



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 sheikh, 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 him-

self, 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