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By the Pricking of My Thumbs, Something Wicked This Way Comes: Omani Perceptions of the Supernatural

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SIT Study Abroad

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By the Pricking of my Thumbs,
Something Wicked This Way Comes:

Omani Perceptions of the Supernatural

By: Jennifer L. Borger

Oman: Political Culture and Economic Development in the Gulf

SIT World Learning

Spring 2011

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INTRODUCTION:

As a student who came to Oman knowing very little about the Arab world or Islam, I can safely say that my knowledge has increased tenfold. Upon entrance to the country in January 2011, I had no idea what my independent research study would end up addressing. Upon first hearing of the concept of the evil eye and all it relates to, my interest peaked. I began to think that this topic was interesting enough to command a month's attention from me. This all changed during a weekend trip to Salalah, in the south of Oman, which included a lecture regarding witchcraft in Dhofar. I was so fascinated throughout the lecture that I was almost jumping out of my seat. This was by far the most interesting phenomenon I had heard about since being in the Middle East, and I needed to know more. I immediately decided to switch my topic to the study of witchcraft and the supernatural in Oman, and I can say without a doubt that I have no regrets.

As I began reviewing literature regarding witchcraft and spirit possession, I noticed that none of the articles took the threat of the supernatural seriously. Authors dismissed the validity of these claims by explaining it through histories of slavery or colonialism, as well as through gender roles in society. As a Westerner I do see the validity in this type of analysis, but I also think that it is imperative to view the topic of the supernatural from the perspective of a person who has been reared in a society in which such things are a very real threat to one's well being. These people do not doubt the reality of the possibility of harm from the supernatural, and therefore analysis should take this into consideration. While attaching historical and societal explanations to the origin of supernatural stories is important, I will also be discussing how the presence of

supernatural forces influence peoples' daily lives, considering that these things are a real, concrete threat to the well being of individuals in this society.

CHALLENGES AND METHODOLOGY:

Once I had secured my research topic, I initially intended to do a comparative study between Bahla and Salalah, two cities in Oman that are incredibly significant in the study of the supernatural. However, my access to the Bahla area was quite limited by multiple factors. First of all, discussion of the supernatural in Oman is not something that most people are willing to indulge a foreigner in. Obtaining people willing to discuss this topic was, at times, incredibly frustrating. Through connections I had with Omani's I was able to talk to two people from Bahla, but no more. Due to this, I decided to do a study of the supernatural in Oman in general; interviewees from Muscat, Bahla, and Salalah are included. I conducted interviews between April 10 and May 2, 2011. Some of these interviews were conducted in English, and some were translated from Arabic to English. Most of these interviews took place in Salalah between April 12 and April 21, 2011.

I had much more access to people willing to discuss this topic in Salalah through some incredibly helpful Omanis who work with the Oman World Learning Center. Interviewees were much more willing to talk to me and discuss matters of the supernatural openly after having a person who he or she knew well introduce me and explain my aims. Therefore, a large majority of my interviews were with people from the Dhofar region. I designed an interview protocol, which in reality was only loosely followed. It served to keep me from forgetting key points rather than as a strict direction

for each interview to follow. Most interviewees were young males, though there were some females and some older individuals. I used snowball sampling, which ended up with many of the interviewees being from the same group of friends. Another factor to take into account is the type of person that this research attracts. My results may be skewed due to the fact that my topic may have attracted a certain type of interviewee; someone who is willing to talk to a foreigner about witchcraft. These people may have been particularly interested in the topics of witchcraft and *jinn* possession.

One of the biggest challenges of this research has been trying to take the multitude of different and sometimes contradictory accounts and trying to tie it together in a way that will make sense to the reader of this essay. I was forced to leave out certain details and generalize others for the sake of avoiding confusion and trivial details and conveying the general message I believe I have received. Due to this fact, I have not created a perfect presentation of the supernatural in Oman. In fact, there is no such thing. Rather than try to achieve this unattainable goal, I have focused on trying to convey a general message and summary of what a majority of interviewees led me to believe. These generalizations do not apply to every interviewee I spoke with or every Omani by any stretch of the imagination. Nothing written in this essay is undisputable, so I would ask the reader to proceed with this fact in mind: this message is my imperfect interpretation of a personal month long struggle to understand the issues of the supernatural in Oman.

IMPORTANT TERMINOLOGY:

Throughout this essay I will be using certain Arabic terms whose definitions are sometimes confused or disputed. To avoid confusion, I am going to define certain terms and indicate their meanings in the context of this essay.

Sahir: witch; a male or female who practices magic for evil purposes.

Mu'alim: healer; a man or woman learned in the ways of supernatural healing through the use of the Holy *Qur'an* or the use of magic for good purposes.

Sihir: magic; the use of spiritual powers; can be used for good or evil purposes; some perceive this term to apply to the use of solely evil powers.

Kaaba: the cube structure inside Mecca, the most sacred site of Islam.

Umrah: the optional pilgrimage to Mecca that can be made during any time of the year.

Jinn, pl. jinni: non-human creatures created by God and made of fire who inhabit the earth but are invisible to human beings in their natural form.

haram: forbidden; used to refer to anything prohibited by the Islamic faith

LITERATURE REVIEW:

The Supernatural in the Context of Islam:

The word *sihr* encompasses a wide range of subjects, from white and black magic to having contact with *jinni* (nonhuman creatures created by God and made of fire). Its basic meaning is the same as the English word magic: falsification of reality, having contact with supernatural or psychic powers, and creating a transforming effect on the

soul. The meaning, reality, and practice of magic have been dealt with in such diverse sciences as astrology, alchemy, law, and theology. Most of the *Qur'anic* references to magic are negative, since Muhammad was accused of being a magician (*sahir*, *Quran* 10:2) by his detractors. Even though white magic has been somewhat tolerated, its practice has been emphatically discouraged.¹

The concept of *sihr* consists of a falsification of the reality of things and of actions. According to the Encyclopedia of Islam, “This term [*sihr*] is applied to that which entrances the eye and acts on the psyche of the individual, making him believe that what he sees is real when it is not so. [...] It also refers to things, the apprehension of which is fine and subtle; this applies, for example, to certain poetry and certain eloquence, that of the *Qur'an* in particular.” It is also applied to the use of a demon’s help in any situation. Actions relating to *sihr* are condemned by Islam.²

The souls of magicians possess the ability to exert influences in the universe and to tap into the spirituality of the planets, in order to use it in the exercise of their influence, by means of a psychic or satanic force. There is incredible diversification in the definition of the concept of *sihr*; “It [*sihr*] is everything which entrances the intellect and everything which bewitches the soul, word or action, in the sense of amazement, attachment, inclination, submission, appreciation, obedience, acceptance.”³ This is licit *sihr*, whereas that exercised with the aim of abusing people is illicit *sihr*. In Arabic, *sihr* denotes clear expression and clarification of the true meaning of things and the exploitation of this to influence people. In the *Qur'an*, *sihr* is the equivalent of *kufur*, or infidelity. The essence of black magic is the use of demoniacal forces and their aid in the

¹ “Magic”, The Oxford Dictionary of Islam.

² Fahd, “Sihr”.

³ Fahd, “Sihr”.

performance of the magical act. *Sihir* has a demonic origin; two fallen angels taught *sihir* to men, and men knew that which was harmful to them. People were aware that those who acquired this art were disinherited from any share in the future life and were condemned to Hell; they had sold their souls cheaply.⁴

Belief in spirits, charms, curses, and the evil eye is still widespread in Islamic culture. High, or divine, magic depends on the supernatural powers of God and other helpful spirits and used for positive purposes, such as protecting one from misfortune. On the other hand, low, or satanic, magic works through the devil or other evil spirits to carry out sinister purposes; a practitioner of low magic is called a *sahir*.⁵ Practitioners of magic are believed to have special knowledge and techniques for controlling supernatural forces, and usually use their forces for client requests, such as a person seeking a cure for an illness. Magicians are respected for their knowledge and creative powers, but also feared for their ability to hurt their enemies. Many people wear amulets with *Qur'anic* verses written inside, some magicians write passages from the *Qur'an* on small pieces of paper, which their clients burn and then rub on their body; many soak bits of paper with verses written on it in water to dissolve the ink and then drink the liquid in receive the magic in the verse; some magicians write verses on the inside of a clay bowl so the writing dissolves in water and then their client drinks it.⁶

The Prophet Muhammad reportedly permitted magicians to use spells to avert the effects of the evil eye. People sometimes use magic to attack others openly by calling on the name of a supernatural being; curses including the names of God or of saints are intended to punish sinners, not to harm innocent people. According to shari'a law,

⁴ Fahd, "Sihir".

⁵ "Magic and Sorcery", *The Islamic World, Past and Present*.

⁶ Ohtsuka, "Magic and Sorcery".

eloquence of speech is distrusted because it is associated with Satan; it relates to a form of eloquent expression that has the effect of magic.⁷ This effect is deception.

According to Remke Kruk, “In spite of the negative attitude of official Islam, magic practices have over the centuries become intricately interwoven with religious elements and practices, and the line of demarcation between what is forbidden and what is allowed is so blurred that neither the practitioner nor the client often is aware of transgressing the boundaries of orthodoxy” (48).⁸ This fusion of magic and religion has led to confusion between what Islam endorses and what unrelated traditional practices. Additionally, this leads to a psychological effect on patients who believe themselves to be afflicted. For example, if someone believes that they are being affected by magical elements, *Qur’anic* treatment will have a positive psychological effect on them.⁹

The Relationship between Witchcraft and Societies:

Diane Ciekawy argues that there are four processes through which “witch others” are created in societies of coastal Kenya. These processes include the operation of a state legal apparatus to categorize rituals and prosecute magical practitioners, the everyday policing of these people by administrative agents, the creation of a set of ideas and practices about mystical harm derived from colonial administrative, European, and Christian practice that comes to be known as witchcraft, and the construction of collective moral discourses among common people, elites, and state agents. These processes result in the conceptualization, categorization, and naming of particular members

⁷ Ibrahim, “Sahir and Muslim Moral Space”, 389.

⁸ Kruk, “Harry Potter in the Gulf”, 48.

⁹ Kruk, “Harry Potter in the Gulf”, 50.

of the community as witches.¹⁰ In these Kenyan societies, the discourse related to harmful magic that is created and operates within social and political settings is largely under the control of the people, without primary influence from state agents or the sponsorship of state institutions.¹¹ This same concept of “witch other” applies in Oman, although it is created through different processes and types of discourse.

Ways of identifying witches are the same as ways of identifying people who do not fit into the typical mold of a respectable citizen. Moral discourses regarding the naming and prosecuting of witches become a central conceptual tool in the morality plays of colonial and post-colonial state agents in the politics of rule; they build new forms of community factionalism based on the distinction between “us” and “witch others”.¹² Ciekawy highlights the fact that people in these societies conduct most forms of containment outside of state and political power. Even if the defendant is acquitted, there is still a serious social stigma that comes from having been accused and results in social ostracism in the community. This fact is completely applicable to Oman; forms of containment in Oman revolve around the family, the tribe, and the social pressures that each inflicts on individuals. While Kenya’s government officially outlawed witchcraft and held public trials related to magical offenses, there is very rarely any public discourse related to witchcraft in Oman.

Witchcraft becomes a discourse of power in the communities in which it is present as both conceptualization and action. Sexual jealousy of a new co-wife is often assumed to be inspiration for the use of witchcraft; the way women’s use of witchcraft is perceived seems to express men’s fear of women’s active agency and resistance, such as

¹⁰ Ciekawy, “Witchcraft in Statecraft”, 120.

¹¹ Ciekawy, “Witchcraft in Statecraft”, 121.

¹² Ciekawy, “Witchcraft in Statecraft”, 125.

an extramarital affair in response to the taking of a second wife.¹³ There is also a typical association of witchcraft with crime and violation of law, associating these witches with people who do things that are not in society's best interest.¹⁴

During the reformation in Scotland, people who were believed to have sold their souls to the devil in exchange for magical power were hunted as witches. Women were extremely over represented in the population of the accused. These women experienced a "forceful admonition to them to modify their gender-related behavior".¹⁵ Witches were strip-searched and pricked until an insensitive spot on their body was found, which was said to be the mark of the devil. Women were typically then coerced into confessing that they had engaged in sexual intercourse with the Devil to attain their magical powers. The crime of witchcraft became broadly equivalent to fornication with the devil, and was used as a means to educate peasants about their responsibility to maintain sexual morality and avoid contact with the Devil and sin.

Witch hunting took place in brief periods of nationwide panic; at times of moral panic, people become convinced that a particular form of behavior is a threat to society's fundamental values. There were cycles that included bursts of repression, and during these times behavior that was previously tolerated is reclassified as a part of the newly identified deviant pattern.¹⁶ The state's direct concern with women was largely related to controlling their sexual behavior; women's newly acquired public identity was as sexual

¹³ Rasmussen, "Reflections on Witchcraft, Danger, and Modernity", 332.

¹⁴ Ciekawy, "Witchcraft in Statecraft", 121.

¹⁵ Goodare, "Women and the Witch-Hunt in Scotland", 302.

¹⁶ Goodare, "Women and the Witch-Hunt in Scotland", 291.

beings, and they could not play it down because it is linked to the nurturing, motherly role expected of them.¹⁷

Culture and Story Telling:

The major vehicles through which people construct individual and collective worlds are stories, narratives, and myths. Each culture constructs and construes its own world of meaning and it is important to understand the implications of this created world on the behavior of citizens. Human beings naturally create meaning in the world around them and attempt to understand what this world is about. To do so, narratives are used. Dennis Saleeby states, “Culture is a system where meaning is given to action by situating its underlying intentional states in this interpretive system”.¹⁸

According to Saleeby, “culture is the means by which we perceive, organize, rationalize, and understand our particular experiences in the world”.¹⁹ This culture is centrally formed by stories and narrative. In Oman, cultural norms are engrained so deeply in individuals that nearly everyone conforms to the status quo. This entire process takes place through the use of narratives, usually of parents informing their children of the appropriate ways to behave in their society. Additionally, this culture is inundated with belief in the supernatural and stories that affirm this to be the truth. However, there is always interaction between the culture and the self. While the culture provides the framework for these stories, individuals may alter the plot of story lines to suit themselves and make themselves more comfortable in their own world. This phenomenon is absolutely present in Oman; each person has an incredibly personal

¹⁷ Goodare, “Women and the Witch-Hunt in Scotland”, 296.

¹⁸ Saleeby, “Culture, Theory, and Narrative”, 2.

¹⁹ Saleeby, “Culture, Theory, and Narrative”, 3.

understanding of the stories relating to witchcraft. Narratives and beliefs regarding the supernatural are so varied that it seems incredible that people accept the truth of the phenomenon at all. Such contradiction in details of belief shows that each person adapts the concept to fit his or her own life and to assist in supporting his or her own interpretation of the culture and phenomenon of witchcraft.

It is imperative to understand that in Oman word-of-mouth and recounting of narratives is a completely legitimate source of information. In the West people may be skeptical of the truth of such information, but in Oman information passed this way may be more reliable than other mediums such as the media. With ridiculous amounts of media self-censorship, important topics tend to remain under the radar. This results in discussion of such topics verbally rather than in print.

RESEARCH FINDINGS:

Witchcraft in the Context of Islam:

According to Islam, the use of magical power to harm others is *haraam*, or forbidden; it is one of the worst sins possible in Islam. On the other hand, there are certain individuals with an inherent ability, a divine gift from Allah: the ability to detect things from another dimension, the supernatural. These people are known as *mu'alim*, or healers, and serve as a bridge between the supernatural realm and the human realm. They can use their abilities to cure people of mental and physical afflictions, which are often caused by the use of evil magic. The use of this power is not *haraam*, as long as it is used for good and not for evil. These people may study magic through books to

strengthen their knowledge and power, and as long as it is used for good purposes it is acceptable.

According to the *Qur'an*, it is also said that fortune telling is forbidden. Many people understand this assertion to apply to all magic, when in reality it is referencing only the pre-Islamic practice of predicting the future. This leads to confusion about what is *haraam* in Islam and what is accepted; often people confuse the forbiddance of fortune telling with forbiddance of magic, and do not know that magic is acceptable as long as it is used for good purposes. It was made clear by the wide range of answers I received from interviewees that most Muslims have an incorrect impression about what their religion specifically says regarding the supernatural. Some people said that according to Islam, witches are not Muslims, they go to Hell, they die a painful death, and even that Allah will send them hardships during their life on earth.²⁰ Others said that judgment is an issue that involves each person and God and there is no way to know what their fate is.²¹ The line between witches, healers, sheikhs, and Imams is often blurred. These titles are separate, although they sometimes overlap. This overlap seems to cause confusion in some who think that all healers must be Imams, for example.²² This is not to say that no one knows the correct distinction between these different titles, but many people's perception of these terms and concepts seem to have been influenced more by tradition and culture than by Islam, leading to an incorrect perception of the religion.

²⁰ Interview #7; April 16, 2011

²¹ Interview #12; April 22, 2011

²² Interview #12; April 22, 2011

Jinn Possession:

A topic closely tied to witchcraft and magic is spirit possession. In Islam, spirits are called *jinni*: creatures created by Allah, made of fire, and invisible to human beings. *Jinni* are never seen in their true form because it is said that a person would die because of their terrible appearance.²³ Due to this, *jinni* only communicate with people when they have taken the form of another creature or have possessed someone. *Jinni* often take the form of certain animals, such as cats, dogs, and snakes. When in their natural form, *jinni* tend to live in dark, secluded places where humans do not often spend time. These creatures tend to interact only with people who have harmed or annoyed them in some way, although this initial human/*jinn* interaction is often accidental. For example, if a family moves into a house that is inhabited by *jinni*, or if a group of people is in the mountains and disturb a place where *jinni* live, they will likely do things to annoy, scare, or even harm these intruders.

This race of beings live in an alternate dimension, but still inhabit the earth and have free will, just as humans do. *Jinni* marry and reproduce, and have free will to choose where they live, their religion, and to perform good acts or evil acts. Depending on these acts, *jinni* are categorized as either good or evil. One interviewee claimed that all good *jinni* are Muslim and that all evil *jinni* are non-Muslim,²⁴ while others explained that there are good and bad *jinni* of all religions, just as there are good and bad people of all religions.²⁵ A *jinn* can both possess a human body and interact with humans in other ways; good *jinni* may do so to help a person and bad *jinni* will do so to hurt a person, particularly someone who has interacted with them in an undesirable way.

²³ Interview #4; April 11, 2011

²⁴ Interview #6; April 13, 2011

²⁵ Interview #9; April 20, 2011

As one interviewee, Waleed, explained, one day a friend of his was throwing stones on a beach, and suddenly he started feeling hot; his back had become covered with huge red spots. The spots remained on his back for about one week, at which time Waleed took him to a woman who performs “natural treatment”. She told him that he had thrown a stone through a *jinn*. She instructed him to rub his body with garlic at the same time of day that he had thrown the stone, and he would be healed. Indeed, he followed her instructions, and the red spots disappeared.²⁶ Waleed attributes this affliction to the *jinn* at the beach without a doubt.

Another interviewee, Larry, calmly explained that there are thousands of *jinni* living in his house; he chronicled numerous incidents that had happened throughout his childhood. He explained that the *jinni* live there because his house, along with the others around it, had been built on top of an ancient graveyard. It is said that *jinni* resided in this graveyard before construction of his neighborhood took place, and that one old man from this neighborhood had owned the *jinni* since this time. Upon his death the old man dispersed his *jinni* instead of passing them down to his children, at which time they infiltrated the houses of the neighborhood. I asked Larry whether he believed this story to be true, and he answered affirmatively, saying, “I guess it’s true, this is the real explanation to me”.²⁷

There were also many stories of people who initiated interaction with *jinni* by challenging them or attempting to contact them in some way. One story involved Larry’s cousin, Steve, during an excursion outside of Salalah. While Steve and some of his friends were spending a night at a creek, suddenly they heard the sounds of *jinni*; they

²⁶ Interview #6; April 13, 2011

²⁷ Interview #10; April 20, 2011

heard people walking next to them, but could not see anything. According to Larry, one of the older and wiser of the people present told the others that they must leave right away. As the group began to depart, Steve screamed, “Oh, the *jinn* are here! Come, *jinn*, come and take me!”. Larry explained that he was probably trying to seem brave, but that this act was incredibly unwise and uncalled for. When Steve and the others reached the car, Steve started screaming; he had been possessed by a *jinn*. The *jinn* spoke to them through Steve’s body, saying, “I can’t resist that stupid guy who is calling us some bad things, and I will not leave this body, never ever. Because they [the other *jinni*] already left. If I will leave, I will leave with this body”. Steve’s friends tied him down in the car and took him to a *mu’alim*, who eventually exorcised the *jinn*.²⁸

Jinni are known to haunt certain places and areas, in the Dhofar region in particular. One such place is known as the Beach of Death, about two hours outside of Salalah. Larry recounted a story of three friends who had spent a night at this beach. Two of these friends left the campsite to gather wood from a nearby forest. When they entered the forest, they saw a piece of wood and went to pick it up; once they had picked up this piece of wood they saw another piece, a bit further into the forest. After acquiring this piece of wood they saw another and another, each one leading them deeper into the forest. After a bit of a disagreement, the older of the two friends, Greg, convinced the younger, Jim, that they had gathered enough wood and that it would be wise to return to the campsite. Greg sensed that something related to the supernatural was going on. Upon return to the campsite, Jim drew a circle around their campsite and stuck a knife in the ground in the middle of it. According to Larry, this is a challenge to the *jinni*, a call for fighting to see who is stronger. He explained that some strong *mu’alim* do it to gather

²⁸ Interview #10; April 20, 2011

jinni to speak with them, but this man should not have done it. After Jim did this, Greg immediately started a fire as a manner of protection, since *jinni* prefer dark areas. Shortly after, the three men were surrounded by a group of hyenas accompanied by *jinni*. The three friends had guns, but they could not shoot all of the hyenas; the only thing protecting them was the fire, because the hyenas and *jinni* could not get close enough to harm them. They kept the fire burning throughout the night, burning nearly all of their clothes to keep the fire going, and they survived. Jim claimed that he didn't know what drawing the circle and putting the knife in the middle meant; Larry explained that that is what happens when you do something related to magic without full knowledge of the repercussions.²⁹

Another example of *jinn* afflicting humans of their own free will is a story regarding three sisters who were possessed by one *jinn* for months on end. These three sisters would wake up in the middle of the night screaming in foreign languages they had never learned, in voices unlike their own. Their eyes would become red and "different", and they would convulse and faint. As soon as one sister's fit was over, another's would begin. The strongest *mu'alim* in Oman could not heal them; after months of affliction the family traveled to Kenya to see a witch and the daughters came back healed.³⁰ This story illustrates the typical progression of events; if an affliction cannot be cured medically the family will go to a *mu'alim*; if the affliction still cannot be healed some people go to a witch as a last resort.

²⁹ Interview #10; April 20, 2011

³⁰ Interview #5; April 12, 2011

Witchcraft: How? *Kaif*?

Although every interviewee provided a different account of how one could become a witch, many of the stories shared common themes of violence, blasphemy, and some kind of interaction with *Iblis*, or Satan. One of the most common of these methods requires the person who desires magical knowledge to read one of many black magic books, the most commonly known of which is called *al Ghazali*. A person must read this book alone in a deserted place such as a cave or in the mountains. During this time *jinni* will test the person's strength by trying to scare them; many people who attempt to read the book go crazy because of events caused by these *jinni*. Such events include hearing voices and experiencing hallucinations.³¹ Nearly unanimously, all interviewees explained that this book is incredibly difficult to finish reading, because the *jinni* will do things to try to make the reader go insane. Interviewees explained that any person who starts reading this book and is unable to finish would go crazy.

If a person successfully completes this book, *jinni* come to the person and the person can become a witch through further events that include human sacrifices to the *jinni*. This sacrifice must be someone close to the potential witch's heart, such as a parent or a child.³² Other alleged methods of becoming a witch include reading the Holy *Qur'an* backwards, urinating on it, or desecrating it in some other way. Stories of rape by Satan and consumption of human flesh were also chronicled,³³ as well as stories involving the insertion of rice into the anus and simply learning magical knowledge from someone who is already a witch.³⁴

³¹ Interview #6; April 13, 2011

³² Interviews #1, 6, 9, 10; April 8-20, 2011

³³ Interviews #3, 5, 9, 10; April 10-20, 2011

³⁴ Interview #3; April 10, 2011

In addition to methods of gaining magical knowledge for oneself there are also ways that witches can pass their magical powers on to family members, their youngest daughter in particular. While usually the process of becoming a witch is a personal choice, sometimes a person has no choice in the matter. There are two distinctive ways through which a witch can pass knowledge on to his or her youngest daughter.

Muhammad explained that the witch would simply teach the child from a very young age everything he or she knows about witchcraft. Through the use of this method, the child will be more powerful than any witch who began as an adult by the time he or she reaches puberty.³⁵

Clark explained another process through which to transfer magical powers to a youngest daughter. First, the witch must kill his oldest daughter, and once his youngest daughter reaches puberty and is ready for marriage he presents her to *Iblis* and requests that she become a witch. *Iblis* then has a donkey appear, and the mother prepares the girl to have sexual intercourse with the donkey. Preparation is necessary in two senses: the mother rids the girl of her clothing and also encourages her to be silent as the donkey rapes her. If the girl says God's name or the phrase "I rid myself by God's name of the Devil", the donkey will disappear. However, the donkey will continue returning and attempting to complete the act as long the mother or father wishes it. This will continue until the girl is finally silent for the duration of the sexual act and the donkey reaches climax inside of her. Once this occurs, the girl becomes a witch. This method cannot be used to pass magical power on to sons; if a man desires to become a witch, he must read one of the books, such as *al Ghazali*.³⁶

³⁵ Interview #13; April 24, 2011

³⁶ Interview #9; April 20, 2011

Witchcraft: Why? *Laish*?

The reasons for the practice of witchcraft have evolved over the last forty years. In Dhofar especially, witchcraft is an ancient tradition and rituals have been passed down from generation to generation for as long as people can remember. In the past, people were uneducated about Islam and living incredibly hard lives in caves and mountains throughout Dhofar. These people were unaware that magic is forbidden in Islam and therefore simply followed the traditions passed down from their parents and grandparents, unaware of their sacrilegious behavior.³⁷ These traditions include magical rituals to prevent the water springs from drying out as well as ways of protecting livestock from the harm of other tribes' magicians. Since people did not know how to repel magic except through the use of magic themselves, it was deemed necessary for each tribe to have magicians for protection.³⁸ The practice of witchcraft was much more prevalent than it is today, and witches were often publicly known, feared and respected.

In present times, much of this has changed. People are becoming more educated about Islam and everyone knows that magic is *haraam*; people now know how to be close to God and that being so will repel evil magic.³⁹ Due to this change, the number of witches and the publicity of those who remain have decreased significantly. Interviewees stated that very few witches are known of in present times. If people are aware of their identity, these witches are simply avoided as much as possible, but still treated with respect in daily interactions.⁴⁰ Most interviewees believe that people pursue witchcraft because they want power; they want to be able to harm others, and their end goal is to be

³⁷ Interview #12; April 22, 2011

³⁸ Interview #5; April 12, 2011

³⁹ Interview #5; April 12, 2011

⁴⁰ Interview #4; April 11, 2011

feared.⁴¹ However, the large majority of people who pursue witchcraft out of this desire never become powerful enough to publicly display their power, because the sacrifices needed to gain power become too great.⁴² Initially they are curious, but are not aware of the great sacrifices that they will be required to make to gain power; when these sacrifices become too great, they cease attempting to gain power and prefer their identity to remain unknown to those around them.

Witchcraft and *Mu Ghayeb*:

One of the most commonly recounted phenomena is that of *mu ghayeb*. This term refers to a process through which a witch uses magic to force a victim to become a slave. The witch replaces the victim's body with a piece of wood that appears to be the person's corpse. The deceived family buries the corpse and believes that the person is dead, while in reality the victim is either a slave to the witch or a slave to the *jinni*. Where exactly this slavery takes place varies depending on who is asked; some people argue that it is in a place far away from the victims home, for example, in another Arab country. Others believe that victims are kept in their town but only work at night, and yet others believe that victims are brought to the dimension of the *jinn*. The type of work victims perform also varies depending on who is asked. Some people assert that these people work on plantations⁴³ while others claim they become sexual slaves of the witch who "took" them.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Interview #13; April 24, 2011

⁴² Interview #13; April 24, 2011

⁴³ Interview #1; April 8, 2011

⁴⁴ Interview #6; April 13, 2011

How to Repel Magical Affliction:

One of the biggest changes this increase in education regarding Islam has led to is the use of the Holy *Qur'an* to repel magical affliction rather than the use of other magic. This change has opened doors for people known as *mu'alim*, or healers, to use the Holy *Qur'an* to help prevent magical affliction and to expel it if a person is already afflicted. These methods of repelling magical harm revolve around a strong relationship with God and living a good Islamic life. The five daily prayers and reading certain verses of the Holy *Qur'an* every day are measures that should be taken to protect oneself from supernatural harm, and these prayers and verses must be said with deep meaning and understanding; without such they are meaningless⁴⁵. This protection takes the form of an energy circle, or an aura, around each person. This aura provides protection from *jinni*, magicians, and any adverse affects of envy or the evil eye. Only two things can create gaps in a person's circle of protection: to cease praying, or to become scared. If a person becomes scared for any reason, temporary gaps will be created in the circle of protection. Once these gaps are created, *jinni* can penetrate this circle of protection by their own will or by the will of a witch and harm the person.⁴⁶

Most of the victims in stories regarding supernatural harm are people who have either offended a *jinni* or who do not live a good, Islamic life. Additionally, characters in these stories that are pious and moral repel magical harm with ease. For example, Paul relayed a story of an incredibly powerful witch who was known for using his magical power to hypnotize beautiful girls so he could rape them without their knowledge. He saw a girl who he wanted to pursue and attempted to do so, but to no avail. He attempted

⁴⁵ Interview #10; April 20, 2011

⁴⁶ Interviews #4, 5; April 11-12, 2011

multiple times to use his powers to “take” her, multiple failed attempts he confronted her about it; he asked how she had repelled even his strongest *jinni*. She told him that she knew the *Qur’an* by heart and that she protected herself from evils of the supernatural by reciting certain verses and chapters every day. This man was so affected by what she told him that he tried to give up his evil ways and turn back to Islam. When he attempted to enter the *Kaaba* during the *Umrah* he was lifted into the air and thrown backwards. This showed him that God would not forgive his sins and accept him back into Islam, so he turned back to his ways of witchcraft. He eventually went crazy and was seen screaming from his rooftop at night; he died about five years ago in Salalah.⁴⁷

On the other hand, I spoke with one man, Tom, whose pious family dealt directly with *jinn* possession. Tom’s entire immediate family, save him, was possessed by *jinni* sent to them by his grandmother’s sister for two years. This witch sent *jinni* to them because she was envious that men were asking women of his family to marry rather than her grandchildren. For two years Tom was the only person living in his house who did not spend some portion of nearly every day possessed by a *jinn*. Tom spent hours every day caring for his family members, restraining them when possessed to prevent physical harm and reading *Qur’an* over them to try to keep the *jinni* at bay for short periods of time. Countless numbers of *mu’alim* tried to help them, but not until a very famous *mu’alim* from Yemen sent them one of his good *jinni* did they have any success. This Muslim *jinn*, named Muhammad, stayed with the family for two years and helped Tom and his family fight off the *jinni* who were continuously sent by Tom’s grandmother. Only upon his grandmother’s death did the family find peace. He and all of his siblings (eight girls and four boys) stopped going to school during this time and most of them

⁴⁷ Interview #13; April 24, 2011

have not returned, even though their problems ended two years ago. Tom explained that most of his sisters spend all of their time within the home, reading the *Qur'an* and praying, for fear of future affliction. Despite the fact that their pious efforts did not protect them from this witch's attempts, they continue to take these measures today in an attempt to prevent future harm. The family has become much more attached to Islam, and truly believes in everything the *Qur'an* says after having first-hand interactions with *jinni*.⁴⁸

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS:

Throughout the interview process, I began to realize that every person I spoke with had either experienced magical affliction personally or had an immediate family member who had. I also realized that everyone I spoke with had heard countless stories regarding witchcraft and *jinn* possession; their repertoires of anecdotes were never exhausted. It is possible that there are truly multiple and varied ways of attaining magical power and that all stories chronicled are true, and it is also possible that none of these stories are true. I am unconcerned with this matter; given that people in Oman accept these stories as true, I am focusing on the effect these stories have on individuals. The countless, incredibly varied stories of what a person must do to become a witch illustrate that there is no commonly accepted truth about witchcraft, but this and the fact that most stories do not hold up under questioning do not make these stories any less real to Omanis.

In a culture where word-of-mouth is the main medium through which information is shared, the spoken story is one of the most legitimate sources of information. With

⁴⁸ Interview #11; April 22, 2011

story telling as the main medium through which discussion of the supernatural takes place, the legitimacy of this phenomenon is perpetuated. In a society with media censorship and limited rights of expression, there is no discussion of witchcraft in a public forum; the information people receive is largely through the people around them. Since word-of-mouth is a means of communication considered to be completely legitimate, the stories told about witchcraft are legitimized. This legitimization of these stories creates a desensitization of people to the occurrence of magical affliction; it becomes normal and often, almost expected. People understand the supernatural to be a legitimate and common cause of affliction. They are more likely to believe that an illness is caused by the supernatural than individuals reared in an environment without a discourse desensitizing the supernatural. With this outlook, people are more likely to see elements that lend themselves to a supernatural interpretation of an affliction than people in other cultures would be.

These stories include anything from eating the fetus of a child to inserting rice into one's anus to reading the *Qur'an* backwards to killing a child. Although these stories vary greatly, there were some common themes among them. The most prevalent of these is that to become more powerful, the witch must give sacrifices to the *jinni*. Typically these sacrifices must be individuals close to the hopeful witch's heart, usually family members. This shows the *jinni* and others in the community that the witch is more loyal to *jinni* than his or her own family. In a society where family is the basis of nearly all social interactions, this completely alienates the witch from the rest of the community; these stories show that the witch is someone who has no respect for the family, the basis of Omani culture.

These stories create a concept of the “witch-other” in society: people who estrange themselves from the community by committing horrible, un-Omani acts. In a society where family is the most important part of nearly everyone’s life, these unknown, unspecific “others” sacrifice their family members to the *jinni*. In a Muslim society, these people commit blasphemy, desecrate the *Qur’an*, and are no longer considered to be Muslims. The stories relayed make these “witch-others” seem terrifying and inhuman. These stories create fear of the concept of the supernatural and of the people who use it rather than of a specific individual. In modern times when most witches are said to be unknown to those around them, there is no specific person to pin this fear on; instead, people fear the concept of the “witch-other”. People who were previously feared and respected because of their magical power now remain hidden because they now have reason to fear community members.

Since people are now more educated about Islam and aware that witchcraft is *haram*, or forbidden, there is a greater chance that a witch will be harmed or jailed by the community, or more likely, socially ostracized. The community as a whole looks down upon people who dabble in the dark arts. As modernity and education slowly take the place of witchcraft, magical practice is beginning to wane. Oman is at an awkward turning point on the spectrum of power; there is mutual fear within the community between people who dabble in the dark arts and the rest of the community because each can harm the other. This creates the need for a careful balancing act within the community, and has led to greater secrecy among witches and greater avoidance and fear of the “witch other” among community members.

This fear of the concept of the “witch-other” as well as of *jinni* encourages piety and good behavior of community members. The effect that this has on people living in this society was well encompassed by one interviewee: “These stories make people fear witches even more, and people should know that if people are close to God and do what is right to repel these, people then can easily defeat the witch”.⁴⁹ These stories instill fear in those who hear them, which in turn encourages living life in the Islamic way and recitation of the *Qur’an*. Stories illustrate that witches and *jinni* cannot inflict evil on pious people, and that non-religious people are easily afflicted. As one interviewee stated, “praying and *Qur’an* is the only way they cannot harm you”.⁵⁰ It seems that people believe that the only way to avoid constant fear of the supernatural is to lead a good, Islamic life, as well as recite certain verses from the *Qur’an* and pray the daily prayers.

As a result of increased education about Islam, people are now aware of methods through which to repel magic using the religion rather than by using other magic. As modernity is replacing magic, the practice of witchcraft is waning along with traditional societal practices. This fact, along with increasing education, is leading witchcraft to become a means through which to encourage piety. In the past, witchcraft created fear and respect of certain individuals, but now it serves to create fear of impiety. As many interviewees had received much of their information regarding the supernatural from their parents and elders, it seems that one of the purposes of these stories is to have a means through which to encourage piety and good behavior in children.

⁴⁹ Interview #13; April 24, 2011

⁵⁰ Interview #4; April 11, 2011

The understanding Omanis have of witchcraft reflects understanding of religion throughout the world. Even though many of the stories are contradictory and do not hold up under questioning, they are accepted as true. Each person has an incredibly individualized relationship with witchcraft, and an understanding of it that is shaped by these personal experiences. Each person's personal understanding of the phenomenon of witchcraft is different in a society that does not emphasize personal individuality. Everyone becomes possessed a different way, exorcises a different way, and has a different explanation for why these events happen. Perhaps this phenomenon serves as an outlet for the desire for individuality in a culture in which this is frowned upon.

In keeping with things forbidden in Omani society, it was stated by multiple interviewees that people often use magic in an attempt to make a member of the opposite sex "like" them. In these stories when women use magic, it is to make a man fall in love with them. On the other hand, when men use magic, it is to hypnotize the girls for the purpose of rape. This distinction may be the result of a culture in which women are not to consider sex pleasurable, but consider it their duty to get married and have children, while on the other hand sex is accepted as an act pleasurable for a man.

Additionally, this reflects societal ideas that love and lust are "evil"; by grouping them with magic, the pursuit of love and lust is placed in a category that is associated with incorrect behavior. However, as the young generation is beginning to pursue love and lust through the use of technology rather than witchcraft, magic plays a much less frequent role in these interactions. As globalization and modernization continue, things previously attainable through witchcraft can now be achieved through technology, such

as cellular phones and blue tooth devices. The remaining stories of magic related to love and lust serve to instill the idea that these are bad concepts.

CONCLUSION:

The main consequence of the existence of witchcraft is a fear of the concept of the supernatural in citizens that leads them to become more devout. This fear is rooted in Islam, as the Qur'an discusses the existence of magic and *jinni*. Therefore, supernatural beliefs will never cease to exist in any Islamic culture. However, I think the place of the supernatural in society and the effect it has on community members has been evolving and will continue to evolve. I think that the fear of the supernatural has begun changing rapidly since modernization began to occur in Oman in 1970 and that it will continue to evolve in the years to come. The relationship between the existence of the supernatural and the society in which it is present is a dynamic relationship; as society changes, perceptions of the supernatural will be reinterpreted to apply to this new society. Additionally, as understandings of the supernatural change, this will affect relationships within the community, which may in turn lead to changes in the community and society itself.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH:

If continued research on this topic is to be conducted, it would be beneficial to talk to more people from the area of Bahla. I also think it would be helpful to speak with older people to see the differences in perceptions of witchcraft between the generations. It would be quite interesting to see if older people would be able to tell of a noticeable

change in the role of witchcraft and the supernatural in the community within their lifetime. Another fascinating topic would be to investigate whether there has been any influence from East Africa on practices relating to witchcraft and perceptions of the supernatural in Oman. Due to the fact that so many other factors of Omani society have been influenced the country's connection to East Africa, I believe that there is likely a connection regarding this topic as well. Additionally, it would be useful to talk to people who have read the books necessary to attain magical power and people who practice magic, good and evil. One subject I left largely unaddressed is that of *mu'alim* and their role in society. Understanding this aspect of the supernatural is essential when looking at the large picture of Omani perceptions of the supernatural, and is something I have not had the time to address.

APPENDIX:

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Interview Protocol:

1. Could you describe a “typical” witch to me, if one exists?
2. Do witch have certain characteristics and/or attributes?
3. Could you describe a “typical” victim of witchcraft to me, if one exists?
4. How are witches perceived in the context of Islam (What does the Qur’an say about witchcraft?)?
5. How does a person become a witch?
6. Why do you think someone would choose to become a witch?
7. What effect does this choice have on their loved ones?
8. What do you think about a person’s choice to practice magic?
9. How often does the possibility of being bewitched cross your mind, if at all?
10. Do you take any measures to protect yourself from bewitchment? What measures?
11. How are witches treated in the community?
12. Do you consider the existence of witchcraft to be a threat to your community?
13. Could you tell me a story you have heard involving witchcraft?