



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Exploring the life of amulets in Palestine: from healing and protective remedies to the Tawfik Canaan Collection of Palestinian Amulets

Garcia Probert, M.A.

Citation

Garcia Probert, M. A. (2021, December 1). *Exploring the life of amulets in Palestine: from healing and protective remedies to the Tawfik Canaan Collection of Palestinian Amulets*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3245902>

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3245902>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

6. Conclusion

In 2017, during one of my fieldwork trips to Palestine, I had the chance to know about Ayman's mother. Ayman was part of the staff at the Museum of BZU and helped me going through the items of the T.C.C.P.A so I could photograph the material I needed for this thesis. During the times we met, and while handling the Canaan amulets made of alum, he told me that his mum uses pieces of alum for fumigations. Alum, as explored in Chapter 2, is widely known for its antiseptic and healing properties. It is used as a disinfecting treatment for shaving wounds. Its purifying properties are also applied in fumigations, in which a piece of alum is burnt and the smoke is used to drive evil spirits away. Ayman's mother has been using alum for decades as an inherited tradition from her mother and grandmother. She strongly believes in the efficacy of alum especially with regard to children, who after all are among the most susceptible to be affected by the evil eye and evil spirits. The procedure of the fumigations that she performs is the following. A piece of alum is put on a plate with ingredients such as black-cumin seeds (*al-qazḥa* or *al-ḥabbat al-saudā'*), and a special kind of flour called *ṭaḥīn al-mawlid*. This flour is called after the recitation of special prayers and exaltations from the tradition of *al-mawlid al-nabawī*, the celebration of Prophet Mohammad's birthday on the 12th of *al-rabī' al-awwal*. The three ingredients are put on a plate and burnt on a kerosene or gas stove. When burnt, a very particular steam and smoke is produced, which is dispersed over the house by walking around with the plate while performing the religious reading of *al-ma'ūdihāt*⁵²⁶. The aim is to clean the house from the evil eye and evil spirits, and to counteract any effect or harm that these spirits might have accomplished already in the family. When a child cries too much for no reason, it is believed he has become the object of envy, so the steam/smoke is spread all around him.⁵²⁷

The fumigations carried out by Ayman's mother show current forms of protection and healing that incorporate the same materials that were used in the manufacture of amulets in the early 20th century. This continuity should make us reflect on how the Canaan amulets are not isolated in time and space, they are linked to amulets used in previous centuries and amulets used in contemporary practices. The amulets collected by Canaan have been constructed as remnants of a no-longer existing past, as representatives of a traditional medicine that was "replaced" by modern

⁵²⁶ *al-ma'ūdihāt* refers to the three last auras of the Qur'an.

⁵²⁷ Information obtained from conversations with Ayman al-Shweiki. (fieldwork interviews, fall 2017)

medicine, and as tokens of Palestine's cultural heritage. However, the logic behind the use of amulets informs popular forms of healing, that are still popular nowadays, thus leading to the conclusion that the Canaan amulets are part of a continuum that tends to be overlooked.

Functioning simultaneously as representatives of the past and as powerful remedies, the Canaan amulets disclose that *objects* are defined historically, socially and culturally. They are constantly redefined by people's engagements with the material world. The way Ayman's mother engages with the alum is different from the way Ayman engages with the alum in the Canaan amulets; for her the alum has the function of a purifying agent, for him alum amulets are ethnographic evidence of the pre-Nakba past and valuable museum objects.

The different forms in which people have engaged with amulets throughout the 20th century, can be seen through exploring the Canaan amulets through their trajectories in times and space. The mixed methodology of this thesis allows to understand that the entanglement of people, objects, places and stories helps to deconstruct the predominant narrative around the *Tawfik Canaan Collection of Palestinian Amulets*. It makes it possible to distinguish multiple uses and functions that sometimes overlap making an amulet a very complex object.

Chapter 1 is a reflexive exercise of the category "amulet", the magical load that has been given to it, and the way amulets have been explored in colonial settings. The chapter highlights the imprecision of using the term "amulet" for objects of diverse kinds used in different contexts. In contrast, it suggests the use of *emic* terms, which stand as way they were referred to by the users, collectors, and ethnographers in the early 20th century. One same amulet could be referred to in different ways, disclosing the many and simultaneous forms in which people related to the objects.

In the first half of the 20th century, when Canaan collected his amulets, they were used as a means of protection and healing or for achieving good luck or well-being. However, this thesis has shown that amulets had many simultaneous functions, whereby the "original" medical function was sometimes opaqued by the commercial, political, ethnographic and social functions. In other words, amulets simultaneously participated in commoditisation, politicisation and folklorisation processes between amulet makers, users, merchants, ethnographers and collectors.

Studying the trajectories and circulation of the Canaan amulets, it becomes possible to access the religious, economic, social and cultural developments that took place in Palestine from the late 19th to the late 20th century. In going through the different phases of amulets, Chapter 2 has shown that amulets were ingrained in the medico-religious culture of Palestine, which was predominantly agrarian. It was composed of three main domains, the abode of the saints, the world

of demons, and the natural world. People engaged with elements associated with these three domains in a fluid manner, and amulets resulting from it could be multipurpose/mixed amulets such as the alum-blue bead-*al-mīs* bead amulet. The complexity of everyday religion is also evident in its pragmatic nature. Such as the amulets from Nabi Yaqin (Fig. 14), objects that seemed to be associated to a particular source of power, could be related to other elements (landmarks, saints, stories about the intrinsic powers of their materials) to add to and ensure their efficacy. This pragmatism is also reflected in the way amulets were used by people from different confessions. For them the use of amulets responded to everyday needs, which could be fulfilled in sacred places and through rituals that were beyond any confessional domain.

Since efficacious amulets could restore physical, psychological and social well-being, the demand for these objects was quite high. Chapter 4. has shown that the commoditisation of amulets occurred from the moment they were made. Different instances were involved in the manufacture and circulation of these powerful objects, which challenges any kind of fixed hierarchy. Amulets were made by sheikhs, but also users were capable of making their own amulets by knowing about the intrinsic properties of materials, and ways to infuse power in them. They were made by obtaining them (or parts) in the market, and by activating them in a shrine. Moreover amulets of a particular fame circulated all around Palestine. Merchants moving across the country supplied amulets to the clientele, which gradually included more and more pilgrims, who during pilgrimage, would acquire them to later take them home, pass them on to their relatives, or sell them.

The circulation of amulets cannot be completely understood without considering the role of ethnographers and collectors. Chapter 3. has shown that next to their circulation and use as healing objects, amulets became subject to ethnographic interest. This phase in the amulets' life sheds light on a large part of how Jerusalem's urban culture developed, and the economic relations that the city kept with the surrounding villages. It for example shows how through the establishment of schools, archaeological research institutes and hospitals, missions shaped much of the urban bourgeoisie's culture. Members of this social class eventually contributed to the study of Palestine's folklore and formed collections that remained in Palestine, or were sent abroad. This phase also shows how, although amulets had always operated in commercial contexts, the trade of amulets as part of holy souvenirs increased in the 19th century with the masses of visitors frequenting the sites in Palestine. Once amulets turned into souvenirs and ethnographic evidence, they were given value for their uniqueness and their collectibility. The commoditisation of amulets acquired a new dimension in which people who had only used amulets as healing remedies, entered the networks in which

amulets could be commoditised as collectibles. Users bought amulets not only for their own consumption, but in order to sell them on to make a profit. In such cases the healing power did not longer formed the main interest of the buyers. Merchants specialised their trade according to the demand of the clients, and antiquarians, such as Ohan, offered products in shops for collectors. The phase of the amulets as ethnographic data and collectables also shows the relations that the urban bourgeoisie established with the rural areas through the medical practice and fieldwork carried out by anthropologists. Encounters between physicians, ethnographers, archaeologists, and common people disclose that users of amulets negotiated with the doctors to keep their healing objects. This phase of amulets as ethnographic data is not limited to the time of Canaan. Even when the Canaan amulets were made public again in the 1990's, and entered a phase of politicisation, they kept their status as ethnographic data.

Chapter 5 has shown how the Canaan amulets acquired a political meaning in the 1990's. Starting with the time they were donated to BZU and later during the exhibition *Ya kafî, Ya shaft*, the Canaan amulets were presented as part of the national cultural heritage. Originally coming from a peasant culture that was considered backwards by Canaan and other collectors in the time they were collected, the amulets are now considered by all Palestinians part of their culture. Through the conceptualisation of the *fallāḥ* as a national hero, Palestinians had embodied such a hero and have strengthen their connexion with the land. The chapter has also highlighted that besides their symbolic meaning as representatives of the peasant culture, the amulets had strong ties to elite/learned, modern urban culture. Indeed, Canaan and other urbanite contemporaries of his, played an important role in recording and safeguarding elements of Palestinian culture. They were among the first who became politically active and raise awareness of the threat that Palestine was under. It is precisely during Canaan's collecting activity that the Palestinian-ness of the amulets started to take shape. This layer/phase of the amulets as tokens of Palestine's national culture overlap with their phases as collectibles and ethnographic data. Once the amulets became part of BZU collections they have not been able to circulate as commodities or as healing objects anymore. However, as museum objects they have a latent quality to enter a commoditisation process again.

Canaan's amulets for all their particularities in the Palestinian context of the 19th and 20th centuries, offer insights that can be applied to the understanding of amulets and collections in other contexts. Studying amulets in collections in this way, offers a more comprehensive approach based on the the premise that they are dynamic objects, and that the museum — where we see them now — is just one more setting in their life as objects. It is a combination of historical and anthropological

research, in which the understanding of the objects takes place in their relation to their human, material and social environment through a period of time.

Although this thesis has explored Palestinian amulets through particular case of the Tawfik Canaan Collection of Palestinian Amulets, the approach to the objects can very well apply to all amulets in collections in general. As for the processes and historical conditions, the development of ethnographic research, archaeological interest, the missionary culture and the agrarian culture, can explain many other cases of Levantine material culture. This thesis has selected particular items to exemplify aspects of the life of the Canaan amulets. The Collection is so vast that what remains to be done is a more detailed study of the material; an exploration of the life of each item.

Reflecting on the main research question: what different uses and functions did the objects in the Tawfik Canaan Collection of Palestinian Amulets have during their lifetime? This thesis has found out that by exploring the amulets in a sort of biographical way, in different moments of time and settings, it is possible to see that their use and functions have been impacted by their historical context including: everyday religiosity, colonisation, collecting processes, commercial exploitation, and nationalism. The Canaan amulets that are nowadays presented as Palestinian amulets, retain qualities from the phases they have been through. Once used as healing and protective means, commodities, ethnographic data, museum objects, collectibles, the amulets continue to be part of a continuum of process of contextualisation.