



## Demons, spirits, and haunted landscapes in Palestine

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### ABSTRACT

In recent decades, a spectral turn has animated geography and related fields like archaeology, memory studies, and landscape studies, examining how places can be haunted by the ghosts of the past, with heavy emphasis on metaphorical specters and spirits. The geography of spirits and other unseen forces presented here takes a less metaphorical approach to haunted landscapes. This paper examines how spirits have traditionally dwelt within everyday places and objects like trees and stones in Palestine, and how people have sought to cohabitate with or settle such spirits. Attending to the physical geography of the spirit world can shed light on how spaces become sacred through belief and practice, and how sacred spaces are continuously remade within changing social, cultural, and political contexts. Drawing together historical observations by European and Palestinian ethnographers and interweaving the voices of Palestinian elders in the form of recorded oral history testimonies, this paper examines the typologies and environments of spirits and jinn in Palestine, with particular attention to water demons and haunted trees. The paper reflects on how these unseen forces play a role in establishing moral, gendered, and sacred boundaries, while at the same time blurring boundaries between popular religion and religious orthodoxy.

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At the foot of a mountain south of the town of Anabta, there is a cave with water seeping from its ceiling. After entering through its rocky door, one can go down a flight of stairs and then one walks in a long tunnel. Because of the length of the tunnel, a myth prevailed among the common people that this cave leads to Jerusalem, and for this reason they call it *Magharat Al-Quds* [The Jerusalem Cave]. Some people believed that it was haunted by *jinn* or protected by a *rasad* [guardian jinn king] who frightened away anyone who entered it. These myths about this cave prevailed in the thirties and forties, during the British Mandate over Palestine. It seems that the Palestinian revolutionaries used it as a hideout during the British pursuit of them, and some say that it was the revolutionaries themselves who spread the rumor that the cave was haunted by jinn, so that spies and agents of the British would not follow them there. That is, the topic was used for political or security purposes. Although the entrance to the cave is covered with dirt and

stones today, it still arouses fear among people, especially peasant women.<sup>1</sup>

The source of this story is an 80-year-old man named Amin Nour from the town of Anabta, between Nablus and Tukaram in what is today the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Although belief in haunted places like the Jerusalem Cave is regarded as superstitious nowadays, stories about the site are still well-known among residents. The site's supposed subterranean linkage with Jerusalem carries special significance, with the holy city now blocked by Israeli checkpoints, walls, and watchtowers. Likewise, the cave's connection to resistance fighters who may have used it as a hideout during the 1936–39 Arab Revolt resonates with political meaning today in the context of ongoing resistance to Israeli occupation. According to early twentieth-century Palestinian ethnographer Tawfiq Canaan, however, the significance of such haunted sites lies in their deep connection to pre-modern practices rooted in the physical landscape of Palestine.

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<sup>1</sup> Amin Nour (80) interviewed on 15 July 2021, in Anabta.

Canaan contends that myths, beliefs, and rituals regarding saints, spirits and haunted sites cannot be said to be purely Palestinian. Instead, they are a folkloric amalgamation inherited from Canaanite and Semitic cultures and other peoples of the ancient East, as well as pagan beliefs from the Arabian Peninsula, and from later Christian and Islamic beliefs.<sup>2</sup> In the modern period, Palestinians adapted these myths and practices to their changing social and political realities.<sup>3</sup> What follows is a historical geography of spirits in physical and fluvial landscapes of Palestine, representing a diverse blend of inherited cultural practices and heterodox religious interpretations. In describing these sites, we seek to draw out their social significance within the context of shifting political realities, from the British Mandate period and establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, to the invasion and occupation of the West Bank in 1967 through to the present.

This examination of haunted landmarks has three aims. First, we seek to establish a connection between historical ethnography and contemporary oral history, gesturing toward the deep time of Palestinian folkloric memory and the enduring yet endangered condition of Palestinian cultural landscapes. Secondly, and relatedly, we argue that haunted shrines serve as mnemonic devices linking human action in the present to the deep time of jinn narratives, spanning well beyond the longevity of humans and their governments. This religious folk memory has slowly succumb to the progressive temporality of modernity, through the combined influence of settler-colonialism, urbanization, and the concomitant disenchantment of the natural environment. Finally, and most significantly, we seek to illustrate the relationship between the invisible world of spirits and the tangible world of physical places and how they co-produce moral geographies of care and justice as well as gendered spatial practices. Besides explaining natural phenomena such as droughts and child mortality, the folklore surrounding haunted landscapes in the early twentieth century convey potent moral critiques against political corruption, land privatization, and the exploitation of natural resources. Before turning to our analysis of historical ethnography and original oral history testimony, we first situate this work within the literature on spectral geographies.

### Spectral geographies and haunted landscapes

In recent decades, a subtle spectral turn has animated cultural geography and related fields examining how places are haunted by temporal ruptures of past traumas.<sup>4</sup> This work has been influenced by Derrida's notion of hauntology, a portmanteau of haunting and ontology referring to how traces of the past persist in unsettling ways in the present, like ghosts.<sup>5</sup> Some see political promise in the notion of haunting as a way of problematizing knowledge by including unjustly marginalized voices and refusing to bury histories of violence and dispossession.<sup>6</sup>

With heavy emphasis on metaphorical hauntings, geographers have explored colonial state practices haunted by past injustices

against indigenous people, visual images that haunt the present with traces of a lost past, the remotely sensed spectral remains of geographic expeditions, post-socialist landscapes haunted by the specters of unassimilated communist architecture, and the anxiety-inducing ghostly non-presence of legally-ambiguous off-shore migrant detention centers.<sup>7</sup> Like places, bodies too can be haunted by physically and emotionally painful memories in ways that are productive of identity.<sup>8</sup> From an emotional geography perspective, fear can become fixed in place, representing a temporal trauma requiring closure through spatial commemoration.<sup>9</sup> In Palestine, ongoing territorial acquisition by the Israeli occupation produces fragmented landscapes that are haunted by traces of now-absent Palestinian life.<sup>10</sup> Overall, these spectral geographies emphasize how place is not merely a site of dwelling, but of haunting, where the past continues to unsettle fixed notions of place.<sup>11</sup>

Contributing a spatial sensibility to hauntology, Holloway and Kneale caution against losing the geographic specificity of haunting, instead urging us to consider how ghosts are 'made manifest through specific spatialized narratives and spatial assemblages of practice, embodiment, and materiality'.<sup>12</sup> Like other researchers focused on artistic, filmic, and literary representations of the ghostly, the authors argue that spectral geographies offer analytical hesitancy, resisting representational closure and embracing indeterminacy. Though hauntology is marked by ambivalence, haunting itself is generally regarded as a negative byproduct of violent erasure in spectral geographies. Recent work in religious studies on the role of the unseen in everyday life, however, suggests that we open our understanding of haunting to an affective range beyond trauma, pain, and fear.

Research by Bubant, Rytter, and Suhr examines how the Islamic concept of *al-ghayb*, the realm of the unseen, infuses everyday life, that is, how it 'haunts, affects, and co-produces the visible world in multiple ways'.<sup>13</sup> The authors describe *al-ghayb* as being a domain of uncertainty and contradiction. It is filled with dangerous power, but also the potential for protection and healing. The invisible realm of *al-ghayb* needs to be understood in relation to the 'historical, socio-economic, and political contexts that often work to make particular Muslim groups or practices hypervisible'.<sup>14</sup> In the context of on-going settler colonialism in Palestine, this extends from Zionist mapping practices, which catalogued and seized Palestinian shrines and holy sites in the early twentieth century, to

<sup>2</sup> Taufiq Canaan, *Mohammedan Saints and Sanctuaries in Palestine* (London: Luzac and Co., 1927).

<sup>3</sup> F. Sahlhab, 'Popular Life in Palestine', in *The Palestinian Encyclopedia: Studies of Civilization, IV/III* (Beirut: The Palestinian Encyclopedia Authority, 1990), p. 582.

<sup>4</sup> *Haunted Landscapes: Super-Nature and the Environment*, ed. by Ruth Heholt and Niamh Downing (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016); Tina Paphitis, 'Haunted landscapes: place, past and presence', *Time and Mind* 14 (2020) 341–349.

<sup>5</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (London: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Asha Best and Margaret M. Ramirez, 'Urban specters', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 39 (2021) 1043–1054.

<sup>7</sup> Alison Mountz, 'The enforcement archipelago: Detention, haunting, and asylum on islands', *Political Geography* 30 (2011) 118–128; Kate Coddington, 'Spectral geographies: Haunting and everyday state practices in colonial and present-day Alaska', *Social & Cultural Geography* 12 (2011) 743–756; Elisabeth Roberts, 'Geography and the visual image: A hauntological approach', *Progress in Human Geography* 37 (2013) 386–402; Derek P. McCormack, 'Remotely sensing affective afterlives: The spectral geographies of material remains', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 100 (2010): 640–654; Mariusz Czepczyński, 'Haunted landscapes: Post-socialist memory limbo of contemporary Poland', *The City and History*, 5 (2016) 68–79.

<sup>8</sup> Lars Meier, 'Encounters with haunted industrial workplaces and emotions of loss: class-related senses of place within the memories of metalworkers.' *cultural geographies* 20 (2013) 467–483.

<sup>9</sup> Julia Bordelon, "'I dreamt about it, just like this, exactly the way it is': Haunting emotional geographies in Buenos Aires', *Emotion, Space and Society* 43 (2022) 100881.

<sup>10</sup> Chris G. Harker, Reema Shebeitah, and Dureen Sayyad. "Ghosts of Jerusalem: Ramallah's Haunted Landscapes." *Jerusalem Quarterly* 58 (2014) 7–12.

<sup>11</sup> John Wylie, "The spectral geographies of WG Sebald." *cultural geographies* 14 (2007) 171–188.

<sup>12</sup> Julian Holloway and James Kneale, 'Locating haunting: a ghost-hunter's guide', *cultural geographies* 15 (2008) 297–312 (p. 307).

<sup>13</sup> Nils Bubandt, Mikkel Rytter, and Christian Suhr. "A second look at invisibility: Al-Ghayb, Islam, ethnography." *Contemporary Islam* 13 (2019) 1–16 (pg. 3).

<sup>14</sup> Bubandt, Rytter, and Suhr, 'Al-Ghayb', p. 9.

systems of surveillance and control to which the Israeli occupation subjects Palestinians today. By foregrounding the 'poetics and politics of the invisible', a focus on al-ghayb resists the ocular-centrism of the colonial gaze and offers a way of rethinking the violent disenchantment of natural and cultural landscapes.<sup>15</sup>

Like hauntology, Taneja's notion of jinnealogy evokes a sense of deep time that subverts the progressive temporality of modern governance. Jinnealogy refers to how the mythical longevity of jinn combines with the 'genealogies of human memory' to challenge the 'magical amnesia of the state', resisting the obliteration of cultural landscapes or their subsumption within homogenized heritage sites.<sup>16</sup> The word *jinn* (singular *jinni*), from the Arabic trilateral root *j-n-n* meaning 'to hide,' refers to invisible creatures of Arabian lore, popularized as mischievous and magical genies in Western Orientalist renditions of *Thousand and One Nights*. In Islamic tradition, *jinn* are beings with free will belonging to the unseen realm of al-ghayb, where angels and *shayatin* (devils) dwell. In his examination of Muslim shrines to saintly jinn in Delhi, Taneja argues that prayers at the shrines enact an 'intimate sovereignty' that resists Indian state control of such sites by instead invoking otherworldly justice and care. Rather than haunting the present with a traumatic past, the jinn-inhabited shrines serve as a bridge to carry forward values, attitudes, and practices from bygone days, such as hospitality, into an age of post-colonial governance and bureaucracy. In addition, such sacred/haunted sites display an intertwining of the human world, the natural environment, and the unseen. Their active upkeep resists the disenchantment of nature by unfettered urbanization and dispossession.

Similarly, and in a context closer to Palestine, Khayyat examines the phenomenon of *maskun* (inhabited) trees in South Lebanon along the border with Israel.<sup>17</sup> These enchanted trees, inhabited by saintly spirits in a human/non-human assemblage of the sacred and mundane, stand in steadfast and firmly-rooted resistance amidst the war-wounded landscape of this formerly-occupied territory. As the following sections demonstrate, haunted sites in Palestine are also deeply embedded in both the natural environment and collective consciousness, and often evoke a justice-oriented spatial ethics of care for humans and the environment.

Though the geographic typology of jinn and other creatures presented below represents a more literal approach to spectral geographies, this examination of spirits and where they dwell is nevertheless unsettling in hauntological terms as well. Dominant narratives of Palestine reproduce reductive geographic imaginarity of the Holy Land as sacred territory parceled out from on high through Biblical texts and colonial cartographers.<sup>18</sup> Attending to the realm of the unseen redirects our attention from detached cartographic depictions of territory to visceral experiences of enchanted spaces. It does so by looking at how the spirit world and the physical terrain of Palestine intermingle in ways that are not strictly confined to territorial boundaries, nor boundaries of religious orthodoxy, but are instead connected to ancient customs and cultural migrations played out across 'denationalized space' in deep time.<sup>19</sup>

This perspective poses a challenge to the modernizing temporalities of settler-colonial time and state-centric timelines of the so-called Israeli-Palestinian conflict.<sup>20</sup> To achieve this, the following sections draw together historical ethnographic writing with original oral history testimonies of Palestinian elders whose knowledge has long been exploited by, but rarely acknowledge in, colonial knowledge production.<sup>21</sup> This methodological approach, intermixing historical accounts and oral history testimonies, connects Palestine's colonial past with its settler-colonial present, blurring neat temporal divisions between pre/post 1948-Palestine, and revealing this ongoing colonial project to already be unsettled and incomplete.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, by drawing from and depicting a wide variety of religious interpretations of long-standing myths and practices related to haunted sites, these accounts also disrupt colonial understandings of supposedly discrete demographic divisions between various religious groups in Palestine.

### Mythological geography of spirits and demons

Many early religions arose from the worship of souls, spirits, or divine beings that dwelt within natural features such as mountains, caves, trees, springs, and stones. Many ancient cultures did not distinguish between the spirits of the ancestors and gods, but conflated these invisible supernatural powers in polytheistic, pantheistic, and animistic beliefs.<sup>23</sup> Some early religious practices held that natural forms carried spirits and magical powers capable of transferring the influence of ancestors to the living. As such, trees, springs, or stones were not worshiped for their physical form, but for the spirit and power that resided within them.<sup>24</sup> Ancient humans sometimes courted these inner-dwelling spirits for protection from natural phenomena like floods. Some ancient religions likewise distinguished between benevolent spirits that could provide protection and evil spirits that could cause harm. Divine spirits were regarded as peaceful, close, and helpful, and thus worthy of veneration and requiring ritual sanctification to gain their favor and protection. In contrast, demonic spirits were to be feared and avoided, or, in some cases, appeased through offerings and sacrifices.<sup>25</sup> Though the distinction between benevolent and evil spirits may seem clearcut, the boundary is blurry. Both belong to the realm of the unseen, existing on a spectrum of supernatural power. Divine and demonic spirits are sometimes indistinguishable, able to evolve or degenerate, one into the other.<sup>26</sup>

Traditionally, jinn belong to the world of invisible beings, capable of both good and evil. There are categories of jinn that can appear to humans in different embodied forms in particular places, thus distinguishing such spaces.<sup>27</sup> Some legends state that jinn

<sup>20</sup> Mark Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time: Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

<sup>21</sup> Anaheed Al-Hardan, 'Decolonizing research on Palestinians: Towards critical epistemologies and research practices', *Qualitative Inquiry* 20 (2014) 61–71.

<sup>22</sup> See Stoler, Ann Laura Stoler, *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), especially pp. 63–65.

<sup>23</sup> Karen Armstrong, *History of Myth* (Beirut: Al-dar Al-arabiya Lilulum, 2008), pp. 7, 10; S. Musa, *Noshu' Fikrat Allah* (Cairo: Mu'assasat Hindawi), pp. 9, 11.

<sup>24</sup> Friedrich Max-Müller, *Anthropological Religion: The Gifford Lectures Delivered Before the University of Glasgow in 1891* (London: Longmans, Green & Company, 1892), p. 184; J. Ali, *Al-mufasssal fi Tarikh Al-arab Qabl Al-islam* (Beirut: Dar Al-Saqi, 2001), p. XI, 46–47.

<sup>25</sup> Joseph Henry Philpot, *The Sacred Tree: or, the Tree in Religion and Myth* (New York: Macmillan, 1897), p. 23; Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, translated by A. Abbas (Damascus: Dar Dimashq, 1988), p. 17.

<sup>26</sup> Philpot, *The Sacred Tree*, p. 24, 53.

<sup>27</sup> Edward Westermarck, *Pagan Survivals in Mohammedan Civilization* (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1933), p. 6; M. Al-Sahli and H. Al-Bash, *Al-Mo'taqadat Al-Sha'biyya fi Al-Turath Al-Arabi* (Riyadh: Dar Al-Jalil), p. 63.

<sup>15</sup> Bubandt, Rytter, and Suhr, 'Al-Ghayb', p. 2.

<sup>16</sup> Anand Vivek Taneja, *Jinnealogy: Time, Islam, and Ecological Thought in the Medieval Ruins of Delhi* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020), pp. 50, 54.

<sup>17</sup> Munira Khayyat, 'Maskun: Two Landscapes of War', in *Reverberations: Violence Across Time and Space*, ed. by Yael Navaro, Zerrin Özlem Biner, Alice von Bieberstein, and Seda Altug (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021), pp. 186–204.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Talbot, Anne Caldwell, and Chloe Emmott, 'Perceiving Palestine: British Visions of the Holy Land'. *Jerusalem Quarterly* 82 (2020) 50–76.

<sup>19</sup> Wai Chee Dimock, 'Deep Time: American Literature and World History', *American Literary History* 13 (2001) 755–775; Cécile Roudeau, 'The Buried Scales of Deep Time: Beneath the Nation, Beyond the Human ... and Back?', *Transatlantica: Revue d'études Américaines American Studies Journal* 1 (2015) 1–14.

were created before man.<sup>28</sup> Other accounts hold that jinn originated from the descendants of Adam and Eve. In this account, Eve gave birth to forty children and, when she was unable to feed them all, she killed half of them. After Adam discovered this, he prayed to God to revive his lost children. God answered his supplication, but turned the outcast children into unseen sprites.<sup>29</sup> They reproduced into a race of jinn, outnumbering humans.<sup>30</sup> Other popular imaginations believed jinn to be the souls of the dead appearing in the form of shadows or ghosts, or the souls of dead enemies come back for revenge.<sup>31</sup> In such iterations, mischievous jinn are contrasted with saintly spirits, with whom places thrive in safety.<sup>32</sup>

Jinn and their ilk have appeared in folklore since ancient times, and are associated with stone monuments, dolmens, or natural rock outcroppings.<sup>33</sup> In Babylonian and Assyrian belief, jinn are spirits who mediate between the physical world of humans and the unseen realm of gods.<sup>34</sup> The Romans believed that benevolent nymphs were descendants of three beautiful goddesses of fate<sup>35</sup> and were associated with life, springs, rivers, and fertility.<sup>36</sup> Arab lore depicts jinn as infernal creatures belonged to the underworld, inhabiting chthonic sites like cracks, caves, hollows, and wadis, referring to jinn as 'people of the earth'.<sup>37</sup>

Many Pagan, Jewish, and Christian tribes throughout the Arabian Peninsula believed in jinn and spun tales about spirits inhabiting unique rocks, strange trees, distinct mountains, or isolated springs. Islamic tradition affirms the existence of jinn, adding that jinn can be believing Muslims or unbelievers (*kufar*). Indeed, the term *rijal Allah* (men of God), includes both human and jinn saints.<sup>38</sup> According to popular belief, Muslim jinn wear white clothes, white representing the flag of the Prophet Muhammad and the sacred *ihram* of *hajj*. Believing jinn may also wear green, another significant color in Islam, whereas infidel jinn are said to wear red.<sup>39</sup> Elsewhere, it is said that green is the favorite color of jinn generally and is thus a symbol of ruin. Hence one should not wear green near caves or streams.<sup>40</sup>

This belief in blessed or cursed colors also extends to animals. Ambiguity surrounds whether evil spirits appear in the form of animals, whether animals are inhabited by evil spirits, or if some animals are merely harbingers of evil spirits. Spirits that take the form of animals are not necessarily bad, however. Some may be good-natured or indifferent. Spirits that appear in the form of white animals are usually regarded as peaceful, whereas black animals are considered dangerous. The camel is wicked regardless of color. In dream interpretation, camels are always a bad omen.<sup>41</sup> The reason for this is the widespread belief that the camel originally belonged to the world of the jinn.<sup>42</sup> Black cats and dogs are believed

to be inhabited by jinn, and are thus avoided at night.<sup>43</sup> Likewise, hyenas are haunted by jinn and may turn into ghouls that dig up graves and eats the dead.<sup>44</sup> Snakes are also inhabited by jinn, as they are creatures belonging to the earthly underworld.<sup>45</sup> The famous foundational myth of the origin of good and evil states that a jinni appeared in paradise in the form of a snake, tempting Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit, thus resulting in their expulsion from Paradise.<sup>46</sup>

This belief in immaterial spirits — whether free-floating or inhabiting people, animals, plants, or objects — is found in folklore, mythology, and religion around the world and throughout history. Though intangible and only sensed through visual, aural, or embodied sensations, the belief that spirits can inhabit objects and places concretely affects how places are perceived and navigated. Palestine is a fruitful place to explore the relationship between the spirit world and perceptions of place in the physical world. Palestine holds special significance to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Given its geographic location on the Mediterranean and at the crossroads of Asia, Africa, and Europe, Palestine has also been influenced by numerous cultures. This includes the Ancient Egyptians, Canaanites, Israelites, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, and successive Islamic caliphates spanning the seventh through twentieth centuries, interrupted by about a century of Crusader dominance. This rich history of intercultural and interreligious mingling has resulted in a landscape replete with shrines said to be inhabited by the spirits of prophets, saints, and jinn, reflecting the intermixing of paganistic and monotheistic practices. Shrine practices in Palestine thus reflect a unique cultural, political, and religious milieu, while also paralleling broader patterns of practice throughout the Eastern Mediterranean, as well as North Africa and South Asia.<sup>47</sup> Haunted sites illuminate the interaction of Palestinians with their land over extended periods, with these sites acting as enduring components of Palestinian folklore in the face of cultural erasure in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries by the forces of modernity and settler-colonialism.

The effects of modernization and urbanization, combined with the ongoing Israeli occupation, has resulted in displacement, dispossession, and fragmentation of Palestinian territory, as well as disenchantment of the landscape. As belief in haunted sites has declined and become regarded as superstitious, this belief has turned inward toward a focus on jinn possession. Belief in jinn possession is especially high in besieged and embattled Gaza, where residents suffer from repeated and ongoing traumatic stress.<sup>48</sup> Throughout Palestine, many Muslim healers treat ailments believed to be caused by malevolent spirits. Similarly, Samaritan priests sometimes maintain clinics to treat illnesses caused by jinn and seek the assistance of spirits to resolve social and marital problems. Whether dismissed as superstitious or not, stories of haunted places still circulate in oral traditions. Drawing upon oral history interviews conducted by the lead author in Arabic in 2020–21, the sections below bring the voices and memories of

<sup>28</sup> Westermarck, *Pagan Survivals*, p. 5.

<sup>29</sup> Sahhab, 'Popular Life,' p. 654.

<sup>30</sup> Andrew Breen, *A Diary of My Life in the Holy Land* (Rochester, N.Y.: John P. Smith Printing Company, 1906), p. 193.

<sup>31</sup> Al-Sahli and Al-Bashm, *Al-Mo'taqadat Al-Sha'biyya*, p. 59, Max-Müller, *Anthropological Religion*, p. 433.

<sup>32</sup> Westermarck, *Pagan Survivals*, p. 5; Sahhab, 'Popular Life in Palestine', p. 655.

<sup>33</sup> Pierre Canavaggio, *Mo'jam Al-Khorafat wa Al-Mo'taqadat Al-Sha'biyya fi Urobba*, translated by Ahmad Al-Tabbal (Beirut: Al-Muassaa Al-Jami'yya Lildirasat, 1993), pp. 100–101.

<sup>34</sup> Al-Sahli and Al-Bash, *Al-Mo'taqadat Al-Sha'biyya*, p. 59.

<sup>35</sup> Canavaggio, *Mo'jam Al-Khorafat*, p. 66.

<sup>36</sup> John Arnett MacCulloch, *The Religion of the Ancient Celts*, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1911).

<sup>37</sup> Taufiq Canaan, 'Haunted springs and water demons in Palestine', *Studies in Palestinian Customs and Folklore* 1 (1922) 153–154.

<sup>38</sup> Westermarck, *Pagan Survivals*, 20.

<sup>39</sup> Al-Sahli and Al-Bashm, *Al-Mo'taqadat Al-Sha'biyya*, pp. 68, 217.

<sup>40</sup> Canavaggio, *Mo'jam Al-Khorafat Urobba*, pp. 11, 13, 67.

<sup>41</sup> Canaan, 'Haunted springs', p. 160.

<sup>42</sup> O. Al-Ashqar, *Alam Al-Jinn wa Al-Shayatin* (Kuwait: Maktabat Al-Falah, 1984), p. 24.

<sup>43</sup> Westermarck, *Pagan Survivals*, p. 6.

<sup>44</sup> Sahhab, 'Popular Life', p. 659–660.

<sup>45</sup> Al-Sahli and Al-Bash, *Al-Mo'taqadat Al-Sha'biyya*, p. 270.

<sup>46</sup> Flavius Josephus, *Complete Works of Josephus: Antiquities of the Jews; The Wars of the Jews, Against Apion, etc. etc* (New York: Bigelow, Brown, 1900), pp. 1, 3–4.

<sup>47</sup> Glenn W. Bowman, 'Identification and Identity Formations around Shared Shrines in West Bank Palestine and Western Macedonia', in *Sharing Sacred Spaces in the Mediterranean: Christians, Muslims, and Jews at Shrines and Sanctuaries* ed. by Dionigi Albera and Maria Couroucli (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 11–30.

<sup>48</sup> Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, 'Public Opinion Poll No (73)', September 22 (2019), <https://pcpsr.org/en/node/775>.

Palestinian elders into our understanding of the role of jinn and other spirits in everyday life.

First, we provide an overview of the spirit world in Palestine, drawn from the ethnographic writings of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a period of radical social and political change. This era is marked by Ottoman political centralization, increased European encroachment, and early Zionist settlement. Likewise, this period of modernization brought with it increased travel and tourism, and the advent of Biblical archaeology, intent on mapping European Christian and Jewish Zionist imaginings of the holy land onto the Palestinian Arab cultural landscape. The partition of Palestine in 1948 and the displacement of Palestinians, combined with the subsequent invasion and occupation of remaining Palestinian territory in 1967, serves as a series of ongoing traumatic assaults on Palestinian cultural continuity. Though typically viewed through a political geography perspective with a focus on territorial boundaries, the subsequent sections turn our attention to the realm of the unseen to illuminate the intimate spiritual connection to the land maintained by the Palestinian folkloric tradition.

### Land-dwelling demons and evil spirits in Palestinian lore

Writing in his memoirs after his visit to Palestine at the end of the nineteenth century, American Catholic Father Andrew E. Breen wrote: 'The idea of the existence of evil spirits and all kinds of ghosts fills the Arab world, Muslims and Christians believe in it, and they believe that it is widespread in the countryside and the city, indoors and outdoors, on land or over water, however, some places are more inhabited than others'.<sup>49</sup> During this period, marked by increased dissatisfaction with Ottoman rule, Palestinian popular belief held that jinn society was divided into different tribes, each one having its own authority, rulers, and just courts, whose judges were incorruptible because of the holiness of the country.<sup>50</sup> This is consistent with the idea that jinn society is characterized, not by individualism, but by a tendency towards collectivism, perhaps illustrating a romantic ideal of peasant life prior to the land tax reforms instituted during the *tanzimat* (reorganization) of 1839–1876. Following the passage of the Ottoman Land Code of 1858, land that had been collectively cultivated by villagers came under singular ownership, often by merchants, governments officials, or other urban elites who became absentee landlords.

Though many jinn are associated with benevolence, fairness, and even saintliness, others are inclined toward evil. Tradition holds that *Shaytan* (Satan) was an outcast jinni named *Iblis* who, out of his own arrogance and jealousy, refused to bow to Adam when commanded to do so by God. Since then, *Shaytan* became an avowed enemy to humans, luring them away from God. This duality of good and evil, with its roots in ancient Semetic beliefs, extends not only to spirits, but also to blessed and cursed places, people, and objects. As such, jinn and other spirits play a role in maintaining the stability of moral geographies during times of political, economic, and social upheaval. This section details the stories of ghouls, hags, and other gendered jinn that haunt particular places and, in doing so, impose boundaries of morality.

One of the most common evil spirits in Palestinian folklore is the *ghoul*, about which numerous stories still circulate today. Ghouls are sometimes called cemetery jinn, because they are believed to feed on the bodies of the dead. If a person is killed somewhere, their

ghost might manifest as a female ghou (*ghouleh*), who appears to people and inflicts harm on them.<sup>51</sup> The ghou is imagined as a hideous being covered with hair, with laterally slit eyes and hooves.<sup>52</sup> The ghou is sometimes said to resemble a woman with the legs of a goat or a donkey, or with human legs and the body of a goat with long pendulous breasts. Alternatively, the ghou may appear in the form of a lustful woman. Such beautiful ghouls may seduce and kidnap young men, forcing them into sensual relations before eventually devouring them.<sup>53</sup> A female villager in the Ramallah district tells that a woodcutter passed by a carob tree and saw a bride dressed in gold coming out of the tree. The bride lured the woodcutter, seducing him with money. When he refused, she slapped him on his eyes and blinded him.<sup>54</sup> Similar encounters were reported near the shrine of Sheikh Ibrahim in Al-Khader, and Al-Zut cave near the Hassan Al-Gharib shrine in Galilee, northern Palestine.<sup>55</sup> The ghou thus plays a role in maintaining gender boundaries, warning men about the seductions of women and the negative consequences of illicit romantic encounters with strangers.

The *sila* (hag or succubus) is like the ghou in many respects. She appears in frightening form with hair covering her entire body. However, she can transform into a beautiful woman who seduces then kills men. In Ain Al-Joz in the Jerusalem area, a *sila* is rumored to have appeared in the form of a black goat. If a man tried to catch her, she would jump from one place to another, luring him to an empty place where she then turned into a beautiful bride. After having sex with the man, she would kill him.<sup>56</sup> Such threatening behavior, however, is not limited to female jinn. Women were warned to beware of male jinn who might violate them. If a peasant woman wanted to relieve herself outside, she would say, 'Oh, landowners, protect the honor', to prevent the assault of jinn. Representing gender-based anxieties, female jinn are thus known for their deception, while male jinn are to be feared for their physical aggression. In general, violence begets violent jinn as in the case of the *marid* (giant demon) who appears in the form of a giant man in remote areas and places where people have been killed.<sup>57</sup>

The *qarinah* is another female jinn (also sometimes associated with Lilith, of Judaic and Mesopotamian mythology), which Palestinian lore depicts as having mated with *Iblis* after Adam rejected her. Her offspring target pregnant women, the descendants of Adam and Eve, aborting their babies and killing newborns.<sup>58</sup> They also target grooms on wedding nights, preventing marital consummation. As a result, the *qarinah* is responsible for making couples infertile, representing values and fears around fertility, childbearing, and infant mortality. Similarly, *al-khanuq* (the suffocator), is a jinni specializing in spreading epidemics, especially cholera and the plague, including to children.<sup>59</sup>

There are numerous manifestations of jinn and other creatures that play on popular fears and account for unexplained and unwanted phenomena. The *ifrit* sect consists of both males and

<sup>51</sup> Claude Reignier Conder, *Tent Work in Palestine: a Record of Discovery and Adventure* (London: Richard Bentley, 1879), p. 233; K. Ayyash, *Al-jinn fi Al-Adab Al-Sha'bi Al-Filistini*, unpublished Master's thesis, (Nablus, Palestine: Faculty of Graduate Studies, An-Najah National University, 2018), p. 56.

<sup>52</sup> Al-Sahli and Al-Bashm, *Al-Mo'taqadat*, p. 65.

<sup>53</sup> Westermarck, *Pagan Survivals*, p. 21.

<sup>54</sup> Sahhab, 'Popular Life in Palestine', pp. 664–65.

<sup>55</sup> Canaan, *Mohammedan Saints*, p. 271.

<sup>56</sup> Ayyash, *Al-jinn*, pp. 57–58.

<sup>57</sup> Baldensperger, 'Peasant Folklore of Palestine', 206.

<sup>58</sup> Robert Lebling, *Legends of the Fire Spirits: Jinn and Genies from Arabia to Zanzibar* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010).

<sup>59</sup> Sahhab, 'Popular Life', pp. 654–57.

<sup>49</sup> A.E. Breen, *A Diary of My Life in the Holy Land* (Rochester, N.Y.: John P. Smith Printing Co., 1906), p. 193.

<sup>50</sup> P. Baldensperger, 'Peasant Folklore of Palestine', Palestine Exploration Fund (1893), p. 204.

females and is one of the most harmful types of jinn.<sup>60</sup> The ifrit can appear as a column of smoke, then transform into a giant with horns.<sup>61</sup> Evil spirits are said to appear in the form of a whirlwind of smoke or a dust devil.<sup>62</sup> Palestinian folklore holds that strong winds are a demonic apparition caused by the whistling of jinn.<sup>63</sup> In the absence of modern education and health care or representative governmental or judicial authorities, and in the context of rapidly changing political and economic circumstances, such creatures served as both moral guardrails and explanatory devices offering a sense of predictability and possible recourse to action. From these land-based jinn, we now turn to a discussion of water demons in Palestinian folklore, the places they haunt, and the geographies of justice they inscribe.

### Water demons and haunted springs

The people of the village of Zawata disagreed with the people of the village of Asira over the ownership of a water well inside a cave located on the lands of Asira, and each party claimed that the well was theirs. The people of Zawata believed that the water from this well came from Ain Zawata (Zawata's spring). To prove this, one of the people of Zawata put dry straw and hay in the water of Ain Zawata, then went to the well to confirm to the people of Asira that if the straw reached the well, that meant the source of the water was Ain Zawata. The man went down the well to check but did not return home. His mother went to the well looking for him. The jinn, the guardian of the well, appeared to her in the form of a man and said to her: 'The water of the well kidnapped your son and sent him to the Badhan spring as punishment for polluting the well with straw and hay'.<sup>64</sup>

This story was recounted by Adel Abu Amsha, an 80-year-old man from Zawata near the city of Nablus. In the story, while the villagers of Zawata and Asira disputed about ownership of the well, the water itself asserted its sovereignty and punished the villager for polluting this precious natural resource. As with the earth-dwelling creatures described above, this section describes several evil, beneficent, and seductive water spirits that delineate celestial and earthly moral geographies, while also explaining natural phenomena.

The belief that low-lying places like springs, streams, and wells, are haunted by spirits is widespread belief in many cultures.<sup>65</sup> The mysterious appearance of lifegiving water in arid areas led to the belief that such springs possessed supernatural power and were inhabited by spirits. Conflicts between good and evil spirits in such springs can result in the interruption of the flow of water. This is the case with the spring of Ain Al-Fawar (Ain Farah), south of Hebron. Local people believed that it was inhabited by two spirits, an enslaved black spirit, and the spirit of a slave-master. These two powerful spirits were constantly battling. When the slave-master gained victory, he allowed the water to flow. When the enslaved spirit took control, he stopped the flow of water to take revenge.<sup>66</sup>

The spirits inhabiting this spring thus provide a moral lesson about the negative consequences of exploitation and abuse.

Similarly, the well of A'ona is variously said to be haunted by the spirit of the Virgin Mary or that of a vengeful slave. Likewise, Ain Al-Hajar in the village of Deir Ghassanah northwest of Ramallah is said to be haunted by the spirit of a Muslim saint called *As-Sit Moumena* (the Lady Believer) and a rival evil spirit. Numerous other springs throughout Palestine are said to have intermittent flow due to the competition between benevolent and vengeful spirits. This includes the springs of Ain Al-Joz and Ain Silwan near Jerusalem, the first said to be haunted by warring white and black goats, and the latter inhabited by a thirsty evil camel and an opposing beneficent spirit. In addition to intermittent water flow, the presence of hot springs is also attributed to jinn. In the Islamic tradition, the wise prophet-king Solomon is said to be able to communicate with animals and jinn. Palestinian folklore attributes hot springs to jinn boiling water at Solomon's command so that people can bathe. The jinn entrusted with this task did not know of Solomon's death, so they kept warming the water for fear of his punishment.<sup>67</sup>

Along with wells, springs, and streams being associated with the underworld, and thus spirits, these places have another more celestial association. Various Semitic cultures divided heavenly bodies into good and bad omens and linked natural phenomena to corresponding planets. This moral division of the heavens and its correlation with earthly phenomena persists in Palestinian folklore. The two bad planets are Mars and Saturn, with the latter being the worst. Springs, wells, caves, subterranean channels, and secluded valleys, all belong to this ominous planet. All natural features that belong to this planet are connected to demons or magic. However, some believe that the springs and wells were once all sacred and dedicated to the worship of God, and that divine spirits still visit such springs. It is only when evil spirits inhabit them that water-borne illness and death are inflicted on the people.<sup>68</sup>

Though their names, personalities, and apparitions vary, water-dwelling spirits found throughout Palestine serve to explain intermittent flow of water, the spread of disease, and other phenomena.<sup>69</sup> With their origins in pagan traditions, these beliefs are also shared among adherents to monotheistic faiths. For many Muslim and Christian Palestinians alike, springs can be guarded by the spirits of saints buried nearby, or by evil spirits.<sup>70</sup> In Palestinian folklore, this guardian *rasad* jinn (or *wanas* in Bedouin parlance) can manifest in the form of an animal or a bird, which magicians were said to use to protect treasure and possessions.<sup>71</sup>

Wells, springs, or streams located near the shrines or tombs of saints take on the sacredness of these holy people. Some sacred water streams may also be associated with a saint, without the physical presence of that saint's shrine, tomb, or sacred tree.<sup>72</sup> All wells in open plains are said to be guarded by the spirits of saints who dwell in them.<sup>73</sup> On the holy days of the saint whose spirit supposedly guards the spring, miracles are said happen. Thus, the water of the well of A'ona rises on the day of the Virgin, and the stones of the mouth of the well turn red. Similarly, there is a spring in Nablus that flows on Sundays, and it is said that the spirit of a monk inhabits the spring and performs his religious duties on Sundays. As such, not only do spirits and haunted places inscribe moral geographies upon the landscape, but pious people can also

<sup>60</sup> Al-Sahli and Al-Bashm, *Al-Mo'taqadat*, pp. 60, 79; Conder, *Tent Work*, p. 233; Cunningham Geikie, *The Holy Land and the Bible, II* (London: Casselle & Co., 1887), p. 233.

<sup>61</sup> Ayyash, *Al-Jinn*, p. 62.

<sup>62</sup> Westermarck, *Pagan Survivals*, p. 6.

<sup>63</sup> Al-Sahli and Al-Bashm, *Al-Mo'taqadat*, p. 35.

<sup>64</sup> This story was recounted several times to the first author in visits to Zawata in 2018 and 2020 by Adel Abu Amsha (80) and others from the village.

<sup>65</sup> Tamari, 'Lepers, Lunatics and Saints', p. 127.

<sup>66</sup> Canaan, 'Haunted springs', pp. 153–54, 156.

<sup>67</sup> Sahhab, 'Popular Life', p. 628–29.

<sup>68</sup> Al-Sahli and Al-Bashm, *Al-Mo'taqadat*, p. 75.

<sup>69</sup> Canaan, 'Haunted springs', pp. 154, 156.

<sup>70</sup> Canaan, 'Haunted springs', p. 158.

<sup>71</sup> Sahhab, 'Popular Life', p. 655; Ayyash, *Al-Jinn*, p. 60.

<sup>72</sup> Canaan, *Mohammedan Saints*, p. 61.

<sup>73</sup> Baldensperger, 'Peasant Folklore', p. 204.

leave traces of their benevolence behind in physical spaces, for others to benefit from and emulate.

As with the spirits described in the previous section, these moral geographies also reinforce gendered spatial practices. It is forbidden for any menstruating woman to approach any spring dedicated to good spirits, otherwise she will be stricken by disease, and the flow of blood to one of her limbs may stop, along with the flow of the spring's water, thus punishing the entire village. In the case of Ain al-Sultan, the evil spirit believed to guard the spring used to menstruate once a year, resulting in the spring's water turning red for ten or twelve days. At the Khirbet Nota spring in Beitunia, the water would decrease or stop flowing from time to time. It was believed that this happened because a menstruating woman had approached the spring. If this happened, a sheep would be presented to Sheikh Saleh's spirit which dwells amid the nearby vineyards, and the spring would thus be cleansed of impurity and would flow more abundantly.<sup>74</sup> Menstruating women were also forbidden from approaching the spring of Jifna, said to be inhabited by the spirit of a bride.<sup>75</sup> If the spring dried up, a priest would go to it and recite supplications and burn incense as an offering and appeasement until the water flowed.<sup>76</sup> One of the popular narrations from the village of Farkha mentions human sacrifices, where it was said that Ain Badran suddenly stopped flowing until someone left his child for the spring to take, allowing the water to flow again.<sup>77</sup> These practices point to the perceived impurity of menstruation, and blood in general, across religious and cultural traditions in the region, as well as patriarchal impositions on the mobility of menstruating women. However, the practices also indicate the lack of any taboo against public discourse on menstruation, which was essentially considered a public health issue.

Although most springs are associated with either good or evil spirits, an intermediate category exists, namely, women who appear at springs in the form of talking dolls. Like seductive sila, though not as dangerous, these female spirits promise men riches and comforts, though they rudely repel women.<sup>78</sup> These spirits are described as having an imposing stature and charming figure, wearing beautiful clothes and expensive adornments. They are said to sit on a stone by the flowing water and comb their long hair, which hangs partly on their shoulders and partly over their chest. These beings have a special predilection for people, beckoning them to come and live together. Like the water nymphs of Greek mythology, these spirits symbolize growth and fertility and the vital importance of water. Having discussed various inhabitants of springs and wells, we turn finally to oral histories of sacred trees and tree-dwelling spirits which, again, emphasize the importance of collective care of nature, rather than selfish exploitation of resources.

### Sacred and haunted trees

Many cultures believe that old trees are inhabited by spirits. In many countries, including Palestine, when fruiting trees become old and stop bearing fruit, it would be attributed to aerial demons. Some cultures classify trees like oak, carob, fig, blackberry, sycamore, and caper-bush as representing the preferred dwelling places for evil spirits.<sup>79</sup> For example, in Palestine, brambleberry shrubs

and trees are often said to be favored by jinn. In eastern Christian tradition, it was a bramble bush that supplied Christ's crown of thorns during his crucifixion, and tradition states that some bramble varieties do not give edible fruit because the devil dwells in it. Many Palestinian Christians used to cut branches from mulberry trees on Epiphany and burn them because it is said that all trees prostrate to God on this feast, except for berries.<sup>80</sup> Since spirits belong to the earthly underworld, they like thick and knotted trees whose roots penetrate deep into the earth. Places with old, gnarly trees are often considered haunted in the Palestinian popular imaginary. In practice, however, it is difficult to determine which trees are haunted by good jinn, bad jinn, or the spirits of saints.<sup>81</sup> There are examples of one kind of tree being blessed by saints in one location, and haunted by demons in another.<sup>82</sup> Canaan maintained that, unlike springs, when a tree is inhabited by jinn, it cannot be inhabited at the same time by a saint.<sup>83</sup> However, others believe that trees inhabited by saints can also be haunted by jinn, regardless of whether they are good or bad. Like the water spirits described above, tree spirits sometimes blur the lines between good and evil, while nevertheless serving to inscribe boundaries of right action, including care for humans and trees alike.

The fig tree is significant in many faiths in Palestine and beyond. God swears by the fig tree in chapter 95 of the Qur'an (Surah at-Tin, the Chapter of the Fig) which begins "By the fig and the olive." Likewise, the fig tree (*Ficus benghalensis* or Banyan tree) is called the tree of knowledge by Krishna in the Bhagavad-Gītā. Contrastingly, the book of Genesis depicts Adam and Eve using fig leaves to cover themselves after having gained ill-gotten knowledge from the forbidden tree. Thus, fig leaves became a symbol of concealing sin and providing refuge to evil spirits. The fig is the only tree that Christ is said to have cursed, and the wild fig, according to tradition, is the tree on which the traitor Judas Iscariot hanged himself.<sup>84</sup> In Palestinian folklore, huge fig trees are among the favorite places for jinn to live and gather.<sup>85</sup> Fig trees abound in cemeteries and near shrines and caves dedicated to saints and sheikhs. This includes the Virgin fig tree in Jifna, as well as fig trees near the shrine of Sheikh Hatem in Jurish, the shrine of Sheikh Ahmad in the cemetery of the village of Abu Shukhaidim, Sheikh Mustafa's cave in Deir Ibbzi', and the cave of Siti al Waliyeh (the Lady of Guardianship) in Deir Qaddis.<sup>86</sup> In addition, the people of the village of Battir believed that the three fig trees around the shrine of Abu Yazid were inhabited by evil jinn, due to the old, decrepit graves at the site. Residents were afraid to pass the figs at night, and they believed that jinn would harm whoever broke any branch.<sup>87</sup>

Belonging to the ominous planet of Saturn, Carobs carry more straightforwardly negative connotations in Palestinian lore.<sup>88</sup> The word for carob in Arabic (*al-kharob*) is derived from the word for ruin (*kharab*), therefore the carob denotes death and destruction in dreams and in real life. It is no wonder, then, that jinn are said to

<sup>80</sup> Sahhab, 'Popular Life', p. 630.

<sup>81</sup> Westermarck, *Pagan Survivals*, 20.

<sup>82</sup> Westermarck, *Pagan Survivals*, p. 20.

<sup>83</sup> Canaan, *Mohammedan Saints*, 60.

<sup>84</sup> Folkard, *Plant lore*, pp. 17, 259.

<sup>85</sup> Canaan, *Mohammedan Saints*, p. 60; Al-Sahli and Al-Bashm, *Al-Mo'taqadat*, pp. 74, 338.

<sup>86</sup> Khaled Farah (65), interviewed on 16 September 2021 in Jurish; Muhammad Qandah (63), interviewed on 6 October 2021 in Abu Shukhaidim; Mashhour Mansour (58), interviewed on 26 October 2021 in Deir Ibbzi'; Saeed Abu Zeid (55), interviews on 6 October 2021 in Deir Qaddis.

<sup>87</sup> Zakaria Kayed Qatoush (65) interview on 15 April 2021 in Battir.

<sup>88</sup> Canaan, *Mohammedan Saints*, p. 60.

<sup>74</sup> Canaan, 'Haunted springs', pp. 159, 166.

<sup>75</sup> Canaan, *Mohammedan Saints*, p. 121.

<sup>76</sup> Sahhab, 'Popular Life', pp. 629, 655.

<sup>77</sup> Maher Rizkallah (50), interviewed on 27 September 2021 in Farkha.

<sup>78</sup> Canaan, 'Haunted springs', p. 160.

<sup>79</sup> Folkard, *Plant Lore*, pp. 84, 65; J.E. Hanauer, *Folklore of the Holy Land: Moslem, Christian and Jewish* (London: Duckworth & Co., 1907), 286.

congregate under carob trees.<sup>89</sup> In earlier times, gold was protected from theft by placing carob seeds with it, to attract guardian jinn.<sup>90</sup> People used to dispose of the clothes of their dead by placing them on a carob tree, so if a person wanted to wish death upon someone, they would say: 'May your clothes hang on the carob'.<sup>91</sup> Baldensperger observed in 1893 that many Palestinian peasants would avoid sleeping under carob trees, especially fathers who feared that devils would destroy his offspring.<sup>92</sup> A popular proverb says: 'Sleeping under a carob tree is not desirable'. Likewise, farmers would avoid tying their donkeys under carobs without first asking permission from the jinn.<sup>93</sup> In Burqin, the Al-Waliyeh carob tree stands as a sort of shrine out of which jinn are believed to emerge.<sup>94</sup>

In some parts of Palestine, Pistachio trees (*Pistacia atlantica*) were also associated with bad omens. The villagers of Nisf Jubail, north of Nablus, would see lights and hear the hooves of galloping horses near one such pistachio tree.<sup>95</sup> It is possible that this tree was associated with the cave located nearby, which itself could have been associated with jinn or the spirit of a saint. With successive generations, reverence may have turned to fear as people began to associate the site with terrifying jinn. Similarly, the villagers of Beitillo mentioned that they used to hear rattling sounds at night in the mountain opposite the shrine of Al-Yasira, whenever an intruder tried to steal something from the shrine or attack its trees. They called the entity that made these sounds 'Umm al-Kharakhish', the mother of rattling.<sup>96</sup> Muhammad Youssef Saleh from the village of Beit Lid likewise recalled that 'During my childhood I was afraid to pass near a pistachio tree near the tomb of Sheikh Mughith, even during the day.'<sup>97</sup> In the village of Qira, another huge pistachio tree near an ancient Roman pool was home to a parliament of owls, which are associated with evil spirits and bad omens. On one occasion, an owl was said to have turned into an agama lizard, demonstrating how jinn may change from one animal to another. In another story, a ghoul appeared near the tree, scaring an onlooker away.<sup>98</sup> The tree was cut down so that it would no longer constitute a source of fear for the residents.

In most cases, no one dares to cut the branches of haunted trees, just as it is not permissible to harvest their fruits until the permission of the jinn is obtained by placing some food under the trees.<sup>99</sup> When someone tried to cut down the haunted oak of Umm Zaben in Kafr Thulth, the other townspeople prevented it, so that no harm would come to them.<sup>100</sup> People were afraid to enter Al-Qattara Cave (the Cave of the Seven Brides) at night in Aqraba, and they refrained from cutting any branch of the oak trees surrounding it, for fear of the reaction of the jinn and the consequent calamities for the perpetrator.<sup>101</sup> The site consists of two large caves and seven oak trees surrounding them, each representing the spirit of a bride.<sup>102</sup> Legend has it, the jinn killed an Ottoman-Turkish soldier there because he cut branches from one of the oaks.

Another rendition recounts that the spirits of the underworld united with the British to defeat the Turks in that location because the Turks encroached on the property of the jinn.<sup>103</sup>

Similar stories are told about the haunted oak tree at Alkhirba near Salfit, out of which sparks of fire were said to have emitted upon each axe blow during an attempted arboricide.<sup>104</sup> Likewise, when the people of Deir Jarir used branches from Al-Mubarak oak to build a mosque, the mosque collapsed before it was completed.<sup>105</sup> According to popular narration, the shrine of Al-Yasira and its grove in Beitillo are protected by jinn, and people tell stories about jinn paralyzing aggressors in the area.<sup>106</sup> Similarly, a belief prevailed among the people of Salim village that the spirits that inhabit Sheikh Nasrallah's pistachio tree could slap people on their faces, and that whoever harms the tree would be paralyzed or have their hand broken. It was said that a person from the village cut off a stem and broke his neck as a result.<sup>107</sup> These stories help to preserve these trees for the common good.

Apart from not harming haunted trees, Palestinian villager in many areas would also practice a custom found in other cultures throughout the world, namely, adorning such trees with cloths and rags.<sup>108</sup> John Mills observed people in Palestine gathering at some trees associated with evil spirits to tie cloth to them as part of what he perceived to be a ritual of superstitious magic.<sup>109</sup> In Silwan, people used to hang rags on an oak tree called Abraham's Oak to appease and ward off spirits. Likewise, near Lake Hula in northern Palestine, there is a supposedly haunted grove of oak trees that villagers would decorate with rags.<sup>110</sup> When people passed near Umm Zabin oak tree, west of the village of Kafr Thulth, they would tie white flags to it to seek safety from the evil spirits that inhabit it.<sup>111</sup> People also used to decorate the oak trees of al-Qattara Cave with colored rags for the same reason.<sup>112</sup> Such rituals are practiced at the haunted Umm Al-Sharayet oak in Wadi Al Naml near Beitunia and at the oak of Bab Al-Ghars in the Abu Sharif valley west of Silwad village, suggesting the practice to be a widespread way of containing the evil associated with certain inhabited trees.<sup>113</sup>

Many other such trees believed to be inhabited by both good and evil spirits caused fear for passersby, thus affecting everyday mobilities and perceptions of place. For example, in the village of Aqraba, there was a stand of pomegranate trees belonging to the spirit of Sheikh Zamil, north of the old village, near a pond and a Roman cemetery. People there call it Bustan Al-Sra' (the Orchard of Epilepsy), and avoid it for fear of jinn-induced ailments.<sup>114</sup> The trees of the shrine of Abu Ammar in Nahhalin were also feared by residents because they believed them to be haunted by spirits.<sup>115</sup> In the village of Deir Jarir, the Al-Mubarak (Blessed) oak still arouses fear among the residents, because they believe it to be inhabited by jinn.<sup>116</sup> It is said that a woman was unjustly killed under the oak,

<sup>89</sup> Baldensperger, 'Peasant Folklore' p. 204; Hanauer, *Folklore of the Holy Land*, p. 286.

<sup>90</sup> Al-Sahli and Al-Bashm, *Al-Mo'taqadat*, pp. 73, 79.

<sup>91</sup> Hamza Diriyeh (45), interview on 22 September 2022, recalling stories he heard from elders between 2007 and 2009.

<sup>92</sup> Baldensperger, 'Peasant Folklore of Palestine', p. 204.

<sup>93</sup> Canaan, *Mohammedan Saints*, p. 59.

<sup>94</sup> Kamel Abdullah (63), interview on 30 September 2021 in Bruqin.

<sup>95</sup> Mohie Barham (64), interview on 15 September 2021 in Nisf Jubail.

<sup>96</sup> Hussein Abdulla (80), interview on 21 October 2021 in Beitillo.

<sup>97</sup> Muhammad Youssef Saleh (72), interview on 29 October 2021 in Beit Lid.

<sup>98</sup> Ishaq Farid Arabasi (68), interview in 23 September 2021 in Qira.

<sup>99</sup> Hamza Diriyeh (45) 22 September 2022.

<sup>100</sup> Abdelaziz Arar (64), interview on 24 September 2021 in Kafr Thulth.

<sup>101</sup> Faddah Suleiman (100) and Aql Hassan (98), interview on 29 November 2021 in Aqraba.

<sup>102</sup> Canaan, *Mohammedan Saints*, p. 271.

<sup>103</sup> Canaan, *Mohammedan Saints*, p. 272.

<sup>104</sup> Halima Odeh (85), interview on 27 August 2021 in Salfit.

<sup>105</sup> Jouada Maali (40), interview on 14 August 2021 in Deir Jarir.

<sup>106</sup> Hussein Abdullah (80), interview on 21 October 2021 in Beitillo.

<sup>107</sup> Izzia Shtayyeh (75), interview on 30 August 2021 in Salim.

<sup>108</sup> Canaan, *Mohammedan Saints*, p. 59.

<sup>109</sup> John Mills, *Three Months' Residence at Nablus, and an Account of the Modern Samaritans*, (London: John Murray, 1864), p. 54.

<sup>110</sup> Al-Sahli and Al-Bash, *Al-Mo'taqadat*, p. 339-40.

<sup>111</sup> Aisha Arar (84) and Abdelaziz Arar (64), interview on September 9, 2021 in Kafr Thulth.

<sup>112</sup> Faddah Suleiman (100) and Aql Hassan (98), interview on 29 November 2021 in Aqraba.

<sup>113</sup> Omar Musa Hamed (50), Silwad, 2/10/2021 and Salah El-Din Youssef (71), interview on 11 November 2021 in Beitunia.

<sup>114</sup> Hamza Diriyeh (45) 22 September 2022.

<sup>115</sup> Muhammad Ghayaza (58) interview on 13 May 2021 in Nahhalin.

<sup>116</sup> Jouada Maali (41) 14 August 2021.



which stands nearby a cave containing the remains of Ottoman soldiers. Thus, do acts of violence as well as acts of benevolence call forth good and evil spirits to inhabit specific sites, inspiring both fear and reverence in future generations.

## Conclusion

Until recent times, and even today, peoples' experiences with their everyday natural surroundings were heavily mediated and influenced by sensed yet unseen supernatural forces. As attested to by historical ethnography, as well as oral history testimony, this is true in Palestine as it is elsewhere. Indeed, the melding of the unseen spirit world and the physical landscape seems to be a near universal phenomenon, and one that geographers have largely left to folklorists to document.

The jinn and other entities examined in this paper range from the malevolent to the mischievous and benevolent. What they all have in common is that they act with moral agency and help to maintain gendered and moral geographies of justice and care. This suggests that hauntings may not merely symbolize traumatic ruptures with the past to be healed but may themselves act as forces of healing. Beyond the physical powers such haunted places might be believed to possess, memories of saints and jinn dwelling in rocks, trees, and springs in Palestine may also retain resistant political power in the context of the ongoing occupation and displacement. Specifically, collective memories of these everyday sacred and haunted sites may serve to reconnect social linkages with cultural and natural landscapes that have otherwise been severed through the erasure of settler colonialism.

In Palestine, known for its association with the three Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, beliefs and practices associated with sacred spaces and haunted landscapes have ancient, pre-biblical roots, tracing back to Canaanite customs and the traditions and beliefs of other semitic-speaking peoples and neighboring cultures. However, these beliefs and practices, firmly rooted in surrounding physical landscape and cultural customs, nevertheless get reimagined and reinterpreted within changing, social, political, and economic contexts, be it the advent of Christianity or spread of Islam, or the new socio-economic configurations that resulted from Ottoman land reforms and perceptions of political corruption and inequality.

Indeed, beyond describing natural phenomenon such as intermittent water flow, jinn myths contain moral truths and lessons about care, justice, and fairness for human and non-human life. As indicated in the stories above, they have also played a role in interpreting geopolitical events such as the British defeat of Ottoman forces. Even today, jinn resist the bulldozers of the Israeli occupation, and variously attack or assist antiquities poachers.<sup>117</sup> Though references to the active participation of jinn in resistance to occupation are limited and sporadic, for some Palestinians who feel marginalized and abandoned by the global community, the idea of hidden forces intervening on their behalf may have emerged to fill that gap. The Israeli settlement and expansion policies,

including land seizures, settlement construction, and the building of military and settlement roads, destroyed many cultural heritage sites, including those believed to be inhabited by jinn. This has led to some oral narratives losing their connection to specific geographic places. This loss of access to cultural heritage sites, combined with the trauma and stress of a restricted life under occupation, has led to a shift in perception of jinn away from inhabiting specific places and more toward inhabiting people's bodies, especially in the besieged Gaza Strip.

Likewise, the myths discussed above are heavily gendered, but not straightforwardly so.<sup>118</sup> Menstruation is seen both as a cause for springs to run dry and flow freely. Myths warn of female manipulation but also male aggression and indicate that those who unjustly accuse or murder women will be cursed. In this way, jinn can serve as delimiting physical spaces, as well as gendered, moral geographies.

What all the myths share is their intimate interconnection with the physical landscape and natural world. This suggests the need for geographic perspectives on the relationship between physical landscapes and spirits, and the spatial patterning and diffusion of inhabited places beyond metaphorical understandings of haunting. Still, in the metaphorical sense, haunted springs and sacred trees represent a hauntological presence in the context of the Israeli occupation, which uproots trees, diverts water resources, and blocks access to sacred sites. While much of the focus on sacred space in Palestine remains on the holy sites of Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Hebron, the historical ethnographic writing and oral histories presented here point to a cultural landscape replete with sacred sites at every turn. That these popular religious customs are deeply rooted in the physical landscape is indicative of their indigeneity, which, combined with their unorthodoxy, serves as an unsettling spectral presence disrupting settler colonial discourses backed by Biblically-based territorial claims. In other words, the subterranean stores of deep time that such heterodox myths tap into, reach into the cervices of ancient Canaanite culture and manifest material and embodied memories that haunt exclusionary scriptural narratives of the land. As Tawfiq Canaan recognized over a century ago, the preservation of such customs not only resists their cultural erasure by the combined forces of modernity and settler-colonialism, but points to other ways of living with and remaining on hallowed and haunted lands.

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<sup>117</sup> Salah Hussein A Al-Houdalieh, 'Physical hazards encountered by antiquities looters: a case study from the Palestinian National Territories', *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 145 (2013) 320–333.

<sup>118</sup> See also Celia E. Rothenberg, *Spirits of Palestine: Gender, Society, and Stories of the Jinn* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).