



*Orthodoxy or efficacy?
Muslim women negotiating the spirit world*

Abstract

This article examines the beliefs and practices of Muslim women as they seek to negotiate the spirit world. It acknowledges the reality of this realm, and the tension women face between being orthodox while also needing practices that are efficacious in daily life. It examines the way in which women attempt to harness spiritual forces both to gain blessing or good fortune, and to ward off evil and misfortune. The final section presents some ideas for Western Christians to keep in mind as they engage with Muslim women in this area. The article draws on insights gathered by women who, as part of the [Women's I-View Course](#), are engaged in conversations with Muslim women around the world. Those insights are compared and contrasted with beliefs and practices found in Java, Indonesia, where Islam mixed with older animistic, Buddhist and Hindu practices, and where it continues to evolve and shape the ways in which Muslim women engage with the spiritual realm.

Reality

Muslim women throughout the world know that there is a spiritual realm. They live with the reality that whether spiritual forces are seen or not, they can be felt and are there.⁹ The Qur'an and the Hadith teach about the reality of the spiritual world.¹⁰ So how do women negotiate the spiritual world in their daily lives, and why?

Women bear great responsibilities in their societies, overseeing times of transition and vulnerability—pregnancy, birth, adolescence, marriage, death. “Women want to have control over their lives and the lives of their loved ones. They want to have some power over health and happiness.”¹¹ Despite this, women may feel they lack access to God and his power in their daily lives. Teaching that comes from the mosque is likely to primarily concern “truth” and “facts,” as opposed to methods of dealing with the problems of everyday life. Due to purity concerns, women are restricted in their religious observances each month through not being able to read the Qur'an or perform *sholat* prayers. Women, particularly in rural areas, may lack control over their lives. They may feel that they “have to make their own protection and be their own agency as there is no sense in Islam that God is with us.”¹²

Throughout the Islamic world women engage spiritual forces through a variety of practices, either to gain blessing or good fortune, or to ward off evil and misfortune. Popular Islamic beliefs and practices are not homogenous: those which are common in one country or region may be markedly less significant in another. Research conducted by the Pew Research Center, which interviewed more than 38,000 Muslims in 39 countries and territories in 2008–2009 and 2011–2012, showed that there are wide intercountry variations in the percentage of Muslims who believe in *jinn*, believe in sorcery, believe in the evil eye, use talismans for

⁹ Dina, Central Asia. All names have been changed.

¹⁰ E.g. Al-Baqara 2:102; Al-An'aam 6:112; Al-Falaq 113:4; Sahih al-Bukhari 4: 144; Sahih al-Bukhari 54: 490; Sahih al-Bukhari 71: 663.

¹¹ Mary, working in Central Asia.

¹² Jane, working among diaspora Muslim women in Europe.

protection, use charms to ward off the evil eye, display Quranic verses in their homes, use traditional religious healers, and have seen exorcisms.¹³

The differences highlighted in the Pew report, and seen in the varied conversations that women have had about this topic, demonstrate that it is not possible to generalise about a religion as distinct from its cultural context. In order to understand and engage with our Muslim sisters, we need to understand the *practice* of their beliefs. As Don Miller and Jan Branson clarify, “Religion is practised rather than thought; known rather than believed; efficacious or not rather than true or false ... religion is part of everyday experience.”¹⁴ Nowhere is this more true than in Java, Indonesia, where traditional beliefs, religions, and practices have mixed with Islam, and where the practice of Islam is still changing with the gradual spread of Salafi/Wahhabi influence.¹⁵ This paper will bring together the voices of Muslim women from around the world but will also focus on the particular beliefs and practices found in Java, for it is when we look at concrete examples of popular Islam practised in particular locations that we are then alerted to the kinds of questions we can ask in other contexts.

Tension

“Backwards,” “unorthodox,” “old-fashioned,” “village/rural people do these things, not city/urban people,” “not in accordance with the teachings of Islam,” “sinful.” These are some of the responses Muslim women give when asked about beliefs and practices that relate to the spiritual world and to interactions with spiritual forces. Although some will acknowledge their involvement in spiritual practices, many women refuse to engage further with the topic. Western women in a variety of countries across the Middle East, Central Asia, South Asia, and

¹³ Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion and Public Life, *The World’s Muslims: Unity and Diversity*, (Washington D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2012), Chapter 4, 67–82. Accessed May 7, 2018, <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/08/09/the-worlds-muslims-unity-and-diversity-executive-summary/>

¹⁴ Donald Bruce Millar and Jan Branson, quoted in Bianca J. Smith, “*Kejawen* Islam as gendered praxis in Javanese village religiosity,” in *Indonesian Islam in a New Era: how women negotiate their Muslim identities*, edited by Susan Blackburn et al. (Clayton, Australia: Monash University Press, 2008), 102.

¹⁵ Andrew Beatty, *A Shadow Falls in the Heart of Java* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), 8–9.

Southeast Asia, as well as those working among diaspora Muslims in the West, have all found it difficult to encourage their Muslim friends to open up and talk about practices relating to the supernatural.

This reluctance to discuss such matters may stem from a concern that Westerners will not understand, or may openly mock, them. Indonesian students of mine assumed that I, as an Australian, wouldn't believe in spirits and ghosts. Dina said she knew there was a spirit in her house, but her Western husband could not see it, and was dismissive of the effects the spirit was having.¹⁶ Arabs may ignore Western medical advice if they think the root cause of their problem is spiritual, and they assume that the Western medical practitioner will not understand this. Ruth, a psychologist in Central Asia training local psychologists, had to convince them of her own belief in demon/spirit possession before they would talk about it with her.

More fundamentally, reticence can stem from a desire to be seen as practising “pure” or “orthodox” Islam. This is certainly the case in Java, Indonesia, where differences in the practice of Islam are often related to one's cultural background, age, and Islamic group affiliation. Islam arrived in Java in approximately 1400 A.D. into a culture that was already thousands of years old, comprising of animist, Buddhist, and Hindu elements. Popular, often Sufi mystic, Islamic practices mixed into this culture and over time formed a syncretistic belief system that is known as *kejawen*. *Kejawen* culture was particularly strong in Yogyakarta, Central, and East Java, the centre of the influential Hindu Majapahit kingdom. Most *kejawen* practitioners identify formally as Muslims, and see no conflict between their Javanese beliefs and practices and their Islamic ones.¹⁷

¹⁶ Central Asia.

¹⁷ The six official religions in Indonesia are Islam, Protestant Christianity, Catholic Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Confucianism. All citizens are required to choose one of these religions to list on their identification cards (KTP). As of November 2017 the government has agreed to add a seventh category, “believers of the faith” (*kepercayaan*), which covers those who wish to identify as *kejawen*, as well as those who adhere to other native faiths. Krithika Varagur, “Indonesians Fight to Keep Mystical Religion of Java Alive,” *VOA News*, April 5, 2018. Accessed May 7, 2018, <https://www.voanews.com/a/indonesians-fight-to-keep-mystical-religion-of-java-alive/4333638.html>

While the cultural and religious landscape of Indonesia is changing, and the sharp definitions of different groupings within Indonesian Islam that Clifford Geertz identified are fading,¹⁸ it is fair to say that a large number of Indonesian Muslims, even if they assert that they are “just Muslims,” have an affinity with either reformist or traditionalist Islam, and many identify with one of the two largest Muslim associations in the country, Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU).¹⁹ NU and its members are broadly within the traditionalist group, celebrating *kejawen* rituals such as the *slametan* (a ritual feast), visiting saints’ graves and shrines, engaging in chanting (*zikir*), and mystical prayers.²⁰ In contrast, Muhammadiyah and its members are reformists/modernists, who promote Islam as a logical, rational religion,²¹ and who wish to eliminate superstition, Hindu practices, and traditions that are contrary to Islam.²² Firda, a Javanese Muslim, asserted that she does not engage in any practices outside of prayer and reading the Qur’an, because she “grew up within the culture of Muhammadiyah, an Islamic organisation whose ... mission is to purify the Islamic teaching from practices considered as *syirik*. *Syirik* is believing in not only God as the source of power.” Firda’s comments are echoed in a fatwa released by Muhammadiyah, which forbids the use of amulets, as they rely on sources other than God.²³

Two further factors to consider when discussing supernatural beliefs and practices with women are that of age and context. Only six university-aged Indonesian students wanted to engage with me on the topic of supernatural beliefs and practices—and of those, only three

¹⁸ See Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976). For changes in Islamic religious groupings, see Pieterella van Doorn-Harder, *Women Shaping Islam: reading the Qur’an in Indonesia* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), and Howard M. Federspiel, *Persatuan Islam: Islamic reform in Twentieth Century Indonesia* (Jakarta: Equinox, 2009).

¹⁹ Muhammadiyah has around 20 million followers, while NU has around 30 million. van Doorn-Harder, *Women Shaping Islam*, 2, 59. It is important to note that while the modernist-traditionalist dichotomy is still useful, Indonesian Islam and its organisations have been in flux over the past decades. New organisations have emerged, and the modernist-traditionalist distinctions between NU and Muhammadiyah have blurred. See Martin van Bruinessen, “Overview of Muslim Organizations, Associations and Movements in Indonesia,” in *Contemporary Developments in Indonesian Islam: explaining the “conservative turn,”* ed. Martin van Bruinessen (Singapore: ISEAS, 2013), 21–59.

²⁰ van Doorn-Harder, *Women Shaping Islam*, 60.

²¹ van Doorn-Harder, *Women Shaping Islam*, 60.

²² Federspiel, *Persatuan Islam*, 85.

²³ Hadi Suroso, Tim Fatwa Majelis Tarjih dan Tajdid, Pimpinan Pusat Muhammadiyah, “Hukum Memakai Jimat” [Law on the Use of Amulets], April 10, 2009. Accessed May 14, 2018, <http://fatwatarjih.com>

were willing to discuss any practices that did not involve prayer or recitation of the Qur'an or Hadith alone. Furthermore, one of those students, Mirna, was at pains to distance herself from such practices, pointing out that she is a Muslim activist and a teacher of the Qur'an. My students' reticence is almost certainly related to the fact that younger generations of Indonesians have become increasingly pious and observant in their practice of Islam.²⁴ Andrew Beatty observed this change, noting that in the East Javanese village where he did his ethnographic research, young people were turning away from "the diversity of [their] parents' and grandparents' generations" and embracing "a certain vision—puritan, rule-bound, conformist—of the Islamic way" that is now promoted in Indonesian schools,²⁵ on television, and in law.²⁶

With regard to context, it may be that urban people feel they have more control over their lives, and thus feel less need to turn to these practices. Sue got the impression that "folkish" activities were "only done by people outside the city."²⁷ Mirna commented that "Islam *kejawan* are mainly in rural areas." Rifki stated that "I and my family don't practice those traditions [*kejawan* rituals] anymore because my family lives in a city where the people are more moderate so we practice the good deeds that are stated in Qur'an and hadiths only. So we practise Islam without mixing it with the culture although we're not extremists."²⁸ Hanifa said that for her mother, relatives, and mother's neighbours in South Asia, folk Islamic practices are "a way of life." Hanifa grew up knowing of power places, objects, persons, times,

²⁴ van Doorn-Harder, *Women Shaping Islam*, 52. One example of this is the phenomenon of increasing numbers of young women wearing the *jilbab* (*hijab*), a trend which has now spread to include their mothers and older women. See Louise Jefferies, "The Rise of the Jilbabisasi in Indonesia: implications for Christian witness," *Missiology: an International Review* 39, no. 2 (2011).

²⁵ Muslim children in Java, even those in villages, regularly now attend Qur'anic reading/recitation classes after school. Both state universities and private Muslim universities also hold compulsory Qur'anic reading/recitation classes.

²⁶ Beatty, *A Shadow Falls*, 228. This "Islamic way" has been greatly influenced by a consistent effort by the Majelis Ulama Indonesia to "purify Indonesian Muslim's beliefs and practices, harmonizing them with an idealized orthodoxy." van Bruinessen, *Contemporary Developments*, 6. The Majelis Ulama Indonesia was established by the Soeharto government, and as such is a "semi-official religious authority". After Soeharto's New Order regime ended in 1998, the MUI has actively promoted the purification of Islam in all areas of Indonesian life and thought. Moch Nur Ichwan, "Towards a Puritanical Moderate Islam: The Majelis Ulama Indonesia and the Politics of Religious Orthodoxy," in van Bruinessen, *Contemporary Developments*, 60–61.

²⁷ Middle East.

²⁸ Indonesia.

and rituals, but she feels like it's something uneducated, rural people do. Educated Muslims, many of whom live in urban contexts, have more access to power that comes from "official" Islamic sources—they may attend a mosque or community building more regularly than less educated women for lectures, prayer sessions, and to memorise, read, or recite the Qur'an.²⁹ As such, they may feel less need to access supernatural powers from other sources. Van Bruinessen comments that *kejawen* and traditionalist Muslim

*beliefs and rituals are focused on local shrines and local spirits, whose powers are geographically circumscribed. As has been observed elsewhere, once people break out of their geographical isolation and by trade and travel start interacting more intensively with more distant communities, the old local spirits are of little help to them and supernatural support of a more universal scope has a strong appeal.*³⁰

The need for solutions

Despite the reluctance of many Muslim women to discuss supernatural beliefs and practices, most of them acknowledge their existence, and many admit to engaging in them. The reasons women want to harness supernatural forces for good or ill stem from their need for solutions to life's everyday problems and to those things which seem out of their control. This desire for control can outweigh a woman's need to be seen as "orthodox." Elina said that while she believes it is a sin to dabble in such practices she has seen the efficacy of them, and that "what drives people to these practices is their need for a solution to their problems. The mullahs at the mosque only teach you the Quran."³¹ Mina reported that women in her country cannot "conceive of a worldview where people don't think about good/evil/neutral spirits on a daily

²⁹ See Moyra Dale, *Shifting Allegiances: Networks of Kinship and of Faith* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016). Also van Doorn-Harder, *Women Shaping Islam*.

³⁰ Martin van Bruinessen, "Ghazwul fikri or Arabization? Indonesian Muslim Responses to Globalization," in *Southeast Asian Muslims in the Era of Globalization*, ed. Ken Miichi and Omar Farouk (UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 16. Accessed May 22, 2018, <https://dspace.library.uu.nl/handle/1874/314829>

³¹ Central Asia.

basis. Women are controlled even more by fear of death and spirits than they are by a desire to be honourable.”³² Claudia found that South Asian diaspora women are highly pragmatic in their approach— “It works, my uncle was healed, so why would God think it was bad?” She further commented that “it always seemed that if an occult practice worked it was sanctioned by God, and if it failed it was of Satan or the victim had some sort of sin sticking to him.” Clearly, the line between what is considered a “legitimate” source of power and what is seen as not “legitimate” is drawn differently by different Muslims. As Eleanor Doumato discusses, for Wahhabis and their interpretation of the Qur’an and Hadith, prayer, following the correct procedure, is the right and only way to engage with the spirit world—through invoking help directly from God, “the ultimate spirit.” Contrastingly, for “Sunnis of the Gulf, and for Shi’ites, the line between prayer and magic was elastic.”³³ While this observation was made based on practices in the early 1900s, the concept of legitimacy remains one that is highly relevant to explore with Muslim women.

In Java the overriding need for harmony within a community compels rural women to engage in *kejawen* rituals that interact with the spirits. “Interactions with [the world of village guardian spirits and ancestors] ... are seen as essential to the ongoing religiosity of the village: that is, women desire village harmony, and communication with spirits is vital to ensure this.”³⁴ Furthermore, the Javanese emphasis on the preservation of harmony leads women from both orthodox and *kejawen* backgrounds to work together in *kejawen* rituals, despite having different theological views about them.³⁵ The converse can also be true: Beatty observed that villagers who were somewhat “nominal” in their observance of Islam joined the more orthodox in preparing for and celebrating Islamic feast days because they “wanted to belong to a village where differences could be harmonized.”³⁶ Van Doorn-Harder also contends that the Javanese worldview centres on “a belief in the unity of being that must remain in a state of harmony.

³² Central Asia.

³³ Eleanor Abdella Doumato, *Getting God’s Ear: Women, Islam, and Healing in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 147.

³⁴ Smith, “*Kejawen* Islam,” 108.

³⁵ Smith, “*Kejawen* Islam,” 111–112.

³⁶ Beatty, *A Shadow Falls*, 227.

Unseen powers that affect the human condition are part of this universe.” She states that while for reformists this belief “is not harmless syncretism,” they too are “keen on preserving harmony” and so have “transformed this Javanese concept into one of their most cherished characteristics: *ikhlas*, or total dedication to God’s will.”³⁷

History, culture, context, and individual circumstances all play a role in how women view, and to what extent they engage in, practices that seek to influence spiritual forces. What is more, there is variation in the actual practices undertaken. These practices can be grouped as those which seek to attract blessing and good fortune, and those which aim to ward off evil and misfortune, or to undo evil/misfortune that has already been suffered.

Seeking blessing

The concept of blessing (*baraka*) is used frequently in the Qur’an. Blessings come from God,³⁸ and are a gift from Him to those who obey Him and submit to His will. Blessings can come “in the form of knowledge, wisdom, qualities, skills, wealth, health, or family.”³⁹

One of the key ways in which blessings are obtained is through visiting holy places, such as shrines or cemeteries of saints/holy people. The Pew Forum report found that a majority of Muslims across Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and South Asia, as well as in Lebanon, Iraq, and Russia, “endorse visiting shrines of Muslim saints as a legitimate form of worship.”⁴⁰ Pilgrims visit shrines to access the mediatorial powers of the saint or prophet who is buried there. The shrines of the *wali songo*, nine saints who are credited with bringing Islam to Java, are frequented by Muslim pilgrims, some of whom ask the saints to pray to God on their behalf,

³⁷ Van Doorn-Harder, *Women Shaping Islam*, 59.

³⁸ E.g. Al-Araaf 7:96; Al-Ahzaab 33:43.

³⁹ Serdar Demirel and Hikmatullah Babu Sahib, “Concept of *Barakah* in the Qur’an and Sunnah: Towards its Realization in Modern Discourse,” *FSM Scholarly Studies Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 5 (2015): 268. Accessed May 21, 2018, <http://oaij.net/articles/2015/1621-1435834127.pdf>

⁴⁰ Pew Forum, *The World’s Muslims*, 95. However, while Muhammad himself visited the graves of, and prayed for, his companions who had died fighting for the cause of Islam, orthodox Sunni beliefs state that a license to visit graves does not mean Islam condones treating them as holy places, placing offerings there, or worshipping the saints there. See Mohamed Elaskary and Eun Kyeong Yun, “Death, Resurrection, and Shrine Visitations: An Islamic Perspective,” *Religions* 8, no. 34 (2017): 5. Accessed May 21, 2018, www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/8/3/34/pdf

in the hopes that, since the saints are closer to God, their prayers will be answered.⁴¹ There are also two particularly auspicious mountains in Java where many people go to perform rituals to gain wealth.⁴² Even political candidates in Java are not above performing rituals in sacred places, following procedures prescribed by *dukun*.⁴³ They do this in order to absorb the power that resides in such places, so that they too will be powerful and will increase their chances of being elected.⁴⁴

Dina said that in her Central Asian nation “most people visit graves of saints to get blessings, get healed etc. We have a lot of places where many people do pilgrimages there. Cemeteries and holy places have pure water to wash them from sicknesses, bring healing. Most places have trees around those graves which they call “wish trees”. They tie some clothes or piece of material on the branches and secretly tell their wishes so it will come true.” Cora observed that in South Asia the three biggest reasons women visit shrines and “make deals with “angels” for blessings” were fertility issues, finance issues, and chronic health issues. Anne reported that in the Middle East festivals are seen as times when both “Christians and Muslims experience power and blessing that comes from a Christian or Muslim saint”, and she noted that because different saints specialise in specific things, different tombs have power for different things.

⁴¹ Jewel Topsfield, “Indonesian summit to promote ‘renovated’ Islam in challenge to global jihadism,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, May 8, 2016. Accessed May 14, 2018. <https://www.smh.com.au/world/indonesian-summit-to-promote-renovated-islam-in-challenge-to-global-jihadism-20160508-qop31k.html>

⁴² I first heard about these mountains when attending an anthropology class taught in an Indonesian Islamic University. They are Gunung Kemungkus (see Patrick Abboud, “Sex Mountain,” *SBS Dateline*, November 18, 2014, <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/dateline/story/sex-mountain>) and Gunung Kawi (see Admin, “Inilah Ritual Pesugihan Yang Paling Manjur Di Gunung Kawi” [Here’s the most effective wealth-seeking ritual at Mount Kawi], *Misteri.id*, accessed May 24, 2018. Accessed May 7, 2018, <https://misteri.id/inilah-ritual-pesugihan-vanq-paling-maniur-di-gunung-kawi/> R.S. Soeryowidagdo, “Pesarean Gunung Kawi, Malang, Jawa Timur” [Mount Kawi Cemetery, Malang, East Java], *Islamireligius* (Blog), March 2014. Accessed May 7, 2018, <http://islamireligius.blogspot.com.au/2014/03/pesarean-gunung-kawi-malang-jawa-timur.html>.)

⁴³ The word *dukun* roughly translates as “traditional healer,” “shaman,” or even, in some Indonesian sources, “paranormal.” There are different types of *dukun*, with *dukun santet* being those who practise black magic. See Tom Allard, “World of black magic holds sway over rich and poor,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, January 14, 2012. Accessed April 30, 2018, <https://www.smh.com.au/world/world-of-black-magic-holds-sway-over-rich-and-poor-20120113-1pzei.html>

⁴⁴ Bayu Dardias, “Paranormal Politics,” *New Mandala*, March 25, 2014. Accessed April 30, 2018, <http://www.newmandala.org/paranormal-politics/>. en former president Abdurrahman Wahid meditated at the tomb of an Islamic saint after being advised that the saint’s spirit was unhappy. Allard, “World of black magic.”

Other ways of gaining blessing include giving money or clothing to others—“So I give my old clothes away and my cupboard gets filled with even more clothes!”⁴⁵—or shaving a newborn baby’s hair and giving the same weight in gold to the poor to ensure the baby has good health all their life.⁴⁶ In North Africa pregnant women “look at someone with features they want for their baby then the baby will get those features,” and in Southeast Asia pregnant women will ask their friends’ daughters to touch their belly so that they too will have a daughter. South Asians visit *pirs* (Sufi holy men), who write down Qur’anic verses in “special ink” which is then dissolved in water or milk and drunk (this method can also be used to deliver curses). In Indonesia uncooked rice or salt is sprinkled on the floors of new businesses to bring good fortune.

Charms or talismans can also be used to gain blessings or good fortune. Some Indonesians get magical charms, in the form of needles (*susuk*) that have been blessed by a *dukun*, implanted under their skin. These charms are believed to bring about good fortune in love, work, and business dealings.⁴⁷ Even the Qur’an can be used as a protective charm—it is placed in cars and on the top of a cupboard in the house for this reason.⁴⁸ While not “charms” in themselves, the reading/recitation of the Qur’an, the strict observation of the five pillars of Islam, prayer in its various forms, and leading a life of worship and service to God often appear to be used as a way of harnessing the positive force of blessing.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Maha, Middle East.

⁴⁶ Sarah, Middle East.

⁴⁷ Webadmin, “Need Love? It’s under your skin,” *Jakarta Globe*, 15 September 2009. Accessed April 30, 2018, <http://jakartaglobe.id/archive/need-love-its-under-your-skin/>

⁴⁸ Middle East, South Asia.

⁴⁹ A number of Indonesians cited one or other of these methods as a way of gaining blessing, and the observation has also been made regarding Muslims in South Asia.

Warding off evil

As well as being used to gain blessing, amulets and charms are frequently used to ward off evil. In Central Asia one type of charm can be attached to the body,

usually tied around the upper arm but can be worn on a necklace or pinned to the inside of a shirt ... [This is often] prescribed for fear. ... People believe that getting scared can lead to physical illness or sometimes even to tragedies (death of a relative), so these [charms] are supposed to be able to avert the illness/disaster. They are sometimes prescribed along with a special diet that should be followed for 2 weeks.

Inas said she has an object shaped like an egg with the words from the Quran around it at the entrance of her apartment to keep the evil out.⁵⁰ Diaspora Muslims in Europe hang pieces of black ribbon from rearview mirrors or exhaust pipes, place chappati made from a special flour of ground seeds on roofs, and hang chilli peppers around doorframes to ward off evil spirits. A candle can be placed in every corner of a room to take away evil in East Africa. Incense is used across the Muslim world to cleanse a place of evil. Salt is sprinkled at the site of new constructions in North Africa.

Objects can also transmit curses if they have had spells put on them by a traditional religious healer. Fatimah said that someone placed a dead animal in front of her door to put a curse on her. While Fatimah said she didn't believe in curses, her Western friend got the impression that maybe she believes that something bad will happen.⁵¹ Dina described a variety of different things that can be used to bring curses on someone, for example "hair, pins, needles, dust ...".⁵² Fari related the story of a woman in the Middle East whose "father's second wife put curses on her by making a doll out of her hair and stolen clothes and poking it with pins in the back and chest. She talked about how for months she was debilitated with

⁵⁰ South Asia.

⁵¹ North Africa.

⁵² Central Asia.

terrible pain in the chest and back which doctors couldn't treat until the doll was discovered and destroyed and the pain went away.”

Traditional Javanese daggers (*keris/kris*) are widely believed to be a source of power.⁵³ Van Doorn-Harder relates the story of a well-known, and devout, Muslim activist in Yogyakarta who inherited a *keris* from her father. When it was stored carelessly in the attic of an orphanage, several children fell ill and some died. A *dukun* traced the source of the problem to the *keris*, whereupon the activist performed the required rituals and the sick children were healed.⁵⁴ Indonesia's former president Suharto also held a large collection of *keris*, as well as ancient Javanese manuscripts, “that many believed were the source of his power.”⁵⁵

The evil eye

The concept of envy is, for many Muslim people around the world, associated with the evil eye, a curse which has the power to cause harm or misfortune.⁵⁶ The evil eye is linked to the concept of ‘limited good’—that there is only so much good in the world, so if someone has something good it means that someone else misses out and will be worse off. Belief in the evil eye and its effects is common in a majority of countries the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia.⁵⁷

Women employ a variety of means to ward off the evil eye, with one of the most common being the use of amulets, in the form of blue beads or stones, which are worn, carried, or displayed in houses. Dina, from Central Asia, said that such amulets are “glass, dark blue with black dot on [them].” These amulets are said to deflect the curse—“the evil eye looking at you is met with the blue ‘eye’ looking back.”⁵⁸ Another often used symbol is that of a hand with

⁵³ While they are most strongly associated with Javanese culture, *keris* are not confined to Java or Indonesia: they are also indigenous to Malaysia, Thailand, Brunei, Singapore and the Philippines. See Wikipedia, “Kris,” Accessed June 6, 2018.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kris>

⁵⁴ van Doorn-Harder, “*Women Shaping Islam*,” 58–59.

⁵⁵ Allard, “World of black magic.”

⁵⁶ Muhammad himself acknowledged the evil eye as real. Sahih al-Bukhari 71:634–636.

⁵⁷ Pew Forum, *The World's Muslims*, 73.

⁵⁸ Noor, Middle East.

the palm facing outwards.⁵⁹ The phrase *masha'Allah* (*mashallah*, “God has willed it”), which invokes God’s blessing, is frequently employed for protection after a compliment is given. In Central Asia people who are particularly beautiful are spat upon to protect them. Safina, a South Asian Muslim residing in Europe, reported that she doesn’t tell anyone of her plans or of the good things happening to her/her children because she’s afraid of jealousy, curses, and someone lying about her.

Since babies are particularly susceptible, a large number of protective measures are taken to prevent them being affected. These include making the baby appear unattractive by painting kohl or black eye liner around the eyes, by placing a black dot on the forehead or side of the head,⁶⁰ tying red threads around the baby’s wrist,⁶¹ pinning an amulet containing blessed Qur’anic verses on to the baby’s clothes as soon as it is born,⁶² and tying a small black Qur’an verse bag around the baby or toddler’s neck.⁶³ Petra’s sister-in-law forbids other members of the family from telling people about her children, “for example the Western habit of sharing their birthweight/mentioning how much they’ve grown/milestones reached, etc,” in order to protect them. While jealousy is a key element of the evil eye, many of Petra’s friends pointed out that “it can be done "accidentally" without envy or bad intention—even a loving mother who praises her child and forgets to say "mashallah" can cause it to be cursed, accidentally.”⁶⁴ In South Asia chillies are burned in the house in case of unconscious release of the evil eye when visitors come to congratulate the family on the baby’s birth.

The effects of envy can be significant:

Multiple university educated friends of mine have strongly expressed the evil eye was the cause of them getting ill. There was NO other reason for the illness (not a virus!). For

⁵⁹ South Asia, North Africa, Middle East.

⁶⁰ South Asia and Middle East.

⁶¹ Central Asia.

⁶² Middle East.

⁶³ Middle East and South Asia.

⁶⁴ Middle East.

example, my teacher was looking very beautiful at a wedding, forgot to get her mum to say words of the Qur'an over her, and then she was in bed with flu-like symptoms for 4 days without any other cause: it was definitely jealousy of the other women at the wedding. Another example is that my friend purchased a new house, and when everyone found out about it, she got a flu.⁶⁵

"Friends refused to sell their car when people came wanting to buy it and then it was in an accident the next time they went out in it. They saw that as very much deliberate."⁶⁶

Antidotes to curses include burning particular herbs, getting some seeds mixed with honey from the local *pir*, destroying the cursed object, and speaking the Qur'an over oneself or the affected person.

Despite its prominence in a majority of countries, not all Muslim cultures link envy strongly to the evil eye and its negative effects. I was unaware of the evil eye when I was in Indonesia, and saw none of the ubiquitous blue beads that are associated with it in other places. The Pew Forum report correlates this observation, showing that only 29% of Indonesians have a belief in the evil eye.

When I asked my university students about the concept of envy and its power to make people sick, only two responded. Rifki said "I have actually heard of *penyakit 'ain* [sickness caused by envy]. I think the term is also new in Indonesia, but it's quite trending since you know most Indonesians are Muslims. There are some posts on Facebook, Instagram, or articles about *penyakit 'ain*. So I think people already believe in that." It is possible that the evil eye is a concept that is trending because it is being brought back by the many Indonesian graduates of universities in countries where it is prevalent, such as Turkey and Egypt. It could also be carried in to Indonesia by Indian or Turkish Muslims who come as missionaries to the country.

⁶⁵ Janet, Middle East.

⁶⁶ Cathy, South Asia.

Rifki explained that the Facebook posts/articles “usually contain some suggestions for people not to post or brag actually about their life because it might cause other people to be jealous and it will impact their health. The most important suggestion I guess is not to post a picture that shows the face especially when the purpose is to show how beautiful someone is.” Latfi commented that

from what I know, when someone envies a person, the person who gets envied sometimes will get sick. 'Ain [envy] happens when we see something beautiful (a good-looking baby or beautiful woman, etc) and then we talk about the good things of the person, he or she will get something bad. I learnt that to protect someone from 'ain, we have to praise God when we see something beautiful. If someone gets sick because of 'ain, it is suggested to use the wudu (ablution) water (the water that is used to clean some body parts before praying) of the person who envies to heal the one who gets envied.

Possession

The fear of evil spirits is widespread in the Muslim world, and stories abound of people being possessed by them—either through deliberate witchcraft or because the person is susceptible to their influence. A group of Indonesian women said that “some people are more vulnerable to being disturbed by spirits, especially if they go to ‘sinister’ places, and if you daydream you are definitely more vulnerable.” One of my Indonesian students was possessed while in class at university. My Javanese house helper came to work one day visibly upset, telling me that her son had gone to watch (against her wishes) a local Javanese dance (*kuda lumping*) in which the dancer enters a trance, becomes spirit-possessed, and performs abnormal feats, such as eating glass. While watching the performance, her son was himself possessed. Dina’s BMB friend experienced possession as a result of engaging in adultery. She commented that “sex is an opening for an evil spirit to come and live in you.” In order to avoid possession, women avoid going out in the dark, or to places which are known to be frequented by spirits—my female students would never go alone to the bathroom in the English classroom block.

It is not just individuals who can be affected. Stories in the Indonesian media about mass possessions are commonplace, with a quick search on just one news website bringing up four pages-worth, spanning the years 2012–2018. Factory workers and school students appear to be the most often affected. According to one Indonesian Islamic religious teacher, the majority of those who are possessed are females, due to “aspects of their psyche/spirituality being weaker” than that of males.

Exorcism in Islam is called *ruqyah*. How the *ruqyah* is performed appears to differ from place to place. When Sa'id became a Christian, his Middle Eastern family believed him to be possessed. They took him to a mosque where an imam who specialised in exorcisms shouted in his ears, hit him on the back (“to make the spirit uncomfortable to make him leave”), and then recited the Qur'an and spat in water, which Sa'id then drank. Mirna made clear that in Indonesia there is a distinction between *ruqyah syar'iyah*, which is performed by an Islamic leader (*ustadz* or *kiai*) and is based on the Qur'an and Hadith, and *ruqyah syirkayah*, which is performed by a *dukun* and asks for deliverance from *jinn/Shaitan*. For *ruqyah syar'iyah* an *ustadz* will read some verses of the Qur'an and pray to Allah for the person. This can be done in a house or a mosque, but is more effective in a mosque. Rifki explained that the *ustadz*

will read some lines from the Qur'an that will cause the evil spirit to feel burned, and then they will communicate with the evil spirit through the person and ask the evil spirit to leave the person's body. If the evil spirit refuses to leave, the ustadz will read some more lines that will torture the evil spirit and force them to get out. The person usually will puke as the sign that the evil spirit is already out of their body.

According to Rifki, *kejawen* Muslims ask an *orang pintar* for help, as

they believe that person can move the jinn from their houses to a tree, river, or somewhere else where the jinn won't disturb them anymore. The orang pintar will usually try to communicate with the jinn and make a bargain with the jinn.” The jinn will agree to move in

return for something—“for example the owner of the house should provide sesajen [ritual offerings to spirits] or food for the jinn that usually consist of coffee, sticky rice, and chicken.

Where to from here?

Although the Bible teaches about the reality of the spirit world and has many examples of interaction with it, Western Christians remain unsure of how to engage with Muslim women in this area. Understanding the differences between a Christian covenantal relationship with God and a Muslim relationship with God may help us to approach this issue.

Unlike Muslim women, we are in a covenantal relationship with God. We “have forgotten what it's like to live in fear—of powers, of judgement, of not being loved,” because we have “absolute certainty that the power we have is God's power and so there is no power that is stronger. ... [We also] know that God works to bring us good and not harm, [so] we are not afraid of God's power. ... [Another] big difference is that we have access to that power all the time. We know that God is with us each minute of each day. ... God is good, reliable, and consistent.” We are convinced, and can share with our friends this conviction, that “that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:38–39).

In contrast, many Muslim women, despite their efforts (be they “orthodox” or less so), fail to achieve freedom from their fear of evil spirits, and fail to gain the assurance and control they seek. Biblical stories which show God’s power may not necessarily have the impact we desire because while Islam affirms God’s omnipotence, God is not bound to Muslims in covenant relationship, and therefore his reliability, goodness, and consistency, are not certain.

This lack of assurance in how God will respond means that many of the practices Muslims engage in demonstrate a desire to control and manipulate spiritual forces, including God, to ensure they have access to blessing and protection from evil. Christians, on the other hand, don’t need to manipulate God. Instead, we live in covenantal obedience to Him, accepting that He is in control and not trying to operate behind His back.

Stories that demonstrate how generous God is challenge the view that there is only limited good in the world and that not all will be beneficiaries of that good. Instead, if generous good is waiting to flow to all, even those who appear ‘undeserving’ or who are unable to gain merit themselves, then the need to manipulate is removed. Examples of stories that could be used include the parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1–16); the Syrophenician woman (Matthew 15:21–28; Mark 7:24–29); the Samaritan woman (John 4:1–42); the ten lepers who were all healed bodily, even though only one returned (Luke 17:11–19); and the two accounts of abundant leftovers that are gathered after Jesus feeds vast crowds (Matthew 14:13–21; Matthew 15:29–39).

We ourselves need to mirror God’s generosity in the way we relate to our friends. In many cultures, Indonesia included, a person does not receive gifts on their birthday but rather gives gifts to others. For example, if someone gives birth to a child, they celebrate that blessing and goodness by taking small gifts to their neighbours, colleagues, friends, and relatives. For an important birthday or anniversary, adults will take their colleagues and friends out to a restaurant for a party. When we are aware that someone is struggling financially, we can be generous without expectation of return. While such generosity may be viewed by Muslim neighbours and friends as ‘merit-making’ rather than a sharing of God’s generosity, we can dispel this view sometimes by occasionally sharing that the reason we are giving—a simple statement such as “I am giving this to you because God loves you” may open up a conversation about God’s love and generosity.

Praying in Jesus’ name with women is a vital part of our relationships with Muslim women. From most people’s experiences, women have not refused prayer when it is offered. Prayer demonstrates that we are looking to God as the source of protection, blessing, and power. Many women in the I-View Course spoke about the opportunities they have had to speak words of blessing or pray over new babies, using passages such as Numbers 6:24–26. Dina, in Central Asia, prays into the ears of babies, asking that God would open their ears to hear God’s word and bring the family to him. Sometimes, however, people do not hear this link to God’s power alone. Melina related a time when she prayed for a woman’s knee. She was then identified as a person of power that everyone should go to for prayer, and although she tried

to point people back to God as the source of power, they did not hear it. She found it encouraging to be reminded that there are examples of people who do not necessarily immediately follow Jesus despite receiving his healing power —thus “their response is not our responsibility.” We may also need to deal with situations in which God responds to prayer with a “no.” Claudia said South Asian diaspora Muslims “have a hard time accepting a no from God and this can lead to more occult practices.” Her friends were challenged, however, when they saw how she and her husband accepted no from God. Developing deep relationships with women and sharing our lives and faith with them openly is key to helping them see what our relationship with God is like and how different it is from one in which we are trying to manipulate God or spiritual forces for our own agendas.

In conclusion, we need to acknowledge the reality of the spirit world. We must ensure that we ourselves are trusting in God as the ultimate source of power. Since we are dealing with a powerful reality, prayer must undergird everything we do. We should ask other Christians to pray for us and with us. We need to examine our own responses to crises—what is the first thing we do? We can ask God to help us see and understand the world as our Muslim friends see it, and ask Him to help us to connect with them in ways that are meaningful for them.

To God be the glory!

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