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FOLK ISLAM IN EAST AFRICA

R. Marvin Smith

Anyone who has studied Islam from a textbook will find the actual beliefs and practices of Muslims in Africa quite varied from orthodox Islam discussed in textbooks. For Islam has always accommodated the various traditional beliefs of the peoples who have embraced Islam. Becoming a Muslim is quite simple. Anyone who recites the Muslim creed once with sincerity is a Muslim. So the traditional beliefs and practices are carried into Islam.

In this article Marvin Smith provides a more realistic assessment of the Muslim beliefs and practices in Africa which centre around traditional African beliefs in mystical powers and the world of spirits, intertwined with Muslim doctrines. Knowing these deeply felt beliefs and fears will create many opportunities to present Christ who alone can deliver from the fears of darkness.

INTRODUCTION

One of the wonderful truths of Christianity is the protection that believers in Jesus Christ have from the forces of evil. Those who have been born again by hearing the gospel and placing their trust in Jesus Christ have nothing to fear from Satan and his demons. There is no reason for the believer to take steps to appease these evil forces, and believers are never to take steps to gain their power. Muslims, however, do not enjoy this freedom from fear of evil spirits. For many followers of Islam, manipulation of the dark forces of the occult world is part of everyday life. This is particularly the case for the majority of Muslims who practice folk Islam. The purpose of this paper is to explain folk Islam, particularly as found in East Africa, with the hope that believers will share with Muslims the wonderful blessings of faith in Jesus, including freedom from the fear of evil spirits.

Definition. "Folk" or "Popular" Islam may be defined as the world of Islam that operates apart from the strict orthodox teachings of Islam and centres primarily around efforts to appease and manipulate demonic forces that are seen

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to control and affect most areas of life. Most Muslims in the world insist they believe the doctrines of Islam, but in their daily lives they follow occult, animistic practices. The primary motive for this emphasis on the occult is fear of evil spirits. As a result, practically speaking they are more concerned with magic than with Muhammad, they follow Allah, but fear demons.¹ This practice of magic is done in an attempt to answer questions of well being (illness and health), success and failure, and knowing the unknown (divination).² And even while following the orthodox teachings and pillars of Islam, many Muslims attach occultic meanings to these.

Importance. Unless this "folk" view of reality in Islam is understood, witness to Muslims may not be effective. After reading Bill Musk's book, *The Unseen Face of Islam*,³ one AIM missionary to Muslims said, "This book completely changed our ministry. We now are able to relate to our people on the level on which they actually function." Samuel Zwemer, an early missionary to Muslims, understood the importance of folk Islam and wrote:

The student of Islam will never understand the common people unless he knows the reasons for their curious beliefs and practices . . . all of which still blind and oppress mind and heart with constant fear of the unseen. Witchcraft, sorcery, spells, and charms are the background of the native Muslim psychology to an extent that is realized only by those who have penetrated most deeply into the life of the people.⁴

Official and popular Islam. There is therefore an official Islam and a popular Islam. Official Islam is presented in any number of texts on Islam, and is what a teacher of Islam in the local mosque will declare to the inquirer. However, this official, orthodox Islam is simply a veneer over the folk Islam which controls the way most Muslims think and behave. The farther one gets from the Arab world, the more one would expect to see evidence of folk Islam. However,

¹ Love, Rick, "Muhammad, Materialism, Magic, or the Messiah?," *Urban Mission*, (March, 1998) 17.

² Hiebert, Paul. "Power Encounter and Folk Islam." *Muslims and Christians on the Emmaus Road*. J. Dudley Woodbury, Ed. (MARC Publications: Monrovia, CA, 1989), 47.

³ Musk, Bill A. *The Unseen Face of Islam*. (MARC, Monarch Publications: Kent, England), 1989. Bill Musk is probably the leading authority on folk Islam and this book is the best work currently available on the subject.

⁴ Quoted by Musk in "Popular Islam: The Hunger of the Heart," *The Gospel and Islam, A 1978 Compendium*, McCurry, Don, Ed. (MARC: Monrovia, CA, 1979) 209.

books coming out of even Arabia give indication that folk Islam holds sway over those living in the historical heart of Islam.⁵

Folk Islam operates under a world view quite different from the western world view. For example, Bill Musk presents the differences between western and folk-Islamic world views of "being" as follows:⁶

	Western View	Folk-Islamic View
<i>Other-worldly</i> <i>Trans-empirical</i>	God angels devils	God Angels
<i>This-worldly</i> <i>Empirical</i>	humans animals	spirits <i>jinn</i> ancestors ----- humans animals

Note that for most of the world's 1.2 billion Muslims, dealing with spirits and *jinn* is part of everyday life, something that can be seen and felt and experienced. For most Muslims, folk Islam answers questions frequently encountered in their daily lives and meets deep needs arising from their world view.

THEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND FOR FOLK ISLAM IN ISLAMIC TEACHING

It may be argued that the very theology of Islam, particularly in regard to demonic beings, lends itself to the development and accommodation of folk Islam.

Angels. According to Islam, angels are living creatures with speech and reason, who were created by God from light. They have no carnal desires or evil emotions. Angels live in heaven and their work includes praising God, performing His commands, and interceding for man. When man was created,

⁵ Examples would include Jean Sasson's books, *Princess*, (Bantam Books: New York, 1993) and *Princess Sultana's Daughters*, (Dell Publishing: New York, 1994).

⁶ Musk, *The Unseen Face of Islam*, 176.

angels were commanded to bow down before him, and they obeyed, with the exception of Satan. According to Islam, angels perform special tasks. For example, Gabriel is said to be the angel who brought the revelation of the Quran to Muhammad. Michael is recognized as the angel assigned to the Israelites. The angel in charge of hell is named Malik. Islam teaches that every person is attended by two angels, which sit on each shoulder. One records good deeds, the other bad deeds (Sura 50:17-18). There are two angels who examine the dead in their graves on the night after burial and categorize them according to their faith. In Islam, angels occasionally break in to the empirical world for various reasons (such as revealing the Quran). However, in Islam, there seems to be little effort made to distinguish between God's holy angels and Satan's demons who may at times appear as "angels of light" (II Cor. 11:14).

Jinn. According to the teachings of Islam, *jinn* are spirit beings created by God from smokeless fire before the creation of Adam. In the order of created beings, they fall somewhere between angels and men. They eat and drink and reproduce. They are able to have sexual relationships with humans, in which case the offspring are part human, part *jinn*. Some *jinn* are said to be Muslim and others infidels. The devil is said to have been a *jinn* before he fell and is called the father of the *jinn*. *Jinn* may appear to humans in the form of serpents, dogs, cats, or human beings. They can be made to do the will of man. For example, Solomon is said to have constructed the temple largely with the help of *jinn* (Sura 34:12-14). There are some *jinn* which are evil, and others which are good. According to Islamic teaching man is in frequent contact with *jinn*. Some are benevolent, and can be encouraged to render assistance. Others are malevolent, and steps must be taken to protect from their mischievous and sometimes evil intentions.

Examples and stories about *jinn* are common in the Muslim world. Musk tells on a well known female *jinn* in Morocco by the name of A'isha Wandisha, a seductress, whose camel feet are kept hidden under a long dress. If a man succumbs and sleeps with her, he becomes her slave forever. However, there are ways through cunning of making a marriage contract with her in order to gain her power for advantage.⁷ Similar stories are told in Algeria. In Mombasa, Kenya, men claim to have been seduced by a beautiful woman and go to her house for sexual intercourse. However, upon awakening in the morning, they find themselves high in the branches of a baobab tree and realize they were

⁷ Musk, *The Unseen Face of Islam*, 39.

seduced by a *jinn*! Similar stories are told in Lamu, Kenya, and have even made newspaper headlines.⁸

Many if not most Muslims are terrified of *jinn*, who are blamed for miscarriages, still births, illness, deformity, paralysis, and death.

Satan (*Shaytan*) and Devils (*Shaytin*). *Shaytin* are the demonic hordes of Satan. The devil was created from fire. His original name was 'Azazil. He was taken captive by the angels when the *jinn* transgressed. He grew up among the angels and was considered one of them. However, when he refused to bow to Adam, he was banished from heaven. He has authority over the animal and spirit world. Every person has a devil attending him and every child is touched by the devil at birth, making him or her cry. According to tradition, common events are associated with the devil. For example, when a donkey brays, it is because it has seen a devil. However, roosters crow because they have seen an angel!

The Muslim preoccupation with the spirit world opens them up to deception and control by demonic forces. This is particularly true in regard to attempting to gain the assistance of "good *jinn*," and even demons.

Who is a Muslim? Another theological aspect of Islam that may contribute to folk Islamic practices is the ease with which someone may become a Muslim. A Muslim is someone who has recited the Islamic Creed with sincerity: "There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet." From the moment a person recites the creed he is considered a Muslim, regardless of his life and practice. Islam is content to let such "Muslim peoples" continue in their previous life patterns, at times for decades, with the hope of slowly bringing them into conformity with orthodox Islamic teachings. This attitude towards "converts" easily accommodates a wide range of folk Islamic practices in a given group of people. In this way, Islam becomes a veneer over the animistic culture of the people.

Folk Islam in the *Quran* and *Hadith*. There are elements of folk Islam in the *Quran* and the *Hadith*, which are collected traditions of what Muhammad said, what he did in the presence of his followers, and things done in his presence without condemnation. There are over 600,000 collected traditions, of which perhaps 7,400 are considered genuine by respected Muslim scholars

⁸ Wills, Christy. "Spirit Worship, Islam, and African Traditions on the Kenyan Coast," a paper written in connection with studies at Friends World College, 1990.

such as Bukhari and his disciple, Imam Muslim. The *Hadith* are filled with references to folk Islam practices, such as the "evil eye." The *Quran* mentions the creation of *jinn* in Sura 55:15 and gives indication of beings and powers not seen, which may be appealed to in times of need. Twenty six other verses in the *Quran* mention *jinn*.

Arabian traditional religion elements incorporated into Islam. It can be shown that a number of elements from Arabian pagan practices were brought into Islam, thus setting the stage for other non-orthodox practices to be added to popular Islam. For example, the *Kaaba* was a centre of idolatry for centuries before Islam. Muhammad gave it great significance in the Islamic *Haji* and credited it's construction to Abraham and Ishmael (Islam claims it was originally built by Adam, and was destroyed in the flood). The pilgrimage itself was part of the early pagan idolatry, as was kissing the black stone and circling the *Kaaba*. The part of the pilgrimage involving running between the two mountains and activities at Arafat were pre-Islamic practices related to pagan religion. Later, Sufi Islamic practices, which had elements of eastern religions (Hinduism and Buddhism) were incorporated and popularized by Al-Ghazali.⁹

Muhammad's concern about occult powers. It may be shown from the *Quran* that Muhammad himself was plagued by fear of demons and *jinn*. Sura 113:1-5 indicates the prophet's anxiety over evil beings, over those who practiced magic against him, and over those who projected the evil power of envy towards him. Again, in Sura 114:1-5, Muhammad speaks of danger coming from the activity of the whisperer (Satan), *jinn*, and men. There were times when he could not distinguish between God speaking to him and Satan (thus the "Satanic verses found in Sura 53:19-23, which were later canceled by a subsequent revelation, Sura 22:52-53). There are two sermons given by *jinn* to Muhammad recorded in the *Quran*, found in Sura 72:1-15 and Sura 46:29-32. In these messages a group of *jinn*, who confess not being able to enter heaven, proclaim that the *Quran* is wonderful and that its message that God "has taken neither wife nor son" (a reference to the trinity) is believed by them. This indicates that Muhammad had direct contact with *jinn*. From this it may be concluded that beginning with Muhammad, Muslims have had contact with *jinn*, have feared the activities of occult powers, and have taken steps to protect themselves accordingly. This fear of the occult, taking protective measures, and even gaining the support of "good" *jinn* continues to this day in the various expressions of folk Islam.

⁹ Chapman, Colin. *Cross & Crescent, Responding to the Challenge of Islam*. (Inter-Varsity Press: Leicester, England, 1995), 113-115.

FOLK ISLAM AND ORTHODOX TEACHING

Folk Islam takes the basic orthodox teachings of Islam and infuses new meaning into them which correlate to an animistic world view. Some of these teachings are briefly explained below and examples of folk-Islam adaptations given:

Belief in God. Muslims believe in one God called Allah, which means "the God" in Arabic. Islam emphasizes the unity of God. "There is only one God" is the most prominent doctrine of the faith (seen on *almost every mosque*). *Muslims mock the Christian view of the trinity and the Quran* specifically states that Jesus is not God. The greatest sin ("*shirk*") in Islam is that of associating a partner with God. The greatness of Allah is repeated constantly, "*Allah Akhbar*." Everything that exists was created by God (even evil), and God is absolutely sovereign in what He does and is not bound by any of his own attributes. He is transcendent, ultimately unknowable by his creatures. The concept of a personal loving God is foreign to the Muslim. In Islam, Allah has 99 other names, which really are attributes of God frequently recited by Muslims using a rosary.

In folk Islam, the names of God are used in magic for power and protection. For example, one name is "The Forbearing One." It is said that if a farmer writes this name on a piece of paper and puts it where his seed is sown, no harm will come to his crop.¹⁰ Other names are used to attract "spirit guides," wisdom, knowledge of the future, material rewards, etc. The names of God are frequently placed on amulets and charms for protection from evil and attracting benefit. There are many books available to Muslims on the magical use of the names of God, where certain formulas are said to compel God to act according to the person's wishes.

Belief in angels, demons and *jinn*. As discussed above, Islam emphasizes belief in supernatural beings. Folk Islam centres around the appeasement of these supernatural powers and attempts to "harness" such powers for personal gain.

Belief in Books. According to Islam there are 104 books that have come from God. Of these, only four remain: The *Torah*, the *Zabur* (Psalms), the *Injil* (gospel) and the *Quran*.

¹⁰ Stacey, Vivienne. "The Practice of Healing and Exorcism." *Muslims and Christians on the Emmaus Road*, J. Dudley Woodbury, ed. (MARC Publications: Monrovia, CA, 1989), 292.

All that is necessary for Muslims to know is in the Quran. Muslims accept that the *Torah*, *Zabur* and *Injil* are also books from God, but claim they are presently invalid and unreliable for the following reasons: Corruption. Muslims claim that Jews and Christians have hopelessly corrupted these scriptures by alterations and additions and misinterpretations. Abrogation. The *Quran*, being the superior, final revelation, cancels and replaces all previous scriptures. Muslims believe the *Quran*, revealed to Muhammad over a period of 23 years, came from an exact copy in heaven, and is God's final and perfect revelation to mankind.

In folk Islam, the Quran is used extensively in charms and amulets. It is common for words of the Quran to be written on a piece of paper with ink, which is then washed off into a glass of water and drunk by a person who is ill as a cure. Portions of the Quran are tacked to wooden doors as a protection on the household. The Quran is recited as protection from evil spirits. Portions of the holy book are recited in order to place a curse on another individual. Miniature copies of the Quran are pinned to babies' clothing to ward off evil spirits, or placed in vehicles or homes to ward off misfortune.

Belief in apostles. Islam accepts that God has sent prophets to mankind, the first being Adam and the last Muhammad. Actually there are two classes of prophets, a *nabi* is one sent to teach and guide, but who is not given a book. An apostle (*rasul*) is inspired to teach and guide, but has been given one or more books. In all, Islam claims that 124,000 prophets have been sent by God, and of these 315 are apostles. The most important messengers sent by God are nine in number: Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David, Job, Jesus, and Muhammad, who is the most important of the nine and is the "seal" of the prophets.

In folk Islam, the concept of special messengers from God is used in producing fetishes and in saint veneration for the purpose of gaining blessing. For example, in Pakistan, a mosque displays 27 relics of the prophet and his companions. Among items included are Muhammad's sandals and underwear, and Fatima's prayer mat.¹¹ Pilgrims come from far away to gain the blessing associated with these items. An example of folk-Islamic veneration in East Africa is the extensive celebrations of *Maulidi*, the prophet's birthday, in Lamu, Kenya each year.

Belief in the last days. Islam teaches that certain eschatological events will take place in the last days. These include the arising of a *Mahdi*, who will usher in a reign of peace on the earth under Islam. Another event will be the

¹¹ Stacey, 292.

return of Jesus, who will preach, kill all pigs, destroy all crosses, pray with Muslims, die of old age, and be buried next to Muhammad. The anti-Christ will appear, along with the great beast who will mark the faces of believers and unbelievers. Following these events will be the resurrection of all peoples for judgement. Those whose good works prevail will proceed to paradise, a place of sensual pleasure, the rest to hell, a place of torment that may be temporary or permanent, depending on the degree of wickedness of the particular person.

In folk Islam, certain saints are seen as mediators, operating between the present time and eschatological events of the future. An example of such saints is Fatima, Muhammad's daughter married to his cousin, Ali. In addition, the spirits of departed saints are believed to remain at the grave site, thus encouraging pilgrimages for veneration and obtaining power and blessing.

Predestination. In Islam, a basic doctrine is that God is sovereignly responsible for all that occurs, both good and evil. Nothing can happen in the world, whether it concern sickness or health, obedience or disobedience, faith or infidelity, riches or poverty, etc., that is not pre-written in the decrees of God. The phrase, *Insha'llah*, "if God wills," is used constantly by Muslims. Allah is not bound by ethical or moral considerations. Ultimately this results in a fatalistic view of life that places responsibility for all that occurs on God entirely.

Even though predestination is a strong doctrine in Islam, practitioners of folk Islam find ways to intervene. For example, there are dates in the Muslim calendar, when attempts are made to alter a person's fate.

FOLK ADAPTATIONS OF THE PILLARS OF ISLAM

The five pillars of Islam (Some Muslims see *jihad*, holy war, as a sixth pillar of Islam) are utilized in folk Islam for gaining power and protection. Below a brief explanation along with the significance of these basic practices for "folk" Muslims will be given:

The Creed. The Creed of Islam states, "There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his prophet." All Muslims recite this frequently. It is used as a battle cry, a cry of joy at the birth of the child, and words of mourning at a funeral. All that it takes to be a Muslim is to repeat this phrase once with meaning.

In folk Islam, the words of the creed are held to be powerful in themselves in warding off evil. The words appear on amulets. The phrase is repeated constantly when traveling in places of danger or where evil spirits might lurk.

Prayer. Prayer is considered to be the most important of the prescribed duties for the Muslim. It is said that Muhammad referred to prayer as the "pillar of religion, the key to paradise, and that which causes a man to be a true believer." There are several specifications to be followed for prayer to be valid:

Purification. Sura 4:43 of the *Quran* explains the need for ritual purification by water (or sand if necessary) before prayer may be made. According to tradition, Muhammad stated that purification is half of faith and prayer without purification is invalid.¹² Purification relates to those parts of the body which are most exposed: Hands and arms to the elbow, the head, especially mouth and nostrils, feet and ankles. Running water is preferred, otherwise water poured over the body. Where water is not available, sand is substituted. Washing must be done in the prescribed manner to be valid, and must be accompanied by appropriate statements of intent to perform the purification. For certain defilements it is necessary for the whole body to be cleansed.

Times of prayer. Prayer is to be made at certain times of the day, as specified by the *Quran* in Sura 30:17-18: At dawn (4:30-5:30 a.m.), shortly after midday (12:30 p.m.), late afternoon (4:00 p.m.), at sunset (6:30 p.m.) and two hours after sunset (8:30 p.m.).

Place and direction of prayer. Prayer may be made anywhere, but is most valid in a mosque. Ladies are normally expected to pray in the privacy of their homes (some mosques have separate facilities for women). Originally Muslims faced Jerusalem when they prayed. However, in Medina, when Muhammad turned against the Jews, the direction was changed to be towards Mecca (Sura 2:144).

The order of prayer. Prayer must be conducted in the proper order.

1. Declaration of intent, stating how many times the Muslim intends on performing the prayer cycle.
2. Repetition of "Allah Akhbar," with hands raised to the ears.
3. Standing with arms folded across the chest, the worshipper repeats Sura 1 of the *Quran*.
4. Placing hands on knees the Muslim repeats words of praise to Allah.

¹² *Sahih Muslim*, Vol. 1, 435 (page 149).

5. Standing the worshipper declares, "God hears him who praises Him, Oh our Lord, thou art praised."
6. Kneeling with toes, knees, palms, forehead and nose touching the ground, "Praise be to Thee Oh my Lord the Most High" is repeated.
7. Sitting on heels with hands on thighs, praise is repeated.
8. Number six above is repeated.
9. Standing with arms folded across the chest again, the Muslim prepares to repeat the cycle.

The whole cycle is repeated at least twice, and sometimes more. On special occasions such as Ramadan, it may be repeated a dozen or more times. Omission of certain parts of the procedure or stumbling render the prayer invalid and it must be repeated. At the conclusion of the prayer, a blessing on Muhammad and his descendants is pronounced.

The purpose of prayer in Islam is to gain merit with God. According to the sayings of Muhammad, prayer can cover minor sins such as lying, lust, and anger. Other more serious sins require more extensive good works (such as keeping Ramadan)

In folk Islam, the prayer ritual is seen to cleanse a person of demonic pollution. According to one tradition, Muhammad decreed that the nose be included in the ritual washing procedure because the devil spends the night inside people's noses.¹³ Washing can also remove sin for some Muslims practicing folk Islam. Additions to the prayer ritual by some have folk Islam roots: preventing gaps in the line of men praying, lest Satan join in, and moving the fingers about during prayer to keep demons from hiding between them.¹⁴

Giving Alms (*Zakat*). *Zakat* is the portion of a Muslim's property which is given in order to purify the rest of his property and to gain blessing and merit from God. It is mentioned some 82 times in the *Quran*. In order to give alms, the following conditions must be met: 1. The giver must be a Muslim. 2. He must be free (not a slave). 3. He must possess a certain minimum of property (alms start with a minimum of 5 camels) which has been his for at least a year. Today alms are calculated at approximately 2% of a person's net worth, and are paid annually. Those qualified to receive alms are:

¹³ *Sahih Muslim*. Vol. 1, 462 (page 153)

¹⁴ *Musk*. 217

1. The poor, people who do not own enough property to pay alms.
2. The needy, those whose income is not sufficient to cover daily needs.
3. Those who collect alms are entitled to keep a portion in accordance with time spent collecting.
4. Recent converts to Islam may be encouraged by gifts from alms collected. Muhammad established the practice of giving gifts to help motivate people to accept Islam.
5. Ransom to free another person's slave (not your own slaves).
6. Debtors, who cannot pay their debts.
7. Helping a poor person take the pilgrimage to Mecca or engage in holy war.
8. The person stranded on a journey without funds to continue.
9. For the cause of promoting Islam. Many wealthy Muslims contribute heavily for this, going beyond the amount required for *zakat*.

In folk Islam, the giving of alms may be associated with protection against the "evil eye," where jealousy brings about a curse.¹⁵

Fasting. There are several one-day fasts in Islam, but the most important fast is that of Ramadan, which continues throughout the ninth month of the Muslim lunar calendar. The fast is mandatory for all Muslims according to Sura 2:183-188 (exceptions below). The purpose of Ramadan is to purify and guard against evil. Muslims believe that those who keep the fast are pardoned for their past excusable sins. Regulations for the fast are as follows:

1. For Sunni Muslims it cannot start until some Muslim states that he has seen the new moon. This is difficult when the weather does not cooperate. Shi'ite Muslims accept the calendar date for the rising of the moon, whether or not it is actually sighted.
2. The fast begins at dawn as soon as a white thread may be distinguished from a black thread. It continues until sunset. During this time nothing may be eaten or drunk. Not even saliva may be swallowed.
3. The fast must be kept by all Muslim age 12 and above. Exempted are pregnant women and travelers on a journey of more than three days.
4. During the month of Ramadan, at least 20 cycles of prayer are to be observed for the evening prayer.

¹⁵ Musk, 218

5. The fast lasts for 30 days, the length of the lunar month. Because the lunar calendar is shorter than the solar calendar by 10 days, Ramadan comes earlier by that many days each year.
6. From sunset until dawn a Muslim may eat as much as desired and indulge in any lawful pleasure.
7. The fast is broken the day after Ramadan and ends with a great feast. This important celebration may be compared to Christmas, with new clothes purchased, cards and gifts sent to friends. Special alms are given and prayers may be made for dead relatives.

Folk Muslims have ways of practicing their beliefs during Ramadan, including veneration of Muhammad for special merit and blessing, and special ceremonies on the 27th night of Ramadan (the time when the first revelation came to Muhammad), when it is said the gates of heaven are opened and one's fate or destiny may be altered. Some Muslims at the coast of Kenya make special sacrifices and offerings to demons after Ramadan to appease them because such sacrifices and offerings are not allowed during Ramadan.¹⁶

Pilgrimage. Every adult Muslim is required to make a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in his lifetime unless he is too poor to afford it or is constantly ill. The *Hajj* takes place during the 12th month of the Muslim lunar year. A person taking the pilgrimage may add *Hajj* (*Haji* in Swahili) to his name. Nine duties are obligatory for the pilgrim, the first three being most important:

1. Wear a special garment consisting of two pieces of cloth wrapped around the waist and shoulders.
2. Stand on the Mount of Arafat.
3. Make a circuit around the Kaaba seven times, kissing the black stone.
4. Spend a night in the desert area between Mina and Arafat.
5. Run between two nearby mountains, Al Safa and Al Marwa.
6. Throw stones at a pillar representing Satan.
7. Offer a sacrifice of a goat or lamb (some offer many sacrifices, depending on their wealth).
8. Make an extra circuit around the *Kaaba* if a non-Meccan.
9. Shave the head at the end of the pilgrimage.

¹⁶ Giles, Linda, "Mbaraki Pillar and its Spirits." *Kenya Past and Present* (Issue 19, 1982) 46. This is an excellent article detailing the extent of occult involvement by Muslims at the coast.

There are specific and detailed forms, recitations and rituals to be completed at each stage of the pilgrimage for the event to be valid. The ceremony takes ten days to complete. It is said that for the Muslim who participates in the pilgrimage in a sincere manner he will return home as pure from sin as the day he was born.

There are many aspects of the pilgrimage with special meaning for folk Muslims. For example, some teach that the black stone is actually the remains of the clay that God used to create Adam, and that all the energy, love and unity of Islam generates out of the sacred cube of the *Kaaba*.¹⁷ Therefore there is great power available to those who encircle the *Kaaba* and touch the black stone. Water used during the pilgrimage for cleansing is carried home in hope of healing ill relatives back home.¹⁸ Muslims returning from the pilgrimage are thought to have extra *baraka* or power.

In conclusion, it is seen that folk Muslims attach special meanings to the basic teachings and practices of Islam, converting them to symbols and vehicles for obtaining power, protection and blessing.

EXAMPLES OF FOLK ISLAM PRACTICES AND BELIEFS

The evil eye. Many Muslims in East Africa live in fear of "the evil eye." The meaning of the evil eye is that people and things may be destroyed by the force of envy which is projected through the eye, and no one knows for sure who might have this "evil eye." For example, if a visitor looks with jealousy upon a possession, the force of evil projected through the eye may bring devastating damage to the owner and his household. For this reason, Muslims will often give a visitor the object of admiration rather than risk the power of the evil eye. One new missionary woman was visiting a Muslim family and expressed praise for the couple's new baby. The husband immediately got very upset and threw her out of the house! He was afraid her admiration for the baby would bring about a curse.¹⁹

Muslims attribute many of the problems of daily life to the evil eye syndrome. Various means are used to try and determine who it was that cast

¹⁷ Mahdi, Sayyid Al Imam Isa Al Haadi. *Science of Healing*. (Ansaaru Allah Publications: Brooklyn, New York, 1977) 31-32.

¹⁸ Sadat, Jehan. *A Woman of Egypt*. (Coronet Books, Hodder and Stoughton: England, 1989) 313.

¹⁹ Musk, Bill. *Touching the Soul of Islam*. (MARC, Monarch Publications: Crowborough, England, 1995) 100.

the evil eye and caused the problem. Cures may include special readings of the Quran, burning of incense, or visiting a saint's tomb to obtain counteractive baraka.

There are many prophylactics used against the power of the evil eye. One very common measure is "the hand of Fatima." Fatima was the daughter of Muhammad who was married to Ali, Muhammad's son-in-law. Fatima is seen by Muslims to have great power as a protector and advocate, and appeals are often made to her. The "hand of Fatima" consists of a drawing, painting or small sculpture (often jewelry) of a hand, palm facing outward, with an eye pictured in the middle of the hand. The hand is worn (or painted on doorways or vehicles, etc.) in such a way that it faces the one who might cast an evil eye. Other amulets and talismans are also employed.

Another preventative measure is using the phrase, *ma sha allah*, which means, "What God has willed." This is spoken as a protective measure in all cases of admiration and praise, so as to direct attention away from the object to God, who created the object being admired.

Undoubtedly, there is great demonic power associated with the evil eye, and Muslims who turn to the occult for protection entwine themselves in Satan's plan for control and manipulation. It may be noted that the concept of the evil eye has parallels with the "jealousy curse," common among many tribes of Africa. For example, the jealousy curse is very common among the Mijikenda, and it is reported among tribes in Uganda, Tanzania and Mozambique.

The Names of God. It is very common to see Muslims holding a rosary of either 33 or 99 beads and with lips moving, silently reciting the 99 names of God (some use 100 beads, with a larger bead for Allah). Every Muslim is aware of the 99 names of God, even if he does not know the *Quran*. There is great merit for those who memorize the 99 names and recite them repeatedly. Many do so on a daily basis. Of interest is the fact that the name "Love" is not among the 99 names.

In folk Islam, many of the names are repeated over and over in an effort to bring about the attribute of the name on behalf of oneself or someone else. Musk lists several examples:²⁰ Repeating the name, "The Peace" (The healthy One), *Ya Salaam*, is used to bring healing to a friend. The name must be repeated at least one-hundred times with concentration. Another example is repeating the name *Ya Qahhar*, "The Destroyer," in order to bring about the

²⁰ Musk, *The Unseen Face of Islam*, p. 157-158, 209.

death of an enemy. Repeating *Ya Rahman*, "The Merciful," is said to free a person from depression. There are apparent examples of the effectiveness of these practices, indicating the demonic power associated with folk Islam beliefs.

Another use of the names of God is when they are written on charms or talismans. They are also used in number charts for the purpose of divination, with numbers designating the names of God.

Veneration of Saints. The veneration of important leaders and holy men (and sometimes women) in Islam is a practice that goes back to the beginning of Islam. Naturally, the burial place of Muhammad became very significant to his followers, and even articles of his clothing and hair from his beard and head are claimed to be in existence and to have great power for gaining *baraka*. The burial sites of early leaders of Islam following the death of Muhammad are also seen as places where people may obtain a measure of the *baraka* that permeates the sites.

Today, especially in Africa, the tombs of well known religious leaders of Islam (*pir*) are destinations for pilgrimages by ordinary Muslims seeking blessing, healing from illness, cures for infertility, success in business and other areas of life. Miracles are often attributed as the consequence of visiting a holy site. Often vows are made at these burial sites. The vow is composed, often being written on a piece of paper, and is dropped in a "vow box" located at the shrine. Vows may involve the promise to make the pilgrimage to Mecca, or the promise to perform a certain number of prayers, or give money for the support of a Muslim institution.

An example of a well-known Muslim shrine in Kenya is found in the village of Mackinnon Road, between Voi and Mombasa. Sayyed (meaning he was a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad) Bargahali Shah was a Punjab holy man who died in 1902. It is claimed that he served as a humble railroad laborer, and when carrying a load of soil, the basin never touched his head. Muslim truck drivers slow down when passing the area, and Muslims from Mombasa make pilgrimages there in hope of having prayers answered and gaining blessing. A similar shrine has been built around the grave of his brother, another holy man, buried at Ulu.²¹

Divination. The practice of divination takes place in folk Islam for various reasons: fortune telling, predicting the gender of an unborn child.

²¹ Salvadori, Cynthia. *Through Open Doors, A View of Asian Cultures in Kenya*. (Kenway Publications: Nairobi, n.d.) 208

discovering the cause of an illness along with its cure, and determining the best marriage partner for a man or woman.

Various methods are used for divination. Sometimes the *Quran* is opened at random, and the verses revealed are interpreted according to the situation in mind. Prayer beads are used, with a bead randomly selected, and the corresponding name of God interpreted in respect to the issue at hand. A book is available in a Muslim bookshop in Nairobi in which hundreds of possible subjects of dreams are listed, along with the interpretations which usually involve an event occurring in the future. Sometimes a Muslim shaman is called, who contacts the spirits and learns the cause of an illness.

Healing. Illness is one of the most common causes of concern for Muslims, and various means are used in folk Islam to determine its cause and come up with a cure. It is interesting to note that along the coast of Kenya, the Mijikenda believe that Islam has greater mystical power to heal illness than does Christianity or traditional religion. Therefore Muslim Wadigo medicine practitioners carry a higher status among the Mijikenda for their healing abilities.²²

According to folk Islam, some causes of illness are:

Attack by jinn. After the name of the offending *jinn* is determined, the proper prescription is given for cure. Many Muslims in Kenya burn incense in their homes to keep *jinn* away.

Possession by evil spirits. Various means of exorcism are employed, ranging from burning incense to animal sacrifice to repossession by an even more powerful spirit who can subdue the offending spirit.

Poisoning by enemies. This is determined by a medicine man, who prescribes the proper herbal cure.

Breaking taboos. The ill person must with help determine what taboo has been broken and the corrective remedy applied.

²² Mkangi, Katama. "The Perception of Islam by the Mijikenda of Kenya Coast." in *Islam in Kenya, Proceedings of the National Seminar on Contemporary Islam in Kenya*, Bakari, Mohammed and Yahya. Saad S. Eds. (Mewa Publications: Nairobi, 1995) 113.

The evil eye. As previously discussed, diagnosis and prescription take various forms.

Sorcery and black magic. This is a high level illness requiring the assistance of a powerful medicine man. One of the most influential men in a Muslim society is the medicine man. He is respected and depended upon in the community. He offers herbal as well as magical potions for curing of various illnesses, common and demonic. Muslim medicine men often sell small packets of tablets said to cure ailments, including demon possession.

As related previously, miracles of healing are often attributed to visiting the tomb of a Muslim saint.

Protection from Evil. According to the Muslim world view, an assortment of evil supernatural beings come into frequent contact with human beings, and various means are used as protection:

Charms are worn on various parts of the body. Most often a charm consists of a portion of the *Quran* sewn into a piece of leather and hung on the body, attached to a door, or placed in a vehicle. The "hand of Fatima" may be employed to ward off the evil eye.

Muslims constantly repeat the words, "*Bismillah*" (In the name of God), as a protection from evil. Before eating, many will drop a pinch of salt on the food while repeating the phrase, to keep evil spirits away from the meal. It is repeated when entering a bus or leaving the house, or entering a building or passing a place known to be inhabited by *jinn* (an outhouse, for example).

In folk Islam, animal sacrifice is often associated with protection from evil. In Lamu, whenever a new dhow is launched, an animal is sacrificed as means of protecting the craft from *jinn* and evil spirits on its voyages. For a small dhow, a chicken is killed. For a larger craft, a goat must be slaughtered. For the largest ships, a cow is pushed and pulled up to the deck and its throat slit in a special ceremony followed by a *pilau* feast.

Special precautions are taken for new-born babies. In Mombasa, Muslim mothers often put a dark paste on the babies eye lids and forehead as a protection against evil spirits. Even before birth precautions are taken with pregnant women. It is believed that an angel comes and forms the baby in the womb and determines the baby's future life. For this reason, a pregnant woman should not be wakened from sleep, lest the angel be disturbed in its work.²³

²³ Musk, *The Unseen Face of Islam*, 132

Throughout the child's life, various folk Islam ceremonies may accompany rites of passage such as naming the child and circumcision.

Various ceremonies are performed at weddings in connection with keeping the new couple free from evil influences. In fact, often the right partner is determined by divination practices. At the *nikah*, the wedding ceremony, the bride and sometimes the groom are completely covered as a protection against the evil eye. After marriage, the wife may take occultic steps to keep her husband from straying to other women. Some potions are used to render the husband impotent with all women other than his wife.

Some steps may be taken in popular Islam to secure employment. One Muslim family in Mombasa noticed black powder on their food and learned that their worker had paid for witchcraft which would guarantee that he would never be fired from his employment.

In times of death, Muslims often follow folk Islam prescriptions. If death is imminent, the person's face is turned toward Mecca, giving him a better chance of entering paradise. Muslims believe that upon burial of a body, angels come and question the deceased in regard to their good works as well as shortcomings. During this time relatives may read the *Quran* and do good deeds in hope of enhancing the deceased chances of making it to paradise. Along the coast many Muslims sprinkle rose water in graves to keep evil spirits away from the body at burial.

In some Muslim areas, new buildings are "protected" against evil spirits by special charms placed in the cement walls of the structure. Incense is burned in many Muslim houses along the coast to repel spirits and *jinn*.

In addition to protection, Muslims often appeal to occultic powers for gaining prosperity. Charms may be purchased which are said to attract good luck and financial gain.²⁴

Cursing in Islam. Although orthodox Islam decries the practice of cursing in Islam, the practice is very common in folk Islam. Cursing works by employing the powers of the occult world and directing them against an enemy. In 1992, the IPK political party in Kenya slaughtered two goats and a rooster at Mwembe Tayari as part of a curse ceremony directed against the KANU

²⁴ An example of this may be seen in the film, "The Charm," available through Maturity Audio Visuals, Nairobi, Kenya.

government.²⁵ Though the practice of cursing is condemned by orthodox Muslims, many find support in the practice in Sura 3:55-63, which encourages Muslims to pray for a curse from God against those who lie by ascribing deity to Jesus Christ. In popular Islam cursing takes the form of the "evil eye" and "fire in the eye," resulting in many living in fear and taking steps to protect themselves.

Days of the Week and Places. Times and places are very significant in folk Islam. For example, Musk lists the significance of days of the week in Popular Islam. Friday is seen as the best day of the week, though one hour of that day may be unlucky. Thursday is also a good day, and Sunday and Monday are acceptable. Wednesday is the worst day; Saturday and Tuesday have negative connotations.²⁶

Events are planned to coincide with positive times and avoid negative days. There are also significant dates on the Muslim calendar, some being positive and others associated with demonic mischief and danger. Naturally, Ramadan is the best month of the year, and *jinn* are said to be imprisoned during that month. The 27th day of Ramadan, the "night of power," when it is said that Muhammad began receiving his revelations, has strong positive connotations for folk Muslims.

Orientation towards Mecca is very strong in Islam. Mecca is seen as the holiest place on earth and is the centre of the universe. Whenever a sacrifice is made, the head of the victim is turned towards Mecca. Oaths are made while facing the holy city. Muslims are buried facing the birthplace of Islam. Prayer is always made facing Mecca.

There are geographical and spatial areas of blessing in folk Islam. Shrines of departed saints are held to be areas of strong *baraka*. Of course the cities of Mecca and Medina are significant, and soil and water may be carried from these places to transport the blessing.

Certain areas are held to be the abode of demons and *jinn*. Toilets, garbage piles, caves and heavily wooded areas are said to be inhabited by *jinn* and demons, and are to be avoided as much as possible. The phrase *bismallah*, is repeated frequently when entering such areas.

²⁵ Mbugguss, Martha. "What's this curse mania all about?" *Daily Nation* Wednesday Magazine, (July 15, 1992).

²⁶ Musk, *The Unseen Face of Islam*, 150.

Demon Possession in Islam. Cases of demon possession seem very common among Muslims. Muslims along the coast of Kenya are known to seek out this condition for the purpose of gaining power.²⁷ Missionaries working in Muslim evangelism are frequently confronted with this situation. Muslim novels feature this syndrome prominently. Descriptions of life in Arabia by Muslim authors include examples of demon possession as part of everyday life.²⁸

The zar Cult in the Muslim World.²⁹ A well documented part of life in the Muslim world is what is known as the zar cult, in which ritual demon possession takes place. The history of the cult is traced back to at least the early 1800s, most likely beginning with Sudanese women. It has spread throughout the Muslim world since then. There are reports of ritual cult demon possession activities taking place along the coast of Kenya.³⁰ The cult involves men as well as women, though women feature more prominently in the cult. The focus of the cult is identifying the particular demon or demons which are afflicting an individual, causing disease or other manifestation, and then taking steps to form a permanent alliance with the demonic powers so the victim may live in harmony with the demons and utilize their power.

The ritual is carried out when someone realizes they are possessed by a demon. Symptoms of this possession include illness, apathy, depression, erratic behavior and sometimes wild screaming and running. The spirits who possess such individuals may be male or female and have distinct names and personalities. Some are "dirty, ugly, unkempt, foul smelling and eat dirt and excrement." They are associated with dysfunction, lack of self control and death. Others are characterized as being clean, beautiful, well groomed and bathed. They desire and are attracted to gold, fine clothes, perfume and fine foods, and are associated with seduction and sexual pleasure.

The zar priests or priestesses are individuals who are themselves demon possessed by zar demons and have become skilled at controlling their demons for advantage. Male specialists are often homosexual. When a victim requests assistance in forming a compatible alliance with the demon, the specialists are called

²⁷ Giles. 48.

²⁸ An Example of this may be seen in Jean Sasoons book, *Princess Sultana's Daughters*, when one of the daughters becomes involved in the occult and demonstrates characteristics of demon possession.

²⁹ This material on the Zar cult is taken from a paper on the subject by a missionary who worked in a Muslim country in Africa. Source protected.

³⁰ Giles. 48.

The *zar* ceremony lasts from one to seven days, depending on what the patient can afford. It is attended by the specialist and others who have performed the ceremony in the past. There are parallels to preparation for a wedding, with women wearing a white dress. Part of the ceremony involves animal sacrifice in honor of the spirits. In response to loud monotonous drumming, music, dancing and songs, the patient enters into a trance. The spirit is invited to enter the body. In return for various demands, the spirit makes a contract to restore the victim's well being. Neglect of the contract opens the victim to relapse.

Once a *zar* covenant has been made, the victim is demon possessed until death (apart from responding to the gospel and being delivered by Jesus Christ).

FOLK ISLAM AND WITNESS TO MUSLIMS

It may be concluded that folk Islamic practices affect every part of the ordinary Muslim's life. The motivation is fear of the powers of evil and the desire to gain supernatural power to solve life's problems. This interaction with occult forces takes time and often money, and leads to oppression and manipulation by the forces of evil. What a wonderful message believers have concerning Jesus, who delivers people from the domain of darkness and transfers them to His kingdom. Along with presenting the gospel clearly, those who witness to Muslims must be aware of folk Islam and take advantage of every opportunity to proclaim the power and protection that Jesus gives those who trust Him.

For example, believers can use charms and other protective measures taken by Muslims to establish a conversation that leads to the gospel. When Muslims demonstrate fear of evil spirits, the message of freedom through Christ may be presented. Muslims may be asked, "Have you heard of the wonderful blessings of protection from evil that Jesus offers those who trust Him?" Those who practice folk Islam may be encouraged to study the life of Christ, including his complete power over the forces of evil.

Believers involved in this kind of ministry must of course realize the importance of "putting on the whole armor of God" as they deal with powerful forces. There may be times when Muslims seek help and deliverance from demon possession. One missionary encountered such a situation and spent several days teaching the elders of the village about Jesus and his power to protect from evil. Finally they agreed that the afflicted person could trust Jesus as savior and that the missionary could pray for him. This "power encounter" resulted in a new openness to the gospel, but also renewed opposition from Muslim authorities.

In dealing with such issues with Muslims, there is the need for wisdom and care to prevent faith in Jesus from being seen as simply another protective charm in folk-Islamic societies. Paul Hiebert gives some excellent cautions in this regard as missionaries proclaim the power of Jesus to protect from demons. In "Power Encounters and Folk Islam," he points out "The danger of a new Christian magic."³¹ Jesus certainly protects believers from the evil one, but this is only a side effect that comes with the new birth. In telling Muslims about the wonderful blessings of faith in Christ, we must first and foremost emphasize the salvation that comes through acknowledging sin and its consequences and trusting the atoning work of Jesus Christ on the cross.

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³¹ Hiebert, 58.

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