

## ANIMISM IN ISLAM

### (HAIR, FINGER-NAILS AND THE HAND)

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IT MUST not surprise us that a great deal of animism and old Arabian superstition persist in Islam. The words of Frazer apply in this connection:\* "As in Europe beneath a superficial layer of Christianity a faith in magic and witchcraft, in ghosts and goblins has always survived and even flourished among the weak and ignorant, so it has been and so it is in the East. Brahminism, Buddhism, Islam may come and go, but the belief in magic and demons remains unshaken through them all, and, if we may judge of the future from the past, is likely to survive the rise and fall of other historical religions." He goes on to say, "with the common herd, who compose the great bulk of every people, the new religion is accepted only in outward show, because it is impressed upon them by their natural leaders whom they cannot choose but follow. They yield a dull assent to it with their lips, but in their hearts they never really abandon their old superstitions; in these they cherish a faith such as they cannot repose in the creed which they nominally profess; and to these, in the trials and emergencies of life, they have recourse as to infallible remedies when the promises of the higher faith have failed them, as indeed such promises are apt to do."

What is here written is evident in many popular customs observed by the common people in Arabia and in Egypt, not to mention other Moslem lands as we shall show in the following notes on certain superstitions connected with hair cutting, nail trimming, and the use of the hand as an amulet, especially in lower Egypt. The field is so vast and investigations along these lines have been so meagre, however, that our readers must regard this paper as only a point of departure for further

\**The Scapegoat*, pp. 89-90.

study rather than a complete survey of even so small a section of a world of animistic practice.

Some writers go so far as to say that animism lies at the root of all Moslem theology. Simon states:\* "The Moslem is naturally inclined to Animism; his Animism does not run counter to the ideal of his religion. Islam is the classic example of the way in which the non-Christian religions do not succeed in conquering Animism. This weakness in face of the supreme enemy of all religions and moral progress bears a bitter penalty. Among the Animist peoples Islam is more and more entangled in the meshes of Animism. The conqueror is, in reality, the conquered. Islam sees the most precious article of its creed, the belief in God, and the most important of its religious acts, the profession of belief, dragged in the mire of Animistic thought; only in Animistic guise do they gain currency among the common people. Instead of Islam raising the people, it is itself degraded. Islam, far from delivering heathendom from the toils of Animism, is itself deeply involved in them. Animism emerges from its struggle for the soul of a people, modernized it is true, but more powerful than ever, elegantly tricked out and buttressed by theology. Often it is scarcely recognizable in its refined Arabian dress, but it continues as before to sway the people; it has received Divine sanction."

According to animistic beliefs the soul of man rests not only in his heart but pervades special parts of his body, such as the head, the intestines, the blood, placenta, hair, teeth, saliva, sweat, tears, etc. The means by which this soul-stuff is protracted or conveyed to others is through spitting, blowing, blood-wiping, or touch. In all of these particulars and under all of these subjects we have superstitions in Islam that date back to pagan days but are explained by Moslem tradition and in some cases by the Koran itself. The personal soul in man has also a direct connection with his shadow, his dreams, his second self, or demon. In a former article we have treated the subject of the *Qarina* or *personal demon* at

\**The Progress and Arrest of Islam in Sumatra*: Gottfried Simon, pp. 187-8.

some length.\* The soul may escape through sneezing, yawning, etc. This is the reason for pious ejaculations by Moslems on such occasions. Soul-stuff exists in animals, certain plants, and these are therefore considered sacred. The Moslem doctrine of the soul itself, its pre-existence, its journey after death, the visiting of graves and the whole subject of demonology is full of animistic elements. It is against the dread of demons and with the object of protecting the soul and strengthening it against sinister influences that we have in Islam magic of every description.

In the disposal of hair cuttings and nail trimmings among Moslems to-day, and their magical use, there is clear evidence of animistic belief. People may be bewitched through the clippings of their hair and parings of their nails. This belief is world-wide.† “To preserve the cut hair and nails from injury,” says Frazer, “and from the dangerous uses to which they may be put by sorcerers, it is necessary to deposit them in some safe place. In Morocco women often hang their cut hair on a tree that grows on or near the grave of a wonder-working saint; for they think thus to rid themselves of headache or to guard against it. In Germany the clippings of hair used often to be buried under an elder-bush. In Oldenburg cut hair and nails are wrapt in a cloth which is deposited in a hole in an elder-tree days before the new moon; the hole is then plugged up. In the West of Northumberland it is thought that if the first parings of a child’s nails are buried under an ash-tree, the child will turn out a fine singer. In Amboyna before a child may taste sago-pap for the first time, the father cuts off a lock of the infant’s hair, which he buries under a sago-palm. In the Aru Islands when a child is able to run alone, a female relation shears a lock of its hair and deposits it on a banana-tree. In the island of Rotti it is thought that the first hair which a child gets is not his own, and that, if it is not cut off, it will make him weak and ill. Hence, when the child is about a month old, his

\*THE MOSLEM WORLD, Vol. VI, October 1916, No. 4.

†*Taboo and the Perils of the Soul*, pp. 274-275.

hair is polled with ceremony. As each of the friends who are invited to the ceremony enters the house he goes up to the child, snips off a little of its hair and drops it into a coco-nut shell full of water. Afterwards the father or another relation takes the hair and packs it into a little bag made of leaves, which he fastens to the top of a palm-tree. Then he gives the leaves of the palm a good shaking, climbs down, and goes home without speaking to any one. Indians of the Yukon territory, Alaska, do not throw away their cut hair and nails, but tie them up in little bundles and place them in the crotches of trees or wherever they are not likely to be disturbed by beasts. For they have a superstition that disease will follow the disturbance of such remains by animals. Often the clipped hair and nails are stowed away in any secret place, not necessarily in a temple or cemetery or at a tree, as in the case already mentioned."

It is remarkable that in Arabia, Egypt and North Africa everywhere this custom of stowing away clippings of hair and nails is still common among Moslems and is referred to traditions of the Prophet.

In North Africa a man will not have his hair shaved in the presence of anyone who owes him a grudge. After his hair has been cut, he will look around, and if there is no enemy about he will mix his cuttings with those of other men and leave them, but if he fears someone there he will collect the cuttings, and take them secretly to some place and bury them. With a baby this is said to be unnecessary, as he has no enemies—a surprising statement. Nails are cut with scissors and they are always buried in secret. One can see this superstition also in the account given of a charm described by Captain Tremearne\* which consists of certain roots from trees mixed with a small lock of hair from the forehead and the parings of all the nails, hands and feet, *except those of the first fingers*. The fact of this exception clearly shows that we deal again with a superstition that has come from Arabia and Animism as we shall see later.

\**The Ban of the Bori*, p. 57.

In Bahrein, East Arabia, they observe a special order in trimming the finger-nails and bury the discarded trimmings in a piece of white cloth saying *Hatha amana min 'andina ya Iblis yashud 'anna al Rahman*.<sup>\*</sup> They bury hair-combings in the same way expecting to receive them back on the day of resurrection. Concerning the thumb, they think it has no account with God because it can do no evil.

The belief that cut hair and nails contain soul-stuff and therefore may be wrongly used by enemies leads Moslems to hang their hair on the tombs of saints together with shreds of their garments, nails, teeth, etc. On one of the great ancient gates of Cairo, called *Bab-el-Mutawali*, this also takes place and one may watch a constant procession of men, women and children having communion with the saint who dwells behind or under this gateway and seeking through personal contact with the doorway by touching, breathing, etc., to carry away the blessing.

In connection with this superstition Rev. L. E. Högberg of Chinese Turkestan† tells of the popular belief that “during the last days, Satan will appear on earth riding on a *Merr dedjell* (Satan’s mule). Every hair on the mule’s body is a tuned string or musical instrument. By the music furnished in this way all the people on earth are tempted to follow Satan. Great horns grow out on their heads, so that they can never return through their doors. The faithful Mohammedan has, however, a way of salvation. He has carefully collected his cut-off nails, and placed them under the threshold, where they have formed a hedge, blocking the door so as to prevent the household from running after Satan!” Again the hair and nails have special power assigned to them as a protection for the soul against evil!

Many superstitions are connected with the paring of the nails some of which are doubtless from Judaism, others from paganism. According to the Haggadah‡ “every pious Jew must purify himself and honor the

<sup>\*</sup>“O Satan, this is a safe deposit from us as God is our witness.”

†*Central Asia*, December 1916.

‡*Jewish Encyclopedia*, Vol. ix, art. “Nail.”

coming holy day by trimming and cleaning the nails beforehand. The Rabbis are not agreed as to when they should be pared; some prefer Thursday, for if cut on Friday they begin to grow on the Sabbath; others prefer Friday, as it will then appear that it is done in honor of the Sabbath. It has, however, become the practice to cut them on Friday and certain *poskim* even prohibit the paring of the nails on Thursday.\* Moslems also have special days for this purpose. The Jews believe that the parings should not be thrown away. The Rabbis declare that he who burns them is a pious man (*Hasid*), he who buries them is a righteous one (*zaddik*), and he who throws them away is a wicked one. The reason for this is that if a pregnant woman steps on them the impurity attached to them will cause a premature birth.\*

In the order of cutting the nails the Jews have borrowed from the Zoroastrians while the Mohammedans seem to have borrowed from the Jews. According to Mohammed the order of procedure is remembered by the word *Khawabis* which indicates the initials of the names of the five fingers of the hand. First one is to attend to the *Khansar* (little finger), then the *Wasti* (middle finger), then the *Abham* (thumb), then the *Binsar* (ring finger), and last of all to the *Sababa* (index finger). The *Sababa* means the "finger of cursing"—compare the root *sabba*=to curse. Moslems generally follow this practice without knowing the reason of what they do. The cuttings of finger-nails are never thrown away but are either wrapped in a paper, buried under the door-mat or carefully put into a chink of the wall. Similar superstitions exist among the animistic tribes of the South Seas.

The custom connected with hair cutting or shaving and the trimming of the nails during the pilgrimage ceremony at Mecca is well-known. As soon as the pilgrim assumes the *Ihram* or pilgrim dress, he must abstain from cutting his hair or nails. This command is observed most scrupulously. We read in a celebrated Moslem book of law:† "The expiatory fine of three *modd* of foodstuffs is

\**Jewish Encyclopedia*.

†*Minhaj et Talibin*: Nawawi, p. 120.

only incurred in full when at least three hairs or three nails have been cut; one *modd* only being due for a single hair or a single nail, and two *modd* for two hairs or two nails. A person who is unable to observe this abstinence, should have his whole beard shaved and pay the expiatory fine." When the pilgrimage is terminated and the ceremony completed, the head is shaved, the nails are cut and the following prayer is offered:\* "I purpose loosening my Ihram according to the Practice of the Prophet, Whom may Allah bless and preserve! O Allah, make unto me every Hair, a Light, a Purity, and a generous Reward! In the name of Allah, and Allah is Almighty!" After this prayer strict Moslems carefully bury their hair and nail trimmings in sacred soil.

The statements made in books of Moslem law leave no doubt that hair is considered sacred and may not therefore be sold or in any way dishonored. We read in the *Hedaya*, a great commentary on Moslem law:† "The sale of human hair is unlawful, in the same manner as is the use of it; because, being a part of the human body, it is necessary to preserve it from the disgrace to which an exposure of it to sale necessarily subjects it. It is moreover recorded, in the *Hadith Sharif*, that 'God denounced a curse upon a *Wasila* and a *Mustawasila*.' (The first of these is a woman whose employment it is to unite the shorn hair of one woman to the head of another, to make her hair appear long; and the second means the woman to whose head such hair is united.) Besides, as it has been allowed to women to increase their locks by means of the wool of a camel, it may thence be inferred that the use of human hair is unlawful."

In many parts of the world, especially in East Arabia, human hair is used by native doctors in medicine as a powerful tonic. It is generally administered by tincture or decoction. In this respect the hair of saints has more value than ordinary hair. I have known of a case where a learned *kadi* sent to the barbers to collect hair in order to prepare such a powerful tonic. Special chapters are

\*Burtons *Pilgrimage to Meccah*, Vol. ii, p. 205.

†Hamilton's *Hedaya*, Vol. ii, p. 439, 1791.

found in lives of Mohammed the Prophet on the virtues of his *Fadhalat*, breath, blood, etc., including his hair. We read for example in the life of Mohammed by Seyyid Ahmed Zaini Dahlan:\* "When the Prophet had his head shaved and his companions surrounded him they never suffered a single hair to fall to the ground but seized them as good omens or for blessing and since His excellency only had his hair cut at the times of the pilgrimage this has become *sunna*. So it is related in the *Mawahib* and he who denies it should be severely punished. And Mohammed ben Sairain relates I said to Obeidah Suleimani, I have a few hairs of the Prophet which I took from Anas and he replied, If I had a single hair it would be worth more to me than all the world."

Because of this belief hairs of the Prophet's beard, and in some cases of other saints in Islam are preserved as relics in the mosques throughout the world, *e.g.* at Delhi, Aintab, Damascus, etc. To give a recent instance, the population of Safed in Palestine, according to a missionary correspondent,† was all excitement in the early days of July 1911 because a veritable hair from the beard of the Prophet had been granted them as a gift by the Sultan. A Christian builder was engaged to restore a mosque of the Binat Yacoob, where the famous relic now finds shelter. The mayor of the city took the journey to Acre in order to accompany the relic to its resting place. The correspondent goes on to relate some of the marvels that were told as to the virtues connected with the hair of the Prophet. Twenty soldiers, fully armed, escorted the relic, which was carried on horseback by a special rider.

We pass on to superstitions connected with the human hand. Mr. Eugene Lefebure writes:§ "There never was a country where the representation of the human hand has not served as an amulet. In Egypt as in Ireland, with the Hebrews as with the Etruscans, they attribute to this figure a mysterious power. In the middle parts of

\*Margin of *Sirat al Halabi*, Cairo Ed. 1308 A. H., Vol iii, pp. 238-239.

†*Der Christliche Orient*, September 1911.

§*Bulletin de la Societe de Geographie d'Alger et de l'Afrique du Nord*, 1907, No. 4.



France they have the hand made of coral, and the Arabs in Africa and Asia believe that the fingers of an open hand, like the horn, has the power of turning away the evil eye. This belief they have inherited from the Chaldeans and the Phenecians, which belief they share with the Jews. Whether it be the figure of a hand, or the hand or fingers taken from a corpse, he who possesses a talisman of this kind is sure of escaping bad influences. In Palestine this goes by the name of *Kef Miryam*; in Algeria the Moslems in our French colonies very appropriately named these talismans *La Main de Fatima* and from this source another superstition has been developed: the mystic virtues of the number five, because of the five fingers of the hand.”† (Or its sinister power.)

“The hand of Fatima,” says Tremearne, “is a great favourite in Tunis, and one sees it above the great majority of doorways; in Tripoli there is hardly one, and this is only to be expected, since the sign is an old Carthaginian one, representing not the hand of Fatima at all, but that of Tanith. It has been thought, however, that the amulet is so curiously similar to the thunderbolt of Adad, worn in the necklet of the Assyrian kings along with emblems for the sun, the moon, and Venus that it may be a survival of that.”†

The hand is often painted upon the drum used in the bori (devil) dances in Tunis. It is also held up, fingers outstretched and pointing towards the evil-wisher, and this in Egypt, North Africa and Nigeria has now become a gesture of abuse. In Egypt the outstretched hand pointed at some one is used to invoke a curse. They say *yukhammisuna*, or “He throws his five at us,” i.e., he curses. Not only the hand but the forefinger is used for this purpose. It is therefore called, as we have seen, the *Sababa*. Goldziher gives many illustrations of how the forefinger was used in magical ways long before its present use in testifying to God’s unity. A controversy arose in Islam very early about the raising of the hands in prayer. It is regarding the position of the hands that

†Mr. Lefebure in his short work, *La Main de Fatima*, has gathered all that is known on the subject.

the four sects have special teaching and can be distinguished. Who can doubt that this indicates also a magical use of the hands? The hand is widely used as an amulet against the evil eye. It is made of silver or gold in jewelry, or made of tin of natural size and is then suspended over the door of a house. The top of a Moslem banner is often of this shape. It is also worn on the harness of horses, mules, etc., and on every cart used in Alexandria we see either a brass hand or one painted in various colors. The following points are to be noted. It is unlucky to count five on the fingers. All Egyptians of the lower classes when they count say: "One, two, three, four, *in the eye of your enemy*." Children, when at play, show their displeasure with each other by touching the little finger of their two hands together which signifies separation, enmity, hatred. The same sign is used by grown-up people also to close a discussion.

The origin of the stretching out of the hand with the palm exposed toward the person was explained by a Sheikh in this way. Tradition says that at one time a woman who saw Mohammed became very much enamored with his handsome presence and Mohammed fearing she would work some power over him, raised his hand (said to be the right one) and stretched it out to one side in front of him with the palm exposed toward the woman at the same time he repeated Sura 113. When he did this the covetous glance passed between his two fingers and struck a nail that was in a tree near by and broke it in pieces!

Finally we may add the curious custom also common in lower Egypt, of dipping the hand in the blood of a sacrifice and leaving its mark upon doors, foundations of buildings, animals, etc., in order to consecrate them or protect them from evil influences. In an article on the '*Aqiqa*\*' we have already referred to the prevalence of blood sacrifice in early Islam, and its significance. The practice of dipping the hand in blood and putting marks on the door-post may go back to the story of Israel in Egypt, but the present use of the hand in this way is

\*THE MOSLEM WORLD, Vol. vi, July 1916, No. 3.

mixed with all manner of superstitions. Who can unravel the threads in the tangled skein of Moslem beliefs and practices? There is much of Judaism as Rabbi Geiger has shown; more perhaps even of Christian ideas prevalent in Arabia at the time of the Prophet; but most of all Islam in its popular forms is full of animism and practices which can only be described as pagan in origin and in tendency.

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*Cairo, Egypt.*