

***THE JINN IN ARABIAN MYTHOLOGY***

**By Y. Samuel P W**

**Abstract**

When we speak of Arabian mythology, the wonderful stories from Arabian Nights and related fables immediately come to mind. The powers or supernatural powers like the genie from the Arabian nights dominated the mindscape of the people of Arabia. Their culture had images of djinns, demons, gods and demigods. The shrine at Kaaba was dedicated to the god Hubal and also contained images the three chief goddesses Al-lat, Al-Uzza, and Mannat.

Jinn, jann or djinn, jinnī, djinni, or genie were supernatural creatures. Jinn is a plural word in the Persian language. It means "hidden from one's vision". Jinn are found in Islamic mythology and also in pre-Islamic Arabian mythology. The Quran has references to them. The 72nd Sura of the Quran is titled Surat al – Jinn.

The expression genie in English is resultant from Latin genius. It is a custodian force which is assigned to every human being at birth. English borrowed the French descendant of this word, génie; The French translators of The Book of One Thousand and One Nights used génie as a version of jinnī because it was alike the Arabic expression in resonance and in connotation. This use was furthermore adopted in English and has since become prevalent.

The paper examines the evolution of The Jinn in Pre-Islamic Arabia, The Jinn as manifested in Islam, Features of Jinn, The Jinn in Folklore and The origin of the Genie in the Lamp. It is a fascinating journey of how mythology has manifested itself in history over the ages.

**Keywords**

Arabian mythology, Arabian Nights, genie djinns, demons, gods, demigods. supernatural creatures, "hidden from one's vision", Islamic mythology , Quran , Surat al – Jinn, Latin genius, custodian force, The Book of One Thousand and One Nights , evolution of The Jinn in Pre-Islamic Arabia Folklore, Genie in the Lamp.

When we speak of Arabian mythology, the wonderful stories from Arabian Nights and related fables immediately come to mind. The powers or supernatural powers like the genie from the Arabian nights dominated the mindscape of the people of Arabia. Their culture had images of djinns, demons, gods and demigods.

**Jinn, jann** or **djinn**, jinnī, **djinni**, or **genie** are supernatural creatures. A *Jinn* is a plural word in the Persian language. It means "hidden from one's vision". The root word comes from Arabic i.e. j-n-n pronounced as jann or junn. It means to hide. Other words derived from this root are *majnūn* 'mad' (literally, 'one whose intellect is hidden'), *junūn* 'madness', and *janīn* 'embryo, fetus' ('hidden inside the womb')<sup>i</sup>

Jinn are found in Islamic mythology and also in pre-Islamic Arabian mythology. The Quran has references to them. The 72<sup>nd</sup> Sura of the Quran is titled Surat al – Jinn. According to the Quran and other Islamic texts, the Jinn live in an invisible planet called Djinnestan, which is further than our universe. The Quran says that the *jinn* are made of a smokeless and "scorching fire". But they are also physical in nature, being able to interact in a tactile manner with people and objects and likewise be acted upon.<sup>ii</sup> God's creation consists of three categories, the angels, human beings and the jinn. The *jinn* can be fine, wicked, or impartially compassionate. They can act freely like humans.

The expression *genie* in English is resultant from Latin genius. It is a custodian force which is assigned to every human being at birth. English borrowed the French descendant of this word, *génie*; The French translators of *The Book of One Thousand and One Nights* used *génie* as a version of *jinnī* because it was alike the Arabic expression in resonance and in connotation. This use was furthermore adopted in English and has since become prevalent.

### **The Jinn in Pre-Islamic Arabia**

Inscriptions found in Northwestern Arabia give the impression of the veneration of jinn. An inscription from Beth Fasi'el near Palmyra pays homage to the "*jinnaye*", the "good and rewarding gods"<sup>iii</sup>

### **The Jinn as manifested in Islam**

Islam speaks about the creation of humans from clay by Allah. In the same way jinn are created from smokeless fire by Allah. According to the Quran, jinn have free will, and *Iblīs* abused this freedom in front of Allah by refusing to bow to Adam when Allah ordered angels and jinn to do so. For disobeying Allah, *Iblīs* was expelled from Paradise and called "*Shaytān*" (Satan). Jinn are recurrently mentioned in the Quran: Surah 72 (named *Sūrat al-Jinn*) is named after the jinn, and has a passage about them. Another surah (*Sūrat al-Nās*) mentions jinn in the last verse. The Quran also mentions that Muhammad was sent as a prophet to both "humanity and the jinn", and that prophets and messengers were sent to both communities.<sup>iv</sup>

Jinn are usually unseen to humans, but humans do appear visibly to jinn, as they can possess them. Jinn have the power to journey great distances at tremendous velocity and are believed to inhabit inaccessible areas, mountains, seas, vegetation, and the atmosphere, in their individual communities. Akin to humans, jinn will too be judged on the Day of Judgment and will be sent to Heaven or Hell according to their actions.

### **Features of Jinn**

An astonishing discovery in the mythology of the jinn was their resemblance to human society. They had kings, courts, weddings, and bereavement rituals. There are five types of demons—the *Marid* (the strongest type), the *Ifrit*, the *Shaitan*, the *Jinn*, and the *Jann* (the weakest type). A few customs (hadith), split jinn into three classes: those who have wings and soar in the sky, those who bear a resemblance to snakes and dogs, and those who journey about incessantly. Other than their beast forms, the jinn sporadically assume human appearance to deceive and annihilate their human victims.

Ibn Taymiyyah (22 January 1263 - 26 September 1328) was an Islamic scholar (*alim*), theologian and logician. Ibn Taymiyyah believed the jinn were generally "ignorant, untruthful, oppressive and treacherous".<sup>v</sup> Ibn Taymiyyah believes that the jinn are responsible for much of

the "magic" seen by humans. They assist magicians to elevate objects in the sky unseen, and send concealed fact to fortune tellers.

In the Sūrat al-Raḥmān, verse 33, God reminds jinn in addition to mankind that they would acquire the capability to surpass further than the furthest reaches of space only by His authority, followed by the question: "Then which of the favors of your Lord will you deny?" In Sūrat Al-Jinn, verses 8–10, Allah narrates regarding the jinn how they tried to reach the sky and found it packed with harsh guards and shooting stars, as a forewarning to man. It goes on further to say how the jinn used to take stations in the skies to listen to divine decrees passed down through the ranks of the angels (Sura al Jinn verse 9),<sup>vi</sup> but those who attempt to listen now (during and after the revelation of the Quran) shall find fiery sentinels awaiting them. The Quran forbids their association with God, and advises men not to worship jinns instead of Him, Quran Says "And they imagine kinship between him and the jinn, whereas the jinn know well that they will be brought before (Him)", Quran Surah 37, Verse 158.

### **The Jinn in Folklore**

Credence in jinn was widespread in early Arabia, where they were thought to motivate poets and soothsayers. Even Muhammad initially feared that his revelations might be the effort of jinn. Their reality was also recognized in official Islam, which indicated that they, like human beings, would have to face ultimate salvation or damnation. Jinn, especially through their association with magic, have always been favourite figures in North African, Egyptian, Syrian, Persian, and Turkish folklore and are the centre of an immense popular literature, appearing notably in *The Thousand and One Nights*. In India and Indonesia they have entered local Muslim imaginations by way of the Qurānic imagery and Arabic texts.

The stories of the jinn can be found in a range of Muslim cultures around the globe. In Sindh the notion of the Jinni was introduced during the Abbasid Era and has turned out to be a widespread element of the general myths which also includes stories of both male jinn called "*jinn*" and female jinn called "*jiniri*". Folk stories of female jinn include stories such as the *Jejhal Jiniri*.

further celebrated stories of the jinn can be found in the *One Thousand and One Nights* chronicle of "The Fisherman and the Jinni"<sup>vii</sup>; more than three diverse types of jinn are described in the story of *Ma'ruf the Cobbler*; a mighty jinni helps young Aladdin in the story of *Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp*; Ḥasan Badr al-Dīn weeps over the grave of his father until slumber overcomes him, and he is woken up by a large group of sympathetic jinn in the *Tale of 'Alī Nūr al-Dīn and his son Badr ad-Dīn Ḥasan*.

During the Rwandan genocide, both Hutus and Tutsi avoided searching in local Rwandan Muslim neighborhoods and widely believed myths that local Muslims and Mosques were protected by the power of Islamic magic and the efficacious jinn. In Cyanguu, arsonists ran away instead of destroying the mosque because they believed jinn were guarding the mosque and feared their wrath.<sup>viii</sup>

### **The origin of the Genie in the Lamp**

How did 4,500 year old demons evolve into cobalt guys singing songs regarding friendship? It took a few thousand years of city conquering and myth twisting to divorce the old from the new, but thanks to pop culture and the French, the ancient and terrifying creatures of the desert became docile cartoon characters and spunky blondes engaging in classic televised histrionics.

Genies, or jinn as the Arabic word is Romanized, come from a long line of mythological creatures dating back to 2400 BC. According to the Qur'an, God fashioned jinn out of the "fire of a scorching wind". It wasn't until later that humans were made from mud and clay. Clearly the jinn got the better end of that deal. No source states how much time passed between the birth of the jinn and the birth of humans. They had plenty of time to form their own societies, found their own religions and write their own laws, so one could say that it was a lot of years.

Jinn are much more than demons or spirits. They're intelligent, free-willed creatures who live close to nature and are endowed with magical powers. Very much like humans, only more supernatural. Some of them are good, some are evil, and still more are somewhere in-between. We can conclude that they are tricksters in one form or another.

Although they can change their appearance at will, jinn do seem to follow some patterns in their choice of physical manifestations. One source states they always have thick fur on their legs, no matter the form they take. Another description offers up a much more haunting mental picture:

*“The jinn came in every shape and size, some with hooves, with long tails and flapping ears; some with bodiless heads and headless bodies”.*

The race of jinn is filled with different types of demons and spirits, each with its own place in the pandemonium. There are shaitan (a proposed inspiration for Satan), nasnas, ghuls (the origin of modern day ghouls, just as far removed from the original as genies are from jinn), ifrit and marid. Marid jinn are usually the ones we find imprisoned in bottles. They're the most powerful and arguably the most evil of all the jinn, which makes their recent 'kittenification'<sup>ix</sup> all the more ironic.

Unfortunately the race of jinn made God angry, causing them to lose their great civilization and scatter to the wind. Some were even imprisoned in the process. Since then, jinn only appear when they want to trouble humans. There are even tales about human-jinn mating taking place, not to mention theories that Adam's first companion was actually a female jinni, not the rib woman Eve.

The initial few centuries in the region of the Mediterranean were a thrilling period. The Romans were winning lands and were affluent with their gigantic amounts of possessions. A few of the lands they captured included parts of contemporary Syria. Here, the populace of the metropolis of Palmyra had a somewhat unusual understanding of the jinn myth. A Palmyran gny (sometimes jny or ginnaya) was a protector archangel of sorts, doing surveillance over citizens, homes and families to make sure everything was fine. There were no curses, just friendly warnings that it was about to rain.

It's this understanding of jinn that was installed in antique Roman civilization. The Latin word genii refer to these compassionate attending spirits, not their sinister cousins. The singular form

of genii is genius, which is a familiar word. Back in the day, people who were intelligent, creative and talented attributed those qualities to their genius, their guardian spirit.

Coming to the 18th century, the Roman Empire had long since come apart and Latin had broken down into a handful of diverse languages. Each one of them carries some form of the Latin genii, but since those older pagan beliefs were falling out of favor, an additional connotation was eclipsing the word's paranormal genesis. The root form gen- asserted its "to produce, create or inspire; warm or cheerful in manner" description. Contemporary English still carries those remains in vocabulary like generate and genial.

A Frenchman Antoine Galland, of *The Arabian Nights*' was the foremost to decode the compilation for a European audience, depicting the French version in 1704. When he came across the Arabic jinni, he thought it sounded a lot like the French word génie. So the translation stuck. Jinni was now genie. This new marriage united two words separated by several thousand years of history. Their meanings, however, refused to mingle. Jinn stayed as jinn, the desert-dwelling creatures of old, but the younger, prettier genie held on to its newfound "happy" definition. When European readers saw the word genie, that's what they pictured. Not some ancient demon. Phase two of kittenification complete<sup>x</sup>.

Now that Europeans know about genies, they started stuffing them in bottles. The stories in *Arabian Nights* had been floating around the ancient world for hundreds of years. Galland's translation was the first most Europeans had heard of it, so nobody really noticed when he added a few self-authored pieces to the collection. These orphan tales include *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* and *Aladdin*, the stories most westerners talk about when discussing *Arabian Nights*.

With *Aladdin* came a serious genie/bottle association that is probably the reason contemporary genies are forever ensnared within them. Prior to that, though, *Arabian Nights* connected the two. For example, *The Story of the City of Brass* follows a group of travelers searching the Sahara to find a lost city of brass. Their side-quest is to locate a vessel that supposedly held a jinni imprisoned by King Solomon. The life of Solomon and his God-given jinn-controlling ring is a

fascinating topic on its own, but this seems to be the legend that first started shoving genies into small containers.

In another story from Arabian Nights a fisherman actually discovers this brass vessel and opens it. Guess what pops out? A big evil marid jinni named Asmodeus! After being trapped for 400 years, Asmo wasn't in the greatest of moods. He reveals he has long contemplated how to reward/punish the one who freed him from his prison. One of his ideas was to grant this person three wishes. Instead, though, he lets the fisherman choose how he will be killed, which isn't nearly as polite as it sounds. Still, the jinni mentioned wishes, and this seems to be the earliest specific reference to three wishes being granted by a freed genie.

It's the tale of Aladdin that really sets the genie in the lamp story in place. Aladdin is recruited by a sorcerer to retrieve an oil lamp from a magic cave filled with traps. The sorcerer gives Aladdin a magic ring that's supposed to protect him in this cave. Far into his journey, Aladdin starts to fret and rubs his hands together like an old worrywart. A genie pops out of the ring and whisks Aladdin back home, magic lamp in tow. Aladdin's mother sees the lamp is dirty and decides to clean it. Rub rub rub, another genie appears, and this one is bound to do the bidding of whoever holds the lamp. Aladdin becomes rich and powerful, the sorcerer comes back to stir up trouble, people die, other people live happily ever after, so on and so on. The wish granting genie tale was out of the bottle, and 18th century Europe loved it more than Harry Potter.

With so many dateless stories in Arabian Nights, it's difficult to tell exactly when genies stumbled into the role that would typecast them for centuries. The tales surrounding King Solomon are the most likely culprits. Sources claim he even had hundreds of jars stuffed with captured jinn. His reign was between 970 and 931 BC, which puts a neat little cap on the earliest references. The genie trapped in a bottle trope is about 2,984 years old.

Despite the efforts of Galland, Solomon, and ancient Palmyrian storytellers, jinn in their traditional sense haven't become extinct. They're alive and well in modern Arabic cultures,

haunting abandoned ruins and possessing the odd human or two. Even modern western culture has preserved slivers of the original jinn, hiding them away in fantasy novels, video games, comics and the like. You can exterminate them, distort their name and turn their legends into kids' stories, but when something is fashioned out of the fire of a scorching wind, it won't stay silent for long.<sup>xi</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Mythology serves as a reflection of the inner turmoil of good and evil that humans struggle with. Mythology has its root in some real problem and unconsciously becomes a part of reality which created the myth. Mythology also gets diffused as inter cultural exchanges take place. It changes from depending on what aspects the borrower wants to assimilate. It has implications on politics, history, cultural and social life. Mythological ideas have a greater impact on the psyche of the people than historical figures and it gradually seeps into the historical discourse of any milieu.

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 <sup>i</sup>Wehr, Hans (1994). *Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic* (4 ed.). Urbana, Illinois: Spoken Language Services. p. 164. ISBN 978-0-87950-003-0.

 <sup>ii</sup> [www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com)

 <sup>iii</sup> Hoyland, R. G., *Arabia and the Arabs: From the Bronze Age to the Coming of Islam*.

 <sup>iv</sup> Quran 51:56–56

 <sup>v</sup> Ibn Taymiyyah, *al-Furqān bayna awliyā' al-Rahmān wa-awliyā' al-Shaytān* ("Essay on the Jinn"), translated by Abu Ameenah Bilal Phillips

 <sup>vi</sup> <http://quran.com/72>

 <sup>vii</sup> The fisherman and the Jinni at About.com Classic Literature

 <sup>viii</sup> Kubai, Anne (April 2007). "Walking a Tightrope: Christians and Muslims in Post-Genocide Rwanda". *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* (Routledge, part of the Taylor & Francis Group) **18** (2): 219–235. doi:10.1080/09596410701214076.

 <sup>ix</sup> [www.giantglacier.com/the-origin-of-the-genie-in-the-lamp/](http://www.giantglacier.com/the-origin-of-the-genie-in-the-lamp/)

 <sup>x</sup> *ibid*

 <sup>xi</sup> *Ibid.*

### **Bio**

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EPISTEME