Chapter 10
Seeking Providence Through Things: The Word of God Versus Black Cumin

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Introduction

Once again, I am riding with Ibrahim, a settled Bedouin in his mid-twenties, in his car a few kilometres from the village of Beidha towards Siq al-Barid in southern Jordan. This time I cannot stop wondering about the elaborate merchandise hanging from the car's rear-view mirror (Fig. 10.1). Pointing to the patterned cloth bag hanging in a white string and the handful of amulets with Qur'anic calligraphy, I ask him "*What is this for?*" Ibrahim answers: "*This one is the black cumin bag. It is put in the car as decoration. If you have a beautiful car some people might envy it. The black cumin will take the attraction to it instead of the car. The evil eye will not affect the car, it will affect the black cumin; they will break. As little as the seeds are; they break. The other is 'There is no God but God, and Muhammad is the Prophet of God'. This is Islam!*"

Puzzled by what appears a redundant use of different amulets against the evil eye, I point at the Qur'anic words and ask, "*but how are these different from the black cumin?*" He answers, "*These are God's and Muhammad's names. When anyone sees the car or a house, he will say 'God pray upon Muhammad' and he won't envy*". Not really feeling that his answers address my question I continue, "*If you already put the names of God and Muhammad, then why do you need the black cumin?*" Ibrahim explains, "*It is not a must to have the black cumin. You have to put God's names and 'God pray upon Muhammad'. The black cumin has been known for a very long time. The elders say that it is good against envy. But, 'There is no God but God' is better. When you put the black cumin, it will protect the whole car. God protects, but the black cumin is a tradition.*"

The conversation reminded me of a similar discussion on protective stones and amulets I had with Ahmad, another Bedouin in his late twenties from Beidha. Ahmad is well versed in Islam and he frowned at my questions. Unlike Ibrahim he

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Fig. 10.1 Prophylactic objects in rearview mirror. Photo by the author

said, "*Twenty years ago if you said this stone doesn't work, they would say, 'you are crazy! This stone protects me'. But now they discovered that the stone doesn't work. The stone is a stone; Nothing more*".

Clearly, in the past the stones and black cumin must in some way have seemed effective as protection against envy; indeed, to Ibrahim they still seemed to work. So I asked Ahmad how did the black cumin and stones work? Would people have to perform certain rituals with them? Ahmad's reply was intriguing: "*No, no, just put it and it protects you*", and he started laughing, "*This is what people think, but not me! Don't hang it here or anywhere, because that means you don't believe in God. You have two Gods to worship if you put it here, because you think it helps you. No. Just depend on God and forget all the materials. That's the summary"*.

Ahmad and Ibrahim are part of the Ammarin Bedouin tribe, which was resettled in 1985 in Beidha, North of the tourist site Petra. Settlement policies have facilitated increasing access to health clinics, mosques, schools, electricity and have changed the economy and livelihood of the Bedouin generally in the region, as well as resulting in changing tribal power structures. However, settlement has also left a sense of nostalgia among the Ammarin towards Bedouin traditions, as semi-mobile herders, dwelling in remote areas. Protective objects such as the cumin bag are part

of these traditions, as Ibrahim explained. They constitute elements of a life form that is increasingly disappearing in the area, and which the young generation were rarely brought up with themselves, yet miss.

The conversations with Ibrahim and Ahmad highlight a contemporary conflict, which is also apparent on a more general level in Muslim's everyday life in the Middle East, between different understandings of specific material means of protection. In the southern areas of Jordan, this tension is a result of the promulgation of a particular kind of literal understanding of Islam during the last three decades. This particular version combats what is perceived as innovation to Islam (*bid'a*) often associated with Sufism and "folk Islam", such as saint intercession (*tawassul*), celebrating prophet Muhammad's birthday (*mawlid al-nabi*), or prophylactic items like the black cumin bag, etc. In essence, this understanding of Islam seeks "ridding the world of magic" (Gilsenan 2000) with the side effect of reformulating existing power structures – much like modernization policies. Furthermore, this version emphasizes a detachment from what its followers see as threatening materialism and instead preaches a need to focus on immaterial virtues, and the Word of God by replicating a "pure" Islam as it was believed practised and preached in prophet Muhammad's time.

The propagation of this version of a literal Islam is particularly evident in the case of the previously semi-nomadic Bedouin. Increasingly, the mosques have promoted a conformist teaching and through collective prayers publicly expose people's religious practices and dedication. Furthermore, schoolbook authors and policymakers have been heavily inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood,[1] thereby influencing the young generations (Anderson 2007). Technological developments have also enabled Islamic satellite television programmes transmitting from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf to reach distant areas communicating their particular Islamic understandings, thereby impact powerfully on people's religious perceptions and practices on a global scale.

The inception of this emergent version of Islam in the area lends very little to existing local traditions and religious understandings, but seeks, rather, to abolish these as un-Islamic inventions, as articulated by Ahmad in the above. Consequently, both the traditional objects for protection and different understandings of Islam in everyday life also become entangled more generally in the pronouncement of social hierarchies, religious knowledge and authority (see Lambek 1990).

Although people among the Ammarin are gaining increased access to material goods, asceticism and relying on the uncreated Words of God presented in the Qur'an are increasingly perceived as superior means of seeking providence and protection to that of non-Qur'anic amulets; "forget all the materials". This raises the pertinent question of how one can experience God when the absence of material form presumably is the ideal? Recently, Daniel Miller has aptly argued that "the passion for immateriality puts even greater pressure upon the precise symbolic and efficacious potential of whatever material form remains as the expression of the spiritual power" (2005: 22).

[1]Represented by the political party "Islamic Action Front" in Jordan.

In this chapter, I will investigate this *paradox of immateriality* as it unfolds in conceptualizations of presence, absence and efficacy among the Bedouin.

Furthermore, the protective objects are entangled in social negotiations of identities, where protective strategies are manifestations of vanishing traditions and forefathers' ways of dealing with the perils of life. Protective strategies confront both the sense of vulnerability and exposure, as well as performing publicly the morality and propriety of protecting people, places and things in accordance with the socially accepted ways of relating to cultural traditions.

What I am concerned with is not the absence of any objective material as such, but the negotiation of material efficacy, revolving around cultural and religious conceptualizations of specific kinds of absence that play potent roles in social life. This calls attention to an ambiguous and contiguous relationship between presence and absence that almost imbricates, yet avoids this through conceptualizing particular sensuous engagements with things. From the conversation quoted above, Ibrahim clearly showed us that materials are by no means forgotten, and the decomposition of the cumin beads proves their efficacy. Furthermore, even Ahmad would have artifacts with Qur'anic verses around his house and car. Paradoxically, then, the protective amulets containing the Word of God attest to an increase in material registers of protection (cf. Coleman 1996; Engelke 2007; Meskell 2004). If people should "forget all the materials" since they signify polytheism and religious ignorance, then how are we to understand the persistence of material objects in Ibrahim's rear-view mirror, and indeed with Ahmed? This paradox, I argue, suggests that we need to be careful not to conflate absence with "the immaterial", or as oppositions to presence and empirical matter, as all are subject to ambiguous classifications and experiences.

This chapter argues that there are particular logics underlying the continuous use of various protective objects, conceptualized through engagements with "irreducible materiality" and "immaterial things". Investigating this logic through notions of "multiple ontologies" (Henare et al. 2007; Viveiros de Castro 1998) may draw attention to ambiguous conceptualizations and experiences of presence and absence within specific cultural contexts. My overall suggestion is that the various strategies in use emphasize how adjacent registers of protective materials may co-exist locally in everyday life, exactly because of the lack of imbrications in sensuous efficacy in confronting harm – while other strategies that overlap in efficacy are discarded. The propriety of seeking efficacious protection is thus contingent upon the proper understanding of the materiality of efficacy and immateriality of God, and the announcement of which arouses unremitting social disquietude.

The Physicality of Protection

People protect themselves against many forms of risk, which often have more to do with ideas about dangers than their objective impact. A particular risk that people in Beidha and elsewhere in the Middle East fear is being harmed by the "evil eye".

The "evil eye" rests on the idea that a look of envy, even unintentionally, can cause harm and misfortune, such as childlessness, lack of success in transactions or illnesses (Abu-Rabia 2005). The evil eye is thought to have a very physical nature since it "touches" by looking – being a form of *haptic vision*. One of my informants explained: "*When you have a beautiful glass, and they just keep looking, you are afraid the glass may break*". This is further articulated by Bedouin proverbs of the evil eye being "more penetrating than a spear", or having the ability to "cut stone" (Al-Sekhaneh 2005: 158; Drieskens 2008: 70–79; Nippa 2005: 544–545, 568). We, as outsiders, may understand this physicality as metaphorical and the means of confronting it as magical. However, to Ibrahim the material decomposition of the black cumin proved that the look of the evil eye was a physical fact (cf. Mauss 2001 [1950]: 109).

Several prophylactic items and ritual practices have been used among the Ammarin to protect themselves against envy. The Black cumin bag (*hubbah as-sudda*) contains seven pieces of flint and three pieces of alum, aside from the black cumin.[2] The flint pieces are considered physically "hardest" and therefore better able to sustain and ward off the effect of the evil eye. The alum may be used for healing purposes against illnesses inflicted by the evil eye. The black cumin bag is placed somewhere visible in order to attract the evil eye. The proximate presence of protective objects enforces the malevolent person or force to see the amulet. As Ibrahim explained, the black cumin *absorbs* the envy causing the beads themselves to materially decompose. This complexity of various material registers within the same protective object – the hardness of the flint to deflect, the cumin to absorb, and the curative properties of the alum – creates a composite efficacy that has more to do with materially confronting the physicality of envy, than with the magical power of the "spirit" of or in the material (cf. Taussig 1993: 136; Pels 1998).

Other widespread protective amulets in this area of Jordan are the blue stone (*hajjar al-'ayn*) and the Guard (*herz*). Among the Ammarin, the blue stone is a two cm milky blue oblong stone, coated with a shiny varnish, hanging in a necklace around a woman's neck under the veil. The blue colour and shiny surface are thought to both attract and deflect the evil eye. Because the stone is hidden under the veil, it is not visible to a casual viewer, but it will nevertheless attract the malicious evil eye. The blue stone is often used in conjunction with other prophylactic materials, geometric or pictorial symbols, such as triangles, crescents, silver or cloves, to provide protection. The blue stones are also used in necklaces with other stones that are believed to cure illnesses, enhance prosperity or bring fortune. In that sense, these composite protective objects communicate with the invisible to attract positive powers while rejecting the negative (Nippa 2005: 553).

A third amulet regularly used is the "Guard". Whereas the black cumin bag is used in cars (and on camels), and the blue stone around women's necks, the Guard is used to protect the houses or tents (Fig. 10.2). It is made of beads from *Peganum harmala*. It is visibly placed in the reception rooms whereby potential envy is

[2] Occasionally tortoise shell is also used.

Fig. 10.2 Triangular guard in reception room. Photo by the author

absorbed by entering the centre of the guard, which renders the envy harmless. Like the other items, it is the proximity, ability to physically attract, absorb and interact with the envy of a potential perpetrator, which protect the space and person.

These various amulets, and others like them, are increasingly contested and are gradually vanishing as protective strategies in the villages in southern Jordan, due as mentioned to the impact of more literal teachings in mosques, schools and television. Their efficacy in all instances is perceived to work in similar *centripetal* ways in the sense that the physicality of envy is attracted to them, and either deflected or absorbed. Interestingly, these amulets' power hence work through the material, colour or form inherent to the object (Mershen 1987: 106).

Thus, these various material registers confront a physical phenomenon – the evil eye – capable of breaking things in an equally physical manifestation of material presence. The protective powers of these objects, I argue, are inherent in their "irreducible materiality" to use William Pietz's term (1985: 7); that is, deriving from the object's physicality itself, such as the decomposing cumin (Pels 1998: 101; Nakamura 2005: 22; Meskell 2004; see also Ingold 2007). The material properties of the amulets need to be "there" to be efficacious; their efficacy relies on their unambiguous physical presence to confront the evil with the physicality of the protective matter; the matter strikes back (Pels 1998: 91).

Belief in the evil eye is also a social mechanism of morality, which sanctions people not to desire the possessions of others, all the while explaining misfortune, bad luck and illnesses (Abu-Rabia 2005; Dundes 1981). Moreover, the social act of protection is also entangled in notions of Bedouin identity; particularly in a post-nomadic nostalgia of "how it was". The imposition of settled lifestyle during the last two decades has to a large extent rendered herding and tent life impossible. The

tent, coffee pot and camel are primal objects in this nostalgia. Yet, protective amulets also materialize "Bedouin" conceptions of the world and means of coming to terms with vulnerability and danger. The amulets are ambivalently positioned, simultaneously acting as material anchors of Bedouin traditions and nostalgic reminders of a life less dependent upon material consumption, while also acting as proofs of ignorance to "proper" ways of protection against envy; i.e. Divine, rather than magical or physical protection.

This ambiguity situates protection as a material phenomenon on a socially potent scene with continuous tension between emerging religious and vanishing cultural identities as (semi-) nomadic Bedouin. The social stakes are high in allegations of ignorance, and disrespecting cultural roots causes social exclusion, and there are great amounts of cultural capital invested in gossip of "incorrect" behaviour. As my informant Hussein, and others like him, clearly pointed out in relation to the amulets: "*Humans always have to ask God to protect them from the Devil, and mention God (by praying and reading). In the past the people were ignorant. All of them ignorant*". Clearly then, neither the amulets nor the Words of God, as I will now turn to, are detached from social or material relations, but are heavily invested in negotiations of knowledge, hierarchies and authority.

The Ambiguous Immateriality of the Word of God

The reliance on physicality to confront envy – on the one hand the intangibility of envy, and on the other hand the occurrence of physical changes – has become a problematic issue. As Ahmad would argue, the protective measures to ward off the evil eye resemble acts of polytheism (*shirk*). Instead, the protective materials should be replaced by "forgetting the materials". That is, by an intentional absence of objects relying on an irreducible materiality. The absence of certain kinds of materials enforces attention to the superiority of seeking providence in immaterial sources; a providence that involves preparation and anticipation of Divine support for future eventualities, even if these are not immediately apparent to the believer. The efficacy of such "absence" instead relies on the contiguity of God through *Baraka* (blessing) or *dhikr* (remembrance of God). The two most known ways of achieving this is through saint veneration and the Word of God as presented in the Qur'an.

The Petra region has many tombs and shrines from Biblical and Islamic times. Most renowned to the general audience is the shrine of Moses' brother Aaron at Jebel Haroun, to where people from the area would perform biannual pilgrimages. Many other local saints are buried in the region, and the people are referred to as *awlia* (singl. *weli*) meaning "friends of God" or saints. As "spiritual representatives" the saints are considered closer to God and, at least until recently, are thought to be able to influence God. They are not "lesser gods" as much as they are (or were) seen as *intercessors* between human and God. The *weli* describes a charismatic and knowledgeable person, who transmits *Baraka* bestowed on him/her by God through various kinds of contact (Meri 2002: 59–73, 101–108; Renard 2008; Marx 1977). In the Beidha area they are associated with the ascetic character of the

faqiir (cf. Jaussen & Savignac 1914). This again highlights the perception of the superiority of "forgetting materials" to achieve divine providence and blessing, but as we shall see, it relies on the paradox of immateriality.

While *Baraka* is "one of those resonant words it is better to talk about than to define" (Geertz 1968: 33), it is generally considered to be (1) prosperity and favour bestowed by God, (2) a wish, invocation or greeting asking for such a favour to be granted to someone else, or (3) an expression of praise to God (Stewart 2001: 236). It is a "benevolent power which radiates from the holy place to everyone who comes in contact with it" (Canaan 1927: 99). Thus, I would argue, despite its immaterial and intangible nature, it is a highly material phenomenon, as it emanates from people, places and things. In that sense *Baraka* is a *centrifugal*; an emanating force, securing providence for people, places and things in the vicinity of its material medium. This mode of seeking providence through intercession relies on a sense of *being-in-touch* emotionally; an intimate, immediate and passionate closeness with God through the *weli*.

For the Ammarin in Beidha, the tomb of the *weli* Salem Awath, was until recently a central place to obtain healing, blessing and future prosperity. Many families in Beidha claim descent from him, and he is highly respected by other tribes. People would perform prayers, burn incense and offer animals to seek providence through him, and they would tie white or green rags on his grave (Fig. 10.3), as a sort of "contact magic" to remind the *weli* of a personal wish or prevent misfortune (Canaan 1927, 1930; Kriss & Kriss-Heinrich 1960a; Mauss 2001 [1950]; Meskell 2004; Taussig 1993).

Fig. 10.3 Saint tomb in Wadi Arabah. Photo by the author

During the last 10 years, however, people have increasingly dissociated themselves from this sort of intercession because the tradition has come to be seen as un-Islamic.[3] This is based on the theological argument that the participants ask the saint for *Baraka*, rather than God directly, whereby they commit heresy by worshipping not the immateriality of one God, but the saint both as secondary divine medium and material form.

Replacing the worship of saints, the Word of God as written in the Qur'an has gained further pre-eminence as protective strategy within recent decades.[4] Muslims understand the Qur'an as God's own uncreated and literal words. They existed previously in Paradise and were passed on to the Prophet Muhammad by the archangel Gabriel. Hence, they are the foundation of religious thought in any Muslim community, and are the message and guidance from God to humanity in all aspects of people's lives. The relationship between the words, text and material of the Qur'an and the practitioners' senses hold a particular role: "to hear its verses chanted, to see the words written large on mosque walls, to touch the pages of its inscribed text creates a sense of sacred presence in Muslim hands and hearts" (McAuliffe 2001: i). Because of this profound relationship between the Qur'an and the experience of God, the very words of the text employ a markedly different materiality than those of any other book. As Clifford Geertz (1983: 110) describes this relationship, "the point is that he who chants Qur'anic verses […] chants not words about God, but of Him, and indeed, as those words are His essence, chants God Himself. The Quran […] is not a treatise, a statement of facts and norms, it is an event, an act".

"Qur'an" literally means "recitation", but the Qur'an as a material book is termed *mushaf* (from the word *sahifa*, singular for "page"), suggesting that through different classifications of the same object – from an empiricist position – the immateriality of the one and physicality of the other are emphasized. In that way, despite historically written down after the life of the prophet, "the character of the Quran as a book in the Western sense is far less pronounced than its identity as a recited 'word' […] the quintessential Muslim 'book' denies its writtenness" (Messick 1989: 27–28).

The Qur'an is believed to contain the most powerful *Baraka*. Hence, aside from guiding humanity, material artifacts with Qur'anic verses also protect the believer against misfortunes and malevolent forces. But more powerful than the Qur'an as a material book, is its commitment to memory that shapes an evocative nearness to God (El-Tom 1985: 416); that is, its internalized nature creates a sense of immediacy and *being-in-touch* (in Runia's (2006) sense). In this way, acts of

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[3] This interpretation, drawing particularly on *salafi* and *wahabi* readings of the Qur'an and Sunna, is contested in other places in the Middle East for example by arguing from a *hadith* describing how a blind man was allowed intercession by prophet Muhammad. The denunciation of intercession is adopted by most Ammarin despite claiming to adhere to the *shafi* school of Islam that holds a less strict position on the matter.

[4] It must be emphasized that there is no direct opposition between a "Bedouin" and an "Islamic" identity, rather these are intrinsically linked among the Ammarin. Furthermore, the Word of God has held a position as protective strategy throughout history, but it is important to emphasize the current increase and dominance of this material register among the Bedouin.

recitation and remembrance (*dhikr*) of God shape a contiguous relationship that offers safeguarding. Interestingly, the words themselves in materialized or verbal form impose the remembrance on people, as a pervasive "affecting presence" (Armstrong 1971), whereby the Qur'an is "both the occasion or catalyst for *dhikr* as well as what should be recalled, the object of *dhikr*" (Madigan 2001: 372).

Inherent in the Qur'an is therefore both a tension and a connection between the physical (*mushaf*) and the immaterial (*Qur'an*: recitation). The proper understanding of this relationship is continuously creating social tensions, implying potential allegations of misconduct and misunderstandings of the Divine. The Qur'an offers a sense of "closeness" to God through remembrance of his words on the one hand. On the other hand, there is the theological obligation not to worship the Qur'an as a *material* book in itself, despite its powerful *Baraka*. Protection through the Word of God therefore becomes a socially potent question of the proper understanding of presence and absence of material efficacy. Therefore, the issue addressed here also extends beyond questions of objects' effects, to a question of the ability for the objects to cause those effects in a suitable way – both in terms of social life and protective efficacy (cf. Gell 1992, 1998).

The Word of God, particularly evident in the soundscape of the village through the call to prayer penetrating spaces and bodies, and in everyday speech acts, is used to invoke divine power, blessing and protection. The continuous recitation of divine names and phrases from the Qur'an acts as repetitive remembrance that generates a sense of *being-in-touch*, which becomes a vehicle against sorcery or harm. Likewise, when entering a house or a car, starting dinner, killing a goat, accidentally breaking a thing, etc., people would immediately utter variations of the *basmala* ("In the name of God the Compassionate, the Merciful"). When seeing a thing that potentially could be an object of admiration, such as a telephone, car, jewellery, etc., the words "*maa shaa' allah*" ("what God wills") are uttered as a self-reflexive mechanism. Protection through the *Baraka* invoked by the soundscape of the Word of God is not as much about understanding every word, but about sensing the divine presence, which acts as a moral and ethical regulating mechanism of behaviour (Graham 1987: 96, 104; see also Hirschkind 2006).

More than just part of the soundscape, the Words of God are also increasingly entering the market for religious commodities (Starrett 1995; D'Alisera 2001) and domestic architectural form (Dodd & Khairullah 1981; Campo 1987; Metcalf 1996). In Beidha, they are printed over doors, on posters on cars or amulets like the Chinese merchandise in Ibrahim's car, or in one case in letters of a man's height spelling "Allah" in purple tiles in a kitchen (Fig. 10.4). Most reception rooms have at least one golden frame with either one or all of the 99 names of God, the *basmala*, or verses from the Qur'an, particularly verse 1, 113, 114 or the powerful "Throne Verse" (2: 255). Another way of shaping closeness is through letting the fingers slide between each of the 33 beads on a rosary string (*sibha*) three times as bodily mnemonics of God's 99 names. All of these objects, verbal and bodily gestures impose themselves on people for them to remember God. They invoke passion, enlightenment and morality, and are ascribed internalized ontological efficacies by individuals. I had previously asked Ahmad about his perception of the shift in protective practices and the sensuous engagement with the Qur'an:

Fig. 10.4 Allah in tiles. Photo by the author

> 'If you asked me this question in the past, at least 40 years ago, or before, I would answer "I use the amulet to protect me" because I am uneducated, but now even if I use the amulet, I use the Qur'an to protect me, it is God's words I use to protect me. In the past they believed that the amulet would protect them, but now they use the Qur'an and Qur'an verses in the house so that God will protect them if they have his words in the house. We do not exactly believe that the Qur'an as a book, or as a material in our house, protects us. […] We use the words from the Qur'an to connect with God; our senses, our soul, directly with God'.

This internalization of the Words as offering a direct link is also apparent in healing practices. During the healing ritual of "Drinking the Qur'an" among the Ammarin, the healer would take a glass of water and utter Qur'anic verses over the water, and prescribe the patient to drink it as a residuum of *Baraka* (see also O'Connor 2004: 174). Thereby, the *Baraka* of the words are materialized and internalized through water. In another more material version a piece of paper with a Qur'an verse written on it would be dissolved in the water and then consumed (El-Tom 1985). In other places the same idea is presented in a variation where water is poured over the edges of the Qur'an into a bowl (Donaldson 1937: 266).

Yet, in Beidha some uses of Qur'anic verses are controversial, particularly the Qur'anic talisman. The talisman is a personal charm with the Words of God written on paper or cloth by a special Qur'anic healer, e.g. a *Dervish* (Al-Krenawi & Graham 1997; Kriss & Kriss-Heinrich 1960b). The effectiveness of the talisman relies upon both the reifying power of Qur'anic words and the physical transmission

of Qur'anic blessing (O'Connor 2004: 164). Most people in Beidha now denounce such objects as illicit magic, sorcery and polytheism. The problem is that by wearing the talisman, people take the Word of God with them to impure places such as the toilet, or the healer may take verses out of context or write them wrongly. Furthermore, people would rely on the material properties of proximity, rather than through the immaterial ideal of *being-in-touch,* as expressed by Ahmad saying "*Without God in your mind no material will help you!*" In other words, the problem is not that the words are objects on the body, as "repositories of power" (Tambiah 1984: 335), but that they are reduced to instrumental matter, rather than internalized and engaging in a sensorium of *being-in-touch*.

The material manifestations of the Word of God also have another function aside from actively reminding and healing: Their mere physical presence seems to be beyond that of reading and meaning and to relate instead to the words themselves being part of a protective strategy. This should also be seen in the context of official numbers, stating that 26% of the inhabitants in Beidha are illiterates,[5] with practical illiteracy being much higher. The point is, I would suggest, that in terms of protection, rather than being meaningful, the Words of God are powerful. However, this leads to a very careful regulation of understanding and use of the religious objects, since a "good Muslim" must resist sacralizing objects and thereby risking *shirk* (polytheism). Quite obviously though, defining this sacralization is a matter of ambiguity. Using calligraphic Qur'anic ornamentation in an illiterate's home may be seen as Islamic, since it instantiates the divine in hearts and minds. Using Qur'anic verses on paper set in a necklace may conversely be seen as illicit magic. The point here is not to pass theological judgement, but rather to show local variation in the conceptualization and engagement with the Word, and that such variation is contingent upon ambiguous approaches to the materiality of seeking providence.

The talisman along with saint veneration are denounced by many as *jahiliyyah*: belonging to the Age of Ignorance, either as pre-Islamic or contemporary conduct, which goes against Islamic culture, morality and way of thinking and behaving. It is from this perspective of the social potency of announcing practices *jahiliyyah* in a post-nomadic setting among the Bedouin, that the physics of the black cumin and other non-Qur'anic amulets to absorb and deflect, and the presence of a protective blessing in heart and mind through the Word of God that the initial conversation with Ibrahim and Ahmad must be understood.

Reformulating Absence

With the increasing influence of literal Islam, the act of protection has been reconfigured to rely more on achieving intimate divine presence and blessing than on proximate matter. The Word of God becomes part of the ethics of anti-materialism,

[5] According to the Jordanian Department of Statistics.

which, paradoxically, is not reflected in an attendant lack of materials. Quite the contrary, objects with the Word of God are rapidly circulating with different receptions among Muslim communities (D'Alisera 2001; Starrett 1995).

By applying the Word of God to things, people can claim to stay true to worshipping God's immaterial qualities and thereby avoid allegations of materialism. The local Islamic preacher would have blue stones and cloves hanging in his car in a decoration with Qur'anic words without problems, and yet he would fiercely denounce the use of the blue stone alone or the Qur'anic talisman for that matter. The application of the Words of God re-classifies a thing into something ontologically entirely different. The propriety invested in dealing with the Word of God is contingent upon conceptualizing how the material and immaterial aspects are adjacent, never overlapping or separate, but linked together through comprehending its ambiguous materiality: more than immaterial and less than material. To make sense of the conceptualizations of it in Beidha, I will argue that as the literal Word of God, the Qur'an is an "immaterial thing", although the Ammarin do not refer to it in these terms. To make this conceptual leap, I must emphasize that the physicality of the book – as *mushaf* – is at times acknowledged, but what matters about the Qur'an is its *Baraka*, recitation and *dhikr*; externalization and internalization. Its physicality is downplayed (or avoided), and so of little or no relevance as protective strategy, even if the Words of God throughout history have been elaborately materialized – for example in calligraphy. Yet, in the immediate everyday engagement, discourse and perception of the Word of God, they are less than material; an "immaterial thing".

The notion of "relative materiality" developed by Michael Rowlands (2005) suggests in this case that technologies of seeking providence highlight how some things are "more" (and irreducibly so) or "less" material, and these may be complementary protective strategies depending on the perception of the propriety of using materials against envy. Certainly, the words themselves are enmeshed in a process of objectification, but as Maurer (2005) argues, they are neither considered material nor ideational, but "both and neither". The application of the Word of God, I argue, transforms an otherwise mundane object into an "immaterial thing" and in terms of its relative materiality emphasizes an immaterial source of protection. The notion of "immaterial thing" is thus not just a conceptual riddle of oxymoronic classifications, as the "both and neither" statement may insinuate. Instead, it relates to the sensuous engagement with the ontology and adjacency of things and their affecting presence "asserting their own being" (Armstrong 1971: 25). The riddles are *real*: "Drinking the Qur'an", the use of the word "Qur'an" as "recitation" to describe a book, or Ibrahim who instead of saying "decoration with written Qur'anic words", describes his car decoration as "*There is no God but God*". These are examples of the cultural practice and reality of such oxymoronic classifications.

With this strategy of protection, emphasis is on the direct, unmediated link to God (see also "live and direct" in Engelke 2007), and thus highlights the problematic nature of seeking *Baraka* through saint veneration in developing the understanding of Islam. God becomes present through remembrance or recitation evoked by even

a few of God's words or names. Thus, the immateriality of a protective strategy is sustained by conceptually dematerializing the object that communicates the protection. What is important for most informants is that the manifestations of the Word of God constantly influence the believer to *remind* him/herself of God, whereby God offers protection; not the "thing", but the words.

The materialization of divine words and repetitive formulas convey an understanding and sensorium of *being-in-touch* with a protecting God. In local ontology, the Qur'an *is* the Word of God, and does not just represent it. The Qur'an is an immaterial thing, and thus to some degree absent at least from what ontologically may be classified as clear-cut "matter". I thus wish to argue that in this context when asking questions about presence, what is emphasized is the deliberate absence of what is conceived of as "material" or bound in a register of "presence" that relies on irreducible matter, and instead highlighting the intimacy of *being-in-touch* with a supreme God through the intangibility of *Baraka*, *dhikr* and recitation.

Amulets, such as the black cumin, on the other hand, are conceived of as "satellites". They are external from the body, having their own (efficacious) life. They receive the evil eye precisely because of their spatial proximity and physics of absorption and deflection. Hence, the non-Qur'anic amulets are "more" materially present in local ontology and deny any reduction of their matter (except as proof of their efficacy).

The protective registers of the black cumin and the Word of God hence rely on very different protective qualities and engagements between people and envy, which forces us (once again) to question dichotomies such as material and immaterial. As Lynn Meskell argues, "for *things to work* they must be beyond the object-as-taxonomy approach that we are comfortable with in Western societies. There must be a pervasive presence, constant influence and agency travelling between spheres" (2004: 27). It is the co-existence of *centrifugal* and *centripetal* efficacy as well as the difference in modality of "presence" that allows for the continued – although contested – use of both registers. The tombs of the saints, however, are a more contested matter, exactly because of the imbrications with the Word of God in terms of relying on emanating *Baraka* through intermediary material form.

The engagement with the past and the landscape through saint veneration and sacred places has rapidly changed. Ibrahim would, for example, not go on the pilgrimage to the tomb of a local saint, since this relied on the intercession of blessing and *being-in-touch* with a saint to provide providence. Thus, closeness to God through intercession and saintly providence is now nearly obsolete, as blessing is increasingly achieved directly through the Word of God. Some saint tombs are even actively destroyed.

The persistence of material strategies, such as the black cumin or infrequent surreptitious acts of saint worship, should not simply be seen as social resistance and retaining traditions in light of contested settlement policies by ignoring religious arguments. Nor should the public dissociation from these practices simply be seen as acts of sycophancy towards the authority of those presumably knowledgeable in Islam, to gain better social standing. The basic concern about what one protects oneself against has not changed considerably during the last 20 years of settlement

in terms of envy and spirits. But the concrete means of seeking providence have emerged as a delicate, tangible and socially potent matter that raises continuous disquietude in everyday life as people experience misfortunes. The shift in regimes of protective knowledge creates tension in terms of senses of roots and Bedouin identity, in that Bedouin knowledge and social hierarchies from the past are questioned, exactly because the traditional protective objects rely on the proximity of irreducible materiality to confront the evil eye.

"Nostalgia inevitably reappears as a defence mechanism in a time of accelerated rhythms of life and historical upheavals" Svetlana Boym (2001: xiv) tells us. In this case, nostalgia revolves around the way the increasing absence of a nomadic life form imposes itself in formulations of memories and identities. Settlement has brought education and increasing religious awareness to the Ammarin, but also a rapid social transition where concrete houses, agriculture and tourism have for most parts replaced tents, caves and herding goats and sheep. Here, tent life, goat herding, coffee rituals and other aspects of engagement with material culture associated with the Bedouin identity become material reminders of a Bedouin life style that is largely abandoned, but which continues in oral traditions and to some degree in protective practices. When asking about what it means to be a Bedouin, one is confronted with informants pointing to the desert landscape and the increasing absence of tents and herds that present themselves as illustrative of the rapid change of the roots of Bedouin identities. This has created a distinct sense of loss and utopian anchor among the young Ammarin, raised in villages, who shape narratives of the loss of "Bedouin culture". This notion of Bedouin becomes essentialized as nomadic pastoralism at some undefined time between the arrival of the rifle and the car, through "hyper-nostalgic reminders of a glorious Bedouin past of which their ancestors perhaps never partook" (Wooten 1996: 72). As Susan Stewart poetically puts it, "Nostalgia is the desire for desire" (1993: 23). This mourning of the past establishes links with history in the present through what *remains* as anchors for nostalgia, which act to negotiate the past, as well as re-imagining the future (Eng & Kazanjian 2003).

Conclusion

Classifying, transforming and using ideas of whatever constitutes "matter" as a protective strategy is not only ambiguous in this context, it is also a way of showing and reaffirming alternative identities and religious awareness. Perhaps even more importantly, by partly denying the physical properties of the Word of God (at least in terms of any binary opposition between materiality and immateriality) people are reaffirming their reluctance to rely on materials for protection by transforming a thing into something conceptually "less material" by applying Qur'anic scripture. The anti-material ideals of the divine presence through material absence are thus achieved by a cultural reformulation of what constitutes matter and efficacy.

For the Ammarin, the question of the materiality of protection is thus one of understanding various modalities of presence and absence. The socially entangled

nature of the diverging strategies of protection has led to current attempts to dissociate oneself from materialism, in order to avoid allegations of backwardness and heresy on account of the perceived superiority of immateriality.

To Ibrahim, the black cumin was complementary to the Words of God as they fulfilled different modalities of presence. The use of the black cumin was based on the knowledge of what his Bedouin forefathers had been using for generations, and a way of life and cultural identity that Ibrahim and others like him feel increasingly alienated from today. The objects are markers of cultural identities. More than this, through the very properties of the materials he is convinced of the efficacy of the amulets by the physics of absorption, and deflective properties of the flint against the physicality of the evil eye.

On the other hand, a different solidarity and belonging as a modern enlightened Muslim is presented by the efficacy of experiencing the presence of God through "immaterial things". The Qur'anic frames and merchandise are also markers of identity, but rather than marking Bedouin roots, they mark solidarity with a moral and religious identity focusing more on being a Muslim. Ibrahim wanted both, and to him the two ways of materializing protective efficacy were not mutually exclusive. Ahmad, on the other hand, would have none of this and wanted instead explicitly to "forget all the materials". From a material perspective, obviously, he did not fully comply with this, but in local ontology he did by making use of Qur'anic objects classified as "immaterial things". Not exactly a thing, but neither immaterial, rather both, conjoining material and immaterial, a presence through the absence of a *certain kind of material efficacy*.

Rather than describing a result of social change, the protective objects are mechanisms of change. The objects both describe and act as a social display of the means of coming to terms with vulnerability, physicality of envy, and experiencing the Divine, as well as negotiating a post-nomadic identity. Thus, in terms of the providence of *Baraka* through reciting, remembering and surrounding oneself with things, the Word of God, as immaterial things, suffices. Hence, investigating everyday conceptualizations of absence reveal how absence as a cultural phenomenon has both ontological and epistemological implications of being the ideal of anti-materialism, as well as confirming the sense of nostalgia related to a rapidly changing Bedouin culture.

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