

# Dwelling and healing with saints and jinn in the haunted landscapes of Palestine

*cultural geographies*

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/cgj](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/cgj)**Amer A Al-Qobbaj**

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**Abstract**

The Jinn of Islamic and Middle Eastern popular mythology play a role in maintaining spatial divisions between sacred and profane space, public and protected areas, and acceptable and exceptional behaviour. Though research on jinn continues to be of importance in cross-cultural psychology, the rich relationship between jinn and place has largely been lost or severed. This paper seeks to restore this link through an examination of the relationship between unseen spirits and place in Palestine and throughout the Levant (*Bilad ash-Sham*). Drawing upon both European and Palestinian historical ethnographic writing, as well as oral history interviews with Palestinian elders, this paper examines spatial practices that can attract, prevent, or heal harm from jinn and other unseen forces, as well as places where such spirits dwell, including graveyards, caves, wells, sacred trees, and shrines. Jinn play a dual role in helping to protect the sanctity of these places, while also threatening to violate the intimate space hearth and home. In this way, jinn play an important role in both establishing, and at times blurring and negotiating social mores and their related physical boundaries. In examining how jinn threaten the sanctity of homes and bodies, but also how place-dwelling spirits help to heal bodies and sooth souls, this paper moves beyond mere metaphorical understandings of spectral geographies to understand the material implications of unseen and imagined forces. By doing so, this paper builds upon recent research exploring the deep connection between the environment and spiritual/sacred understandings of place.

**Keywords**folklore, haunted places, *jinn*, Palestine, shrines**Corresponding author:**

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## Introduction

The people in the village of Aqraba [near Nablus], and in Palestine in general, believed that every place where a person was killed and his blood flowed, a *jinni* called “Amora” would appear at night, and that this jinni might appear to people shouting the last thing the murdered person said before his death. For this reason, people used to place stones at the place of killing so that the spirit of the murdered person would not come out and harm people. [. . .] In Wadi al-Hajj Issa there were two jinn, one of whom appeared sitting under an oak tree in the form of a woman wearing a black dress. The strange thing is that these jinn, although they were scaring people, were protecting property. People used to put their belongings in the nearby caves, and the revolutionaries during the British Mandate used to hide their rifles there, and people believed that it remained protected from the jinn, or that people did not dare to approach it for fear of the jinn.

This story, recounted by 45-year-old Hamza Diriyeh recalling what he had heard from elders in Aqraba, demonstrates the intimate intermingling of the spirit-world of jinn, the physical world of rocks and caves, and political realities of colonialism and resistance in Palestine. This intermingling arises from and reproduces a complex moral geography of cursed, haunted, blessed and protected places throughout the Palestinian cultural landscape. In this moral geography, acts of injustice and violence embed themselves in the landscape in the form of vengeful jinn who haunt caves, yet who can be contained by stones stacked by passersby. However, as this paper will demonstrate, acts of care and piety performed by humans and jinn alike can also leave long-lasting traces in the form of blessed physical spaces. For example, in the village of Beitillu near Ramallah, there is a shrine which is said to contain the body of a woman who had been captured and killed by Crusaders, only to have her body rescued and returned to the village by pious jinn, who now bless and protect her resting place in the shrine, making it a site of healing and blessings for visitors. Jinn-haunted places can thus protect as well as harm.

Similar to other unseen spirits throughout the world, jinn (singular *jinni* in Arabic) are invisible creatures found in folklore from the Middle East and North Africa, South Asia and parts of sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>1</sup> Islam inscribes jinn within its scriptural tradition, however vernacular understandings of jinn blur boundaries between orthodox and folk religion, as well between Islam and other faiths.<sup>2</sup> In Islamic belief, jinn can be righteous believers or *kufar* (disbelievers) in cahoots with *shayatin* (devils). Although jinn mythology can sometimes serve to maintain sexual purity and patriarchal authority,<sup>3</sup> faulting jinn for blameworthy behaviour can also be a way for women to negotiate ‘rigid cultural constraints’.<sup>4</sup> Helping to define and close the gap between what is and what should be, jinn figure into negotiating boundaries of acceptable and exceptional behaviour more broadly. As such, jinn play a role in maintaining defined yet flexible social-spatial boundaries.

Early 20th century Palestinian ethnographers like Tawfiq Canaan and others in the Palestine Oriental Society documented the importance of jinn and spirits in public life and social relations. They did so both to shift the balance of knowledge production away from European colonial epistemologies and priorities, and to demonstrate Palestinians’ cultural connection with the land.<sup>5</sup> Though research on jinn continues to inform cross-cultural psychology,<sup>6</sup> the relationship between jinn and place has largely been lost. Drawing on European and Palestinian historical ethnography and travel writing, as well as oral history interviews with Palestinian elders, this paper examines this understudied relationship between the physical world and the realm of the unseen, that is, between the *dunya* and *al-ghayb*, in Arabic. Following this introduction, we situate this paper methodologically and conceptually within the literature on spectral and sacred geographies, placing this research into productive conversation with religious and folklore studies. Here we emphasize how the notion of haunting in spectral geographies need not serve only as a metaphor for how

marginalized memories of past trauma unsettle places in the present but can also refer to a wider array of affective experiences of place, including happiness, healing and security. From here, we draw upon historic ethnographic writing examining the relationship between jinn and mental health in Palestine, illustrating how jinn blur the boundaries between madness and saintliness as well as between healing and haunted spaces. Finally, this paper considers an array of haunted places that provide protection and healing and spatial practices that can attract or prevent harm emanating from *al-ghayb*.

## Grounding spectral and sacred geographies

This exploration of the interplay between the spirit world of jinn and the physical world of places and cultural landscapes in Palestine draws upon data collected from 68 original oral history interviews conducted in Arabic by the lead author between 2020 and 2023. These oral histories are analysed in conjunction with European as well as Palestinian ethnographic writing from the late 18th and early 20th century, to examine both the cultural continuity and disruptions that these data together reveal. These ethnographic writings and oral histories are largely drawn from Palestinian rural communities and villagers. Stories of jinn emerge from these areas where everyday life was and is deeply connected to natural settings such as fields, water, springs and caves that inspire stories, beliefs and practices related to jinn and the unseen. Through displacement, occupation and rapid urbanization, access to such natural and enchanted spaces has been greatly reduced, though beliefs and practices related to jinn nevertheless persist in Palestinian urban society, as have other social practices and values. Methodologically, putting the contemporary voices of Palestinian elders and into conversation with the historical writing of Palestinian and European ethnographers, positions Palestinians as active interpreters of their own social and cultural conditions, rather than primitive participants in static cultural traditions. Moreover, by combining historic ethnographic writing with oral history data, this research seeks to establish productive linkages between cultural geography and folklore studies.<sup>7</sup>

According to Noyes, folklore can unconsciously form part of the everyday 'surround' including the built environment, narrative and material culture, or can consciously 'interrupt' this 'discursive surround' in the form of folkloric news and events, including monstrous legends, stories and blasphemy.<sup>8</sup> Although a helpful heuristic, a spatial dialectical or grounded theology approach to understanding how the unseen (*al-ghayb*) plays a role in human experience and perception of the grounded realm (*dunya*) draws our attention to how the monstrous can both disrupt and be domesticated in everyday life through routine rituals.<sup>9</sup> Attending to folk religious beliefs, including how unseen forces play a role in producing place, introduces a new avenue of investigation for geographies of religion in general, and Islam in particular, which has tended to focus on the spatial politics of formal sacred space.<sup>10</sup>

In the early 20th century, folklore studies began to shift from examining patterns of folktales across cultures, towards analysing folktales in their 'living context' and environment,<sup>11</sup> positing a deep connection between 'visible and invisible' folk culture and geography.<sup>12</sup> Folklore studies have also sought to highlight how stories, narratives, and memories contribute an unseen component to landscape and sense of place.<sup>13</sup> A turn towards the unseen in cultural geography has likewise been informed by Derrida's notion of hauntology, referring to how traces of the past unsettle the present in unexpected ways like ghostly apparitions.<sup>14</sup> Holloway and Kneale expand the notion of hauntology by stressing the importance of place in ghostly phenomena, encouraging researchers to retain the spatial specificity of haunting and emphasizing how ghosts manifest through spatial narratives and practices.

Geographers have used this concept of hauntology to examine tropes of Indigenous haunting in colonial states,<sup>15</sup> the haunting presence of animals hunted to extinction,<sup>16</sup> and the spectral landscapes of promised-but-never-realized infrastructure.<sup>17</sup> Such spectral geographies focus on non-linear temporalities that challenge overarching 'meta-narratives' of place.<sup>18</sup> Geographers have used creative narrative, visual, material, and aural approaches to examine ghostly non-presences in more-than-representational, post-industrial, 'ruinous landscapes'.<sup>19</sup> These spectral geographies emphasize how place is experienced not just as a site of dwelling, but a site of haunting.<sup>20</sup> In this way, hauntology evokes Heidegger's notion of the uncanny, a 'floating' and 'hidden feeling' of 'not-being-at-home' in the world that undermines the 'protecting shelter' of Dasein, or being-in-the-world, resulting in dread or anxiety.<sup>21</sup>

While haunting is typically associated with negative consequences resulting from violent erasure, recent work in religious studies suggests we that broaden our understanding of haunting to encompass a wider range of emotions beyond trauma, pain and fear. Bubant, Rytter and Suhr's research, for example, examines how the Islamic concept of *al-Ghayb* (the unseen) permeates everyday life and influences the visible world in various ways.<sup>22</sup> Al-ghayb is characterized by uncertainty and contradiction, containing both perilous power and the potential for protection and healing. This invisible realm must be considered in the context of historical, socio-economic and political factors that, in contrast, have often made Muslim people and practices hyper-visible in the gaze of colonial and neo-colonial technologies of surveillance and control, from European ethnography to US and Israeli drones. By emphasizing the significance of the 'poetics and politics of the invisible', a focus on al-ghayb challenges the visual-centricity of the colonial gaze and works against the disenchantment of natural and cultural landscapes.

Like the concept of haunting, Taneja's idea of jinnealogy explores how progressive temporalities and logics of modern colonial governance are challenged by the magical longevity of jinn and the places they inhabit. Taneja's analysis of Muslim shrines dedicated to saintly jinn in Delhi illustrates how prayers at these shrines establish an 'intimate sovereignty' that resists attempts to subsume and secularize these sites under Indian state control, invoking otherworldly justice instead. These jinn-inhabited shrines bridge the past to the present, preserving values like hospitality and care in an era of post-colonial governance and bureaucracy. These sacred and haunted sites also demonstrate a deep interconnection between the human, natural and supernatural realms. The active maintenance of such shrines resists the disenchantment of nature caused by unchecked urbanization and dispossession. Closer to Palestine, Khayyat has documented enchanted trees in southern Lebanon that are '*maskun*', that is, inhabited by saintly spirits. Such sacred trees serve as steadfast symbols of resistance within this war-torn, formerly occupied territory. Sacred and haunted sites in Palestine also blend and blur the human, natural and supernatural worlds, in ways both horrifying and healing.

In examining how jinn threaten the sanctity of homes and bodies, but also how place-dwelling spirits help to heal bodies and sooth souls, this examination of haunted sites in Palestine moves beyond mere metaphorical understandings of haunting to understand the material implications of the unseen. As such, this research rejects the 'soul-less' materialism of demonic geographies,<sup>23</sup> and joins calls for non-metaphorical paranormal geographies defined by 'radical ontological openness'. By doing so, this work builds upon burgeoning research on 'spirited topographies' of sacred space,<sup>24</sup> as well as recent research exploring the deep connection between the environment and spiritual/sacred understandings of place.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, by examining how haunted sites can be places of harm as well as healing, and how afflictions like madness can be viewed as blessing, this research opens our understanding of haunting beyond the affects of terror and trauma.

## Insanity, saintliness and blessing in Palestinian popular consciousness

I pitched my tent at the site of Tell El-Safi, and while I was busy writing my notes for the day, I suddenly found myself surrounded by a crowd of men, women, and children, among whom was an old man in dirty, tattered clothes, his head covered with a pointed green hat, and his right hand armed with a spear. He sat in front of my tent, and the people seemed to look upon him as a saint, which indicates the blind influence which beggars and fools, under the name of saints, exercise upon the common people.<sup>26</sup>

In this ethnographic account, 19th century French explorer Victor Guerin describes, incredulously, the apparent reverence Palestinian Arabs had for beggars and madmen, taking them to be blessed by virtue of being inhabited by spirits. Indeed, the term for insanity in Arabic, *majnun*, contains the same tri-literal root as jinn (j-n-n), referring to possession by unseen forces. One belief holds that mental illness is attributed to jinn possession as punishment from God for transgressing accepted social-spatial behaviours. This includes violating the sanctity of the shrines of righteous saints, throwing water out of the house, hitting children at a house's threshold or preparing harmful spells and charms. Though madness-inducing jinn-possession can be viewed as divine retribution, there is a contrary correlation between madness, love<sup>27</sup> and blessing (*baraka*).<sup>28</sup> Many popular righteous saints in Palestine were considered mad.<sup>29</sup> The love that beggars and madmen have for the unseen realm of God, above the material world of the *dunya*, was considered crazy yet saintly. Eccentric Sufis or mentally disordered dervishes were believed to be inhabited by good spirits, bringing them closer to God and affording them unique powers.

Writing in the late 19th century, British explorer Claude R. Conder also observed that the most highly regarded and venerated by Palestinian peasants were 'madmen' who wander blind and naked from village to village, performing tricks and carrying tin pots with which to receive alms.<sup>30</sup> He writes:

In the village of Qannir, south of the city of Haifa, I saw a negro [sic] carrying a flag, he was very angry, and foam came out of his mouth, then he attacked us with a sharp spearhead. This category receives the attention of the official authorities. I saw the Judge of Nazareth preparing food, boasting to a wretched dervish in dirty clothes, sitting in the Hall of Justice, being consulted as if inspired.<sup>31</sup>

Writing in the early 20th century, British orientalist and archaeologist Stately A. Cook similarly observed that madmen often received unusual respect in Palestine and were allowed what was not permissible for others.<sup>32</sup> All of these accounts describe the deference that people afforded dervishes. Though the tone of these accounts is disdainful, this deference is practiced even today in Palestine as a form of courteous sympathy. In popular parlance, people with intellectual disabilities may be referred to as '*ala baraka*, or being blessed.

Though mental illness could be viewed as a blessing, Palestinians considered the sudden onset of mental disturbances as being caused by a touch of the jinn. People resorted to sorcery, magic and the use of amulets to expel jinn and undo their touch. It was also believed that striking the mentally afflicted with blessed pomegranate branches could cure them. In the village of Deir al-Ba'na in northern Palestine, the mentally ill used to sleep on a stone terrace believed to cure mental problems.<sup>33</sup> Such sites later came to serve as mental hospitals. One of the shrines dedicated to Al-Khadr, about a mile north of Solomon's Pools near Bethlehem, served as a mental hospital for people of all faiths.

Whether considered mad or blessed, righteous saints of all stripes were traditionally highly regarded in Palestine. It was also believed that saints, whether living or dead, possessed miraculous

abilities. Saints believed to be permanently possessed by jinn were seen as holy, and thus capable of healing the sick. American minister and scholar Elihu Grant recorded that in the village of Ain Arik near Ramallah, there was a 'madman' who went about naked, and people believed that he was blessed. Families of the sick would send this man gifts and food, and in return they would take some of his dirty hair to burn for healing.<sup>34</sup> The curative and protective powers of such people were believed to be derived from the unseen via the jinn. Some could harness the power of jinn to defend their property and help them perform their miracles.<sup>35</sup>

Oral history interviews with Palestinian elders describes a wide diversity of sacred and haunted spaces harnessing these powers. For example, 85-year-old Aisha Afana from Aqraba described a cave near the town that was 'inhabited by jinn', who would 'come out at night to frighten people'. She continues:

Nearby [the cave] was the shrine of Sheikh Al-Rifai, who had authority over the jinn. The jinn were afraid of him and did not disobey his orders. So, he would use the jinn to perform miracles, such as healing the sick. So, people would complain about their situation to the spirit of Sheikh Al-Rifai [to be healed].

Elsewhere, believing fever in children to be caused by jinn-induced panic, mothers would take feverish children to a saint's tomb, where they would wash the child's limbs and ask for healing through the saint.<sup>36</sup> Stones inhabited by good jinn also had a healing role, such as the 'fever stone' on the southern side of the village of Rantis. This pointed stone standing 120 cm long and 80 cm wide is in the middle of a semi-flat field. There, women used to pick up nearby pebbles, bundle them and then hang them around the neck of their children to treat fever.<sup>37</sup> Having examined the relationship between madness and blessing, and the curative power of places and objects inhabited by saintly spirits and good jinn, we turn now to an examination of other haunted sites with healing powers.

## Healing in haunted landmarks

All over the world, people used to harness haunted trees to treat physical and mental illnesses. Superstition states that a person can transfer disease to such trees.<sup>38</sup> Likewise, whoever wears something hung on an 'inhabited' tree gains its spirits' protection.<sup>39</sup> In Palestine, people traditionally tie rags to sacred trees, leaving it there for some time to absorb the holiness of the tree and the blessing of the spirit of the saint who inhabits it. Later, the rags are then taken to the house so that the blessing of the saint may spread over it and protect it from the danger of evil spirits, the evil eye, diseases and epidemics.<sup>40</sup> Likewise, pinning a cloth from a shrine or sacred tree to a child's clothing protects them from evil spirits.<sup>41</sup> Based on the principle of contact magic, the spirit that lives in the sacred tree or shrine blesses the cloth and protects whoever wears it or keeps it in their home.<sup>42</sup> However, when a rag is taken, it must be replaced with another rag.

The most famous example of this is Shajarat al-Sa'ada ('The Tree of Happiness') between Jenin and Alamoun. Similarly, in Wadi Al-Radm, east of the village of Aqraba, there are 11 carob trees haunted by jinn, and there is a small rocky pond called the *Tasat al-Rajfa* or 'shiver bowl'. Many residents of Aqraba and neighbouring villages used to come to take water from the pond, believing it could cure cases of fear and panic because it belongs to the jinn who inhabit the site.<sup>43</sup> Such powerful stone, trees, or ponds could be curative but also dangerous. People passing by the haunted tree of Um Zabin in Kafr Thulth would pile stones around the tree to ward off its evil and prevent the diseases it could cause.<sup>44</sup>

Throughout the region, wells and springs hidden from sunlight have long been believed to be inhabited by spirits, and therefore considered therapeutic.<sup>45</sup> An unknown traveller from Bordeaux of the fourth century C.E. mentions:



Inside Old Jerusalem, there is a pool with five porticoes called Bethsaida, and these pools turn red when someone commits an offense at the site. In addition to these ponds, there is a crypt in which King Solomon used to torture demons. Patients were constantly coming to this place for recovery.<sup>46</sup>

Similarly, it was believed that the hot springs near Tiberias were inhabited by jinn, and that they had the power to heal the sick.<sup>47</sup> Likewise, there are caves throughout the region, which contain water wells said to be inhabited by jinn. New mothers who lack an adequate milk supply will drink the water from these wells to produce milk for their children.<sup>48</sup> In the village of Mughallis, there is Bir Umm al-Hamam, to which people used to go to treat diseases, as well as Ain Musa between Soba and Al-Qastal, and Bir Ayoub and Ain Siti Maryam in Jerusalem, where sick children were placed inside the hole of the well for healing.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, the al-Shifa Cave, south of the village of Kafr Abboush, contains a well inside it said to cure people from various diseases.<sup>50</sup> Other sacred water sites include *Bir al-Sihr* ('The Well of Magic'), north of Deir Tarif; Ain Abu Nyaq in Deir Ghasana; Ain al-Wehra in Kafr Tut northwest of Ramallah; and Ain Soba west of Jerusalem.<sup>51</sup>

There are also many caves that contain haunted wells, which infertile couples visit to help them conceive.<sup>52</sup> For example, infertile couples used to visit a cave between Shuqba and Shabtain in the hope of obtaining offspring. After intercourse in the cave, the couple would wash with the water of the spring.<sup>53</sup> Likewise, the Ain Aqraba spring was also believed to be inhabited by good jinn, who were said to help infertile women conceive.

Numerous other caves were said to be haunted by good jinn, and thus had healing power. For example, the Ar-Ratma Cave in Khirbet Abu Al-Jarayesh near Aqraba was also said to be haunted by good jinn. Once, a man from the Abu Qasqus family was suffering from an inguinal hernia, so he slept in the cave, and when he woke up in the morning, he found that he was healed, believing that the jinn had healed him. Hammad Abu Shihab told of another large, haunted cave on the eastern road to Aqraba. One day he was passing by and heard the songs of a wedding celebration in the cave. He went in to join the feast and ate his fill, only later learning that the cave was inhabited by jinn, and that this wedding was for one of the jinni's sons.

Having explored how places haunted by good-jinn and the spirits of saints could heal and benefit people, we examine spatial-temporal practices that provoke or invoke protection from jinn, according to Palestinian folk culture. In exploring these places and practices, we emphasize the intertwining of the unseen with material and embodied realms, and how traces of enchantment linger in landscapes of Palestine today.

## Living with jinn

Palestinian popular folklore preserved many practices for protecting person and property from jinn. Saying the Basmala ('In the name of Allah, the beneficent and Merciful'), for example, is the most common method of avoiding harm. For Palestinian Muslims, the Basmala precedes all actions, such as meals, as a means of adding blessings to it. All places of food are guarded by jinn according to popular belief. If one forgets to say the Basmala before eating, the jinn will share the food, and no matter how much a person eats, they will not be satisfied.<sup>54</sup> The jinn may steal away a share of food to their underground dwelling.<sup>55</sup> Alongside the Basmala, reciting verses of the Qur'an is also considered one of the most effective means of avoiding evil jinn, because they flee when hearing the Qur'an, to be replaced by angels. Devils also flee from the call to prayer.<sup>56</sup>

People can also avoid harmful jinn by avoiding places and times that jinn are known to be active. Because jinn were originally created from fire, jinn prefer fiery places such as stoves and ovens.<sup>57</sup> As a result, one should avoid sleeping close to a hearth, so as not to be subjected to the blows of jinn.<sup>58</sup> Husbands and wives avoid having intercourse near luminous lamps and blazing

fires to avoid the infamous *Tayr al-Tayyar* jinn afflicting their children epilepsy. The Basmala must be uttered before extinguishing fire with water, to allow jinn to leave in peace without harm. Otherwise, the jinn may beat them, causing panic or physical disability.<sup>59</sup> In addition to being made of fire, jinn are chthonic creatures, preferring to inhabit earthly places. Thus, pouring water into cracks of the earth may harm them, leading to outbursts of anger.

Many people avoid talking about jinn in the home or elsewhere, because jinn are believed to listen to everything that is said and may take revenge.<sup>60</sup> Likewise, whistling provokes jinn. Another behaviour that exposes the owner of a house or their family to jinn is sitting on the threshold. Jinn are 'masters of the house'<sup>61</sup> who live under thresholds, entering and exiting the home from this base.<sup>62</sup> In ancient times, the threshold had its guards of gods and spirits who defended the entrance of the house against demonic forces.<sup>63</sup> Traditionally, in Palestine, when the bride and groom are about to enter their new home, they say the Basmala before crossing the threshold, to ward off the spirits living under it and waiting for the door to be opened to enter the house. This is also why the bride and groom do not step on the threshold with their feet. In some villages they put a sword and a plate of water on the threshold, so the bride and groom pass over them. Crossing the threshold of churches likewise requires rituals and utterances, as it represents a dividing line between the sacred and profane. As such, jinn play a role in delineating the boundaries of private, protected spaces from the outside world.

Jinn are also known to exact more extreme retribution on more extreme behaviour. For example, in Beit Dajan, in the Haifa district, it was said that jinn killed a man because he had killed someone else.<sup>64</sup> Places where killings occurred or where dead bodies had been dumped were regarded with trepidation, due to the likely presence of evil jinn there. On the side of the road leading from Ein Yabrud to Al-Taybeh, east of the Nablus Road, there is a piece of barren land full of stones called Al-Wastiyeh. It is said that a murdered man was thrown into a well there. This made people pass by the place quickly, for fear of attacks by evil jinn. Less than an hour away from the village of Beit Ur Altahta, on the road to Ramleh, Grant, writing in 1921, observed a fig tree near which a man from Ramallah had been killed 50 years prior.<sup>65</sup> A pile of stones had been placed in the exact place where he was killed. This stone pile alerted people to the privacy and danger of this place and was meant to appease and pacify the jinn living there, thereby reducing the danger.

In addition to inhabiting particular places, tradition holds that unseen spirits are more intensely active at certain times, especially in the dark of night. The night was associated with stillness and death, and people believed that the souls of the dead came out at night to vent their grudges and harm people.<sup>66</sup> Evil jinn were said to come out from sunset to dawn on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, until the end of the day on Friday.<sup>67</sup> Children playing outside at sunset expose themselves to jinn who are active at that time and deliberately harm children. Given the proclivity of evil jinn towards night-time activity, people traditionally avoid visiting cemeteries at night.<sup>68</sup> Looking at oneself through a glass object, such as a mirror, was also to be avoided at night to avoid jinn invasion of the eyes.<sup>69</sup> Sick patients were not to be visited on Wednesdays so that their condition would not worsen. On Fridays, it was not recommended to extract water from the well.<sup>70</sup> If a mother feared that her son's beautiful and clean appearance might attract the envious eye, she would let him get dirty<sup>71</sup> and refrain from washing him on Fridays.<sup>72</sup> Women are wary of giving birth on Friday, when the devils are active.

Seasonally, during the ripening time of the wheat, one was careful to avoid 'the apple of madmen'. The pulp of this fruit has a sweet flavour and a pleasant aroma, but it is possessed by madness-inducing jinn.<sup>73</sup> At the end of the harvest season, farmers left part of the crop in the field as an offering to the spirits of the earth.<sup>74</sup> Palestinian farmers also used to present offerings and gifts to spirits to appease them, obtain their sympathy, bring them happiness, apologize for mistakes that provoked them and to avoid harm.<sup>75</sup> In agricultural lands far from villages, farmers



would stay for weeks in caves during the harvest season to be close to distant fields. Before entering the caves, they would make an offering by slaughtering a bird or an animal to the spirit of the place, to establish a good relationship with it.<sup>76</sup> Popular belief holds that evil jinn reside in the corners of caves and houses. A popular proverb says: 'There is no corner that does not have its devil'. Sometimes sweets are placed in areas of the house believed to be inhabited by jinn, given their fondness for sweets.<sup>77</sup>

Sacrifice is an ancient tradition that was prevalent in numerous societies, including in the Arabic Peninsula where sacred offerings were offered to the idols before Islam.<sup>78</sup> Making offerings to the souls of the dead at their graves is also consistent with folk beliefs in Palestine, which hold that cemeteries are teeming with invisible beings, including souls that hover around their graves.<sup>79</sup> It is also believed that jinn resort to shrines at night, residing next to them.<sup>80</sup> A popular Palestinian proverb says: 'Do not sleep among the graves and do not see bad dreams'.<sup>81</sup> Inhabitants of a house built over a grave will likely see the spirit of the dead appear in the form of a demon or ghost.<sup>82</sup> Cemetery jinn, who are believed to feast on the dead, are carefully avoided, or at least greeted with polite salutations upon entering the cemetery to appease them.<sup>83</sup> People also attempt to appease the spirits of the dead by slaughtering sacrificial animals and offering them food and drink. This corresponds to rituals of sacrificial slaughter and distribution of its meat for the benefit of the souls of the dead in Palestine. For the same purpose, Palestinian peasants would make hollows in stone graves to put water for the spirits to drink.<sup>84</sup> Because of the belief that Thursday is one of the days in which the jinn are active, the 'Thursday of the Dead' tradition appeared. On this day, women would go during the day to visit graves carrying boiled and coloured eggs and sweets that are distributed to children and the poor, as it is believed that this food reaches the souls of the dead.<sup>85</sup> Canaan observed that the practice of putting pieces of meat in places believed to be haunted by jinn was rare but not entirely absent in Palestine.<sup>86</sup> According to oral testimony, one of the sites where this ritual was practiced was the Umm Zabin oak tree, west of the village of Kafr Thult. Meat offerings were left around the oak, near were buried the bodies of children who died of an infectious disease that afflicted the village 200 years ago.<sup>87</sup>

Although jinn love abandoned and uninhabited houses, jinn can also live in houses inhabited by humans, though they might terrorize their inhabitants to get them to leave.<sup>88</sup> Accordingly, the sacrifice that is offered before living in a new house is called the house sacrifice,<sup>89</sup> or peace sacrifice.<sup>90</sup> This practice has deep roots. Ancient Canaanites sacrificed their livestock and even their children for their new houses.<sup>91</sup> In Palestine, people traditionally would not live in a new house before offering a sacrifice, and if a family lives in a new house without doing so, they believe that some calamity will befall them, such as the death of a family member.<sup>92</sup> After the sacrifice is slaughtered, the owners stain the walls and foundations of the house with blood before construction begins. Blood has a prominent place in the popular belief because it is the home of the soul in the living body. For Christians, before moving into a new house, a priest should sprinkle it with holy water.

Given that the jinn were created from fire, and that water extinguishes fire, the process of gently sprinkling water is believed to calm jinn and prevent harm. That is why water is traditionally sprinkled on the thresholds of houses in Palestine, so the house and its inhabitants become protected. Water is also poured in front of and behind brides in wedding processions. In addition to the water being a symbol of fertility and blessing, the water protects her from evil spirits. Water may also be sprinkled on the groom, as well as salt.<sup>93</sup> Similarly, if a young child falls on the doorstep of the house, especially on Friday, his mother would sprinkle salt or water and salt on the doorstep so that the jinn do not harm the child. This action is accompanied by the Basmala and the saying '*Dostur min khaterkom*' (with your permission), referring to the jinn as masters of the house. Sprinkling salt is another means of removing jinn altogether, because jinn hate salt. Salt protects magicians and those walking at night from harm.<sup>94</sup> During the month of Ramadan, evil spirits are imprisoned, and

as soon as it ends, they rush into homes in search of food. To prevent them from entering, people sprinkle salt on the thresholds of their houses.<sup>95</sup> Alternatively, women may sprinkle a handful of seven types of grains over the threshold and in front of the house so that the jinn discover the grains and do not harm the household in search of food. Some women may hang bread on the door for the same purpose.

In addition to being repelled by water and salt, evil jinn are afraid of the light and prefer to live and carry out their activities in the dark, so people light lamps and candles in dark places.<sup>96</sup> Lighting lamps wards off evil jinn from new-borns and brides, as well as from the dead before burial.<sup>97</sup> Another popular way to get rid of jinn is burning incense. According to the popular practice, incense is burned on Thursday night until Friday, so that the jinn flee, and angels attend. Incense is also used in magic and sorcery to attract benevolent hidden spirits.<sup>98</sup> Burning incense at the statues and alters of deities is an ancient Pharaonic Canaanite custom. The use of incense is presently found in Palestinian Christian, Muslim and Samaritan ceremonies, as well other religious traditions throughout the world.

Besides incense, jinn also dislike tar, henna, alum, rosemary, coriander seeds and gum ammoniac because of their strong taste or smell.<sup>99</sup> They also hate cypress trees, which is why they are planted at the gates of tombs to protect visitors from wandering spirits and demons.<sup>100</sup> To ward off evil spirits, Palestinian peasants traditionally resorted to other practices, such as hanging blue beads around the necks of animals, wearing blue glass bracelets and hanging eggs and garlic at the entrances to new homes. Eggs are used to fortify homes against harm caused by jinn inspired to act by a jealous evil eye. Just as the yoke of the egg is protected by the shell, so too is the home thus protected from external influences of the evil eye.<sup>101</sup> Similarly, in Beit Jala and elsewhere, people hang blue beads and the hamsa hand on their homes to ward off the envious evil eye.<sup>102</sup> These traditions serve as a rich array of spatial-temporal practices that protect people and places from harm, and which help delineate boundaries between public and private/protected places.

## Conclusion

As the preceding has demonstrated, jinn have traditionally played an active role in the everyday lives of people of all faiths in Palestine. In the past, jinn were summoned to expose thieves, tell the future, obtain news of absent friends, find buried treasure and perform magic.<sup>103</sup> In more recent times, jinn have even been said to be involved in the Palestinian freedom struggle. The residents of Tabaqa village near Hebron, for example, mention that a jinni guards a treasure in the shrine of a saint known only as 'Al-Abed' (the Worshiper). They say that the jinni there thwarted the Israeli occupation's attempts to build a settlement on the shrine's land by battling their bulldozers. Others mention of a similar action in nearby Beit Jibril, explaining that the Israeli occupation tried to place explosives under the walls of the Tamim Al-Dari shrine to destroy it, but failed despite repeated attempts. This demonstrates the power of saints and jinn to protect holy places from destruction.<sup>104</sup> However, jinn are fallible like human beings, and are capable of both piety and mischief. While jinn today protect shrines from destruction by the occupation, jinn are also conscripted by looters in their hunt for illicit antiquities.<sup>105</sup> Though typically associated with old-fashioned superstitious beliefs and fairy tales, this research has demonstrated how traces of folkloric traditions of blessed and hunted places persist in the Palestinian cultural landscape and influence spatial perceptions and practices in ways that are revelatory of social values and desires. These traditions, though transformed by changing social and political realities, are also deeply rooted in the natural landscape and in folk customs that precede the arrival of monotheistic faiths.

Danièle Hervieu-Léger theorizes religion as a 'chain of memory' that has largely been severed by modernity, bifurcating into formal religious institutions and spaces on one hand, and spiritual inclinations, beliefs and practices on the other.<sup>106</sup> Resisting this disintegration, many Muslim

believers around the world maintain this chain of memory through the preservation of *asnad* (literally, chains or links in Arabic) of hadith (actions and sayings of the Prophet Mohammad), Quran memorization lineages and Sufi *tariqas*. In Palestine, home to the monotheistic faiths of Islam, Christianity, Judaism and Samaritanism, chains of folk religious memory rooted in the surrounding environment and spatial practices blur the boundaries between these formal traditions, stretching back to pagan traditions, myths and legends. Though greatly disrupted both by the processes of modernization, including in the health and education sectors, as well as disrupted by ongoing settler colonialism, popular religious customs and beliefs continue to animate the lives and spaces of people in Palestine today. A recent survey of Palestinian popular beliefs found that 71% of Palestinians believe in the existence of jinn and their preference for deserted places. Tellingly, the data indicate that the religion of the respondent had little to do with predicting level of jinn belief, suggesting that jinn belief is equally common among both Christians and Muslims.<sup>107</sup> However, the survey also found that women and people with less education tended to have stronger belief in jinn and related superstitions, whereas more religious people were less likely to believe in superstitious beliefs and practices associated with jinn. The opposite was true in a different survey from 2019 that found that, although only 48% of Palestinians believe in jinn possession, the belief is more prominent among religious people (55%).<sup>108</sup> Interestingly, the belief in jinn possession is much higher in Gaza (67% compared to 37% in the West Bank), and higher in cities and refugee camps than villages, suggesting that jinn belief today has more to do with the presence of trauma and the stress of life in cramped, urban refugee camps under violent occupation.<sup>109</sup>

Increased access to education and health care has reduced the belief in and necessity of many of these myths and practices. Still, a wide variety of spiritual and alternative healing customs continues to be practiced in Palestine, ranging from the more Islamically acceptable practices like *hijama* (cupping), herbal medicine, *ruqya* (exorcism), and religiously-infused self-help programmes on television and the internet, to practices like astrology and fortune telling. Though transnational flows of information are transforming the beliefs and practices described above, they are still present in the Palestinian landscape and spatial practices. As Bowman observes<sup>110</sup> in his reading of W. Robertson Smith's (1907) lecture 'The Relation of the Gods to Natural Things – Holy Places – The Jinn',<sup>111</sup> there is a close relationship between settled dwelling on the land, and its sacredness. Jinn play a dual role in helping to protect the sanctity of places, but also threatening to violate the sanctity of homes, thus reinforcing boundaries around sacred and domestic spaces. Like the jinn who wander in deserted places as dust devils, wandering madmen and Sufi dervishes seemed to violate the customary norms of sedentary lifestyle, thus warranting appeasement and deference. Likewise, places from corners and caves to thresholds and graves required appeasement of the jinn to protect and define their boundaries. In this way, jinn play an important role in both establishing and at times blurring and negotiating not only social mores and boundaries but also their related physical boundaries.

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