Upper Egyptian and Black African women healers, and the amulets they wielded, shaped robust spiritual and political economies of healing in Egypt’s long nineteenth century. Known as “old wives,” these women stood at the center of a contest over power, expertise and scientific authority. Despite repeated and overlapping imperial, colonial, and nationalist efforts by government officials and doctors to discredit their knowledge, wise women controlled a widespread market in occult objects and services that were crucial to everyday life. By the 1920s, the production of occult knowledge became intimately entangled with the internationalization of the social sciences. Egyptologists and anthropologists designated women healers and their magico-medical practice as “survivals” of ancient Egypt. As such, these women were both objects of scientific inquiry and critical producers of medical and anthropological knowledge.

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