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Spirit Mediumship in Upper Egypt

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Abstract. – Based on a poorly known study by the German anthropologist H. A. Winkler, "Die reitenden Geister der Toten" (1936), this article sets the worldview of Upper Egyptian country people in the 1930s in social context. It illustrates the power of an imagined universe to guide people's choices in life through its construction of reality. Winkler's book examines the case of a single spirit medium, and thus it reveals the relationship between an anthropologist and his subject/informant. The study also explores the processes through which a person could become a shaykh, or fail to do so, and attempts to see the directions of change in Upper Egyptian society. The conclusion places this older study in the context of more contemporary thinking in anthropology. *[Egypt, spirit mediumship, history of anthropology, anthropologist-informant relationship, constructionism]*

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1 Introduction

In early 1933, an otherwise unremarkable Upper Egyptian peasant named Abdel Radi was possessed by the spirit of his late paternal uncle Bekhit. Bekhit appeared to Abdel Radi in a dream, and commanded certain things, notably that Abdel Radi was to serve as the "mount" or medium for Bekhit, who would express himself through him. Abdel Radi, with the help of his father and wife prepared a room in their house and began to receive visitors seeking messages through Bekhit from "the other side." Abdel Radi would induce possession in himself, and Bekhit would appear through his voice and other mannerisms, and answer the questions of the petitioners.

This was the situation in December 1933 when the German anthropologist Hans Alexander Winkler returned to the hamlet of Kiman near Qift where he had done research in 1932. His field project had to do with material culture and folklore, but Winkler also had a professional interest in shamanism, on which he had given a seminar at the University of Tübingen in the summer of 1933. When Winkler arrived in Kiman, and heard of Abdel Radi's new role, he straightaway went to visit him, and Abdel Radi welcomed him, offering on the spot to invoke Bekhit and demonstrate the possession. Winkler felt that Abdel Radi was not a charlatan, like the spirit medium he had seen in Cairo, so he decided to study him (1936a: 1).

During his stay, Winkler attended many of the sessions when men were the petitioners (there were also women petitioners), and collected other information on the social and cultural context. He interviewed Abdel Radi at some length. The book (Winkler 1936b) in which he gives an account of this spirit medium and his social and cultural setting is the subject of this analysis. "Die reitenden Geister der Toten" (The Riding Spirits of the Dead or less literally The Ghost Riders) is rarely cited, hard to find, probably unreviewed, and appears to be a largely forgotten text on the anthropology of Egypt.[1] "Die reitenden Geister der Toten" was

1 Winkler wrote an earlier book on the village of Kiman (1934), and he published an account of a survey trip he made

probably neglected at the time of its publication because it was out of touch with the emerging racist ideology in Germany at that time, and neglected abroad because it was from a Germany with that ideology.

This article has several goals. First of all, it is an effort to rescue a forgotten book of considerable ethnographic interest, a book that was methodologically somewhat precocious, and to situate it within the life history of the author. This is a contribution to the history of anthropology in Egypt. Spirit mediumship has otherwise not been reported in such detail from Egypt,[2] and thus this article showcases a valuable contribution to Egyptian ethnography, complementing other forms of spirit possession. Finally, it illustrates the power of an imagined universe to guide people's choices in life through its construction of reality. At a time when most anthropology was concerned with broad theories of the sweep of human history or generalizing accounts of customs, Winkler focused on a case study, and took a broadly phenomenological view and wrote himself into the text. It thus raises questions about the relationship between culture and action, and between anthropologist and informant.[3]

I first introduce the two main characters, Abdel Radi Hamed and Hans Alexander Winkler. Then I present the setting and the unfolding of the research, the construction of the domain or worldview within which Abdel Radi functioned, and finally develop a further analysis of the material in the book based on comparative cases and concepts. The main themes are social process, social organization, and the cultural construction of reality through debate.[4]

2 The Protagonists

Despite differences in national and educational background, Winkler and Abdel Radi were similar in some ways. They were about the same age (early 30s), each was married and had two children, each had done physical labor under difficult circumstances, and each was somewhat marginalized in his own society. While Abdel Radi linked the visible and invisible worlds, Winkler linked the East and the West through the book in hand. Judging by Winkler's account, they established a cordial relationship: not only did Winkler attend many of Abdel Radi's sessions, but Abdel Radi also visited Winkler in his lodgings. Winkler's account thus enables us to reconstruct the informant-anthropologist relationship.

2.1 Hans Alexander Winkler (1900–1945)

Winkler's life was tumultuous (Junginger 1995), reflecting German history during that period.[5] He was born in 1900, and finished his secondary schooling in the spring of 1917. He joined the army, and apparently saw combat. In the postwar years he found it difficult to establish himself. He attended university irregularly because of money problems. To earn money he worked as a miner for a period of time in the early 1920s, and joined the German Communist Party (KPD). This was at a time when the leftwing movements were strong in Germany, and he was in a working class environment. He retained a "nominal" membership in the KPD until 1928. During this time he married a young Armenian woman who had likely also been a youthful communist; they had two children, born about 1924 and 1929.

However, Winkler's real interest was in scholarship and the academic world, and he passed through the various degrees until he became a Privatdozent at the University of Tübingen, teaching in the Department of Comparative Religion (Religionswissenschaft). One of his patrons was the professor of Semitic studies, Enno Littmann (1875–1958).[6] This was the situation when he made his first field trip to Egypt in 1932, after having published material on Arab magic and related topics from library sources. He spent two months in the hamlet of Kiman, and largely from his interviews with his host, Mohammed Ahmed es-Senusi, wrote "Bauern zwischen Wasser und Wüste" (Winkler 1934). Senusi was a former archaeological dig foreman for German archaeological expeditions. In the summer semester of 1933 Winkler taught a course on shamanism at Tübingen. This represented the high

through Egypt (1936a) and other studies of Islamic texts and the rock art of the Egyptian desert. The book examined here contrasts methodologically with the rest of Winkler's work.

2 Spirit possession in the form of the *zar* has often been noted in Egypt, as well as in the Sudan and Ethiopia.

3 In November 2006, I was able to visit the village of these events. I incorporate a few notes in this article where appropriate, but the full analysis will be developed elsewhere.

4 I have changed the spelling and transliteration of names to the usual current Egyptian standards.

5 Junginger's article is largely based on Winkler's papers in the archives of the University of Tübingen.

6 Littmann is best known for his translation of "The Thousand and One Nights" into German. Winkler wrote a philological article on nonsense words in a Festschrift dedicated to Littmann (Winkler 1935).

point of his formal academic career. He was moving from comparative religion to anthropology.

The National Socialists came to power in Germany in early 1933, and by the end of summer they began to purge the universities of opponents. Winkler was targeted because of his early membership in the KPD. He was informed that he would be no longer associated with the university. His wife, who taught Russian at Tübingen, was also dismissed. However, through friends in the academic establishment he was able to get some funds from the "Notgemeinschaft der deutschen Wissenschaft" allowing him a second field trip to Egypt. He went hoping to find additional funding locally for a project of an ethnographic survey of Egypt. He never found the additional funds, but he did manage to spend about four months in the village, and some additional time doing a quick survey of the Nile valley. Winkler's two stays in the village were thus separated by the political change in Germany as the Nazis established their regime.

During the remainder of the 1930s, Winkler moved between Germany, Egypt, and England. He joined a project led by Sir Robert Mond for which he surveyed and recorded rock paintings in the Egyptian deserts, and work on the publications from these projects took him to England. This activity ceased when Mond died in 1938. In the meantime his wife died at the age of 36 in 1937. Winkler returned to Germany and joined the Nazi party in May 1939, and through a contact he had known in the German embassy in Cairo was offered a post in the German foreign service in August. In September he married Hedwig Oelschläger, and was assigned to the German embassy in Iran where he remained from 1939 to 1941. Later he worked with military intelligence in the Africa campaigns, until he was severely wounded and evacuated (June 1942). He was then assigned to work with Arab exiles in Berlin before being assigned to a German diplomatic post in Spain in 1943. When he learned that his son had deserted from the army, he volunteered in his place, and fell in action in Poland during the German retreat from Russia in January 1945.

2.2 Abdel Radi Hamed (ca. 1901 – ca. 1970)

Abdel Radi was the eldest son of Hamed, a peasant farmer in the village of El Hegiri. The family and the villagers are sedentarized Bedouin (Arabs). Abdel Radi had five younger brothers. He was illiterate, like most of his fellow villagers. Before the possession, Abdel Radi was only conventionally religious. He used to observe *zars* and *zikrs* without taking part, but never attended a session with a person who was possessed by a ghost, and was somewhat skeptical of ghostly possession. At the age of 20 he married Fatma, a young woman from a nearby village, and she gave birth to four children, two of whom were living at the time of research. During his 20s, Abdel Radi went annually to Ismailia in search of employment. He earned £E 3 a month, and stayed from 4 to 9 months each year.

During his last stay, which was probably in 1932, he fell sick, and eventually had to return home. This illness involved fever and shivering, head and body aches, vomiting, and night sweating. It lasted about seven months, and then improved to the point where Abdel Radi could do light farmwork. Then he fell ill again. The second illness involved paralysis, especially on the right side, and aches all over. Abdel Radi's eyes remained closed, and he couldn't see or hear. The right arm and leg atrophied to the bone. The illness was severe for about three months, then lightened up somewhat. Abdel Radi in retrospect felt that the first illness was natural but the second one was from God. It seems that during this period a *zikr* may have been organized as part of an effort to diagnose Abdel Radi's problem (Winkler 1936b: 55).[7]

Then one day while Abdel Radi was sleeping on the bench in front of his house, he broke out into a sweat on the right side. He then wandered off into the desert, returned at sunset, and fell on his knees (as a camel would in response to an order). That night he dreamed of a figure who offered him a banner and spoke, "I am your uncle Bekhit and you are my camel-mount [*ga'ud*].[8] I love you." The figure then settled on his shoulders. Two days later, the shaykh possessed him again. This call dream marked the end of a long and painful illness (55–57). Abdel Radi had become a spirit medium. The transition was complete.

After Abdel Radi's acceptance of Bekhit, the arm and the leg regained musculature and strength, without fully returning to normal. Abdel Radi appeared somewhat pale to Winkler who thought it might be because he was inside all day rather than working outdoors. On the whole, Winkler described Abdel Radi as sickly, and thought he might be tubercular.

7 Later on, during Winkler's stay, Abdel Radi organized a *zikr* performance in front of his house (135).

8 *Ga'ud* or *qa'ud* refers to a young male camel, not yet fully grown.

Winkler summed up Abdel Radi's personality by saying that he was pure of heart, shy and gentle, honest and direct. He had the peace of mind of a pious man. Winkler found him sometimes childish in his reactions. Abdel Radi was more oriented towards images than towards texts, and these images recurred in his visions while possessed. He was not motivated by money, although it helped that the ghost of Bekhit had reassured him that he would take care of his material needs (Winkler 1936b: 126). Abdel Radi said that since Bekhit appeared to him, he had become impotent.[9]

3 The Setting: Time and Place

The village of Qift lies between Qina and Luxor on the east bank of the Nile. It carries the name and occupies the site of the Greco-Roman town of Koptos, which was a key post for trade and transport between the Nile valley and the Red Sea port of Quseir across the eastern desert. Over the years, other settlements, mostly of sedentarized Bedouin, grew up around these ruins. One of these villages was Kiman, where Winkler lived in 1932 and again in 1933–34. Further to the east, on the desert fringe, lay other villages of sedentarized Bedouin. One of them was Nag' el Hegiri, the residence of Abdel Radi and his family. The walk from Kiman to Nag' el Hegiri required less than half an hour. Even further to the east, in the desert itself, lived the Azaiza and Ababda, who could be described as "semisedentarized" Bedouin. Between Qift and the Nile, and along the Nile, were "fellahin" villages such as Barahma. Qift and its dependent hamlets probably had a population of around 10,000 in the 1930s.

Winkler argues (1934: 58) that the people in the sedentarized Bedouin villages have lost Bedouin customs and culture without gaining peasant ones. He points to but does not develop a contrast between the "peasant" life in Qift and other settled villages and the "Arab" settlements such as Kiman and Nag' el Hegiri.[10] The different origins did not interfere with social relations and marriage. Winkler also points out that the main pressure towards acculturation to a wider culture comes not from European culture but from Islam.

The village of Qift had an *omda*, supervising the shaykhs in the different hamlets. But Winkler argued that the real power figure was the father, not the shaykh, and that the family was the most important social institution. Paternal authority was so strong that no lateral organization, based on residence, age, or other factors, could emerge. A partial exception was the distinction between men and women.[11] Apart from the family, only the community of believers was an important social reference, and this was expressed in part through the religious brotherhoods. At least in Kiman and similar villages, most farmers were tenants, and land was in the hand of large private owners or the government (1934: 140). Other links between people were through the market, held weekly on Tuesday (141). People were poor, careful about their money, and always anxious to hear about new employment opportunities.

At the time of Winkler's research, Egypt was a parliamentary kingdom still under British occupation. It was not until 1936 that a treaty restored Egypt's international sovereignty.

4 The Research

In December 1933 Winkler returned to the site of his earlier research, staying again with Mohammed es-Senusi. He divided his time between the case of Abdel Radi and a community of semisedentarized Bedouin on the desert fringe. Winkler would sometimes interview informants in a room in Senusi's house, or would also seek people out in the surrounding villages. He relied on assistants, notably the adult son of Senusi. He kept a diary in narrative form as well as other kinds of notes. He had an interest in material culture, in folklore, and in popular religion and shamanism. Frequently he cast his argument in culture historical terms, i.e., in terms of the gradual assimilation of Bedouin to the peasant life style.

When he arrived in Kiman in December 1933, Winkler heard that a young man in a neighboring village, Nag' el-Hegiri, had become a spirit medium for his paternal uncle Bekhit. He went to look

9 Abdel Radi's grandsons said in 2006 that he lived until about 1970, and continued to receive Bekhit during his lifetime. The impotence turned out to be temporary, and Abdel Radi married twice more and had numerous children, one of whom was in turn possessed by Bekhit after Abdel Radi's death, and until his own death in the early 2000s.

10 The pattern of sedentarized "Arabs" living along the edge of the valley and partly in the desert is common in Upper Egypt. See Blackman 1927: 30: "This difference between the two races is so marked that I can almost always tell if a village is Arab or Egyptian directly I enter it." Winkler rather stressed the integration of the two groups. See Müller-Mahn (2001) for a recent geographical study of this phenomenon in Minya governorate.

11 Winkler lived in Senusi's house for two months and only glimpsed his wife once (1934: 8).

into the matter and found Abdel Radi sitting under a sycamore with his father. This was on December 10, 1933. Abdel Radi asked immediately, "Did you come for the shaykh? Shall he 'come down' "? So then they went inside to a special room in the house denominated the *khilwa*. Since the appearance here of a spirit of the dead, this room was treated as a holy place, requiring the removal of shoes. Using an incense brazier, Abdel Radi went into trance and responded to questions. His father "interpreted" the obscure points. When he came out of trance, Abdel Radi reverted to his normal personality and was concerned for instance that his "rider" Bekhit might have said something unsuitable which he had not (Winkler 1936b: 48f.).

After this, Winkler determined to follow up with Abdel Radi. Since he had recently taught a course on shamanism at Tübingen, he was prepared to inquire and fit the answers into an intellectual format.[12] Winkler records further visits to Abdel Radi on Dec. 10, 11, 24, and 25, 1933, then on Jan. 1, 10, 18, and 25, on Feb. 15, and on March 2, 11, 25, 1934, for a total of at least 12 visits over a period of nearly four months. These visits are described and analyzed in "Ghost Riders" (1936b). In addition, Winkler also collected data on this case of spirit possession from others, and Abdel Radi came to visit him in Kiman several times. Winkler was interested both in constructing the worldview of Abdel Radi and the people around him, and also in the social organization of the visits and the soothsaying. While Winkler sometimes seems to sum up the data in general terms, at other times he presents the data in terms of a debate between different individuals, with a focus on process rather than structure. His study stands out as a detailed and well-contextualized case study, in contrast to the more descriptive studies he conducted at the same time, and also the approach of W. S. Blackman (1927) based on long research in Middle Egypt.[13]

Winkler notes that he eschewed theorizing, or seeking comparative data from elsewhere, and especially he avoided comparisons with ancient Egypt. His goal was to present a case study as free of such considerations as possible. Of course, it could not be completely free, but there is a concentration on description and first-level analysis. He was concerned to convey this material to ethnographers, specialists in comparative religion, Egyptologists, and psychologists (1936b: v).

5 The Domain of Spirits: The Shaykh Cult

Following his informants, Winkler constructs the domain that includes various aspects of folk and high religion – the meaning and role of shaykhs, the types of actors other than living humans who can be involved in social affairs, and so on. He was aware that some points were disputed among the people, or even if the theory was not contested, then its application to a particular case might be.

Winkler is at pains to point out that the people of Qift are good Muslims who follow the basic instructions of the religion, on whose lips the common Muslim phrases such as the profession of the faith are ever-present, and who are devoted to the Prophet Muhammad (1936b: 39). The great tradition of Islam is not opposed to folk expressions, he argues, but is enhanced by them (5, 40).

Some of the ideas in the folk tradition are comparable to those in the Quran while others may not be. The issue here is the nonhuman actors in the social world, which include demons, ghosts, jinns, *'afrit*, and others. Both jinn and *'afrit* are mentioned in the Quran and so have an epistemologically distinct status. An *'afrit* according to Winkler's ethnography is first of all the ghost of a person who died a violent (or at least an unusual) death (1936b: 9–11),[14] while the jinns are beings who live below ground and prey on dishonest or otherwise vulnerable folk (11).

For the analysis here, ghosts – the spirits of the dead – are relevant. In some cases, the spirit of a dead person, even some time after his or her death, can select a living person as a "mount" whose body they can commandeer and through whose mouth they can speak. The image is of a rider on a camel.[15] In such a case, both the dead person and

12 Winkler noted (1936b: v) that he had with him in the field the book by his Tübingen colleague, T. K. Oesterreich, on possession (Oesterreich 1921). Winkler also corresponded with Oesterreich from the field, and Oesterreich advised him, in cases of possession, to consider the environment, the circumstances, and the background (Junginger 1995: 154); the book seems to reflect this advice. Oesterreich (1880–1949), who was Jewish, was dismissed from the University of Tübingen at the same time as Winkler. Oesterreich was a philosopher and psychologist, even parapsychologist.

13 Winkler said that he had read Blackman's "The Fellāḥīn of Upper Egypt" (1927) thoroughly, and probably met the author. Blackman was trained in anthropology at Oxford, and was in Cairo for much of the 1930s (Winkler 1934: 2).

14 This is consistent with el-Aswad (2002: 103), while Blackman (1927: 227–239) has a different version, which seems to assimilate jinns and *'afarit*. But compare: "In addition to his soul (*roh*) every human being is believed to possess an *'afrit* which leaves his body at death" (Blackman 1927: 237).

15 Elsewhere in the world, it may be a horse; here camels are more common. The metaphor of mount and rider is also used in the *zar*. El-Aswad reports it from Beheira (2002: 103, 126).

the living "mount" are commonly called "shaykh." The ghost chooses the person through whom it will be manifested.[16] Often a shrine is built to honor the "shaykh" (either version), and these become key nodal points in the landscape.[17]

But who are the people whose spirits appear? First one could consider the "fools," more or less "holy fools." These may be considered close to God in their lifetimes, and people may appeal to God through them, but unless they appear after death in a dream or through possession they have no further influence. The sign of blessing must be visible. For instance, if you insult a fool, and then your hand swells up or you turn dumb, then that one may be powerful.

A fool who begs is not a shaykh. If people give freely, then perhaps it is a shaykh. For instance, when people give money to Mutwalli, whose speciality is to know when someone is going to die, he passes it on. Another potential holy fool is Fatma, a halfwit who sits by the side of the road. The older she gets, the more power she represents.

But a holy fool only gives rise to a cult when they speak from the other side – whether "fool" or not. Such ghosts appear because they enter into a living person and then through that person's mouth make known their wishes and news (Winkler 1936b: 27). The ghost is likely to demand a better burial place. Many of these shrines have a caretaker (*naqib*), sometimes a relative, or sometimes the post is inherited (32). But these shrines come and go, and if the idea is not renewed, the building falls down and things are forgotten (Blackman 1927: 244–246).

Ghosts also arise from among those who died an unnatural death. Amin the fisherman from Qift was drowned while fishing, and appeared to his mother through a medium to tell her to stop mourning. Later on he announced that he wanted a better tomb, and his sick brother improved. The father of a boy who drowned in the Nile flood also went to a possessed shaykh, and learned that the boy wanted a better tomb and a wooden catafalque. Again the father and then the brother of a boy who died young were informed that the boy wanted a better tomb.[18]

These are all family cults, and outsiders play only a small role. But in every village there are holy men from olden days. Such is the Shaykh Ghazzali in Abnud, to whom people are taken for an ordeal to see if they are telling the truth. A "thief" cannot enter the shrine of Shaykh Youssef in Kiman, for passage is blocked. Shaykh Aweda in the Qift cemetery helps recover stolen objects (Winkler 1936b: 30).

Winkler recognized a hierarchy of shaykhs. Some are family and village holy people, with a small circle of devotees, and could not be expected to last more than a couple of generations (1936b: 35). These shaykhs are close to the world of the living, and many appear from time to time in a medium. An example would be Shaykh Ali of Nag' el Hegiri who lived two generations ago, and is still honored in his village. At a higher level are some old established town saints. These appeal to a larger circle, their cult is more dynamic and durable. Since they are higher in the world of ghosts they do not so easily come down through a medium to speak to people. One such is Shaykh Ansari in Qift, where he has an impressive shrine. He was a fighter in holy wars, and his miracle is that after his head was cut off in a fight, he took the head in his hands, and came flying through the air to land in Qift, to die and be buried.

Even higher than these town holy men is the regional holy man, Sidi Abderrahim of Qina (Winkler 1936b: 36). At the same level are the founders and leaders of brotherhoods, such as the Dendarawi family (36f., 40). The town and regional saints do not manifest themselves through mediums.

So ghosts can play a key role as causes and helpers. People may make a vow to a saint, bring a sacrifice, or say a prayer, but all this is directed to God. The shaykhs stand for public morality, and in a context in which there is little direct political government, remind people of the right way.

Possessing shaykhs, whether holy fools or victims of violence, speak from the other world to this world of the living. Winkler says that the living shaykhs, from the village fool to the global theologian, are on the borders of the narrow present world of daily sorrow and fatigue, and the other world of God and the spirits. They are "Grenzvolk" (1936b: 23) or what Turner (1969) would call "liminals." Winkler does not address the question of the psychological state of these "fools"; although the words he uses imply mental deficiency rather than psychopathology.

16 Blackman (1927: 198) reported that a man or a woman can be possessed by one or more "shaykhs," also either a man or a woman, and this possession continues on a lifelong basis. She noted that a person "troubled by the sheikh who possesses them" may seek a diagnosis from a magician or perhaps a *zar* leader. According to el-Aswad (2002: 89; see also pp. 126–132), *'afrit* is equivalent to the soul.

17 These shrines are small buildings with a dome and a grave inside. People can pray at the grave or leave an offering. These become places where people go to seek a cure (Winkler 1936b: 24).

18 For a similar story, involving a dream rather than possession, see Blackman (1927: 242f.).

As mentioned, the words *'afrit* and jinn appear in the Quran, thus testifying to the reality of these creatures. But accepting their reality is one thing, and deciding how that reality is manifested is something else. Many people are skeptical that a particular manifestation is of an *'afrit* or a ghost, and attempt to use their logic in an experimental way to test this reality.[19] The cases of Abdel Radi, Mohammed Abdel Gadir, and Abbas below illustrate how this skepticism works.

There were several other kinds of spirits. The *zar* cult was present in this area, led by women whose origin was further south in the Sudan (Winkler 1936b: 15). They and their male musicians would occasionally organize sessions in which the spirits of the *zar* would be called down to take possession of one of the dancers. As elsewhere, most of the possessed were women. For the dancer this would or could be therapeutic in the sense that at least temporary relief would ensue (Nelson 1971). The *zar* cult here is comparable to the practices elsewhere that have been reported in greater detail. However, it is important here since some people could seek accommodation of a *zar* spirit as a form of therapy. The *zar* was part of the experimental practical diagnosis of trouble cases, as in the case of Abbas which we discuss below.

Another kind of gathering was the Sufi *tariqa*, which could also offer catharsis to the individual. The dominant *tariqa* in the Qift area at this time was the Dendarawiyya, also known as the Rashidiyya, whose headquarters was near Dendara on the other side of the Nile (Sedgwick 2005). The *tariqa* is organized hierarchically, with local leaders subordinate to central ones. The sessions were led by a singer, the *munshid*, and the individual participants sought a form of ecstasy, not possession (Winkler 1936b: 41–45; see Hopkins 2004). The Dendarawiyya was strong in Nag' el Hegiri at the time of Winkler's research, and the Shazliyya was also present.

There was also a certain degree of competition between different living shaykhs (spirit mediums) for clientele and customers, although Winkler does not develop the point. AbdelRadi/Bekhit was only one of a number of individuals who had been possessed and who were available to help others glean information from the invisible world. These included both men and women, although Winkler's study focuses on the men since he was part of the male world. Some of the women were possessed by the spirits of dead men (see Winkler 1936b: 52); the gender dimension of this needs further exploration.

6 Spirit Mediums and Ghostly Riders: Abdel Radi and Bekhit

We have seen above how Abdel Radi was possessed by his uncle Bekhit.[20] As is typical for a shaykh who appears in a dream for the first time, Bekhit asked for a tomb. Bekhit had died while in another village, and the chief of that village had insisted on burying him there while covering the expenses. It seems that he felt Bekhit was holy, and he was hoping for some credit. Bekhit did not have a tomb of any kind in his family village. So one of the first things that Abdel Radi and his father Hamed did was to erect a tomb, shaded by a sycamore sapling and with a water trough for animals. Hamed was told to supply the money equal to the cost of the funeral shroud he did not buy when Bekhit died, and to use that to start construction. Bekhit also told Abdel Radi that he would look after him materially; being a medium was a blessing from God and such a person must give up on wives and having children. After that time, Abdel Radi felt himself impotent – but told Winkler that he found it easy to reconcile himself to this change as he had a wife and two children already. However, Abdel Radi felt content in his new situation since the body was temporary while the relations with the spirits would endure (Winkler 1936b: 125). He knew this because Bekhit had explained it to him in a dream. Service as a medium excluded sexual activity. Bekhit also informed Abdel Radi that he likes *jawli* incense,[21] so some is always ready when Bekhit may appear.

Bekhit was the brother of Abdel Radi's father, Hamed. He appears to have been a simpleton of some kind, unable to speak correctly, unable to work, given to wandering around, and with a gargantuan appetite. During his lifetime he already had the reputation for being able to punish supernaturally those who angered him (paralyzing their hand, for instance). He seems to have been about 20 when he died while visiting another village. Winkler reports nothing unusual about the death itself; on the other hand, the ability of the *omda* of that village to exclude Bekhit's own family from the funeral

19 Sayyid Qutb in his account of growing up in the Asyut village of Musha in the early 20th century gives a good account of the belief in these spirits and the growing skepticism concerning them (2004: 59 ff.).

20 The names Abdel Radi and Bekhit refer to the same body, supporting two personalities. Like Winkler I use the identity that is appropriate to the context.

21 Or *jawi*, *benjoin*, or frankincense of Java.

arrangements sounds unusual, and was something that people may have felt unconsciously needed to be corrected.

In the beginning there was some skepticism in Nag‘ el Hegiri about the possession of Abdel Radi. Some thought that instead of the ghost of Bekhit, it was a jinn that had possessed him. So a scholar was brought, who whispered phrases from the Quran in Abdel Radi's ear while he was possessed in the hopes of expelling the jinn. But Bekhit proclaimed through Abdel Radi "I am not a jinn. I am Bekhit. Abdel Radi should be happy, and so should you, for this is a blessing." Then the shaykh went on to tell stories from Bekhit's life to prove he really was Bekhit, and so convinced people. They were also persuaded by the fact that the ghost always reappeared, and that he did not kill Abdel Radi the way a jinn would have done (Winkler 1936b: 62). But there were further skeptics, who argued that Abdel Radi must be possessed by a good believing jinn, as noted in the Quran, who chose to appear in the guise of Bekhit. In this sense they could argue, as many did, that "ghosts do not exist" (*ma fish mashaykh*), since it was a believing jinn in the guise of Bekhit (96). Abdel Radi had earlier been one of those who held this position (126).

Still there were skeptics who tested Abdel Radi/Bekhit, for instance by asking questions to which they already knew the answer – for instance, when the father of a dead man asked what he had eaten in his last supper at home. Clients were also concerned to get their money's worth: the deal is money for information. Bekhit was right about the information often enough, maybe half the time. If he were not right, people would stop coming and bringing their coins. As it is sometimes they got impatient, especially with the vague and incomprehensible pronouncements – "Speak Arabic!" said one impatient client to Bekhit when no clear answer was forthcoming (Winkler 1936b: 95).

The initial reaction among Abdel Radi's relatives and friends was ambivalent. On the one hand, some did not accept that the spirits of the dead could appear, and on the other, there were costs associated with it, such as the building of the shrine. Here there was a small tug of war between the ghost of Bekhit and his living brother Hamed. Bekhit told his brother to put up the money for the shroud. Hamed offered ten piasters, but the shaykh, speaking througth Abdel Radi, was angry because the sum was so small, and asked for another "riyal," twenty piasters. When Hamed claimed he could not do that, he was struck dumb. Only when he managed to bring the "riyal," he was able to speak again, and the construction of the shrine began (Winkler 1936b: 61). In the beginning, Hamed tried to appropriate the gifts, but then Bekhit refused to descend saying they were for the mount, so Abdel Radi took them and put them under the mat.[22]

By the time Winkler came to know Abdel Radi and his family, there was a routine, and a complex. Abdel Radi had set aside one room in his house as a *khilwa* or retreat, and this is where he tries to be when Bekhit "comes down." Those who enter must remove their shoes as in a mosque. Abdel Radi receives people in this *khilwa* at set times: Monday until the afternoon prayer, Wednesday after the afternoon prayer, Thursday all day, Friday until the noon prayer (Winkler 1936b: 62). On Tuesday eve, Bekhit would appear to Abdel Radi alone (128). Women are admitted first, then when they are done, the men enter.

The "possession" itself is somewhat ritualized. It is in a sense a rite of passage. Abdel Radi begins yawning about two hours before possession. He also fasts. When everything is ready, a clay pot with *jawli* incense is brought in, nominally because it pleases Bekhit, but it is clearly in Winkler's account a major stimulus to possession.[23] So Bekhit "descends" on his mount, Abdel Radi, whose movements and sounds then resemble those of the camel, which he metaphorically is. Once he is possessed, one of those present provides a "token" (a common one is a bit of cloth torn from a *gallabiyya*, or hair from an animal's tail if an animal is involved), or simply touches Abdel Radi. This provides the "smell" which helps identify the problem and the solution. The ghost's ability to "see" into the future and at a distance depends on some form of human contact, either directly or through a belonging. Some petitioners who were unable to come themselves, i.e., because of distance, would send their token with another in order for the consultation to proceed. The petitioner must also make a small donation, usually a small coin wrapped in cloth, sometimes in kind, before anything can happen.

The concerns that people bring with them are fairly standard for this kind of situation – health and curing; recovery of stolen or lost objects; resolution of interpersonal disputes, even revenge killings; the likelihood of success in enterprises; and for the women marriage, childbirth, and child health. Thus the shaykh suggests cures for illnesses – mostly involving everyday remedies, accompanied by the

22 Winkler had these stories through informants, including his assistant, the son of his host es-Senusi.

23 Breathing (yawning) and fasting are also familiar techniques for inducing possession. Music and rhythm are not part of the vocabulary here, though they are in the *zar* and the *zikr*.

proviso that it will work if God wills – and intervenes in cases of theft and physical harm, mostly to suggest some form of reconciliation. In some cases there was a stand-off, as when Bekhit consistently identified a teenage boy as a thief, and the boy ardently denied it.

When Bekhit speaks through Abdel Radi, his meaning is often obscure – the words are unclear, or telegraphic, or mumbled, or combined with ambiguous gestures. Abdel Radi's father is there to help interpret the meaning of the oracular pronouncements for the petitioners, and so plays a key role. (He also waits outside with the male petitioners while the women take their turn, and so could easily learn their concerns.) Winkler thought that probably Abdel Radi's wife Fatma played the corresponding role when the women petitioners were present, but he was unable to attend such a session.

With time, Abdel Radi's relationship to Bekhit extended to other "ghosts," so that sometimes Abdel Radi would in a single session be possessed by half a dozen or more ghosts. Some of these were known figures from the neighborhood, but some were completely unknown. Winkler identified nine other ghosts which possessed Abdel Radi periodically (but always in a sequence involving Bekhit).[24] In several cases they were recently dead persons who appeared initially to instruct their surviving relatives what to do: one assured his parents that his death was an accident and not murder (he had been crushed by a train; see below), another wanted a better tomb, and two admonished their fathers for not looking after their grandchildren properly. Others are more obscure: Mohammed Ahmed Youssef el-Asyuti comes seldom, gives no advice, but identifies himself and chants and sings. One was a major regional saint, Selim el-Huwi, whose tomb was on the bank of the Nile near Hu, about 60 km away;[25] he is the exception to the rule that some ghosts are too important to enter into a medium, so that some argued it might be someone else in his guise. The rapid passage of the mount, Abdel Radi, from one of these personalities to another is a very dramatic scene, and certainly points to the lability of the mount who can reflect so many personalities at one sitting. This underlines the performance aspect of ghostly possession.

7 Winkler and Bekhit: Experimentation and Involvement

Winkler wrote himself into this ethnography. He did so by describing the give and take with various people around him, warning us that he is quoting from his field notes, and so on. But most of all he does this by describing his relationship to Abdel Radi/Bekhit. He often went to Nag' el Hegiri to visit Abdel Radi, when he was in consultation. He would both observe and seek consultation himself. Sometimes Abdel Radi would walk to visit him in Kiman, where Winkler would question him about the circumstances of his possession and other aspects of his life. Abdel Radi posed for photographs, and with his family's permission Winkler photographed Abdel Radi in a state of possession.[26] Winkler congratulated himself that Abdel Radi saw him as a friend and confided in him; yet there were certain questions Abdel Radi would not answer, saying that to do so would displease Bekhit.[27] Winkler and Abdel Radi had a friendly relationship, but it was an unequal one in that one "studied" the other, and reported on the encounter.

In the consultations, Winkler was often given insight into the future, or into the distance, i.e., his family in Germany. Winkler enumerated certain considerations that could affect the visions. First of all, he was a European, and thus many aspects of his life were either strange or unknowable to an Upper Egyptian villager. Secondly, he generally did not come (he says) with a burning question to Abdel Radi, which would have given Bekhit something to work on. Thirdly, the family was likely anxious to offer him a consultation because they expected a larger sum of money. Finally, Winkler visited frequently, so that the visions of the future and the distant could build up gradually. Winkler also examined the issue of whether Abdel Radi could have known certain things about his life from conversations that he or others would have had with Winkler. Thus he raises the question of the link between the experience of Abdel Radi in the real world and the kind of insights into future and distance that he (as Bekhit) proposed.

Bekhit often predicted how long Winkler would remain in Qift or in Egypt, and how and when he would travel. On this score he seems to have

24 Bekhit's "team" included "24" other shaykhs, but this number is nominal rather than an actual count (Winkler 1936b: 129).

25 On Shaykh Selim, see Sauneron (1983: 190f.).

26 These were taken without Abdel Radi's knowledge; Winkler asked travelers not to show them to him. In our 2006 visit, the grandsons were as busy photographing us as we were them.

27 Winkler did not say what questions Abdel Radi asked him, so we know only one direction of the interchange.

been only partly successful, sometimes right and sometimes wrong. Winkler was interested to know whether a friend would come from Cairo, and Bekhit identified his concern for a possible visit, but could not correctly predict when this would happen. Once Winkler received a telegram, and this was widely known before Winkler could read it. Bekhit again predicted that it would involve travel, but in fact it was a Christmas greeting from Winkler's wife. Later there were predictions about letters that would come concerning Winkler's future, again some wrong and some right. Bekhit indicated that Winkler would learn, as he did, that he would receive some extra funds to stay in Egypt. He also predicted a meeting between Winkler and his patron Littmann in Cairo, although Winkler had mentioned this to no one in Qift.

Bekhit took a lively interest in Winkler's home life, and established the fact that he had a wife and two children, an older boy (then ten) and his younger sister (then four). Some of this he could have known as the information circulated in the village, either from this stay or from the 1932 stay. Bekhit noted that the son played the flute, and this was true. Toward the end of December Winkler wanted to know how his family had experienced Christmas, and Bekhit reported that his daughter had received a toy wagon with which she was very pleased. Later on Winkler learned that this was true. He points out that toy wagons are not part of Upper Egyptian peasant culture, and found this insight remarkable. When Winkler learned that his wife was having eye trouble, he sought clarification from Bekhit, but got none. Following on earlier predictions, Bekhit began to describe Winkler's house in Tübingen, and got many features right – the house was in a garden, and across the street was a orchard with banana trees – they were actually apple trees.[28] Later on he added some features to this house: it had a well and a dovecote. This was not true of the Tübingen house, but was true of a house built somewhat to the north of Qift by a Swiss chemist who was prospecting in the desert for phosphates, so that Winkler feels that Bekhit/Abdel Radi may have drawn from this image or experience.

At one level Winkler was using his own case, and the interest of Abdel Radi/Bekhit in it, to test the accuracy of the clairvoyant. It was easy for him to control whether the prediction turned out to be true, or whether the vision into distant things was reliable. Once other visitors left it would have been difficult for the researcher to learn more of the truth of the insight. At another level, Winkler was of course interested in his own case, both predictions for what the near future would bring him, and insights into the situation at his home in Germany, from which he had been absent for a long time. In that sense, his comment that he brought no concerns to the meeting might seem disingenuous.

8 How to Become a Shaykh

8.1 The Pattern

We have seen the process by which Abdel Radi became the mount for Bekhit's ghost. In this several factors were important. One was Abdel Radi's two illnesses, the one that brought him home from Ismailia and the one that led to the possession. Abdel Radi was also part of an established family, so that his father in particular was available as an outside person to help manage this new structure. We do not know how much Bekhit's story was discussed in Abdel Radi's presence when he was growing up, but we do know that the notion of possession by a spirit of a dead person was current in the sociocultural context. In fact, the spirit of Abdel Radi's mother's deceased brother had also returned to social life by possessing two women in the neighborhood, and the mother had returned to her home village in order to manage the shrine to him that was erected. So the idea was very much in the air.

What is interesting here is that Abdel Radi's transformation did not involve the intervention of any other person. It was not a matter of one already affected person initiating another into a process or status. Both the *zar* and *zikr* work on a principle of initiation, but this case was different. Abdel Radi felt this coming on himself, and provided his own interpretation, although some of those around him explored other options. He himself refused to visit another possessed person for diagnosis.

Winkler stresses the complex and ambiguous role of Abdel Radi's father as an organizer in this process. Between Abdel Radi and Hamed they managed to construct an appropriate venue for the descent of Bekhit – the *khilwa*, the shrine with tree and trough – and to provide interpretations of the ghostly utterances. However, we have seen that Hamed's efforts to collect the money brought by petitioners was prevented by Bekhit, who desig-

28 Winkler suggested that the clairvoyant might have confused *moz* (banana) with *loz* (almonds) and pointed out that the apple trees might have looked like almond trees to the unskilled eye (1936b: 93). The association could have been through language or imagery. Abdel Radi told Winkler that he had visited his Tübingen house twice in his dreams (135). The links between dreams and possession visions are complex and not spelled out.

nated the money for Abdel Radi. Winkler does not tell us what difference that makes in the household or how the money was spent.

8.2 A Contrasting Case: Abbas

Although Winkler had to use interviews to reconstruct the early stages of Abdel Radi's emergence as a medium, he was able to observe the case of Abbas directly. Abbas, whose family consisted of a blind mother and a feebleminded sister (Fatma, see above), worked collecting saltpeter for fertilizer from the adjacent desert. He was about twenty years old. Once he returned from his work in considerable mental distress, and eventually it was thought that he had been possessed by "Mahmoud," a name he kept repeating. No one could identify this Mahmoud, although Abbas kept mentioning his name, along with the name of "Ahmed." His friends burned cloth under his nose to exorcise jinns, and invited a Quran reader to read, but Abbas did not respond to this. He verbally rejected being a "devil," and kept repeating that he was a Muslim, meaning that the treatment was inappropriate. In the meantime, people recalled that Abbas's mother had vowed a sacrifice of an animal to the Qift saint, Shaykh el-Ansari, if her children survived, and had not fulfilled this vow.

So for further diagnosis, Abbas was taken to Abdel Radi/Bekhit. Bekhit noted the presence of two "shaykhs," Shaykh Mahmoud who had taken possession of his nose, and Shaykh Ahmed who had taken his right side. The cure was to establish a *khilwa* to welcome the shaykhs, and for his mother to fulfill her vow. And Abbas should wear a white *gallabiyya*.[29]

Abbas's family was of course very poor, yet somehow the mother managed to acquire two chicken and a goat for the sacrifice to el-Ansari, and also the cloth for a white *gallabiyya*. Moreover, in the hopes of reconciling Abbas with el-Ansari and perhaps the ghost, a *zikr* was arranged, which Winkler attended (Winkler 1936b: 45). This, however, did not have much effect. So Abbas was taken back to Abdel Radi/Bekhit a second time. Winkler, who was present on this occasion, felt that Abdel Radi was uncomfortable with this situation, and did not feel much sympathy for Abbas. When it came time for Abbas's consultation, Bekhit first asked him to recite the profession of faith, then said that the forgotten burial place of Mahmoud was behind Abbas's house (some had the theory that Mahmoud was manifesting himself out of displeasure because people were walking on his tomb with shoes). Bekhit called on Mahmoud to leave Abbas alone, and asked for the profession of faith again. Bekhit pointed out that there were many ghosts and spirits in the desert where Abbas had gone. He anointed Abbas with a mixture of different foods he had requested, and told him not to clean himself for three days. He said that Abbas should spend the night in the area where he was possessed, covered in various grains and with a key tied to each hand, foot, and to his head. If he did this, he would recover. Bekhit also stated that Mahmoud was upset because the sacrifice for el-Ansari had been done too hastily; they should have waited three weeks. And in any case Shaykh Mahmoud was now in Aswan (a kind of mythical place in the local geography where shaykhs gathered). Finally Bekhit ordered an expensive *gallabiyya* for his mount. When the family said they were too poor for that, he sent them away.

Abbas never returned to Abdel Radi/Bekhit, perhaps because the fee was too high. Abbas remained unwell for a while, and aggressive to those around him. But slowly he became better, and returned to his old life. It seemed Shaykh Mahmoud had released him, and had given up the idea of using him as a vehicle to reach the visible world. We do not know the subsequent events in his life.

Winkler speculated that Abdel Radi/Bekhit's ambivalence about Abbas derived from a sense that he was a possible rival. What is clear from Winkler's account is that Abbas and his team were discouraged from coming back by the high fee. Abbas and his family came to Abdel Radi looking for assistance, presumably to seek to end the relationship with Shaykh Mahmoud rather than to enhance it. Shaykh Mahmoud's only pronouncements were through Bekhit, not through his potential mount, Abbas. The structure of the interview was that Abbas was the petitioner, and Bekhit had the upper hand.

Winkler uses the story of Abbas to amplify the early phases of the story of Abdel Radi. But there are clear differences. The moment of seizure was different – for Abdel Radi at home, for Abbas in the desert. Abdel Radi was taken by the ghost of a relative, while Abbas was apparently taken by the ghost of a man who was not only not a relative, but was unknown to neighbors. In both cases, however,

29 Another form of diagnosis came from the local doctor. He had heard of Abbas's distress, and decided to quarantine him on suspicion of smallpox. Abbas was thus taken to the isolation area, which was actually fairly public, and there Winkler went to see him. However, after a day, the doctor decided he did not have smallpox and released him.

there may have been a sense of guilt in the family: Bekhit was buried away from the family, while Abbas's mother had not fulfilled her vow to Shaykh el-Ansari. Abdel Radi basically diagnosed himself, according to the story, while Abbas and his family sought various levels of explanation and "cure." Abdel Radi's family, though poor, was a cut above Abbas's (they were probably tenant farmers while Abbas was a day laborer), and Abdel Radi had the advantage of a surviving and active father, wife, and five brothers, not forgetting a mother who was the custodian of another shrine nearby, while Abbas's family included only a blind mother and a half-wit sister. Abdel Radi was ten years older at the onset of the crisis. Thus Abdel Radi, with the help of his family members, was able to turn his disability into an asset – a financial asset because he attracted income to compensate for his inability to continue physical labor, and a social asset because it gave the family increased prominence in the local social scene. Abbas lacked the resources for this.

8.3 Mohammed Abdel Gadir of Barahma

Another case involved Mohammed Abdel Gadir, who became not a medium but a "ghost" (Winkler 1936b: 74–78). Mohammed worked as a signalman for the railroad, and was run over and killed by a train. It appeared to be an accident, but his parents worried that perhaps it was a deliberate killing, requiring revenge. One night, his mother dreamed of Mohammed. He told her to go to Abdel Radi in Nag' el-Hegiri, and that he would be there. The parents went to Abdel Radi, and the ghost of their son appeared through a medium. Abdel Gadir, the father of Mohammed, decided to test the ghost. Winkler was present at the second meeting of these two. Abdel Gadir had brought a basket of dates, which he left next to Abdel Radi. Abdel Radi followed the usual procedures for entering possession, and Bekhit appeared. First Bekhit counseled a man on the sickness of his wife. Then he turned to Abdel Gadir, Mohammed's father, and appeared to change personalities. He greeted the father, and Abdel Radi's father Hamed asked him who he was. He answered that he was Mohammed Abdel Gadir from Barahma. The father then asked the spirit what he had for dinner the last night, and the spirit answered in detail and satisfied the father that this was indeed the ghost of his son. The father then asked the son if he died because of an accident, or through the work of enemies. The ghost then answered *amru*, *amru*, meaning it was God's decision. The ghost then went on to say that his parents should not cry so much. Then he leaned forward to kiss the old man on his turban, and repeated this gesture several times. "Don't cry," he whispered.

Then the ghost of Mohammed departed, and the ghost of Shaykh Ali from Nag' el-Hegiri entered into Abdel Radi, and that as quickly changed into Asyuti, and finally Bekhit. Bekhit then proceeded to help another client. Then Abdel Radi collapsed, and the possession episode ended. The dates were shared among those present.

Abdel Gadir subsequently came several times to Abdel Radi, and each time the ghost of his son appeared. On one of these occasions Winkler was present. Eventually Abdel Gadir asked Bekhit where his son – the ghost of his son – went when not there, and Bakhit answered, "In Aswan" – as we have seen, a mythical site for ghosts and saints.

8.4 The Case of Ahmed Radwan

The case of Ahmed Radwan is not cited by Winkler, but it is an interesting contrast. Ahmed Radwan (1895–1967) was from the village of Baghdadi, about 50/60 km to the south (Hoffman 1995: 255–267). Although it must be noted that this is the story accepted by his family some 20 years after his death, still the contrast is clear. Ahmed Radwan was born into a somewhat higher social stratum – a "noble" tribe descended from the Prophet Mohammed; he was literate and memorized the Quran at a young age; his family was linked to the Sammaniyya Sufi order. At the same time he "performed the work of a peasant." "As a young man he began to receive divine insights" (Hoffman 1995: 261). In his youth he was often in a state of spiritual ecstasy (he was *magzub*), and spent much time in the desert seeking and knowing God. Later Ahmed set up a center (*saha*) in his village where he taught the Quran "according to his own inspiration." He became wealthy, and used his money to provide hospitality for those who came to his *saha*. Ahmed is "credited with many miracles, especially miracles of knowledge, such as knowing people before they are introduced to him, seeing events that happen far away, and being able to communicate with the spirits of other saints" (Hoffman 1995: 264).

The process here is similar to that in the case of Abdel Radi, with some clear differences. Ahmed was literate, and linked to the great literate tradition of Islam. He came from an established family. He was seized by God while Abdel Radi had been possessed by the ghost of a deceased relative. And above all, Ahmed Radwan was able to create an institution, his *saha* near Luxor, which a genera-

tion after his death was still being managed by his sons. The *saha* is a substantial set of buildings with facilities for people to eat, rest, and sleep. It could be seen as a larger version of the *khilwa* that Abdel Radi and his family established. Ahmed Radwan and Abdel Radi Hamed were men of the same generation and roughly the same geographical provenience, but different by their social background and their experience of the links between the visible and invisible worlds.

8.5 Religious Visitors

Winkler also reports the passage through Nag' el-Hegiri of other religious virtuosi. One of them was named Musa, a member of the Ababda tribal group (Winkler 1936b: 83–85). Winkler also interprets Musa as a rival to Abdel Radi, and recounts a session in which each was possessed at the same time by his "shaykh." Musa, an elderly and nearly blind man, appeared one afternoon when Abdel Radi was receiving Bekhit. He entered and sat down. Eventually Abdel Radi greeted Musa, and he began to perform. He was said to be the mount of a shaykh buried in Kom Ombo, his home. But his behavior was quite different, he rocked and sang something like the *zikr*, and sang hymns in praise of the prophet Mohammed. Exactly in what sense this was possession, as opposed to a form of trance, Winkler does not make clear. Winkler made an appointment to meet him the next day, but he left hurriedly, apparently encouraged to do so by local people, thus confirming the hypothesis of rivalry. He had come as an equal not a petitioner.[30]

Another visitor was a boy from Yemen who had traveled from Aden all the way north to Iraq and Syria, and was then returning to Yemen via Egypt. On the way north he had accomplished the pilgrimage to the Holy Shrines of Mecca and Madina. In Nag' el Hegiri he was relying on the hospitality of the mosque, through the local head of the Dendarawiyya order. Bekhit first told the boy of a dream he thought the boy had had, involving his sister, and this turned out to be true. Bekhit then prophesied for him that he would not make it home, but would die first (Winkler 1936b: 112).

In other words, one of the ways in which the *khilwa* and *qubba* of Bekhit had become a central place is that these travelers stopped.

30 The confrontation between Musa the Abbadi and Abdel Radi/Bekhit is reminiscent of the two shaykhs in north Lebanon (Gilsenan 1982: 132–139). The issue was also a contest in which an outsider lost out to a local.

9 Analytical Commentary

Winkler's conclusion is in terms of the general problem of knowing what is true, and how to believe it. He sought explanations for the clairvoyance, and found some. He was most puzzled by the indication that his daughter had received a toy wagon for Christmas, something he himself did not know, and by the eruption of another ghost, that of Mohammed Abdel Qadir, when his parents came to seek consultation over his death. He found himself unable to doubt everything, and unsure what to do with the residue. In the end, his conclusion is in terms of the contrast between a cool and rational West, and an Eastern world in which inexplicable things could happen. Winkler noted that is contrary to the spirit of our science to close our eyes to the possibility of the existence of the spirits of the dead (1936b: 139). There is no proof that spirits don't exist and so we should keep an open mind. This argument omits a number of conclusions that it is possible to draw, or to suggest, from his text, as we compare it with contemporaneous or subsequent discussions in anthropology.

Winkler's major path of investigation is to assume that the reality lies in the personality and intellectual abilities of the medium, Abdel Radi in this case. Thus he devotes considerable space to his evaluations of the personality and background of Abdel Radi. Although Winkler deliberately does not pursue the psychological dimensions, the material certainly does raise questions of dual (or multiple) personalities.

9.1 Implications for Social Structure

Winkler was fascinated by the emergent quality of the social structure around the regular possession of Abdel Radi by Bekhit. He spoke of it as creating a new central point in the local society. Not only did people come to consult with Bekhit through Abdel Radi, but also a new complex of social relations emerged among people as they chatted about life and novelties while waiting their turn. In fact, some people might just stop by to join the conversation. More generally, one can infer from Winkler's argument that such key points in the local social dynamics might emerge from time to time, but it would take a lot more for them to become permanent.

The implications for social change also attracted the attention of A. M. Hocart, the British anthropologist who taught at Fuad I University in Cairo from 1934 to 1939. Hocart had an interest in the evolution of human society, summarized in his 1936

book published in Cairo, "Kings and Councillors" (Hocart 1970). Here he argued that political organization evolved from ritual organization: "When however society increases so much in complexity that a coordinating agency, a kind of nervous system, is required … ritual organization will gradually take over this task." Continuing, he noted "this evolution from ritual organization to government" (1970: 35). Hocart then added a late note to his text, referring to Winkler, in whose book he clearly saw a confirmation of the point made in the main text. He sums up "Die reitenden Geister der Toten" as showing "how a man possessed by the dead has become adviser, judge, physician, etc. to a group of Egyptian villages" (1970: 300). Thus, Hocart argues, a "humble villager" who is possessed "can acquire some regulative power over the activities of his community." The fact that Abdel Radi was possessed by multiple spirits leads Hocart to comment that he resembles a king who can represent several deities. Hocart's evolutionary standpoint aside, his stress on the potential social importance of Abdel Radi's role, made possible by possession, for himself and his family, is clear.

More generally a shortcoming in Winkler's analysis is the absence of information about the social background of the Abdel Radi–Hamed family (the Nasarab). Our general knowledge of Upper Egypt suggests, that rivalries between lineages and clans is common, but we don't have the information to evaluate this here. Is this family in competition with other similar families for prestige within the village, and if so what is the nature of the claim to greater position inherent in the link with the "shaykh"? Nawal el-Messiri (1978: 68–71) has pointed out that in Nubia each lineage tends to have its own "saint," and that lineage rivalry can take the form of rivalry among the shaykhs. With more information we might see a similar dynamic here.

Rivalry between lineages might also clarify the relationship between Abdel Radi's father's and mother's lineages and villages (Nasarab of Nag' el Hegiri and Atwal of Kiman). The mother's brother had appeared as a ghost, and possessed two women in a nearby hamlet, and the elderly, blind mother had become the caretaker of the shrine in Kiman, living from the donations (Winkler 1936b: 50–52). She was not living with her husband and sons, and this is not explained. She does not appear in the story – Winkler had trouble accessing the women's domain. The possession of Abdel Radi by Bekhit sounds like a possible response to the ghostly possession in his mother's lineage. Once possession by Bekhit was regular, Abdel Radi was also occasionally possessed by his mother's brother.

We have seen that there are other status and class dimensions. The inability of Abbas to become a medium seems linked to the lack of resources, and is in contrast to the success of Abdel Radi. Outsiders like Musa the Abbadi are not welcome if they challenge local figures like Abdel Radi.

9.2 A Nexus of Roles

A nexus of roles surrounded the possession and the clairvoyance. In the center is the *medium*, whose passage to the role is marked by recovery from illness. The meaning of the medium's illness is determined by a *diagnostician*, or rather by the kin group which carries out a series of steps designed to eliminate possibilities or competing diagnoses and discover meaning. The medium transmits messages from the "ghost," or *shaykh* who has chosen him or her as his "mount," the human vehicle for his activities. There seems to be no fixed prior relationship between the "rider" and the "mount." Next to the medium there can be a manager, such as Hamed in this case, who handles the clients and interprets the message for them, to ensure that the communication between ghost and person through the medium is effective. And finally there is the *petitioner*, the "client," who comes seeking the insights of the shaykh as transmitted through the medium. Although the medium-shaykh relationship is critical, it needs the nourishment of the petitioners. The diagnostician plays a part in interpreting the possession, and one or more people may play the role of encouraging others to seek out the shaykh.[31]

9.3 Transitions

The initial possession of Abdel Radi reads like a "rite of passage" with its conventional three parts (Van Gennep 1960: 10f.). First there is the illness acting as a rite of separation, then the actual moment of possession, including the flight into the desert and the dream that night, that appear as a rite of transition, and finally the routinization of the possession/clairvoyance, the construction of the shrine and the *khilwa*, all fill the place of the rite of reintegration. The continuing separation is indicated by the subordination to Bekhit, Abdel Radi's impotence, and the creation of sacred places..

However, beyond this each episode of possession also operates as a rite of passage as Abdel Radi

31 This approach is inspired by Jeanne Favret-Saada's work on witchcraft (1977, 1989).

separates himself from the normal world through such preparations as fasting, and yawning, and the use of incense, then as Bekhit provides answers to people's questions, and finally at the end of the session returns to normal. Winkler points out that Abdel Radi's meaning (significance) for his fellow countrymen is that he is a "door" between the worlds of the dead and the living, and that the one who can open this door, the ghostly spirit Bekhit, has insight into the distance and hidden (1936b: 85).[32]

Winkler suggests that by this separation Abdel Radi is becoming a kind of priest, while his father who manages many aspects of the possession is becoming perhaps another kind. So we can see here the appearance of new roles that herald a possible evolution in the social organization. What we don't see are all the political implications of this.

9.4 Meaning

When a person, such as Abdel Radi or Abbas, demonstrates certain symptoms – physical signs like sweating or emotional ones such as confusion – people begin to argue that this is perhaps a case of ghostly possession. However, this is not the only possible interpretation. To be sure, the ill person and his associates may experiment with some of the other possible interpretations. For instance, they may expose the ill person to a *zar* ceremony to see if he or she reacts to the invocation of the spirits there. They could also expose the person to a *zikr* to see if that seems to improve his state. They could also try various methods to expel a jinn – reciting the Quran, for instance, to see if that makes a difference. If all these methods fail, then the presumption of ghostly possession grows, especially when a ghost begins to speak through the new medium. Even when a person is actually possessed by what appears to be a ghost, therefore the spirit of a deceased holy man, there is room for skepticism. People may argue that this is a jinn or some other trickery. Others argue that there is no basis in theology (Quran) for ghostly possession, and that the source is, therefore, not a ghost but a God-fearing jinn. In all these various ways, the community tries to reach a consensus on the meaning of the event.

9.5 The Construction of Reality

As we have seen, Winkler provides excellent material for a consideration of the construction and dynamics of the worldview concerning this domain. A more contemporary reading would extend the extent to which the individual's perceptions and actions fit into a framework of cultural understanding. Meaning emerges from the debate about people and about events, given a certain starting point. Certain acts and events are given a meaning by those who have created a common set of cultural understandings, and this in a sense creates its own reality. What people think is true, is true in its consequences, said W. I. Thomas in the 1920s (Coser 1978: 315). The language of ghostly possession is one of the possible languages for people in Qift; insofar as people share its assumptions (and that would include even the skeptics), they can use it for communication. Insofar as people accept this language and worldview as representing a possible reality, then they behave as if it were true; at some level, then, it becomes true.

This shared body of ideas that guide behavior becomes then also a mechanism for social control. The idea that certain kinds of behavior (theft or murder, for instance) might lead to supernatural sanctions, or at least to supernatural identification of the culprits, could act as a deterrent and also as a justification for reaction by others in the community to a misdeed. The communications from Bekhit are articulated by Abdel Radi, and interpreted by Hamed and others, in ways that reinforce the social values associated with religion, family life, and social relationships. It is noteworthy that they often focus on reconciliation. This is underlined by the constant reference to the basic precepts of Islam, the repetition of the profession of faith, and so on. However, how these understandings are enforced, if at all, is not clear. The strongest sanction seems to be the notion of supernatural or divine punishment, and this provides one of the links between the folk beliefs and the scholastic interpretation of Islam.

People also shared ideas about the importance of dreams. The dreams were often taken as communications from the invisible world, and provoked or justified the actions of individuals in a waking state: for instance, the appearance of a dead person's ghost in a dream asking for a better tomb often leads to the construction of that tomb, or perhaps the other way around, a decision to invest in a better tomb may be rationalized on the grounds of a dream. Dreams are also used to diagnose illness or to explore the world. It would seem plausible that

32 It is unclear whether the door metaphor is from the people around Abdel Radi or from Winkler.

there is a link between the imagery of dreams and that of the possessed, but the data given here are inadequate for that purpose.

10 Summation

This study of spirit mediumship in Upper Egypt is consistent with studies of the same, widespread, phenomenon from other parts of the world. Firth summed up a lot of debate on definitional issues as follows (1964: 247 f.): "*Spirit mediumship* is normally a form of possession in which the person is conceived as serving as an intermediary between spirits and men. The accent here is on communication; the actions and words of the medium must be translatable, which differentiates them from mere spirit possession or madness." As is common, the spirit medium and the linked spirits described here are only one of a range of possible spirits (here including *zar* spirits, *'afarit*, jinn, etc.).

Spirit mediumship can occur in widely different types of society, and is known from all corners of the globe. In Qift, in rural Upper Egypt in the 1930s, it occurred in a poor, agricultural society, one just beginning to come to grips with a technological world beyond. The hand of formal government seems to have been relatively light, and the social structure one without a strong central point. Gender, age, and family groupings were the main relevant social distinctions. Doubtless people of greater power and wealth played a role here, but from a distance. Thus the emergence of a spirit medium like Abdel Radi could suggest change in that direction. The main concerns people brought to the medium were, expectedly, fertility, health, interpersonal relations, money, and other possessions, including theft, and an effort to foretell the future outcome of personal efforts. There was a strong belief in God and his Prophet Mohammed, and in a parallel world of spirits. Winkler argued that these two systems of belief reinforced and strengthened each other.

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