Imperial Muslims

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It was the Muslim month of Safar and the usual rumors were once again beginning to circulate, Lt. Mosse of the Aden Police noted in his official report. The Jabartis (the “African sweeper class”) steal children. They eat them. They sell them to the Free Masons who render the bodies to extract gold from their blood . . . but only during the month of Safar. But on this April morning in 1906 things had really started to get out of hand. An Arab child had been reported missing the night before and several Jabartis were severely beaten as a result. In retaliation, a mob of some seventy to eighty Jabarti men swept into the Tawahi bazaar the next morning bent on pay back. Following a tense stand-off, Lt. Mosse, with the assistance of a Somali Havildar, managed to get the crowd to disperse with only limited causalities. Curiously, despite the violence, the authorities chose not to pursue the matter. No charges were brought against the garbage men and no arrests were ever made. The primary reason for this, according to the lieutenant, was that had legal action been pursued the sweepers would very likely have gone on strike, precipitating a public sanitation and health crisis in the Settlement.

Since the publication of K. N. Chaudhuri’s Trade and Civilization in the Indian Ocean thirty years ago, a vast library of scholarship has been dedicated to the social and cultural history of one of the earliest and longest-lived examples of a transregional arena, the western Indian Ocean. For most, however, this has been a world dominated by elites. Long-distance merchants, ocean-going religious scholars and European colonial officials—along with the networks and webs woven by each over the course of hundreds of years—constitute the bulk of this scholarship. Largely absent from this picture are tens of thousands of individuals like the “Jabarti” whose lives were no less cosmopolitan and mobile but because of the low social status ascribed to them by wider society tend to be less visible in the historical record. One place where they frequently become more observable, however, are along the often-contested moral boundaries utilized to delineate membership in the community.

As we have witnessed in previous chapters, Aden’s majority, non-European population was an ethnically diverse community whose members were drawn from across Britain’s Indian Ocean imperium with little in common other than a shared faith. As a result, over the course of the nineteenth century and early twentieth religious ideals and institutions increasingly formed the center of social and communal
life for most Adeni Muslims. Institutions like waqf, the Qadi’s courts and sacred spaces, such as mosques, shrines and cemeteries, and, later, reformist organizations, became venues for individuals who wished to stake a claim to either membership in the community and/or social authority. It was within the arena of Muslim institutions that the act of creating community was carried out.

The wealthier and politically connected elements ultimately emerged as a continually shifting set of elites who acquired social capital largely through their association with religious institutions and imperial authority. It was these individuals, along with a few pre-colonial socio-religious elites, most notably the Aydarus Sayyids, who served as the brokers of power and authority within the Settlement and sought to define the parameters for “belonging” to the community of Aden Muslims. The town’s wealthy merchants, civil servants and religious scholars, along with others that imperial authority recognized as “respectable” citizens were the people who led public committees, founded reformist organizations and administered shrines and mosques. As such, they emerged as the chief arbiters of who did and—more importantly—who did not belong within the bounds of moral, upright society.

The authority and assertions of these elites, however, rarely went uncontested. Rather than mere pawns of their social and political betters, the less connected and wealthy frequently contested the boundaries set by their supposed superiors. While reform-minded businessmen and ‘ulama’ sought to restrict the limits of acceptable religious practice, Sufis and adherents of spirit-possession cults worked to keep such boundaries fluid and ensure their place in society.4

Like all urban centers, Aden was home to numerous individuals who inhabited what may be referred to as the social and moral margins. Some, like the Jabarti, constituted corporate groups whose marginality was rooted in some perceived genealogical or occupational stain that placed them beyond the pale of acceptable society. The marginality of others may be the result of some unfortunate circumstance, such as poverty or employment in an occupation considered morally suspect by “respectable” society, such as incense or coffee sorting—both regarded as covers for prostitution. Using the imperial archives, this chapter begins by outlining the lives of certain marginal groups in Aden generally ignored by the historical record. Its focus then narrows to the efforts of certain so-called peripheral elements to claim and maintain their membership in the community. Specifically, it looks at two groups who created a place within local society via what may be termed the “spiritual economy” and the realm of spirit possession: the Jabarti—the much-maligned “sweepers” mentioned above—who were practitioners of Tambura, a spirit-possession cult from the Sudan, closely associated with various local saints’ tombs and their annual festivals or ziyarat and a more loosely affiliated group of low-status Ethiopian and Somali women who presided over the local practice of the well-known Zar cult found throughout eastern Africa and littoral Arabia.

Both traditions maintained a long-standing presence in Aden. However, by the 1920s they were under attack by early scripturalist reformers (commonly referred to today as Salafis) who viewed their rituals as licentious performances that ate away
at the moral core of society. Curiously, even though their spiritual practices were similar and both sought remedies via the same channels, the two groups experienced very different outcomes. The women who practiced Zar were entirely unsuccessful in their efforts and were ultimately forced outside the Settlement or underground. The Jabarti practitioners of Tambura, however, succeeded in avoiding an outright ban, although certain restrictions were placed on their activities. Here we consider the place of Tambura and Zar as part of the religious public sphere and the ways in which their socially disadvantaged practitioners sought to protect their position in the face of nascent scripturalist reform and the shifting boundaries of acceptable morality during the 1920s. At the same time, it suggests that defense of tradition and the unseen were, for some at least, not simply “weapons of the weak” intended to secure their position in society in opposition to stronger social elements. Rather, rituals were also critical to how individuals engaged with the unseen in ways that impacted their daily lives.

**Cosmopolitan imperial society—“servile” groups and “marginal” people in Aden**

As we saw in earlier chapters, Aden, from its founding as early as the first century BCE, served as a cross-cultural epicenter for virtually all of the trading civilizations of the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean worlds. This cosmopolitan character only increased under British rule as the port attracted individuals from throughout the Red Sea and western Indian Ocean in search of economic opportunity. The social and economic profile of the Settlement’s Muslim residents encompassed an increasingly broad spectrum. On the upper end of the scale, those British authority dubbed the Settlement’s ‘respectable citizens,’ were wealthy merchants, shop owners, religious leaders, doctors, lawyers, clerks and policemen. As Aden grew, these individuals were drawn from across Britain’s Indian Ocean domain and included Arabs, Indians and Somalis among others. On the other end lay the vast majority of the population who scraped together an existence as porters, stevedores, carriage drivers, bum-boatmen, day laborers, mosquito hunters, incense and coffee sorters (largely a female profession), domestic servants, prostitutes and, lowest of all, the sweepers or garbage men. The members of this end of society were no less—and possibly even more—diverse than their elite counterparts. While a significant number of Aden’s laboring class were drawn from the near Yemeni interior, many others hailed from the East African and Red Sea coasts as well as India.

Many of these may simply be classified as members of “the urban poor,” whose arrival in Aden was driven by multiple factors. Some came to settle and start new, more prosperous lives. These included “Jabali” villagers from the Yemen highlands or Hadramis from the southern Wadi Hadramaut, seeking to escape the more precarious life of small-hold farming and herding for what they saw as the greater security of wage labor or petty commerce in the city. Indian Memon and Bohra Muslims from western India sought to parlay skills such as tin-smithing or bricklaying
into some semblance of prosperity. And, indeed, there are many stories of modest successes, such as the illiterate Sayyid from Hadramaut who became a successful butcher or his contemporary, a poor fish monger, who came to dominate the town’s trade in seafood, both of whom became prominent and “respectable” citizens.6

Others came for what they anticipated would be shorter stays, hoping to earn enough money to achieve some short-term goal. Pilgrims returning from the Hajj trying to earn enough for the passage home or young Somali men working on gangs “bunkering” coal in the harbor or ferrying ship passengers to and from shore in small boats, hoping to save enough cash to buy the livestock needed for contracting a good marriage back home.7 As such, there were few theoretical limitations on the social or economic mobility of most of these individuals.8 There were others in Aden whose place in society was much more circumscribed. These included the Sidis, the Akhdam and Jabartis, frequently referred to in the colonial literature as “outcaste groups” who society viewed as distinct communities and whose status was the result of perceived genealogical impurities nearly impossible to shed.

The Akhdam and Jabarti
The Sidis were former slaves, and their descendants, captured by the British anti-slavery squadron and liberated in Aden during the second half of the nineteenth century. The majority of liberated Africans did not remain long in Aden but were either repatriated to the continent or transported onward to India where they usually came under European Christian mission tutelage for at least a short time. As a result, the community was never large and we know little about those who remained in Aden.9 The Akhdam and the Jabarti, on the other hand, were more prominent and permanent fixtures in Settlement society.

The Akhdam (Ar. lit servants, sing. Khadim) were a community native to southern Arabia but distinguished by their physical appearance. While Arabic speaking, the Akhdam were characterized by their “African”—specifically Ethiopian—features. Rather than the scions of slaves, they were popularly believed to be the descendants of soldiers and colonists left behind after the end of the ancient Aksumite Kingdom’s occupation of Himyar in the sixth century CE. According to one legend recorded in the mid-nineteenth century, “when the Arabs succeeded in shaking off the Abyssinian yoke (which they did with the assistance of the Persians), a number of Ethiopian families were scattered over the country. The Arabs, in order to perpetuate the remembrance of their victory, condemned them to the condition of serfs.”10 Commonly referred to as Mukhallafat Abraha (Abraha’s leftovers)11 the Akhdam were forbidden from engaging in important social rituals with “noble” Arab families, including sharing food and intermarriage, for fear of ritual pollution. They were also prohibited from living in close proximity to “Arab” families, in structures more than a single story in height or in properties with an enclosed fence.12 Not surprisingly, they were relegated to the most menial jobs, including haircutting
and garbage collection. Many Akhdam were drawn to British Aden seemingly by economic opportunity. However, in doing so they escaped few of the restrictions or humiliations experienced in the highlands. They occupied their own neighborhoods both in Crater and Shaykh Uthman, working primarily as musicians “in the low coffee-shops,” sweepers and incense sorters—not to mention maintaining a reputation for engaging in prostitution.13

The Jabarti, as a group, are much harder to pin down. In the Aden residency records, they are simply referred to as “the African sweeper class.” Although identified collectively by the British as “a community,” living mostly in the Settlement “sweeper lines,” the Jabarti do not appear to have been a single group linked by blood or common ancestry. F. M. Hunter, who makes one of the few references to them in the colonial literature, referred to them simply as “low born Somalis and negroes,” who “do scavengers’ work.”14 Records from the early twentieth century indicate that the community’s core was made up of non-Arab Sudanese as well as riverine Somalis and even some Ethiopians, whose names appear on various petitions and reports.15 Regardless of their ethnic make-up, the Jabarti were charged with the collection of garbage as well as “night soil,” throughout the Settlement. While technically municipal servants, they also often maintained private arrangements, cleaning the cesspits and latrines of well-to-do households throughout the port.16 In the close-quarters and fetid climate that characterized life in Aden, while roundly despised for their contact with human waste, the Jabarti performed a civil function whose importance cannot be overemphasized.

The term “Jabarti” and how it came to refer to the sweepers of Aden remains unclear. The word appears frequently in the European travel literature of the Horn of Africa but is rarely explained in detail. J. Spencer Tringham, writing in the 1960s, noted that the earliest identified use of the term in an Arabic text was al-Maqrizi in the mid-fifteenth century who used it to refer to the region around Zayla. Tringham held that the name came to refer to Muslims from any of the southern Ethiopian kingdoms and was ultimately generalized to all Ethiopian Muslims. Indeed, it was—and to a certain extent still is—a regional word for some Amhara- and Tigrinian-speaking Muslims of the high Ethiopian Plateau who claim the “Abyssinian Hijra” of the early seventh century as the date of their arrival.17 The word itself, at least in popular etymology, derives “from gahr (plur. Abert) servant (of God).” Tringham is at pains to point out that while used as a general word for Muslims, “it must be clearly understood that in no sense” is it “the ethnic name of a people.”18

This was certainly the case in colonial Aden. Based on the names recorded in the residency records, the Jabarti appear as a diverse collection of low-status individuals from the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, hailing from as far south as the Benadir coastal region in Somalia to as far north as the Sudan. Thus, among those recorded we find the common nisba ‘Sudani’ along with individuals whose names were distinctly Somali such as Hasan Robleh and Yusuf Abdi.19 Although the records do not
explicitly say as much, those categorized as “Jabarti” appear to have been recruited by the imperial state from the African coast for the express purpose of employment as sweepers in the Settlement. This notion seems supported by the provision of government housing for them within the civil lines.20 Trimingham notes that, in Ethiopia, the phrase could occasionally carry a derogatory meaning, but how it came to identify those recruited to collect the Settlement’s refuse and human waste remains unclear.

On the margins of public spirituality—Zar and Tambura

While the Akhdam and Jabartis occupied a reviled, although crucial, place in the Settlement as refuse and “night soil” collectors they also maintained a similar space in the town’s spiritual arena. The public spiritual sphere in Aden from the beginning of the colonial occupation through the early decades of the twentieth century was dominated by two not unrelated phenomena: the Sufi “cult of the saints” and spirit-possession groups (that is, Zar and Tambura). In addition to keeping the streets of Aden free of trash, the Akhdam and the Jabarti played important, if sometimes indirect, roles in both of these activities.

Sufism and the “cult of the saints,”21 as we have already seen, was a prominent element of the public sphere of Aden from the beginning of the British occupation through the early decades of the twentieth century. As the town grew through the nineteenth century saint veneration and Sufism continued to emerge as an important expression of popular spirituality and communal belonging. By the 1920s Aden boasted more than a dozen annual saints’ festivals centered on tombs dotted throughout the settlement. Some of these were associated with particular Sufi orders or ṭariqas; others were maintained by local followers with only loose affiliations to any particular order. Newcomers seeking, at least in part, to establish their connection to the Settlement, founded virtually all of these.

Central to most festivals was a carnival-like atmosphere with numerous diversions for the pious, ranging from the innocent to the risqué. At a typical ziyara of the 1920s one would find innocuous entertainments such as rides, puppet shows, street magicians and games of skill and chance such as ring toss, lucky dip and the odd shooting gallery. In addition to such “wholesome” amusements one could also see groups of Akhdam musicians and dancing girls, wearing “semi-transparent clothes” and Jabarti ‘Akils’ leading Tambura ceremonies.22 While festivals were organized by either the various Sufi orders or adherents of a particular saint, they were financed by large associations of merchants, landlords and other prominent citizens. These individuals gained the admiration of the community for their charity, but also made a great deal of money from the thousands of pilgrims who came to venerate and honor the deceased.23 For their part, the Akhdam and Jabarti gained valuable connections that served their mutual economic and spiritual benefit and may well have helped them retain their spot in the public sphere. As we shall see, such connections could be parlayed into important social capital, a resource the disciples of Zar conspicuously lacked.
Spirit possession in Aden

Tambura was only one of two spirit-possession cults popular in Aden through the 1920s. The other was the more widely known cult, Zar. Both Zar and Tambura were concerned primarily with curing individuals of illness caused by largely malevolent spirits. The few anthropological studies that focus on both cults hold that while likely related to each other they were distinct phenomena. Both were believed to have roots in the Horn of Africa and share close affinities with the Bori cult of the Western Sudan. However, while Zar is believed to have originated in what is today Ethiopia, Tambura seems to have separate origins as part of an ancestor cult among the tribes of southern Sudan, most notably the Zande. In addition, Zar tended to be dominated by female practitioners and in Aden at least, never seems to have been associated with the ziyaarat while Tambura was dominated by men who maintained close ties to the “cult of the saints.” As two recent researchers have noted, while there appear to be overlaps between the two traditions in terms of the conceptualization of spirits and illness, “similarities in ritual process” as well as amicable relationships between the two groups, the practitioners “themselves stress the differences rather than the similarities between the cults. The distinction between ‘we’ and ‘they’ is emphasized and...expressed in terms like the ‘bori (Zar)’ people and the ‘Tambura people.’” To better understand their individual trajectories within the context of Aden, it is helpful to examine the known history of each.

Zar

Zar is—historically speaking—a widely spread phenomenon found throughout Northeast and coastal East Africa, the Red Sea and Persian Gulf coasts of Arabia, Egypt, Sudan and even southern Iran. As a ritual found across a large geographic area, as Richard Natvig has pointed out, the “ceremonial and cosmological differences,” socio-sexual make up of its participants as well as the social and cultural “consequences of participation” vary considerably across time and space. Two constants, however, tend to stand out. First, the purpose of the practice is invariably “the curing of illnesses or misfortunes caused by possession by a species of spirit called ‘Zar.’” Second, and more important, while affliction strikes women from across the social spectrum, its practitioners are unfailingly either women of slave origin or ascribed low social status. The origins of Zar are, unsurprisingly, somewhat murky. References to a “Zar” spirit have been found on Ethiopian protective amulets excavated at Aksum that can be dated to the sixteenth century. The earliest mention of a Zar ritual—in European sources, at least—dates only to the first half of the nineteenth century. In 1839, two evangelists of the Church Mission Society, John Lewis Krapf and Charles William Isenberg, witnessed a possession ceremony held in a home in highland Ethiopia. Their account is strikingly similar to modern descriptions of Zar ritual:

The Gallas and all of the people of Gurague and Shoa, believe that there are eighty-eight spirits, which they call Sarotsh—in the singular Sar. These spirits are said to walk about and inflict men with sickness; and hence, when such persons feel sick, they take
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their refuge in superstitious means. By smoking and singing, moving their body, and
particularly by offering a hen to the Sar, they imagine that they can frighten away the bad
spirit and secure themselves against being sick. The Sartosh are divided into two parties,
each having its Alaca or head . . . When persons perform such a ceremony, they speak
in another language. Thus, for instance, they call a hen, “Tshari”—in the Amharic, a hen
is called Doro. The hen is afterward slaughtered and eaten by the assistants, except the
brains which are only eaten by the person who has performed the most part.32

While Natvig refers to this as “proto-Zar . . . at an early stage of development,” as
opposed to “the fully developed Zar cult,” the ceremony described bears many of the
hallmarks of rituals recounted by later observers. These include the use of tobacco,
smoke or incense, dancing, speaking in “tongues,” gift giving to placate the spirit
and sacrifice.33 Over the course of the nineteenth century through the middle of the
twentieth, there are numerous accounts, written mostly by Europeans, of Zar rituals
around the western Indian Ocean. Although ranging over a wide geographic area,
all describe strikingly similar ceremonies and cosmologies, as well as attributing the
cult’s origins to a single source: Ethiopian slaves.34 C. B. Klunzinger, a quarantine
doctor on Egypt’s Red Sea coast, Salma bint Said (also known as Emily Ruete, the
errant Zanzibari Princess) and Snoucke Hurgronje, the noted Dutch Orientalist, all
link the practice explicitly to “Abyssinian” slave women who introduced the ritual
to the households of their masters if not the very notion of jinn and possession.35 The
descriptions provided by Salma bint Said and Hurgronje of ceremonies in Zanzibar
and Mecca, respectively, are of particular significance. Both offer a level of detail
found in few historical sources, but more importantly each affords insight into the
broader appeal and social context of the cult.

Hurgronje was an Orientalist and sometime adviser to the Dutch colonial state,
who penned what is probably the earliest detailed ethnography of daily life in Mecca
based on his sojourn in the Hijaz from 1884 to 1885. His observations on Zar are
of interest as much for his ability to perceive their wider social significance as for
their detail. Zar, he noted, was a fact of everyday life in nineteenth-century Meccan
society.

From youth upwards the women hear so many tales told of the Zar that when they are
attacked by the diseases mentioned, those diseases generally take in their view the form
of the dominion of the Zar over the will of the individual. In some cases this dominion
shows itself in the woman being thrown at certain times to the ground and lying there for
hours in convulsions; sometimes she appears to be suffering from some known disease,
which however now and then passes away suddenly leaving only the pale colour and
the wide-strained, open eyes. Sometimes the patient is during the attacks as though wild
and raging. Learned men, doctors and in general most of the men are always inclined to
employ either medicine or else orthodox religious exorcism of the Satanic powers; the
female friends and relations on the other hand advise unconditionally the calling in of an
old woman who is versed in dealings with the Zar [Hurgronje contends the word Zar had
no plural] (a Sheikhat ez-Zar36) and they in the end overcome all resistance.
The Sheikhah does not put questions to the sick woman herself, but to the Zar who is lodged in her body; sometimes the dialogue is in common language and so can be understood by the bystanders, but often the speakers use the Zar language, which can be understood by no one without the interpretation of the Sheikhah. Essentially there is little difference to be observed in the results of such conversations. At the repeated request of the Sheikhah the Zar declares himself willing to depart, on a certain day on the performance of the customary ceremonies, but stipulates certain conditions. He demands a beautiful new dress, gold or silver ornaments, or the like. As he himself, however, escapes human perception, his wish can only be gratified by the articles mentioned bestowed upon the sick body which he inhabits. It is touching also to see how the evil spirits consider the age, taste or needs of the possessed person. On the day on which the departure of the spirit is to take place, the invited female friends of the sick woman come to her in the afternoon or evening and are regaled with coffee, tea, pipes and also often with food; the Sheikhah and her slave girls, who must attend these functions with beat of drum and with a species of song, partake of the refreshments and prepare for their work.37

Hurgronje’s detailed description of Zar ritual reflects his training as an Orientalist and early ethnologist. However, what sets him apart from other contemporary observers is his ability to perceive the wide social appeal and function of the possession cult. Zar, he tells us, was not a limited phenomenon. Traditions of spirit possession, he wrote, could be found “among all the nations that are represented in Mekka” and while they might have various appellations for it “they soon here take on the local name, which is derived from the Ethiopian and shows that the superstition was introduced by Abyssinian slaves.” Rather than a single, homogenous tradition, there existed, at least in theory, various methods for driving out spirits. There were “for instance, a Maghrebin (North-West African), a Sudanese, an Abyssinian and a Turkish method.”38 However, in the end, most of the afflicted ultimately called on the services of the Ethiopian “Sheikhah,” the acknowledged expert.

In addition to recognizing its widespread presence in Meccan society, Hurgronje also noted its importance particularly for women. “The struggle with the Zar,” he wrote, “exemplifies the saddest and gayest sides of the lives of the Mekkan women.” While women were undoubtedly tormented by possession it also represented a social and material opportunity for them.

It is easy to perceive that this work very rarely means the expulsion of real Zar; fine clothes and nice parties are what the Mekkan women love above all things, and they are shrewd enough to act at the same time the part of the Zar and the possessed ones: this disease-comedy has however actually become an endemic sickness. It would be necessary to keep a woman away from all intercourse with other women in order to preserve her from this infection: just as it may be said: “I must go tomorrow to the wedding of such a one”, so another day it is said: “I am going to such a one this evening she has a Zar” (the word is used for the company that attends the exorcism as well as for the evil spirit itself). Nay, some too even give away the show and say to their husbands: “It is high time for me to give a Zar for I have been to so many at my friends”. “What is the use of all his objections and how can he use his legal right to prevent his wife from leaving
the house when he knows that she upon his refusal will behave like a madwoman until he gives way or divorces her? And what is the use of a divorce when he cannot do otherwise than marry another who similarly after a short time commences her Zar? The Zar in fact is just as much a necessity of life to most women as tobacco or gold or the gilded embroidery of their trousers.39

Salma bint Said similarly recorded the broad appeal of the cult in East Africa. Although dominated by female ‘Abyssinian’ practitioners, possession, she noted, could afflict anyone and all segments of Arab society in Zanzibar participated. Even recently arrived, and largely skeptical, Omani were not immune. “The Omanites,” she writes, “reject such nonsensical practices as I have been describing.” Indeed, “when they come to Africa, they at first think us barbarians, and would like to return immediately; however, they soon become receptive to the very notions they denounced, and adopt the most absurd. I was acquainted with an Arabian of that sort, who believed herself possessed by an evil spirit which made her ill; she was convinced that it could be propitiated if she held festivities in its honour.”40

Zar, as practiced in Aden, closely mirrored the descriptions of Hurgronje and Bint Said. The Settlement was home to a number of independent possession circles each led by a priestess or ‘Alaka.’41 Groups were primarily composed of Somali and Ethiopian women from low-status social groups who filled various functions either assisting the Alaka, singing musical accompaniment or helping the possessed. While led and dominated by women, the groups’ musicians—mainly drummers—were mostly men.42 Although the practitioners were almost universally drawn from socially marginal groups, their clients—as in other places—came from across Aden society. These included women of limited means but also individuals from some of the wealthiest and most respectable households in the Settlement as well as a few men. Ceremonies were, on some occasions, semipublic affairs held on bits of open common ground in neighborhoods like Shaykh Uthman. At other times, they might be held in the women’s quarters or courtyards of private homes.43 Presumably, the latter was the privilege of Aden’s wealthier women who could afford to pay for such privacy.

The premise of the cult, as elsewhere, was rooted in the belief that women frequently came under the thrall of certain malevolent spirits or jinn becoming ill as a result.44 Once possessed it was believed virtually impossible to rid one’s self of the intruder. The task of the Alaka and her coterie was thus not to expel the jinn, but to negotiate with and placate it through ritual as well as expensive presents such as perfumes and jewelry. Descriptions of Zar rituals in Aden vary and none are as detailed as Hurgronje’s or Bint Said’s.45 However, all include drumming, clapping and chanting along with some sort of ritual sacrifice (a sheep, goat or chicken, depending on the client’s means) as well as feasting.46 Performance of cult ceremonies was undoubtedly a noisy, boisterous affair. Even when performed in a private home, as a number of testimonies are at pains to point out, it could hardly go unnoticed by the neighbors.47
Finally, a few words must be said regarding the cult’s links to broader religiosity. Later twentieth-century examinations of Zar—particularly in Sudan—highlight the lengths to which practitioners go in order to link their beliefs with Muslim cosmologies and the Islamic calendar. Writing in the late 1940s, the anthropologist Sophie Zenkovsky noted that at the conclusion of an “ordinary Zar,” the “shaikha invokes Shaikh Abd el Gadir el Gilani and Shaikh Mohammed, and they [the gathered participants] all bow as in the performance of a Zikr [sic].” In addition to invoking the saints, the Zar shaikhas also tied their beliefs to the Islamic calendar, Zenkovsky writes:

During the month of Ramadan all the “good” Islamic spirits have great powers and all the afarit, shayatin and riyah are hidden under the earth. Nobody can or will attempt to darab al-Zar; all the implements of the shaikha are collected on a table and covered with a cloth. On the 15th day of Ramadan the shaikha burns incense in front of the table and may uncover them.

In her seminal work on possession in the contemporary Sudan, Janice Boddy notes similar conscious parallels with tariqa Sufism and adherence to the Muslim calendar. In the urban Omdurman of the 1970s a Zar Shaykha “commands honor from adepts much as a tariqa [sic] shaykh does from his following.” Furthermore, “public zar ceremonies periodically organized by individual shaykhat greatly resemble in their format the public zikrs [sic] of the tariqat [sic]; both use a common set of ceremonial props including flags, and both direct prayers to Allah and the Prophet.” What stands out about Zar in Aden is the near complete absence of such imagery. Boddy has amply demonstrated that, in the Sudan, Zar circles consciously coopted the imagery and even the terminology of tariqa Sufism. Significantly, this does not appear to have been the case in Aden where no such references occur. As we shall see below, the Alakas of Aden portray Zar—much like the depictions of Hurgonje and other early writers—as a practice that existed parallel to Islamic custom rather than within it. This was a characterization that would ultimately work to their disadvantage.

Tambura

While depictions of Zar organization and ritual must be pieced together from fragments in the colonial record, descriptions of Tambura ritual in Aden are even more scant. As a result, we need to turn to the colonial literature on the Sudan to develop a fuller picture. As described by observers and participants in the 1930s, Tambura in the Sudan was a complex, horizontally organized association whose membership consisted primarily of men from low-status or slave backgrounds. Unlike Zar, associates of Tambura were generally those who were previously possessed by spirits and cured by the ritual. As G. P. Makris notes, “affliction,” was “a precondition for
becoming a cult group leader.”53 Also distinct from Zar, where each group was autonomous, a number of groups—“tanabir” (pl. of Tambura)—recognized the authority of a senior practitioner known as the dalil or guide who determined the timing and frequency of ceremonies. In the Sudan, the leader of an individual group held the title of Sanjak, an Ottoman military rank, while in Aden such individuals were known as Akils.54 The principle distinctions between Zar and Tambura ceremonies, however, appeared to be the choice of musical instrument and, as we shall see in Aden at least, a curious and overt relationship to Sufism.

Zar traditionally relied primarily on drumming for its ceremonies. While drums were certainly used, at the center of Tambura ritual was a six-stringed rababa55 that appeared to serve as the principle medium of communication between the group and the offending spirits. Each rababa received a name from the Akil/Sanjak that also served as the group’s name.56 So in Aden Mansur Ba Yasin was “the keeper of the tombora Salah”; Said Banda was the keeper of “tombora Nasra”; Khamis Barut was that of “tombora Jaria”;57 and Muhammad Sa’ad was keeper of “tombora Jamala.”58 In addition, male participants wore a leather girdle or belt decorated with cowries, sheep bones and goat hooves.59 Probably the most curious distinction between Tambura and its Ethiopian cousin as the latter was practiced in Aden was its close connection with Islamic mysticism.

Tambura in Aden was performed by the sweepers on a weekly basis, most usually on Thursdays and Saturdays. However, it was also a prominent feature of almost every major ziyara in the Settlement.60 Performances of Tambura might be viewed as an anomalous entertainment particularly since these were located not in the vicinity of the tombs but further away among the dice games, puppet shows and shooting galleries of the wider festival. Indeed, both imperial authorities and Tambura practitioners stressed—for reasons to be discussed below—that theirs was a simple pastime, “a sing-song . . . among people of slave origin” in the words of one Akil, with no religious significance.61 Other evidence, however, suggests that this was a carefully constructed picture meant to deliberately obscure the connections between Tambura and tariqa Sufism.

While it could hardly be argued that Tambura was simply an idiosyncratic form of Islamic mysticism, descriptions and testimonies from Sudan in the 1930s and 1940s reveal the use of a great deal of Sufi imagery within its ritual as well as self-conscious ties to the Islamic calendar. According to one observer, every Tambura group possessed two banners, “one is red with the words Abd el-Gadir [Jilani] with a star and a crescent moon written on it in white lettering, the other is white with Saidi Billali62 and the star and the same moon in red. On the top of the banner staffs are rattles ending one with a crescent moon and a star; the other with a crescent moon and something like the head of a spear.”63 The resemblance of such banners to ones used for processions by nineteenth- and twentieth-century Sufi turuq is striking. The similarities did not, however, end there. During the ceremony known as al-Kursi (the throne) the banners were “hennaed” and then on Friday a procession was undertaken to visit each saint’s tomb in the vicinity whereupon “dates and sweets
are thrown at each site.’ In a separate ceremony seven pigeons were sacrificed ‘in the name of Abd al-Qadir Jilani, who is thought of as the ‘king’ of the Tambura spirits.’64 The banners were again taken out during the principal feasts of the Muslim calendar, Id al-Fitr marking the end of Ramadan and Id al-Adha (the feast of sacrifice) that marks the Hajj and during every local mawlid or saint’s festival.

While ritual processions resembled those of their Sufi counterparts, other ceremonies also bore at least a passing similarity to local Muslim custom—in particular, the rituals surrounding mawlid or celebrations of the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday. Writing in the 1940s, Zenkovsky noted that at the time of the mawlid:

The floor is strewn with mats: the rababa with her singer is in the centre near the wall facing east, and on her left is the bearer of the big staff who is an old woman. The small staff reclines on the wall near her. In front of the rababa is a big incense burner with female attendant. Near the right hand wall are two drums with their attendants and the belt; near them are more burners. Near the entrance of the veranda are seated the women and children with big rattles in their hands.

The singer tinkles the stings, the big drum gives one or two beats, the audience shake the rattles: it is the prelude. Then the singer being his [sic] chant by a sentence ordered by the rababa, the choir takes it up; the drum catches the cadence and the rattle shake in rhythm. The ceremony has began [sic].65

To anyone familiar with the performance of Maulidi along the East African coast, which is also used to celebrate the birth of the Prophet, this description will sound strikingly similar. However, this was not the only connection of the cult to the Islamic ritual calendar. As one informant noted, as with Sudanese Zar, Tambura ceremonies were not held during the holy month of Ramadan. Instead, at the start of the month the strings of the rababa were “plaited across with date palm leaves [rendering it unplayable] and the whole instrument is clothed and shut in its room.” It remained so until the fourteenth day of the month when it was taken out and the strings unplaited, the instrument would be incensed and then returned to its cupboard until the Id at the end of the month.66

Like Zar, the descriptions of Tambura ritual in Aden are scant and there is no firm evidence that the Sufi-like rituals observed by Zenkovsky in Khartoum carried over to Aden. Other evidence exists, however, that does indicate a close association between the Tambura adherents and local tombs. As we will see below, by the mid-1920s Tambura practitioners in Aden sought to distance their rituals from what may be regarded as unseemly religiosity. For many, however, the ceremony certainly held spiritual significance connected directly to the Settlement’s many tombs and shrines. In a 1932 petition to the Chief Commissioner, a group of Akils stated that Tambura was a ritual “created from our ancient days, [the] time of our grand-fathers,” if “our saints [go] without worship . . . our relations [will] fall . . . sick . . . one after [another].”67 In a similar petition from a few years earlier the Akils Mahi Ibrahim and Yusuf Abdi requested permission to hold a Tambura ceremony
during the ziyara of Shaykh Ahmad in Tawahi as “We got a Vow [sic] to complete as we solemnly promised To [sic] God to complete . . . on the day of the fair.”

Finally, one police report noted, in 1931, that the practitioners of Tambura sought to become possessed by the spirit of whichever saint’s ziyara they happened to be at. For some at least, the practice of Tambura remained closely intertwined with the cult of the saints and the public performance of spirituality even while they distanced themselves from it within the official narrative. Unique among spirit cults in the region, Tambura practitioners seem to have engaged in what may be called a “positive” form of possession, where, rather than an affliction, the spirit was called upon in an effort to do good. Although this is quite speculative, it could be argued that the practitioners of Tambura viewed the saints, as well as the Prophet, as benevolent ancestors whose spirits could still assist the living in ridding them of less beneficent specters.

Zar and Tambura, if the claims of their adherents are to be believed, held a secure spot within public spiritual space from the earliest days of the British occupation if not before. By the 1920s, however, elements of Aden’s more “respectable” Muslim population found both of these groups to be at best a public nuisance and at worst serious moral dangers. The campaigns against them stemmed directly from the growing religious reformism that suffused most public Muslim discourse from the late nineteenth century.

Religious reformers and the campaigns against Zar and Tambura

The undersigned inhabitants of Aden-Arabs, Somalis and Indians beg most respectfully to approach your honor on a subject of the utmost importance to the whole Moslem community in Aden . . . The subject that we bring forward for consideration is the great nuisance caused to us by an irreligious performance usually held in Aden among women, which is call “ZAR”. It has been formerly tolerated because it used to be on [a] smaller scale very rarely [performed], but now it has turned out to be most unbearable.

The late nineteenth century and early twentieth has been referred to as the era of the imperial petition, an instrument employed by colonial subjects across Britain’s Empire in their efforts to gain the attention and favor of the state for various economic, social, religious or political purposes. Such appeals might be intensely personal and individual (for example, an application from an Indian clerk asking to hold a Zar ceremony in order to honor a personal vow). Others, such as the one above, could purport to represent much larger groups demanding action by the imperial state on some matter of grave public concern—in this case, the spirit-possession cult Zar.

Beginning in 1923, Aden’s spiritual status quo began to come under pressure from a certain influential segment of Aden’s male Muslim population that began to agitate against various practices deemed “un-Islamic” and a danger to the moral hygiene of the local Community of Believers. Their efforts, of course, were inspired
by the growing discourses of Islamic religious reform that flowed across the British Empire from Cairo to Kuala Lumpur in the early twentieth century. Reformists in Aden varied greatly along socio-economic, ethnic and ideological lines. They were united, however, in the perceived need to eliminate (or at the very least “purify”) particular local spiritual practices deemed morally suspect. These included spirit possession in any form, certain Sufi practices and various long-established religious rituals regarded as *bid‘a* or “unlawful innovations.” Reformists used a variety of old and new media forms to accomplish their goals. In addition to petitioning the state, reformers also utilized relatively new forms of social media to spread their message and attract adherents, including pamphlets and the formation of social clubs (for example, the Arab Literary Club) whose members regularly led discussions of current events and delivered lectures to the unlettered on pressing social, moral and political matters. At the same time, we should note, reformists continued to avail themselves of more traditional Muslim social media in the form of mosque sermons, *fatwas* (religious opinions) from respected local religious scholars and religious poems intended to galvanize public support.

The earliest and, in some ways, easiest targets of reformist efforts were the local spirit-possession groups. Whether as a result of incipient reformist influence or fears over the cult’s sudden growth in popularity, Zar was targeted first when, in December 1923, a group led by the Qadi of Aden, Da’ud al-Battah, initiated a petition seeking to have it banned. The ‘*ālim* and his fellow petitioners argued that the custom should be proscribed partly because it was *haram* but more importantly because the practitioners preyed on women of “rank and honor,” duping them out of their savings and “introducing bad moral behavior into the entire community.” Backed by the signatures of many of Aden’s “respectable citizens” as well as *fatwas* from three notable religious officials, including the representative of the Imam in Sana‘a, the Residency and Superintendent of Police, quickly outlawed the practice.

The reformers, however, were not the only ones to exploit the imperial medium of the petition. The practitioners of Zar and Tambura resisted the efforts to put them out of business by taking their case to the state. Both utilized formal petitions in an effort to convince the Resident to overturn their respective bans while the adherents of Zar even ultimately resorted to the British colonial courts. Curiously, even though their spiritual practices were similar and both sought remedies via the same channels, the two groups experienced very different results. The followers of Tambura succeeded in avoiding an outright ban, although certain restrictions were placed on their activities. The women who practiced Zar, however, were entirely unsuccessful in their efforts and were ultimately forced underground or outside the Settlement entirely.

**Zar priestesses versus The Powers That Be**

Following their prohibition, the four Zar priestesses of Aden wasted no time in organizing their own petition. On the same day—January 18, 1924—that the Resident issued his final pronouncement regarding the cult’s prohibition, the women filed...
their own petition seeking to have it overturned. The January appeal was the first of many that the Alakas of Aden submitted to the state from 1924 to 1932. In their initial salvo, the women addressed the charges brought against them by, on the one hand, disputing the moral and religious validity of the accusations, but also by challenging the very authority of those who made the allegations.

We the undersigned prefer our complaint against those who complained to cancel the existence of Zar (i.e. a sort of females play [added by the translator])

1. We inform your honour, Sahib, that it is unlawful to prevent the existence of Zar because it is being practiced in this country as well as in the other countries throughout the East and West. In this country, the Zar has been practiced since the last hundred years when Aden was an Abdali territory and not of late and at that time neither the complainants nor their fathers or fore-fathers were there and we can prove this by original residents of Aden.

2. We inform your honour, oh Sahib, that the complainants are not originally Aden people but are foreigners some of whom are from Hadramaut, some from Syria and some from Yemen and other places.

3. Oh Sahib, we have heard that the above complaints against the Zar have obtained the signature of Sayed Mahomed Dawood Battah the Kadi of Aden for the discontinuance of the Zar and on that account we inform you, oh Sahib, that the aforesaid Kadi knows nothing about the locality, for it is [only] three or four years since you have appointed him as kadi. He belongs to Zabid and the Zar which he has declared in writing to be unlawful is being practiced in Zabid, Hodeida and the other countries in that direction. If the practice of Zar was unlawful, the people of Zabid and other countries would have stopped it because there were many Kadis and learned men who know better than him.

4. Oh Sahib, if the practice of Zar was not lawful and should not have been practiced in the town the original people of Aden would have stopped it, such as the Mansab of the country Sayed Abdulla Aydaroo and the former Kadi of Aden Kadi Sheikh Ahmed, Kadi Sayed Yehia, Kadi Sayed Hasan and his sons Mahomed and Hamood bin Hasan, the Kadi of Sheikh Othman, Kadi Abdul Rehman Nijm, Kadi Omer Abdulalah Sharaf, his son Mahomed Omer Sharaf and his present brother Kadi Awad Abdulla Omer Sharaf. The above persons being the Kadis of Aden and Sheikh Othman and its Mansab would have stopped the performance of Zar if they could find any harm or corruption in its practice because they are more conversant than any one else with the principles of the Islamic faith.

5. We inform your honour, oh Sahib, that there are several immoral acts strictly forbidden from a religious point of view being practiced in this country such as the Toombara in which both male and female play... Such playing are openly made in the fairs [saints' festivals] and other places. There are people drinking liquor, committing adultery and Sodomy, practicing usury and gambling and doing other objectionable acts which God has forbidden in the Koran. Why the complainants and the Kadi who complained against the Zar have not raised objection to the existence of these immoral acts which are forbidden by both God and His Apostle? We further say that the acts pointed out by us are not permissible by God nor His Apostle or the Islamic religion. The Zar is not an objectionable act, on the contrary some good is derived out
The complainants against the Zar are wrong in their action and have no right to stop it, as it is not one of the objectionable acts but they have done that out of jealousy on their part. Oh Sahib, we are widows and have no any other means of livelihood except the performance of Zar and whatever we gain from the blessings of God and the Zar. You have now suspended the practice of Zar and said that you have done so until you go through this case. We obeyed your orders but this Zar is now being practiced by people at Sheikh Othman both in day and night time. It is unfair, oh Sahib, to stop us as we are widows. We now request God and you kindly to grant us permission to continue the Zar. Oh Sahib, when any one (female) of Aden people intend to perform Zar he (she) firstly pay us a visit at our home and we then go to his (her) place and perform the Zar under purdah. The people who perform the Zar are respectable (females) of Aden but we do not do as those who act against the Commandments of God.

Meanwhile, oh Sahib, the complainants have fabricated lies against us but God forbid that from a just point of view you would listen to the tale of liars and thus we become the victim of wrong while you are in existence. We invoke blessings for you as we are helpless widows.

The women argued, first, that their practices in no way violated the legal precepts or moral community of the Faith, a contention that they sought to support by calling upon both local tradition as well as the wider regional context. Zar, the women held, had been a part of Aden’s spiritual landscape since before the arrival of the British in the middle of the nineteenth century, when the port belonged to the Abdali Sultan. The ritual, they argued, was practiced throughout Yemen from Zabid in the mountains to Hodeida on the Tihama coast. And, finally, not only was Zar a longstanding tradition, but it was one tolerated by religious authority and they provide a lengthy list of ‘ulama’, past and present, who had never objected to the ritual.

This list invoked the names of virtually every prominent Adeni Qadi since the late nineteenth century as well as Sayyid Abdullah Aydarus who, as a descendant of the town’s patron saint Abu Bakr Aydarus (d. 1506) and caretaker of his tomb complex, was recognized as one of the most learned and influential Muslims in the Settlement. Indeed, for a brief spell the Sayyid defended the women before the Resident as the practitioners of an innocent pastime. When interviewed by the First Assistant Resident regarding the ritual’s permissibility under Islam, the Sayyid noted, “The Zar is not in accordance with the Sharia, but is a long standing tradition in Aden, after all there are many things—such as photography—which are not in accordance with the Sharia.”

Those who objected to Zar, on the other hand, the women charged were “not originally from Aden . . . but . . . foreigners some of whom are from Hadramaut . . . Syria . . . Yamen [sic] and other places.” This included Qadi al-Battah who, they pointed out, as a native of Zabid should have known better. “If the practice of Zar was unlawful,” they noted, “the people of Zabid and other countries would have stopped it because there were many Kadis [sic] and learned men [living there] who know better than him.”
Finally, they argued, while the town’s so-called respectable citizens were busy persecuting a group of poor widows, other, flagrantly immoral activities, that were “strictly forbidden from a religious point of view,” were allowed to continue uninterrupted. Tambura, for instance, was far worse than Zar where men and women mixed openly, getting up to God only knew what. The annual ziyarat associated with various tombs in the city hosted festivals where people drank liquor, “committed adultery and sodomy,” and practiced “usury and gambling,” all of which were “objectionable acts which God has forbidden in the Koran [sic].” How could Zar—a widely followed and wholesome practice—be banned when these immoral acts were not?

By invoking the Faith, correct practice and belief (not to mention scholarly authority) the Alakas initially sought to place Zar within the acceptable moral boundaries of the Muslim community using arguments that were not unlike those of their opponents. Curiously, neither side in this dispute attempted to bring to bear any specific theological or legal arguments frequently found in reformist debates of the period. Instead, both employed much more vague protestations revolving around ideas of morality and what Islam would and would not allow as determined by agreed-upon-practice or a perceived “common sense” notion of the boundaries of the public sphere. Unfortunately, for the priestesses it was the Qadi’s view of morality, along with the signatures of more than 100 townsmen that the British accepted.

In response to the women’s petition, the Residency replied, “Respectable citizens of Aden and Sheikh Othman [sic] are against the custom of Zar. This question has already been fully considered and orders issued to the police to refuse permission to hold the Zar in Aden and Sheikh Othman in future.”

For reformists, the matter was settled successfully in their favor and they, for the most part, moved on to other issues (most immediately their campaign to ban the town’s other spirit-possession cult, Tambura). The four Alakas, however, did not concede defeat quite so easily as they continued to petition the state to lift the injunction over the next eight years. Continuing to utilize the medium of the formal petition, the women quickly abandoned the notion that Zar fit easily within the realm of acceptable Islamic practice. However, they continued to argue that the cult’s practices were consistent with the community’s broader moral economy.

Starting with petitions sent in March and April 1924, the women began to recast the matter. They argued, first in an application on March 31, that their services hardly represented a strain on the pocketbooks of women, stating that such ceremonies—at their most expensive—cost an individual a mere 15 Rs (if she were a woman of means) and only 4 Rs if she were poor. The women held that this was no more than was often paid to someone performing a wedding and, as such, did not represent an unreasonable expense. The amount spent on Zar, they averred, did not in any way amount to “prodigality.” Indeed, the opposite was true. As poor widows, they argued in an April 16 statement, they had no other major source of income and as a result the ban on Zar imposed an undue burden on their ability to earn a livelihood. The prohibition, they argued, created rather than alleviated economic hardship.
With this, the *Alakas* started to shift their arguments away from those who sought a place within the Muslim moral sphere and began appealing to British moral authority. Specifically, they appeared to deliberately appeal to the British conceit that they were the enlightened champions of colonized womanhood. Rather than a religious ceremony, they sought to re-characterize Zar as a “harmless meeting” held by “Muhammedan womenfolk” since “times immemorial.” These were, they argued, “simply a sort of social meeting where women meet together to pass a few hours listening to small drums being played and sing songs.”

Gatherings were held “according to strict purdah,” and men never allowed to attend. Such gatherings they held were among the very few forms of entertainment that women in seclusion could enjoy “being for . . . most . . . of their lives cooped up.” By permitting the resumption of Zar, the Resident would in fact be taking a stand in favor of the rights of women.

Your lordship knows that even in such an enlightened country as England, there are many people who hold it to be a grievous sin to even dance, smile or go to any theatre . . .

As it is, the enjoyment of Zuhr [sic] has nothing obnoxious about it, and no harm has ever been caused to anyone and it is therefore [we] humbly hope that your Lordship will mercifully be pleased to allow the Zuhr to be played as before and thus all the purdah . . . ladies who used to attend . . . will look upon and remember your Lordship as their Champion.

In subsequent petitions, the *Alakas* refer to their craft as “Zar theatre” and emphasized the hardship that the ban had placed on them, precipitating grave misfortune. “Your humble petitioners are insolvent old females who have no other source of income to maintain ourselves and our large family . . . We have been living in a terrible condition and crisis and are likely to perish with hunger having none on whose protection to rely except God and your Lordship.” They went on to declare that “your humble petitioners have every confidence . . . that your Lordship will . . . confer your protection on poor females like us who deserve pity.”

Through these and other petitions, the *Alakas* appear to try to enlist the Resident as a new moral arbiter—one who protected women from religious overzealousness and physical deprivation. When this, unsurprisingly, failed, they sought out one last desperate remedy: the courts. On August 2, 1932 the Chief Commissioner received a letter from I. J. Sopher, Barrister-at-Law, who pled the women’s case before the Magistrate’s Court.

On behalf of my clients Mariam bint Mohamed, Zainab bint Omer, Amina bint Ali, Fatoom bint Awad and Amoon bint Hasan [Ibrahim], I have the honour to state that two of these persons are Zar women and along with the rest form a company of singers who are frequently engaged by the local people to sing at their private residence. The singing is accompanied by the playing of drums. The hours of singing vary, sometimes during
the day and at nights their engagements do not exceed the limit of 11pm, within which period they cannot be styled as a nuisance to the public.

It appears that a few years ago the Police were instructed not to issue any permits to the Zar women as this was being restricted under Section 48 of the Bombay District Police Act. For your information, I may point out that in Jammada Bhukhandas I. L.R. 19 Bom. 737 it has been held that the words of Sec 48 of the District Police Act does not empower the D.S.P. or the A.S.P. to stop music in private houses.

My clients have now and again been illegally meeting with opposition from the Police in view of the department orders. In view of the authority quoted above as also in absence of any legislation on this point, I have to request you to vacate the order refusing permits to Zar women to perform in private houses.94

The lawyer’s main point was that rather than any kind of religious ceremony, Zar gatherings were in fact musical performances held in private residences. As a result, based on the Bombay Police Act, the authorities could not move to disrupt them as long as they did not violate long-standing customary rules regarding public nuisances. The Aden District Magistrate was reluctantly forced to agree, noting, “Sopher’s point must, I fear, be conceded.”95 and the Alakas were informed via their lawyer that they may once again practice their craft.96

Their victory, however, was short lived. By early September another petition from the “respectable citizens” was lodged with the Residency and by late October the state moved once again to ban Zar’s practice.97 And this would, in fact, be the death knell of Zar within the Settlement. A new rule was added to the Settlement Regulations (260A to be exact) that specifically defined Zar as a public nuisance and forbade its practice.

Following this defeat, it seems that the four Alakas knew when they were beaten and ceased petitioning the state. Instead, they appear to have packed up and moved beyond the Settlement limits in the Sultanate of Lahej, at least temporarily, where they continued to exorcise spirits unmolested.

Emboldened by their seemingly easy victory over Zar, the reformists turned their attention to Tambura. Curiously, while the campaigners succeeded in winning what were largely nominal restrictions on Tambura and other activities associated with the ziyarat, unlike Zar, none of these were ever completely barred.

Gender, as we shall see, certainly played its role in this discrepancy. Zar practitioners were uniformly poor foreign women with little to protect them from patriarchal elites well connected with the imperial state. Reformist attempts to outlaw both Tambura as well as more risqué elements surrounding the ziyaras, however, were no less aggressive than those mobilized against Zar. Ultimately, however, they bore far less fruit. The question we must ask, of course, is why. Rather than a case of simple misogyny, the different outcomes for Zar and Tambura may also be tied up in a number of other issues, including spiritual patronage, “respectability,” and the reinforcement of accepted social hierarchies. The practitioners of Tambura, as well as the Akhdam musicians and dancers, appear to have survived through a fortuitous
confluence of circumstances and, in the case of the former, an uncanny ability to exploit their relationships with the influential.

**Tambura survives**

Beginning in the early months of 1925, Qadi al-Battah and others submitted a number of letters and petitions calling for similar measures against the Tambura cult as well as what were viewed as the more salacious activities surrounding the various *ziyarat*. In this case, their rationale was not the ill affect it had on the moral fiber and pocketbooks of upstanding women, but that Tambura and other activities (drinking, gambling and dancing with the women of the Akhdam) promoted a general air of licentiousness throughout the settlement and frequently led to drunken fights and a general disturbance of the peace.98

The Deputy Superintendent of Police concurred, noting that “whenever this instrument is played, loafers, such as Arabs, half-breed Jaberti [sic] boys and women of ill-fame and loose character join in a dance around the instrument . . . As the ‘Zar’ was [banned] around a year ago I have the honor to request that the playing of this instrument be similarly prohibited.”99 Curiously, however, while the campaigners succeeded in winning what were largely nominal restrictions on Tambura and festival activities, unlike Zar, a complete banned never emerged.

Following a flurry of memos within the Residency it was decided that Tambura should only be excluded from the celebrations surrounding saints’ festivals. Adherents were allowed, however, to continue holding ceremonies on a weekly basis (usually Saturday evenings) at various locations throughout the Settlement after each group obtained a permit.100 The dances of the Akhdam, by the same token, were deemed harmless and its practitioners left undisturbed. The survival of both appear due in no small part to their close association with the tombs of the saints. The *Akils* of Tambura, in particular, seemed able to achieve a relatively favorable outcome through two strategies. First, unlike the women of Zar, they managed to successfully cast themselves as a benign entertainment. Second, and more importantly, the leaders of Tambura activated their own network of patrons within the Settlement who were willing to support them.

When the same reformists who led the outlawing of Zar turned their attention to Tambura, its practitioners reacted quickly. While the Residency debated whether or not to ban the custom in response to reformist petitions, several Tambura leaders submitted their own plea to the First Assistant Resident who was responsible for issues surrounding public order. The *Akils* wrote:

\[
\text{Sir, Being aggrieved by the order prohibiting us from playing the Tambuura [sic] a native string instrument, we most humbly appeal to your Honor to set aside this order, for the following reasons.}
\]

\[
1. \text{That this playing and dancing with the Tamboora [sic] is an ancient custom used only by persons like us who are of Negro origin and no religious meaning attaches to it.}
\]
2. That the playing of Tambuura [sic] is merely a Negro method of having a sing-song of passing a couple of hours in enjoyment of an innocent amusement.

3. That ever since the British government entered Aden no trouble whatsoever has been caused by the playing of the Tamburra [sic] and we have always been allowed to play it and thus peacefully enjoy ourselves as can be verified by inquiry and it has no connection with Zar. Therefore, we humbly venture to hope that your kind and merciful Honor who is well known to be the protector of the poor and helpless will mercifully allow us to play Tamburra as before in understanding to keep the peace as before. And we, your humble petitioners, shall be forever grateful [and] pray for your honor’s long life and advancement.101

The most detailed of a number of requests sent to the Residency, this petition lays out certain key elements of the Akils’ strategy for preventing an official ban. Unlike their Zar counterparts, whose first instinct was to try to defend their practice as lying within the bounds of acceptable Islamic morality, the Tambura men quickly denied the presence of any religious or spiritual meaning in their practices. Instead, it was merely an “innocent amusement,” meant to pass “a couple of hours in enjoyment.” In addition, they explicitly and vehemently denied any connection to Zar, noting that no public trouble had ever been caused by their performances unlike the disreputable practice that had just been banned.

The Akils need not have worried, as the authorities had already decided against a complete ban, instead prohibiting the practice only at the local ziyaras.102 Over the next several years Tambura groups continued their weekly rituals with few interruptions. However, they also periodically challenged their exclusion from the local saints’ festivals. Petitions appear in the residency records about every two years with different groups requesting permission to perform their rituals at the ziyaras (either that of Abu Bakr Aydarus in Crater or Shaykh Ahmad of Tawahi). In addition to their petitions, they also called upon the good offices of Sayyid Abdullah al-Aydarus, the guardian of the Aydarus shrine, who the British recognized as the mansab or titular head of Aden’s Muslim community. On at least two occasions, Sayyid Aydarus supported the requests of Tambura Akils to perform their ceremonies at important ziyaras.

In the first case, in 1925, Sayyid Abdullah personally petitioned the Residency for special permission to allow a Tambura ceremony at the Aydarus ziyara:

I most humbly and respectfully beg to request your honor to grant permission to the Tambura [sic] players (drummers) to play this evening from 4 o’clock to 1pm [sic] because they were suspended by the Police Inspector to hold it as usual although they have not made any riot or quarrel to make them deserve suspension by the police authority. I hope your honor will be kind enough to grant them the above request as a special case for the occasion of the Aidroos fair.103

Several years later, in November 1930, when petitioners sought permission to perform at the ziyara of Shaykh Ahmad in Tawahi, they noted, “People have [an]
endowment and they desire to fulfill it . . . if they do not do so it is very bad for them.” And in case the authorities were not convinced of the spiritual urgency of the matter he requested that they “forward our petition to Shams-ul-Ulama Syed [sic] Abdullah Aidroos [sic] for his opinion on the subject.”

In neither case was an exception granted. However, the fact that the Tambura Akils viewed the Shams al-Ulama as someone who understood and supported their cause certainly indicates that on some level the practitioners of Tambura enjoyed an amicable relationship with the local Sufi religious establishment.104

An additional, if more general, show of support for both the Akhdam and the Jarbarti Tambura adherents arose from the entrenched economic interests of their social betters. In a number of counter petitions merchants and tomb functionaries implored the government to leave the festivals as they were. They held that apart from the spiritual aspect, the activities surrounding the ziyaras were an important source of income for small traders and entertainers throughout the year. Any disruption, they argued, would cause serious hardship.

In 1931, for instance, the committees of two shrines in the suburb of Shaykh Uthman (Hashim al-Bahr and Uthman Damreel) wrote to the Resident begging that the carnival activities surrounding the saints’ days should be left alone for economic as well as religious reasons. They noted that the majority of the Settlement’s inhabitants were “much pleased with the Fairs as well as the Homage to the saints,” and it was only the conniving of meddling, puritanical reformists who wished to put an end to them. In addition to their spiritual benefits, they opined, the annual ziyaras were important as a major source of income generation. Visitors to the ziyara, they noted, came from all around and could number 20,000 or more. If each person spent 5 Rs, as they estimated, this accounted for the major portion of the yearly income of local small merchants and traders. To limit the “entertainments” of the fairs would invite economic disaster.105 The Residency was apparently convinced by this logic and quickly declared that the carnivals—including “mixed dancing”—could continue, although those responsible for overseeing the festivities should make every effort to curb the worst excesses.

The petition does not explicitly endorse the participation of Tambura. However, the expressed desire of the committees to leave the festivals unregulated certainly suggests a tolerance, if not outright support, for the cult. Indeed, at least some groups may have skirted the ban on performing at festivals by holding their ceremonies not in close proximity to the tomb but within the sweeper lines.106

The lives of the socially circumscribed, the public spiritual sphere and the importance of the unseen

The official records of the ziyaras end in the mid-1930s and so does our information on Tambura, Zar and, for the most part, references to the “servile classes.” We
know from other sources that the practitioners of Zar survived first by moving their ceremonies beyond the Settlement boundary, although this seems to have been a temporary exile. Indeed, by the 1960s, R. B. Serjeant, the distinguished historian of Southern Arabia, noted that although formally outlawed, Zar continued to “flourish” within the Settlement. Although there is no record indicating whether or not they were ever able to again hold their rituals openly at the local saints’ festivals, Tambura continued and Serjeant again mentioned its continued practice in the 1960s.

By the same token, while moved to the margins of the celebrations, the Akhdam were permitted to continue what was regarded as their traditional entertainment. Unfortunately, however, following this glimpse in the official records the Akhdam, the Jabarti, the Zar priestesses and all forms of public spirit possession recede into the social background.

At first glance, it is all too easy to accept the characterization of European observers and officials that so-called “serviles” held little importance in society beyond the menial tasks they performed. While occupations such as garbage and night soil removal were critical in a port such as Aden their place in society could be viewed as largely marginal. The evidence presented here, however, suggests otherwise. Certainly, the Akhdam, the Jabarti and the women who led Zar lived existences viewed as peripheral by both European and wider Muslim society. They all worked at menial jobs and were frequently associated with the outer edges of morality (such as drinking, gambling and prostitution). However, the evidence suggests a need for closer examination of not only the role of such people in the religious public arena, but their ability—or inability—to protect that space when under threat. It may also leave us room to interrogate what these rituals meant to the actors in a broader sense. Was it only about the power to belong or was there more at stake?

At the start of the 1920s, all of these practices were integral components of public spirituality in Aden and, as such, they became targets of early scripturalist reformers. Tambura and Zar each sought to safeguard their place through the same state channels and by self-consciously distancing themselves from any connection to what could be defined as religious practice. Instead, both tried to recast themselves as “mere entertainments.” Yet, neither ever shed their connection to the unseen in practice. For both sides—pro and con—the conflict over spirit possession was not solely over the authority to define public space. It was also about differing visions of the universe. Reformists subscribed to a post-enlightenment view of rationality in which other realms (such as the divine and the jinn), although they existed, were largely inaccessible to the world of humans. Proponents of spirit possession, however, maintained a different view. Not only could the realms of human, jinn and the divine intersect with one another but these alternate dimensions regularly influenced the world of people. As such, in order to understand the conflict more fully, we need to see it as one grounded not only in questions of authority but also differing understandings of the universe and humanity’s place in it.
Spiritual hucksterism or communing with other realms?

The practitioners of Zar were all low-status women with little in the way of social protection. Many of the participants in Zar rituals, however, were women of means who may spend relatively lavish amounts on ceremonies. In other periods and contexts—nineteenth-century Zanzibar or Mecca, for instance—this was viewed as a comparatively harmless aspect of elite female life; however, in twentieth-century Aden it was deemed socially disruptive and morally corrupting. At issue was not just perceived impiety—although this played its role. The original petitioners charged that Zar targeted women of “rank and honor,” preying on their religious ignorance and superstition. But they also averred that Zar ceremonies constituted an unhealthy drain on the income of respectable Muslim households. Writing more than ten years after the initial ban, Ahmad al-Asnag—an Adeni essayist and supporter of scripturalist reform—noted that “women believe that Zar is a beneficial remedy to chronic maladies and they hold celebrations upon which they expend great wealth.” Women, however, were not solely culpable. Al-Asnag held that “many husbands lend a hand in this,” paying for the ceremonies and sacrifices needed to placate the jinn and “cause the pain of his wife to abate.” As a result, “the people’s wealth flows to these tiresome women [that is, the practitioners] and their souls are bound to Zar.” Zar threatened not only the piety of respectable Muslims, but also the economic security of the domestic realm. This, Asnag was at pains to point out, was as much the fault of the men of the house as the women. Zar was not the only danger to respectable Muslim domesticity in his view. Just as bad were the “swindlers and deceivers who wear white turbans and carry long strings of prayer beads, [who] deceive people by leading them to believe they are from among the learned ‘ulama’.” These “fraudsters,” he wrote, convince people that all illnesses are the work of the devil and possession; they promise to cure the “naïve” with folk remedies and “fleece the ignorant of their wealth.”

Piety and scripturalist notions of orthopraxy were central to the campaign against Zar. Equally important, however, was an additional current running through Adeni society of the 1920s, the notion of “respectability.” Both Asnag and Muhammad Ali Luqman wrote with concern of a growing materialism and profligacy that afflicted Aden’s Muslims. Luqman wrote in the introduction to his novel Sa’id, that while women “believe in silly practices like Zar, charms and amulets, vows [or votive offerings, nadhur], pilgrimages and tomb visitations,” of equal concern was the profligate behavior of young men and the conspicuous consumption found in many households. Liquor, drugs and lewd public behavior among young men of respectable homes were at the top of their lists. Families waste their wealth on “costly automobiles and gasoline; electricity and ice; the cinema, mila, and clothes; none lasts but a few days then it becomes an old fashion.”

Curiously, Asnag believed that the people who sought the services of Zar priestesses and the hucksters in “white turbans,” suffered from genuine illnesses. Resorting to such remedies, he argued, was misguided and naïve at best and a great waste
of resources. The money of Aden’s inhabitants, he argued, would be much better invested in women’s education, the founding of hospitals and the training of female doctors who could treat the needs of women in either clinics or the home.116

For many, Zar and Tambura were lewd superstitions that drained family resources, precipitated moral delinquency and threatened respectability. For others, the rituals remained an important conduit to the unseen and the divine—the performance of which were critical to their physical health and well-being. As we have already seen, Akils in the early 1930s argued that if they were not allowed to perform at the tombs the saints would “go without worship” and their relatives would “fall . . . sick . . . one after [another].”117 In a similar petition, the Akils Mahi Ibrahim and Yusuf Abdi requested permission to hold a Tambura ceremony during the ziyara of Shaykh Ahmad in Tawahi, as “We got a Vow [sic] to complete as we solemnly promised To [sic] God to complete . . . on the day of the fair.”118 As one police report noted, these were not metaphorical rituals. The practitioners of Tambura, as noted earlier, also sought to become possessed by the spirit of whichever saint’s ziyara they happened to be at, becoming physical agents for the intersection of different realms.119 Even while they distanced themselves from the notion publicly, for these Akils, at least, the practice of Tambura remained closely intertwined with the unseen.

But it was not only the practitioners of Tambura who saw interactions with the jinn as a necessary part of life, particularly in times of crisis. In June 1931, for instance, Hasan Khan Mirza—a typist for the Anglo-Persian Oil Company—filed a petition with the Residency. He stated that in 1929 he was struck with an unspecified “serious illness” from which he did not expect to recover. Faced with the end, he wrote, “I made a vow to perform a ‘Zar’ ceremony after 2½ years, should I regain my health.” Hasan miraculously recovered and now he asked for permission to hold a ceremony “as a special case.”120 Another petitioner, Husayn Fazoo, appealed to the authorities to host an “Indian Zar” in his home. He argued that “Indian Zar is not a public nuisance,” like that practiced by the Arabs “who used large drums, etc.” Instead, “it is simply a lady’s party called Gamat,” held in the name of the Sufi saint Abdul Qadir Jaylani.121

Like the revival of specific tombs and the desire of individuals to be interred near particular sanctified spots, the “positive” form of possession evinced by the Tambura adherents and the performance of Zar as a method of vow fulfillment can be read as active engagement with the unseen rather than simply as attempts on the part of the disadvantaged to assert political power. Certainly, they represent efforts by individuals to convince the state to reverse their position on ritual practice or at least make temporary exceptions. But, in these cases, we see not just social and political maneuvering aimed at securing space within the community. Rather, they illustrate the perceived importance of unseen forces in daily lives. Rituals must be held in order to prevent the physical illness of loved ones; vows kept to remunerate the divine realm for services rendered, whether this might be God, the awliya’ or spirits. Indeed, in these instances questions of social space and political power were
relatively moot. The Tambura *Akils* were not banned from their rituals merely from certain locations, while those petitioning for exceptions to the sanctions against Zar were otherwise “respectable” citizens with little stake in the woes of the cult’s practitioners. However, their relationship with forces of the unseen was deemed important enough for them to continue to defy elite society and the imperial state. This was not because they hoped to derive some social benefit, but because the maintenance of such relations was deemed critical to their own well-being and that of their families.

**Explaining the different outcomes**

Finally, we must turn to the question of why these two cults, so similar in nature, achieved such different outcomes. The campaign against Zar was certainly, to a large extent, about women in the domestic sphere and control over definitions of proper piety during a period when such notions were in a state of flux. Also at issue, however, were concerns about social class, economics and “respectability” that not only resonated with Adenis across the social spectrum but insured that Zar had no public champions. Tambura and the Akhdam dancers were more fortunate. The relative success of the latter and failure of the former to defend their place in the public sphere, however, hinged little on their ability to navigate the currents and eddies of the colonial petition regime. Rather, success in the end seemed contingent on their perceived impact on the moral, political and economic interests of what the British would refer to as “respectable” society.

On the face of it, Tambura and the Akhdam shared many of the same disadvantages as Zar. The followers of Tambura were similarly drawn from a reviled low-status group, the Jabarti; the Akhdam dancers belonged to what was likely the most despised community in the Settlement. Both were associated with activities (public debauchery, mixed dancing, alcohol consumption and spirit possession) widely associated with moral turpitude if not outright heterodoxy. In addition, their pursuits were, if anything, more public than those of Zar, taking place in the streets, coffeehouses and shrines of Aden’s various neighborhoods. Yet circumstances and interests appear to have enabled them to emerge relatively unscathed.

Tambura was more successful, it can be argued, not because its leaders managed to navigate and manipulate the new world of petitions and bureaucracy any more successfully than the *Alakas* of the Zar, nor simply because the state and society tended to favor men in the public sphere over women. They, and the Akhdam, survived because each managed in large measure to retain support from certain “respectable” elements of society despite their ribald reputations. The persistence of both practices was due in part to their economic importance but also the fact that their presence helped to reaffirm rather than subvert certain social and spiritual hierarchies.

Within the context of the Sudan, both Tambura and Zar communities maintained a close connection with the Islamic spiritual calendar as well as with shrine
In Aden, however, it was only the practitioners of Tambura who appear to have such associations. While proclaiming in some petitions that their dances had no religious or spiritual connections, in others the Tambura Akils betrayed the continued importance of the saints in their ceremonies. Their reputed ability to channel the spirits of deceased saints could be read as attempts to subvert local hierarchies by claiming power equal to that of their spiritual and social betters. However, the continued support of the head of the most important shrine in Aden—on more than one occasion—suggests that the Akils’ ceremonies were interpreted as a sign of their love for the Friends of God and a reinforcement of the spiritual status quo rather than a challenge.

Similarly, important elements of the local merchant community who subsidized the festivals surrounding each ziyara were willing to go on record—tacitly, at least—in support of Tambura as well as the Akhdam entertainers. Like Zar, many denounced these practices as beyond respectability. However, they were central elements of the lucrative carnivals that popped up around all of the major ziyaras. It was one thing for them to intervene to supposedly protect respectable women from exploitation. But large merchants and shrine caretakers seemed less willing to police the moral probity of the rural bumpkins and urban riff-raff who constituted the bulk of fair goers and, thus, the principal source of profits at the annual festivals. As such, they rushed to the Akhdam’s defense along with all the other members of the “carnival economy” when faced with opposition from religious reformers.

While it is difficult to draw definitive conclusions from the available evidence, one thing is certainly clear. The public spiritual space of British imperial Aden was broad and even those considered to be on the fringes of respectable society had their place. More importantly, these were spaces that, once acquired, they were loathe to give up easily. In the end, however, the ability to navigate the bureaucratic alleyways of the Aden Residency was insufficient to insure survival. The Alakas of Zar proved themselves to be quite adept at using the medium of the petition to set out their claims and even re-inventing themselves in terms that they hoped would appeal to the imperial state. But the interests of Muslim elite society proved decisive. Both Tambura and Zar were subjected to the prevailing winds of scripturalist morality sweeping “respectable” society. Zar’s close association with the domestic sphere of Aden—whose moral and fiscal probity were central concerns of reformers—appears to have left the priestesses irrevocably exposed. With the virtue of respectable women and the fiscal security of the home at stake, none could be seen to be championing their cause. Conversely, and somewhat ironically, Tambura’s identification exclusively with the “lower” elements of society worked to shield it from complete prohibition. While Zar’s perceived profligacy impinged on respectable domesticity, the imagined licentiousness and borderline heterodoxy of Tambura and the Akhdam, by contrast, directly impacted only those already considered on society’s fringe. Indeed, it could be argued, they even reinforced certain elite interests. As a result, “respectable” merchants and those associated with the shrines could rise to their defense with British authorities with fewer fears of con-
sequences. By the same token, those who defended Tambura were driven by more than crass economic self-interest. The scripturalist movement’s campaign against spirit possession foreshadowed a broader effort to define the acceptable spiritual parameters of the community as they began to take aim at a new target of alleged impiety: Sufism and the cult of the saints.