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The Duality of Spirit Possession and Mental Illnesses in Islam

INTRODUCTION

In the Quran and the Hadith, there have been several references to three beings that were created by *Allah* or the “One God”. During the process of creation, angels were made out of rays of light, human beings were molded from clay and were given the essence of life through the breath of Allah, however the jinn were created from smokeless fire. The existence of the jinn has been closely interlinked to human beings. Countless debates have ensued over the merging of the spatial planes that separate jinni and humans considering some individuals believe that these beings can form relationships with humans. Due to this, there has been blame attributed to jinni and their possession of their hosts brings about a plethora of issues whether that manifests through physical or mental means. Spirit possession plays a pivotal role in Islamic beliefs and as a result of this, the notion of mental illnesses brings about perpetual stigma which allows for the ascription of those with undiagnosed problems with that of possession.

THE ORIGIN OF THE JINN

Marranci’s *The Anthropology of Islam* notes a particular issue that exists amongst those who view Islam in an academic manner and he claims that some individuals have the perception “that religion induces Muslims to believe, behave, act, think, argue, and develop their identity as Muslims despite their disparate heritages, ethnicities, nationalities, experiences, gender, sexual orientations” (6). In spite of this generalized popular belief, it is one that is skewed as there are a variety of ways in which people may practice their religion depending on different aspects such

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as their gender, ethnicity, culture, or their region that they are located in. As Marranci has stated, it is vital to understand that “a Muslim person is primarily a human being” (6.) There is no single monolith that Muslims follow or live by and it essentially boils down to seeing Muslims as people with both emotions and feelings.

When it comes to the idea of academic discourse, another fallacy seems to be everpresent in El-Zein’s *Islam, Arabs, and Intelligent World of the Jinn* as she experiences that “Western sources simply [dismiss] the whole concept of the jinn as superstitions, primitivism, and the like” (10). Due to this belief, the origin and the concept of jinni have been ignored and have been set aside for other ‘sensational’ topics such as veiled women, acts of terror, and jihad. The West tends to essentialize these topics and encompasses them to represent all facets of Islam although this is not the case. El-Zein describes jinn as inhabiting the element of fire and not being the “souls of the dead, kind of ghosts roaming the earth; they are not forces of evil battling forces of good... each jinni is responsible before God for his or her own deed” (15). The jinni cannot be seen in a black and white perspective when it comes to ethical terms such as good or evil. Jinni are beings who are granted the right of free will by Allah and are guided solely by their own actions or thoughts without the influence from Allah. If they are to travel down the virtuous path, they will reap rewards, however if they follow a reprehensible path, they must suffer the consequences that come along with it on their day of judgment. In addition to this, the jinn are able to participate in activities that are associated with mortal human beings such as eating, drinking, and reproducing.

The word *jinn* stems from Arabic origins that translates to “hidden from sight”. According to El-Zein, the combination of the words *jim* and *nun* “convey the meaning of

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invisible, unseen, or hidden,” (16) similarly to that of *Jannah* or paradise. El-Zein mentions the *Al-Futuhah Al-Makkiyya* by the scholar and mystic Ibn ‘Arabi who claimed that jinni have “many ruses, wiles, and subterfuges they use to hide from human sight... the spirit is able to escape from human sight by creating a shape in front of him, which he can use as a shield, and he will move it to a different place from where he is standing. If the human who is looking at him follows the form created by the spirit, the latter can make his escape” (25). Jinni are able to utilize their imagination in order to morph or shape-shift into different organisms in the physical world. For example, it has been said that the jinn will take on the form of different animals, such as a black dog if they are malevolent and if they want to send you a message, they will take on an eccentric pelt color so they will appear as a yellow dog.

INTERACTIONS BETWEEN HUMANS AND THE JINNI

Countless debates have emerged over the years as to whether human beings can truly interact with the jinn and the boundaries or limits that human beings can overstep with jinni have also been questioned. Suhr has stated that there have been cases abound in which humans enter into alliances with these invisible creatures, even to the degree of marriage and sexual reproduction” (96). Jinni are able to take on the form of animals or are able to shift to a human-like form in order to form a relationship with human beings.

El-Zein goes on to mention accounts in her book *Islam, Arabs, and Intelligent World of the Jinn* from pre-Islamic times as to where human beings formed relationships with jinni where the jinni were called *tabi* or *tabi’ah* which translates to “follower”. She states the following, “[i]t was alleged these spiritual entities would always follow the human they loved, whether the latter

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was aware of their presence or not... in return, would teach them the arts of medicine and the art of war, especially how to make fine swords” (103). These interactions can either be coerced or come with benefits such as the exchange of knowledge and wisdom, therefore it is important to understand that jinni do exist in a world that has a degree of gray instead of purely black and white as their actions can be malicious or beneficial to the human beings they decide to form relationships with. The relationships that took place between the jinni and human beings were seen as particularly omnipotent as a result of the power balance between these mystical entities and mortal beings. As these bonds formed, different astral planes meshed together which allowed for disengagement for both the humans and the jinni.

THE POSSESSION AND EXORCISM OF THE JINNI

The concept of possession has existed before and after pre-Islamic times and the jinni in particular have been known to use human beings as a vessel. Jinni can also partake in the worship of Allah and submit voluntarily to Allah. However, those who do not submit to the will of Allah are seen to be especially threatening and malicious as they have deviated away from the righteous path. The Jinni that are perceived to be cunning and manipulative will possess people to drive them to madness, may cause harm to them physically and mentally, or lead them to their death. Jinni are known to bring about the spread of disease, plague, injuries, and mental ailments. El-Zein’s *Islam, Arabs, and Intelligent World of the Jinn* describes some of the narratives from pre-Islamic times where “one can find a relationship between the sounds uttered by the jinn and the loss of reason. The jinn avenge their dead by inflicting upon humans strange sounds,... invisible source the Arabs called *hatif* (a call from the unseen). Sometimes, the jinn simulate the sounds of the winds in the sands, or a thin murmur. This jinn’s music is also called *azif*” (74).

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The way in which Jinni lure in their potential hosts is similar to that of a siren singing to attract sailors and in the same way that they are able to shape-shift, they also are capable of altering their voice to trick human beings. Possession by the jinni can be avoided by using incense, charms, beads, and other items as long as there is an Arabic religious inscription on the object. Another way human beings combat possession is by utilizing the power of animals to gain an upper hand on the jinni as well which is especially interesting as jinni commonly take on the form of animals. Arabs in pre-Islamic times used the strength of the bonds they made with their livestock and charms made from various animals to keep these trickster spirits at bay. This displays how the use of animals in a spiritual and a physical sense can tip the balance of power when it comes to the relationships that the jinn and human beings share.

There are a plethora of reasons why an individual may be subject to possession whether it is due to their gender, the way they live their lives, or their sense of morals and ethics. Lluís and Dieste's "*Spirits Are like Microbes*": *Islamic Revival and the Definition of Morality in Moroccan Exorcism* claims that there are "two main local explanations for possession... due to an accident (e.g. someone accidentally steps on the jinn) or to a weakness of the person, which raises questions of an ethical nature: jnun find it easier to invade people who do not properly follow the rules of Islam... sent by a third party, using magic (*sihr*)" (56). The first explanation indicates that the boundary between the different veiled worlds that separate both the jinn and human beings can certainly be crossed. It also displays how jinni can hold grudges against humans and use this grudge as a motivator to cause physical, mental, or spiritual harm to their supposed aggressors. Jinn also seek out those who live "sinful" lives whether that involves having little

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disregard for Islam, seeking out the company of prostitutes, or incessantly drinking. In addition to this, individuals can also be victims of possession through black magic or *sahr*.

The practice of exorcisms exists in multiple religions including that of the Islamic religion. In Morocco, the general practice of exorcism is performed by a *faqih* who are known as Islamic theologians or scholars. The jinn must not be killed when it is exorcized from the body and must be set free. The reasons as to why jinni should never be killed can be dependent on the *faqih* as some believe that they have been created by Allah and that it would be forbidden to harm them as a result of that. Some other *faqih*'s are aware that the jinni are able to hold grudges against other human beings and they understand that this will result in other jinni trying to avenge the deceased jinn.

GROUNDS FOR POSSESSION: MUSLIM WOMEN, PREGNANCIES & MIGRATION

Muslim women are more than likely be subject to possession as they are viewed to be significantly weaker emotionally, physically, and mentally than their counterparts. In “*Spirits Are like Microbes*”: *Islamic Revival and the Definition of Morality in Moroccan Exorcism*, Moroccan Muslim women are described to be irrational emotionally and that their menstruation is also at fault for their possession as the blood is considered to be a delicacy for the jinni. According to the *faqih* Lluís and Dieste interviewed, the jinni will weaken a Muslim woman “before it enters her and this is when its seed can get inside her. In many cases, the woman’s stomach swells and grows as though she were pregnant, but there is nothing inside... infertility is caused by the presence of a jinn who is physically located at the entrance of the vagina or fallopian tubes and prevents sperm from gaining access” (52). Moroccan Muslim women are targeted as a result of

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their bodily functions or the inability of their bodily functions whether that involved menstruation or their fertility. This process is purely that of a physical one where a jinn can control her and her body as soon as it withdraws into her body. In some cases in Morocco, women will expel a black liquid which will “[repulse] the husband” (53) and that is used as a marker to identify if she is possessed or not. This black liquid is attributed to the jinni’s seduction of the Muslim women in order to keep her from having sexual relations with anyone else but the jinn itself.

Postnatal depression and certain behaviors of the mother as well as the baby are commonly associated with jinn possession. In *Cultural Variations in Interpretation of Postnatal Illness: Jinn Possession Amongst Muslim Communities*, Hanely and Brown have interviewed Muslim women about their experiences after giving birth. These “[m]others report a range of emotions from sadness, tearfulness and depression through to guilt, anger and self blame (350). These Muslim women are unable to find coping mechanisms and tend to resort to burdening themselves with self blame because they have the perception that their lifestyle put them at risk for possession. There have been claims that the jinni are able to affect the baby’s behavior. This can manifest through the baby being restless or vocal. Pregnant Muslim women are considered to be subject to possession as the pregnancy makes them vulnerable because it leaves them in a weakened state. In a majority of these cases, these Muslim women also lacked support from both their family as well as their husband and some felt that they did not want to bear children but believed it was their responsibility to do so regardless of how unwell they felt. In order to protect themselves before giving birth, these mothers would take preventative actions such as dressing modestly, staying indoors if it was dark, by covering their hair with scarves or by burning

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incense. Hanely and Brown have stated that “[a] family history of Jinn possession was also common, echoing familial patterns... reported that their mother or sister also had a Jinn. This pattern was perceived to be due to a ‘familial Jinn’ that specifically affected a family, returning to all female members” (351). In some cases, the jinn can be passed down to family members over time throughout their genealogy and lineage. Familial jinni are considered to be inevitable and no preventable actions can be taken to keep them at bay, therefore women will have to take preparations as they know they will be afflicted regardless of what they do beforehand. The Muslim women in this Arabian Gulf State underwent different methods of exorcism, one of which involved sheikhs using “therapeutic body pastes concocted from frankincense, sand, charcoal and spices mixed with oil, water or animal’s urine” (351). This method also displays how Muslims had carried on with the pre-Islamic method of using animal byproducts and natural materials in order to cleanse the women from her possessed state. Other forms of exorcism involved the recitation of the Quran, the sacrifice of livestock, and leaving offerings such as gold, money, or precious gemstones (352).

The notion of immigration shines positively in the minds of some people as immigrating to a new region, country, or a different continent can bring about social, economic, cultural, and financial success. In spite of this, immigration comes along with a variety of downsides for some Muslim women as they lack an ummah or a community that they belong to. For example, in Bowen’s *Religions in Practice: An Approach to the Anthropology of Religion*, he claims that “[i]n some countries, immigrants have tended to live and socialize mainly with others... ethnic concentration has made integration across religious lines more difficult... sharpest conflicts on religious grounds precisely in those counties where Muslim apart from others” (197). The

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struggles of immigrating can be difficult as there are many barriers immigrants must overcome in order to assimilate or integrate themselves into new communities. This can bring about feelings of confusion, grief, and panic as Muslims lose their ties to their ancestral homes.

In Jinn, Psychiatry and Contested Notions of Misfortune among East London

Bangladeshis, there is a case about a Muslim woman named Rashida who is an immigrant from Sylhet who makes a transition to migrate to the United Kingdom. Upon living in the United Kingdom, she struggles as she experiences language barriers, poor housing conditions, and she claims that she yearns to return to her old life in Bangladesh. Rashida begins to feel pains in her chest and she visits general practitioners but makes several complaints as to how they do not take her seriously. However, after going to a local healer who diagnoses her with jinn possession and performs recitations of the Quran, she ultimately recovers from her chest pains. Dein et. al has claimed that “[t]his informant’s narrative about sickness revolved around a discussion of racism and deprivation, implicitly criticized service provision and was typical of those who held a similarly marginalized status” (39). Multiple cases involve Bangladeshis who feel a sense of inferiority and isolation living in the United Kingdom. Muslims in these communities have no access to their ummah and are unable to receive the support needed either from the government or the community. This brings about a barrage of disillusionment as Muslims strive to improve on their newfound lives in new regions. Many of the Muslim women in these cases feel that they are seen as the “Other” and describe feelings of disenchantment as they are unable successfully integrate into their communities. Consequently, some of these Muslim women choose to live as isolationists as they lose hope and fall subject to feelings of loneliness.

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**THE JINNI'S CLOUD OVER MENTAL CONDITIONS & STIGMA IN MUSLIM
COMMUNITIES**

In Muslim communities, undiagnosed mental conditions take on the form of jinni possession and some Muslims believe that there are supernatural forces at play. Islam and Campbell's *Satan Has Afflicted Me! Jinn-Possession and Mental Illness in the Qur'an* have claimed that "mental illness is deeply mired in a culture of silence, especially in racial minority, immigrant and religious communities" (230). Some devout individuals who practice Islam believe that their ailments are a result of the sinful life they have lived throughout the years and feel that they deserve to live a life full of misery as a result of their own weaknesses. There is a central element of shame incorporated into the lives of many Muslims as they succumb to what they claim to be possession by a jinn.

Dein et al.'s *Jinn, Psychiatry and Contested Notions of Misfortune Among East London Bangladeshis* has claimed the following:

"Sickness of any severity is characteristically seen as being fated, *Qudr*, the decree of Allah, and to this extent is accepted. This, however, does not mean that the sufferer should be inactive in the face of illness, far from it. Islam teaches that the sick person should seek help for their illness first with natural medicines, then divine medicines and then a combination of the two. It is also held that there is no sickness for which Allah does not provide a cure (apart from old age)" (41).

The belief is that Allah has created everything in nature and that natural resources will quell the ailment of those who worship Allah. Hence, some Muslims may seek out natural cures, divine medicines, or both and will not attempt to resort to modern medication. If one considers

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themselves to be truly devout, they may feel like they are betraying Allah by using other forms of medication to help them with their ailments. Furthermore, as stated before, sicknesses are considered to be fated and individuals may believe that they need to accept it as it is destined. If a Muslim outwardly chooses a different path to alter their punishment or fate, they may also feel emotions that resemble guilt, shame, and may feel culpable.

Muslim communities in particular tend to experience racism, marginalization, oppression, and Islamophobia. These factors will build up and lead to mental or physical stressors over time. However, these stressors are kept within and bottled up out of fear and stigma. In the Quran, spiritual health is a prevalent theme and Islam et. al's *Satan Has Afflicted Me! Jinn-Possession and Mental Illness in the Qur'an* has claimed that "[d]isease is usually connected to spiritual malady, and health comes from trusting God and eschewing evil... described in one hadith: "There is a piece of flesh in the body if it becomes good (reformed) the whole body becomes good but if it gets spoilt the whole body gets spoilt and that is the heart" (Bukhari 1.2.49). Hypocrisy, disbelief, hatred and doubt are spoken of in the Qur'an as causes of spiritual heart disease" (9:125, 33:12, 47:29) (233). This causes a level of embarrassment amongst Muslims if they are told they are possessed by a jinn, as this entails that their heart is equivalent to that of a tainted heart, soul, and body. In the lives of Muslims, religion can be instilled in their foundation from a very young age and if one displays signs of what is considered to be "madness," (depression, sadness, anxiety, epilepsy, etc.) the pillars will start to form cracks as they may believe those symptoms are associated with evil forces. Possession can indicate that a Muslim has little to no faith for Allah and is spiritually weak which allowed for the malevolent spirit to take them as a host in the first place. This will lead to emotions or feelings of self-doubt and can

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cause that person to question their identity or their relationship they have with Allah.

Additionally, this is embedded in one's culture as admitting to having a mental condition or ailment leads to the destruction of the family's reputation and it leaves a stain on the individual's life. This can affect future prospects in their life whether it revolves around their marriage or their standing in their community. If the individual potentially does want or need help, they will abstain from doing so to keep their and their family's image unblemished.

The journal *Mental Health Stigma in the Muslim Community* describes a study that was conducted about Muslim women who went through the ordeals of domestic abuse and found out that “70% reported shame and 62% felt embarrassment seeking formal mental health services. Khan's (2006) study involving 459 Muslims in the United States revealed similar gender patterns in stigma and help-seeking. Out of 459 participants, 15.7% of the participants reported a need for counseling while only 11.1% reported ever seeking mental health services” (Ciftci et al., 2012). The stigma of reaching out for mental health services is deep rooted in a cultural and a religious sense. The Muslim women specifically believed that their issues should not have a light shed on them as these are matters that should be internalized and did not address them as a result of wanting to keep their own privacy. Seeking out mental health services in this study was especially gendered as more Muslim women sought out help than Muslim men. Muslim men in the study did not see mental health services to be necessary and viewed it in a negative light. I believe this may also be attributed to the culture they practice. If they are to look for help, this may take away from their masculinity and hurt potential opportunities for these Muslim men. For example, this may hurt their reputation, their standing in social settings, opportunities for marriage, their finances, and their lives as a whole.

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CONCLUSION

In essence, the topic of jinni possession is still quite prevalent in Muslim communities and continues to persist despite the modernization that exists in present-day society. In spite of modernization, a degree of censorship continues to prevail when it comes to mental health in Muslim communities. While there are no issues associated with trying out religious means of help whether that is through natural medicine or divine forms of healing, keeping mental health services as an option is exceptionally beneficial. This ultimately boils down to human sentiment and I believe that some people truly should seek out services without the associated cultural stigma that comes along with it as undiagnosed ailments can potentially result badly for the individual themselves or the people around them. The cultural stigma has incapacitated some Muslim communities and I believe significant changes on a community level can be made to assist those who may need assistance with their ailments whether it is physical, mental, or spiritual. However, there should also be improvements made in the healthcare system for those who actively try to look for help as some of these individuals will avoid reaching out as a result of marginalization, oppression, and rampant islamophobia. As the times change, younger generations of Muslims will no longer find or seek refuge in their ummahs and this may bring about various changes whether it is on a societal, cultural, and a religious level. Therefore, it is immensely vital that changes should be made for the betterment of Muslim communities whether it revolves around the de-stigmatization of mental conditions or acceptance from others in one's community such as family members, religious leaders, and individuals in the medical field.

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