"It Is Like Mathematics"!

How to Influence the Universe with a *Khatim* (Islamic Seal)

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Abstract. – This article covers how the West African *khatimulu* (Islamic numerical tables) are presently applied and taught in Western Europe. First, an introduction to the *khatim* is followed by a presentation of the context of the West African Mandinka *marabout*. Then, all the crucial components used in the design of the *khatim* – from the choice of initial sacrifice, the size of the *khatim*, the principles of numerology, the personalization of the *khatim*, the use of possible metaphysical agents, to Koranic quotes and physical substances to enhance the effect – is described. Further, the methods of two interviewed marabouts based in Sweden are compared with the classic Islamic esoteric literature and earlier ethnographic research. Finally, the clients for the services of the marabouts based in Western Europe are identified as primarily non-Muslim native Europeans, not West Africans. *[West Africa, Islamic magic, magic squares, marabout, Sufism, talismans]*

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1 Introduction

First, you write the *khatim* with black ink on a paper. If you carry it on you as an amulet you should put it inside a leather pouch to protect it and hide its contents from outsiders. You can also dissolve the *khatim* in water and then drink the solution. This will bring you instant protection. If you instead use the dissolved *khatim* to wash your entire body, the protection will last longer

(Interview with Omar).

When I first studied the Islamic numerical tables (tables based on number symbolism), I got the impression that it was an extinct practice. The reason being that when I searched for scholarly works describing it, with a few exceptions[1] the ethnographic studies were almost a century old, or descriptions of antique talismans and other religious artifacts found in the collections of European museums. It was, therefore, an unexpected and exciting find, when during my fieldwork on the contemporary demonic possession phenomena and exorcism in Sweden I discovered that this knowledge was not lost and is presently in use, both in West Africa and Europe. In the following text, I hope to shed light on and dispense with some of the current lack of information on the contemporary design of Islamic numerical tables.

The objective of this article is threefold: (1) to describe step by step how the *khatim*[2] (Islamic magic seals originating from the art of numerical tables) is presently used in Western Europe; (2) to examine how the art of Islamic numerical tables has evolved

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1 I found less than a handful outside the French-speaking world.

2 The informants use the Mandinka term *khatim* (sometimes pronounced *khâtimu*) and *khatimulu* (pl.) in the interviews instead of the Arabic terms *khatam/khatim* (s.) and *akhtam* (pl.) Allan and Sourdel 2015).

in West Africa from the classic Islamic esoteric literature and earlier ethnographic research; and (3) to identify the market for *khatimulu* in Western Europe.

I have chosen to let one informant, Omar, be the main voice of the field. I have also interviewed Omar's brother, my gatekeeper to the Mandinka community, who is familiar with *khatimulu* as a client, but does not have the skill himself to design them. Omar later introduced me to Mustapha, a Sufi marabout who also designs *khatimulu*. To be able to compare the field with other sources in this article, while still making it clear which source states what, I use only Omar to represent the field in the first part of the description. Nevertheless, in the last stage of the description, a short summary of Mustapha's methods will be presented. To understand the possible interpretations of the rationale behind Islamic numerical tables, it is essential for the reader to have an insight into both the medieval Islamic intellectual context where they were developed, and the West African field where they still are used. Therefore, I have included an introduction to the West African cultural field and to the theory of Islamic numerical tables from mainly the most acknowledged authority – al-Buni. In the text I alternate between the voice of the field, Omar, and the voices from the older studies (both from al-Buni's corpus and from earlier ethnography collected in other Islamic cultural areas) of this practice.

2 The West African Mandinka People and the Marabout Omar

The Mandinka originate from the ancient empire of Manding (Mali), a high culture that in the 14th century occupied most of the northern half of West Africa. It is said that when its emperor Mansa Musa in 1325 went on hajj with his retinue of 15,000, he spent "so much money that it upset the price system in both Cairo and Mecca" (Comhaire 1956: 337). From the mid to the late 19th century, the majority of the Mandinka converted to Islam after local jihad wars. The Mandinka follow the Malikite School of Law, the Sunni school most open to assimilation of local concepts. Sufism is held in high esteem among the Mandinka, as with other West African Muslims (Comhaire 1956: 339). In addition to the Islamic tradition, some of the older customs are still alive and respected, for example, tribal art and the mask dances. Muslim clergy and traditional healers are found to work side by side, and the approach is quite pragmatic – if one tradition does not work, try another (Bravmann 1974: 74).

A marabout (*moro* in Mandinka) is the local oracle, healer, and religious counselor who often also possesses abilities to communicate with the spiritual world (Schaffer 1980: 34). A salient difference between a marabout and a sorcerer is that the former always operates in the name of God and Islam (Doutté 1909: 53). The average formal education for a marabout in the early 20th century was the two to three years attendance at a Koran school (Marty 1914: 335).

A notable aspect of Mandinka Islam is the status of the learned (male) Islamic scholar. Unlike the competing non-Muslim, religious specialists during the 19th and early 20th century he was literate. This prestigious advantage sets him apart from both the non-Muslims and the less learned Muslims. They had neither access to books nor the ability to use their written esoteric secrets (Hunter 1976: 447). Probably this is one reason why the written letter-based talismans became so important within West African popular Islam. A case in point, fragments from al-Buni's influential works have been copied and shared for generations among Senegalese marabouts (Marty 1914: 329). The first Muslim scholars in this part of West Africa – unlike in other regions of Africa – were not merchants and they supported themselves by charging tuition fees as teachers and to a major degree from revenues acquired through divinations, the performance of prayers, and the sales of talismans with Koranic verses.[3]

My main informant, here named "Omar," is a marabout of the Mandinka people. He is in his late 40s and has been living in Sweden since the mid 80s. I was introduced to him by his older brother, a good friend of mine for more than two decades, as "the scholar of the family." Omar's formal education is four years in a Koranic school as a boy. He is able to recite all the Koranic passages he refers to in our interviews by heart. The dividing line between a religious scholar and a practitioner of "popular Islam" is, except for Islamic knowledge, the ability to speak, write, and read Arabic. To be able to communicate, independent of time and space, may have been seen as a form of "magic" unto itself. Like Latin in the Roman Catholic cultures, "the sacredness of Arabic was doubtless intensified by the simple

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3 An amulet generally consisted of a prayer to God or the prophet, along with a few figures representing the attributes of God and a statement of purpose: to cure infertility, bring a good harvest, or gain victory in battle, for example. It usually also included patterns of magic squares called *khatims* containing special letters or numbers, the designation written inside each square symbolizing some potential evil imprisoned by the *'alim*'s (Islamic scholar) skills (Hunter 1976: 453).

fact that most people [in West Africa] did not understand it" (Brenner and Last 1985: 433).

As an adult, Omar also studied the non-Islamic African esoteric arts. This is a common phenomenon in West Africa, where esoteric knowledge is not limited to cultural or religious restraints (Brenner 2000: 163). I have found it characteristic that Omar, as well as my other West African informants, are proud to claim that they are constantly studying and upgrading their personal knowledge. Especially while living in Europe, their scholarly efforts encompass learning from available sources outside their West African cultural field – for instance, books, the Internet, visiting different kinds of ethnic mosques, and conversing with people from other cultural fields.

3 *Khatim*, *simiya'* and the Different Categories of Islamic Numerical Tables

Basis of the Islamic numerical table is the magic square. The principle of the magic square was first created in China and then probably further developed in India before it reached the Islamic countries. The common historic denominator for the use of magic (mathematical) squares – whether Chinese, Hindu or Islamic – was to create a micro-representation of the universe. However, the way it affected the universe was explained differently within each culture (Cammann 1969: 183–191).

In Arabic, the magic square is called *wafq*. The oldest version of the *wafq*, the *buduh* (the square of nine cells), has frequently been used as a numerical table since at least the 10th century (Cammann 1969: 189 f.).[4] Other versions of the *wafq* were further popularized in the 13th century, after al-Buni's (d. 1225) authoritative works on Islamic esoteric practices were widely distributed (Savage-Smith 1997a: 60). The magic square belongs to the *djadwal*-category of geometrical magical figures.[5] The Mandinka (according to my interviews) seem to prefer the Arabic term *khatim* (seal). Canaan states that, the characteristic of a *khatim*, compared to other talismans, is that it is primarily utilizing divine and/or prophetic names, instead of symbols and quotations (1914: 112).

According to the corpus of al-Buni, God created the world through the secret of letters. "He also planted great power and wisdom in them, including

the secret of His Greatest Name, His speech, and the afterlife" (Francis 2005: 135).[6] In the Islamic numerical tables usually letters represent the numeric values derived from the *abjad* letter-based numbering system within the Islamic art of *simiya'* (the secret powers of letters and names).[7]

Abjad, like the earlier Jewish *gematria* and the later Christian numerology, originally is a Greek writing system. These Pythagorean ideas of a sympathetic correspondence between an "object's" attributes and the numerical values of the alphabetical letters in its name spread to the Far East following the conquests of Alexander the Great (Billigmeier and Burnham 2012).

Abjad is the reason why the most frequently used *wafq* is called *buduh*. The *buduh* contains a 3×3 cell grid and utilizes each of the numbers 1–9 once, to result in the numerical value of 15 in all directions. The corners of this square contain the corresponding (numerical) letters of *b-u-d-h* (Cammann 1969: 190). This square is also called Adam's seal. According to tradition, Adam, the first prophet, had it on his signet ring. The sum of all the letters of this square is 45, the same as the *abjad*-value for the name Adam (Canaan 2004: 158). Interestingly, the *abjad*-value of Eve's name is also 45 (Shurreef 1973: 232). This magic square is considered so powerful that writing *buduh* on a talisman is sufficient for its potency, and if one pronounces its name, it is said one will gain a great fortune (Doutté 1909: 129). A *buduh* represents the category of mathematical tables as shown in the following diagrams.

The earliest magic squares were "mathematical tables," designed so that the sums of all the numbers in the cells are the same in all directions. Still,

4	9	2
3	5	7
8	1	6

Fig. 1: Mathematical Table.

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4 However, Canaan (2004: 158) implies that the *buduh* was used already in the 8th century.

5 Graefe et al. (2015) explain that "*djadwal*" (if it has the meaning of table, plan) is synonymous with *khātim*.

6 Francis' reference is from *Kitab lata'if al-isharat*.

7 The secret of letters is twofold: their numerical secret and the secret inherent in the letter itself (Canaan 2004: 156). I have not found that the latter secret is used when composing a Mandinka *khatim*. Also, the scope of this article is numerical tables and not other kinds of talismanic symbols, like different kinds of stars, complete esoteric alphabets, and Arabic letters symbolizing planets.

9	81	67	81
13	501	6	90
71	111	805	53
3	67	10	731

1	2	3	4
2	3	4	1
3	4	1	2
4	1	2	3

Fig. 2: Esoteric Table. **Fig. 3:** Formula Table.

it seems like this requirement was eased later and instead *the square* in its own power, or sometimes even a rectangle, became "magic" as a synecdoche.

The most common examples of the non-mathematical tables are the "esoteric tables," where the mutually unrelated (in this article, *abjad*-derived) numbers represent primarily independent cosmic symbols (in this article, mostly derived from the Koran) combined with the names of the involved human beings, and the "formula tables," a design based on repetition of one formula, also known as Latin squares, if written with Latin letters.[8] Canaan suspects that the esoteric tables originated from errors in the copying of mathematical tables. Implicitly he also gives another explanation for possible misunderstandings, explaining that sometimes a *khatim* consisting of senseless numbers is composed with an alternative *abjad*-system. The "higher numerical value" is obtained by first writing the letter as it is pronounced and then adding the numerical values of these letters (Canaan 2004: 162).

The main Islamic numerical table designed by my informants in this article, the West African *khatim*, is an esoteric table. According to my informants, the standardized mathematical tables, like the *buduh*, and the formula tables are considered less effective in West Africa than the personalized esoteric tables. Omar even compares them to "worthless tourist traps" for the spiritually ignorant.

4 The First Stage.
Identifying All the Involved Person's Names and Their Mother's Names

Omar explains that if a client comes to him for help, before he can design the proper *khatim* he must ob-

tain background information. First, the problem that the client wishes him to solve has to be clearly defined. Secondly, he needs to know the given names and their mother's names for all the people involved.

Why are the mother's names and not the Pan-Islamic culturally used father's names essential to identify the persons concerned in the construction of the *khatim*? Though kinship followed the mother according to old Mandinka tradition (Schaffer 1980: 86), in this case it seems to be an element that follows general Islamic belief of an alternative lineage of kinship for matters of *sihr*.[9] Omar explains that a human life starts in the womb of the mother. Because of this, "a man has more from the mother, than the father." So for divinations and *khatimulu*-designs it is vital to have as much essence of the person as possible, and in this case the mother is more important than the father.

5 The Second Stage.
The Choice of a Proper Sacrifice

In most cases, a sacrifice is beneficial to smooth over the transaction with the metaphysical agents. To decide what to sacrifice Omar prefers to use "'l-isti-kar" – divination by dream interpretation. This is a method also favored by the Sunna (the practice of the prophet Mohammad) for others than prophets (see, e.g., *al-Bukhari* n. d./87: 112, 167). He uses

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8 Sometimes also a "two-legged magic square" (an inverted U-shaped open square) is included in the category of magic squares (Shurreef 1973: 231).

9 I have not found any consensus among researchers on the background of this widespread alternative line of kinship. Drieskens' suggestion based on her Cairo fieldwork is a saying that on Judgment Day, God will call all individuals by their given names followed by the names of their mothers and grandmothers. Her informants' reason for this cultural oddity is that God in His Mercy covers the mistakes of women in case their children are not those of their husbands (2008: 134). Yet, I have not been able to confirm her explanation with my informants.

"Abdul" (a North African Arabic Sunni informant for my research on contemporary Islamic exorcism) told me that he considered constructing a *khatim* as the equivalent of performing *shirk* (idolatry, blasphemy). He explains that *sihr* is based on compelling pagan djinns to perform the sorcerer's errands, which is why the mother's name is used. The *shayatin* ("devils," amoral pagan djinns) are not married and procreate uninhibitedly with each other. This means that they do not understand the concept of knowing one's father. So for the *shayatin*, a family can only be explained based on matrimonial lineage, according to Abdul.

Canaan (1914: 106) gives two alternative explanations why the mother's names are used when constructing Islamic talismans in the former Ottoman Palestine. The first, related to Drieskens, is that one can never be certain about the father, only about the mother. The second is that it is possible that at the critical moment of conception, a djinn may have, undetected, participated in the intercourse and become the real father of the child.

as an example the request by a client wishing to know if he has chosen a proper girl to marry. Before Omar goes to sleep he writes the client's and the girl's names on a paper and then prays to God to show him if the match is good and if there are any obstacles in the way. After he has put forth his question, he recites *Al-Qadr* (*The Qur'an* n. d.: surah 97) ten times followed by *Al-'Ikhlas* (*The Qur'an* n. d.: surah 112) three times, altogether 13 recitations.[10] Then he spits in his right hand and rubs the blessed saliva over his eyes.[11] Again, Omar asks God to show him what the client needs to know about the intended spouse before he goes to sleep.

Usually an obstacle is solved with a sacrifice. When dreaming he might perhaps envision a bird standing on a sack of rice or a grazing goat. Sometimes human beings also appear, for instance, old people or children. These dream-visions describe what kind of sacrifice must be made for the client to fulfill his goal. He may need to sacrifice a goat or a live bird. Other times the sacrifice could be a bag of rice or bananas. Perhaps he must give alms (*sadaqha*) to the poor, old people, or children, depending on what the dream portrayed. The client then gives the alms, the food, or the sacrificial animal to the people in the mosque. In return he asks them to pray for him to reach his goal. This procedure is called *dua* (prayer of intercession) and is highly respected as a mighty force among the Mandinka (Schaffer 1980: 40). If one is a Christian, Omar suggests, one could leave it to the people in the church, or in the market place. The sacrifice and the prayers of the religious and/or poor people will remove all the potential obstacles for the rest of the procedure to reach the client's goal.

6 The Third Stage. Preparations, the Design of the *khatim*, and Dividing the Names

As a preparation, Omar first ritually purifies himself with regular water (*wudu*). He washes himself from right to left and three times: his hands, his ears, his eyes, his mouth, and finally his feet. Afterwards he recites the *Bismillah*-prayer.

In the next step a *khatim* is designed. Before it is activated it consists of a grid of empty cells. Omar claims that the complexity of the *khatim* is depen-

dent on how many people it has to influence to fulfill its mission. For example, a matchmaking *khatim* needs to contain fewer cells than one used for somebody seeking to become a local chieftain, or even greater complexity still to become the president of a country. Nevertheless, the less cells used, the faster the *khatim* works. A measure of the skill level of a marabout is his ability of reduction, i.e., how few cells he needs to design a potent *khatim*. Omar draws a rectangle with 4×6 cells when he demonstrates the regular procedure to me.

The first step is to divide each person's name into all its alphabetical parts using one of the *abjad*-systems. "Throughout al-Buni's corpus, it is a common assertion that names are connected to and influence the thing named. This also gives power to the name's constituent elements … the Arabic letters which makes it up" (Francis 2005: 136). Omar exemplifies that Michael, for instance, may be divided into close to 300 parts. Some longer names, like Elizabeth, may be divided into, perhaps, 1,000 parts and shorter names, like John, into 20 parts.[12] Omar keeps track of the counting with the help of a rosary and makes a note on a separate paper for each reckoning of 10, when he calculates the *abjad*-value of a name. It is important that everything is correctly done for a *khatim* to work. He compares it with how "to program computers, one mistake is enough for a program to fail." When I asked Omar, he also admitted that an additional reason for using *abjad*-derivates is to hide the content of the *khatim* for outsiders.

After a name has been divided into all its possible alphabetical parts, Omar states that "you have got everything on this person." This statement corresponds to the *pars pro toto* representation. A part, like the name as a synecdoche, represents the complete essence of a person or object in magical or religious rituals (Mauss 1972: 65). It corresponds to al-Buni's corpus, too, where (Indian) numbers have power over the intellect and (Arabic) letters over the soul (Francis 2005: 144).[13]

7 The Fourth Stage: Selecting the Proper Metaphysical Agents

Omar then places the different alphabetical parts of the main person's name in each cell of the *khatim*.

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10 I have not found the number 13 mentioned in any of my Islamic reference works as an auspicious number. The most favored numbers for talismans are 3, 5 and 7 (Canaan 1914: 93).

11 Saliva is often used as a medium for healing and transferring blessings (see, for instance, *al-Bukhari* n. d. /71: 642).

12 Omar does not want to disclose which *abjad*-system he uses. However, he explains that he summarizes all possible combinations of the letters, syllables, and pronunciations of the letters in a name to get the highest possible numerical value.

13 Francis is quoting al-Buni from *Kitab lata'if al-isharat*.

He further composes the *khatim* by placing other names around the parts of the names of the persons, depending on what he wishes to accomplish with the *khatim*. As an example, the most commonly used Arabic word for God, Allah, is composed of four letters (like a square), but its numerical *abjad*-value is 66 (Canaan 2004: 135). Omar often uses some of the names for God combined with the names of different prophets or angels. According to the Islamic tradition, God has 99 known names, and a secret one (*al-Bukhari* n. d./50: 894). He is compelled to answer whenever He is called by any of them.[14] Al-Buni explains that the prophets have gained special knowledge of God's Greatest Name (i.e., the secret 100th name) through revelation and that is how they can perform their miracles (Francis 2005: 204 f.).[15] According to Omar, "the Jews … [who he considers slightly related to] the Blacks, not the Arabs, have the secret of God's [100th] name."

Each of the known 99 divine names has a specific sphere of action and power assigned to them. For example, according to the specific list of al-Tirmidhi, if one uses the name al-Malik (The Lord, *abjad*-numerical value 91), one will gain wealth, al-Batin (He Whose Secrets Are Hidden, 62), and one will become a friend to mankind or with an-Nur (The Giver of Light, 256), one's mind will be enlightened.[16] This entails placing the numerical value of one of these divine names in a cell of the *khatim* for the designer to generate a causal compelling effect on the outside world. Another method would be to design a *khatim* as a mathematical table, where the sums in all directions would be the *abjad*-value of the used Divine Name (resembling the principles of the *buduh*).

Omar explains implicitly that the prophets are used based on their performances in the Koran. For example, for a love-*khatim* he prefers Yusuf (Joseph) and for a *khatim* that will protect the owner from natural catastrophes Nuh (Noah) is used.

The angels govern all the events occurring in the universe on a mandate from God (Surah 79:5). Omar explains that if the situation is urgent, one can insert the angel Jibra'il (Gabriel) in a cell. This follows the tradition of the four archangels' specific attributes. Jibra'il is the messenger between God and the prophets, Mika'il presides over rain and fertility, Israfa'il stands next to the divine throne and guards the heavenly trumpet, and Uzra'il is the feared angel of death.[17] Each weekday, each cardinal point, etc. also can have a specific angel as a ruler (Canaan 2004: 137, 171). Some other angel names might be mystical names derived from *simiya'*. One method is to calculate the *abjad*-value of the attribute one wish it to rule over and then deduct this sum with the *abjad*-value of the angelic ending *-il*. The residual value is then transformed back into letters compromising the mystical name of the desired angel (Mommersteeg 1988). From this perspective an angel can be seen as a personification of a property that the creator of the *khatim* wants to manipulate for his goals.

In the event that one wants to solve the matters in secrecy, Omar suggests to include an invisible djinn[18] as a helper. Yet, to command a djinn one has to know his name to transform it into its numerical value in the *khatim*. The tradition of djinns as helpers plays an important role in the art of composing Islamic talismans. For instance, the lords of the cardinal points are entitled the "Four Helpers." For curing or projecting sickness, the correct name of the ruling djinn has to be used (Canaan 2004: 140 f.). Omar mentions that a *khatim* is also efficient in casting out djinns if they are possessing people, which corresponds to the Christian concept of exorcism.

Eventually, Omar always places the name Muhammad in the last cell. He explains that if one uses the name of God in spiritual matters, one also has to include the name of the prophet Muhammad, because God will fulfill everything one asks of Him if one uses Muhammad as an intermediary.[19]

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14 Mustapha, my second marabout informant in this article, described how his teacher used to solve problems with djinns (in this case it was *shayatin*), harassing people in their homes with the aid of divine names. The old man selected an appropriate surah, and then a verse from this surah to solve the problem. Within this verse he identified one of God's Names as the esoteric key of the verse. He wrote this Name on a paper together with the name of the client and the object of the *khatim*, both its purpose and the punishment of the djinns if they did not obey. Then the same *khatim* was copied three times and the four papers were buried in the corners of the client's plot. This formed an esoteric impenetrable fence against the djinns, who would be killed by it if they tried to enter the client's grounds.

15 Francis is referring to al-Buni's *Tartib-al da'wat* and *Shams al-ma'arif wa-lata'if al-'awarif* [*al-sughrá*].

16 Canaan (2004: 135); Doutté (1909: 203); Shurreef (1973: 240–245). – There exist alternative lists of the 99 divine names.

17 I have not found any correspondence between angels and stars as described by, for instance, the "Brethren of Purity" (Lory 1992: 152). Neither stars nor astrology are mentioned as components by the marabouts when they compose a *khatim*.

18 I prefer to use the English spelling of djinn (sing.), djinns (pl.) in this article, instead of the Arabic *jinni* (sing.), *jinn* (pl.), because my informants pronounce them slightly differently in Mandinka and English, too.

19 Maybe this is a reason why this practice is called *khatim*? Muhammad is well-known as the seal (*khatam*) of the prophets. Omar also once told me the legend that God taught Muhammad all the esoteric secrets during his nightly journey

8 The Fifth Stage: How to Enhance the *khatim* with the Koran and Other Ingredients

To further enhance the effect of the *khatim* it is essential to include the proper references from the Koran. Technically, when constructing a *khatim* with components of a passage from the Koran, it is the total sum of each component's numeric value that is inserted in the separate cells. For instance, one first summarizes all the letter values of each word, then the part sums of all the words' values in each sentence and, eventually, each sentence's value into a combined number for the complete verse (Shurreef 1973: 239). An alternative procedure is to calculate a number from the title of the surah to insert in the cell (Savage-Smith 1997b: 106).

Omar recommends *kun* (Be!) as a short but useful and extremely powerful quote from the Koran to increase the potency of a *khatim*. This is following the tradition of creation through words, exemplified with how God created using *kun*.[20] But Omar also uses longer passages. As an example, he suggests that if one wishes to gather several people, one uses a passage from the Koran where people are ordered to gather. Or one can perhaps use *Al-'Ikhlas* (*The Qur'an* n. d.: surah 112) to unite people as one force, because in this surah God is declared to be one. If one needs to protect oneself from enemies who want to slander or harm you *An-Nas* (*The Qur'an* n. d.: surah 114) is preferred. To pacify or cleanse the negativity of one's enemies one can use the *Bismillah*, and for general protection *Ya-Sin* (*The Qur'an* n. d.: surah 36) is the most useful.

Finally, according to one of the works of al-Buni, both the letter values of the designer's name and the desired action should be included in a talisman (Francis 2005: 147).[21] However, Omar does not acknowledge this procedure to me. He never uses his own name in the *khatim* but always mentions its purpose. The purpose could either be written into the *khatim* or be included in an "accompanying prayer to activate it."

Omar gives another example of how to activate or "close" a *khatim* to make it possible to pass by a dangerous person unnoticed. Omar uses his open palms and faces them towards each other, representing two people facing each other. Then, he closes the paper with the *khatim* by pressing his palms together. Because he has closed the dangerous person's "eyes" and only left him with his back open, he will not notice when one passes him nor will the owner of the *khatim* see him. "This means, me and him we do not see each other. My back on his back."

To "enhance" some *khatimulu*, one grinds a root and puts it on top of the paper before one folds it. For some other *khatimulu*, like those intended for war, animal blood is used, either instead of ink or one smears it on top of the *khatim* before closing it. Perfume also might be used for a love-*khatim*, etc. Which ingredients to add to enhance the effect of each kind of *khatimulu*, is something that earlier generations of marabouts have discovered by trial and error. They have found that for each surah (and sometimes even verse), different ingredients work as enhancers of the esoteric effects. Some *khatimulu* are dissolved in water and either one drinks or washes oneself with the solution. Sometimes, a *khatim* has to be placed at a specific location after it has been closed – for instance, at a mountain, the sea, or in a house.

It is preferable to write the *khatim* with a utensil that the designer has made with his own hands. Omar exemplifies this with a pen made from a bird's feather. Another method to strengthen a *khatim* is to use a non-Arabic language. Usually Omar uses Arabic for the names and the Koranic quotes and Mandinka for the purpose and other non-Islamic related matters. This is the reason why several Arabic people, according to Omar, prefer a *khatim* written in an African language (like Mandinka), instead of in Arabic.[22]

9 Mustapha, the Sufi Marabout

"Mustapha" is a 39 year old Mandinka marabout and is currently one of Omar's main teachers. He moved to Sweden a few years ago after first living some years in Spain, coming from West Africa. Mustapha became a Sufi approximately ten years ago and is highly respected by Omar for his spiritual abilities. When Mustapha made his quest to become a Sufi, his teacher gave him instructions together with 40 small food balls of rice and sugar. He then lived totally isolated in the African wilderness for 40 days, eating one ball each day. The reason given for the limited food intake was to be as pure as pos-

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from Mecca to the farthest mosque. Then other human people – not God or Muhammad – created the art of the *khatim* based on Muhammad's esoteric secrets, according to Omar's view.

20 Surah 16:40: How God creates with language – "…*fa-yakun* ['Be!' and it is]."

21 Francis is referring to al-Buni's *al-Usul wa-al-dawabit*.

22 This statement can also be interpreted as a personal marking point against the perception of some Arabic *'alim*'s claims of higher Islamic knowledge than that of the West Africans.

sible during the stay and so minimize the amount of unclean feces.

During the first part of his mystical quest, Mustapha repeatedly chanted some of God's Divine Names. It was conducted continually a preset number of times each day and he only took short breaks for his regular daily prayers. In the later part of his mystical retreat, God instructed him each night in his dreams (*'l-istikar*) as to what he should do the following day. During Mustapha's last days, he reached his goal receiving in a waking state direct contact with God. Mustapha explains that as a Sufi he communicates directly with God in spiritual matters and does not need any djinns or angels as intermediaries.

Mustapha also practices the art of the *khatim*. After finishing the Koran school, he went to an old marabout to learn *sihr*. In the beginning, he was considered too young and immature to learn the arts, and was not accepted until being in his late 20s. He was very poor then, so he first worked in the fields of the old man for two years to pay for his tuition. After the two years were completed the old man taught him the art of composing *khatimulu* based on the *Bismillah 'r-rahman 'r-rahim*. Similar to how the prayer *Bismillah* initiates all surah (except one), this form of *khatimulu* also covers all possible applications of the Koran. Before he was allowed to learn the art, he had to pledge never to abuse his knowledge and only use it for good causes. When Mustapha had completed his studies, the teacher prayed to God for his success and blessed him.

Later, he learned additional skills from other marabouts. In one case he returned to his original teacher to solve a problem he was unfamiliar with. However, this time he had money to compensate him, so he did not have to stay long. On occasion marabouts have even shared small parts of their knowledge (sometimes it was only a potent keyword) with Mustapha for free after first observing his behavior in their village to ascertain whether he acted properly and responsibly.

Mustapha states that "*khatim* is all from the Koran." They are all based on surah, verses, and words from the Koran. The four main categories of *khatimulu* he has mastered are: for protection; those which influence people on matters of love and politics; for healing and curing diseases; and for use in war – either invincibility or for harming or killing one's opponents.

The Fig. 4 is a non-personalized draft of a *khatim* for general protection made by Mustapha for this article. To activate it, Mustapha inserts the name of the owner. He places both the first letter of the owner's given name, combined with the *abjad*-numerical value of the full name in each cell. Mustapha explains that the main reason for the abbreviation of the name is purely practical, to be able to fit all the needed information in each cell. He says that it works with only the given name, but the *khatim* will become more powerful if the mother's name is also included in the numerical value.

Before personalizing the *khatim*, Mustapha always starts by writing *Bismillah* in one of the cells, and on each occasion he designates an appropriate prophet for the purpose of the *khatim*. In this draft model, he has inserted the name of the prophet Muhammad in the outer cells. (This might also explain
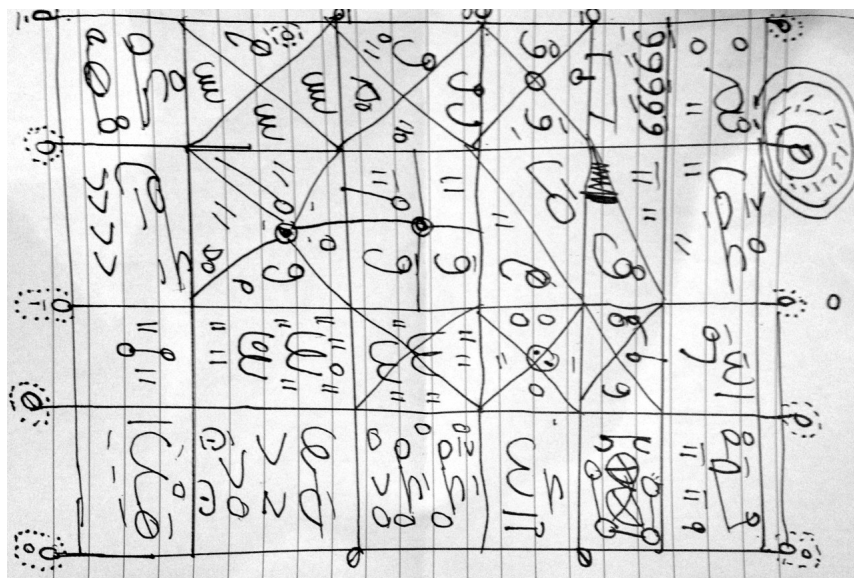

Fig. 4: Non-personalized draft of a *khatim* for general protection.

why the West African esoteric tables were originally labeled *khatimulu*, i.e., a seal attributed to a specific prophet.) Then he inserts several of God's 99 Names, both with their first letters and their numerical values into the different cells. In some of the cells he also places references to different surah in the form of their numerical values. This procedure is quite complex as, depending on the purpose of the *khatim*, the same surah may have different numerical values. Mustapha explains that the efficiency of these different numerical values have been tested for generations by earlier marabouts and then handed down from teacher to student.

The circles and dots outside the *khatim* are enhancing symbols that are added just before Mustapha closes the *khatim*. When finished, Mustapha prays to God that with His Will the *khatim* will be effective for the intended owner. When asked, he confirms that this is not really needed for its effect. Mustapha chooses to say the prayer anyway, because he finds it important to show respect to God, even if He, in this specific case, already has shared all the knowledge on how to influence the events in His Universe with Mustapha.

When the *khatim* has been personalized and completed, the owner is also given a "prescription" on how to keep it potent. For example, if it is supposed to be carried on oneself as an amulet, it is important not to wear it when having sexual intercourse or when using the bathroom. If one violates these instructions, the *khatim* will be deactivated and worthless. If the *khatim* is used for healing, Mustapha first mixes the ink with different medicinal roots. When completed, the patient dissolves it in water and drinks it. When wearing a *khatim* made for warfare, it is of the outmost importance that one's children are forewarned. If not, they too will be harmed if they hug their father when he leaves or returns home. Mustapha also tells the owner how long it will take before the *khatim* generates its effect, for instance, for marital or job-related matters.

Finally, Mustapha explains the three factors that can make a properly composed *khatim* impotent. The first is *disrespect*, either by the client not keeping the *khatim* clean (and thereby defiling the name of God used in it) or not taking the *khatim* seriously. The second is if a *counter-sihr* has been used, either someone else has already composed, for instance, a love-*khatim* before he has, or a later *khatim* is more potent than the one he is using. Like all arts, there is a difference between the skill levels of different marabouts. If someone has already composed a *khatim*, this means, that a metaphysical barrier is raised, and it demands greater skill from the marabout to be able to penetrate it. The third factor is

righteousness. If one is misusing *khatimulu* to hurt innocent people, God will protect them and not allow the *khatim* to work. If a *khatim* does not function as intended, the client will return to the marabout, who will usually perform *'l-istikar* to find the reason. Sometimes he will make a new *khatim* and other times he will simply tell the client that the case is hopeless because of one of the two last factors.

10 The Two Different Forms of Koranic Knowledge – *'ilm* vs. *sihr*

Instead of using the Western concepts of science vs. religion and magic my two informants explained their opinion on the difference between *'ilm* and *sihr*.[23] *'Ilm* is the Islamic knowledge openly taught in the regular Koran schools to all Muslim students in West Africa – learning Arabic to be able to read and understand the Koran. *Sihr*, however, is the esoteric knowledge of how to use the Koran to manipulate the universe (in this article, primarily by composing Islamic numerical tables), a skill taught individually outside the Koran schools only to a chosen few. This means that it is only possible to learn *sihr* after the candidate has mastered the *'ilm* level of understanding of the Koran. When I asked Omar if reciting a certain surah to protect oneself, in case one is threatened, is *'ilm* or *sihr*, he tells me that it is *'ilm*. So, to be *sihr* the Koran has to be modified. This implies that (according to my informants) if one uses the (unmodified words of the) Koran to influence the universe, it is still considered as being *'ilm*, even if the knowledge of which passage to read might be esoteric. Omar clarifies:

You are now changing things to the way you want to have it. It is not how it is written from the beginning [in the Koran]. People who have knowledge have discovered [i.e., *sihr* consists of more than what God disclosed to Muhammad] the Koran in a different way, and they can use it to either protect or to kill, or to help [people in] other ways.

Similar to how the Koran existed before it was given to the prophet Muhammad, *sihr*, too, existed before it was revealed to him. Musa (Moses) used *sihr* to defeat Pharaoh, and Isa (Jesus) also used it

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23 From the perspective of the informants, it is not possible to translate *'ilm* as science and *sihr* as magic because both "religion" and "magic" fall within the concept of *sihr*. *'Ilm* also includes premises derived solely from the Koran (religion). Hence, I do not consider the modern Western/Christian dichotomy of "magic" and "religion" as applicable in the researched field of this article.

to heal people and resurrect a dead man, according to Omar.[24]

With the proper knowledge and design, the Islamic numerical table is considered by its practitioners to direct the different forces of the universe to influence a particular event. In this respect, *sihr* is viewed as a technology or a science, a method of coercing acts upon the created universe and its inhabitants. This presumes implicitly that its effects on the universe are always empirically predictable – like natural or scientific laws – instead of each case being left up to the mercy of God.

A case in point can be found in the 10th century teachings of the "Brethren of Purity," *Rasa il Ihwan al-Safa* (Epistle 7, 5), the Islamic sciences are divided into three fields: the propaedeutic (useful to improve life on earth), the religious (useful to improve fate after death), and the philosophical (useful only for the sake of knowledge). In this classification, *sihr* is placed in the first category, next to mathematics, medicine, agriculture, commerce, and other practical knowledge (Lory 1992: 149).[25]

Another indication that *sihr* (among my informants) is viewed as a technology, and not a pure faith system, is the testing of the talismans. For instance, in the West African discourse, a talisman's "capacity to defeat evil cannot exist purely at the level of belief and must be validated by [empirical] results" (Schaffer 1980: 20f.). In my interviews, the informants also confirmed that they have themselves *experienced* several times how well the Islamic numerical tables worked and they stress that it is a science. The Islamic numerical table's proven causal efficacy originates from a scientifically coercive structure based on the laws of Nature, for example, both argument and evidence. Still, the argument of this logical structure is conditioned on the truth factor of the underlying Islamic premises derived from the Koran and the Sunna for what constitutes "Nature."[26]

11 How the *khatim* Works According to Omar

Omar explains that behind each *khatim* are djinns as helping agents or executive powers.[27] If the design of the *khatim* is correct, these metaphysical agents are compelled to fulfill its orders. Omar uses a metaphor to describe the effect of a properly composed *khatim*, "it is like mathematics." His conviction of the coercive function of the *khatim* supports Cammann's assumption that the metaphysical symbols within the square "were not only symbolic depictions of motion and creativity, but were actual possessors of universal power … [that] might be utilized to work for good and evil ends" (1969: 199). Omar further states that any surah, or *khatim*, is effective even if the clients or enemies are non-Muslims.

I asked Omar why God allows the *khatimulu*, or other kinds of Koran-based manipulations of the universe, for ethically dubious transactions like harming one's enemies or forcing somebody to marry you? At first, he responded that the mentality in Europe is different from the African in such matters. Later, Omar's diplomatic answer was that it is up to God on Judgment Day to decide if the outcome of the *khatim* was unethical. Analogous to how He has given Man a free will, He has shared this art with man to be used with responsibility.[28]

12 The European Market for Marabouts – The Case of Mustapha

Mustapha handles most of his clients at a clinic in a southern suburb of Stockholm that he shares with four other West African marabouts and healers. He also acquires clients by distributing his business cards, but mostly by word of mouth from content clients he has helped. Omar, who often helps him and some of the other healers as a translator, dis-

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24 Interestingly, a resembling explanation for the miracles of Moses and Jesus is given in the teachings of the "Brethren of Purity." These prophets' miracles are not caused by divine intervention interrupting the natural order, but the prophets' higher knowledge from within the natural order, however, given to them by divine grace (Lory 1992: 154).

25 However, at a higher level "magic" is explained as a meta-science, everything that exists on earth is a result of divine magic (Lory 1992: 158f.).

26 As a comparison, the informants' reasoning resembles how (inspired by medieval Islamic sources) *magia naturalis* was viewed in the Christian world during the Renaissance. Firstly, it was considered as a discipline within science. Secondly, it did not intervene with God's intentions for the Universe, i.e., it solely manipulated how Nature otherwise would have behaved, and it did not cooperate with satanic forces. Thirdly, it shared the openness among the practitioners to incorpo-

rate theories and methods from other cultures and then adapt them to their own cosmology. However, in the Christian Renaissance world (unlike in the informants' cosmology) angels and demons were not considered to belong to the natural world (Lehrich 2003).

27 Mustapha is also of the opinion that it is djinns who are compelled by the *khatim* and execute its orders. When I asked him if angels also might be used, he answers that they have much more important matters to take care of than human made *khatimulu*.

28 Shurreef (1973: 229) argues in another fashion with regard to reading Koranic passages; "[t]o cause the death of an enemy … practitioners only undertake them for those actually in need of relief [from their enemies]: and the Almighty again, on his part, will only hear the supplications of those who are really distressed."

close that most of Mustapha's clients are Europeans and non-Muslims. It is a mix of immigrants from other European countries and native Swedes. A typical case according to Omar was a Swedish lady with three children who wanted to prevent her husband from leaving her.[29] With the help of a *khatim*, Mustapha solved her problem successfully.

Omar mentions that it took Mustapha a very short time after his arrival in Sweden, with no contacts at all, to become self-supporting. In his case, I am convinced that the reason was that he was introduced to Omar, who had all the local contacts early on. According to Omar, Mustapha does not live like a king, but he earns a decent living from his fees. A standard session seems to cost around € 60 (SEK 500), and a regular treatment will take from four to ten sessions (€ 240–600). He also treats people for free who cannot afford the fixed fees of the regular Swedish health care (€ 24/SEK 200 per session in 2012/2013).

The reason why only a minority of his clients are West Africans is, according to Omar, that they find the Swedish marabouts' fees too high.[30] Instead, they solve their problems either when they are visiting their country of origin or they phone a relative and ask them to solve it on their behalf with a (much cheaper) local marabout.

Mustapha is also earning income from teaching his esoteric methods to five students in Stockholm. Except for Omar[31], the other students are Wolof, another West African people. Thus far, no native Swede has asked to be taught his skills. However, Mustapha assures me, that he will teach anybody with the proper mindset and willingness to learn.

13 Conclusion

Since the introduction of Islam in West Africa, the marabout has competed with other non-Muslim re-

ligious specialists with his unique skills for reading, writing, and mathematics. When applying these skills to designing talismans – as a technology to influence the universe independent of the religious affiliation of the clients – a market emerged that has survived into present times. It is argued here that the *khatim*, seen through the eyes of the field, should primary be viewed as a technology not as magic or as a religious practice.

The principle is to use the *khatim* with theological code words to instruct the lower creating agents of the Islamic universe, primarily the djinns, to fulfill the orders of the marabout. This is following the tradition how Suleiman (Solomon), with the help of having God's 100th name engraved on his signet ring (*khatim*), ruled over the djinns (Doutté 1909: 156 f.). In my opinion, this is the most probable reason among those brought forth in this article, why it is called a *khatim*. The practitioner imitates how Suleiman, "the proto-marabout," used his signet ring to perform *sihr* with the help of the powerful djinns.

In Western Europe, the primary market for the marabouts is not the West African community, who prefer using the much cheaper marabouts in their home countries, but the native population and local immigrants from other European countries.

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29 In French media advertisements, marabouts mostly market themselves towards potential native French clients as specialists for solving love problems. They compete in the alternative market with psychics and other occult consultants for the same clients. The main competitive strengths of the marabouts are their plentitude of methods, the "exoticism prejudice" of the greater occult knowledge of the "Other," and their focus on not only diagnose but also actually working to solve the client's problem (Kuczynski 2007: 348 f.).

30 In Paris, which for colonial reasons is a much more mature market for marabouts than Sweden, it appears that most of the clients are non-West Africans (Soares 2004: 916).

31 Omar is also currently studying with another marabout here in Stockholm. Unfortunately, this *bake* (a healer from the Jakhanke people) is less willing to disclose his "secrets" to me than Omar and Mustapha. However, he has shown me his favorite *khatim* that compels a mighty djinn.

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