-75). In considertation of this epistemological and gendered incongruity, I chose to employ an alternative reading or direction of thought (Ricoer 1976) in appraisal of Janice Boddy's (1989) *Wombs and Alien Spirits*. In exploration of the *zār* ceremony in the village of Hofriyat, the central subject of the book, my aim is to answer the question: Can the *zār* be interpreted based on extant theories surrounding the co-gendered nature of shamanism? Where Boddy theorizes that the cultural over-construction of gender in Hofriyat, specifically compulsory gender complementarity, leads women to claim they are possessed, she overlooks many symbolic elements that are central to the co-gendered and gender transgressive nature of spiritual practice. I believe this perspective is possible due to theoretical insight developed after the publication of Boddy's work, such as Bacigalupo (2007), Blackwood (2005), and Balzer (2003), who stress the importance of co-gendered divinities in shamanic cosmology and the social gender fluidity that results. Thus, in reading Boddy's work, I took special notice of areas she neglected in her investigation, such as the co-gendered central *zār* spirit, the cross-dressing that is tantamount to the *zār*, and the gender transgressive attributes of the *zār* practitioners.

[1] Exceptions include Bacigalupo (2007), Blackwood (2005), Poole (1981), Tedlock (2005), and Whitehead (1981).

Further, I believe that Boddy inherently limits the encompassment of her argument in the importance she places on intersex gender complementarity rather than notions of gender developed after her work's publication, such as Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performance. In these regards, I believe a more modern and holistic reading of *Wombs and Alien Spirits* is a beneficial and purposeful quest given that Boddy's (1989) ethnography has been on the shelves for two decades with little critical reevaluation. More than serving to augment Boddy's theory, I believe this investigation can contribute to new developments in the study of spirit possession in the manner of recently released titles such as *Possession and Trance: New Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (2010). Correspondingly, the academic pursuit of anthropological research related to spirit possession need not be relegated to incipience or obsolescense, as belief in spirit possession is shown to be on the rise globally (Behrend and Luig 1999).

Inspired by Besnier's statement that "[gender] liminal women embody a hidden discourse … [though] they are even more liminal than their male counterparts … [yet] no analysis of the phenomenon has been conducted" (1994:288), I set out to justify the lacuna of this "ethnographic vacuum" (1994:288) of research related to female gender liminality. In developing a methodology by which to do so, I was inspired by ethnographies of fertility, transgenderism, and ritual and secular gender transgression in female shamanic practitioners, such as Poole (1981), Rasmussen (1987), and Bacigalupo's (2007) analysis of ritual women. I observed a historical and regional recurrence of the theme of androgyny as both perplexing and compelling, yet coherently applicable in relation to these topics. Though like the academic disdain toward research of gender liminal female shamans, the theme of androgyny has been condemned to obscurity after Freud, as the frontrunner of the burgeoning intellectual field of sexuality, had the "inability to think androgyny through scientifically and objectively whenever he encountered it … notably in the famous case of demon possession (d'Anglure 2003:239). Thus, I feel it is especially fruitful to explore these two unfoundedly disregarded scientific pursuits by applying a Ricourian "reading" of androgyny to the case study of *zār* spirit possession. To the best of my knowledge, no prior analysis has endeavored to relate the androgynous, co-gendered nature of shamanism to a spirit possession cult.

In an effort to develop a meaningful approach through which to interpret the case of *zār* possession, I considered literature related to fertility, gendered sociality, and spirituality through the lens of androgyny. I chose to "read" androgyny as a liminal state, either occurring naturally in the life course (such as before circumcision or after menopause) or due to an interrupted life course (such as the case of untimely infertility). Androgyny as a liminal state is the psychological, spiritual, and physical

manifestation of the unification of conceptual duality but at the same time the absence of dichotomization. In the words of Turner, this is the "peculiar unity of the liminal: that which is neither this nor that, and yet is both" (1987:9). Using androgyny as an apical theme, I isolated relevant key characteristics that independently congealed in a reading of the trans-regional ethnographies of female spiritual practitioners in deliberation of Boddy's (1989) work. I allege four premises of androgyny to be characteristic of the female ritual woman in what I have opted to entitle the "quaternary model of androgyny." The facets of this model include physical androgyny (infertility), social androgyny (gender liminality and anti-sociality[2]), spiritual androgyny (co-gendered spirit partners), and ritual androgyny (cross-gender dress and behavior). As will be detailed in a review of the literature, it is apparent that many ritual women are post-menopausal, such as the *waneng aiyem ser* (Poole 1981) and the Kel Ewey Taureg woman (Rasmussen 1987); hermaphroditic, such as can be the case with the female *berdache* (Whitehead 1981), the male *basir* (Ripinsky-Naxon 1997), and the male-to-female Hijra (Nanda 1994); gender liminal, such as the female Chuckee shaman (Kharitonova 2004); socially liminal, akin to the Mapuche female *machi* (Bacigalupo 2007); that they worship co-gendered, androgynous, or bisexual divinities (extant universally in these instances); and that they engage in ceremonial cross-gender behavior and dress, and often undertake permanent or semi-permanent gender reversal (also documented in all above examples).

Like the shaman, I believe the infertile Hofriyat woman is a gender liminal and anti-social actor, who is characterized by inclinations of co-gendered spirit worship and cross-gendered ritual participation. Thus, the four components of this model are interrelated and discriminately selected; a purposeful construction of the infertile woman as a liminal character is necessary to fit with the reticular nature of social liminality and spirit possession, since "ghostly attack is closely associated with liminal states and times" (Parry 1994:232), while the "infertility syndrome" often underlies the shamanistic avocation of women in spirit possession cults (Lewis 2003[1971]:85). As will be elaborated in Chapter 2, the majority of the *zār* participants are infertile (physically androgynous) who, due to Hofriyat definitions of gender as based on fertility, are deemed culturally genderless and anti-social (socially androgynous). Social and gender liminality are highly characteristic of the shamanic practitioner, who, guided by a co-gendered spirit, often transgresses norms of gender in his or her society. Thus, in Chapter 3, I demonstrate the inherent centrality of co-gendered spirits in rituals that invoke cross-gendered behavior and dress, which is likewise characteristic of the *zār*. In Chapter 4, I show that within

[2] I use this term to reflect Halliday's (1976) notion of "anti-society;" see also Boddy (1989:157).

the environment of the *zār*, the infertile gender liminal woman becomes possessed by co-gendered *zār* spirits, leading to implications of gender transgression in both ritual and secular contexts. These concepts will be conveyed through anecdotal support by profiling the lives of the *waneng aiyem ser* in review of the literature (Chapters 2 and 3) and the Hofriyat woman, Umselima, in the case study (Chapter 4).

2. Androgyny *of* body: Secular identity

In this section, I will assess ethnographies of the physical body (fertility) as well as the social body (the cultural construction of gender), for according to Douglas, "the social body constrains the way the physical body is perceived" (1996 [1970]:69). Section 2.1 develops a notion of "physical androgyny," meaning infertility as a culturally defined category that does not necessarily equate to reproductive barrenness. In Section 2.2, I intend to show that in many societies gender is unconditionally a derivative of social construction and is, resultantly, a retractable privilege. In doing so, I will provide ethnographic basis for the case study in Chapter 4, to show that the infertile Hofriyat woman suffers rescindment of her cultural gender, whereby she is transmogrified into a liminal character who is apt to yield to spiritual and ritual inclinations.

2.1 Physical androgyny: The infertile woman

Like Plato, who believed that the first humans were androgynes (Turner 1987:8; Weil 1992:21)[3], Cucchiari (1981) argues for the existence of an archaic "pre-gender system." In this system, he contends that gender is a social construction, and a modern one at that (cf. Laqueur 1990), and as an institution serves as "one of the most effective means of social control" (MacKenzie 1994:1; see also Green 2001). The social construction of gender is both taught and performed while deeply enmeshed in power relations (Butler 1990). Sociality and gender are intimately related and, as I intend to demonstrate, the "social body" both effects and affects the perception of the physical body (Douglas 1996[1970]), specifically in societies in which the "reproductive paradigm" (Herdt 1994:25) is employed as the sole model of gender designation.

Globally, the interpretations of fertility and infertility are highly varied (van Balen & Inhorn 2002:9) and tend to be highly context specific (Leonard 2002:201). "Indigenous models of [in]fertility" (2002:209) tend to differ greatly from medical definitions of infertility (Greil 2002:101; Sunby 2002:204). In Third World contexts, such as Hofriyat, infertility is commonly defined as not giving birth to a son (Boddy 1989). Yet trans-regionally, "infertility is about much more than simply having or not having a child" (Pashigian 2002:135), as it is often the basis of gender, selfhood, and social identity.

In many Third World countries, and specifically Hofriyat (see Section 4.1), the institution of gender is based solely on fertility and is the key to obtaining an adult identity (Riessman 2002:15; Unisa 1999). For example, in Taureg society (a proximally similar Islamic ethnic group in Northern Africa), menstruation is a sign of transformation "from social nonperson … to full social being" (Rasmussen 1987:22). Whereas men can define aspects of their identity outside of the home, women are usually confined to the internal sphere and lack external facets in the development of their personality extraneous to fertility. In these contexts, selfhood is differently oriented and constituted than in the West (Crapanzano 1977b:142; Boddy 1989; 1994:422) and in Hofriyat, an "individualized and compartmentalized concept of the self … has no basis in village culture" (Boddy 1989:255). In line with Radcliffe-Browne's (1959) distinction between the *person* and the *individual*, in some contexts, the notion of the individual does not exist as separate from the social person. Within societies such as Hofriyat, notions of personhood and self are posited solely on gender[4] while the category of the

[3] Some feminist scholars have likewise adopted this position, such as the controversial writer Elizabeth Gould Davis (1972).
[4] See Smith (1992:43-57) for a discussion of "how gender qualifies humanity."

individual in the Western sense is nonexistent. *Self* is equivalent to the social *person*. In other words, you can either be a "male" person or you can be a "female" person; and in terms of gender, there is "no orthodox space for in between-ness" (Tauchert 2001:182).

In places such as Hofriyat, the body serves as an emblem of the self (Synott 1992); specifically, fertility as the sole postulate in construction of the gendered person and serves as the "central axis to identity" (Riessman 2002:135). If there is an "essentialist connection between motherhood and identity" (Thompson 2002:52), the implications of infertility in regards to social gender membership and identity are grave. According to Boddy, "a self which is integrating in conformity with others manifests or realizes the 'person'" (1989:253), whereby the non-conformist lacks personhood. Infertility is a "failure of the body and the self" (Greil 2002:113) and can cause social exclusion as well as conflicting notions of self and self-expression[5]. Physical barrenness results in social barrenness (cf. Pollock 1992:40n), and as I intend to argue, can result in "structural invisibility" (Turner 1987:9), classificatory oblivion, and social non-existence. In other words, physical androgyny (infertility) is an anti-social disposition that equates to *gender liminality* and *social androgyny*.

[5] Judith Butler (1997) sees agency and identity as formed by internalized discourses; thus an infertile woman may have a similar experience to a transsexual who experiences a sense of self that is distinct from their physical body (Munro 2001:61).

2.2 Social androgyny: Gender liminality in society

> According to Saint Basil, "a eunuch cannot suckle and therefore is not a woman and yet is also not a man."
>
> -- Ringrose (1994:89)

Greil, in his interview with an in vitro fertilization (IVF) patient, summed up the social, emotional, and metaphysical implications of infertility in her pithy yet compelling question, "how can I be a real woman?" (2002:106). In the West, women are able to develop aspects of personhood and identity outside of motherhood (cf. Riessman 2002:162), but in Third World contexts, such as Hofriyat, this is not the case. In many instances, a permanently infertile woman must develop an alternative *personae* and role, such as the barren Nuer woman who may take a wife, in effect becoming a "cultural man" (Evans-Pritchard 1951)[6]. This situation is reiterated in the social role of the Chuckee female-to-male transvestite shaman who would share her wife with men and "father" the newborn children (Kharitonova 2004:260). Yet these are exceptional cases, because in many societies barren women are granted neither social identity or inclusivity and "are generally depicted in the anthropological literature as marked by suffering and exclusion" (Gerrits 2002:234).

In the appositely titled "She Who Will Not Be Listened to in Public: Perceptions Among the Yoruba of Infertility and Childlessness in Women," Pearce (1999) elucidates the consequences of infertility for a woman whose reality as a social, gendered person is founded on her ability to procreate. In perspectives where the social personae can exist outside the realm of reproduction, there is no social space for one who cannot reproduce. In terms of gender categories, they exist in a structureless, socially indefinable, anti-social position, one that I consider to be equated to *social androgyn*y and *gender liminality*.

Whereas Rasmussen (1987:17) ascribes elderly Taureg women to a "culturally androgynous status," the infertile woman of reproductive age exists outside of the acceptable limits of a prescribed social category. Other scholars have attempted a theoretical typology of this indefinite gendered space, such as Czaplicka (1914) who believed that shamans were neither male nor female but belonged to a "third class," d'Anglure's (2003) model of the "third gender" of Inuit shamans, Roscoe's (1994) analysis of the four-gendered Native American *berdache*, or Davie's (2007) "five gender" model for the Bugis of Indonesia. Though where d'Anglure and others construct a cultural category out of the void between

[6] Cf. Etienne's (2001) notion of "social maternity."

male and female[7], I prefer to draw attention to the inherent vacuousness of Third World infertility in regards to gender. In much the same way Besnier (1994) conceptualizes the Tahitian *mahu* (men who act like women) as an intermediate, gender liminal category, I contend that the infertile woman is both physically androgynous or intermediate, in line with Lewis's contention that infertile women are considered "half-men" (2003[1971]:85), and socially asexual in that she lack a socially defined gender category as based on the "reproductive paradigm" (Herdt 1994) of gender ascription. This is an important distinction because *absence* is a more severe and metaphysically powerful category than *intermediate*, for in many societies "human existence without gender identity is inconceivable" (Ramet 1996a:xii). This point has ethnographic credibility when one considers the unfortunate fate of transgender Pokot children who are "denied status as women or men and [will] occupy a netherworld of genderlessness if they are not killed at birth" (Bolin 1996:25).

The implications of gender liminality and social genderlessness imply a Turnerian change in social status. For example, when Kate Bornstein, a transgender writer, was born with male anatomy "it was the *absence* of a feeling, rather than a presence" that compelled her to change her gender identity (my italics, 1994:24). This gender bending has historical precedence[8] and across time and space has been associated with spiritual proclivities. For example, in interpreting the story of Otwa, an ancient Japanese mythologem, Nagy (1987:228) deduces the statement "I have neither a child nor a penis [I am infertile]" to mean "I have both a masculine and feminine spirit in me." This quote deftly illustrates a point to which I will now turn, that of the interrelatedness of infertility, gender, and spirituality.

[7] For an alternative critique, see Tedlock (2004:133) who argues that d'Anglure's model "represents a static structuralist description of what is in fact an extremely fluid situation."
[8] See Peletz (2006) and Blackwood (2005) for a discussion of archaic transgenderism in Southeast Asia.

3. Androgyny *of* spirit: Transpersonal identity

> But the hidden secret of 'androgyny' (*maag'maak migiim'aan*) is always inside 'the living center of the life-force.
>
> -- Poole (1996:197)

In much the same way that Otowa has neither a child nor a penis, "the *waneng aiyem ser* possesses neither … semen nor menstrual blood … she is a 'ritual mediator'" (Poole 1981:156). In the course of his fieldwork in Papua New Guinea, Poole discovered the *waneng aiyem ser*, the "paramount ritual leader … the sacred women … of ambiguous gender" (1981:116). Ambiguous gender becomes an outward manifestation of a metaphysical internal identity, modeled on the veneration of androgynous spirits: "When she appears in [ritual] contexts, she is a transvestite, an androgynous being, and an image of the hermaphroditic ancestors Afek and Yamnok, with whom she is identified" (1981:153). The social identity of this "ambiguous androgyne" is "betwixt and between" in terms of gender as well as social standing, for she "has become devalued (socially) … and more highly valued (ritually)" (1981:130, 117, 151).

The *waneng aiyem ser* is both physically and socially androgynous. "She is old, no longer married, asexual, and postmenopausal," while "highly polluting to all other persons" (Poole 1981:117), for that which is unclassifiable is dangerous (Douglas 1966). The situation of the *waneng aiyem ser* parallels my description in Chapter 2 of physical androgyny (infertility) as an isolating experience that renders the individual socially androgynous. Yet, physical androgyny is closely related to notions of spirituality[9], typified by the historic and trans-regional spiritual vocation of hermaphroditic, postmenopausal, virgin, and infertile women. Historic examples of the sexual correlation to spiritual proclivities include the transgendered *hijra*, the hermaphroditic *berdache*, the virgin Apollonian oracles, and the infertile *basir*; the term *basir* meaning "unable to procreate, impotent" (Eliade 2004[1964]:352). Oftentimes, this ritual gender transgression is the result of a particular cosmology, namely the veneration of co-gendered, asexual, or hermaphroditic deities (Bacigalupo 2007; Balzer 2003; Blackwood 2005:853-9; Hoskins 1990; Kharitinova 2004; Poole 1981; Stutley 2002:12; Tedlock 2005:248), which I will discuss in Section 3.1. In

[9] Though I don't intend to elaborate on the ethics of "normal" versus "abnormal" sexuality, Wilson (1967:371) states (albeit it in a slightly outmoded and indecorous manner) that it is well known that "shamanism and possession provide an outlet for sexual abnormals."

Section 3.2, I will discuss the upshot of these particular cosmologies, namely ritual transvestism, sex change, and gender transgressive behavior.

3.1 Spiritual androgyny: Divinities

> Cultures that have androgynous supreme beings find androgyny to have extreme power.
>
> -- Stutley (2002:12)

When one thinks of ancient symbolism in many religions, such as the half-male, half-female Shiva, it is apparent that androgyny is an integral feature of many religions (Kharitinova 2004:261). Whether world religion or tribal, "the ideal gender may be embodied in an androgynous deity, in a creator with a shifting gender, or even in a co-gendered cultural hero" (Tedlock 2005:248). This is especially true in traditions of shamanism and spirit possession in which androgynous and genderless spirits are the foci of adulation, such as the androgynous Tsunki spirit in Shaur shamanism (Perruchon 2003:328), the genderless Orisha in Afro-American spirit possession (Schmidt 2010:103), or the hermaphroditic *foye* tree symbolism of Mapuche shamanism (Bacigalupo 2007). It seems evident that the image of divinity that represents life-giving and fertility should represent the male-female union, in this sense becoming the androgynous creator "who combines the perspective, occupation, and outward appearances of both a male and female being (Tedlock 2004:134).

In this context, masculine and feminine are not identified with male and female but representative of psychological and spiritual principles; "both are found in the souls of individuals of either sex and have their divine analogues" (Corbett 1987:378). Thus, when the spiritual creator is regarded as co-gendered or androgynous, it may lead its adherents to consider these qualities spiritually superior (Stutley 2003:11), possibly catalyzing an attempt at spiritual unification of these two polarities. On the other hand, the spirits may directly request their human host to change sex or a "spiritual marriage" may be enacted between a spirit and host of the same sex, instigating a requisite sex change on behalf of the initiate (Kharitinova 2004:260). This point is affirmed by Hoskins, who shows that ritual gender categories are fluid; a temporary "cosmic fusion" of gender in ritual due to the fact that, like the *Wilād Mama* of the *zār*, "all the highest-ranking deities are double gendered" (1990:305, 277). In the following section, I will explore the ramifications of this androgynous spiritual cosmology, namely the co-gendered ritual and secular attributes of spiritual practitioners who adhere to an androgynous typology of veneration.

3.2 Ritual Androgyny: Practitioners

> Ritual requires androgynous diviner-curers, who supplicate ancestral spirits of androgynous identity.
>
> -- Poole (1996:207)

Returning to the ethnography of the *waneng aiyem ser*, the fact that the sacred ancestors are hermaphroditic implies that the corporeal equivalent is highly valued. And in reality, this is the case as pseudohermaphroditic individuals are granted special privileges in ritual contexts (Poole 1981:158n). As mentioned previously, sacred and ritual androgyny is well-known and vastly explored in relation to male shamanic practice, yet there is overt and inexplicable paucity on the topic in relation to women practitioners (Tedlock 2005:252; Kharitinova 2004:259). Thus, in this section, focus will be limited to a discussion of ritual and consequent secular androgyny in female and transgender adepts that is most relevant to subsequent analysis of the *zār* practitioner.

What Balzer (2003:243) terms "shamanic gender transformation" and Eliade (2004[1964]:352) entitles "ritual androgyny" has both a spatial and temporal history. Transvestite shamans were first observed by Herodotus in Scythia (Ripinsky-Naxon 1997:51; Stutley 2003:11), while more contemporaneously practiced in South America (Patagonians and Araucanian), Siberia (Chuckchee, Kamchadal, and Koryak), extensively in North American tribes, the Inuit (Eliade (2004[1964]:125n, 258), the *balian* and *basir* of Borneo (Eliade (2004[1964]:352; Ripinsky-Naxon 1997:49; Blackwood 2005:854-5), the Hijras of India (Nanda 1994), and the Mapuche of Chile (Bacigalupo 2007). For according to Lev Shtemberg, the power of "sexual transformation lay at the heart of shamanism" (Balzer 2003:246).

Shamans may assume characteristics of the possessing spirit (Riboli 2004:254; Crapanzano 1977a:19) or, alternatively, the spirit may require the shaman to adopt certain attributes such as celibacy or sex change (Kharitonova 2004:260). Equivalently, infertility may be a requirement for shamanic practice, such as the case of the hermaphroditic and infertile male *basir* (Ripinsky-Naxon 1997:49) or the Pueblo male *berdache* who undertake self-induced ritual impotency (Stutley 2003:11). On the other hand, marriage to a same-sex spirit may be in order and protract a requisite sex change on behalf of the initiate. As is the case with the *zār*, the spirit may ask the initiate to adopt certain gender transgressive modes of dress and behavior for the purpose of curing (Balzer 2003:244). This physical expression of the androgynous spiritual represents a masculine-feminine unification, or a "divine

biunity," that enables the individual to act as intermediary between these two realms (Eliade 2004[1964]:352).

As an intermediary between planes of existence and a corporeal reflection of the co-gendered deity, the gender liminal shaman is considered to be closer to god (Ramet 1996:5). In addition to ritual androgyny, bisexuality in the practitioner signifies raised spiritual power (Ripinsky-Naxon 1997:49). This transcends mere material transvestism, for, according to Halifax (1991[1979]:22, 27), the androgynous practitioner is representative of:

> The dissolution of the contraries – life and death, light and dark, male and female – and reconstitution of the fractured forms is one of the most consistent impulses in the initiation and transformation of the shaman … The occasional androgyny of the shaman is one inflection of paradise, where the two become one … the unification of planes of being, earth and sky, male and female…

The ritually androgynous practitioner is able to manipulate and direct the masculine and female cosmic powers (Balzer 2003:22; Tedlock 2004:132) and, as a result, is often considered the strongest and most powerful of all shamans (Kharitinova 2004:261; Stutley 2003:12). In the eyes of their peers, an androgynous ritual mediator is considered neither a man nor a woman, but a unification of male and female (Kharitinova 2004:261)[10]. Likewise, Peek (1991:196, 191) concludes that ritual practitioners seek an "androgynous state" in a "rejection of normal sexuality in order to attain a sexless state or symbolic synthesis of both sexes," in a manner similar to notions of gender liminality discussed previously.

Similar to Peek's (1991:191) rejection-based conclusion, Horton (1969:42) concludes that the ritually gender liminal woman harbors "a deep seated rejection of woman's basic roles." Thus, cross-gendered ritual may give women a chance to "perform preferred identities" (cf. Langellier 2001:152). For example, in Verger's (1969:224) study, he found that half of his informants who engaged in ritual contexts "wished they were men." Similarly, Sered (1994:183) concluded that female Brazilian mediums may become possessed by male spirits precisely because they enjoy performing male behavior (such as smoking cigars, drinking alcohol, and shouting vulgarities) and may only acceptably do so in trance. Thus, in societies where there is no social space for women to act like men, engage in non-heterosexual

[10] I believe it warrants signification at this point to reiterate my argument that the ritually androgynous shaman is considered culturally co-gendered, whereas the infertile woman is perceived as culturally genderless.

relations, or stray outside proscribed gendered behavior and representational expectations, ritual may give them a context in which to do so.

For women who take on ritually androgynous roles, their cultural gender and social status are likewise transcended. Transformations such as this exist throughout the anthropological accounts, such as Middleton's (1969:224) description of Lugbara women who dress as men because they are possessed by male spirits; while Horton in the same volume describes the *okuro* ritual woman who socially "transcends the sex barrier" (1969:42). Women who are ritual leaders tend to be either androgynous or aged (Rasmusseun 1987:18), divorced or childless (Lewis 1969:204), or reject their womanly status in society (Horton 1969:42; Lewis 1969). For example, in Lewis's description of the Somali *saar* practitioner (contextually similar to that of the Sudanese *zār*), he concludes that all women who are subject to possession "generally fail in some important respects to conform to the ideal of Somali womanhood which is that of the married woman with children" (1969:204). This situation is staunchly typified in the life-story of Umselima that will be discussed in Section 4.2.

Consequences of possession by male or co-gendered spirits (such as the *Wilād Mama* that will be discussed in Chapter 4) include cross-gendered dress and behavior and can imply a status change in cultural gender. For example, Busoga female mediums were granted seats (a privilege normally granted only to men) and treated as men during possession (Kenyon 1995:170), while the "Kel Ewey Tuareg women appear culturally androgynous in ritual" (Rasmussen 1987:18). This cultural androgyny can extend beyond ritual contexts: Bacigalupo outlines the story of a female *machi* (shaman) who, like all Mapuche shamans, becomes a "co-gendered being" when possessed by the co-gendered deity Ngünechen, yet after many years of practice begins to challenge gender norms by assuming "manly behavior" (2007:76, 220). Thus, it seems the permanency of gender transgressive behavior within and outside of ritual context is dependent on whether the possession participant is a full-time practitioner or merely an attendee. It appears that female practitioners and "mediums are given asexual attributes as sign of liminal roles," which require "permanent or temporary asexuality" (Middleton 1969:224). Often female cult practitioners undertake permanent gender rescindment and may be relegated to a position of "permanent liminality" (Peek 1991:207n). Accordingly, in the following sections, I argue that the infertile female *zār* attendee is temporarily gender liminal, a position she performs in the *zār* ceremony through cross-gendered behavior and dress; a reversible state upon regaining her reproductive abilities. This "temporary sacralization" (Balzer 2003; cf. Hoskins 1990) is contrasted with that of the female *zār*

practitioner (*shaykha*) who, unlike the temporarily infertile follower, fails to "reaggregate" (Turner 1987:5) and is consigned to a position of permanent gender liminality due to her spiritual vocation.

4. Case study: *Zār* Possession

The objective of this chapter is to relate the themes that I have developed thus far, that of physical, social, spiritual, and ritual androgyny, to a case study of the *zār* possession cult. Section 4.1, "Androgyny *in* Boddy," details relevant background information of Hofriyat society, home of the *zār* possession cult, to demonstrate that woman's sense of self is developed solely on the basis of fertility. Using the methodology developed in Chapter 2, I intend to reveal that the infertile Hofriyat woman is certainly rendered an ambiguous, liminal, and genderless character in the context of Hofriyat society. In Section 4.2, "Androgyny *in* spirit (possession)," I will evince an inherent correlation between social ambiguity and spirit possession that renders the gender liminal woman vulnerable to *zār* attack. I will conclude by teasing out narratives of the co-gendered nature of the *zār* as a theme entirely disregarded by Boddy, to draw parallels among theories of shamanism (as discussed in Chapter 3), the *zār*, and spirit possession more generally.

4.1 Androgyny *in* Boddy

This section explores the implications of infertile identities in Hofriyat society. The social constitution of Hofriyat society is symbolically rested on the centrality of fertility in villagers' lives. Women's status and identity are defined solely on reproduction; namely, the bearing of adult sons. In situations of untimely reproductive failure, a woman's personhood and identity are swiftly (yet reversibly) reneged.

4.1.1 Physical androgyny: The infertile Hofriyat woman

Hofriyat is an Islamic, patriarchal, Arabic-speaking village in northern Sudan (Boddy 1989). Like many Islamic villages in northern Africa, Hofriyat is highly sexually segregated both physically and symbolically (Boddy 1989; Constantinides 1977:63; 1985:686; Al-Shahi 1984:38). Symbols of interiority versus exteriority mirror the separation of women's and men's spheres, respectively, and are tangibly represented in the *modus operandi* of the circumcision of both male and female Hofriyat children. Circumcision is highly representative of appropriate fertility as an act that literally inscribes gender onto one's body. In this respect, gender is both socialized and achieved, using Bourdieu's terms, both a habitus and praxis, in that "gender [becomes a] … naturally acquired native language … acquired [and perpetuated] without deliberate instruction or choice" (More 2001:170).

As explained in Section 2.1, in Hofriyat, gender is constructed solely on the basis of fertility. This point is reiterated by Boddy in her persistent avowal that "women are implicitly and materially "subjected" – in the Foucaultian sense … to feel with their fertility" (1989:185). Like circumcision which permanently distinguishes two sexual categories, the men and women of Hofriyat live separate existences with separate gendered expectations. A Hofriyat woman is expected "to be 'closed,' chaste, and modest, to conduct herself with dignity, marry a close kinsmen, and to produce numerous offspring, especially sons" (2010:118). Villagers have very specific notions of appropriate fertility, and as explained in Section 2.1, Hofriyat's "indigenous model of [in]fertility" (Leonard 2002:201) includes notions that supersede barrenness, such as miscarriage, birth of only daughters, a history of sons dying in infancy, or the inability to conceive within one year of marriage (Boddy 1989:181-2). The expectation to bear sons is of the utmost importance, representing both capital and "an achievement of gender" (1989:180). Appropriate fertility is the only way a woman can gain status[11] (cf. Constantinides 1977:78; 1985:686), and occupy a social role in society through the expression of gendered expectations. Thus, when a woman's reproductive capabilities are incapacitated, she suffers a loss of status and personhood, and as

[11] According to Gerrits (2002:234), this is true in most Middle Eastern and African societies.

I maintain in the following section, is rendered a nonexistent, genderless, anti-social being in Hofriyat society.

4.1.2 Social androgyny: Gender liminality in Hofriyat

Throughout time immemorial, infertile women have felt stigmatized (Greil 1991; 2002:106; Handwerker 2002:310), but in Hofriyat, infertility is grounds for divorce or polygyny[12] (Boddy 1989:174), while serving to deprive her of a gendered space in society. As explained in Section 2.1, the Hofriyat woman is not an individual but a member of a wider collective, that of her gender (1989:255), resulting in only two social roles for adults: man or woman. Unlike societies in which women have the ability to construct identities outside of reproduction, in Hofriyat this is a not conceptual possibility due to the formulaic "personhood = motherhood." Thus, "in this culture, which reduces womanhood to essences, women feel acutely the material need to demonstrate fertility and are understandably anxious for any progenitve mishap" (1989:122) as there are "no alternatives to the highly valued role of mother" (Gerrits 2002:234).

When a woman does find herself in a position of untimely infertility, she lacks any tangible means upon which to define membership to the social category of gendered person. She is left in an ambiguous, gender-liminal and socially androgynous position in that she lacks a culturally defined gender and is resultantly anti-social. According to Boddy, the gender socialization process "is unable to deal conceptually and actively with infertility" (1989:242). The infertile identity is one situated in an interstitial, liminal, structurally indefinable space (Turner 1987), which is highly inappropriate in Hofriyat due to the "explicit intolerance of ambiguity where gender is concerned" (Boddy 1989:185-6). Infertility is considered an "impaired social function" (Constantinides 1985:690); a "heinous … anti-social act" (Boddy 1989:96). As a result, "when a woman's self-image and expectations clash with experiential realities … the result is a paradox. And when the paradox is realized subjectively it may lead her to claim she is possessed" (1989:122). This is an important point when one considers notions of both social rejection and gender liminality that are commonly associated with shamanic practice, as it allows for a direct comparison between shamanism and the *zār*; the *raison d'être* of the ensuing sections.

[12] Likewise true in both Muslim and non-Muslim contexts, for an example in Vietnam, see Pashigan (2002:106) and in Mozambique, see Gerrits (2002:232, 244).

4.2 Androgyny *in* spirit (possession)

> … for an entire evening she is given to see herself and those around her as in a hall of mirrors, the proportions of her selfhood shifting from moment to moment, from context to context, now alien, now frightening, now bizarre.
>
> -- Boddy (1989:355-6)

> While transsexualism reveals that a society's gender system is a trick done with mirrors, those mirrors are the walls of our species' very real and only home.
>
> -- Shapiro (1991:249)

In this section, I intend to establish the indefatigable connection amongst the *zār*, androgyny, ambiguity, liminality, and paradox as related to notions of fertility, personhood, and spiritual callings. I will relate the biography of Umselima to notions of spiritual and cultural androgyny, for she is culturally scripted as an infertile woman who becomes possessed by a co-gendered spirit, transgresses gender norms, and ultimately becomes a *zār* practitioner (*shaykha*). In Section 4.2.1, I will provide background information as to the *zār's* relationship to fertility and ambiguity. Within Section 4.2.2, I examine the implications of androgynous "anti-space" in Hofriyat society (as defined in Section 4.1) and, in Section 4.2.3, discuss a lifestyle in which this androgynous liminal zone is permanent and inescapable: that of the *shaykha*.

4.2.1 Background: The *zār* and infertile identities

Umselima has no male kin and lives alone with mothers and sisters. She frequently walks alone at night and in many respects violates the ideals of Hofriyat womanhood. Once married but now divorced, she was deemed "infertile" after the death of three infant sons. As a result, she becomes an anti-social, gender liminal actor, whereupon soon afterwards she is possessed by a male spirit (Boddy 1989:198, 208, 207). According to Boddy, "For Umselima, marriageability, childbirth, the deaths of her children, pregnancy and its absence, are all bound up in her visions of zayran [*zār*]. Her reproductive problems are, like the events preceding her initial apparition, violations of feminine ideals that precipitate or signify possession" (1989:200). For it is significant that "in women, and also perhaps men, the association of *zār* with problematic fertility is patent" (1989: 232).

The *zār* is a healing possession cult, created by women, for women, that exists throughout Muslim Africa and the Middle East. The women who participate in *zār* cult activities have no other socially acceptable religious outlet since they are barred from participation in the male sphere of Islam (Boddy

1988; 1989; 1994; 2010; Constantinides 1977; 1985; Navtig 1988; Al-Shahi 1984). In the ceremonial context, the women "drum the *zār*" in order to become entranced by their partner spirits for the purposes of curing; namely, for dealing resolutely with problematic fertility[13] (Boddy 1989; Constantinides 1977:78-9; 1985:689; Kenyon 1995; Navtig 1988:66; Sered 1994:107). According to Boddy, one of the "most impressive" aspects of the *zār* in Hofriyat "is that one in every two possessed women has sustained both fertility and marital problems in the course of her life," while the highest percentage of women has *never been pregnant at all* (1989:175, 172). The women are rendered ambiguous and liminal in the eyes of society and lack another social space in which to act other than that of the *zār*. This point is enumerated by Boddy: within the 40 collected case histories, she found that "the onset, acknowledgement, or relapse of possession ailments regularly coincided with the experience of reproductive disorder" (1989:186).

As discussed in Section 4.1, sex distinctions in Hofriyat are based on a delimited and impermeable notion of two genders as based on fertility and, in a Turnerian sense, are of great structural importance. As I have argued in previous sections, when a woman fails reproductively, she fails as a gendered being and is rendered "structurally invisible" (Turner 1987:8). This liminality is manifested in the form of possession, for in Bourguinon's (1967) investigation of nearly 500 studies, she found that possession is most likely to be found in cultures with exceedingly rigid social roles. Thus, structure and, conversely, liminality, are of paramount importance in the interpretation of the *zār*, as spirits often attack those in liminal positions (Crapanzano 1977b:144; Parry 1994:232).

In Hofriyat, infertility is a failure of "culturally defined potential" (Constantinides 1977:83) and renders women to an ambiguous, liminal, and structurally invisible position of ambiguous status. For women, *zār* possession provides an "experiential idiom for disorder and threatened selfhood" (Boddy 1989:147) and an arena for a "dramatic enactment of inadequacies" (Constantinides 1977:83). Possession is intimately related to ambiguity (Boddy 1989:340, 353) and, for *zār* spirits, "ambivalence and ambiguity are windows of opportunity" (1989:142). More intimately related to possession is ambiguous fertility, and the greatest proportion of possessed individuals have some type of ambiguous sexual identity (Crapanzano 1977a:17). Since possession is a "liminal excursion" (Boddy 1989:352), it follows that it necessitates a "form of *rite de passage* whereby social identity may be changed" (Wilson

[13] Many non-*zār* possession cults are also associated with problematic fertility; for example, see Horton (1969:35), Sunby (2002:250), Lewis (1969:212), Middleton (1969:224), Southall (1969:245), and Perrin (1992:116).

1967:377). In the consequent section, I will develop this conception of a ritual reclamation of social identity after gender rescindment due to infertility.

4.2.2 Transcending the physical body: The *zār*

In revisiting the story of Umselima, it is revealed that she is possessed by the *Wilād Mama* spirit, a co-gendered spirit strongly associated with fertility (Boddy 1989:232). According to Boddy, this spirit has a highly androgynous nature, "a spirit which blurs male and female identities" (1989:280). Though Boddy identifies the co-gendered nature of this spirit, she does not explore the implications of this type of possession (such as those discussed in Chapter 3), and is, once again, a "direction of thought" (Ricouer 1976) explored throughout this section. For Umselima articulates notions of her selfhood in terms of this *zār* (1989:207) and through mimesis her "inchoate feelings are structured and objectified" (Crapanzano 1977a:16). The fact that Umselima is possessed by a co-gendered *zār* has many implications as far as the social gender of the practitioner (such as those explored in Section 3.2), and consequences specific to her case are explored in Section 4.2.3.

Women who are in liminal standing in Hofriyat society often become possessed by the *zār* (Boddy 1989:142, 250). "Created of smokeless fire, amorphous, transformable" (1989:272), they are the very definition of ambiguity and ephemerality. Like the red spirit of the *waneng aiyem ser* (Poole 1981:132, 133), all of the *zār* spirits are associated with red, the color of ambiguity (Boddy 1989:160, 187, 188, 272) and are of "ambivalent sexuality" (1989:288). Though numerous as they are multifarious, for the purposes of this discussion, concentration is converged upon an especially ambiguous spirit and the most important *zār* of the ceremony, the *Wilād Mama:* the "vizier of all zayran." As "spokesmen for the entire pantheon of *zār* spirits" (1989:233), the *Wilād Mama* is a powerful male spirit who acts like a woman (Constantinides 1977:80).

The co-gendered nature of the *Wilād Mama* is, in my opinion, strongly correlated with the shamanic cosmology discussed in Chapter 3. However, Boddy takes little note of the androgynous nature of the spirits and neglects to make any comparison to shamanic cosmology. Boddy's argument centers around the notion of the "alien other," in that women are able to redefine their sense of self by "seeing through the eyes of the *zār*," that is, seeing self as "other" (1989:350, 255-6; cf. Goldingay 2010:210). In my estimation, this analysis gels with singular sex spirits, but fractures into theoretical lacuna with the introduction of spirits of co-gendered physiognomy and transvestite ritual assistants. Boddy speculates that the co-gendered spirits render locally proscribed notions of gender identity and behavior ambiguous, and that this "ambiguity is offered to participants as food for thought" (1989:281).

In my opinion, a "food for thought" hypothesis seems unjustifiable when one considers the spatial and temporal history of co-gendered spiritual possession and resultant gender transgression in ritual. Resultantly, I disagree with her "alien other" hypothesis by taking due consideration of well-established theories of shamans who address co-gendered deities and cross-gender boundaries during healing performance. By disregarding the shamanic theories that are a structural correlate to that of the *zār*, it serves to embolden androcentric narratives that aim to further delineate shamanism and spirit possession[14].

Like the shaman who marries his or her partner spirit, the Hofriyat woman is paired for life with one or more *zār* spirits, effectually being deemed "the bride of the *zār*"[15] (Boddy 1989:265). Boddy thoroughly explores wedding symbology within the *zār* (1989:159, 256-56, 310-12; see also Navtig 1988), but does not consider the instance where a woman is paired with or "married" to a same-sex helping spirit. As discussed in Section 3.1, this often entails a requisite sex change on behalf of the practitioner. Though instances of same-sex spirit "marriage" cannot be addressed here due to lack of data provided by Boddy, one may consider notions of mimesis and representational performance within the *zār*. According to Boddy, host and spirit "coalesce in possession trance" (1989:151), becoming "interchangeable" identities (2010:123), producing incredulous behavioral and structural brisance, such as masculinity, transvestism, and androgyny that will be discussed in Section 4.2.2. Thus, the *zār* may give the women a chance to "represent different facets of her personality" (2010:127), incarnate "personal symbols" (Obeyesekere 1981) associated with her strained social position due to infertility, or address personal "ambiguity arising from within" (Boddy 1989:307). The co-gendered *Wilād Mama* spirit (as a man that acts like a woman) would thus serve as a symbolic enactment of inadequacies (Constantinides 1977:17), in that, secularly, she is a woman who acts more like a Hofriyat man (due to lack of parturition abilities). In other words, within her performance of possession by co-gendered spirit, the infertile woman could be enacting embodied beliefs associated with her culturally defined role as "half-man" (Lewis 2003[1971]:85). Like the gender transgressive shaman, she enters a liminoid space in which she constructs her performance from a repertoire of symbols which are themselves

[14] Since the publication of Eliade's (1964) exposé which delimited shamanism and spirit possession (mainly based on the gender of the participants), the relationship between the two has been fervently debated. In line with Stutley (2003:3) who says that "spirit possession is essential to all forms of shamanism" and Perruchon (2003:209) who contends that shamans are permanently possessed by spirits, I tend to see the two as relatively comparable practices.

[15] Not that the "bride" itself has connotations of ambiguity, androgyny, and liminality and is an idiom used to designate male and female children who are undergoing circumcision as well as women who are in childbirth (Navtig 1988:63).

"hegemonic cultural constructs" (Boddy 1989:356) of gender inscribed in both mind and body. The co-gendered nature of the *zār* spirits is one noted by Boddy – "here again gender ambiguity surfaces as an issue" (1989:281) – but does not stray from her argument in an attempt to discuss the implications of co-genderedness in a manner I have set forth. The fact that shamans who address co-gendered deities often cross gender boundaries in their performance (Tedlock 2004:135) is not a point explored by Boddy, yet, in my opinion, has inherent integrality to the ritual transvestism of the *zār* ceremony and is a theory I will contend with in Section 4.2.3.

4.2.3 Transcending the social body: The *shaykha*

Umselima's possession by her co-gendered partner spirit, the *Wilād Mama*, was "to witness a paradox: a woman who is not who she is – not human, not Hofriyat, not even in most cases, female" (Boddy 1989:355). Like many women who are possessed by a *zār*, Umselima violates both behavioral and representational gender norms, including the incredulous acts of "smoking, wanton dancing, flailing about, burping and hiccupping, drinking blood and alcohol, wearing male clothing, publicly threatening men with swords, [and] speaking loudly lacking due regard to etiquette" (1989:131). This change in social gendered status is more than a superficial manifestation of ritual transvestism when she initiates divorce from her husband, thus "subvert[ing] village praxis and socially appropriate dispositions" (1989:337). Formal sanctions of Islam state that a woman may not legally sue for marital dissolution on any grounds (1989:110), yet "Umselima implies it was because of the *zār* that she obtained her divorce." Her divorce "releas[ed] her from certain obligations and limitations by which married women are bound, freeing her to pursue her own interests," that is, "to become a full-fledged *shaykha*" (1989:206). Paralleling Umselima's narrative, this section assesses the gender ambiguity and social liminality in both the male and female *zār* practitioner as based on fertility – a theme eschewed by Boddy – in order to develop the *zār* within the theme of shamanic ritual androgyny.

In many ways, the *zār* ceremony grants women a culturally prescribed arena in which to violate cultural expectations and, essentially, the opportunity to act like men (Boddy 1989:207; Constantinides 1977:74; Al-Shahi 1984). But where Boddy mainly focuses on the therapeutic aspects of possession (1988; 1989:207), she disregards the cross-gendered nature of the ritual itself; for the *zār* ceremony in many ways mirrors that of shamanic ritual transvestism. As described above, the women behave as outlandish masculine characters and request male clothes (1989:128, 129, 160, 228) – a severe contravention in everyday village life. Whereas Boddy focuses on notions of "alien other" rather than gender, in Kenyon's (2007:73) analysis of the material objects in the *zār*, she notes there are, in fact,

four gendered categories within the context of the ceremony: male, female, male-female, and female-male; very much in line with the institutionalized "third" and "fourth" gendered categories that exist within Siberian and Native American shamanism.

Kenyon's (2007) "male-female" gender category grants exceeding clarity to the existence of gender bending within the *zār*. Ostensibly, the male *zār* assistants and practitioners are transvestites (Boddy 1989:125, 239) or homosexuals (Boddy 1989:164; El-Hadi El-Nagar 1980:682). Boddy describes a male participant's case by which possession "enabled him to articulate certain ambivalences he harbored with regard to his identity" (1989:211), specifically that of his "fertility problems" (1989:211). Though Boddy ends her analysis here, it is realized through alternative sources that "some men are regular participants at the cult rituals, and a few have become cult group leaders. Of this male minority, some are overt homosexuals, while others initially may have symptoms, such as bleeding from the anus or penis, which tend symbolically to classify them as women" (Constantinides 1977:63; see also Al-Shahi 1984:682). Like the women's cross-gender *zār* performance, male subjects are required to wear a bridal skirt and in this context "he behaves like a woman" (Al-Shahi 1984:39). Though ethnographic testimony on individual gender transgressive male *zār* participants is paltry, a journal entry detailing a performance of the Hamdushi possession cult, a male parallel of the *zār* cult (Boddy 1989:132), adeptly illustrates the acute cross-gendered temperament of male spirit possession in this region:

> At 4:15 there was a hush in the crowd as an extremely tall man in white robes, with a gold scarf around his neck entered the dance arena. A woman poked me and told me that he was a seer, a true Hamdushi. A man signaled that he was a homosexual who played the passive role. His costume was, in fact, effeminate, his breasts well developed, his hair long and curly, and his neck so swollen that I suspected some sort of glandular disorder (Crapanzano 1973:xiii).

Like the women of the *zār*, the inability to live up to male gender standards, specifically impotence, results in asseverations of possession and cross-gender behavior within ritual (1973:224). Like the shamanic practitioner, often men are "impotent or homosexual," thus "making them 'like women'," whereas the women "are either barren, or pre-pubertal, or post-menopausal," in other words "they are regarded as 'like men'" (Middleton 1969:224). These "gender reversals" (Balzer 2003) can be conceptually accounted for using the gloss "ritual androgyny," for "reversals … can emphasize difference and also stress undifferentiated nature; thus portraying difference and continuity at the same time" (Rasmussen 1987:26). Like the homosexual (and therefore non-procreative) androgynous male diviner

(Peek 1991:196; Verger 1969:142), Boddy implicates the male practitioners to be "homosexuals and therefore sexually neutral" (1989:164). In my opinion, statements purporting "sexual neutrality" (1989:164) within a society that hosts an "explicit intolerance of ambiguity where gender is concerned" (1989:185-6) warrants elucidation, though Boddy makes no attempt to expound upon the gender transgressive nature of the male (or female) *zār* actors.

Similarly unobserved is the "female-male" category that exists within the *zār*, including the integral gender transgressive attributes of the significant female *zār* practitioner. Where Boddy fails to mention any social attributes of the *shaykha*, details were once again obtained from other sources. Constantinides (1985) constructs the *shaykha* to be of "low sexual status," who does not require the partnership of men. Most are either divorced or childless (or culturally defined as "infertile") and some have even engineered their divorce by "refusing to make themselves attractive and submissive" to men (1985:690). Yet they are "formidable women indeed – women of independence, organizational ability and spiritual strength, with considerable status among their peers," whereby "the social background and activities of these cult group leaders provide the very antithesis of what normally determines status for a Sudanese woman" (1985:690; see also El-Hadi El-Nagar 1980:674, 685). Like the gender and socially liminal shaman, the *shaykha* has crafted a social role out of this ambiguity in her relationship with her co-gendered spirit. I believe co-gendered spirits are central to an understanding of the mechanics and manifestations of shamanism (as described in Chapter 3). Thus, if the *shaykha* is partnered with a co-gendered spirit, it would greatly parallel that of the shaman and may translate to ritual androgyny and secular gender transgression. Remarkably, this line of reasoning is substantiated when it is unequivocally revealed that "possession by the … *Wilād Mama* … is beneficial if not mandatory for the aspirant *shaykha*" (Boddy 1989:233).

The *zār shaykha* is very much like the female Mapuche *machi* who is ritually androgynous during possession by her co-gendered spirit, and within the realms of ordinary existence, is seen to contravene gendered expectations through the adoption of "manly behavior" (Bacigalupo 2007:220). For, culturally, the *shaykha* is considered to have a "masculine social range" in which she "cuts across all the norms of female behavior" (Constantinides 1985:690). Analogous to the shaman, this anti-social, gender liminal position grants her a "mediating role" between the spirit world and the secular, as well as between men and women, in a society with marked sexual segregation (1985:685). The *shaykha*, as a culturally defined "infertile" woman, follows the shamanic path of social and gender liminality, and "it is a theme among these women that powerful healers and mediators with the spirits such as themselves

have no need of men, nor of their own sexuality – a theme bourne out by their successful existence in a society antithetical to the lone woman" (1985:690). It is confounding that within a book about gender in the *zār*, Boddy pays little heed to the social gender of the most important character of the *zār* ceremony; that of the *shaykha*. For the *shaykha* corresponds in many ways to the shamanic practitioner typified by the quadratic of physical, social, spiritual, and ritual androgyny. Importantly, the *shaykha* is a beacon of feminine empowerment and privileged status (El-Hadi El-Nagar 1980:685) in that she transcends the constraints placed on her by the "social body" of Hofriyat and supersedes the limits of her physical body (sex) by adopting the role of androgynous diviner-curer.

5. Conclusion

Umselima represents anecdotal coherence in reaction to the question: Can the *zār* be interpreted using theories surrounding the co-gendered nature of shamanism? For, in many ways, she mirrors the *waneng aiyem ser*, the "androgynous ritual woman" (Poole 1981) who incarnates a quaternary model of androgyny. A social classification of androgyny is possible due to the fact that gender is necessarily a cultural construction and, as shown in Chapter 2, when based on such tenuous concepts as fertility, gender as a social role may be rescinded. Furthermore, as expounded in Chapter 3, this type of gender liminality is an anti-social position and a common characteristic of the shamanic practitioner who venerates a co-gendered cosmology. Umselima's dispositions of infertility, gender liminality, anti-sociality, co-gendered spirit possession, and cross-gendered ritual performance become tantamount to her secular gender transgressive behavior. Like the androgyne and the shaman, she cultivates a position that "confound[s] normal, normative, and priveleged dualities of female and male" (Poole 1996:200) that define much of Hofriyat life.

Considering the definitional thorniness surrounding the classification of the androgyne, caveats of this analysis concern the ambiguity and complexity of the term *androgyny* and its inherently essentialized categories of the masculine and feminine: "How then does one understand the symbolic potential of the androgyne, a figure that, by definition, both asserts original difference (in the male and female "halves" it unites), and claims to transcend that "most virulent" of binary oppositions?" (Weil 1992:11). *Androgyny* represents creative analytic potential but may be counteracted by its inherent ambiguity, which could likewise lead to its self-destruction as a category of analysis. Further, the etymology of the word necessarily implies a problematic presupposition of the essentialized categories of masculine and feminine (Bem 1976:59). Though when defined as a liminal space, I believe these issues may be circumvented. For, when approximated to the liminal, "that which is neither this nor that, and yet is both" (Turner 1987:9), the "consequent tension and ambiguity of the androgynous … opens up an imaginative path" (Poole 1996:201). In these regards, analytical androgyny offers encouraging theoretical insight in the manner of Ricouer's conception of the "positive and productive use of ambiguity" (1976:47).

A motif of androgyny allows for an analysis of the Hofriyat woman in which she is able to transcend the restrictions of the social and physical body, for the "androgynous state … is a condition for transcending the secular existence" (Ripinsky-Naxon 1997:49). Just as the *shaykha* transcends secular and gendered expectations, the ways in which physical and social bodies are perceived have eclipsed

Boddy's (1989) publication of *Wombs and Alien Spirits*, as witnessed by developments in the fields of gender performance and queer studies. Though, the fascination with spirit possession has not since diminished, as "possession still continues to hold the anthropological gaze despite heroic attempts to tame it, [or] render it harmless or understood" (Boddy 1994:407). In addition to augmenting the theoretical perspective of Boddy, I believe the implications of an alternative "reading" of her ethnography point to the creative uses of androgyny as a conceptual tool in understanding the cultural constructions and implications of gender. As such, a specific outcome of this analysis may serve to motivate ethnographic researchers to more readily situate women in gender transgressive spiritual roles where prior focus has been only on men (Blackwood 2005; Tedlock 2005). This would further serve to mitigate gender biases that inform the theoretical distinctions between spirit possession and shamanism.

Within the secular realm, "What are the consequences of an androgynous reformulation of difference?" (Haynes & McKenna 2001:11). New paradigms of androgyny may require us to revisit our system of beliefs surrounding gender, social structure, sexual stratification, and personhood. After Freud first disregarded androgyny as an analytic concept over a century ago, new models of androgyny have demonstrated value within fields such as psychology (Bem 1976; Corbett 1987; Kaplan 1976). Thus, just as Butler (1990) moves beyond the structuralist and binary logics of "man" and "woman," I believe the theoretical development of androgyny inspires novel and adaptable potential within the fields of psychology, religion, gender studies, and anthropology. Theoretically and cognitively, "the androgynous mind is resonant and porous" (Woolf 1989[1929]:98), and akin to spirit possession, represents a "rebellion of the human mind against the fetters of cultural constructs" (Boddy 1989:309). Thus, the melioristic prospects of an "androgynous reformulation of difference" (Haynes & McKenna 2001:11) allow for the physical, social, and spiritual transcendence of the physical and social body in the form of "gender freedom" (Munro 1996), for according to Virginia Woolf, it is in androgyny that our "future salvation lies" (Weil 1992:147).

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