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# Harry Potter in the Gulf: Contemporary Islam and the Occult

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# Harry Potter in the Gulf: Contemporary Islam and the Occult

REMKE KRUK\*

## Introduction

A short item in the *New York Times* of February 13, 2002, contained the following news item:

*United Arab Emirates: 'Potter' magic denied.* 'Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone'<sup>1</sup> has been banned from school libraries because it contravenes Islamic values, the education ministry said, without offering details. J.K. Rowling's best seller about a boy wizard-trainee was among 26 books banned, but copies remain on sale in bookshops and movies show the film version. The ministry censors school books to make sure they contain no sexual, religious or historical content offensive to Islam, Arabs or government policy. (Agence France-Presse)

To the average American or European reader the news item may not sound very different from the reactions to 'Harry Potter' that occasionally are heard from the sterner brand of Christian believers. The ground in both cases is roughly the same: sorcery is forbidden in Islam as well as in Christianity. Yet the actual social context in relation to sorcery in which the Arabic version of 'Harry Potter' has to make its way differs considerably from that of the English original.<sup>2</sup>

It is not my intention here to analyse the reception of 'Harry Potter' in various Islamic countries, however interesting that would be. Maybe the future will offer opportunities to carry out the extensive survey needed to answer questions to this



<sup>55</sup> Bali, al-Sarim pp. 55–76.

<sup>56</sup> Bali, al-Sarim pp. 57–58.

<sup>57</sup> Bali, al-Sarim pp. 58–68.

<sup>1</sup> This is the American title of Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone.

<sup>2</sup> For brief introductions to the subject of magic and mantics in Islam I may refer the reader to the publications of Fahd and Lemay included among the references.

<sup>3</sup> Rossell H. Robbins, *Encyclopedia of Witchcraft and Demonology*. (New York: Crown Publishers, 1959), p. 7. This is the meaning of sihr which is relevant in the context of this article. I do not enter here upon a wider discussion of the various meanings of sihr in Arabic.

<sup>4</sup> Hans Sebald, *Witchcraft: The Heritage of a Heresy*. (New York & Oxford: Elsevier, 1978), p. 212.

<sup>5</sup> My colleague Prof. Léon Buskens remarked to me on this subject that it would be very interesting to devote a study to the question why the condemnation of sorcery led to such different results in Christianity, with its ferocious witchhunts, and in Islam, where in spite of the occasional execution or banishment (see, for instance, Edward William Lane, *The Magicians and Sorcerers of Egypt* (London: George Philip and Sons Ltd; New York: Dover Publications, 1955), p. 100), the attitude was much more relaxed.

<sup>6</sup> M. El-Ghazali, *Al-Ikhtisār fī al-ʿIlal al-ʿArḍiyya* (Cairo: al-Maktaba al-Khamsa, 1967), p. 100. zugeschrieben. In the 19th century, the Anna Maria Piccolomini, a German, wrote *Usul al-H'ikma* (Cairo, 1995), which, according to al-Buni, is a collection of chagafiyya, repeated. (n.d.). The

<sup>7</sup> An exhibition catalogue. For the

<sup>8</sup> As the German, Edward Westermarck's *Ritual and Belief in Morocco* (London: MacMillan and

Co., 1926) being one of the few exceptions. Michael W. [Dols](#) included two chapters on magic and healing in his *Majnun: the Madman in Medieval Islamic Society*. Edited by Diana E. Immisch. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), but they are not very systematic. Dols makes ample use of the works of Doutté and Westermarck.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Diyarbi’ is the usual vocalisation if this name. It is also sometimes written as ‘Diyarbi’, see for instance Taha Husayn Al-Ayyam (Cairo: Dar al-Ma‘arif, n.d.; originally published 1929) vol. I, p. 97. C. Brockelmann, *Geschichte der arabischen Literatur*, Suppl. II p. 445, gives the name of the author as ‘al-Daira-bi’: Ahmad b. ‘Uthman al-Dairabi al-Shafi‘i al-Azhari, d. 1151/1738. For a survey of the contents of his *Mujarrabat* (or *Fath al-malik al-majid*), see Pielow, *Quellen*, p. 61 ff. – The other books that formed the stock-in-trade of the travelling bookseller were, according to Taha Husayn (Al-Ayyam I, p. 97): *Manaqib al-salihin*; ‘stories about ghazawat and futuh’, the legendary early Islamic raids and conquests, often anonymous, but some of them ascribed to pseudo-al-Baladhuri; ‘the story of the cat and the mouse’; ‘the discussion of the wick and the oil stove’; *Shams al-Ma‘arif al-kabir*, Al-Buni's well-known book on magic and sorcery; various pious recitations; stories connected to the Prophet's birthday celebration; volumes with Sufi poetry; books with pious adhortations; other books with lectures and miraculous stories; various popular *siyar*: the *Sira Hilaliya*; *Sirat ‘Antar*; *Sirat al-Zahir Baybars*; *Sirat Sayf ibn Dhi Yazan*.

<sup>10</sup> See R (ion).

<sup>11</sup> For tra llen, pp. 125–9; f ghribi al-Tilimsan, p. 162.

<sup>12</sup> Pielow

<sup>13</sup> For the  
<sup>14</sup> An e.

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<sup>15</sup> An ex e here, firstly, to Robbi t is a late medieva to control natural forces, either for good or evil purposes, and, secondly, to what Edward Evans-

Pritchard says in his *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937), p. 21: 'Azande believe that some people are witches and can injure them in virtue of an inherent quality. A witch performs no rite, utters no spell, and possesses no medicine. An act of witchcraft is a psychic act.' Sorcerers, on the other hand, make use of evil medicines, and that is what the sahir treated in Bali's book does. The effect of the evil eye more properly comes under the definition of witchcraft, but is usually treated separately, also by Bali.

<sup>16</sup> Bali, *al-Sarim al-battar fitasaddi li-l-sahara al-ashrar* (Jedda: Maktabat al-sahaba, 1991), pp.6-26.

<sup>17</sup> Bali, *al-Sarim al-battar fitasaddi li-l-sahara al-ashrar* (Jedda: Maktabat al-sahaba, 1991), pp. 32-36.

<sup>18</sup> Author of *al-Sirr al-maktum fi mukhatabat al-nujum* (M. Ullmann) *Die Natur- und Geheimwissenschaften im Islam* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1972), pp. 388-90), a book on astral magic, which is still used, especially in the abbreviated version of al-Fullani, *Al-Durr al-manzum wa-khulasat al-sirr al-maktum*, printed Cairo 1350/1931.

<sup>19</sup> *Khawa* literally means 'special properties', and is sometimes used simply in that sense. In the context of natural philosophy, however, it indicates the virtues, the hidden or sympathetic properties of natural substances. For a discussion of the

concept, see e.g. *al-Sirr al-maktum*. It may be noted here that the concept of hidden properties is not unique to the Islamic tradition, but is found in many cultures. For instance, the concept of the 'hidden' or 'sympathetic' properties of natural substances is found in the *al-Fullani* (1994), pp. 307-308.

<sup>20</sup> On the concept of the 'hidden' or 'sympathetic' properties of natural substances, see e.g. *al-Fullani* (1994), pp. 307-308.

<sup>21</sup> Bali,

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Ibr. *al-Sirr al-maktum* (1994), pp. 307-308. *Occultes* dans la culture arabe, Actes du Symposium de Paris, 1956. (Paris: Bessou & Co, 1956). *Occultes* prepared as

<sup>23</sup> See also Douthé, *Magie*, p. 67.

<sup>24</sup> Bali, al-Sarim pp. 32.

<sup>25</sup> Bali, al-Sarim, p. 34.

<sup>26</sup> Lane, *Manners*, p. 273.

<sup>27</sup> Bali, al-Sarim, pp. 35.

<sup>28</sup> Bali, al-Sarim, p. 36.

<sup>29</sup> Bali, al-Sarim, p. 36.

<sup>30</sup> Bali, al-Sarim, p. 37.

<sup>31</sup> Bali, al-Sarim, p. 37.

<sup>32</sup> What is described here is astral magic, which makes use of the spiritual powers of the stars. This method goes back to the star cult of the Harranians.

<sup>33</sup> Bali, al-Sarim, p. 38.

<sup>34</sup> This practice belongs under mantics rather than under sorcery. The known practice, is described for instance by Lane, *Manners*, pp. 274–82 and Doutté, *Magie*, pp. 389. It

35 Bali, a



37 Bali, a

38 Bali, a

39 Bali, a

<sup>40</sup> For an example, see Atiya, *Khul-Khaal*, pp. 170–1, 134.

<sup>41</sup> For an example, see Atiya, *Khul-Khaal* pp. 103–122.

<sup>42</sup> For examples, see Atiya, *Khul-Khaal*, pp. 153–154, 169.

<sup>43</sup> For an example, see Atiya, *Khul-Khaal*, p. 158.

<sup>44</sup> *Sidr or nabq*, *Zizyphus spina christi*, see Kruk, ‘*sidr*’.

<sup>45</sup> The reference given by Bali is *Fath al-Bari* X: 233, but I have not been able to trace the quotation in the edition of the *Fath al-Bari* available to me.

<sup>46</sup> Bali, *al-Sarim*, p. 107.

<sup>47</sup> Bali, *al-Sarim*, pp. 107–8.

<sup>48</sup> The French translation, which regularly omits parts of the text, also omits this word.

<sup>49</sup> Bali, *al-Sarim* pp. 123–136.

<sup>50</sup> The tenth-century philosopher al-Amiri (al-Amiri. Everett K. Rowson (ed. and tr.) *A Muslim Philosopher on the Soul and its Fate: al-Amiri's Kitab al-Amad ‘ala l-abad*. (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1988), pp. 126–7) explains this as follows: ‘For when the configuration of the celestial spheres is associated with the repulsion of corporeal beauty, whenever the child sees something like poison or the presence of the divine’, pp. 297–8, 301. The spheres are part of a coherent system rather than sorcery.

<sup>51</sup> Bali, *al-Sarim*, p. 107.

<sup>52</sup> al-Maḥallī, *al-Sarim*, pp. 245–245.

<sup>53</sup> This is the case, but, Al-maktaba, 198.

<sup>54</sup> Extended references (see list of references at the end of this article) deserve to be translated into English.

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