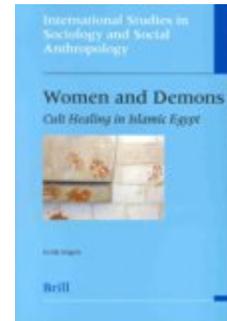


Gerda Sengers. *Women and Demons: Cultic Healing in Islamic Egypt*. Leiden: Brill, 2003. viii + 302 pp. \$66.00 (paper), ISBN 978-90-04-12771-5.

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Childbearing, Economic Participation, Domestic Violence, Infertility

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The concept of demon possession in the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa has occupied the attention of anthropologists. Investigations of the intersection between possession and gender, religion, power, and mental illness have dominated the studies in Sudan, Morocco, and Sub-Saharan Africa. *Women and Demons: Cultic Healing in Islamic Egypt* by Gerda Sengers offers an important contribution to the body of scholarship dedicated to demon possession. Sengers's rich ethnography investigates the contemporary manifestations and roles of demon possession among lower-class women in Cairo. Moving beyond her more narrowly focused predecessors, Sengers chronicles the experiences of both possessed women and the healers themselves. *Women and Demons* examines both Qur'an healing and the *zar* ceremony, thereby offering insights into multiple modalities of ethnomedical treatment and socio-cultural interpretations of possession. Rather than exploring the "instrumentalism" of demon possession, Sengers provides the reader with a glimpse into the world of demon possession, as experienced and understood by women, healers, and the larger community.

Women and Demons begins by providing a context for conducting research in contemporary Cairo. Sengers discusses the concept of poverty and the struggles of women residing in a lower-class area of the city. In chapter 2, Sengers turns specifically to the issue of demons and the relationship between demons and humans in contempo-

rary Egyptian society. By tracing historical and religious influences on the local cosmology, Sengers provides a detailed reflection on magic, sorcery, and healing. *Women and Demons* then situates itself within the larger body of scholarship on spirit possession. Dedicated to introducing the overall theoretical framework of the study, chapter 3 provides a critical analysis of previous anthropological and sociological research on the phenomenon of possession. Sengers convincingly demonstrates the importance of moving beyond an instrumentalist analysis of demon possession and sets the groundwork for the primary research laid forth in the remaining chapters of the book.

The second part of *Women and Demons* is dedicated to the extensive fieldwork and analysis conducted by Sengers. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 describe and compare the *zar* and Qur'anic healing rituals. Through discussions with both *zar* leaders and Qur'anic healers, Sengers offers insights into the structure and intention of the respective rituals in healing possessed women. Noting the importance of gender in the susceptibility to possession and the relationship between the possessed and the demon, Sengers also explores the importance of gender in the relationship between the healer (female in the case of *zar* leaders, male in the case of Qur'anic healers) and the possessed in the healing rituals themselves. Sengers offers important reflections on the similarities and differences between these two modalities of healing and the reasons for which individual women find recourse in each type of ritual.

Chapter 7 is arguably the strongest chapter in the book. Entitled "A Kaleidoscopic Picture of Egyptian Society," chapter 7 offers accounts of individual women's experiences with possession. Using these individual stories as a springboard, Sengers follows each narrative with a detailed discussion of a number of thematic issues affecting the urban poor. From childbearing, infertility, and domestic violence to economic participation, poverty and health care, chapter 7 provides an important context in which to view the experiences of possessed women. Sengers argues that the healing rituals are important, individually and collectively, for women's empowerment and self-expression.

Although *Women and Demons* focuses on two ethnomedical modalities of treatment, the study would have benefited from a greater discussion of the biomedical re-

sponses to possession. Consistent with the practices of women throughout the Middle East and North Africa, many of the women presented by Sengers appear to have interfaced with both the ethnomedical and biomedical worlds of healing and treatment. Thus a more explicit discussion of the biomedical establishment's conceptualization of demon possession and modes of treating women who identify themselves as possessed appears warranted.

In spite of this limitation, *Women and Demons* offers a rich and nuanced examination of contemporary demon possession in Cairo. Although this study focuses on spirit possession, the methodological contribution extends beyond the fields of medical and cultural anthropology and will undoubtedly benefit readers from a variety of social science disciplines.

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