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Cultural Context of the Midway Plaisance International Performances: Who Were Those Supernatural Beings Summoned by the Magicians?

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FAIR TRICKS

THE MAGICIANS AT THE COLUMBIAN EXPOSITION, CHICAGO 1893

Cultural Context of the Midway Plaisance International Performances: Who Were Those Supernatural Beings Summoned by the Magicians?

Fair Tricks includes several references by contemporary journalists visiting the Midway Plaisance at the Columbian Exposition who noted that performers sometimes called out to supernatural beings for assistance in accomplishing their magic. As one example, Teresa Dean provides an extended reference to Halil Nada, one of the Egyptian magicians on the Street In Cairo, who in his performance appeals to "Goeli" (*Fair Tricks*, page 37). What can we understand about the cultural and religious background of these phrases, used by the magicians as part of their patter for the Americans and world travelers they entertained at the Chicago World's Fair? We asked Torsten Janson, Senior Lecturer at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Lund University in Sweden and we are privileged to share his essay with informal thoughts on this question.

The Spirits at the Fair

First of all, from a purely orthodox, Islamic perspective, magical practices and fortune telling have been frowned upon and considered as aspects of the "Jahiliyyah" society, *i.e.* pre-Islamic ideas and polytheism (the quintessential sin in Islamic theology). Even so, there is no historical doubt that pre-Islamic ideas indeed were incorporated into Islamic faith and practice, such as the pilgrimage to Mecca as well as a long list of cultural practices and ideas of the late-Hellenic and distinctly heterodox cultural environment in which Islamic faith and society expanded - with its mixture of Neo-platonic, gnostic, pagan, Judaic, Christian, Monophysite, Coptic, Persian-Zoroastrian as well as Akkadian and Sumerian influences.

In the process, a number of varying and competing Islamic theologies emerged already from the 700s - some of them referred to as proto-Shia ideas (before the eventual proliferation of Shia proper), not least in Egypt. From the 900s, the (Shiite) Fatimide Caliphate was formed in the newly established city of Cairo - in conflict then with the Sunni Abbasid Caliphate based in Baghdad, building on an eclectic and heterodox mixture of Islamic and gnostic ideas, where magical ideas (especially numerology) were prominent. Several such traits were also nurtured in the emergent Sufi traditions, from about the same time.

The point being, then, that such magical ideas indeed have had a strong and lasting hold on the popular imaginations, while being disregarded and often persecuted by formal, Sunni-orthodox authorities as heretic. Pretty much in the same way as in the Christian inquisition.

One important train of thought in such alternative ideas has been the idea of "intercession" (Ar. *shafa'ah*) - not dissimilar from Christian veneration of saints. For instance, Sufi sheikhs (passed and living) are considered as capable of mediating divine benediction and forgiveness, since they are carrying a particular divine inspiration (gnostic knowledge) of the "inner" levels of the revelation, known as "batin". Praying individuals may thus invoke the spirits of such "saints" and this - in popular religiosity and/or magical practices - has expanded also to other spiritual beings. Here we then enter the fascinating realm of jinn (genies, ogres) and shayatin (demons).

The jinn indeed are accepted as real beings in formal Islamic thought, but they have attained a broad popular significance far beyond of what is formally recognized in orthodoxy. They may be good or bad, believers or non-believers. But generally they are feared and function as "chaos factors" associated with misfortune, disease, and death.

In reference, then, to the journalists' accounts of magicians summoning spirits in the street fairs, I find it plausible that such popular jinn traditions form the cultural context. There are indeed historical data to support that the names of jinn have been invoked in magical practice in Muslim societies. There are, for instance, a number of prominent "Jinn kings" who are associated with particular aspects of nature and elements. I have not come across the name of "Goeli" in this context, but I would speculate that this formulation actually refers to the Arabic "ghoul", an Arabized version of the Mesopotamian "Gallu". Ghoul was a type of female (sometimes animal like) jinn capable of changing its physical appearance, and, according to Arabic literature, particularly threatening travelers. As Ahmed Al-Rawi explores in some detail ("The Mythical Ghoul in Arabic Culture", *Cultural Analysis* 8, 2009), the ideas about the ghoul also were distorted and misunderstood by European travellers in the 19th century, complicating the matter. But this I think also interestingly resonates with the journalists' accounts referred to. Indeed, if you google ghoul you will find how such distortions nowadays have influenced the gaming world. And just recently, Netflix broadcast the Indian horror miniseries named "Ghoul" - which I find quite amusing and interesting.



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In the Islamic world and beyond, ideas about Ghoul thus have become popularized and trivialized in daily use, and have commonly been disconnected from the more serious and ominous ideas about jinn. "Behave! Or Ghoul will take you!" contemporary Iranian parents can say to a disobedient child. Religious or not, in history as well as in contemporary times: magic remains an inherent aspect of globalized everyday life.

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