

BERTI QUR'ANIC AMULETS

BY

A. OSMAN EL-TOM

(University of Gezira, Sudan)

The Berti live in the Province of North Darfur in the Sudan. They are sedentary people whose main livelihood is based on rain cultivation and animal husbandry (for more details on the Berti see Holy 1974). For several centuries the Berti have spoken their own dialect of the Arabic language. They are Muslim, following the Maliki school of Islamic Law. Among the Berti, Islam is disseminated and taught by their religious men, locally referred to as *fugara*, a term translated as juriconsults, clergymen, Sufi mendicants or religious officiants (see Trimmingham 1949:140, 1968:61 and 130; Yusuf 1975:116; among others). As professionals, Berti religious men render a variety of services to their clients. They teach the Qur'an, preside over rituals, and treat the sick. In this article I shall restrict myself to the provision of 'amulets' which are believed to help their owners to achieve certain objectives.

Hijab

The term *hijab* (pl. *hijbat*) is difficult to translate into English. Different scholars used a variety of terms and definitions when referring to it in their writings. While Hussey reserved the term without translation (Hussey 1933:37), Abdal Halim (1939:37) and Al-Tayib (1955:147) preferred the term 'amulet' and al-Safi used the term 'phylactery' (1970:32). However, Al-Tayib employed the word 'amulet' as a general term referring to *hijab*, *bakhra* (fumigation charm) and perhaps erasure (Al-Tayib 1955:147). His use of the term and the way he defines it is similar to Sanneh's who, in his study of the Jakhanke of West Afrika, uses the term *hijab* for:

...any phrase from an Islamic ceremony or prayer devotion which is believed to be infused with barakah and which is efficacious when retained on one's person, either in the form of a memorised formula or as an amulet. Such

barakah charged formulae can also be written down on Qur'an slates and washed off, the mixture serving as medicine (Sanneh 1979:208).

Both of these terms, amulet and phylactery (see Fowler and Fowler 1964:40 and 914), limit the functions of *hijbat*, as will be apparent from further examination of the indigenous meaning of the term. Writing about northern Sudan, Al-Tayib defines *hijab* as: "astrological formulas written on a sheet of paper which would later be rolled up and covered with leather according to a certain design requiring the skill of the local saddler" (1955:147). Al-Safi describes it in the following way: "Some Quranic verses are written on a piece of white paper, supplemented by the 99 names of God, names of angels and jinn and some astrological formulae. This is called a *hijab* (phylactery)" (1970:32).

These definitions exclude many others recognized as *hijbat* by the Northern Sudanese, including the Berti people. A Berti *hijab* may contain some Qur'anic verses, some of the 99 names of God and names of angels and demons, or it may include only one or some of these things. It may be rolled up in a leather cover, but it may also be covered by a piece of cloth. It is also possible to find a *hijab* which is used without either of these covers, such as the *harrasa hijab* (guardian) which is hung, unfolded and uncovered, over the entrance of a hut. Moreover, the *hijab* may be written by non-human beings through human mediums, a possibility not covered by the above-mentioned definitions. The contents of such a *hijab* are believed to be unintelligible to human beings (see El-Tom 1980:23).

The *hijab* has many functions: it may be used to avoid the malicious influences of evil spirits, the evil eye or sorcery, or to divert weapons such as bullets, knives, sticks, etc. A *hijab* may also be employed to incite love in someone, to gain respect, to frighten away enemies, to ensure success in trade, animal husbandry, cultivation or any other activity which may affect one's livelihood. The *hijab* is then considered to have the power to affect the entire social environment for the benefit of its owner.

Once a *hijab* is prepared, it has to be used in a certain way depending on its kind and function. According to Al-Safi, "the paper of the *hijab* is folded in a special way, wrapped, hanged by a thread and worn across the trunk, around the arm, waist or hanged around the neck" (1970:32). This description is again adequate for the majority of cases but does not exhaust all the ways of keeping

a *hijab*. Depending on the kind of the *hijab*, it may be buried, burnt, hung from a roof or inserted in the walls of a house or a shop. In the case of animal *hijbat*, they are normally hung around the necks of camels, donkeys or horses.

The writing of a *hijab* is done on a special kind of paper sold by almost all village shops and imported specially for making *hijbat*. The standard size of *hijab* paper, which also seems to be the largest sheets of paper available, is about 13" × 18". Writing is normally done on one side only, and the written side later becomes the inner side after the *hijab* has been folded so that it measures approximately 1" × 1". With comparatively little space to be filled with writing, the preparation of a *hijab* requires about two hours of work. Covering the *hijab* with a piece of leather or cloth, if necessary, is the responsibility of its owner who in most cases entrusts the job to a local saddler. The cost of a *hijab* ranges from one to ten pounds. Several factors operate in determining its actual price: the kind of *hijab* on order, the status of the healer and his relation to the client, the financial situation of both, the time of consultation, etc. The cheapest and also the shortest *hijbat* are those written for animals. A *hijab* is normally prepared to be used by a particular person, but a recent tendency towards impersonalisation of *hijbat* is manifest in their sale in the local markets without a previous order. No dealers are involved in the trade in *hijbat* and it is the faki who prepares them and sells them at the same time. The commercialisation of *hijbat* and their display for sale are abhorred by many fakis in the area.

Almost every Berti adult has at least one *hijab*, usually prepared for him after a successful treatment by a faki. The majority of them have between one and five *hijbat*, although a few claim to have quite a large number of *hijbat* numbering up to a hundred. The highest number of *hijbat* owned by a single person that I saw was 50, followed by 40, 36, 20 and 15. The owners of these *hijbat* were not fakis, although two of them were fakis' sons. The owner of the highest number of *hijbat* was regarded as a troublesome person, and he had actually appeared in various local courts more than ten times. He had eight *hijbat* for ensuring that things would go his way if he was taken to court, and 44 *hijbat* in his total collection could be used in various situations involving trouble; some of his *hijbat* were for protection against various weapons, some were for scaring off enemies and some for ensuring success in adultery and theft.

The other owners of large numbers of *hijbat* whom I met were ordinary people who could not be differentiated from an average Berti. The majority of their *hijbat* were also for protection against weapons and a very few were related to health problems. Women exhibit less interest in *hijbat* than men but they normally keep a few against diseases. This derives from the fact that they are less involved than men in fighting, trading, travelling, going to court, etc.

Many Berti tend to keep more than one *hijab* of the same kind and they often claim that should one fail, the substitute might work. It is particularly non-medical *hijbat*, especially those for protection against weapons, which are often duplicated. The *hijbat* against diseases are unable to be tested as easily as those used to combat weapons. Stories about testing a *hijab* of the latter kind with both positive and negative results circulate widely in the area, some of which support the efficacy of *hijbat*, others telling about unfortunate results with the user ending up in the hands of the police. However, deliberate testing of *hijbat* is viewed with disapproval, and if the test of the *hijab* is negative it is not accepted as evidence for the fraudulence of a *hijab*, because one's own faith in a *hijab* is necessary for its efficacy. The *hijab* contains the "names of God which shall not be doubted", such that it is not the *hijab* as such but rather God invoked in it who fulfils the objective. Thus, doubting the efficacy of a *hijab* implicitly involves doubting the power of God, and people often say to the sceptic: "the name of God shall not be doubted", without necessarily referring to the *hijab*. The question of faith as contributing to the efficacy of a *hijab* cannot be supported in the case of animal *hijbat* however. Other Berti argue differently when a *hijab* fails to stand a test. For example, blame may be thrown on lack of ritual cleanliness, mistakes in writing, or lack of appropriate knowledge on the faki's part. Even if the result of the test is accepted, it can only prove or disprove the efficacy of a specific *hijab*: it does not affect the belief in the efficacy of other "untested" *hijbat*.

Examples of hijbat

In the following pages I will present some examples of the most commonly used *hijbat* in the area. All of these *hijbat* start with certain sentences which I will omit in the subsequent descriptions to avoid excessive repetition. These are: "In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Ever Merciful", "May God pray for and lay peace on

the prophet Mohammed and his Companions’’ and ‘‘May God accept our plea’’. Most of the *hijbat* are concluded with the following signs: ✠ 6 0 IIII # r ~i ✠.

These signs are spoken of as Solomon’s seal and as having a protective power against a variety of malicious forces (see El-Tom 1983:70-74). The main body of the *hijab* consists of a number of Qur’anic verses, some of which are repeated a certain number of times. Passages merge into one another without full stops. Purely for the sake of convenience, I will terminate such passages by the sign ‘‘*’’. Should a need for further comments within the text arise, they will be placed between square brackets. Passages which are repeated more than once will be marked by the letter ‘‘R’’, followed by the number of repetitions.

Hijab 1 (Tasrif: to avoid various weapons)

The term *tasrif* derives from the verb *visarrif*, meaning to deflect or cause the target to be missed. In general, some regard this type as efficacious against all sorts of arms, including rifles. Others take it to be protective only against minor weapons such as swords and sticks but not firearms.

With the omission of the general introduction, this *hijab* (see Figure 1) reads as follows:

To avoid (*visarrif*) rifles, swords, knives, sticks, whips, bullets, rocks and all kinds of weapons * They (the weapons) never penetrate the body by the will of Allah * Your God is One and the Book [Qur’an] is one, they should not be doubted. Any one who doubts this *hijab* is an infidel with regard to God and his prophet * ‘‘All types of perfect praise belong to Allah alone, the Lords of all the worlds, Most Gracious, Ever Merciful, Master of the Day of Judgement. Thee alone do we worship and Thee alone do we implore for help. Guide us along the straight path — the path of those on whom Thou hast bestowed Thy favours, those who have not incurred Thy displeasure, and those who have not gone astray’’ (Sura 1:2-7, Khan 1981:5)* ‘‘Allah is He save Whom none is worthy of worship. the Ever-Living, the Self-Subsisting and All-Sustaining. Slumber seizes Him not, nor sleep. To Him belongs whatsoever is in the heavens and whatsoever is in the earth. Who is he that dare intercede with Him, except by His permission? He knows all that is before them and all that is behind them, and they cannot compass aught of His knowledge, except that which He pleases. His knowledge extends over the heavens and the earth, and the care of them wearies Him not. He is the Most High, the Most Great.’’ (Sura 2:256, *ibid*:41)* ‘‘The desire of increase in worldly possession beguiles you till you reach the graves. Surely you will soon come to know the vanity of your pursuits; again, you surely will soon come to know how mistaken you are. Indeed if you only knew with the certainty of knowledge, you could surely see hell in this very life. But you will see it with the certainty of sight in the life to come, and then you shall be

called to ...” (Sura 102:2-9, ibid:629). [the chapter ends with the following incomplete word: “*tus*”, R. 4]* “Surely, a Messenger has come to you from among yourselves; grievously heavy is it on him that you should fall into trouble, ardently desirous is he of your welfare, compassionate and merciful towards the believers. Yet, if they should turn away, say to them: Sufficient for me is Allah. There is no god but He. In Him do I put my trust. He is the Lord of the Mighty Throne” (Sura 9:128-9, ibid:190) [R. 7]* “Proclaim: He is Allah, the Single; Allah, the Self-Existing and Besought of all. He begets not, nor is He begotten; and there is none like unto Him.” (Sura 112:2-5, ibid:634) [R. 4]* “Proclaim: I seek the protection of the Lord of creation, from the mischief of every created thing, against the mischief of the darkness when the moon is eclipsed, from the mischief of those who seek to promote discord, and from the mischief of every persistently envious person.” (Sura 113:2-6, ibid) [R. 4]* “Proclaim: I seek the protection of the Lord of mankind, the King of mankind, the God of mankind, against the mischief of every sneaking whisperer, who whispers into the minds of people, whether he be hidden from sight or be one of the common people.” (Sura 114:2-7, ibid:635) [R. 4]* “Allah” [R. 13]* [A 63 cell table (7 × 9) follows. The Arabic letter ش (pronounced ‘sh’ as in ‘shall’) is written twice jointly in each cell.]* “Allah our Lord, do Thou send down to us from Heaven a table spread with food, that it may be a festival for the first of us, and for the last of us, and a sign from Thee, and do provide us from Thyself for Thou art the Best Provider” (Sura 5:115, ibid:116). [R. 4]*

The purpose of *hijab* 1 is stated at the beginning of the text. It is also specified that there is no doubt about its efficiency. However, the warning goes much further in the same text. A person who doubts it is declared an infidel who does not believe in God and His prophet. Though the majority of the Berti may not approve of the assumption that doubting the *hijab* indicates a lack of faith in the power of God and His prophet, the warning still taps a sensitive nerve and might operate to eliminate doubts.

The table in the *hijab* contains a single letter repeated twice in each square. The letter is one of the two Arabic letters which are regarded as extreme in their “hotness” (see example 4) or “unluckiness” (Al-Boni 622 hij.: 10-14). This is probably related to the notion expressed in the local saying “The hot cures the hot”, which is used to emphasise that a complaint can only be dealt with efficiently by using measures of equal strength against it. The most important passage in the *hijab* seems to be the *takathur* (lit. “overbreeding”) or “The Piling Up” chapter (see Sura 102, Ali 1938:1780), which also appears in most of the *hijbat* against firearms. The meaning of the words of the chapter: “The desire ... *tus*” (see *Hijab* 1) has little to do with the purpose of the *hijbat* in which it is used. The words contain a warning to those who are distracted by the pleasures of the earthly life from following the

divine way. The way the chapter is copied reflects the marginal importance of its overall meaning. A part of it is omitted altogether and the Arabic word *tusalunna* ("you shall be called to account") is only partially copied. We are left with the letters creating the sound *tus* which has no meaning and does not form a word proper. The sound *tus* is thought of as being similar to the hissing sound made by a rifle bullet which has failed to explode, and the Berti often say *tus* when they want to imitate the sound produced by a failed shot. The guns which the Berti use mifire quite often. As cartridges are expensive and difficult to obtain, the Berti have developed a technique of refilling empty cartridges and using them several times. Instead of using gunpowder, they often use local explosives extracted from rocks. This technique is very often ineffective and the reused cartridges quite often fail to work, producing the sound rendered onomatopoeically as *tus*. As what is important in the chapter is this sound and its associations, the rest of the word and the remaining part of the verse are left out. The chapter, or more precisely this part of it, appears in this form throughout the *hijab*. It is repeated seven times and accompanied by other Qur'anic verses. The verses "Surely ... throne" (Sura 9:128-9) are believed to render the individual invisible when passing through the enemy's territory. The Unity (Sura 112), the Dawn (Sura 113) and the Mankind (Sura 114) chapters are believed to be endowed with immense protective power against the evils of man and nature (see el-Tom 1983:79-84).

Hijab 2 (for *sug*: market)

The following *hijab* (Figure 2) is typical of those used by Berti merchants in order to attract more customers.

"Rejoice then, in the bargain (*bey*) that you have made with Him; that indeed is the supreme triumph" (Sura 9:111, Khan 1981:188). [R. 31]* "... leave me not alone, Lord, Thou art the Best heirs (*warithin*)" (Sura 21:90, *ibid*:316). [R. 3]* Whoever sells (*ba'a*) the "second life" for "this earthly life" will soon discover his disappointing deal* "Those who swear allegiance (*yibayunaka*) to Thee swear allegiance to Allah: Allah's hand is above their hands" (Sura 48:11, *ibid*:513)* "Many a small party has triumphed over a large party by Allah's command; Allah is indeed with the steadfast" (Sura 2:250, *ibid*:40) [R. 3]* "When they perceive a matter of commerce or amusement they drift away from Thee and leave Thee standing by Thyself. Tell them: that which Allah has to bestow is better than any matter of amusement or commerce. Allah is the Best Provider" (Sura 62:12, *ibid*:563)* [The *hijab* ends with a table whose squares are filled simultaneously with letters and their numerical values].

The above *hijab* is expected to attract more customers to the merchant. The main concern seems to be not with the number of customers as such but with the amount of sales. This is the main factor determining the choice of the Qur'anic verses. The Berti words for "sell" or "sold" are *yibi* and *ba'a*. Unlike classical Arabic, the Berti dialect uses the same word for buying and selling. The passages of the *hijab* show particularly well the Berti understanding of the quoted Qur'anic verses and its divergence from their classical meaning. In their theological interpretation, words which are taken to relate to the subject of the *hijab* are often metaphors for different experiences. Some of the words in the quoted verses have different meanings in classical Arabic from the meaning ascribed to them by the Berti, and very often it is the phonetic sound of the word which is the source of the meaning ascribed to it by the Berti. I have bracketed the key words in the Qur'anic verses and I will use them to clarify my argument.

The first verse in example 2 ("Rejoice ...triumph") is selected because it contains the word "bargain" (*bey*) which has the same meaning in both classical and Berti Arabic. In the Qur'anic verses it is, however, used metaphorically and has nothing to do with markets, goods or buying and selling. Rather, it refers to those militant Muslims who offer their lives in the *jihad* in return for the rewards of the next life. The sentence "Whoever ... deal." is not a Qur'anic verse as it stands. Its source is unknown to me and it would not be appropriate to substitute it with a similar Qur'anic verse on the assumption that it is misquoted. What is important is that it includes the key word *bey* despite its classical meaning, which is different from the one ascribed to it by the Berti. Again the verse: "Those ... hands" provides a problem. It contains the word *yibayiu* translated as "to swear allegiance" which is phonetically similar to the key term *yibey* (to sel, Arabic and Berti) and is thus invested with the meaning "to sell". The last verse: "When they ... provider", is chosen because of its two words: *tigara* (commerce) and *razig* (provider). The classical meaning of the verse is again different from that ascribed to it by the Berti. The verse was revealed to the prophet in the course of his outrage when his co-worshippers left him behind leading the prayers and rushed to watch the arrival of a commercial caravan. The word "commerce" is used in a context of warning similar to the previous term "*bey*" in the passage "Whoever ... deal" (see above).

“Allah will soon bring about your victory (*fath*) or some other events from Himself favourable to you” (Sura 5:53, Khan 1981:107)* “With Him are the keys (*mafatih*) of the unseen, none knows it but He. He know whatsoever is in the land” (Sura 6:60, ibid:124)* “Our Lord, judge (*afatih*) between us and our people with justice, for Thou art the Best of those who judge (*fatihin*)” (Sura 7:90, ibid:150)* “If the people of those towns had believed and been righteous, we would surely have bestowed (*fatahna*) blessings upon them from heaven and earth” (Sura 7:92, ibid:151)* “O ye who disbelieve, if you sought judgement (*tastaftihu*), then judgement (*fath*) has indeed come to you” (Sura 8:20, ibid:166)* “When they unpacked (*fatahu*) their things they found their money had been returned to them” (Sura 12:66, ibid:225)* “They sought (*istafatahu*) Our Judgement, and every haughty enemy of truth came to naught, and found himself facing hell” (Sura 14:16, ibid:239)* “Even if We were to bestow (*fatahna*) upon them some extraordinary means of perception and they were to begin to perceive the truth through it” (Sura 15:15 ibid:224)* “... implored his Lord: My people have rejected me Lord, therefore, do Thou judge (*afatih*) finally between them and me, and deliver me and the believers that are with me from our enemies” (Sura 26:118-9, ibid:262)* “Whatever of mercy Allah grants (*yafatih*) to people may be withheld by none; and whatever He withholds, may not be released by any thereafter. He is Mighty, the Wise” (Sura 35:3, ibid:427)* “Those who follow the book of Allah and observe prayer and spend out of that which We may have provided (*razagna*) for them, secretly and openly, are pursuing a commerce that suffers no loss; for Allah will give them their full rewards and will add to them out of His bounty” (Sura 35:30-1, ibid:430)* “When they approach it, its gates will be open (*futihat*)” (Sura 39:22, ibid:463)* “Surely, We have granted (*fatahna*) thee a clear victory (*fath*), Allah may cover up thy shortcomings, past and future, and that He may complete His favour unto thee, and may guide thee along the right path; and that Allah may help thee with a mighty help” (Sura 48:1-3, ibid:512)* “In heaven is your sustenance (*rizig*), and also that which you are promised. By the Lord of the heaven and the earth, the Quran is certainly the truth even as it is true that you speak” (Sura 51:23-4, ibid:524)* “Thereupon we opened (*fatahna*) the gates of heaven with water pouring down; and We caused the earth to burst forth with springs, so the two waters met for a purpose which had been determined. We carried Noah in the ark constructed with planks and nails” (Sura 54:12-4, ibid:534)* “... help from Allah and speedy victory (*fath*). So give glad tidings of it to the believers” (Sura 61:15, ibid:561) [R. 3]* Bestow on me wisdom and understanding of the matter; You are the Greatest Provider. Provide (*arzig*) me with my sustenance; You are the Greatest Provider (*razigin*). [R. 3]* [The *hijab* contains a unique table that is different from the conventional tables. It includes in its centre the following incantation: May God, the Lord of the worlds enrich (*arzig*) His servant in trade! Amen.]

The key word which appears in most verses in *hijab* 3 is the word *fatah*, *yafatahu* (“to open”) and its derivatives *mafatih*, *afatih*, *fatahna*, *tastaftihu*, *fath*, *fatahu*, and *yafatahu*. In the Qur’an it conveys the idea that the means of sustenance and wealth are locked beyond the access of individuals and that it is God who “opens the gates of the means of sustenance” to His favourite creatures. This notion is embodied in the greeting formulae used by the Berti in the markets.

When a customer leaves a shop or passes in front of it, he addresses the shopkeeper with the words: “May God open (the gates of wealth for you)”, and the shopkeeper responds by saying: “Amen”. In my translation of *hijab* 3, I have reserved the original words relating to the verb *fatah* and its derivatives. It is apparent that the word *fataha* is the main determinant of the selection of the verses for the *hijab*. Other verses are chosen because they contain the word *rizig* (wealth, sustenance) or one or more of its derivatives (*razig*, *razigin*, *arzig*).

Few changes have been made in the selected verses and more or less the only manipulation has been in deciding where to start the quotation and where to end it. For example, the verse “With Him ... land” is only partially quoted. It continues in the Qur’an as follows: “... He knows whatsoever is in the land and in the sea; .. not a leaf but He knows it” (Sura 6:60, Khan 1981:124). The Berti quotation ends with the word “land” and the rest of the verse is omitted. The Berti have no sea in the area and they know little about it. In Berti *hijbat* generally, there is no reference to seas or rivers and it seems that they are not mentioned simply because they play no part in the people’s livelihood. In riverian Sudan, however, the Nile is of vital importance as a source of livelihood and in such areas, seas and rivers are referred to in *hijbat*. This is therefore contrary to the general view that *hijbat* are the same throughout the Muslim Sudan.

The order of the verses in *hijab* 3 indicates that the author of the *hijab* followed the sequential order of the verses in the Qur’an. This rule is not followed in other *hijbat* that I have examined.

Hijab 4 (*burda*)

The term *burda* stems from the word *barid* (cold) which is a key term in Berti symbolism (El-Tom 1980) and is used metaphorically to signify easy and comfortable in opposition to *har* (lit. hot), which signifies difficult, uncomfortable, etc. The *burda hijab* is believed to secure for its holder an easy passage in confronting his adversaries. A person taken to court can turn the verdict in his favour simply by carrying the *hijab* with him. A positive verdict is described as “cold” in opposition to a negative one referred to as “hot”.

The *hijāb* is composed of the following drawing (see Figure 4):

The outer space of the square includes, first, the names of the four archangels, each one written once on a single side of the shape; and

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ
 بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ
 مَا تَدْعُوهُ إِلَّا السَّمْعُ الْأَعْمَى

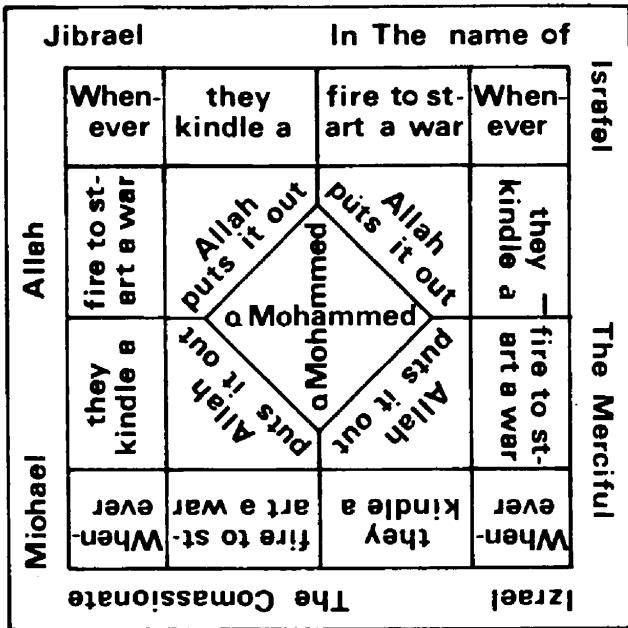
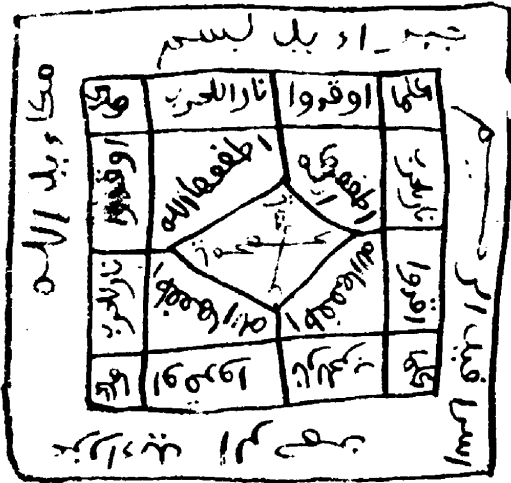


Fig. 4

second, the verse: "In the name .. Merciful" divided into four parts, each written on one side of the shape. There is no relation between the part of the verse and the archangel with whom it appears on each side of the drawing (e.g. "in the name" and "Jibrael"; see the drawing above). The verse, "Whenever they kindle a fire to start a war, Allah puts it out" (Sura 5:54, Khan 1981:109), is divided into four parts, each repeated four times. Three of these are inserted into the cells adjacent to the outer space and repeated four times. The four spaces next to the central cell are filled with the fourth part of the previous verse ("Allah puts it out"), written once in each corner. Thus, the full verse appears four times in the whole shape. The central space includes the words "O Mohammed" written twice across each other.

The verse "Whenever ..." attributes innocence of the client and views his rival as the aggressor who starts the trouble. This is indicated by equating the client with the prophet Abraham who was saved from the fire lit by his enemies. The *hijab* also contains the names of four of the most famous archangels. These names are frequently mentioned in the published books kept by local fakis in their private libraries. Their use is, however, associated with very different contexts of which only a few could be related to the purpose of the *hijab* (see Al-Tukhi (a) N.D.:74, 90, 93, 98, 99, 100, 104 and Marzugi 1970:107). The archangels are also spoken of in Arabic books as kings of their race and are therefore endowed with exceptional power (Al-Tukhi (b) N.D.:15).

The verse: "In the name .. Merciful" appears in the main body of the *hijab* as well as its beginning. Its latter position is common to all kinds of *hijbat*, and it is probably inspired by one of the published books used by fakis in which it is indicated that reading the verse 19 times every morning will save the reader from the "fire" (hell) (al-Tukhi, (a), N.B.:85). The Berti employ the word "fire" metaphorically to indicate difficulties and troubles and it is its metaphorical meaning which makes it appropriate for the *hijab*, which is not related to either the fire of hell or to ordinary fire, but is concerned with slander or any other activity that may instigate trouble.

Hijab 5 (batuta)

The nearest word to *batuta* in classical Arabic is *battata*, meaning to flatten (Elias & Elias 1978:35). In Berti Arabic, the word *batuta*

person, and buried in an ant hole, the invading enemy will turn away* The one who reads *batuta* will avoid poverty and will gain much wealth* If *batuta* is hung around a goat's neck, the animal will never be eaten by a wolf* If *batuta* is written, erased and sprinkled on the house of a Muslim or an infidel enemy, he will certainly perish by the will of Allah; fear Allah and never administer it except against the person who deserves it* *Batuta* can enable the sick to survive chronic leprosy, itch or headache by the will of Allah* If *batuta* is read with the rival's name after the sunset prayers, he will vacate the vicinity with the wind and never come back at all* If *batuta* is written and burnt in the place of prayer with the name of a woman, she will never marry another man apart from the actor, even if she was asked by a thousand men* If *batuta* is read by a (ritually) clean person, the reciter will see (in a dream) the prophet and the angels telling him about his future in paradise* If one writes *batuta* on a lion's or a cat's skin, and the wraps the piece of skin around his arm, he will be invisible to all human beings and will never be harmed at all.

Praise be to Allah, Lord of the worlds. Lord of Moses, Lord of Harun, Lord of Ismael, Solomon, David, Zakaria and Ayub [names of prophets]* Praise be to the Lord of Jibrael, Michael, Israfil, Israel, Munkar, Niker and Ridwan [names of angels]* Praise be to the Lord of the Torah, the Gospel, the Psalm [*zabur*] and the Qur'an* "They are deaf, dumb and blind and are not able to understand" (Sura 2:172, Khan 1981:27)* Render our enemy dumb, blind and inarticulate* "Our Lord, make us not the subject of persecution at the hands of the oppressors" (Sura 10:87, *ibid*:201)* "Put down that which is in thy right hand, it will swallow up that which they have wrought, for that which they wrought is but a magician's trick, and a magician shall not thrive" (Sura 20:70, *ibid*:302).

The introduction to the above *hijab* indicates its general use. If we regard the introduction as part of the fakis' knowledge, we are again confronted with the discrepancy between the esoteric and the exoteric levels of belief. I pointed out before that this *hijab* is used to facilitate the intrusion into a rival's territory. This is well known to all, and none of the non-professionals interviewed related the *hijab* to its general purposes specified in the introduction such as marriage, becoming a king, protection against sickness, protection of animals, etc. The fakis support their belief in the general power of the *hijab* by referring specifically to those various contexts in which the *hijab* is supposed to be effective. The contents of the *hijab*, however, clearly lend support to the exoteric knowledge about it in that the verses which it contains are directly related to making a person invisible.

It is known that the *hijab* must be combined with three "spouses": the saliva of a dead person, a strand of hair from the forehead of a recently born cat which is still blind, and the first menstrual blood of a young girl. At least the cat's hair, which can easily be obtained, is said to be necessary for the efficacy of the *hi-*

jab. According to the native exegesis, the saliva of a dead person causes the enemy to lose awareness of his surroundings; in this respect he resembles a dead person. The hair of the blind cat is seen as being capable of blinding the rival. The fakis were not able to offer any explanation for the use of the menstrual blood. However, menstruation, especially in a young girl, is a subject of great secrecy, as are all facts related to adult sexual organs. Knowledge about such facts is either denied or severely suppressed. In one of the Berti riddles, the female sexual organ is described as "that which has never seen the sun" i.e. as something that is never exposed to light and is always confined to darkness. I would argue that it is this secrecy, confinement to darkness, and suppression of knowledge which makes menstrual blood relevant to the *hijab* rather than the fact that the *hijab* itself is used to facilitate adultery. The Berti are unlikely to associate adultery with menstrual blood simply because intercourse is avoided during a woman's period, when it is regarded as dangerous and a possible cause of venereal diseases.

To set the *batuta hijab* in operation requires a special ritual technique. The owner holds the *hijab* high above his head in his right hand and points it towards his rival. He then utters the name of the rival followed by the name of the rival's mother three times. He also addresses the *hijab*, saying *amsik* (grasp) or *agbud* (take over) before moving into action. This is the ideal way of activating the *hijab*, but it is often impossible to put into practice, especially when the owner of the *hijab* does not know his victims. Nevertheless, the *batuta* differs from other *hijbat* in many respects. It is set in motion and told about its victim. It is raised high and oriented in the direction of its victims as if it were to fly as specified. It is easy to speculate why other *hijbat* are not set in motion in this way. For example, a person may not know exactly when a disease is striking or when a flying bullet from an enemy's rifle is approaching, and so he may not have a chance to activate the *hijab*. However, this is not necessarily the case with all the *hijbat*. A person may be perfectly well aware of the time when his *burda hijab* should start operating and a merchant certainly knows when he needs more customers in his shop. Thus, the fact that *batuta*, unlike other *hijbat*, is activated in a specific and conscious way cannot be explained simply on the basis of a knowledge of the time of operation or the specificity of the possible threat. The *batuta hijab*, however, has a salient characteristic which is not found in other *hijbat*. It is the only *hijab* which is used mainly for theft and

adultery, which are both regarded as immoral actions (a few Berti thieves might argue otherwise with regard to certain kinds of theft). All other *hijbat* which are not activated in the same way as *batuta* are concerned with protection in general or with the legitimate pursuit of one's livelihood, and are hence moral in their use. It is, therefore, perhaps the use of *batuta hijab* in immoral actions which makes it necessary that it should work only when it is activated by its bearer. Note that the responsibility for the operation of the *hijab* and hence for the immoral action is shifted from the *hijab*, with its sacred contents, to the activator.

Batuta is regarded as a male *hijab* and women are not expected to obtain it. Women do not normally indulge in ambitious and risky plans concerning theft (e.g. camel theft), and their role in initiating adultery is smaller than that of men. Gender distinctions also affect the use of other *hijbat*, especially those which may involve the use of violence.

According to the introduction of the *batuta hijab*, it can also be used to protect animals. Only a few Berti I talked to expressed the view that the *hijab* could really serve this function. The general view is that animals require different *hijbat* from those used by people and that the animal *hijbat* have limited contents and are cheaper than the *hijbat* for people. This fits in with the Berti conception of animals as being susceptible to less serious malicious attacks than human beings. On the whole, they need to be protected only against the evil eye. Jinn and devils, who cause disease in humans, have no direct interest in them. The limited size of animal *hijbat* could also be related to the limited intensity of the evil eye when directed against them.

Conclusion

The *hijbat* differ from one another by the kind of formulae contained in them. These formulae, Qur'anic verses, sentences, words, names, etc., are in one way or another related to their subject matter. Each *hijab* contains what I have referred to as key words or verses. These are often marked by their frequent repetition or the high frequency of their appearance in the passages. The notion of Berti *hijbat* rests on the belief that the repetition of certain classes of uttered or written formulae can change the reality of the actor. This belief is clearly Islamic, as God himself is believed to have

created things by uttering certain words: "His power is such that when He intends a thing He says concerning it Be and it is" (Sura 36-83, Khan 1981:438).

As in all parts of the Muslim world, the Berti believe in the immense power of the Qur'an. This power can be gained by the commitment of the Qur'an to memory (internalising it in the head), drinking it (internalising it in the body) or retaining it on the body in the form of amulets. The commitment of the Qur'an to memory is regarded as superior to the other two methods of retaining the Qur'an, its superiority lying in its potential for instant reproduction through recitation. Although the drinking of the Qur'an is seen as inferior to its commitment to memory, this is regarded as superior to retaining it in the form of amulets. The latter stands at a disadvantage as the amulet can be lost, left behind or spoilt by ritual dirt.

Although Islam as a great religion has succeeded in unifying in an almost monolithic belief a vast number of culturally diversified groups, these groups have continued to sustain some form of difference, each by enforcing its own unique understanding and practice of Islam. The concern with the commitment of the Qur'an to memory among the Berti is fostered at the expense of understanding its 'theological' meaning. Moreover, the remoteness of the Berti dialect from the classical language of the Qur'an has further added to the obscurity of its more Orthodox meaning. This makes it possible for the Berti to assign their own meaning to the Qur'an, thus rendering it more relevant to their own reality. The divergence of the Berti understanding from the 'theological' meanings of the sacred texts is clearly illustrated in this paper. This, however, should not exclude the possibility of conscious manipulation of the reinterpretation of the Qur'an to suit a given social context.

NOTES

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By 'theological meaning of the Qur'an' I simply mean the meaning which the Qur'an conveys to a Muslim theologian. I have occasionally used the term 'Orthodox' to mean the same thing.

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