The Islamic Attitude Towards Possession States

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Sunnî or orthodox Islam has always affirmed the ability of various supernatural agents, for example, Allah, angels, jinn, and demons, to possess human beings.

In pre-Islamic Arabia, the *kahin* (soothsayer), and originally the *sha'ir* (poet), were thought of as being possessed by jinn or demons *(shaytan,* pl. *shayatin),* who would utter through them "impassioned words, usually in verse, which the man could never compose by himself in ordinary, i.e. non-ecstatic, moments."[1] Such a supematurally possessed person was called *majnun* (possessed by jinn). Because of their connection with the supernatural, both poets and soothsayers enjoyed considerable prestige among the nomadic tribes, to the point that the word for poet was in the majority of cases synonymous with *'qa'id,'* the word for tribal leader.[2] The *kahin,* for his part, was "interrogated on all important tribal and state occasions," and served as judge and diviner in public and private matters.[3]

The *Qur'an* and the sayings of Muhammad admit the ability of the supernatural to possess humans, and Muhammad fully realized the supernatural and political power such persons wielded. He is reported to have said to his favorite Muslim poet, Hassan ibn Thabit, "Your poetry is much more dangerous to our enemy than arrows shot in the dark of night."[4] Probably because soothsayers offered rival foci of power to the nascent Islamic state recourse to them was forbidden by Muhammad.[5]

Like the *kahin,* Muhammad clearly distinguished between what he considered the products of his own mind and utterances coming from a supernatural source, a source generally considered to be the angel Jibril (Gabriel).[6] Since the oaths which began many of the early surahs and their *saj'* meter were also used by the soothsayers to indicate supernatural inspiration, Muhammad was often accused by his Meccan opponents of being just another *kahin* or *tnajnun,* (e.g. *Qur'an* 37:35; 81:15–27; 52:29; 69:42).[7] His response to these attacks was never to ridicule the concept of jinn or demons, but instead to say that he was inspired by Allah, who created jinn just as he created humans, and was therefore superior in authority to them; and that while jinn could deceive men, the words of a prophet possessed by Allah or of an angel of Allah were necessarily true and must be obeyed.[8] On at least one occasion, however, Muhammad admitted to having received verses from Satan, permitting the worship of three pre-Islamic deities as the 'daughters of Allah' *(Qur'an* 53:1–18). These verses were abrogated by later portions of the *Qur'an.*

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[1] Toshihiko Izutsu, *God and Man in the Koran* (Tokyo, 1964), p. 168.

[2] Ibid., p. 171.

[3] *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden and London, 1961), p. 207.

[4] Izutsu, p. 183.

[5] Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Medina* (Oxford, 1962), p. 311.

[6] Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca* (London, 1960), pp. 53, 56–57.

[7] Ibid., p. 57.

[8] Izutsu, pp. 172–73. Although of no theological significance, several interesting details concerning the change in Muhammad's physical state during possession are preserved. See Watt, *Mecca,* pp. 55–56. See also al-Mas 'udi, *Muruj adh-Dhahab wa Ma'adin al Jawhar,* eds, and trans, de Meynard and de Corteille, (Paris, 1864) Vol. 3, 347 ff.

Even though Sunnî Islam considered Muhammad to be the 'sea of the prophets, it recognized the possession states of several mystics after his death as 'divinely inspired'. According to Louis Massignon, for the first three centuries after Muhammad's death, "divinely inspired utterances," later known by the technical term *shath,* "were incorporated [by Muslim orthodoxy] in the classical collections of *Hadith,* not as utterances of the mystics but as 'words of God' *(hadith qudsi*J,"[9] although from the ninth century onward they were excluded from these texts and regarded as the words of the mystics themselves. The famous mystic, al-Hailaj (d. 922), was thus possessed. His supporters claimed that it was not al-Hallaj, but God, speaking through him, who cried "I am God" *(Ana 'l-Haqq).* Orthodoxy thought otherwise in the tenth century, and al-Hallaj became a martyr.[10]

Even in the eleventh century, at the height of Islamic theological development, any discussion of possession states continued to be merely a refinement of typologies, approving of some and disapproving of others. Representative of the *type* of discussion of this period (although not necessarily of opinion) is the Persian writer on Sufism, al-Hujwiri (d. 1073?), who never questioned the existence of ecstasy *(wajd),* one form of which is possession. Al-Hujwiri simply made certain qualitative distinctions, and argued that those persons in ecstasy while 'intoxicated,' or without 'the faculty of discrimination,' are inferior to those in ecstasy where knowledge predominates over feeling, and that to consciously induce an ecstatic state is dangerous and unlawful.[11]

The attitude of contemporary Islamic orthodoxy is difficult to define for several reasons. Firstly, there has never been any ecclesiastical hierarchy in Islam capable of officially representing Muslim opinion, which in any case is presently divided between traditionalist sentiments, such as one finds at al-Azhar, and the views of various modernist and reform movements.[12] Secondly, modern Muslim theologians and European commentators seem to ignore the question of possession states as such.

However, we can legitimately speak of a Great Tradition' and a 'Little Tradition' in Islam, providing we regard these categories as poles of a continuum, and not as independent entities. The Great Tradition, adopted by the social and religious elite, bases Islam almost entirely on the *Qur'an* and the traditions of the Prophet, while the Little Tradition, or popular religion, adds such concepts as saint worship, Sufi broth-

[9] *SEI,* p. 533. Cf. Louis Massignon, *Essai sur les Origines du Lexique Technique de la Mystique Musulmane* (Paris, 1954), p. 120. It is not altogether clear what Massignon means by 'classical collection's' of hadith

[10] Reynold A. Nicholson, *The Mystics of Islam* (London, 1963), p. 152.

[11] 'Ali b. Jthman al-Jullabi al-Hujwiri, *The Kashi al-Mahjub,* trans. R. A. Nicholson (London and Leiden, 1911), pp. 235–36; 414–15.

[12] G. E. von Grunebaum, *Modern Islam* (New York, 1964), pp. 306–7. Cf. Osman Amin, *Muhammad 'Abdu, Essai sur ses Idées Philosophiques et Religieuses* (Cairo, 1944). A brief sketch of modem Muslim movements can be found in H. A. R. Gibb, *Mohammedanism* (London, 1961), pp. 165–92.

erhoods *(tariq,* pl. *turuq),* and syncretisms, which often encourage possession states.[13] The general attitude of the representatives of the Great Tradition, or orthodoxy, towards the Little Tradition is not to deny the religious nature of their practices nor to deprecate them, but to generally tolerate or ignore them.[14] If pressed, a Sunnî Muslim will usually admit the ability of Allah or of lower-ranking supernatural agents to possess human beings, but will often ridicule specific individuals who claim connections with the supernatural world.

The contemporary attitude of Islam towards possessions states can be clearly seen in North Africa. There, t ie urban and educated elite have little to do with saint cults or possession states.[15] But in popular belief and religious brotherhoods, the attitude towards possession has changed so little since medieval times that the terms used to discuss possession are the same as those used by the fourteenth century historian Ibn Khaldun, who distinguished between a person who is *majdhúb,* or possessed by a divine spirit, and *majnún,* simply possessed by jinn.[16]

I doubt whether a more explicit discussion of the religious implications of possession states (than that which is outlined here) will be forthcoming from Muslim orthodoxy. The latitudinous attitude of Sunnî Muslims toward non-orthodox practices serves the useful function of avoiding unnecessary splits in the Muslim community, and the spread of literacy and mass communications media in the Muslim world is tending to propagate Sunnî Islam at the expense of non-orthodox and regional variations.

I wish to express my thanks to Herman Landolt, also of the Institute, who made several valuable comments and suggestions for this paper.

[13] Cults encouraging possession among women in Sudan are known as *zar* cults, according to Harold Barclay, *Buuri el Lamaab* (Ithaca, 1964), pp. 196–209. This term is often incorrectly used to refer to the general phenomenon of spirit-possession in the entire Muslim world.

[14] With the notable exception of the Wahhabis of Sahidi Arabia. Barclay gives the extreme example of two men in present-day Sudan who claim to be 'prophets,' but are merely ignored and kindly tolerated by their neighbors, who treat them as majnûn.

My general reference for this paragraph is von Grunebaum, "The Problem: Unity in Diversity," in *Unity and Variety in Muslim Civilization,* ed. von Grunebaum (Chicago and London, 1963), pp. 28–29.

[15] Roger Le Tourneau, "North Africa: Rigorism and Bewilderment," in *Unity and Variety,* pp. 244–45.

[16] Joseph Chelhod, *Les Structures du Sacré chez les Arabes* (Paris, 1964), pp. 191–92; Emile Dermenghem, *Le Culte des Saints dans l'Islam Maghrébin.* 8th ed. (Paris, 1954), pp. 29–30.

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