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1 Managing tradition

'Superstition' and the making of national identity among Sudanese women refugees

Janice Boddy

What it all comes down to is that we are the sum of our efforts to change who we are. Identity is no museum piece sitting stock-still in a display case, but rather the endlessly astonishing synthesis of the contradictions of everyday life.

(Eduardo Galeano,
The Book of Embraces)

A simple hand-drawn flyer reads:

Sudanese Women Community Invite You to See Superstition and Traditional Dancing – Free *****

Mid-page, tendrils of smoke rise from a fire to embrace the disembodied head of a woman – eyes closed, restful; hair, uncovered, fanning out from her head as if shocked. Below the picture:

International Women's Day, March 8th at 8:00 pm, Location: Eritrea Restaurant 1278 Bloor St. West [Toronto]

The flyers are displayed in downtown ethnic restaurants, in corner shop windows beside provincial lottery signs and the prices of milk, in specialist travel agencies that broker services for arrivals from North-East Africa. They are distributed among the women's friends and neighbours: Egyptians, Ethiopians, fellow Sudanese. Any and all, but especially Anglo-Canadians, are encouraged to come.

The evening is a success; the restaurant fills to overflowing. Yet those who attend see more than a demonstration of ethnicity: they witness a drama of political resistance, one that skilfully seeks to strengthen the resolve of disparate Sudani refugees and forge them into a unified 'we', a nation in absentia. And the community thus imagined (Anderson 1991; see Appadurai 1990: 5) consists of a partnership of women and men.

The women's performance that night and the overlapping contexts that engulf it – the homeland versus 'the West', various social interests in Toronto, the horror of Sudan's continuing north-south divide – expose a subtle interweaving of global and local concerns. Indeed, the events I detail and attempt to render intelligible raise questions about this analytical dichotomy, suggesting that, just as importations are interpreted and transformed within a local context, what is claimed to be universal is firmly rooted in specific sites and societies (see Amin 1989). Both the refugees and the Islamist government in Khartoum are using increasingly globalized culture-technologies – written history, ethnography, museums – as means of articulating their positions *vis-à-vis* each other and the world at large, yet in ways that make sense in decidedly localized terms. Toronto, of course, is one of these locales. It resists depiction as an essentialized, monolithic entity – 'the West', both ground and by-product of Orientalist discourse – for in its specificity it is at once more than this and less. The actions, statements, indeed *silences* of the refugees must be viewed in relation to their ambivalently multicultural host as well as to the hostile regime at home.

The events I discuss took place between 1991 and 1992. They condense to a singular moment an unremitting contest for certainty that is also a struggle over cultural probity; it is a dispute over knowledge, over power and social discipline, over the practices that are 'authentically' Sudanese. Enemies are identified, 'customs' endorsed or excluded; yet the lines that are drawn remain malleable, imprecise. For refugees, uncertain of their future abroad, there is and must be room for rapprochement. Caught in a web of opposed certainties suspended between two worlds, seeking a future that rejects the present but both valorizes and meliorates the past, they are forced to rethink themselves. So their argument is not without contradiction and ironies abound.

Because my own involvement in this episode was integral to its development, the following discussion parallels that process to some extent. Here 'at home', in the city where I teach, I realized more than ever how perforated are the barriers that separate the anthropologist's reality and her informants'; how each of us might simultaneously realize and rethink herself in the other's representations; how local and how global we all, perforce, must be.

ZAR

The ceremony staged by the women of the Sudanese refugee community in Toronto on 8 March 1992, in celebration of International Women's Day, was a *zar*, a spirit possession ritual. But it was a *zar* transformed in the context of refugee existence abroad.

Between 1976 and 1977 and again from 1983 to 1984, I studied the cult called *zar* as it was practised in a group of villages situated on the Nile

some 200 km north of Khartoum. In Sudan, a *zar* is a healing rite; the term also applies to the condition that it addresses and to the spirits whose capricious appropriation of a human body (i.e. 'spirit possession') is deemed to have caused that illness. Both illness and cult are overwhelmingly the province of women. My findings were later published as *Wombs and Alien Spirits: Women, Men and the Zar Cult in Northern Sudan* (Boddy 1989); I summarize a few of its points below.

From an analytical perspective, a woman's dysphoria, precipitated by untoward or anomalous experience that has challenged the culturally constructed self, is converted into a conventional narrative of spirit ingress and appeasement in the process of undergoing a possession cure. Continuing participation in the cult – attending ceremonies, heeding her spirits' requests – supplies a thread of coherence to her life, persuasively affirming once problematic selfhood by providing direct and dramatic experience of what it is not. Spirits who become manifest during a *zar* are alien beings; though they parallel humanity in having ages, genders, religions and nationalities, they are both ontologically different from humans¹ and culturally foreign to northern Arabic-speaking Muslim Sudanese. Their antics and identities, performed during the patient's and fellow adepts' temporally limited bouts of ritual trance, caricature a range of human possibility other than that deemed normal, natural and moral for the women in whose bodies such behaviours appear. Thus the ritual has collective implications as well as individual ones: it is an elaborate dramatization of foreignness that catalyses group understandings, through which women mutually construct an image-in-relief of northern Sudanese identity and experience. At the same time *zar* implicitly domesticates the foreign, enabling its incorporation into the familiar and everyday.

Women's bodies are icons and repositories of community values and morality, conceived of in highly localized terms;² possession both challenges and expresses that embodied knowledge, providing those whom it claims with occasion to distance themselves from themselves, yet also to critique, for themselves and the community at large, domination and oppression by a range of historical and contemporary powers. Issues of power that reflect on daily life – the power of some humans over others, the power of religion, custom, gender – are raised during spirit performances but obliquely, via metaphors contained in particular spirit chants or the spirits' complex self-presentations. For instance, a married Sudanese woman may be seized by a male homosexual Arab *zar* who, now in control of her body, dons a man's long shirt, yet who in performance plays hilariously and unsuccessfully at being a married Sudanese woman dressed in a *towb*, the head-to-foot wrap-around veil that women wear in public. The *zar* provokes the taken-for-granted and assumed, throws open to question everyday practices like wearing the *towb*, or the customary social arrangements that privilege men, even men who act as women. In this way a subtle protest is lodged against the constraints that govern women's

lives; in exposing these as mutable, however morally appropriate – in opening a space for uncertainty – such constraints are recontextualized, perhaps limited, though not of course undone. For to an extent this means that women are contesting themselves.

SUDANESE WOMEN AND THE PRESENT REGIME

Until 1991 there were only three Sudanese women living in greater Toronto (a city of some 4 million). But as the Islamist regime that had seized power in Sudan at the end of June 1989³ enacted ever more coercive legislation, setting curfews, sartorial requirements and ‘morality’ rules, and limiting women’s participation in public life, educational institutions and the like, that number grew to thirty. All sought political asylum. Such women hardly represent the majority of Muslim Sudanese; they are not impoverished, illiterate villagers but women of the urban bourgeoisie, some of the lucky few with resources enough to get out. Four are single women who by 1992 had made their way to Canada on their own.⁴ All are educated to standards far beyond the norm for Sudanese women: all have high-school leaving certificates, half have university degrees or professional qualifications. Several are pious Muslims, others not overtly religious, a few are acknowledged secularists; yet all are culturally and emotionally northern Sudanese. Still, whatever their private convictions, these are women who, in the cities where most of them used to reside, would probably wince at the thought of being seen attending a *zar*, or would publicly disavow having done so except in jest. *Zar*, whether by Western or strict Islamic criteria, is to them ‘superstition’.

I noted that until 1991 there were only three Sudanese women living in Toronto. But there were some 600 Sudanese men. They all knew one another, met regularly, periodically held musical evenings enabling them to socialize and activate their Sudani roots. Yet the community was decidedly skewed, so few were its womenfolk. Earlier I pointed out that women embody local values. Elsewhere (Boddy 1989), along with observers like Sondra Hale (1985), I have noted that in northern Sudan women are regarded as ‘symbols of the homeland’; in the villages especially, they are the moral heart of their communities. It is they who keep the home-fires burning while men emigrate for work; it is they who are responsible for the ceremonies (surrounding weddings, births, circumcisions) and daily acts of hospitality and etiquette that punctuate and weave the social world. These are the *adat* or customs of *dunya*, earthly life. Men’s role is to provide the means to sustain such activity and oversee affairs linked to religious concerns (*din*) having properly to do with Islam – such as funerals, or the slaughter of a ram for the Great Feast. Although 1992’s ten-fold boost to the refugee community’s cohort of women has by no means redressed its lop-sidedness, their number has now, it seems, achieved a critical mass and their presence has become crucial to the

community’s self-definition in the present context. Women are the homeland, and now they are here.

For they cannot be what they are in Sudan of the present day. The present regime sees women’s customary roles, duties, privileges, as immoral, or religious ‘innovation’ and is attempting their reform. In Sudan, for example, women are officially and forcefully discouraged from wearing the *towb*, typically made of a cool, light fabric and worn atop a dress, as this is considered too revealing of the hair, forearms and neck (Gruenbaum 1992: 29).⁵ Nor may younger (school-aged) women wear the *tarha*, or head scarf. Anthropologist Ellen Gruenbaum, who revisited Sudan in May 1992, describes the case of a woman who, the previous October,

was arrested on the street and taken to a ‘public order’ court for violating the unwritten dress code. Although she was dressed in a modestly long skirt, loose mid-length sleeved shirt and the light scarf which many women allow to fall to the shoulders, she was found guilty of creating public disorder and sentenced to receive lashes and a fine. The woman had no way to defend herself since she had violated no specific statute. Her father paid the fine and successfully begged the judge to suspend the lashing.

(1992: 30)

One month later the head of the Revolutionary Command Council and Prime Minister of the country, General Omar Al-Bashir, ostensibly answering public criticism that the behaviour and appearance of Muslim women had so far failed to conform to Shari’a law, declared that ‘all women in offices, public places, streets, educational institutions, etc., should wear long loose garments and cover their heads. This Islamic style of dress is known as “Hijab” and is defined in the Quran’ (*Sudanow* 1991b: 6). To offset the cost to women of acquiring these new clothes, the government undertook to provide them with loans from the ‘Shari’a Support Fund’, repayable through payroll deductions (*ibid.*; Gruenbaum 1992: 30). If by 1 July 1992 they had not complied with ‘Islamic dress’ codes, women employees and students risked being fired or expelled from school and arrested. Pressures to withdraw from participation in the public domain and adopt properly ‘Islamic’ gender roles are tangible. In 1992, visiting Iranian President Rafsanjani, as a gesture of Iran’s financial and ideological solidarity with the Sudanese regime, provided 1,000 *chadors* (facial veils) to be distributed among Sudanese women.

In 1991, in an effort to curb the exorbitant cost of customary marriage rites,⁶ the government began to sponsor group weddings. The project aimed ‘to combat undesirable traditions’ as well as ‘to create stability among young people and follow the example of the Prophet Mohammed, who condemned bachelorhood’ (Abdelrahman 1991b: 24). What was formerly a family matter, involving extended networks of kin, has now

become an affair of the state; thus has a crucial basis of women's power, their mastery of kinship rituals, been eroded.

Beliefs and practices long associated with vernacular Islam are now decried as unacceptable by the National Islamic Front-backed 'Salvation Revolution Government' and regarded as sad evidence of the need to improve educational standards. (This is despite the fact that professionals of all sorts are labelled Western, hence subversive, and are encouraged to leave the country.)⁷ Illiterate women's lack of religious awareness is seen to impel them, for example, to visit the graves of holy men in order to alleviate illness, and to engage in practices of the *zar*. Although *zar* has always been a matter of dispute between those who regard themselves as pious and those they consider unschooled – and so, in large part, between women and men – until recently it was tolerated, if reluctantly, by the Sudanese religious establishment. Spirits were too much a part of everyday life – their existence indisputable, banal, based on patently Islamic precepts⁸ – for clerics and laymen to oppose the cult successfully.

Between 1983, when Islamic law was enacted in the dying days of Nimeiri's regime, and the 1989 coup d'état that inaugurated rule by the National Islamic Front, *zar* underwent a process of folklorization in Sudan's urban zones. Its subtle transformation from religiously informed cult to less threatening theatrical club is instructive. Hurreiz (1991: 152–4) documents how in 1987 a leading *zar shaikh* (male curer) was instrumental in founding the Association of Zar and Folklore Shaikhs, an officially registered society representing dozens of town cult groups. Once formed, the Association sought affiliation with the National Council for Arts and Letters. This, Hurreiz notes, was granted 'in accordance with article (b) of the council's constitution of 1976: "The promotion of theatrical activities, music and folk arts"' (*ibid.*: 153). Both the *zar* practitioners in question, two-thirds of whom were male,⁹ and the authorities at the National Council clearly considered the associated cult groups to be an artistic dramatic society (*ibid.*).¹⁰ Although patients still behave as patients seeking treatment through the *zar*, the Association's founders

are evidently . . . seeking respectability in the modern idiom of drama and psychodrama and a leading role in their public relations amongst the intelligentsia is played by an influential committee member who is a prominent Sudanese actress and graduate of the Institute of Music and Drama.

(*ibid.*: 154)

Not only was the *zar* being routinized as official theatre, it was also being removed from the religious domain, its healing practices rationalized, perhaps trivialized, and dissociated from Islam. Yet in seeming to question *zar*'s reality by making it 'for show', the shift effectively disguised the fact that *zar* continues to be an essential religious force in countless women's lives. Moreover, the upshot of such Procrustean constraints

was public acknowledgement that *zar* is an authentic part of northern Sudanese 'culture'.

Ironically, the process of 'folklorizing' a cult based on resolutely local understandings of society and human existence was an attempt to mould it to the dimensions and categories by which 'cultures' are contained in the West;¹¹ forms of culture, as Hannerz (1992) and others have shown, are becoming increasingly globalized even if their contents are not. Despite the move and arrogation of the cult by males that it implies – but more likely in part because of these – *zar* has been banned as unIslamic by the masculinist theocracy in Khartoum. Its public and highly theatrical trance rituals are no longer suffered to take place. Like other such practices, it is now wholly linked with pagan custom. Interestingly, however and with rhetorical sleight of hand, it and other such customs are also being portrayed in the media as inauthentic, non-indigenous; as *recent* acquisitions. A report on the Comprehensive National Strategy Conference held in Khartoum in October 1991, states that the goals of the Islamic government 'include the revival of indigenous Sudanese values and identity, the ensuring of freedoms and liberties and improving the standard of living so that inherited values can be safeguarded'. It continues, with regard to policy orientations:

the most important of these is that the Sudanese people are one united people and religion constitutes an essential factor in the formation of their culture. The Sudanese people are now striving to achieve the renaissance of their civilization on the basis of their past, present and vision of the future.

(*Sudanow* 1991c: 7)

The regime's invocation of history leads directly to consideration of some instructive peculiarities surrounding my own involvement in the Toronto *zar* event.

HISTORY AND IDENTITY

In 1990 the Royal Ontario Museum (affiliated with the University of Toronto and popularly known as the ROM) staged a sophisticated exhibition entitled 'Into the Heart of Africa', curated by anthropologist Jeanne Cannizzo. Through ironic juxtaposition of texts, photographs and artefacts, Cannizzo sought to expose both the complicity of Canadian missionaries and military personnel in Africa's colonization and the ROM's collusion in this process by collecting through these expatriates African exotica for display. The exhibition was designed to shake up a complacent Caucasian public; it had a rather different and unintended effect. Although Africans and African-Canadians had been part of the consultative process, when the exhibition opened its message fell mainly on deaf ears, its provocative ironies lost in literalist confusion. Members of Toronto's large

Afro-Caribbean community, for whom Africa remains the potent symbol of a golden past, were outraged: Cannizzo was accused of being racist and the ROM came under media fire for glorifying the subjugation of African peoples.

In 1991 the museum was about to open its long-anticipated Nubian and Egyptian galleries and, wishing to allay the mistrust of a highly politicized Afro-Canadian community, curators repeatedly vetted the exhibits with its so-called 'Nubian' contingent. The galleries opened in mid-February 1992 to considerable praise; the Toronto 'Nubians' joined the inaugural ceremonies by staging a 'Nubian' wedding in the museum's central hall, for the public to see. A couple of weeks later the ROM held a reception to thank the 'Nubians' for their help. I was invited to attend.

Now, until that point the penny had not dropped: I had not realized that those whom museum officials referred to as 'Nubian' were in fact northern Arabic-speaking Sudanese. Once this was clear, I was intrigued to find Sudanese themselves acquiescing in the description, in advertising further staged weddings and musical evenings as Nubian events. 'Nubian' is a polysemous term; it has a tangled etymology and a complicated history, some of which I describe below. Popularly, however, the term refers to past farming peoples who lived in villages along the Nile from its confluence in Sudan to Aswan in southern Egypt. In the early 1960s their descendants in the area between Aswan and Wadi Halfa, a town in far northern Sudan, were forced to relocate when Lake Nasser began to flood following construction of the Aswan High Dam. Despite the fact that Nubians straddle the international border, the identity has little currency in Sudan today. Such was not the case in the past.

During the medieval period (the sixth to thirteenth centuries AD) Nubia consisted of three and later two kingdoms in which Christianity¹² was the state religion and, south from Wadi Halfa, matrilineality with matrilineal residence were principles of social organization.¹³ After Egypt fell under Muslim control in AD 639, Arab nomads and traders began entering the area: slowly at first, then achieving considerable momentum in the fourteenth century as the Nubian polities fell apart. When, in AD 1317, the King's throne room at Dongola was rededicated as a mosque, the event was marked by inscribing the appropriate Islamic date (16 *Rabi'a* I, 717 AH) on a stone in the building's wall.¹⁴ Within a few hundred years Islam was well established and people had adopted Arab pedigrees, most tracing their descent patrilineally from the Prophet's paternal uncle, Abbas. That development, plus the widespread adoption of Arabic, has prompted historians and anthropologists to regard the contemporary inhabitants of the Upper Nile as *Arabized* Nubians (Hasan 1967, Adams 1984).

In archaeological parlance, Nubia is a place: the main Nile valley south from Aswan; and the region's historical Christian civilizations, along with those of Egyptian dynastic influence whose earliest remains predate the medieval period by more than 2,000 years, are considered Nubian.¹⁵ This

accords with ancient sources that refer to people living south of the first Nile cataract as Nubae and, starting in late Roman times, as Nobatae and/or Noba (see Adams 1984: 323–4, 386–7, 419–21). Close kinship between contemporary Nubian¹⁶ and some of the languages of the Nuba Hills in Kordofan suggests their common origins and either broad distribution or the shattering of a more concentrated population in the past.¹⁷ According to Hasan (1967: 8), in Sudanese traditions the word 'al-Nuba' alludes to previous inhabitants of the southernmost Nubian kingdom, 'Alwa, whom the Funj, a federation of emigrant Arabs and African converts to Islam that dates from the sixteenth century, came to dominate. Given its breadth and plasticity, the word 'Nubian' has at one time or another encompassed the range of indigenous peoples in north and central Sudan.

To contemporary Sudanese, however, the term is more specific, denoting those who speak a Nubian dialect or identify with the people of the Dongola Reach where Nubian is still, if decreasingly, spoken. Yet al-Shahi (1988: 35) points out that even these Nubians 'have discarded their origin and . . . now claim Arab ancestry'.

In their introduction to *Vernacular Christianity* Wendy James and Douglas Johnson (1988: 7) write:

The culture of medieval Nubia persists on many levels . . . but the political associations of Christianity rule out for modern Sudanese of the central Nile valley any overt recognition of this religion as a historical antecedent and cultural source. . . . [For them] Islam is . . . a part of their national and personal identity. They might well feel that since they are Muslims, the ancient Nubians, who were Christian, cannot have been the 'same people' as themselves.¹⁸

My own findings extend the validity of this distinction: the pyramids and ruined temples of the ancient Kushitic city of Meröe (*ca.* 700 BC–AD 350), adjacent to the village where I lived, were attributed by locals to the work of another, earlier race (*jinis*). Indeed, the government's keeper of this site was decidedly proud of his slim, patrician nose, narrow lips and light frame, taken to be visible signs of Arab ancestry. As Adams suggests, in shifting to Islam, Nubians 'have embraced not only a new destiny but a new history' (1984: 563). And, one might add, a new 'race'.

Why then has their ascribed Nubian identity not been rejected as false by northern Sudanese refugees in Toronto? The answer, I think, is complex and has as much to do with the refugees' lives in Canada as with the Islamic regime's efforts to forge a new nationalism through its management of history. First the urban Canadian context. Significantly, the identity is patently African, as opposed to Arab or Middle Eastern. In both Canada and Sudan race is read as an important determinant of social and political allegiance. In Sudan, where cultural affinity and religion override skin-colour as the primary criteria of race, most Muslims, however dark,

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claim to be Arabs rather than 'Africans' or 'Blacks' (*az-zurug*) – a term they reserve for people of the south. But in predominantly white Toronto, northern Sudanese are inescapably Black. Claiming 'African' identity valorizes their difference from the majority, while conveniently allying them with a Afro-Canadian community ever watchful of social institutions that, despite avowed reform, are often systemically racist nonetheless. For Africans of the earlier diaspora, who compose the majority of Afro-Canadians in the city, Nubia represents indigenous African civilization, an exalted past that predates European hegemony. By being Nubians, northern Sudanese are Africans *par excellence*.

Today it is probably easier to be African in Toronto than Arab, with the imagery of terrorism, censorship (given the *fatwa* issued against Salman Rushdie for his *Satanic Verses*) and intolerance which the latter identity popularly evokes. I was told that the 1991 Gulf War saw a dramatic rise in hostility directed against people of Middle Eastern origin; Sudanese Muslims found themselves targeted since the Islamic regime (which the refugees, ironically, had fled) had chosen to support Iraq.

Nubians are not widely associated with Islam in the popular Canadian imagination; to the extent that anything is known of them, they tend to be linked with Christianity or ancient Egypt. Television documentary series like Basil Davidson's and Ali Mazrui's have affirmed this; one programme described Nubians as legendary 'Black Christians' who fought alongside their white brethren against Muslims during the Crusades. Since ancient Nubia was matrilineal and had queens and queen mothers as well as kings, Nubians seem the inverse counterparts of patriarchal Muslims where women's status is concerned. Orientalist essentialism, however much critiqued in academe, is alive and well elsewhere; thus, by being Nubian in Toronto one is less hindered in being one's Muslim, even 'Arab' self. And given the displacement of ethnic Nubians upon completion of the Aswan High Dam, the identity has romantic overtones: Nubians are the innocent uprooted victims of development and modern technology. In short, Nubianness provides northern Sudanese with a positive African biography and distances them from their currently problematic homeland, from ubiquitous reports of famine, civil war and the 'Arab' abuse of human rights.¹⁹

Such labile use of the term 'Nubian' is hardly without precedent, for migrant Arab Sudanese in the latter part of the nineteenth century are known to have invoked it as an inclusive identity to describe themselves relative to other ethnic groups (and, perhaps, to an earlier hostile regime). The explorer Schweinfurth observed, for example, that young Ja'ali men from villages between Berber and Khartoum who, driven off the land by heavy taxation, had gone south and joined the private armies of slave and ivory traders, referred to themselves as Nubians. The retainers included Shayqiyya and Danaqla from the Central Nile as well as Ja'aliyyin; they lived in fortified stations and took enslaved women as concubines and

their descendants formed settled 'Nubian' communities in the south. Sudanese soldiers recruited from the periphery into the Turco-Egyptian forces were also often known as 'Nubian' or 'Nubi' and played a part in the colonial conquest of East Africa. There are communities today in Uganda and even Kenya known as 'Nubian' or 'Nubi', of mixed provenance but predominantly Muslim with a tradition of historical links to the Sudan through trading or military networks (Schweinfurth 1969 vol. 1: 50, 239, vol. 2: 420–2; Holt and Daly 1979: 70–1; Johnson 1988, 1989, 1992).

For its part, the Nubian identity of Toronto refugees implicitly contains an oppositional stance to the present Islamic regime, one that makes sense in light of both Canadian preoccupations and those of the regime itself. These have to do with managing and organizing history, finding meaning in the past. Islamic fundamentalists have made astute political use of collapsing global certainties and broad dissatisfaction with the legacy of colonialism to provoke a struggle over Sudan's authentic identity and culture (Gruenbaum 1992: 30). That struggle, we have seen, is concerned with purging Islam of 'inauthentic' popular traditions and enforcing 'suitable' roles and behaviours for women but also with rewriting Sudanese history, 'which was falsified by western historians and scholars' (Abdelrahman 1991a: 14). In addition to 'getting written history right' (*Sudanow* 1991a: 4) – restoring the glory of the Mahdiyya [1881–98], the 'first modern state in Sudan' (*ibid.*) – archaeological excavation and museum display are increasingly pressured to emphasize the Islamic past over earlier epochs.

In Sudan today the British are overtly vilified as enemies, invaders, as never before. The battleground at Um Dibeokrat,²⁰ where the Mahdi's political successor, Khalifa Abdullahi, and his cadre fell to Wingate's forces in 1899, has now become a national monument, restored as 'a symbol of heroism and patriotism that celebrates dedicated nationalism' (*ibid.*); despite mistrust of popular belief, it is also portrayed as a site of miraculous healing (Abdelrahman 1991a: 19) and the Mahdists who died there are spoken of as martyrs for Islam (*Sudanow* 1991a: 4).

Indeed, in the Sudanese media there is a concerted attempt to link the government with the Mahdiyya in the minds of Sudanese, thence to map the 'Salvation Revolution' onto the early Islamic state. The Mahdiyya, in other words, provides the pivotal link between the regime and the most sacred past. The Mahdi saw himself as an avatar, recapitulating the Prophet's role, and patterned his movement on early Islamic history; his principal followers were known as *Ansar*, 'helpers', the term applied to Companions of the Prophet at Medina; his lieutenants were designated as successors to *Ar-Rashidun*, the rightly guided caliphs who successively ruled the young Islamic state after the Prophet's death (Holt and Daly 1979: 87–96). Actions of the Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir are likened to those of the Mahdi and, by implication, those of the Prophet

himself. Witness the following report of an interview with the grandson of a noted Ansari:

Talking about the similarities between the Mahdiyya and the Salvation Revolution, Mr. Bashir al-Hilu said that the Mahdi had dissolved the four religious sects and the Sufi tariqas and returned to the pure sources of Islam Quran and Sunna. The NSR [National Salvation Revolution] has banned all political parties and worked for the unity of the country. The Mahdi freed the country from all political and economic pressures. Al-Bashir has done the same thing, declaring an Islamic state and raised [*sic*] the slogan 'live within your own means'. 'Thus I can say that the salvation revolution is the twin of the Mahdiyya,' he said.

(Abdelrahman 1991a: 18)²¹

It is in terms of the Islamic regime's appeal to sacred history²² – with its timeless, transcendent quality – by which meaningful pasts are collapsed into the present, that the refugees' adoption of Nubian identity can be taken as political resistance. This becomes clearer when one considers the relationships of each to their respective museums. As Benedict Anderson (1991: 178) rightly observes, 'museums and the museumizing imagination, are both profoundly political'.

The National Museum in Khartoum, noted primarily for its displays of Kushitic statuary, sarcophagi, jewellery and reconstructed temple walls, and an unparalleled collection of church frescoes from the Christian period, was closed for some time after the military-theocracy's coup and has been criticized repeatedly for not exhibiting more artefacts from the Islamic era. The Christian exhibits are especially controversial and subject to closure more often than the rest. Since 1991, the numbers of professional staff in the Sudan Antiquities Service and the Department of Archaeology at the University of Khartoum – whose institutional memory betrays a focus on the pre-Islamic past – have been reduced by over half. A recent (1992) museum display captures the prevailing mood: this was the dedication date-stone from the Nubian throne hall-cum-mosque, which was cut from its matrix in the Dongola palace and brought to the local Islamic centre, Khartoum. It was for a time lodged in the museum's foyer,²³ there foregrounding Islam, indicating the moment that significant time began in Sudan, framing and imaginatively colonizing the 'earlier peoples' whose remains are presented within.²⁴ Just as non-Islamic nations of the state's rejected past are demonstrably contained, so contemporary non-Muslim Sudanese are expected to adopt the monolithic ideal, to relinquish their 'infidel traditions' in favour of religious 'truth' and sacred history.

Unlike its counterpart in Khartoum, the Royal Ontario Museum's mandate is international: it gathers the world into itself with displays from past and present around the globe. Some of these it defines as 'other', some it defines as 'us'. A sign placed at the entrance to the ancient civilizations hall – containing Mesopotamian, Persian, Greek and Etruscan

as well as Nubian and Egyptian exhibits – reads: 'Western Civilization Starts Here'. Contrast with the Sudanese case is clear.

The ROM exhibits themselves are clever spatial evocations of Nile architecture and aesthetics that chronicle the region's human past. The two galleries are seamlessly linked, which, however objectionable to Sudani Islamists,²⁵ does not affront Occidental sensibilities given the Nile's much interwoven past. On leaving Egypt at Philae (a model) one moves in a coil through Nubian time, from sites of ancient hunters and cultivators, through the remains of dynastic (Egyptianized) Kush, Christian kingdoms and the Funj federation of the early Islamic era. The historically sequenced displays stop in 1821 with Mohammed Ali's invasion of Sudan. No window is devoted to the Ottoman, Mahdist, or colonial periods. Yet interestingly, the historical path rounds back on itself: in the centre of the hall but at the end of the visitor's temporal journey, is a case filled with contemporary Nubian 'folk' artefacts, quotidian household objects from northern Sudan including a *tubug* (flat basketry food cover) in traditional colours of orange, magenta and blue; a clay coffee pot; and a finely crafted *tambour*, a native lyre. Time jumps from 1821 to now, a now that is selective, continuous with 'the past'. One must then cross the room, exiting the historical display, to view three cases exhibiting items of mixed periods from several domains of life; these have a 'developmental' cast, showing both external influences and the continuity of local artistic and technological traditions. But whether sequential or continuous, time throughout is linear: contemporary northern Sudanese have *origins* in antiquity and are legatees of a distinguished pre-Islamic past.

'Who are the Nubians?' reads the signboard beginning the exhibit. It answers, 'Nubia has been inhabited since ancient times by different African peoples, all with strongly local and independent traditions.' Nubians, says the museum, are Africans first; Islam is inessential to their ontology. Muslim Sudanese in Toronto, by acknowledging their Nubianness, subvert the Islamic regime's vision of history and its claim to exclusive truth.

Still, Toronto Nubians are Nubian by virtue of those criteria for organizing people, space and time prevalent in Occidental societies, criteria that constitute them as 'a culture' with diverse antecedents and temporal depth rather than 'a nation' with an omnipresent past. Unlike fundamentalist Sudan, the existence of other cultures within its bounds is crucial to Canada's self-image as a nation. Richard Handler (1988: 6ff.) has suggested that the essence of contemporary nationalism is 'possessive individualism': a nation, like a person, realizes its existence through its possessions and proprietary acts. The refugees are caught between clashing images of nation whose proprietary vectors diverge. Islamic Sudan 'has' a sacred history, contains and denies its connection to the non-sacred past, seeks vehemently to eliminate any 'otherness' in its present. The vector of its ownership is exclusionary, desirous of homogeneity. Canada,

however, is a young, secular nation deeply threatened by its powerful neighbour to the south, bereft of even the touchstone of certainty that a civilly sacred past provides. It is a nation-in-becoming, enduringly divided, constitutionally crisis prone,²⁶ yet perennially anxious to defend its own fledgling 'culture' against incursions from a populous and overly confident USA. And so it realizes its nationhood, imagines itself a community, by tentatively building on its plurality: by 'having' natives, minorities, immigrants, refugees and, through a policy of official multiculturalism, encouraging the self-expression of these 'other', more established cultures in museums and folkloric display. Here conformity is induced through selectively valorized difference. Sudanese in Toronto are under considerable pressure within this context to define an authentic culture for themselves relative to fellow minorities and the national whole, to 'be different' in ways that make local (global?) sense. At the same time they are refugees and, if only to legitimate that fragile status, must cultivate a resistant stance to the source of oppression at home. So they accentuate here what is there denounced. Hence the intricate logic of Nubian weddings – kinship rites that are not specifically Islamic – held in the museum, the public, locally politicized institution that is both formally and substantively global, whose glass-encased evidential knowledge grounds northern Sudanese oppositional identity. Of course, the ROM was undyingly grateful to the 'Nubians' for authenticating its exhibition. Each authorizes and so sustains the other.

ENTER THE ANTHROPOLOGIST

At the ROM's Nubian reception (which interestingly, in deference to Islamic sensibilities, was 'dry') I met several Sudanese women, including one of the longer established members, Nyla, whose parents and husband hailed from a village near to where I had conducted fieldwork. When I told her what I had been doing in Sudan, Nyla revealed that the women planned to hold a *zar* and asked if I would be interested in coming along. We exchanged phone numbers.

A few days later I found myself in a modest Toronto apartment surrounded by a couple of dozen 'Nubian' women and their younger children. On the telephone I had been asked if I had written anything on *zar* – the women, having heard of a book called *Wombs and Alien Spirits*,²⁷ had found it in the library: until then they had not realized I was its author. I was requested to bring a copy of my book as well as my costume for Luliya Habishiya, the Ethiopian prostitute spirit who tries to pass herself off as a Sudanese bride. This *zar* party was to be a display, held in public in honour of International Women's Day; would I be willing to stand up before the expected audience of non-Sudanese and explain in English what was happening on stage? Now in Nyla's flat we were doing a dress rehearsal: Sudanese women on the floor, circling the drums,

'descending' to the spirits' 'threads' (their chants); anthropologist seated on the sofa, book open on her lap, dispensing advice on the order of the spirits' appearance, refreshing the women's memories of spirits' names, personalities, demands. Once the ice was broken the women's memories revived and chants of spirits I'd never before known were being drummed.

The women had circulated a flyer inviting Torontonians 'to see superstition and traditional dancing'. So I wondered how publicly to present the *zar* as they would want it presented. Their answers were revealing. Sadiya, a qualified physician, sympathized with my plight; then said, 'You know, I don't think there are many women here who really believe in the spirits but *zar* is a part of our culture.' Howa, a psychology graduate from Ahfad University, told me she thought *zar* illnesses were psychosomatic, linked to the repression women experience in their daily lives; she used innumerable psychoanalytic terms to expand on this: reactive syndrome, compensation mechanism and more. Nyla said she thought women used *zar* to get the things they wanted from men and gave an exegesis of the status deprivation hypothesis – to my professional chagrin. But everyone wanted to know my interpretation of the *zar* . . . did I think it was something good or bad; did I think it *primitive*? I replied that I thought it was good, that in *zar* Sudanese women had something that women in my own society lacked. The room heaved a collective sigh of relief. Someone ventured that *zar* was a source of power for women, it was 'empowering' she said, in English; someone else, that women 'feel strong' during ceremonies, where in everyday life they do not. *Zar* is a positive thing, they agreed, because when a *zar* strikes, as Howa put it, 'men can say nothing'.

Following the *zar* rehearsal, sustained at a level of noise and revelry uncharacteristic of staid Toronto, we drank *abray* (spiced *dura* bread mixed with sugar and water) and ate an elaborate breakfast to which all the women had contributed: the sun had now set, it was Ramadan and most had undertaken the fast. Sudanese men began to arrive with more children in tow. As they would be providing music for the event, they too were meeting to practise.

Nyla said the women had also decided to demonstrate portions of a wedding. Would I announce these too? The wedding they enacted next resembled those I had attended in Sudan but inexactly; it was a 'mixed' ritual, the women explained, a synthesis of local traditions that has become the prevailing wedding form in Khartoum and Omdurman. I was given to understand that on performance night the *zar* would come first, followed by the wedding. I took my notes home and prepared my 'speech'.

On 8 March I arrived at the Eritrea Restaurant at 8pm to find the place deserted. A makeshift plywood stage had been erected on one side of the restaurant, a microphone system hooked up and lace curtains hung in front to frame the show, to mark the space off from 'real life'. I found two of the women downstairs, getting ready. We sat at a table chatting as people began to arrive, gradually, Sudani style. By 9.45 most of the

women were there and we were ready to start. The audience was almost exclusively made up of Sudanese men, mainly from the north; there were few Egyptians and Eritreans, even fewer *khawajas* (Westerners). The schedule of events had been refined: Zaineb, designated MC, would first welcome people, then introduce the (all female) cast and, given that this was International Women's Day, enumerate their achievements and qualifications. Next, pre-empting the roster, would come the wedding – 'because it makes sense to do it that way'.

The Nubian wedding was executed with the requisite singing and drumming, all parts played by women, those performing male roles wearing turbans and men's clothes. The sequence ended with the bridal dance where a multicoloured wedding veil (*garmosis*) is placed over the bride's head, the 'groom' removes it and the bride begins her dance of restraint, eyes closed, clasped hands covering her face. Several men in the audience who were taken up by the performance came down to the stage to congratulate the groom and ask the bride for *shabal* – a flick of the hair movement said to confer luck. The wedding ended with the groom leading the bride off stage, singers and 'family' participants following downstairs to change.

Next Zaineb introduced 'Dr Ida', an Egyptian woman who is former Dean of Women at Victoria College, University of Toronto and currently President of the Toronto Arab Centre. Dr Ida gave a dignitary's address to the (largely male) audience in English and Egyptian Arabic concerning Canadians' false assumptions about Arab women. Canadians, she said, do not sufficiently recognize the struggles of Middle Eastern women in their homelands and the hurdles that they have overcome. Canada also oppresses women. In Egypt, despite an 80 per cent female illiteracy rate, women comprise 22.4 per cent of university faculty members. In Canada, the comparable figure is only 18 per cent. Here Middle Eastern women not only have to struggle against sexism, they also, as was evident during the Gulf War, confront racism and Orientalism. So we must celebrate International Women's Day, she concluded, and it is good to celebrate it with some of our Canadian sisters.

By now the restaurant was crowded; all chairs were occupied; ribboned children pressed against the stage. Waiters squeezed through the standing throng bearing trays of soft drinks, 'Turkish' coffee, beer. Fragrance rose from painted clay censers, one stationed (idiomatically) at the restaurant door, the other next to a loudspeaker. Two video-cameras and two racks of bright lights swept the audience, coming to rest on the stage.

Zaineb, in stiletto heels, hair elegantly coiffed beneath a delicate Saudi *towb*, then introduced me as Dr Janice, an anthropology professor who would explain in English about this next display of Sudanese women's customs, the *zar*. I had been duly wrapped in my ('authentically Sudanese') iridescent Shendi *towb* and stationed before the mike. Moments into my

account, women began to assemble behind me to drum; I nervously skipped to a sequenced recital of the spirits who were likely to appear. But, I warned, since this was a *zar*, anything could happen. The audience laughed, I left the stage, the drumming began.

The *zar* display opened with the 'patient' greeting the *shaikha* (female curer) and her assistants, followed by laudatory salutations to the Prophet. Next the patient was censured. Then the spirits' chants were drummed society by society, one by one, inviting each to descend in turn. Although *zar* rites in Muslim Sudan regularly invoke first the Darawish *zayran* – the Islamic holy men spirits and their daughters – this spirit society was conspicuously absent from the evening's schedule. Seven²⁸ chants in all were played, starting with Bashir Dagolak, a Hadendowi nomad *zar* from eastern Sudan, played by Nyla, who demanded cigarettes. Then came Sultan al Habish – the Sultan of Ethiopia – who in one woman, swaggered and strutted and waved his scarf above his head, and in another demanded a ticket in Ontario's Lotto 649, hinting at the present impecuniousness of Ethiopian royals. He was followed by Basha Bey, an Ottoman official who strikes his forearms on the ground. Another chant and the European doctor Hakim Basha appeared, demanding a white lab coat and stethoscope. These provided, 'he' asked for cigarettes and whisky. One hand waving a lit cigarette and cocktail glass, the other planted firmly on his hip, he danced an authoritative, rhythmic march and in deep-voiced English announced, 'Hakim Basha is very happy!' Then came a chant welcoming all the *khawaja* or Westerner spirits. This was followed by Nimr al Kindo, a spirit who normally wears a leopard skin over his shoulders, herds cattle and comes from southern Sudan; he is a Nuer, supposed to be somewhat wild, and the woman in whom he appeared made flailing gestures, with open mouth and popping eyes.

Last yet not least came the prostitute Luliya Habishiya (Luliya the Abyssinian), played by Amani, the erstwhile groom. Luliya appeared out of sequence in some ways,²⁹ but was the high point of the display. She began with a *garmosis* covering her head and feigned performance of the wedding dance earlier enacted in good, or better, faith. She then threw off the *garmosis* and, facing the audience, made animated blowing sounds, loud, indignant. Outstretched arms signalling annoyance, she whined (in Arabic), 'Clothes? Gold? No ring?' and motioned to appropriate parts of her body. The audience collapsed with laughter. Someone offered a cigarette and gold bangles, whereupon she cried, 'No beer?' She was handed an empty glass and told it contained whisky. Her eyes bulged, she grinned and danced with the glass on her head. Following Luliya's antics the spirits were dismissed with the *ma'asalama* (good-bye) chant and the women departed the stage.

But the night's entertainment was not over. Moments later the performers were back with me in tow, to perform traditional women's dances from various parts of Sudan, including the non-Muslim south. Lastly,

Sadiya, a medical doctor currently upgrading her skills by taking courses at the University of Toronto, approached the microphone accompanied by a teenaged girl, half-Sudani, wearing three-quarter-length jeans. Sadiya, dressed in a professional's sheer white *towb*, introduced the girl in English as the daughter of Ustaza Atahiya, a famous Sudanese actress and pioneer in women's broadcasting who has acted in numerous films and plays rendered from works of Sudanese literature, including *The Wedding of Zein* and *He and She*. Ustaza Atahiya has spoken out against the repression of women currently taking place under 'this fascist dictatorship with its imported Iranian Shari'a'. The actress had recently fled the regime and come to Toronto but was ill and could not be present tonight. We honour her, said Sadiya, as a model for all Sudanese women; she is a constant defender of women's rights when women in Sudan are being publicly beaten for 'crimes against Islam', are no longer able to attend the university, are imprisoned and oppressed. Next she presented Ustaza Atahiya's daughter with a cloth which, though folded, looked like a homemade Sudanese flag, and called on the regime to respect women's and minorities' internationally recognized human rights. Importantly, their role-model was described as *Zurug*, a woman from the south. With this the evening drew to a close.

MANAGING TRADITION

The image, the imaged, the imaginary
 – these are all terms which direct us
 to something critical and new in
 global cultural processes: *the imagination as a social practice*.
 (Appadurai 1990: 5; original emphasis)

We are the children of Mama, born of the wind,
 As we advance by kind, O Lord, our felicitations!
 They have spread our display, they have lined up our chairs.
 Those who mock us alter consciousness in our midst.
 (An opening chant of a *zar* ceremony)

In the light of earlier points concerning the group's strategic adoption of Nubian identity, let me attempt a few suggestions as to what the evening just described was all about. Though the show was supposed to be fun, it put humour to serious use, to enlighten, affirm and legitimate the community politically. It was a display of 'tradition', of vernacular knowledge now outlawed by the regime, of northern Sudanese women's knowledge and power. It was a performance of women's own 'sacred

history': the officially denigrated rituals of a profoundly threatened way of life. But more than this, it sought to create a new and broader national consciousness, one that, in contrast to the regime's, is multicultural, humanistic, neither fundamentally nor monolithically Islamic. By provoking laughter among those 'in the know', the women's antics in the wedding and the *zar* stirred group understandings even as they sought to transform them.

First, it is significant, I think, that the wedding was presented prior to the *zar*, which forms its imaginative counterpoint in northern Sudan.³⁰ The wedding, whose central figure is the meticulously prepared and self-contained bride, expresses axiomatic values – of purity, restraint, physical integrity, fertility, mutual interdependence – values that define both gender and what it means to be Muslim Arabic-speaking Sudanese. *Zar*, for its part, plays with such values, parodies and ritually defies them through the very bodies that, in daily life, embody them. Yet those who are vehicles of this satire are foreigners and spirits, not members of the community lampooned. To Nile valley 'Arabs' who are the country's privileged social group, *zayran* are alien, members of other (spirit) societies both within Sudan's borders and beyond. The reality of such aliens is thus in a sense 'ethnic'; that of the possessed, projected in relief during spirit performance, is normal, natural, hegemonic.

But in the refugee situation all of this is changed, reconceptualized. In the present historical moment of unstable and emergent identities, *zar* and the Nubian wedding *together* symbolize what is newly realized as ethnic in relation to an encompassing urban order. Where before the two ceremonies countered each other, now they jointly counter both the Canadian context, as expressions of Nubian ethnicity, and the current regime, as political defiance.

Through local women's bodies, *zar* in Sudan communicates resistance to social convention and masculine authority but also to foreign oppression and alien threat. Despite avowed disbelief, it is entirely apt that the refugee community's moral custodians – its women – should reassert their proper role and mobilize the stifled cult to oppose an unjust and severe regime that is at once conceived of as male (but does not embrace all Sudani men) and cast as foreign, alien, non-Sudanese. The women's decision to omit the category of Islamic 'holy men' from the familiar roster of spirits, despite the anthropologist's advice, is signal and, I think, instructive. Exploring this elision entails some consideration of the logic of the *zar*.

Zayran are said to occupy a world ethnographically parallel to that of the human and contiguous with it, though invisible to us corporeal beings most of the time. Spirits are ethereal counterparts of human types and historical personalities, yet, as noted before, all of them are 'others': there exist no *zar* analogues of the spirits' local hosts. Darawish spirit society is comprised of Islamic scholars and saints from Egypt, Iran, the exemplary past, and comes closest to depicting an authoritative, literate, universalist

Islam that is much admired though inaccessible to the unschooled majority. It is a society of model Muslims: devout men and their pious daughters, never their wives, whose behaviours are but approximated by northern Sudanese. Since male Darawish exaggerate local masculine ideals, even a pious man might admit to being possessed by one without gravely injuring his reputation. As befitting their lofty station, Darawish *zayran* are the first to be drummed in possession rites. *Zar* societies deemed least ideal, hence unlike Arab Muslim Sudanese and regarded by them with ambivalence if not enmity, are summoned last; these are the Africans, 'southerners': Dinka, Nuer, Azande.

In Toronto, however, these values are overturned: here northerners are also Africans and the once exalted Darawish dangerous aliens, paragons of a dreaded theocracy. If this is so, there is more; for the logic of *zar* seems also to have shifted significantly, rotated on its axis in the service of a novel message. By eliminating the Darawish, rather than including them but drumming them last, the cult's hierarchy of otherness is not just reversed but undone. Within Sudan, manifest *zayran* are culturally foreign; what is neither explicitly nor faithfully performed is 'ourselves'. In Toronto, on the other hand, the avowed aliens – Islamic authority figures – are wittingly excluded, their ideality denied. What is dramatically reproduced must thus, in a sense, be 'us': a reformulated nation, conceived in absentia in a foreign land and, perhaps, affected by it; an inclusive nation unlike that of the Islamic regime, or even of the pre-exile past. Spirits portrayed during the *zar* are all part of the make-up and history of modern Sudan, whether Hadendowa from the eastern desert, Muslim and Christian Ethiopians from the borderlands, colonizing English, cattle-keeping Nuer and Dinka – not unlike Nubians in the present and the past. All are joined in a single polyphyletic whole.

Yet it is the evening in its entirety, not just the dramatized *zar*, that grounds this observation. That night the refugees embraced as legitimately Sudanese a wider scope of customs and peoples than would have normally been the case within the 'Arab' Sudan, through their performance of dances from the 'African' south and the honours accorded the exemplary Sudanese woman, a 'Black' actress, Ustaza Atahiya (who, incidentally, had recently played the role of a *zar* spirit possessing a man in a popular Sudanese play).³¹ Through artful management of the spirit possession genre the women both distinguished themselves from their oppressors and sought to forge unity by fostering the audience's recognition of their mutual context, to 'imagine' a community through theatrical performance and so realize a greater 'we'. They used a healing cult in an effort to heal the nation.

Still, in the exile situation *zar* alone was insufficient as a narrative of resistance and reformulated identity. It needed the contextual ground of the wedding to 'make sense'. If the 'Nubian' wedding crystallizes specifically Sudanese but not specifically Islamic ideals, *zar* mocks both with

equal flair – in, for one, the person of Luliya Habishiya, the distorted local 'bride'. The women did not refrain from levelling a barb or two at themselves – as brides, medical doctors, consumers of finery – nor did the audience of men emerge unscathed. The hegemony of northern culture – of the refugees' prior position – was playfully and performatively undermined. But whatever the ceremonies' ludic content, together, even in simulation, they are political representations of officially discredited 'adat', northern Sudanese identity, to refugee northern Sudanese. And jointly they are the province of women as keepers of 'adat'.

Moreover these 'traditions', folklorized at home and now abroad, were presented in a forum that lent wider political legitimacy both to the expatriate performance and to its feminist message. The wedding and the *zar* framed the address by the President of the Toronto Arab Centre, herself a woman, who recognized Sudan not as an African nation but as part of the Middle East, and who applauded Sudanese women's struggle against patriarchal injustice. In so doing, she effectively clarified the evening's political import while opening up its apparent message of identity. Whereas the homogenized wedding is a statement of greater Nubianness and the modified *zar* presents Nubia's African circumstance and colonial past, the invitation to officiate at the evening was issued to a self-identified Arab. Clearly, Sudanese refugees are keen to maximize their options for support and Egypt has openly contested the current regime even while Iran and Iraq have championed it. It is significant, however, that Dr Ida was not marked as a Muslim. And as an Egyptian, she is of course a woman of the Nile, historically from the same two worlds – African, Arab – whence come the Muslim Sudanese.

My presence, too, probably served to validate the dramatized cultural bricolage. The authentication I provided was that of Western secular scholarship, of an academic text that both documents Sudanese traditions currently suffering repression in Sudan and affirms their significance to northern Sudanese social identity. My interpretation of the role of Islam in Sudanese women's lives is at odds with the regime's aspirations. Indeed with my fellow actors I too had donned the proscribed *towb* – though mine, of course, was not a costly *towb* made of sheer imported fabric but instead a 'locally' woven one.

In some respects the evening was a staged collision of certainties, givens, absolutes. Note that when beginning the *zar* women sang greetings to the Prophet: hence, Islam itself was not denied, merely a class of powerful, tyrannical Muslims, avatars of the enemy regime. In Sudan *zar* shows considerable deference to Islam, for no spirits are summoned during Ramadan, no rituals held even for display. The date of the performance, 8 March 1992, fell within the fasting month and still the show went on. In the clash of calendars, International time overrode Islamic, so challenging the disciplines and truth-claims of Islam, insinuating a secular community where religion is a private affair. But more than this, during the evening the

certainty that is Islam was made to confront another, equally absolute and transcendental: that of secular humanism 'enshrined' in the International Declaration of Human Rights. Women's absolute rights, especially, of free association, movement, education, have all been eroded in Sudan since 1989; even before that, when, in the early 1980s, fundamentalist Saudi Arabia extended its economic and political grasp. Patriarchal domination and local (Sudanese) male privilege were thus called into question that night by a temporary community of women which was international in fact as well as in name. Recall too the evening's venue, the Eritrea Restaurant, whose overtones of liberation are plain.

An international 'imaginary' (see Appadurai 1990) was being invoked that night but to profoundly nationalist ends. Note that the flyer announcing the event was issued by Sudanese, not 'Nubian' women. Ironically, the women who spoke for Sudanese womanhood were those whose privileged class and cultural position once depended on the oppression of non-Muslim Sudanese women and men; and it is this elite position that has made it possible (even personally necessary) for them to oppose the regime. Yet I dare not think that their broader vision of the country is a cynical one. The group's public identification as 'Nubian' makes sense not only in terms of a politicized, Afrocentric Black community in Toronto and the 'bad press' accorded Arab Sudanese, or of the current regime's historical assertions, but also in terms of a reconceived nation comprised of *Africans*: Nubians and Nuer alike.³² Theirs is not an image of nationhood where minorities must either adopt the religion and culture of the majority or face elimination but where each distinctive 'culture', each site of local knowledge, Muslim and majority or not, is equivalent to every other within an encompassing whole.

All these humanist, nationalist and feminist messages were presented, fittingly for Sudan, within the framework of International Women's Day when, as with the *zar*, 'men can say nothing'. In that they symbolize, iconically and metonymically, the Muslim community's boundedness, it is apt that northern Sudanese women should be vehicles for an image of openness and change. Sudanese women in Toronto were using the *zar* as women have long done in Sudan, to refashion who they, as Sudanese, are but also who they are not. They were structuring their historical experience, investing it with continuity and moral significance (see Palmié 1993), publicly reworking the import of what everyone – audience and performers alike – already knew. Thus they were attempting to transform an entrenched and exclusionary nationalism that had fuelled their disenchantment and precipitated their flight. If the transformation they sought occurred only in the imagination, it was no less crucial for that. Their invitation to attend an evening of 'superstition and traditional dancing' was a deeply political act.³³

EPILOGUE

In October 1992, the Royal Ontario Museum mounted a one-day open workshop on Nubia in conjunction with a guided tour of the Nubian and Egyptian galleries. Three 'Nubianists', myself included, gave lectures on Nubian culture and history; my topic was the position of women in the Upper Nile valley, then and now. Several 'Nubians' attended; the women had made 'Nubian' pastries – *baclava*, *sambusa* and the like – and 'Nubian' musicians initiated the event. A 'Nubian' man later chastised me for not having pushed my theme of matrilineal survivals and women's political roles far enough.

Towards the end of February 1993, I telephoned one of the women who had participated in the *zar* to ask if the group was intending to repeat its performance on 8 March. 'No,' she replied, 'we have all become too absorbed in our lives in Toronto. But the organization is still there. Now we are very involved in working for human rights in Sudan. And we have been having meetings with people from the south to talk about things, to see if we can get to the root of the problems between us.'

At the end of March 1993 I ran into a former student of mine, a Ugandan woman pursuing graduate studies in another field. She told me that she had several Sudanese friends and one day had asked them to show her 'something Sudanese'. They played her a videotape of our International Women's Day *zar*.

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NOTES

- 1 Spirits are said to be composed of air and fire; humans of water and earth.
- 2 Space does not permit me to develop this point fully here; it hinges on the association of womanhood with the household and household enclosure (*hosh*) and with internal affairs of the village. Apropos of this and as I briefly discuss (p. 20), the proper conduct of earthly social life – appropriately bearing and socializing children, keeping up kinship networks, performing the ceremonies that orient the course of everyday life (marriages, namings, circumcisions) – is primarily the responsibility of women. An inward orientation for women is, in part, realized and maintained through infibulation and re-infibulation

- (following childbirth), the painful shaping of their bodies to society's image, whose moral meaning is reiterated in the disciplines and duties that govern their daily lives and in the metaphors of enclosure and fertility surrounding these. Spirits, who are ethereal beings, take advantage of 'openings' – in the social fabric, in women's bodies – to enter the women as a means of gaining access to earthly delights. See Boddy 1988, 1989.
- 3 Sudan gained its independence in 1956 with formal dissolution of the Anglo-Egyptian condominium administration (effectively British rule) and its replacement by a parliamentary democracy. The first period of democratic rule was unstable and short-lived, ending in 1958 with a coup led by General Abboud. Escalating popular unrest in the north and resistance to Abboud's heavy-handed Arabization and Islamization policies among non-Muslim peoples of the south succeeded in forcing the government to dissolve in 1964; a tactical alliance of the country's several opposition groups provided transitional administration. When parliamentary elections were held again in 1965, the result was another coalition government. As new elections were being planned in May 1969, the army returned to power in a coup led by Colonel Nimeiri, who subsequently banned all opposition parties. Under Nimeiri's rule troubles between north and south continued despite a 1972 truce in the civil war. Exacerbating the problem, he declared Shari'a law for Sudan in 1983, presumably hoping to forge closer ties with powerful Arab states and appease Islamic militants at home. His regime ended with his own military overthrow in April 1985. After a brief transitional period elections were held in 1986 and again in 1988. On both occasions the results were precarious parliamentary coalitions which failed to achieve peace. The main political parties in Sudan have always been based on sectarian and/or regional interests and parliamentary rule on unsteady pragmatic alliances. In the 1980s these became increasingly reliant on the powerful Muslim Brotherhood, which supported the 1989 coup. Under the current brutal but well-entrenched regime, policies of Islamization continue in the face of southern and increasingly northern, resistance.
 - 4 By March, 1993, that number had swelled to almost eighty.
 - 5 Gruenbaum (1992) notes that the majority of urban and rural women have not yet adopted the 'Islamic' dress but that they are afraid of suffering the consequences of non-compliance, described below.
 - 6 See Boddy 1989.
 - 7 One woman ventured that the regime could not last long without this exodus, for the refugees have become a major source of foreign currency, channelled into Sudan in the form of remittances to kin. The pattern – of defending the boundaries of the moral society while selectively admitting external influences and subordinating these to internal reformulation – is intelligibly northern Sudanese.
 - 8 *Zayran* (*zar* spirits) are typically considered to be a class of *jinn*, beings whose existence is verified in the Quran.
 - 9 The *zar* in cities and larger towns differs from the rural *zar* in a number of ways. Salient here is that town cult groups tend to be relatively permanent organizations, each associated with a leader, a *shaikha* (female) or a *shaikh* (male). In the rural areas the cult is less strictly organized and curers are engaged on the basis of kinship with the patient or proximity, though for specific problems women will seek out curers in distant locales whose reputations they know of from friends and kin. In both towns and villages, however, female curers are the majority, which makes the move to form an association of *zar shaikhs*, initiated by a man, particularly interesting.
 - 10 Of course, this aspect of the cult has been emphasized by anthropologists since Leiris (1958), although I am uncertain of the extent to which such discourse played a role in the *shaikh's* decision. I am grateful to Michael Lambek for raising this issue.
 - 11 Recent extensions of more anthropological culture concepts (e.g. as in cultural studies) notwithstanding.
 - 12 Coptic, mainly, but see Vantini 1981 for consideration of the complexities of this.
 - 13 It is believed that patrilineal succession was the rule further north. Dr N. Millet, curator, ROM, and specialist in Nubian archaeology, personal communication, 1992.
 - 14 See Holt and Daly 1979: 23; Jakobielski 1986; al-Shahi 1988: 34.
 - 15 See Adams 1984; Shinnie 1967; Trigger 1965.
 - 16 There are three Nubian speech groups: Kenuz in the far north, Mahas in the centre and Danagla in the south of this zone. Kenuz and Danagla are mutually intelligible, Mahas is distinct and its speakers obliged to converse in Arabic with the other two (Adams 1984: 48).
 - 17 Adams (1984: 384ff.), however, suggests that the 'Nobatae' mentioned in late Roman texts as inhabiting the west side of the Nile south of Aswan and the 'Noba' of further south described in Axumite texts of the same period, but even earlier by Strabo and Ptolemy, may be different peoples.
 - 18 In 1813 the Swiss explorer Burckhardt learned that:

According to their own traditions, the present Nubians derive their origin from the Arabian bedouins who invaded the country after the promulgation of the Mohammedan creed, the greater part of the Christian inhabitants . . . having either fled before them or been killed; a few . . . embraced the religion of the invaders.
 (Burckhardt 1819: 133, cited in Adams 1984: 563)
 - 19 See, for example, Benjamin Weiner (1993):

What do we know about Sudan? That nation has been embroiled in a decade-long civil war pitting the Arab Muslims of the north against the black Sudanese Christians and animists of the south. . . . The fundamentalists, supported by Iran, appear to be winning the war against the black Sudanese.
 - 20 Holt and Daly (1979: 119) refer to the place as Umm Diwaykarat. It is located in southern Kordofan not far from Aba Island, where the Mahdist revolt began.
 - 21 The Mahdi is seen as having laid the foundations for the great Islamic state; but, just as Abu Bakr succeeded the Prophet's leadership upon his death, it fell to the *khalifa*, Abu Bakr's Sudani personification, to build upon his work. Indeed, today's Mahdist revival has more to do with elevating the image and achievements of the Khalifa than those of the Mahdi himself (see al-Assad 1991: 20–1) and for obvious reasons: a descendant of the Mahdi was head of the government which al-Bashir's coup replaced.
 - 22 For discussion of this issue with regard to Islamic fundamentalism elsewhere, see Caplan 1987 and Zubaida 1987.
 - 23 I am grateful to Julie Anderson, an archaeologist with the ROM's continuing Nubian expedition, for this information given to me following her return from Sudan in early 1993. The stone has since been returned to the Dongola mosque.
 - 24 It is ironic that both the particular ideology of nationalism and the institution through which it is here expressed originate in the disparaged West.
 - 25 This is significant given more recent intensive interconnections as well: Egypt's role in conquering the Sudan in 1821, in helping to overthrow the Mahdists at the end of the nineteenth century, its official role in ruling Sudan with the British until 1956 and the current antagonism that divides the two countries.

- 26 The events surrounding the Toronto *zar* took place in the midst of one of the worst constitutional crises Canada has undergone. An accord which would have made Quebec a signatory to the present constitution went down to defeat outside Quebec, in part because there was no provision for recognizing aboriginal peoples as founding members of the nation. This prompted endless soul-searching among media and politicians and a series of telecast 'townhall meetings' where notables, politicians and 'average Canadians' debated issues of cultural distinctiveness (for Québécois, aboriginals, ethnic minorities) and the future direction of the country.
- 27 The book had been shortlisted for the 1990 Governor General's Literary Award in Non-Fiction; this provoked a rant in the Toronto press along the lines of 'What does a book on Sudanese women have to do with Canada?' – through which the Sudanese community became aware of its existence.
- 28 Seven is a propitious number; in the *zar* cult there are said to be seven spirit societies (though in fact there may be more than this in some parts of Sudan); the patient steps over the sacrificial victim seven times; a major curing ceremony lasts for seven days; and so on.
- 29 Ethiopian spirits are generally drummed early on in a *zar*; however, female spirits are sometimes classed together as *As-Sittat*, 'the Ladies', and summoned at a later point.
- 30 See Boddy 1989, especially Chapter 9.
- 31 My suspicion that she was the actress involved in folklorizing the *zar* has been neither verified nor fully allayed.
- 32 In subsequent talks, some of the women pointed out that their Africanness was what made them who they are as Muslims and that the regime's denial of its Africanness is what stands in the way of a solution to the civil war.
- 33 From my own perspective at least, a final irony: it may be that the *zar*'s potential to engender a locally nuanced feminist consciousness (see also Hale 1986: 28–9), which I postulated in my book for women in the village of Hofriyat, can only bear fruit outside Sudan itself and in the hands of those who are sceptics. Whatever the truth of this comment, it vitiates neither the vernacular knowledge that grounds the *zar*, nor the cult's vital role in affirming local values threatened with erosion by forces beyond local control. Moreover, since one member of the 'cast' suggested the women should set up a 'house of spirits' (*bayt ad-dustoor*) in Toronto, it would seem logical also to question the relevance of disbelief.

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2 History and the discourse of underdevelopment among the Alur of Uganda

Aidan Southall

In our endless quest for the other, unrewarding so far in itself but valuable in its by-products, the quarry still escapes, twisting, turning, finally, disconcertingly, backwards into ourselves. At which point, having lost the real other, we turn to trivial pursuits examining ever more minute aspects, ever more intricately excavated and creatively imagined interior structures and processes of our own behaviour wrung out in studying the now departed other.

Old tribes became ethnic groups, having supposedly bounded cultures, which we deludedly studied (I was saved by the Alur). Then they lost their boundaries and became fuzzy sets, perhaps no longer cultures at all but only creolized 'knowledges' (Parkin 1993: 84).

Global knowledge has attained the capacity to feed all people and provide them with satisfying affluence and to equilibrate our numbers harmoniously with the global bounty of nature. But global political economy, through the interlocking global elite which manages the production and distribution of knowledge, has other goals. Full knowledge gives pleasure but such knowledge can be so perverted that sharing it causes more panic than pleasure. Bosnians kill one another because, through intertwined histories, they had chosen God in three different aspects which cannot all be true. We could stop them but that would destabilize the currencies on which the banks depend to channel and manipulate the global network of the production and distribution of knowledge and its power.

The dominant anthropological discourse now takes place within certain recognized but unstated parameters, tacitly omitting others previously accorded great significance. This results in a lop-sided narrative which seems like a Zen acrobat to be walking a tightrope with only one leg.

The 'knowledge' I have studied for forty-five years, emulating at a pale distance Sir Raymond Firth's unmatched record of seventy years and more, is commonly called Alur, although like most real ethnic names it is not without its obscurities. The knowledge of the Alur used to appear to them full and satisfying but has come to seem globally limited, fragmentary and even destructive. To call this process creolization is a worthy