



Relatively Hidden

Lorenz Nigst

Institute of Oriental Studies - University of Vienne - Austria

lorenz.nigst@univie.ac.at

Received: 22 Mar. 2014,

Revised: 9 June 2014, Accepted: 30 July 2014

Published online: 1 Sept. 2014



Relatively Hidden

Lorenz Nigst

Institute of Oriental Studies
University of Vienne - Austria

Abstract

The analysis of interviews with different religious specialists in southern Tunisia makes it quite clear that the conceptions of these informants are affected by the official religious system that either reappears in the informants' conceptions in a broken fashion or exerts its influence silently (which, for example, can be shown in the informants' conception of al-ghayb/ghayb al-muhdath). It seems that one cannot fully understand what these informants are saying and "doing with words" without considering their position in the religious field and without considering that they are objectively related to agents who belong to the official religious system.

Keywords: Analysis, religious system, conception, official

مخفي نسبيا تقاطعات ومفارقات

لورانز نيغز

معهد الدراسات الشرقية - جامعة فيينا - النمسا

الملخص

إن تحليل المقابلات مع المختصين في الشؤون الدينية المختلفة في جنوب تونس يجعل من الواضح تماما تأثر هؤلاء المستجوبين بالنظام الديني الرسمي للبلاد. ويظهر هذا التأثير في تصور المستجوبين لنمط حداثي دخیل أو عند ممارسته في صمت وهذا ما يمكن تبينه على سبيل المثال في تصور المستجوبين للغيب والغيب المحدث ولا يمكن فهم هذا التصور في منأى عن علاقة هؤلاء المستجوبين و موقعهم في النظام الديني وعلاقتهم بأعوان ينتمون إلى النظام الديني الرسمي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تحليل، النظام الديني، تصور، الرسمي.



Relatively Hidden

Lorenz Nigst

Institute of Oriental Studies
University of Vienne - Austria

The following remarks are related to a project financed by the Austrian Fund for Scientific Research (FWF). The main goal of that project was to study the dialect of the Marāzīg in Southern Tunisia. At the same time the project aimed at documenting «popular religious» beliefs, and thus, among other things, interviews were conducted with various specialists who formed part of what one might broadly term the «religious field»: legal scholars, healers etc. I wish to state at the beginning that the following remarks are by no means the result of systematic research. Rather, they are a by-product stemming from the analysis of the aforementioned interviews. Nor do they cover everything the informants said (nothing could be further from the truth). Nevertheless, I thought that the facts which shall be presented in the following do represent something like a possibility to raise a few questions as to the position of our informants vis-à-vis the dominant symbolic universe forged by the legal scholars.

The notion of “field” shall be used here because it is worthwhile remembering that the aforementioned specialists are not “just there”, but rather objectively related to other religious specialists. If one talks about religious specialists, it is important to further ask what turns such specialists into specialists. Since not all of them are of one and the same kind, there obviously cannot be one single answer to this question. Now, it is quite clear what competences turn a legal scholar into a legal scholar. As for the other specialists, their reputation must rest upon something else (which, of course, does not necessarily imply contradiction). As far as our informants were concerned, their reputation was due to relations with occult and supernatural forces or beings (ḍjnūn, hāḷhīn). Without such relations, they would not have been specialists at all. In short, if the legal scholars have a history of learning, they, in turn, have a history of more or less spectacular dealings with supernatural beings.



In Islamic terms to talk about the “unseen world”, the “supernatural”, the “ineffable” etc. is to talk about al-ghayb. As is very well known, al-ghayb is a highly complex topic, and I therefore will restrict myself to a number of points of direct bearing on what concerns us here. First, I shall refer to some basic facts concerning the notion of al-ghayb itself. Second, I shall talk about what some of the informants said. How did the informants refer to such basic facts?

The Qur’ān itself is considered a “partial communication of al-ghayb”, and as such informs about a number of articles of faith inaccessible to independent human reasoning: the day of doom, hellfire, paradise, angels, djinn etc. All of these belong to the sphere of *īmān* “belief”, which is, in fact, defined as *tahdiq bi-l-ghayb* “the holding true of al-ghayb”. Further, the Qur’ān repeatedly states that God alone knows al-ghayb, and that (=Q 72/26-27): “[...] He does not reveal His secrets to any, Except to him whom He chooses as a messenger [...].”. Mostly there is no further specification as to what is meant by al-ghayb. But there is at least one exception, that is Q 31/34: “Surely Allah is He with Whom is the knowledge of the hour, and He sends down the rain and He knows what is in the wombs; and no one knows what he shall earn on the morrow; and no one knows in what land he shall die; surely Allah

is Knowing, Aware.”¹ The five points mentioned in this verse are, according to a famous Prophetic tradition, the *mafātīh al-ghayb*.² These five points manifestly refer to the knowledge of future events. (That *hilm al-ghayb*, among other things, has this quality of a knowledge of future events is reflected by a host of documents which currently circulate in the world wide web and which, for example, link speculations in the sphere of stock exchange to the pretension to know al-ghayb).

As far as the Prophetic traditions are concerned, there are at least three *hadīth* which are important for the topic of al-ghayb. They all have to do with the thematic complex of *ru’yā* “vision” or “dream”. First, *ru’yā* is said to be the “forty-sixth part of prophecy”.³ This suggests some connection with divine revelation.⁴ Second, there is the Prophetic tradition which speaks of the so-called “glad tidings” (*mubashshirāt*): “[Muḥammad said:] Nothing has remained of Prophecy except for the “glad tidings”. They said: And what are the “glad tidings”? He said: *ar-ru’yā as-sāliha*. “And, third, there is

1- Translation by M. H. Shakir

2- Al-Bukhārī: *sahīh al-Bukhārī*. 1999, ar-Riyād: Dār as-salām. pp.4778; 4697; 7379

3- Bukhārī, *hadīth*. pp. 6987; 6988

4- Pierre Lory: 2006, “L’interprétation des rêves de portée religieuse chez Ibn Shāhīn”, in: Richard McGregor and Adam Sabra: *Le développement du Soufisme en Égypte à l’époque mamelouke*. IFAO / Cahier des Annales islamologiques 27, p. 259



the Prophetic tradition which says that whoever sees Muhammad in his dream truly sees him since the devil doesn't take his form (fa-inna sh-shaytāna lā yatamaththal bī / yatarā'ā bī / yatakawwanunī).⁵

This suffices as a base. If one now turns to writings that mention al-ghayb (e.g. fatwās, tracts on bidha etc.) it is all too conspicuous that very often they deal with agents who are claiming to have a special relationship with al-ghayb and with specific procedures like geomancy, astrology etc. To put it differently: If one talks about al-ghayb one automatically talks about a “field” and a substantial number of people who operate within their society by virtue of some supernatural competence or something that might serve as a base to claim such a competence. If they have any significance at all, then it seems due to that relationship (and that, by the way, is illustrated by the fact that in the course of the interviews all of our informants talked about how they were drawn into that relationship and “how it all started”, that is, they talked about what turned them into specialists).

Another point of considerable importance is that many of the writings that deal with such agents belong to the realm of *ʿilm*, that is, they were written by legal scholars. If writings of this sort talk about such agents, then this is far

from being “innocent“. A lot of legal scholars were and are highly interested in seeing that relationships with the supernatural are not unfolding outside the realm of their own competence. Indeed, the sources ceaselessly ask how the commerce with the supernatural should/must look like in order to be legitimate, and Houari Touati is certainly right when he speaks of “the great question that tormented the legal scholars of strict orthodoxy” in this respect.⁶ It comes as no surprise then to notice efforts to curb the significance of Prophetic traditions like the ones mentioned above.

So, from the point of view of such sources, not every commerce with al-ghayb is an acceptable or a legitimate one. When the authors of such writings tried to formulate and push through criteria that allowed for distinguishing an illegitimate commerce with al-ghayb from a legitimate one, then these criteria were (needless to say) such that they instilled respect for the stock competences forged by the collective work of the legal scholars. If one thing is all too clear, then it is this tension and the “need” of the legal scholars to check the potentially leaking legal institution and not to let too many autonomous centres of supernatural competence spring up and flourish. As

5- Bukhārī, *hadīth* pp. 6993; 6994; 6995; 6997.

6- Touati Houari, 1994, *Entre Dieu et les hommes. Lettrés, saints et sorciers au Maghreb (17^e siècle)*. Paris: Éditions de l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, p. 133-134



an example one might cite a passage of al-Wanṣharīsī's Miṣyār, which speaks of geomancy, astrology etc. and where the question is raised whether one has to do here with knowledge of al-ghayb or not.⁷ It is quite interesting to see how the idea that this could be the case is discarded: Apart from the fact that the Qur'ānic references presented above are all brought up, one notices another strategy, which must have been deeply reassuring for legal scholars professionally given to think of proofs, evidence, decisiveness etc. If one says I opine, I presume etc. then this must not be mistaken for decisive knowledge devoid of speculation. In short, one has to do here with an "intellectual" argument for "intellectual" people and, what is more important, one derived from the field-specific set of competences with which no legal scholar can dispense.⁸

The same holds true for the complex of ru'yā. The aforementioned Prophetic traditions dealing with ru'yā are, of course, a major threat and danger in this respect, because they at least theoretically turn every ordinary believer into a potential receptacle of divine messages.⁹ It comes as no surprise then to find that the authors of such works are quite busy defusing every potential threat to their authority.

If a believer experiences a ru'yā, if he hears something etc. – then all of this has to be confronted with the Qurān and the Sunna in order to be acceptable. If there is contradiction, then the seer or hearer has been the victim of satanical intrigues and has to discard that which implies the contradiction. For example, in the case of the Prophetic tradition that "whoever sees the Prophet Muḥammad in a dream truly sees him": What, if the content of the vision is at odds with the Book and the Prophetic traditions? What, if the Prophet suggests to the believer to indulge in something reprehensible?¹⁰ Here we find rather wild solutions. As an example one might take Ibn al-hādīdj's Madkhal, from which one learns that the believer doubtlessly and truly sees the Prophet (according to the tradition), but that the devil casts into the believer's ear words that are not the Prophet's words.¹¹

Now, what did our informants say about al-ghayb? Needless to say, there were important differences between the informants. One talked more than the other; one was a reader and another was not, etc. Nevertheless they had something in common. The most salient feature of what they said was that they distinguished between two kinds of al-ghayb.

7-For details see: Wanṣharīsī, Vol. 12, p. 56-57

8- Mīlī, al-husayyin: *Tahdhīb Risālat ash-shirk wa-māhīrihī li-Mubārak b. Muhammad al-Mīlī*, p. 72

9- Lory, p. 260

10- Lory, p. 263

11- hādīdj, vol. 4, p. 288



What about the first kind? If one falls back on the most detailed information given, then this sort of *al-ghayb* comprises: the “hour” (this alludes to both the day of doom and the individual hour of death), *rizq*, “the pregnant woman”, “angels and *djinn*”, “plants”, “rain” and generally everything that was going to befall a person in his or her life. Apart from the point of “angels and *djinn*”, there can be no doubt that the examples given by the informant are more or less congruent with Q 31/34 (although the informant never explicitly alluded to the Qur’ān). If one tries to elicit what all these have in common, then it is obvious that they all refer to facts and future events beyond the possibilities of human calculation: At the time of conception no one knows if the child is going to be a girl or a boy. No one can count the plants on the surface of the earth and so forth. The informant explicitly stated that every allusion to events and facts of this sort had to be regarded as a conjecture (*ihtimāl*).

It is possible to turn to the second kind of *al-ghayb* now. What about this kind? First of all, if one sticks to what the informants said, they felt such a strong difference between the two kinds of *al-ghayb* that they made this difference explicit by further qualifying this second kind of *al-ghayb*. One of the informants called it *ghayb al-muḥdath*. The crucial point here is that: “One has to do with *al-ghayb* here, but this is something that has already happened”.

One of the examples given by the informant is the following: “Somewhere far away it is raining, but we don’t notice that over here. Or someone from your country calls you – who you are here at the moment – and informs you about heavy snowfalls there, which you don’t notice here.” I think this allows us to state that this second kind of *al-ghayb* comprises everything which is “unseen” or “hidden” in a relative sense. It expresses that omnipresence is impossible¹²; it expresses the simultaneousness of different experiences and so forth. In short, one has to do here with things that are “hidden” for someone, but certainly not “hidden” in an absolute¹³ sense. Another informant expressed the same idea when he insisted that one was dealing here with a *hāža sayra* “something going on right now”, “something taking place already”, “something which already is a reality”. One deals here with things “hidden” in this world.

12- One is well advised to bear in mind that maybe one has to do here also with access to a kind of knowledge which is eminently “private“, that is, maybe one *must not* be in certain places. Compare e.g. Hilton-Simpson: “Other occasions on which human beings seem especially susceptible to possession by spirits, usually harmless if exorcised in time, are the periodical fetes held in honour of the memory of some long since departed Marabout or Moslem saint. On such occasions persons of either sex, upon hearing the sound of the drums and hautboys which accompany the ceremony, work themselves up into a state of religious ecstasy. They become temporarily so demented as to lick hot iron, cut and stab themselves with knives, shriek, dance, prophesy, and *disclose the deepest secrets of their neighbours, secrets which, it is believed, could only have been made known to them by some supernatural agency.*” (my emphasis)

13- Compare the expression *ghayb mualaq*.



It is worth mentioning that all informants emphasized the important role being played by occult and supernatural beings like the djinn in this connection. It is them with their own whole range of discreet means to accomplish and effect things who are in a position to furnish information about this second kind of al-ghayb. As one informant put it: “This is something like, for example, a shaykh rūhānī who tells you: ‘There is a caravan moving at such and such a place’, or, ‘There is a broken car at such and such a place’. This is all real and happening. There is no talking about “tomorrow” or “after tomorrow” here. No. Everything is happening right now, but this is far away from you, and you would never know about it if it was not for the sheer velocity of the djinn who pass this information on to you.” The informants agreed on the necessity of some supernatural aid in this respect: “You can find something out about this kind of al-ghayb, if God has given you companions from the djinn who are capable of passing these informations on to you.” It is important to remember that more or less passing remarks like the one that “there was no talking about future events” can by no means be properly understood if one disregards the religious texts we looked at above (that is, the Qur’ānic verses and the Prophetical traditions that basically reject the idea of a knowledge of future events). On the contrary, the informants’

expositions strongly suggest that they were avoiding conflict with such basic tenets of faith.¹⁴

Now that the two kinds of al-ghayb have been presented, something should be said about the different modes of how—according to our informants—one may gain access to them.

As to the first kind of al-ghayb, access to bits and pieces of it may be gained through a ru’yā. The basic necessity for such a ru’yā to happen at all was “purity of the heart” (Ṣafīyat al-qalb) and a devout life. Such a ru’yā, of course, does not imply “God-like” knowledge of al-ghayb, but, as one informant put it, such knowledge was “a tiny bit of a tiny bit”, the important point being that this partial access (even to future events) was strictly limited to the pious who were “a small minority”.

As to the second kind of al-ghayb, that is ghayb al-muhdath, different kinds of “exercises” (riyādāt) might supply those who perform them with the aid of occult beings like the djinn: “Such riyādāt might bring you servants from the djinn who inform you about

14- Indeed, one finds many strategies to avoid conflict in this respect: Khalil Zamiti, for example, called to attention that sometimes agents simply pass over in silence the fact of divination they are associated with: “Ainsi, lorsqu’on demande aux deux officiants de citer leurs attributions et ceux de leur grand-père, ils énumèrent l’ensemble de leurs pratiques mais n’énoncent jamais, sur le mode explicite, le fait divinatoire et le prophétisme.”(For details see Zamiti, p. 58 ff.)



what has happened somewhere whilst it was too far away for you to have any chance to know about it. But these do not know what is going to happen in the future. If someone informs you that this or that was going to happen, then these are mere takahhunāt and not knowledge proper (ʿilm saḥīḥ).” The informant suggested that such exercises were certainly not able to provide access to the first kind of al-ghayb.

I am not at all sure what final conclusions to draw from the material gathered, and I think that a lot more research has to be conducted to give a satisfying answer to the questions that pose themselves in this context. Nevertheless, it seems possible to call attention to an important point: I am quite convinced that the information given by our informants is able to show that whoever talks about specific concepts like the one of al-ghayb automatically sees himself/herself drawn into the language and the corpus of knowledge of a specific group. As far as this knowledge – that of the legal scholars – is concerned, one has to do here with knowledge of a highly systematic character; a knowledge not anyone can handle “properly”. On the contrary, whoever wishes to handle such knowledge “properly” has to take part in the respective field

that produced such knowledge, and it is only by reason of this participation that everything indispensable to stand one’s ground here can be acquired at all. I am inclined to think that our informants were highly interesting in this respect, and this is all the more so if one concentrates on the differences between them. Some of them knew sufficiently much to be able to produce something that contained everything necessary to superficially appear as belonging to the sphere of “knowledge proper” (ʿilm saḥīḥ) – Qur’ānic verses etc. Others were not knowledgeable enough in this respect. I would like to end with a pretty sad incident of direct bearing on this: When we asked one of our informants about the concept of al-ghayb, he suddenly apologized for “not knowing enough”. I could not think of a more biting and sadder reminder that, confronted with the dominant symbolic language, the informants were left with only two choices, either to fall back on a broken¹⁵ version of this language (a language which was not entirely theirs) or to keep – silent.

15- It is impossible to describe the expositions of especially one informant here, which were almost interlarded with (partly uncorrect) Qur’ānic references, quasi-theological explanations etc. – all of this strongly suggests that this informant was «doing things with words», that is, he was trying to prove his familiarity with the sphere of «knowledge proper».



Bibliography:

- Bukhārī, al-Bukhārī: (1999), saḥīḥ al-Bukhārī. ar-Riyād: Dār as-salām,
- hādjdj, Ibn al-hādjdj: al-Madkhal. Vol. 1-4. al-Qāhira: Dār at-turāth, s. a.
- Hilton-Simpson, (1922) "Some Notes on the Folklore of the Algerian Hills and Desert", Folklore, Vol. 33, No. 2
- Katz, Jonathan G. Katz: Dreams, Sufism and Sainthood. The visionary career of Muhammad al-Zawāwī. Leiden, New York, Köln: E. J. Brill, 1996.
- Pierre Lory: "L'interprétation des rêves de portée religieuse chez Ibn Shāhīn", in: Richard McGregor and Adam Sabra: Le développement du Soufisme en Égypte à l'époque mamelouke. IFAO /Cahier des Annales islamologiques 27 (2006).
- Mīlī al-husayyin: Tahdhīb Risālat ash-shirk wa-maāhiriḥī li-Mubārak b. Muhammad al-Mīlī. s.l., s.a.
- Touati Houari, Entre Dieu et les hommes. (1994), Lettrés, saints et sorciers au Maghreb (17e siècle). Paris: Éditions de l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales,
- Wansharīsī: (1981), al-Mi3yār al-mu3rib wa-l-djāmi3 al-mughrib 3an fatāwī ahl Ifrīqiya wa-l-Andalus wa-l-Maghrib. Vol. 1-13. (Ed. Muhammad hadjdjī et al.) S.l.: Nashr wizārat al-awqāf wa-sh-shu'ūn al-islāmīya li-l-Mamlaka al-maghribīya,
- Zamiti, Khalil (1990), Sociologie de la folie. Introduction au Shamanisme Maghrébin. Tunis: Alif, 1990.