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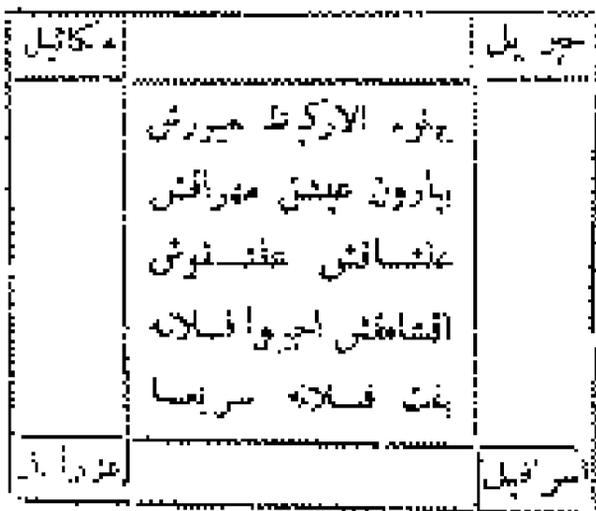
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Approaches
CONSTANT HAMÈS

Scientific research, especially in the social sciences, is extremely tributary to the ideas and the practices in the societies where researchers live. It is thus that studies conducted on religious phenomena, and notably on Islam, experienced an eclipse characteristic of the sixties and seventies. The reason for this, amongst others, was that the class of intellectuals and politicians were essentially preoccupied with struggles and a social utopia of progress without reference, and even in opposition, to the traditional religious institutions. In an inverse yet equally excessive movement, the eighties and nineties were witness to a veritable explosion of these same studies in the context of identity, political, and social re-vindication, particularly coming from the Muslim world and advocating an overtly religious ideology.

In the eighties and nineties a 'pendulum' phenomenon can be observed in terms of magic, both in practice and in studies consecrated to it. However, comparison with religious phenomena allows a significant difference to appear. Research on all that is qualified as 'Muslim' abounds, except that which concerns the sector of magical practices and ideas. It is not that the latter do not exist: on the contrary, all the indications attest to their dynamism and vitality. In France, since some 20 years, the West African – and now North African – Muslim marabouts counsel numbers of people in their homes and some by means of radio communication. These same practitioners in Senegal, for example, prescribe recipes and talismans for years on end, which can be found by the hundreds in rubbish bins after use.¹ Private manuscript libraries in West Africa almost always have their fair share of manuals on magic, divination, prayers of request, Quranic talismans, etc. So-called 'Islamic' book stores all over the Muslim world publish and republish small

Illustrations taken from Ahmad al-Buni Shams al-Ma'arif al-Kubra wa-Lata'if al-'Awarif

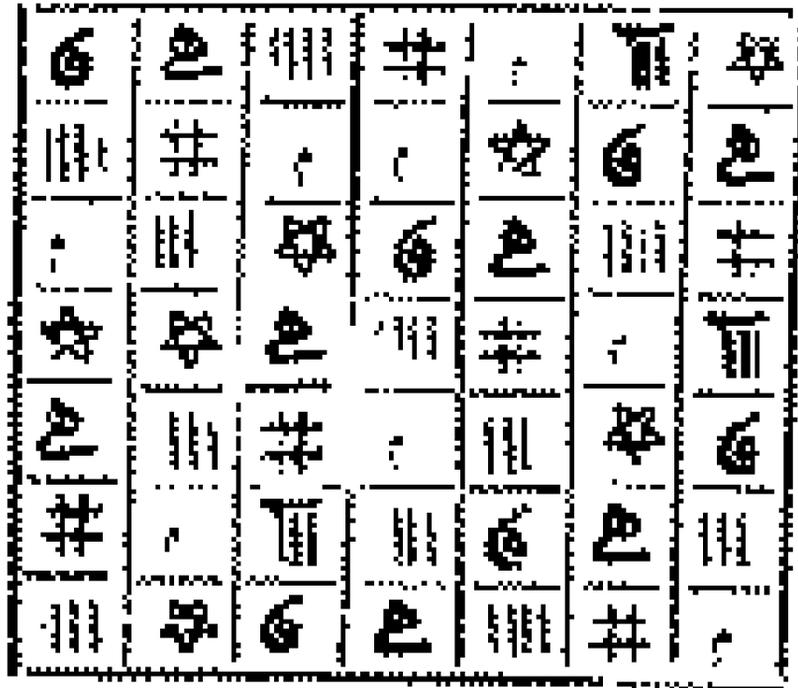


and large books on magic – encouraged to do so by the tangible benefits that create belief in an increased social demand. It is also not that research on magic is faltering; on the contrary, its development follows, albeit in smaller proportions, the rising curve of studies on the 'religious'. But oddly enough, its point of application concerns societies of antiquity. Henceforth, it must be questioned whether there are obstacles to developing the study of magic within the framework of Islam.

Magic and European Rationalism

In reality, all that was considered pell-mell, magic, superstition, and witchcraft was, in Europe, subject to reprobation, even condemnation, by triumphant scientific thought at the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries and by Christian churches anxious to eliminate, or at least relegate, a non-institutional and uncontrolled 'sacred' to the

Magic, Islam and Scientific Research



MATBA'AT HALABI, CAIRO 1927

margins of folklore. However, it seems that European colonialism, which was launched at that time, with that rationalist frame of mind – as lay as it was religious – had naturally been tempted to classify into the categories of magical thought a substantial part of the beliefs of the colonized peoples, including Muslims. In the colonial period, works on magic experienced an hour of glory, all the more significant since they also placed within an evolutionist theory the ideas of magic as an inferior or primitive stage of an evolution of beliefs. Here religion and, according to some, science represented superior or ultimate stages. While Islam was well recognized as a religion in the field, colonial thinking deemed it embroiled in a jumble of 'survivals' and magical behaviours. The European discourse in which magic (inferior stage of religion) is the concern of 'others' (in other words the colonized) is found in many examples, in some respects erudite and elaborate, such as *Magie et religion dans l'Afrique du Nord* (1908) by E. Douffé, or more unexpectedly, in the analyses of the sociology of religion by Max Weber (1864-1920).²

Europeans' rationalist and normative way of looking at certain beliefs and practices of the colonized peoples provoked in turn, attitudes of censorship, discomfort and suppression by the latter when faced with behaviour and ideas that earned them accusations of credulity, charlatanism, and backwardness. Taking upon themselves these value judgements – made in the name of reason, science, and progress – the intellectual and political elite of the Muslim world, at the moment of decolonization, took their ideas even further and contributed to the silencing of a substantial part of social practices to which the populations turned to find solutions to or relief for their problems and anxieties.

That Europe itself suffered from this atmosphere of censorship and avoidance of magic is not at issue here. The point is the particular discredit that – for Muslims and Europeans alike – adversely affected all

magical activities and consequently the scientific studies thereof.

Magical Rituals and Consultations

With some distance, in relation to the ideas of the colonial period and equally in relation to the rationalist simplifications, the moment may seem favourable for placing anew the concept of magic within Islamic thought into perspective. The materials have been gathered – notably concerning talismans with written engravings – and theoretical analyses such as those contained in the collective work of Mirecki and Meyer³ have progressed. It is time to fit the Islamic practices and ideas that M. Mauss did not have at disposition in his time into *Esquisse d'une théorie générale de la magie* (1902).

Our own analyses bring us to certain observations and hypotheses. Utilization of a magic containing Islamic, oral, or more often written elements is found to be present in every period and in every region of the Muslim world. What is so surprising? The notions of magic-witchcraft (*sihr*), of the magician or sorcerer (*sâhir*), or the bewitched person, are strongly attested to in the Quran and the hadith and constitute part of the psychological and social realities of the universe of Muslim thought. The questions posed by the Muslim world concerning these realities often concern knowing how to benefit from these available forces or how to use them in such a way that is canonically licit. From this point of view, the Quranic condemnation of *sihr*, completely unclear in terms of those practices which were in fact condemned, often accentuated the secrecy of this sector of activity and thought. Thus, the position of an author of treatises of magic was most likely not always comfortable, if seen the light of recourse to pseudonyms (pseudo-Aristotle, pseudo-Hermès, pseudo-Ghazâlî, pseudo-Suyûtî, etc.) or in terms of the difficulty in determining whether a well-known author such as, for example, al-Bûnî, represents more than a name. It is noteworthy that this

situation is no longer true today. It is thus that Shaykh Mâl'aynî (died 1910), great religious man of letters and man of politics of western Sahara, openly took up and reworked, in certain works published in Fez at the turn of the century, the magical formulas attributed to al-Bûnî. In the same sense, we observe that certain West African marabouts no longer hesitate to demonstrate their skills in astrology, despite the fact that this 'science' had been formerly subject to formal religious condemnation.

It seems important, theoretically, to return all scientific autonomy to the concept of magic and to consider it as a complete structure of the human relation to the world. That notably implies not defining magic negatively, in relation to religion as well as to science. Many domains of research on Islamic magic have yet to be covered. In addition to field investigations on the process of consultations, and of making/carrying out magical rituals, it is necessary to complete the inventories of ancient texts, and gather data on the transmission and teaching of the occult sciences about which we know almost nothing. And beyond the numerous 'technical' questions, such as the analysis of the printed transformation of the Quran when used in a talismanic way, we must compare the 'powers' of holy figures to those of magicians. Furthermore, we must reflect upon the significance and impact of all the practices concerned at a societal level: is magic genuinely 'a battlement against social destructions' as R. Girard⁴ holds? ◆

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Notes

1. Corpus ALEP, constituted by Alain Epelboin (CNRS-MNHN). See Hamès C. and Epelboin A. 'Trois vêtements talismaniques provenant du Sénégal (Décharge de Dakar-Pikine)', Bulletin d'Etudes Orientales, XLIV, 'Sciences occultes et Islam', Damas, 1992 (1993), 217-214, phot.
2. M. Mauss (1872-1950) is one of the few researchers not to adhere to an evolutionist vision of the relation between magic and religion. See Hubert H. and Mauss M., 'Esquisse d'une théorie générale de la magie', *L'Année sociologique*, VII, 1902-1903.
3. Meyer M. et Mirecki P., *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power*, Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1995, 476 p.
4. R. Girard, interview accorded to the weekly journal *L'événement du jeudi*, n. 380, 13-19 February 1992, 71-73.



MATBA'AT HALABI, CAIRO 1927