

Illustrations taken from 16th century Persian Miniatures showing djinn, some of which are fighting with humans.



TALES OF THE DJINN

The Spirit beings of Islam
Nicholas Breeze Wood

Found all the way from India to the Western edge of North Africa the *djinn* (or *djinni*, *djini*, *djun*) are a race of spirits who it is said have lived upon the Earth since before humans were created. According to Islamic teaching the main difference between the races of humans and *djinn* is that the *djinn* are made from smokeless fire, whereas humans are made from clay.

The word *djinn* comes from the Arabic word *junna*, which means 'hidden from sight'. The European word *genie* (guardian spirit), comes from the Latin word *genius* (spirit), and *genie* were not seen as being Middle Eastern spirits until the eighteenth century, when French translators working on Arabic texts used the European word to translate the Arabic one, mixing up

the two types of spirits in the Western mind.

THE NATURE OF DJINN

When Islam was formed it incorporated many already existing spiritual and folk traditions into the new religion, and the *djinn* were one of these.

In Muslim folklore, the *djinn* are often seen as disruptive spirits, bringers of illness, insanity and accidents, but sometimes they can be of service to humans, especially if the human knows the correct magic to bind and control the *djinn*.

According to some Persian mythology the *djinn* are said to live in a land called Djinnistan, and other legends say that they live with other supernatural beings in the *Kaf*, which are mystical emerald mountains which surround the earth.

However most Islamic teachings say that *djinn* actually live where humans do not, such as in the desert, in ruins, or by dunghills or garbage dumps, or in graveyards and even toilets. The *djinn* are considered to be everywhere and very numerous. It is said that, 'every individual among the sons of Adam has a *djinn* who has been appointed by Allah to be his constant companion'.

They are sometimes associated with *succubi* and *incubi*, spirits who visit humans at night to have sex with them until the human is exhausted, the *djinn* drawing sexual energy, much as a vampire feeds on a victim's blood.

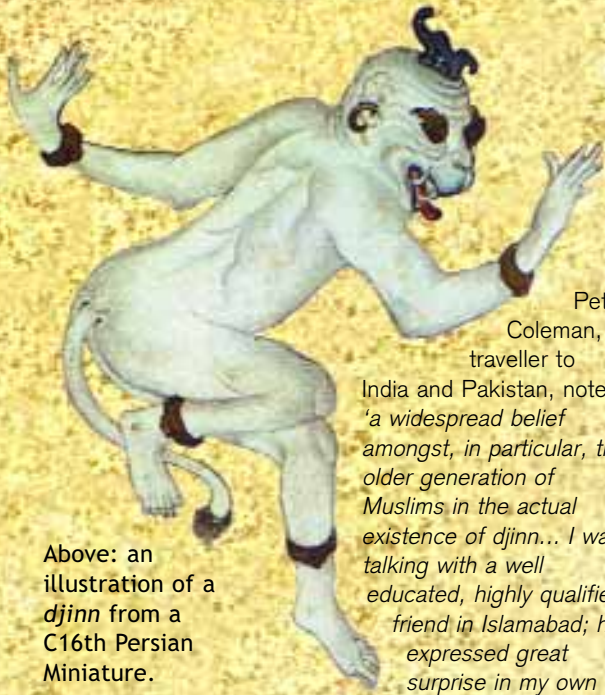
One report in a newspaper from Pakistan in October 2000 shows how much *djinn* are part of the popular culture.

The report was of a *djinn* eloping with a seventeen-year-old girl. The *djinn* had been shadowing the girl, called Tahira Anjum, for six months, and Tahira was said to be possessed by the spirit and would have fits during which time she would scratch her face. Her family would lock her up in a room during these fits, but many times the lock would fall apart, or the door would fly open and she would miraculously escape.

During one fit Tahira's family locked her up again, and opened the door a few hours later to give her some dinner, but found that she had disappeared from the sealed room. They then informed everyone that the *djinn* had eloped with their daughter.

Whether the story is true or not is really immaterial, the fact it was published at all says a lot about the existence of belief in *djinn* in Islamic cultures.





Above: an illustration of a djinn from a C16th Persian Miniature.

Below: a dancer, taken over by a djinn falls at the feet of musicians during a Gnawa ceremony in Morocco.

Peter Coleman, a traveller to India and Pakistan, noted 'a widespread belief amongst, in particular, the older generation of Muslims in the actual existence of djinn... I was talking with a well educated, highly qualified friend in Islamabad; he expressed great surprise in my own surprise that a graduate from Lahore could believe in a hidden race of beings existing alongside us. As to how they came to co-exist with mankind, this was, I was told in a matter-of-fact way, simply another strand of evolution. The existence of transparent sea creatures at great depths, or an animal like the chameleon that can render itself invisible was, he said,

there. He was on his way home very late one night, when suddenly the horse he was riding froze in fear. He looked around and saw that out of nowhere a giant black horse appeared which started to run around him in all directions at an incredible speed.

Abou Awwad's own horse panicked and took flight as fast as it could, galloped away fearfully, champing at its bit so hard that the sound of its teeth against the metal was more audible than the beating of its hooves.

The giant black horse is said to be a djinn who takes that shape and haunts Petra, appearing to people frequently.

The djinn feature in other stories about Petra too. Abou Awwad's wife, Umm Awwad, told about a day when she was herding sheep alone by the caves that are in the valley of Petra. While she was there, she saw a very handsome man, whom she described as having 'a face as beautiful as the full moon', appear before her. He was wearing very splendid, beautiful clothes, and Umm looked hard at him as she did not recognise him as one of her tribe.

After watching him for a little while she asked him who he was, but the man did not answer; instead he walked into a nearby cave and never came out of it again.

The local tribes have traditionally thought that the ruins of Petra

contain large amounts of buried treasure. Legend states that the treasure is guarded by djinn and also strong magic spells which have to be broken in order to get to it.

The local people tell a story of a magician who came looking for the treasure in Wadi Sabra near Petra. He cast a spell of his own, and succeeded in opening the doors of the treasure cave. But his magic was not powerful enough, so when he entered the cave, the door closed on him and he never came out again, being forced to live with the djinn forever.

ISLAM AND THE DJINN

In the Qur'an, the djinn are frequently mentioned and Chapter 72, 'Al-Jinn', is entirely about them. Muhammad was said to have been sent as a prophet to both humans and the djinn, some of which are said to be Muslim, just like humans.

In Islam they are often seen as devils, but unlike other devilish creatures, the djinn are seen as beings with free will, with a chance of redemption like human beings.

According to Islamic scholars, in the story of the Devil and the Fall, which is found also in Christian mythology, the Devil was never actually an angel, but a djinn called Iblis (Despair). According to Islamic teaching, angels are beings made out of light, and unlike the djinn, they cannot disobey God or do evil.

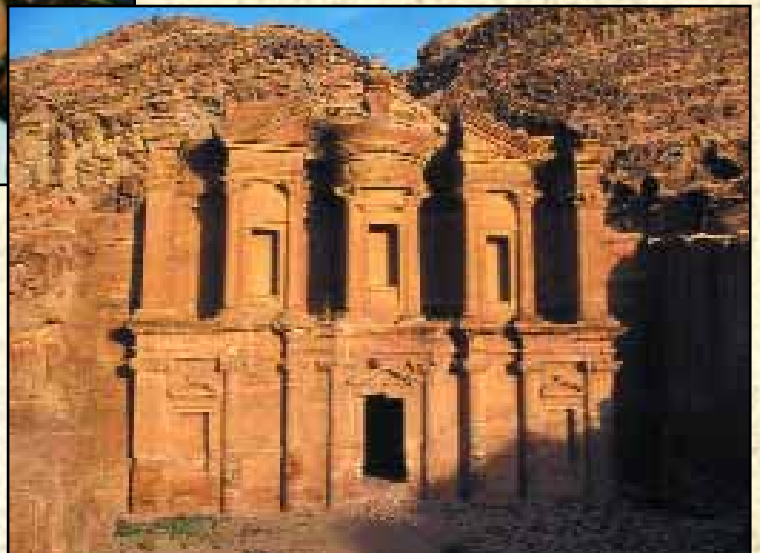
Iblis was once called Azazel, and was the leader of a rebellion in heaven, which began when he refused to bow to the newly-created Adam, whom he considered was beneath him,



regarded as commonplace. If evolution could produce such a diverse population of known creatures on this planet, why should there not be more?'

THE BLACK HORSE OF PETRA

The beautiful ruins of Petra are said to be a regular haunt of djinn. One story is of a man called Abou Awwad, who lived near Petra, and had an encounter with the djinn



Right: the beautiful rose coloured ruins of Petra

being only a creature of earth. Azazel earned the name Iblis when he was cast to earth after the failure of his rebellion.

THE FAMILIES OF THE DJINN

The *djinn* are said to live in communities much like human society, and like humans they eat, marry, and die. Although generally invisible to humans, they can see us, and sometimes either by accident or design, allow themselves to be seen by us.

Most traditions say that there are three types of *djinn*. These are the *ghul* (from whom we derive the English word 'ghoul'), who are mischievous shape-shifting spirits associated with graveyards, the *silá*, who are *djinn* who can appear in any form, and the *ifrit*, who are seen purely as evil spirits.

Other traditions add another type called the *marid*, and see the four types as being related to the four elements of Earth, Air, Fire and Water.

There are also said to be seven families of *djinn*, and these can be found especially in the magical *gnawa* traditions of Morocco, where all-night ceremonies called *lila* (Arabic: 'night') or *derdeba* (Arabic: 'falling into another world') are held. These

ceremonies are dedicated to the seven *djinn* families who are invited through song, dance, and the use of special colours and perfumes to come and possess the human dancers who take part in the ceremonies, which are performed in order to bring healing to the sick¹.

Djinn are said to avoid sunlight, salt and steel, and to be afraid of the sound of singing, fires and the sound of a dog barking. They are said to be controllable by humans, who can magically bind them to objects - the Spirit of the Lamp in the story of Aladdin was such a *djinn*, bound to an oil lamp.

Old Europe was a world that accepted the existence of many unseen races, the fairies, elves goblins and other spirit peoples.

But now that international boundaries are less defined and we are embracing a multi-cultural society, are these spirit peoples going to want to relocate like their human counterparts?

NOTES:

1: For more about the Gnawa traditions of Morocco, see Sacred Hoop Issue 38

tradition has it that the *djinn* actually live where humans do not, inhabiting such wild places as the desert or in ancient ruins



THE ART OF HENNA PROTECTION



One traditional protection from *djinn* and the 'evil eye' used in many countries, is Henna (*Lawsonia Inermis*). The leaves of this plant are pulped to a paste and applied to the skin in thin lines, often in complicated geometric shapes.

The paste is left to dry, after which it is removed to reveal dark patterns. *Mehndi* (the art of henna painting) is thousands of years old, and is used both for ceremonies and personal adornment. Different colour shades are obtainable by mixing other things with the henna, such as tea, coffee, indigo, cloves, lemon, and tamarind.

In Morocco, the professional henna artists are called *hannayas* or *naqashas*, and the Moroccan designs are known as *hargoose*. Nowadays the artists use syringes to apply very thin lines of the henna paste to the skin, a little like icing a cake. The *hannayas* decorate the hands and feet of brides with intricate and beautiful lace-like designs. It is a common belief that henna decorations bring good luck, and decorating the bride's hands and feet with henna brings love, health, prosperity, and safety in childbirth, as well as protection from *djinn*.

Pregnant women in their seventh month also seek out well-respected *hannayas* in order to have protective symbols painted on their ankles. These will then be worn with a special ankle amulets. The henna and the amulet protect both the mother and child through birth, and once the baby is born and the umbilical cord severed, a plaster of henna, water, and flour is placed on the newborn's belly button, ensuring beauty and wealth.

Tombstones in graveyards are sometimes washed with henna to please good spirits and keep away harmful ones, and homes often have their doors painted with henna to bring prosperity and drive away the *djinn*. Even cattle are sometimes protected, their foreheads being decorated with it.