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DRINKING THE KORAN: THE MEANING OF KORANIC VERSES IN BERTI ERASURE¹

Abdullahi Osman El-Tom

Islam, probably more than any other religion, connotes the image of a great tradition which has imposed itself on culturally diverse populations and gradually united them in a monolithic belief whose basic tenets stem from the Koran and the prophetic tradition. This image is bolstered by the fact that, despite the recognized cultural diversity of the Muslim world (see Geertz, 1968) which has been perpetuated through the differing interpretations of Islam embodied in its holy text, little research has been done on the meaning of the Koranic text at the local level. The lack of such research, in its own turn, perpetuates the false image of a uniform meaning of the Koranic text throughout the Muslim world.

This article is concerned with the meaning imposed on the Koranic text by graduates of Koranic schools (*khalwa*) among the Berti of the northern Darfur Province of the Republic of the Sudan. There are 60,000–80,000 Berti living in the area which extends approximately from latitude 13° 44' to 14° 34' N and from longitude 25° 16' to 56° 17' E.² The vegetation of this area consists of dry savannah in the north, which merges into the light woodland savannah of the south. The average rainfall increases from around 200 mm per annum in the north to around 500 mm in the south. The Berti of Darfur have a mixed economy combining hoe cultivation with animal husbandry. They mainly cultivate millet, sorghum, sesame and watermelon. Peanuts are intensively grown in the southern part of Berti territory for cash. The keeping of goats, cattle, sheep and donkeys forms an important activity in Berti economy.

The Berti live in small permanent villages with around twenty households in each. Most of the household heads in each village are close members of the same patrilineage. Children reside with their parents until the birth of their first child after marriage. Most men are married to only one wife at a time, although a man can have up to four wives. Marriage between children of two brothers and patrilineal residence are regarded as ideal.³

The Berti are Muslims and have been speaking their own dialect of the Arabic language for several generations. Their Islamization was a gradual process that cannot be traced back to a fixed date. It was, however, in the fourteenth century that the penetration of the Muslim Arabs into the sultanate of Darfur was first reported (O'Fahey, 1980: 5). The process of Berti Islamization was accompanied by the Arabization of the people. Many Berti leaders have gone further to obtain written pedigrees in order to authenticate their claim to Arab ancestry (see El-Tom, 1983: 303–5).⁴ The Berti are comparatively more Arabized than their neighbours – the Meidob, the Zaghawa and the Fur – who still retain their African languages. The Fur, however, are famous for their more numerous and better Koranic schools and for their stronger adherence to Islam. In addition to other minor ethnic groups, the Berti are also bordered by the Baggara, a pastoral nomadic group. Among all the Berti's neighbours, the Baggara are the closest to the Arabs in many respects, a fact which is also acknowledged by the Berti. As in other parts of Muslim Black Africa, Berti Islam is a fusion of orthodox beliefs and practices and elements belonging to the indigenous pre-Islamic religious system. Indeed, Islam and the pagan cults form a dual axis constituting different

recipes for social action. In general, Berti adherence to Islam is more emphasized at the collective level manifested in public rituals such as religious festival prayers, rain prayers, etc. At the individual level, as in the case of the daily Muslim prayers and ritual of ablution, Islam is grossly neglected by the Berti. Women in general are more pagan than men (see Trimmingham, 1968: 46).

Islam has also been promoted by the traditional Koranic schools, which are geared towards the memorizing of the Koran: the literacy which is taught in them is seen as means to this end. Successful graduates of these schools who claim to have committed the entire Koran to memory are known as *fakis*. This term may be a corruption of either the word *faqih* – ‘jurisprudent’, or *faqir* – ‘a Sufi medicant’ (Trimingham, 1949: 140; 1968: 61; Hasan, 1975: 116). Scholars working in the Sudan have glossed the term *faki* in various ways: a holy man or religious leader (Hussey, 1933: 35), a native doctor (Al-Tayib, 1955: 147), a local clergyman (Trimingham, 1949: 140), etc. These glosses reflect the various roles which the *fakis* assume at different times in various parts of the country. Among the Berti they act as religious leaders of individual village communities, Koranic teachers, healers, diviners and providers of amulets. There are at least one or two *fakis* in each Berti village, one of whom is collectively contracted by village members to lead their religious rituals. He commands his people in all public prayers and attendance at *rites de passage* in the village is also among his duties.

Roughly speaking, less than 10 per cent of the Berti population go to Koranic schools. The majority of those, moreover, do not stay in the schools long enough to become *fakis*. The total number of *fakis* among the Berti ranges between 1 and 2 per cent of the Berti population. The majority of them are ethnically Berti and cannot be differentiated from their clients in terms of their social background. A few *fakis* come from the Fur and various West African groups. Most of the *fakis* are no better off than the average Berti although the few of them who gain a better reputation tend to enjoy a higher standard of living. Their income derives from their services to village communities, such as the leading of rain and epidemic prayers. They also gain considerable remuneration from services they offer to individuals, mostly from the sale of amulets, charms, Koranic medicine, etc.

Berti religious medication is almost entirely causal and the particular force which produces diseases with different symptoms can always be dealt with using the same Koranic verses. Symptomatic treatment of disease is also known and is applied particularly in the case of diseases which are attributed to ‘natural’ causes such as the weather, ordinary accidents, etc. Another important activity of the *faki* is to write some Koranic verses on both sides of a wooden slate (*lōh*) using a pen made of a sharpened millet stalk and ink (*dawāi*) made of a fermented paste of soot and gum arabic. The written text is then washed off with water which is drunk by the *faki*’s clients. The water is referred to as *mihāi* (from the verb *yamha*, to erase) and, following Al-Safi (1970: 30), I have translated this term as ‘erasure’.

The use of both amulets and erasure derives from the belief in the power of the Koranic verses, the names of God and the other divine inscriptions which they contain. These are believed to cure diseases, to protect against specific malevolent forces and to enable the client to achieve various desirable goals.

Although the drinking of the Koranic texts seems to be widespread only on the periphery of the Islamic world (for West Africa, see Sanneh, 1979), the view that the Koran has a medical value is not merely the invention of Black Africans.

It is contained in the Koran itself:

We send down (stage by stage)
 In the Koran that which
 Is a healing and a mercy . . .
 [sura 7: 82]⁵

The notion of uttering the divine names for various purposes is similarly borrowed from the Koran:

The most beautiful names
 Belong to God:
 So call on Him by them . . .
 [sura 7: 180]

The phrase 'call on Him' is perhaps better translated as 'invoke Him' (by His attributes). The original word is *udū* (invoke) which derives from the word *du'ā* (invoking), and the latter term is used by the Berti in referring to rain prayers or any prayers performed to ensure welfare or to alleviate misfortune at the communal level. Although it is spiritual healing which is meant here according to the theological interpretation of the Koran (Ali, 1938: 718 and 396), the Berti understand these verses as recommending and justifying the use of erasure as medicine.

The Koran is regarded as containing divine power; thus, to possess the Koranic texts renders an individual powerful and protects him against misfortunes and malevolent forces. The highest form of the possession of the Koran is its commitment to memory, which amounts to its internalization in the head, the superior part of the body, whence it can be instantly reproduced by recitation. But the Koran can also be internalized in the body by being drunk. Although drinking the Koran is seen as being far less effective than memorizing it, it is superior to carrying it on the body through the use of amulets. A major disadvantage of amulets is that they are liable to be lost, left behind or rendered ineffective by exposure to ritual pollution.

Which particular Koranic verses are to be used for erasure or amulets is not taught in the Koranic schools. A faki has to gather such knowledge from his associates or from published books which are available in the local markets and which are used exclusively by fakis. The majority of these books are recent reprints of literature originally written during the early Islamic civilization and most of them are currently imported from Egypt, Iran, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia. Their contents are centred on early Islamic medicine with particular emphasis on the 'magical' use of the Koran and other divine inscriptions. A few of these books are exclusively devoted to the description of Islamic rituals.

In addition to at least one handwritten copy of the Koran, each faki keeps a small library containing some of these published books as well as a handwritten private book, referred to as *umbatri*, which consists of a collection of extracts copied from other handwritten or printed sources. Apart from Koranic verses or sometimes whole chapters, both amulets and erasure use various signs and tables of letters, numbers and names of prophets, jinns and devils or specific adversaries of the client. The following discussion of erasure ignores these signs and tables, the main concern being with explaining the indigenous reasons for the selection of particular Koranic verses and the meanings imposed on them.

Most Berti villagers drink erasures once or twice a year for one reason or another.

The decision to ask a faki to prepare an erasure may be triggered off by an illness, starting a business, getting involved in a dispute, setting out on a journey, etc. There are, indeed, countless situations which might prompt someone to drink an erasure and different people are obviously motivated by different concerns.

The Koranic chapters or verses which are chosen for erasure are to be written a certain number of times. The numbers 7, 41, 100, 313 and 1000 are repeatedly specified in each *umbatri*. This is in addition to the number 3 which is confined to the introductory verses of erasure. Indigenous interpretations stress these numbers as good (*samhīn*) or lucky (*bukhāt*) (El-Tom, 1983: 65–9).

It has been widely observed that the repetition of certain formulas in writing or in ritual speech is aimed at changing the reality which exists independently of the actors. This notion of the 'magical' power of a certain class of uttered or written words is not something that is exclusive to Berti thought and has been extensively explored in anthropology (e.g. Malinowski, 1948; Evans-Pritchard, 1937; Horton, 1967; Strathern, 1977; Tambiah, 1979). According to Berti belief, God himself created things by uttering 'words'. This belief is clearly Koranic, as can be attested to by a few verses which are often used in erasure: 'His power is such that when He intends a thing He says concerning it: Be, and it is' (Khan, 1981: 438), or 'when He decrees a thing, He says concerning it: Be, and it is' (ibid.: 291). However, the formulas and words which the Berti utter have a similar creative power only when God endows them with it. In line with this view, the Berti fakis often comment on erasure: 'We make the reasons [*nisabubu*], and God accomplishes [*bitim*] them.' A similar notion is involved when the client, instead of asking a faki to make him an erasure to prevent illness, says: 'Create me a reason [*sabib lay*] to avoid sickness.' One sentence which is found in all erasure writings, and which I have omitted from my descriptions to avoid repetition, is: 'May God accept our intention' [*rabbana tagabal minna*]. The word 'intention' refers to the purpose for which the erasure is written and it is specified in some but not in all cases; God, who alone renders the formulas powerful, is believed to be capable of knowing it even if it is not specified.

Depending on the length of the text and the number of times it has to be written, writing an erasure can take anything from a few hours to several weeks. As an erasure is given to the client in small portions, he has to consume each dose before he gets the next one. There is no strict timing for taking it. An erasure is normally received in a small bowl or bottle and the client can either drink the whole lot at once or take it in small doses during the course of the day. The next day he asks the faki for more until the whole prescription has been drunk. An erasure can be prepared for and shared by more than one client and it is a quite common practice to order one erasure for all one's children. Despite the worry about the exact number of times each Koranic verse must be copied in the erasure, sharing the erasure takes place in a relaxed manner and no effort is made to ensure its equal distribution, which would easily be possible if, for example, teacups were used for measuring it. The erasure is taken from the same container by a number of people in exactly the same way as ordinary food and drink is consumed. During the time when he is taking an erasure the client must not commit adultery and, according to some people, he also has to refrain from sexual intercourse and from drinking beer. In spite of their view that drinking beer does not contravene any Islamic proscription, the Berti believe that, if beer and erasure are taken on the same day, the latter will not be blessed by God and consequently will not function.

A few Koranic chapters or verses used in erasures are known, at least by their titles, to most Berti adults. These are used for the most common complaints which require erasures and the client can order them by name. Other less frequently used Koranic passages are not widely known. With these, the client may describe his situation, leaving the choice of the appropriate verses to the faki. The common Koranic chapters which are generally known to most adults include the Unity chapter (used to counter the evil eye), the Mankind and Dawn chapters (used against sorcery), and the Throne verses (used as a protection against devils) (Ali, 1938: 102–3). The Throne verses are also used when the erasure is ordered simply to ensure the client's good health and for protection against any unforeseen misfortune in the future. Their appropriateness for this purpose derives from the fact that they are considered to be the most powerful in the Koran. Ghazali, the Arab philosopher, treated them as a single verse, which he referred to as the 'chief' of the Koranic verses (Abul Quasem, 1979: 75–8). They demonstrate the ultimate power of God, His superiority and His constant alertness which is neither disrupted by fatigue nor terminated by sleep. God is omniscient and nothing can occur to His creatures (including the client) without His will. Misfortune, including sickness, is conceived of as issuing from malignant acts which are not blessed by God, and the client who drinks the Throne verses is taking refuge with God so that He will protect him against such malevolent disturbances.

The Exordium chapter, which is reputed to guarantee success in new undertakings (like trade, travel, etc.), is also generally known. The reason why some Koranic verses are better known than others derives from the fact that the forces against which they are believed to be effective are seen as major causes of disease or misfortune in general. As knowledge is unequally distributed in any given society (Holy and Stuchlik, 1981: 17–18), it is hardly surprising that those who are in close contact with fakis and their clients are better informed than other Berti about which Koranic verses should be used in erasure. Berti women are particularly ill-informed and they show comparatively little interest in these matters. They have less contact with fakis and are expected to be represented by their male protectors when they need their service. At the same time, women are discouraged from attending Koranic schools, except for short periods, and are, therefore, deprived of the chance of becoming professional fakis. Their poor knowledge of the Koran in general can also be related to their lack of participation in the parts of rituals which require the use of the Koran, such as rain and funeral prayers (El-Tom, 1983: chapter 7).

All erasure writings start with the verse 'In the name of God the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful'. This verse appears at the beginning of all but one of the chapters of the Koran. The verse or a part of it is frequently uttered by the Berti to ensure blessing, to avoid bad luck or to ward off any malevolent influences; it is uttered, for example, before eating, drinking, weeding or any other similar activity.

KORANIC VERSES USED IN ERASURES

In the Berti view, specific verses have the power to bring about specific desirable outcomes. Sometimes a certain Koranic verse is used in erasure because the purpose for which the erasure was prepared is understood as being mentioned in the verse itself (Erasures 1–3); in other cases the connection between the verse

chosen and the purpose of the erasure is not that direct. The connection is, nevertheless, established through the imposition of a certain meaning on the verse used.

Erasure 1 (for inducing pregnancy)

The following verses are seen as having the power to induce pregnancy in a woman who has failed to bear children, because they directly recall God's power to create life.

He it is Who shapes you
In the wombs as He pleases.

[sura 3: 6]

There is no god but He,
The Exalted in Power,
The Wise.

[sura 18]

Erasure 2 (for sore legs)

And the servants of [God]
Most Gracious are those
Who walk on earth
In humility, and when the ignorants
Address them, they say,
'Peace!';
Those who spend the night
In adoration of their Lord
Prostrate and standing;
Those who say, 'Our Lord!
Avert from us the Wrath
Of Hell, for its Wrath
Is indeed an affliction grievous,
Evil indeed is it
As an abode, and as
A place to rest in.

[sura 25: 63-6]

These verses are obviously selected for their reference to walking. At the same time they portray the patient as humble, peaceful and spending the night praying. Prayers are normally associated with the physical movement of the body in which the legs are crucial. The selected verses give the impression that the legs are either incapacitated by excessive prayers or that they are required to be restored to health to allow the resumption of religious practice.

Erasure 3 (for promoting intelligence)

This erasure, referred to as *ayāt al-fihim* (literally, 'verses of understanding'), is prepared for primary-school pupils in an effort to help them pass their final exams:

Proclaim! And thy Lord
Is Most Bountiful, -
He Who taught
[The use of] the pen, -
Taught man that
Which he knew not.

[sura 96: 3-5]

To Solomon We inspired
 The [right] understanding
 Of the matter: to each
 [Of them] We gave Judgement
 And knowledge.

[sura 21: 79]

Verily this is
 The supreme achievement.

[sura 37: 60]

A general problem in the translation of this text is the distortion of the meaning of certain words in the original. The word 'proclaim' in the first line is a translation of the term *igra*, which literally means 'read'. In a different interpretation of the Koran, Khan translates the word *igra* as 'recite' (Khan, 1981: 624). For the Berti, *igra* is directly associated with 'learning' which is also known as *girāi* ('reading'). The word 'taught', appearing in the same verse, is a translation of the term *allama*, from which the word *talim* ('education') is derived. The word 'understanding' (*fihim*) is the key word from which the title of the erasure is derived. The third verse as a whole also creates a certain problem of translation. The last vowel sign in the Arabic word *lahuwa* (literally, 'truly it is' or 'truly he is') is omitted by the Berti fakis and the word is transformed into *lahu* (literally, 'for him' or 'for it'). Ignoring the grammatical structure and the theological meaning of the verse, we can reconstruct it according to the meaning it conveys to the Berti: 'The supreme achievement [triumph] will be secured for this person.'

Like the examples presented above, the Koranic verses here relate directly to the subject for which the erasure is prepared. Teaching, the use of the pen, knowledge of the previously unknown (first verse), right understanding and the gaining of judgement and knowledge (second verse) are all clearly relevant to education.

Erasure 4 (for a safe and successful journey)

This erasure was prepared for two young men who were migrating to Libya where the recent oil boom has opened up opportunities for unskilled work, many Berti going there for one or two years. The men were advised by their parents to seek a special erasure from a faki. It was already decided by them that the Exordium chapter was appropriate in their case:

In the name of God,
 Most Gracious, Most Merciful.
 Praise be to God,
 The Cherisher and Sustainer of the Worlds;
 Most Gracious, Most Merciful;
 Master of the Day of Judgement.
 Thee do we worship,
 And Thine aid we seek.
 Show us the straight way,
 The way of those on whom
 Thou hast bestowed Thy Grace,
 Those whose [portion]
 Is not wrath,
 And who go not astray.

[sura 1]

Unlike in the previous examples, it is difficult here to see the relation between the words of the chapter and the activity for which it was used. The meanings conveyed in the chapter include acknowledgement of various attributes of God, a testimony ensuring the ultimate adherence of the individual to Him, and an invocation to Him to lead the person along the path of the people whom He favours. The chapter has no direct reference to material benefit which is the sole purpose of the migration. The only term which the Berti might relate to prosperity is 'grace'.

In Berti Arabic the word *nīma* ('grace') has much wider connotations than its English gloss. It implies a gift of God which can include any privileges an individual might wish to have: children, wealth, social standing, power, etc. The word necessarily implies that the favour in question is given by God. The word is also used in its verb form *yanāma* ('graces', 'favours'). It is often said that God 'graces' or 'favours' an individual with wealth, children, etc. However, the theological meaning of the word 'grace' in the verse refers merely to the spiritual guidance of the individual (along the straight way). The Berti do not in any context correlate material prosperity and spiritual salvation as Weber says Calvinists do (Weber, 1930). Neither is the Berti conception of the people 'graced' by God near to Geertz's finding that the marabouts are endowed with blessings (*baraka*) that include material prosperity in addition to other attributes (Geertz, 1968: 43–4). Although I would not want to go so far as to suggest that the Berti conceive of material prosperity as incompatible with spiritual salvation, they clearly express the opinion that the richer a person is, the more prone he is to being diverted from the godly 'straight way'. The point to be established here is the absence of a clear link between the material benefit which is the main objective of the migration and the guidance called for in the chapter. The implication of this is that the wording of the chapter is not an important reason for its being chosen. But the question still remains as to why this chapter should be seen as appropriate in this situation. The main clue to answering it derives from its ritual use in most situations of transition, like marriage, reconciliation, long journeys, pilgrimage, death, etc. When the chapter is recited to protect an individual during the new phase upon which he is entering, all present raise their hands 'open' (i.e. palms upwards) in front of their faces. After reciting the chapter, they say 'Amen', rubbing their hands on their faces. This practice is also referred to as *al-fātiha* (literally, 'opener'). The efficacy of the chapter in this respect derives from its being the first chapter of the Koran which is conceived of as incorporating every sphere of life. The title of the chapter is often translated as 'the opening chapter of the Koran' (Ali, 1938: 14–15) which is synonymous with the Berti meaning of the word *al-fātiha*. The *al-fātiha* chapter is understood by the fakis as capable of 'opening the doors of this world and the next'. 'Opening the doors' is a prerequisite for succeeding in any undertaking. The chapter is, therefore, regarded as betokening a good start in any change of status or new activity. Although migration to Libya is a fairly recent practice, travelling for the sake of material gain is by no means new. The Koranic chapter is not, however, merely used to ensure material gain but the realization of all possible aspirations such as an easy journey and sound health.

Erasure 5 (against malicious forces)

This erasure was written for the faki's hired herder who was not sick during

the consultation though he occasionally felt his 'whole body' aching, a common complaint in the Berti area. That was coupled with his failure to establish his own herd, despite his reputation as a hard worker. There was a number of reasons suggested for the slow increase of the animals and the occasional physical discomfort felt by the herder: the evil eye, sorcery, *ārids* (highly malicious devils), etc. The Mankind and the Dawn chapters of the Koran, which are particularly effective for the protection of self and property against these particular cases, were selected in this instance:

Say: I seek refuge
 With the Lord
 And Cherisher of Mankind,
 The King [or Ruler]
 Of Mankind,
 The God [or Judge]
 Of Mankind –
 From the mischief
 Of the Whisperer
 [Of evil], who withdraws
 [After his whisper] –
 The same who whispers
 Into the hearts of Mankind –
 Among Jinns
 And among Men.

[sura 114: Mankind]

Say: I seek refuge
 With the Lord of the Dawn,
 From the mischief
 Of created things;
 From the mischief
 Of those who practise
 Secret Acts;
 And from the mischief
 Of the envious one
 As he practises envy.

[sura 113: Dawn]

The erasure was meant to protect the herder and his property against the malicious forces in the present as well as in the future. The two chapters stress taking refuge with God from the malignity of evil forces, and the mischief of the one who whispers in the hearts of people or the mischief of all created things, human beings as well as jinns and devils. They also mention taking refuge from those who practise secret acts, a phrase which immediately connotes sorcery to a Berti, and from the mischief of the envious, which could be directly related to the Berti conceptualization of the casting of the evil eye as being triggered off by envy (cf Shilob, 1961; Morsey, 1979). For the Berti, the verses thus clearly specify the recognized causes of illnesses: evil forces (created things), sorcery (secret acts) and the evil eye (envy). Most Berti fakis are familiar with the Arabic literature which recommends the use of these verses for medication and they know that the Prophet Mohammed once suffered as a result of sorcery and used these two chapters to diffuse its effects (Athir al-Din, n.d.: 653).

Erasure 6 (against the evil eye)

This erasure was prepared for a young boy who suffered from fever for one night during which he screamed several times in his sleep. He was instantly given some tablets bought in the market and by the morning he was feeling well. The sickness followed immediately after a visit which he and his mother had made to a crowded market on the previous day. Everybody agreed that he might have suffered from an evil eye cast on him there. For this reason his father consulted the faki in spite of the fact that the boy had recovered by the morning. The father suggested an amulet, a suggestion which was rejected by the faki, who argued that a child did not know its value and might mistreat it, and suggested an erasure instead. It consisted of the Unity chapter (*al-ikhlas*).

Say: He is God,
The One and Only;
God, the Eternal, Absolute
He begetteth not,
Nor is He begotten;
And there is none
Like unto Him.

[sura 112]

The Berti believe in the existence of the evil eye whereby a person can harm people and their property by merely looking at them. The evil eye is believed to be a result of jealousy triggered by the sighting of desirable people or objects. The hanging of eyecatching materials on children and property is used by the Berti in order to divert the attention of the witch away from the children and property themselves, or to assuage his envious heart. It is, however, accepted by most adult Berti that this chapter is effective against the evil eye. If they meet someone reputed to be a witch, they may recite this chapter to avoid being bewitched by him. Those who do not know the whole chapter may repeat only the first two lines, which are known to most illiterate adults. Any illness which coincides with being in a crowded area is likely to be diagnosed as being caused by the evil eye, irrespective of its symptoms. The words of the chapter do not refer specifically to the evil eye but refer to and confirm certain attributes of God and His unique power. The evil eye can be a direct cause of many ailments but it is God who is identified as the ultimate cause, without whose permission no disease can affect a person, and who has the power to render the direct cause of a disease harmless. Dealing with God instead of the evil eye is a safety valve against misidentification of the direct cause.

Erasure 7 (for mysterious diseases)

The following verses are prescribed for diseases, the direct causes of which are unknown.

. . . Who created me, and
It is He Who guides me . . .
And when I am ill,
It is He Who cures me.

[sura 26: 78, 80]

And whose help I need
 On the day of judgement,
 Oh, My Lord! Bestow on me
 The wisdom of the prophet
 And the righteous people.

By the sky
 And the Night Visitant
 [Therein] . . .
 Surely [God] is able
 To bring him back
 [To life after death].

[sura 86: 1-8]

In explaining the choice of the verses, the faki referred to the phrase 'It is He Who cures me' as the main reason for selecting the first verse ('Who . . .'). The second sentence ('And . . .') was described as a Koranic verse, which in fact it is not. The last verse ('By . . .') was used because of its reference to the ability of God to 'bring him back to life' and, in the course of the exegesis, the faki substituted the word 'him' by the phrase 'sick man'. The verse was understood as referring to God's power to bring a person who is very ill, and hence almost dead, back to life. The verses have been manipulated in a certain way to suit the occasion. The first two lines ('Who . . . guides me') stand in the Koran as verse 78 and are connected in the erasure with verse 80 ('And . . . cures me') to form a single structure. Verse 79 ('[He] Who gives me food and drink') is omitted as it is irrelevant in the context.

The second paragraph translated by myself is a collection of words taken from different Koranic verses. The most dramatic change is made in the last line. The original verse reads as follows:

O my Lord! bestow wisdom
 On me, and join me
 With the righteous.

[sura 26: 83]

The word translated as 'righteous' is *sālihīn* and it preserves its classical Arabic meaning in Berti colloquial Arabic. It is mostly used to describe dead people who have led a highly religious life and who have been granted the status of saints. Copying the verse as it stands in the Koran would imply for a Berti a call upon God to allow the sick person to join 'physically' the 'dead' righteous people. The words 'join me' are omitted to avoid such an impression. Despite the change, the phrase keeps the form of a Koranic verse in meaning and rhythm, so that few people in the area would be able to spot it as a 'forged' verse.

The last line in the third paragraph illustrates clearly the imposition of the faki's own meaning on the Koranic text. The Berti sometimes refer to the recovery of very sick people as their virtually coming from the dead. Unlike the indigenous interpretation, the classical meaning refers to resurrection after death, in the next life and not in the present one as the faki wanted to understand it. The indigenous interpretation explained here is made possible by an understanding of the original text in a way that differs from its theological meaning.

Erasure 8 (for difficult delivery)

An erasure can be prepared when a difficult delivery is expected or sometimes even during the actual delivery.

No God but He
 The Almighty, full of honour.
 . . . There is no god
 But He! – Lord of the Throne
 Supreme!

[sura 27: 26]

No God but He
 Lord of Earth and Heavens.
 . . . There is no God
 But He! – Lord of the Throne
 Supreme.

[*ibid.*]

The day they see it,
 [It will be] as if they
 Had tarried but a single
 Evening, or [at most till]
 The following morn.

[sura 79: 46]

In explaining why these particular verses should ease delivery, the faki spoke about the last verse, specifically the phrase ‘The day they see it’ as if what is seen is the baby being born after a shorter and easier labour than anticipated. He seemed unaware of the classical meaning of the verse which predicts the Day of Judgment, equated here with the baby. The case excellently illustrates the incompatibility of the Berti and the orthodox interpretations of the same sentence.

Erasure 9 (for protection of the community; collective erasure: jumla)

The word *jumla* means ‘total’ or ‘sum’ and it refers to copying the whole Koran, a practice which is also known as *wazn al kitāb* (‘weighing of the book’). The *jumla* is prepared at times when acute misfortunes such as epidemics, pests and outbreaks of fire threaten the whole community. The whole Koran is copied and washed and the erasure is given to all the members of the community to share. As the Koran is believed to contain verses ‘useful against various malicious forces, to partake in drinking the whole of it is regarded as appropriate when the exact force cannot be identified. As the preparation of *jumla* is laborious and normally done on a single day, all the fakis in the area may be invited as well as anybody else capable of copying the Koranic text, such as students and school teachers. Writers congregate at the village mosque and a single looseleaf copy of the Koran is distributed to all the participants to copy. It does not matter where a writer begins as the objective is simply to copy every single word in the Koran. The head faki gives each participant two or three pages at a time. When the pages have been copied, the writer puts them aside and asks for more. The amount of water used for washing the written slates should be enough to allow every individual a drink from it. The erasure from various containers is later collected in a large water pot. More clean water may then be added to the erasure if there are many people to share it. When the whole Koran is fully washed in the water pot, the head faki invites all the men and older boys in the village to have a drink. Some of the erasure is taken to the women in the houses or reserved for the absent members of the community to drink later. The practice usually ends with a public sacrifice (*karāma*).

Erasure 10 (against slander and calumny)

This and the following erasure are the only two which are not drunk. In the *umbatri* from which the following extracts come, the use of the erasure is described in the following way: 'Write the following verses seven times each. Wash them and pour the water in a hole. Fill the hole with straw. Burn the straw and bury the hole. The calumny will disappear even if it concerns a homicide. This is true and has been tested before.'

Every time
They kindle the fire of war,
God doth extinguish it.
[sura 5: 67]

And say: 'Truth has [now]
Arrived, and Falsehood perished:
For Falsehood is [by its nature]
Bound to perish.'
[sura 17: 81]

We said: 'O Fire!
Be thou cool,
And [a means of] safety
For Abraham!
Then they sought a stratagem
Against him: but We
Made them the ones
That lost most.
[sura 21: 69-79]

Will not the Unbelievers
Have been paid back
For what they did?
[sura 83: 36]

Truly strong is the Grip
[And power] of thy Lord.
[sura 85: 12]

And when ye exert
Your strong hand,
Do ye do it like men
Of absolute power?
[sura 26: 130]

The word 'fire', which appears in some of the above verses, is taken metaphorically to mean 'slander': the Berti refer to the slanderer as 'the person who lights a fire between friends', and conflicts caused by the slanderer are referred to as *nār* ('fire').

The status ascribed to the client in the quoted verses contrasts very well with the portrait of his enemy. The first verse ('Every time . . .') presents the enemy as an instigator of war while it is God who protects the client by extinguishing the fire of war. The second verse ('And say . . .') gives the impression that the client is abiding by the 'truth' while his rival is equated with an unbeliever who is founding his position on the falsehood which has perished and for which he will eventually pay (see the verse: 'Will not . . .'). In the third verse ('We said . . .'), the client's position is equated with that of the prophet Abraham, while

the position of the enemy resembles that of those who were plotting against the prophet. The client is thus assured of his innocence and of the divine protection against a losing foe.

Erasure 11 (to inflict leprosy)

This erasure, whose purpose is to kill a person through inflicting leprosy on him, is used in the same way as Erasure 10.

Didst thou not
Turn thy vision to those
Who abandoned their homes
Though they were thousands
[In number], for fear of death?
God said to them: 'Die.'

[sura 2: 243]

That it should be caught
In a whirlwind,
With fire therein,
And be burnt up?

[ibid.: 266]

God has heard
The taunt of those
Who say: 'Truly, God
Is indigent and we
Are rich!' We shall
Certainly record their word
And [their act] of slaying
Their Prophets in defiance
Of right, and We shall say:
'Taste ye the Penalty
Of the Scorching fire.'

[sura 3: 181]

If thou couldst see,
When the angels take the souls
Of the Unbelievers [at death],
[How] they smite their faces
And their backs, [saying]:
'Take the Penalty of the blazing Fire.'

[sura 8: 50]

They said, 'Burn him
And protect your gods,
If ye do [anything at all]'

[sura 21: 68]

The verses are entitled *harēg/jidhām* in the *umbatri* from which they come. The term *harēg* means generally 'fire' or 'burning' and in this context it refers to leprosy. It has, however, no such connotation in classical Arabic nor is it connected with disease in the Koranic verses quoted. The term *jidhām*, on the other hand, refers to leprosy in the Berti dialect as well as in classical Arabic.

Although many fakis might express their knowledge of how to kill a person through the use of the Koran, it is unlikely that any will admit his involvement

in homicide. A number of cases are, however, known to me in which death or fatal diseases are attributed to the work of fakis. The alleged victims were always too powerful for their rivals to deal with them through other channels. The prospects of retaliation by the hiring of a faki might possibly restrain rivals from resorting to other more overt acts of open aggression (see Lieban, 1973: 1053).

THE MEANING OF THE KORANIC TEXT

In the course of placing the Koranic verses of erasure in their social contexts, I have used the distinction between classical or orthodox meaning on the one hand, and the meaning which is imposed or assigned by the Berti on the other. The classical or orthodox meaning can be recovered from various sources on Islamic theology and it involves a considerable knowledge of literature related to the social and historical contexts in which the Koranic verses were first made known. By assigned and imposed meaning I simply mean that which is attributed to the Koran by the Berti during the process of their daily interactions. For various reasons, the Berti are not in a position fully to comprehend the classical or orthodox meaning of the Koran. Their dialect is far removed from the classical language of the Koran, and their traditional schools exclude the interpretation of the Koran from their teaching. A division of knowledge into exoteric and esoteric, or folk and specialized, is characteristic of societies with minimal literacy. The illiterate Berti may not know the contents of the writing and may not understand it if it is read to him. That, however, does not reduce the wisdom of the words, and it is only the illiterate's ignorance which blinds him from perceiving it (see Tambiah, 1979: 182). The meaning is thus viewed as being inherent in the words rather than being assigned to them by individuals. Even if we were to insist that the meaning of a Koranic verse is that which it conveys to an Arabic linguist or a Muslim theologian, another problem would arise: the Berti fakis themselves would only be in a slightly better position than their illiterate clients. In their classical meaning, the verses quoted, in some cases, bear no relation to the subject matter of the erasure. We may perhaps need to review what we imply by 'meaning' or 'understanding'. However vague or 'unclassical' it may be, a faki assigns a definite meaning to whatever he quotes. This also holds true in varying degrees for the illiterate. Despite his declaration that he does not understand the meaning of the passages, he assigns to them specific meanings. How coterminous these meanings are with their classical counterparts is of little importance. The Berti, however, take their imposed meaning to be identical to the classical meaning of the Koran. Lacking knowledge of the orthodox meaning of the Koran, which largely relates to the personal biography of the Prophet and the experience of his contemporary society, the Berti are bound to take their own imposed meaning as the only possible meaning of the Koran and to consider it to be identical to its classic counterpart. This, however, should not exclude the possibility that the Berti sometimes consciously manipulate the meaning of the Koran in order to give it relevance to a given social context.

The lack of an organized method of transmission of the theological meaning makes it possible for the Berti to ascribe their own meaning to the Koranic text, but, no less importantly, it makes it possible for them to avoid the classical interpretations which are irrelevant to their life. The imposed meaning, therefore, derives from their consideration of the Koran in terms of their own reality and

at the same time relates it to this reality through their pragmatic manipulation of it. The meaning which they impose on particular Koranic verses makes them suitable for use in erasure. In the case of some erasures, it was possible to trace the knowledge of suitable Koranic verses to the published books used by fakis. In most cases, however, it was not possible to do so. This indicates that the knowledge pertaining to the choice of specific verses for specific erasures has not spread from the orthodox Islamic centres (Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Lebanon) but has originated in the periphery of the Islamic world (see Sanneh, 1979), of which the Berti are a part. I indicated earlier that the drinking of the Koran itself is confined to the peripheries of the Islamic world. Its origin might, therefore, relate to the religious system which existed prior to the intrusion of the Islamic culture, and which can still be seen in a number of existing practices.

NOTES

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² Other smaller Berti groups have established themselves in Um-Ruwaba and the Gezira Aba in central Sudan and in the Gedarif area of eastern Sudan.

³ For a detailed description of Berti society, see Holy (1974).

⁴ This and a few other writings by the same author have appeared under the name Osman.

⁵ Ali's edition of the Koran (1958), published at Lahore, is used for all Koranic verses quoted in this paper.

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Résumé

Boire le Coran: la signification des strophes coraniques dans les 'effaçures' des Berti

Les Berti du Darfur septentrional (Soudan) possèdent leurs propres écoles coraniques dont le but est d'aider leurs élèves à apprendre par coeur l'ensemble du Coran. Les élèves de ces écoles qui réussissent à obtenir un diplôme deviennent des religieux professionnels, connus localement sous le nom de fakis. Ils doivent rendre certains services à la communauté ainsi qu'à des particuliers, moyennant paiement.

Il existe une croyance selon laquelle le Coran possède un immense pouvoir qui peut profiter à l'individu si on acquiert le Coran selon la méthode appropriée. Le meilleur moyen est de l'assimiler intérieurement en l'apprenant par coeur, privilège dont jouissent uniquement les fakis. Il existe d'autres méthodes telles que le boire ou le porter sur soi sous forme d'amulettes. Cet article traite de l'acquisition du Coran en le buvant. Selon le but dans lequel le Coran est utilisé, un faki, grâce à l'utilisation d'une encre spéciale, copie certaines strophes coraniques sur un feuillet de bois, l'écriture est alors effacée par lavage et l'eau sainte qui en résulte (effaçure) est alors bue par le client. L'eau sainte est supposée avoir des propriétés bénéfiques diverses pour l'individu: elle peut protéger contre les maladies, garantir à son client le succès dans sa vie professionnelle, écarter les épidémies, etc.

Pour de nombreuses raisons, les Berti ne sont pas en mesure de comprendre intégralement la 'signification' du Coran. La fossé entre la langue classique du Coran et leur dialecte est trop important et leurs écoles ne s'attachent pas à l'interprétation du Coran. Le manque de compréhension de la signification traditionnelle du Coran permet aux Berti d'imposer leur propre signification qui se rapporte beaucoup plus à leur propre réalité. C'est cette

signification indigène qui permet aux Berti de déterminer leur choix des strophes coraniques à effacer, utilisées à des fins précises et diverses. Comme la pratique de boire le Coran se limite à la périphérie du monde islamique, auquel les Berti appartiennent, on peut supposer qu'elle a dû prendre naissance dans la culture traditionnelle indigène qui exerce encore son influence sur l'Islam des Berti.