E. Rezvan, M. Rezvan

THE QUR'ÂN, WOMAN AND HER CLOTHING IN THE MAGIC SPHERE OF CENTRAL ASIA*

Over many centuries, the average European mind was inclined to see sorcery and magic as significant components of Islamic civilization. It has long been noted that the "image of the neighbour" really does accumulate significant elements of its culture. This image of Islam was formed among Europeans under the influence of the significant scientific and technical superiority of the Muslim world in the Middle Ages, which determined the effect of Muslim philosophy and the natural sciences on medieval European philosophy and science. This image strengthened significantly in the Age of Enlightenment after the astounding success of the "Thousand and One Nights" published by Antoine Galland (1646—1715), which caused a heightened interest in eastern exoticism. The beginning of the colonial era, Napoleon's march to Egypt, and the work of European descriptive scholars in Egypt, Persia, North Africa and Turkey, strengthened the idea of the principle of magic which played an important role in the culture of Islam. Especially as Muslim civilization in the period of decline provided Europeans with an enormous amount of material connected with the occult.

In Central Asia, like everywhere in the Muslim East, women's traditional clothing was always filled with numerous magic elements, the meaning of which was preserved from antiquity (fig. 1). In different situations, certain types of clothing had ritual significance, which frequently changed over time. For understandable reasons, the largest amount of information on this type of customs and traditions dates from the 19th—beginning of the 20th century. At the same time, it is clear that, while they changed in their frequency and specific manifestations, ideas of this type were preserved over many centuries, in the absolute majority of cases going back to the pre-Islamic past of the peoples of this enormous region [1]. Many magic elements were reconsidered in such a way that they served as a constant reminder of the important events of the history of Islam, and important rituals.

The Russian-speaking ethnographic literature makes it possible to gain a certain idea of magic elements in traditional women's clothing and its ritual use [2]. An entire set of magic ideas was linked with clothes and dresses which touched a person closely and over a long time, and thus "absorbed" certain "energy".

When she went out on the street, along with the veil (puranja, from corrupted Arabic fara'ijiyu) woman put on a čahrīwān (corrupted Persian čahrībān) bands of horse hair, which covered the face and went down to her hips, knees or waist. This element of clothing accumulated important, often polar magic and ritual meanings. A black čahrīwān was considered dangerous. Women preferred to cover their face with muslin. After the wedding the čahrīwān was usually bought by the husbands' father. At the same time, the čahrīwān also played the role of protection: evil spirits run away from black horsehair. A newborn baby was covered with the mother's čahrīwān. In the ritual of placing the baby in the cradle for the first time, the cradle was hit with the čahrīwān, purifying it from evil spirits. The same thing was done when the baby was put in a different cradle or one that had not been used for a long time.

It was not customary to take or to give each other clothing. Above all this concerned the čahrīwān and footwear. It was believed that another person's sweat or breath could carry unhappiness or sickness. A number of "black magic" rituals were connected with these beliefs [3]. Items belonging to infertile women or women whose children died could be given to another woman, trying to pass on the illnesses and unhappiness with them.

Special rituals accompanied the moment of putting on new clothing. In the collection of the Täkhent Brytûn Institute of Oriental Studies, a work is preserved about determining the day which is suitable for putting on new clothing [4].

The introduction and consolidation of Islam as the leading ideological system in this enormous region could not but affect the magic practices of the most varied kind. The Qur'ânic texts occupied a leading place in protective amulets and on weapons. They were used to decorate luxurious fabrics and worn on clothing. For

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example, it was believed that for a woman to marry a specific man, the 10th day of the fifth šíru should be written on her clothing together with the name of the man and his mother, or read the 71—73 days of the sixth šíru in the presence of the woman and man whom the woman’s parents wanted her to marry. A woman who did not marry on time should have the 76—99 days of the sixth šíru tied to her leg, so that she was proposed to as soon as possible. On the other hand, to choose a suitable wife for a man, šíru 87—89 of the fourth šíru had to be written on a piece of clothing and taken with him (see below for more detail about the magic use of the Qur’anic texts).

The collar of the traditional dress was fastened with special ties. There was a belief that Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet and the wife of Ali, in memory of her murdered sons Hassan and Husayn, tore strips from their clothes and made ties for her dress from them. An ordinary woman followed the example of the Prophet’s daughter in her clothing, again and again realizing herself as a Muslim, and the ties served as a daily reminder of a tragic page in Islamic history.

For trimming various types of clothing, lace with a fabric pattern was widely used (fig. 2). Special types of ornaments were developed, both geometric and connected with depictions of plants, birds, fish, women’s and human figures, and also domestic items, work tools and jewellery. The name of each pattern corresponded to the item which it was connected to. It was important that each of these items had the significance of a protection. The pattern “gave” this significance to the lace, and the lace to the item which it decorated.

The protection was a small square in contrasting colour to the dress — a guisette which was usually sewn under the sleeve of the traditional woman’s dress or on the dress of a long-expected child. For the same reason, next to the guisette several stitches were made of another colour, and circles were sewn on the joints of the seams. Neps of several threads served as a protection, which were tied in a special way along the edge of the clothing.

The hem of the skirt of young women and small children was not sewn out of fear that the births would end. Fearing the “evil eye”, some seams were made on the outside, not on the inside. Thus, the “curse remained on the outside”. As a protection the outer edge of the trousers, an integral part of clothing for girls and women, were usually turned out. Thus, the entire item of clothing or its separate elements also became a protection in its functional essence.

The pālāshwin, a special type of outer clothing which went out of use in Transkent by the 19th century, has an amazing history. Later this word came to signify a cape in the wider sense, which played a symbolic role in a number of family and marriage rituals. The bride, who appeared in the pālāshwin in the husband’s house, for several months, and sometimes until the birth of the child, did not go out of her room without it, and covered herself with it from the eyes of the husband’s father and brothers. She covered herself with the pālāshwin, meeting family and guests and welcoming them.

An important role in the ritual and magical sphere was played by the tunic gown of a special cut without a collar, often long, almost to the ground, which in Transkent was called a mīrāx[5]. Before the beginning of the 20th century, the bride was supposed to enter the groom’s house dressed in a mīrāx, which after the first wedding night, in gratitude for preserving the daughter’s innocence, was given to her mother. The mīrāx was compulsory in the ritual of the first bow to the family of the husband and the first visit to the parent’s home after the wedding. After this the mīrāx was not worn again.

From the start of the 20th century, the mīrāx turned into an element of the funeral ritual. It covered the body after death, and then was given to the person washing the body. Two other mīrāx were thrown on the coffin lister. Like other things which touched a dead body, the mīrāx, after returning from the burial, were left out under the open sky at night “so they saw the stars”. After this they became ritually pure. They were kept as part of the dowry of daughters.

Starting from the last decades of the 19th century, a large number of similar ritual functions moved to the parānja, the compulsory upper clothing of urban women of all ages. Under the parānja a bride was brought to the house of the future husband, and in the parānja she was taken to bow to the family of the groom on the day after the wedding. Several days later, the parents of the newly wed held a feast and invited the daughter with her new family. The young woman usually appeared there in the parānja. After this, the parānja was hidden in a chest right until the moment its owner died. The parānja was taken to the cemetery and hung in a room on a wooden nail together with other clothing of the dead person. To hang a parānja in this way during life was considered impossible. It was believed that this could bring on death. It was forbidden to enter a house in a parānja. This meant a wish for death. Washers of the body were an exception.

An important part of the women’s costume was the headdress. In particular, there was a widespread belief that if a woman ate food without her head covered, her guardian angel would leave her. The type of headdress was an important indicator of the age and status of the woman. In Transkent until the 1920s, the main women’s head-dress was the headscarf. Girls wore headscarves from the age of 9—10. They differed in their quality, colour and method of wearing. Women wore small colored scarves without embroidery. Their ends were tied on the head in such a way that the plait was visible. Tying an embroidered scarf on the day after the wedding, a young woman wore it before the birth of two or three children. It was replaced by a white scarf without embroidery. The head-dress of an elderly woman consisted of two scarves tied in a special way.

A whole range of traditional colour preferences were connected with the magic of colour [6] and indicated the age and status of the woman. Red and pink were mainly girls’ colours. Middle-aged women preferred light-blue and grey. In Transkent, white was considered the colour of brides and elderly women, although no one was
forbidden to wear it. Dark colours (black, blue, violet, dark green) were the colours of mourning. Handworks sewn form pieces of fabric of different colours, so called qirāmāt are well-known all over the Central Asia.

“They are usually used for various household articles — child shirts and vests, marriage carriages, pillow cases, quilts, etc., they are believed to have magic qualities and are used as amulets. Local people believe that each colour on the fabric has its purpose. For example, the most effective anti-jinx is a combination of black and white colours. Black-and-white patterns have particular name […] qirāmāt-zi chuñgını (qirāmāt against jinx). The most valuable were multicoloured qirāmāts as wearing them was believed to please God. They protected against bad luck and illnesses” [7].

The traditional costume is unthinkable without a set of jewellery, which was abundant. Jewellery hung from the head, temples, neck, chest, and waist, rings, decorations for the hair, earrings, bracelets — each one, both separately and together, bore signs and symbols which made them protections. Altogether they represented another “layer of protection” in the conflict between people and hostile forces (figs. 3–4).

Of enormous popularity in the Muslim world was jewellery which became a means of protection when the Qur’anic texts were worn on their surface and placed inside. Tūmārs and hātżinband — amulet cases, were widespread (fig. 5). Excerpts from the Qur’ān and prayers written on paper could be kept in them [8]. They were part of the adornments of all Muslim peoples of Central Asia. The level of their prevalence depended directly on the extent to which Islam had entered the everyday lives and minds of people. Cases could be of the most diverse forms — rectangular, square, triangular and cylindrical. As a rule, they were richly decorated with ink or gilt, incrusted with stones. Both stylised and geometric. Arabic inscriptions could be written on them [9].

Tūmārs were worn on the neck (bayiin-tūmār), on the chest (kirdak-tūmār) and under the arm (qolqul-tūmār), and also on the left shoulder. Furthermore, they could be attached to the headress and clothing. All these terms are of Turkic origin. The Persian word hātżinband — “bracelet”, shows the practice of wearing the amulet on the wrist. These cases usually had a tubular form [10]. This term could also indicate a camel’s head, which a calligraphic inscription engraved on it [11]. The terminology used indicates the two sources of tūmārs in Ma wər-i al-Nahr — Turkic and Iranian.

These amulets were mainly worn by women (especially pregnant and breastfeeding mothers) and children, whom the tūmār was designed to protect from all kinds of diseases, curses and various kinds of effects from evil forces. Women wore tūmārs to ease their births and in the hope of increasing the number of children. Tūmārs were one of the compulsory elements of the wedding costume, as it was believed that the bride who was passing from maidenhood to marriage was especially subject to the influence of dark forces.

Evidently, for an ordinary person the effectiveness of tūmārs as amulets was not just determined by the Qur’ānic text on them, but their actual form and appearance, i.e. there are specimens filled with resin, pitch or plaster, covered with gold or silver foil, and also flat ornamental plates [12]. Often, any inscription using Arabic writing gained a sacred significance and transferred this to the item on which it was engraved [13]. It is also important to note that amulets which used sacred texts were not just designed to cure the body, but also the soul, as wearing them was already considered an act that was pleasing to God.

Works devoted to traditional Muslim magic are connected closely with the circle of daily tasks and worries of ordinary people, including, as we have seen, the protective functions of their clothing. They show love and jealousy, trade competition and sickness, fear for tomorrow and interest in the unknown.

In this respect, considerable interest is presented by materials of the manuscript collection of the Uzbekistan Academy of Sciences Bishkek Institute of Oriental Studies. Over 100 works of this collection, written mainly in the 19th century, are devoted to “concealed learning” [14].

A significant part of the contents of works of this kind is traditionally made up of various aspects of relations between women and men. The “women’s world” naturally recognised itself and showed itself in interaction with the world of men, and vice versa: an understanding of the “women’s world” can only be recreated using “men’s works”.

Of interest is the “women’s treatise” on magic incantations, which can arouse the fiery love of a man for his wife and stop him from taking another wife (No. 3870, No. 3880). Here may be included the work on magical means of turning (No. 3873). They are opposed by another book of fortunetelling, which unlike the other work No. 3870, certainly has Muslim roots. It is an anonymous work without a name, which supposedly continues a text by Abū ‘All ibn Sinā (370–428/980–1037). The preface states that Ibn Sinā, arriving in Kāshān with his sister, strictly warned her not to look on to the street, as there were many dangerous magicians there (an attempt to stop harem women from flirting through the open window). She did not obey and put her head out the window. Immediately under the charms of a local magician the girl grew two horns which were so big that she could not put her head back in the window. Ibn Sinā drew up a plan to average all the magicians of Kashan, and they were destroyed. At the order of the “king of Kāshān”, Ibn Sinā allegedly wrote a book including a way of fortune-telling by drawing lines: it consists of 114 chapters (which can be associated with the according number of sūras in the Qur’ān).

Since childhood, Muslims learnt to perceive the world and its diverse phenomena in the form of reflections preserved by divine symbols and names. They were taught to “read” the secret meaning of letters and laws, and be amused at the magic interaction with the sacred text and among themselves. This view on the world and
this way of perceiving it should be considered an important element of the world view of Muslims living in different centuries and belonging to different peoples. This element, which was introduced by Islam and is irrevocably linked with its sacred book, may also be easily found in the modern Muslim world. As we have seen, the Qur'anic texts could be written on clothes for various reasons [15]. Fabrics were also created which bore the Qur'anic texts (t. 6). An analysis of the magic use of individual sūras and ḥāyat could make it possible to single out a separate group among the general circle of issues which relate directly to the world of men and women, and also relations between them. Here are some examples:

Family prosperity is achieved by reading the first, 112th, 113th and 144th sūras.

To stop fights between couples, the 74th and 267th ḥāyat of the second sūra should be read.

On the contrary, to sow discord between couples, read the 102nd ḥāyat of the same sūra.

To separate adulterers, read the 4th ḥāyat of the 23rd sūra and the entire 44th sūra.

To help a person who is mad with love, read the 6th ḥāyat of the 73rd sūra.

To win someone's love, then while reading the 36th sūra, every verse is repeated in Central Asian and Afghan. In Middle Ages, by using magic, people helped to solve problems that are just as relevant today: winning someone's love, choosing a worthy life partner, preserving family prosperity, ensuring the faithfulness of a spouse or on the contrary, saving hostility and discord and separate couples. Men tried to protect themselves with magic from the jealousy of their wives, make an obstinate woman obedient etc. Women's interests are represented by a range of issues relating to conception, pregnancy, childbirth and looking after babies.

The magic sphere of the peoples of Central Asia, including ideas connected with the magic of clothes, contains quite easily detectable layers linked both with the pre-Islamic past and with the Islamic ideas which came here. In the Muslim world as a whole, and in Central Asia in particular, the text of the Qurʾān is a kind of two-sided mirror in which people and society looked into for centuries to see themselves. The magic properties of the Qur'anic texts manifest themselves regardless of the material on which they were written or the use of the object on which they are inscribed. They can be a manuscript or a dress, a ring or a weapon. The material or object is just one of the spheres of existence of this text, the totality of which is truly unique in the Muslim world. Muslim talismans, and as we have seen, clothes in general, and its individual elements were such in their functionary use that they can be seen as fragments of a gigantic, multifaceted body of religious traditions, phobias of people, hopes and aspirations, as one of the aspects of the centuries-long process of humanity understanding the world and themselves. It is an attempt to break through the limitations of human abilities, an attempt to intervene in the limitless and unpredictable game of probabilities. At the same time, texts and objects connected with the Qur'anic magic are for the attentive researcher an extremely interesting source which makes it possible to look into the soul of people who lived many centuries ago, and understand their dreams and fears, worries and hopes.

Notes


3. The basis of the division of magic by Muslim theologians into "approved" and "disapproved" is the principle of "not doing harm" and the issue of the origin of the force which is used to carry out a certain magic action (a force of divine origin for "white magic" and an earthly or demonic force for "black magic").


5. See photo below in the article by Valentina Prichepova "A view from the outside: arka, jalab, bakhcha" (in the MAE RAS photographs collection of 1870—1920) (fig. 3), p. 46.


8. They were used to be known by the word husto, "inscription, writing," Until the 19th century, the Tatars preserved the name beni for annulments. See D. A. Fakhrendinov, Jevlemejnoe tsvalo Uzbekatexto (The Jewellery Art of Uzbekistan) (Tashkent, 1988), pp. 53, 141.

9. For an example of a tilmud of the 10th—12th century with a pseudo-Arabic inscription see ibid., p. 53.

10. For the examples of the taimurs and zibbatiyaz of all types of taimurs see: ibid., pp. 145—149.

11. See: ibid., p. 149.

12. L. A. Chyry, Tashkibochke teryelme skraphetsia (Tajik Jewellery) (Moscow, 1977), p. 97. These types of specimens are mainly local among the nomadic ethnic groups.

13. See for example the inscription on one of the Samarkand bilogukskiy ouyat bracelets (i. e. bracelets containing dyob "decoration of nature") Sukhareva, op. cit., p. 116.


15. By the end of the 15th century in Turkey, Iran and India, the appearance of shirt talismans are recorded which were worn under armour as a "God-bearing garment" (ibdah al-taqwa) (7:26). Their surface is completely covered with writing (text of the Qur’an in its entirety or partially, pious formulas, magic squares etc). See: shirt talismans (India, end of the 15th c.) — the entire text of the Qur’an (K. Catalogue of the Arabic Manuscripts in the Salur Jung Museum and Library (Hyderabad, 1962), No. 177 [catalogue no. 15], shirt talisman (India, end of the 15th c.) — the entire text of the Qur’an (ibid., No. 178 / catalogue No. 157), shirt talismans (Iran, 16th c. — 17th c.) — numerous Qur’anic fragments and Shah-i-farsi formulas (The Nasir al-Din Khajal Collection of Islamic Art) (Oxford, 1993), xvi, No. 33), shirt talisman (probably Iran, 16th or 17th c.), prayers, incantations, numerous Qur’anic fragments, including sūras 1, 48, 112, 114 in their entirety, dyob 2235, 24:35 and numerous Shah-i-farsi formulas (The khajal Collection of Islamic Art, xvi, No. 34). For photographs of the Ottoman type "collar shirt" see: The Oxford Illustrated History of the Crusades, ed. by J. Riley-Smith (Oxford—New York, 1997), p. 254. See also: L. von Hammer, "Observations sur les chemises talismaniques des musulmans et particulierement sur celle qui se conserve dans le cousei des Cisterciens nomme Neukloster, pres de Visente Austriche", Journal asiatique 10/3 (1832), pp. 219—49, Ph. Dornblum, "Notes sur deux vetements talismaniques", Arabica XXXIII (1896), pp. 216—50, J. M. Rogers and R. Ward, Stileman the Magnificent.
PRESENTING THE COLLECTION

A VIEW FROM THE OUTSIDE: URDA, JALAB, BACHCHA

BY THE MAE RAS PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTIONS OF 1870—1920

V. Prischepova

A view from the outside is selective. It registers the unusual, peculiar, that which will be interesting to talk about upon returning home. In which way were the women of Central Asia seen by the first photographers who worked here in the end of the 19th—the beginning of the 20th century? What passed in from of their lens? How “distorted” does the photo mirror become which we look into it after 100 years?

In the Autumn of 1869 the Turkestân exhibition of V. V. Vereschagin, then a little known painter, took place in St. Petersburg. It included the sketches and several paintings of the Turkestân cycle. To all appearances, these pictures were also exhibited and acquainted the viewers with the population and everyday life of the new lands adjoined to Russia.

The first photos of the Museum depicting women of the settled peoples of Central Asia were included in the famous “Turkestân Album”, more known as Kaufmann’s album which was acquired by the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography in 1874. The “Turkestân Album” was issued with the purpose of a comprehensive acquaintance of the academic community with the life of the people of the region. Therefore, an entire series of photos was devoted to showing typical men and women. These are half-length portraits, by which only a partial idea of local costumes could be formed. Occasionally headaddresses, neck decorations, and earrings were demonstrated (figs. 1—2).

Of women’s headaddresses these photos show: a scarf tied with the ends backward, a headband ornamented with metal pendants, worn above the scarf. R. Ia. Rassudaeva suggested that one of the photos of the “Turkestân Album” shows a rare specimen of an elegant party mitvaks, an ancient outer garment seven out of expensive fabric (fig. 3). It was matched with a dress of corresponding colours and tones. Sleeves of mitvaks in Fergana were usually made short (above the elbow) and

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Front cover:
Precious silks — presents of emir of Bukhara to the Russian tsar. MAE RAS. Photo by T. Fëdorova. Courtesy of the Museum.

Back cover:
"Auricular points", 33×35.5 cm (painting), Tibet, 18th—19th c. Courtesy of Soo Tao Oriental Antiques (Tasmania).