

# 3

## The *Djinn*

### *A Sophisticated Conceptualization of Both Pathologies and Therapies<sup>1</sup>*

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**T**his chapter attempts to convey the popular and clinical implications of the use of the concept *djinn*.

*Djinns* could be defined as invisible beings capable of occupying the body and controlling the psychological functioning of a person or a family with the goal of obtaining a compensation from human beings. This compensation can take the form of an offering, a sacrifice, an altar, or even a cult. *Djinn* is an Arabic word derived from a prolific root.

#### ❖ *DJINN*: RELATED WORDS

##### **Uterus**

*Janna* is the womb, the uterus, the internal space where fertility originates, and is therefore probably associated with the earth. *Djinns* come from both the

belly and the earth; they arise from women and spring forth from gardens. The word *janna* evokes the mystery of fecundity. What is it, in the earth, that makes plants grow? What is it, in a woman's uterus, that allows the fetus to develop? *Janna* refers not only to the container but also to the principle that acts from within—a force necessarily hidden. *Djinn*, first and foremost, refers to an “invisible being” (Guedmi, 1984).

### Madness

In Arabic, as in other Semitic languages, the plural of a word signifies a general concept. For instance, the word *lailat* means “nights” or, more accurately, the concept of *night*. It is associated with the Hebrew mythical figure Lilith. In essence, it is the night personified. The plural of *djinn*, *jenoun*, or *jnoun* yields *junan* or *jenan*, which means “madness.” This implies a compelling idea clinicians should reflect upon: “To know every single *djinn* would make one the master of madness.” And how can one come to know every *djinn*? By treating the insane!

### “Indjinned”

*Majnoun* means to be under the control of a *djinn*—to be “indjinned.”<sup>2</sup> It is commonly used to refer to madness, with all the allusive, derogatory, ludicrous, and insulting connotations that are associated with it.

### Fetus

*Janin*, “the fetus,” is the product or tenant of the *janna*. The fetus is as much the tenant of the womb as the *djinn* is of the woman it possesses. *Janin* also means “little *djinn*,” probably because the fetus is always hidden—the *djinn* is hidden in the night and in the earth in the same way a fetus is hidden in the womb. *Janin*—both fetus and little *djinn*—reminds us also that without the help of *djinns*, human beings could not reproduce. And we know how prone these invisible beings are to appear to pregnant women (Nathan & Moro, 1989).

### Garden

*Jénéna* means “garden,” the place of all the *jnoun* (plural of *djinn*), of all the active and hidden principles, where the constant work of these invisible forces is most manifest. *Jénéna*, the garden, is a paradise for *jnoun*.

### Paradise

The word *jennat* can be translated as “paradise.” This is probably associated with the idea that once we arrive in heaven, the secret of trees—not only the secret of the tree of knowledge, but of all the trees, hence of all the *jnoun*—will be revealed to us. It is the place where all *jnoun* are visible.

### Cadaver

*Janan* means both “cadaver” and “tomb,” where the unceasing activity of the dead, resulting from metamorphoses of the world of the living, manifests. Thus, it is not surprising to hear that cemeteries house *jnoun*. And according to the Quran, *jnoun* feed on bones.

### ❖ JNOUN’S ECOLOGY

Although they live “in the hidden world” and also in gardens, deserts, forests, bushes, garbage piles, ruins, sewage pipes, and the blood of animals (I even heard of a *djinn* that had settled inside the mechanism of a watch!), *jnoun* are similar to humans. There are males and females, and they reproduce through sexual activity. However, little is known of their mating behaviors.

They may also have a religious affiliation. The Muslim *jnoun* are the least dangerous of all, because it is possible to negotiate with them by invoking Allah’s name. Christians *jnoun* are more difficult but less so than Jewish *jnoun*, who are almost beyond hope. As for pagan *jnoun* (*kafrin*), they are the most feared because of their deafness to Muslim “arguments” and because they are the most violent of all. A diagnosis of a *Kafar* (“pagan”) *djinn* always indicates fear for the patient’s life.

The *jnoun* are thus invisible beings whose existence is largely accepted, including by the Prophet, who converted several tribes. From a historical and cultural standpoint, *jnoun* is a generic term undoubtedly referring to the divinities of the populations converted to Islam prior to their conversion (similar to how descriptions of “the devil” referred to the pagan practices of the Christianized populations in Europe). Nevertheless, more than 12 centuries after Islamization, the *jnoun* are still present not only in the countries of Maghreb, but also in Arabia, in Yemen, in Somalia, in Djibouti, in India, in Pakistan, and in all of Africa. They are still there when it comes to interpreting the negativities of existence, and they often constitute the soul of traditional therapeutic practices.

## ❖ OTHER NAMES

**Stranger–Visitor**

Instead of the word *djinn*, the words *afritt* and *zar* are used in Egypt and in Sudan. In my understanding, the *afrit* differs from the *djinn* by its location. An *afritt* is not a garden being like the *djinn* but a water being who likes to hide in the whirlpool of the Nile.

The word *zar* in Arabic, Amharic, and Hebrew is always embedded within a chain of meaning around the concepts of “stranger” or “visitor.” *Jnoun* are radically different from us humans—not our fellow men, yet still our brothers, brothers of a different species, made of a different substance.

The *zars* are feared strangers to whom we offer our bodies with the hope of understanding them, much in the same way men have intercourse with women in order to understand women’s logic, and women with men to untangle men’s sexuality. Thanks to *zars*, we learn of another species’ way of knowing.

Merchants are the most likely people to encounter *jnoun*. *Jnoun* appear wherever strangers are bound to meet one another, such as at the *souk*—the market. Evidently, they abound in metropolitan cities. A Malian healer asked me once, “How can you treat patients in Paris; there are so many *jnoun* there!”

The words are not equivalent, however. In each case, a universe emerges in the background: *Djinn* calls forth the invisible, *zar* calls forth the stranger, and *afrit* the whirlpool.

**Winds**

Another interesting series of words is derived from *Ria’*, which has the same meaning as *jnoun* but evokes very different associations. The singular word *ri’ha* means “smell,” *ri’h* means “breathe, wind,” and *ro’h* refers to the soul (in Hebrew, *roua’h*). The life of a human being, his or her identity, is associated with the breathing, the specific smell that emanates from him or her. We understand thus that the Ethiopian and Sudanese masters of *zars* are masters of perfumes. For them, healing means changing a person’s smell, the sign of the active principle that makes a living being. This active principle is hidden in the blood. The specialists of *zar* seem to have acquired its mastery in order to use the blood animals. First, the animal principle must be removed before introducing the perfume, the soul reconstructed by the master of the soul, professor of perfumes.

**Landlords**

*Melk*, used for example by the *gnaouas* in Morocco, refers to “landlord.” It is close in significance to *malek*, “the king” (in Hebrew, *melekh*). The concept

## 30 INDIGENOUS PERFORMANCES, CULTURAL WORLDVIEWS

suggests a world so full of landlords that if we could see them, we would not dare to set a foot on the ground for the fear of trampling one, a world far from the one suggested by modern republics composed of citizens transparent to themselves and autonomous! We should consider the gathering rites of *melk* as a sophisticated form of democracy, a parliament of the invisibles that allows us to summon the owners to whom we belong. We can indeed pretend to be emancipated, yet those thoughts that cross our minds or the mood that suddenly overwhelms us remind us that we are the property of interests whose intentions are very difficult to decipher, even for ourselves.

### Master

In Hebrew, the word *ba'al* signifies “landlord,” but also suggests master and husband. We can say “your *ba'al*,” to signify “your husband,” but the “*ba'al*” are the gods of the past, those animal gods with whom, according to the Bible, people committed so many immoral acts.

What the *jnoun* do to humans today is precisely what was depicted in the Mesopotamian, Babylonian, and Canaanite cults to the *ba'als*: copulation with divinities, service, and sacrificial offerings. Interestingly, there are also similarities with Beninese descriptions of their relationships with their Voodoo divinities: for example, *voduno*, “slave of the *vodún*,” and *vodúnsi*, “priestess of the *vodún*” or “the *vodún*’s spouse.” If we want a correct rendition of the word *ba'al*, we have to combine “master,” “landlord,” and “husband,” as well as “force” and “animal.” These are all characteristics that we find in reference to demons in the Bible.

### Demons

In Hebrew, *shed* (plural *shedim*) can be translated into “demon.” But the same word in Arabic, *shed*, means “the force” and “to pull.” We find the same root in Hebrew, in one of God’s names, the one referring to His strength—*el shaddai*, “The Almighty.”

### S'hur

Spells are profoundly connected to *jnoun*. No one can cast a spell on someone without the help of a *djinn*; conversely, no one can undo a spell without penetrating the world of *jnoun*. A person can be the target of a *s'hur* as a result of a spiteful act perpetrated against him or her, either by someone jealous or envious who made him- or herself the magical object—the *s'hur*—destined to destroy the victim or by a *sh'har*, a “sorcerer,” enlisted to achieve this goal. The symptoms of such an affliction can range from feelings of apathy and weakness to a madness episode.

The *s'hur* refers both to the action of the sorcerer and the object by which the sorcerer achieves his goals. The efficacy of the *s'hur*, demonstrated by an infinite number of testimonies, is unquestionable. What remains to be understood, however, is the concrete processes through which they affect people (on the same topic, see Mauss, 1902, especially his discussion of the notion of Mana).

### ❖ ECOLOGY OF *DJINNS*

An attack by a *djinn* is a complex event. The vocabulary and therapies used carry many meanings that are sometimes contradictory.

#### **Quranic Therapies**

Quranic therapists (*cheikh*, *fkih*, or *taleb*) do not negotiate with the *djinn*, because doing so would entail associating oneself with pagan forces. Instead, they pray, call forth God, and threaten or beat the *djinn* in order to get it to leave. This can be equated to an exorcism.

A North African patient describes the treatment a *taleb* provided to his son:

He takes the thumb of the child and prays until the child falls. He throws water with the Koran on the woman or the man, and the devil can come out. He speaks with the devil. The devil who took my son went to his place, not in a dream but in reality! He even appeared to my wife and said to her: "You have hurt me and the child." He started calling forth his own, the other devils.

#### **Congregations of Possessed**

Other therapies, often practiced by women, seek to tame the *djinn*. Here, the sick one is initiated into a congregation, a *zaouia*. These patients are future seers suffering from an initiatory illness. The therapeutic rite is a sort of religious ritual.<sup>3</sup>

#### **Therapists Associated With *Djinns* by Personal Contracts**

A third category includes therapists who have at their service auxiliary spirits (also *jnoun*) that they send to fight or convince the *djinn* responsible for the affliction to leave the sick one.

#### **The Price of Treatment**

To heal their 10-year-old son, the 'Hok family requested help from the three types of therapists, as is generally the case in similar situations.

## 32 INDIGENOUS PERFORMANCES, CULTURAL WORLDVIEWS

The Quranic healer was ineffective, as is often the case. Those working in congregations were not able to make Souleyman enter a trance state. These attempts were very expensive for the family (~\$13,500 USD).

The last therapist consulted called forth his own *jnoun* and ordered them to find the spell that caused the affliction.

Mrs 'Hok: He wrote a scripture that he then burned . . . he wrote with ink made of sheep's wool . . . he burned the scripture until the *jnoun* appeared. Then, he started speaking to them. He said to me: "put your hand on the basin; I will count until three . . . put your hand on the basin . . . if you find something. And I found it. He took the object out. In a sleeve of one the child's t-shirts, something written in red, with blood . . . and also pieces of bent iron, two scriptures in the sleeve . . . eleven knots on a silk thread . . . so that he would be sick for eleven years, it seems. . . . And a piece of wire in the shape of a hook—like a fish-hook—all of this in a t-shirt with earth on it and fresh grass. (Nathan, 1998)

### The Unfolding of a Therapy

The healer thus made a piece of cloth from a shirt recognized by the parents as belonging to their son appear under a basin, associated with a number of objects. The consultation presented here took place in the Paris metropolitan area in 1999. The child, who had not gone to school since he was 4 years old, was starting to show severe disabilities. Psychological interventions were systematically refused by both the child and the parents. This treatment was the only one that proved to be effective.

Confronted with such a case, a clinician faces a number of difficult problems: (a) the language of the parents; (b) their universe—including their conceptions, reasoning, and certainties; (c) the reality, the coherence, and the efficacy of the professionals acting in parallel with this universe—French and North African healers, in France as well as in their home country.

Ethnopsychiatry seeks to address these clinical problems, as much in theory as in technique, taking care not to disqualify any of the professionals connected together by the affliction of the person who is "possessed" (Hacking, 1988).

### ❖ THE *DJINN* MACHINERY

#### A Necessary Notion: The Ecological Niche

It is not sufficient to classify disorders. Indeed, when a disorder exists within a culture, it is always associated with beings, objects, professionals, a network of

professionals, a vocabulary, and a language. Thus, the disorder takes on a life of its own and becomes incomprehensible. Hence, I follow Hacking (1988) and consider an ecological niche rather than a syndrome (see, e.g., Abdelhafid, 1995; Brunel, 1926; Crapanzano, 1973; Pâques, 1976, 1991).

*Djinn* thus encompasses all of the following: beings possessing given characteristics, disorders, and therapies; cults to pay tribute to *jnoun*, then referred to as *mlouk*, “landlords” (Deleuze & Parnet, 1977, p. 104); networks of congregations (*zaouias*) devoted to the same spirit, extending all over the country and meeting every year for a ceremony and animal sacrifices; as well as perfumes, networks of solidarities, hierarchies, constraints to invention, a market, and so on.

*Djinn* is a “machine” (in Deleuze and Parnet’s [1977] sense):

Machine . . . this does not mean either mechanical or organic. . . . The machine . . . is a “proximity” grouping between independent and heterogeneous terms. . . . What defines a machine assemblage is the shift of a center of gravity along an abstract line. (Deleuze & Parnet, 1977, p. 2)

It is a machine that pushed a human society to “marry,” to borrow Deleuze and Parnet’s (1977) terms, with strangers. We can posit that the consequences of such a union include an identification of these strangers and an in-depth knowledge of their nature, of their habitat, and of their ways of being and acting.

For as someone becomes, what he is becoming changes as much [as] he does himself. Becoming are not phenomena of imitation or assimilation, but of a double-capture, of non-parallel evolution, of nuptials between two reigns. Nuptials are always against nature. Nuptials are the opposite of a couple. (Deleuze & Parnet, 1977, p. 51)

A society that is passionate about the existence of *djinn*s—interested in their sexuality, their habits, and their intent—is also profoundly intrigued and pre-occupied by otherness. There are only two ways of knowing *jnoun*: through ancient texts, presumably written following encounters with such beings, and through the afflictions that currently affect human beings.

The world of *jnoun* is a world of thoughts, not a world of belief. It is both supported by and different from philosophy and religion. It resembles philosophy in its search for the characteristics of these beings, in the same way philosophers seek to identify new concepts. But it also resembles religion, because the beings in question are alive and have intentions. Interacting with such beings has consequences. Where religion builds groups, contributing to the creation of social spaces and to the intelligence of the weak and the deprived, the world of *jnoun* leads those who venture in it to explore the margins, the other side, the escape



## 34 INDIGENOUS PERFORMANCES, CULTURAL WORLDVIEWS

hatches. Religion sets up order; the world of *jnoun* gathers those who are excluded from this order, treats them, and facilitates their reintegration in specific niches. If religion builds walls, the world of *jnoun* creates openings. The philosophical world resembles the world of the *jnoun* by its obligation to create, but it is less accountable to life's demands. Identifying the right *djinn* leads to the healing of the patient or the worsening of the patient's illness. The construction of a "good" concept has much less obvious results in life. But philosophy is able to disintegrate worlds by emptying them of meaning, by deconstructing them. In the end, a healer, an ally of the *jnoun*, is a religious person without a religion, a philosopher lacking that hatred for the world as it is.

Hakim (pseudonym) turned to the Centre Georges Devereux after many problems with other therapists. The following case report is from an ethnopsychiatric consultation at the Centre Georges Devereux. The clinical observation was that Hakim's affliction stemmed from having the heart of a female *djinn* in his male body.<sup>4</sup>

The *djinn* speaks to him: He hears her within himself—her voice giving him absurd orders: "repeat 9999 times the *fatiha*," "rape yourself as though you were a woman," "throw away the bread upon which you pronounced the *bismillah*."<sup>5</sup> She also gives him doubts (*wesswesses* in Arabic): "You thought about God while going to the washroom," and so on.

He feels his thoughts are controlled by her. His reflexes and automatic manifestations are animated by incomprehensible intentions. And apparently, his actions also belong to another.

She acts: She hates his wife. She swears at her, even hits her at times. She stops him from making love with her, makes him leave the bed when she is there. God only knows why, but she gets angry at him and hits him, too. His body curls up in impossible postures, his face grimaces, and he groans from the pain.

She cheats on him: When she desires a man, she makes him have an erection and pushes him to look at the man with enamored eyes. She speaks to him about the people he meets. She promises to leave him alone if he fulfills such and such obligation—for instance, to apply a sticky and smelly substance to his hair or to pull up his left sleeve. He complies, but *she* remains, imposing more rules.

He tries to defend himself.

He listens to a tape with Quranic verses for hours.

He has consulted dozens of therapists, Muslim healers (*fkih*, *taleb*, *cheikh*). One of them diagnosed him: a female *djinn*, a *djenneia*, is living in his body. The remedy? Quranic scriptures, purification rituals, and fumigation. Nothing specific to this particular being. This treatment yielded no results.

It is easy to guess what his psychiatrists thought: unconscious homosexuality and delusions. They prescribed neuroleptic medication and recommended psychotherapy.

The side effects from the drugs were unbearable, and he threw them away after 2 weeks. As for psychotherapists, he consulted with at least 10 different ones, but none of these “believed” in *djinns*.

A *djinn* forces the afflicted to reconstruct part of the world; it calls for the introduction of a new name. No one was able to give Hakim the name of the female *djinn*.

What one should do to really help Hakim:

Treat the *djinn* (find the invisible)—get him to settle in, identify the objects he prefers, the actions that calm him, the words that capture him and allow the *djinn* to control him.

Treat the *zar*—identify the “stranger,” find out his name, his ancestry, his tribe, his religion.

Treat the *ri’h*, his “smell,” his affections, his passions; find out where his intentions are nourished.

Treat the *shed*, the force—identify the benefits that the patient can derive from marrying with the invisible.

Refrain from thinking that Hakim is homosexual, hysterical, schizophrenic, or borderline; but do not think either that possession by a *djinn* could be a sort of item in a new semiology—the treatment would lead to a catastrophe. Hakim is a place, a location—the location of a union, to borrow from Deleuze and Parnet (1977):

There are no longer binary machines: question-answer, masculine-feminine, man-animal, etc. The wasp and the orchids provide the example. The orchid seems to form a wasp image, but in fact there is a wasp-becoming of the orchid, an orchid-becoming of the wasp, a double capture since “what” each becomes changes no less than “that which” becomes. [We could add here: a becoming-*djinn* of the man; a becoming-man of the *djinn*]. The wasp becomes part of the orchid’s reproductive apparatus at the same time as the orchid becomes the sexual organ of the wasp. One and the same becoming, a single bloc of becoming, or, as Rémy Chauvin says: an “a-parallel evolution of two beings who have nothing whatsoever to do with each other.” (p. 2)

Practitioners, researchers, theologians, and philosophers sometime describe *djinns* exclusively in terms of their objective characteristics, thus transforming them into objects of belief, and recognizing their existence only in the realm of the human psyche. I hope to have demonstrated here how such

## 36 INDIGENOUS PERFORMANCES, CULTURAL WORLDVIEWS

a position, though it may appear reasonable, in effect releases us from the obligation to understand and unfold the process in its complex entirety. Thus, to say that “*djinns* are imaginary beings in which North and West African populations believe” would be both a crime against the mind, depriving us of the subtle chain of reasoning that pushes us to search, and an act of aggression against the populations in question.

❖ WHAT *DJINNS* WANT FROM HUMANS

Muslims consider *djinns* as vestiges of a long-gone past. Many commentators, anthropologists, and specialists of the history of religions are following their lead (see, e.g., Doutté, 1908/1984, an excellent monograph despite the trappings of the typical thinking in those days). However, what characterizes *jnoun* in contrast to divinities is their a priori indetermination. Whereas a god is honored in the ways that suit the god, no one knows in advance the identity and the specific demands of a *djinn*, and these are never known in advance. *They are a perfume* requiring a specific fabrication, which is at once a creation and a creature. *They are a color*, mixed by hand from specific ingredients. *They are objects*—not a generic amulet, but one created *ex nihilo* for the occasion. And the actions that will be ritualized must be created for each *djinn*. *They are demons*.

Creating concepts—such would be the work of the philosopher. Identifying new *djinns*, never encountered before; naming them, defining their demands, organizing specific rituals—such would be the work of the therapist in the world of *djinns*.

And finally, what do *jnoun* want? They want to stop the movement of the world, to freeze life; they dream of being like their human brothers: settled down, territorialized. But they want to stop the world to their benefit, to become the only organizing principle of the universe, from which all the others would be derived. Here is the secret: The *jnoun* want to become God. Sometimes, they succeed.

For instance, Dionysos can be considered a sort of *djinn*, one who has succeeded in becoming a god. Indeed, after setting up his cult in Asia, he moves on to Thebes, seeking recognition as a god:

And so, along all Asia's swarming littoral of towering cities where Greeks and foreign nations, mingling, live, my progress made. There I taught my dances to the feet of living men,

establishing my mysteries and rites that I might be revealed on earth for what I am: a god.

And thence to Thebes. (Euripides, 1959, p. 156)

## ❖ NOTES

1. Chapter translated from the French by Patricia Poulin.
2. *Majnoun*, “taken by a djinn,” “indjinned”; *madroub*, “hit” [by a djinn]; *markoub*, “mounted” [by a djinn]; *mamlouk*, “possessed”—as when we are the owner of land or of an apartment—[by a djinn]; *masloukh*, “rubbed until blood is shed” [by a djinn]; *malbouss*, “worn” [by a djinn]—as a piece of clothing is worn—[by a djinn], and so forth.
3. Examples of the same type of ritual abound: Moroccan congregations—*Gnawa*, *Hamadchas*, *Aissaouas*; the *ndop* in Senegal; the *djina don* in Mali, and so forth.
4. The names of people and locations as well as any details that could lead to the identification of the family have been modified.
5. *Bismillah*, “in the name of God,” a Muslim conjuration widely used to keep beings from other worlds at bay—both nonbelievers and spirits.

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