British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies ›

Volume 32, 2005 - Issue 1

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Original Articles

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Pages 47-74 | Published online: 19 Oct 2010

Cite this article https://doi.org/10.1080/13530190500081626

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British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, May 2005
32(1), 47–73

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

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'[1] 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 The ministry censors school books to make sure they contain no sexual, religious or historical content offensive to Islam, Arabs or government policy.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.[2]

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 effect. The observations following here just intend to bring into focus one specific aspect of the current Islamic approach to magic and sorcery, and to give an idea of the cultural context into which the Arabic translation of 'Harry Potter' is launched.

Sorcery is an attempt to control the forces of nature, either for good or evil purposes.[3] As such, it is forbidden according to orthodox Islam as well as Christianity, unless it is done by God's explicit permission, as in the case of miracles performed by people specially favoured by Him. In spite of this, magic and sorcery have been practised on a wide scale in Christian as well as in Islamic culture. This is not a thing of the past either, even in Christianity. The views of the Church on these matters have not basically changed: sorcery exists, and it is the work of the Devil and his servants, the witches and sorcerers. God has given the

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[1] This is the American title of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone.*

[2] 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.

[3] 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.

ISSN 1353-0194 print/ISSN 1469-3542 online/05/010047–27 © 2005 British Society for Middle Eastern Studies
DOI: 10.1080/13530190500081626

Notes

[55] Bali, al-Sarim pp. 55–76.

[56] Bali, al-Sarim pp. 57–58.

[57] Bali, al-Sarim pp. 58–68.

[1] This is the American title of Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone.

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[3] 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.

[4] Hans Sebald, Witchcraft: The Heritage of a Heresy. (New York & Oxford: Elsevier, 1978), p. 212.

[5] 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 Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians. (London: J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd; New York: E. P. Dutton and Co Inc, 1954), p. 274) the approach was far more relaxed.

[6] M. El-Gawhary, Die Gottesnamen im magischen Gebrauch in den al-Buni zugeschrieben Werken. (Diss. Bonn, 1968), cited in the introduction of Dorothee Anna Maria Pielow, Die Quellen der Weisheit. Die arabische Magie im Spiegel des Usul al-H‘ikma von Ahmad Ibn ‘Ali (sic) al-Buni. (Hildesheim etc.: Georg Olms Verlag, 1995), pointed out that the name of Abu al-Hasan al-Shadhili, who lived later than al-Buni, is repeatedly mentioned in al-Buni's Shams al-ma ‘arif (Beirut: Al-maktaba al-thagafiyya, n.d.). This might indicate that at least this work was compiled posthumously.

[7] An exhibition of such texts was recently held at the Leiden University Library. For the catalogue, see bibliography, under Arnoud Vrolijk et al.

[8] As the bibliography of this article shows, these studies are mostly in French and 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.

[9] '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.

[10] See Remke Kruk, 'sidr' Encyclopaedia of Islam (Leiden: E.J. Brill, New edition).

[11] For translations of relevant passages from al-Buni's Usul, see Pielow, Quellen, pp. 125–9; for an example of 'destroying the wrongdoer', see Ibn al-Hajj – al-Maghribi al-Tilimsani, Shumus al-anwar, 2 parts in one volume (Beirut: Dar al-Jil, n.d.) II, p. 162.

[12] Pielow, Quellen, pp. 121–5.

[13] For the title, see the list of references at the end of this article.

[14] An English translation of the full text can be consulted via my home page. www.tcimo.leidenuniv.nl/index.php3?m=2l&c=30

[15] An extensive discussion of the theories and terminology concerning these phenomena lies outside the range of the present article. We may just refer here, firstly, to Robbins Encyclopedia of Witchcraft and Demonology, p. 7, that witchcraft is a late medieval Christian heresy, while sorcery is universal: sorcery is an attempt 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.

[16] Bali, al-Sarim al-battar fitasaddi li-l-sahara al-ashrar (Jedda: Maktabat al-sahaba, 1991), pp.6–26.

[17] Bali, al-Sarim al-battar fitasaddi li-l-sahara al-ashrar (Jedda: Maktabat al-sahaba, 1991), pp. 32–36.

[18] 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.

[19] Khawa literally means ‘special properties’, and is sometimes used simply in that sense. In the context of natural philosophy, however, it indicates the virtutes, the hidden or sympathetic properties of natural substances. For a discussion of the concept, see M. Ullmann, ‘Khawass’, in Encyclopaedia of Islam, new edition. It may be noted here that al-Razi does not include under his definition of Khawa the hidden properties of God's holy names or specificic Qur'anic verses, that occupy such a prominent place in the literature from al-Buni onwards.

[20] On the blurred boundaries between these types of magic, however, see for instance Ednond Doutté, Magie et religion dans l'Afrique du Nord (Paris: J. Maisonneuve, 1994), pp. 307–9.

[21] Bali, al-Sarim, pp. 32–41.

[22] Cf. Ibn al-Nadim, al-Fihrist, as analysed in A. Abel ‘La place des sciences occultes dans la décadence’, in Classicisme et déclin culturel dans l'histoire de l'Islam, Actes du Symposium international d'histoire de la civilisation musulmane, Bordeaux 1956. (Paris: Besson et Chantemerle, 1957), pp. 296–7; there, too, sinful acts are indicated as preparation for a successful invocation.

[23] See also Doutté, Magie, p. 67.

[24] Bali, al-Sarim pp. 32.

[25] Bali, al-Sarim, p. 34.

[26] Lane, Manners, p. 273.

[27] Bali, al-Sarim, pp. 35.

[28] Bali, al-Sarim, p. 36.

[29] Bali, al-Sarim, p. 36.

[30] Bali, al-Sarim, p. 37.

[31] Bali, al-Sarim, p. 37.

[32] 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.

[33] Bali, al-Sarim, p. 38.

[34] 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 was called phialomanteia in antiquity, and also attested in early Christianity. See Georg Luck: 'Witches and Sorcerers in Classical Literature', in: Bengt Ankarloo et al. Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: Ancient Greece and Rome (Philadelphia: Un. of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), p. 155.

[35] Bali, al-Sarim p. 39.

[36] Curiously, Bali does not describe here the very widespread practice of bewitching someone with the help of some of his body substance (for a practical example, see Nayra Atiya Khul-Khaal; Five Egyptian women tell their stories. (Cairo: American University of Cairo Press, 1987), p. 133, but again describes a mantic procedure.

[37] Bali, al-Sarim p. 39.

[38] Bali, al-Sarim pp. 41–50.

[39] Bali, al-Sarim pp. 51–100.

[40]. For an example, see Atiya, Khul-Khaal, pp. 170–1, 134.

[41] For an example, see Atiya, Khul-Khaal pp. 103–122.

[42] For examples, see Atiya, Khul-Khaal, pp. 153–154, 169.

[43] For an example, see Atiya, Khul-Khaal, p. 158.

[44] Sidr or nabq, Zizyphus spina christi, see Kruk, ‘sidr’.

[45] 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.

[46] Bali, al-Sarim, p. 107.

[47] Bali, al-Sarim, pp. 107–8.

[48] The French translation, which regularly omits parts of the text, also omits this word.

[49] Bali, al-Sarim pp. 123–136.

[50] 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, and that configuration coincides with the birth of some child, then whenever the child observes something which has perfect beauty, his glance is to that thing like poison opposing health.’ This is an excellent illustration of what Abel, ‘Décadence’, pp. 297–8, 316, pointed out: the -virtutes, the hidden properties of substances- are part of a coherent philosophical-scientific theory, and are of quite a different nature than sorcery.

[51] Bali, al-Sarim, p. 136.

[52] al-Mahmud, Qasim Mahmud- ‘Abu ‘Uthman’ Al-sihr fi ’l-shari‘a al-islamiyya; nash'atuhu, hukmuhu, al-wiqaya minhu. (‘Amman: Dar Wa'il, 2001), pp. 236–245.

[53] This agrees with what al-Būnī (n.d.) says, Shams al-ma‘arif al-kubra (Beirut, Al-maktaba al-thaqafiyya), part III, pp. 404–16; El-Gawhary, Gottesnamen, p. 198.

[54] Extensive study of them was made by Cor Hoffer, whose books on this topic (see list of references at the end of this article) deserve to be translated into English.

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