



Heritage out of Control: Jinns Matter

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Contested mystical heritage in Pemba, Zanzibar

On the island of Pemba, off the coast of Tanzania, jinns play a key role in shaping human lives and the material world. Oral histories hold that the island was once ruled by a huge population of jinns. Over centuries, others accompanied settlers from the Arabian Peninsula and enslaved persons brought to labor on Pemba's clove plantations. Islam, long vital on this coast, treats them all [as beings made of](#)



[smokeless fire](#), created by God well before Adam. Although humans are now officially in charge, jinns, inherited and passed down over the generations, continue to participate in human social life. Surely they constitute a form of spiritual, cultural heritage. Yet, in 2019, Pembans across the island complained that jinns were going wild: “They’re in control of us!” they said. Jinns today are unruly, make people sick, and generally wreak havoc. Increasingly, people are ambivalent; some want to be rid of jinns altogether. What happens when ancient forms become ‘negative heritage’ that causes people anguish? And what if jinns, too, have opinions, and cultural heritage of their own which they feel humans should protect?

Jinns in history, place and knowledge

Anthropologist [Linda Giles](#) proposes that the constellation of Pemba’s diverse jinns encodes the complex flows of people, ideas, and faiths that have shaped this region. Knowing jinns means knowing Pemba’s history. Important people have prayed with and deployed them, and stories of 19th-century contests between villages feature mystical battles between each side’s jinns. Knowing jinns also means understanding Pemba’s landscape. Features of the land and water bear jinns’ names. Their presence influences the flow of persons – here, some pass unharmed, others must seek permission; there, strangers mustn’t go after dark; unknown children will be swallowed; pregnant women will miscarry. In one village, jinns are so numerous that humans can only squeeze in beside them, building homes so close that Pembans describe them as *pachapachapacha* – ‘twin after twin after twin.’ Land that might seem empty teems with demanding jinns.

Jinns in Pemba can be inherited, purchased, or may freely latch on to someone. Inherited jinns may be local, original to an area – a tree, a cave, a well, a hill, a path – to which, ancestrally, a family also belongs. In this case, jinns confirm a family’s rights of ownership over a place, their deep belonging there. Other inherited jinns may have been purchased by an ancestor centuries ago in Oman or the Hadhramaut; here, jinns may signify a family’s antecedents in ‘Arabia’, as well as involvement in a business or craft, which such jinns protect. Pemban jinns are



also sold by people who claim jinns are more disciplined and satisfied when in contractual relations with humans than when they are alone. And diverse jinns may also come upon a human being – young, old, of all genders – and decide to love or punish them. All jinns, according to their kind, demand regular offerings from their human partners: some, rose water and saffron ink, others, sweet bananas and dates, chickens, goats, or cows, while still others demand *ngoma* – events involving music, dance and feasting.

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Crucially, all jinns *also* have highly expert, intricate knowledge about diagnosing and influencing reality. It is jinns who have known for centuries how to heal illnesses, protect people and properties from sorcery, and how to achieve success. Without jinns, who themselves have genealogies and histories they convey through their hosts, humans would not be able to identify the source of their problems or combat them. While international heritage discourse might consider traditional healing to constitute *human* heritage – a fund of cultural knowledge to be protected – these knowledges and their associated practices arguably belong not to humans but to *jinns*. Any human-worker-with-jinns has learned all they know from their jinn partners, and no healing, attack, or protection can be carried out without their essential participation.

Approaching jinns

While Northern thinking might strongly differentiate jinns from *people*, Pembans know them as very much *like* humans. “They’re born...they marry, they have children,” a woman said in 2019. “They get sick and die, have things they like and don’t like. Aren’t they just like us?” As others repeated: “They’re here and we live among them”.

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Alongside the ethical considerations that should be proper to anthropology, the



ontological and decolonial turns increasingly press Northern-trained scholars to take 'other' ways of knowing seriously; the idea that anthropology explains what is 'actually' going on elsewhere – that what people themselves have to say, particularly about unseen, mystical things, is symbolic or metaphorical – is finally indefensible. Accordingly, ethnographers have recently come to approach jinns as more than products of human creativity and psychology. As 'imaginal' agents who also have a material presence, jinns are increasingly proposed as opinionated historical actors themselves ([Østebo 2018](#); [Masquelier 2008a](#), [2008b](#)). [Straughn](#), speaking to archaeologists in a register ethnographers increasingly know well, has asked what it would mean to fundamentally “acknowledge and respect the Unseen” (2017: 197). Doing so, he suggests, is to take “an ethical stance, a position of humility in the face of ... the potentially unknown.” What happens when an inquiry engages not only human beings' experiences of social change, but the perspectives of the jinns, who, together with humans, witness (and often resist and opine on) it? And how to think of heritage when not only humans have it?

Disruption

While sometimes simplifying history, Pemban discourses often posit that, in the early 20th century, human relationships with jinns, while always potentially dangerous, were manageable. People, they say, had the time, means, and knowledge to engage and control them. But 1964 saw a dramatic interruption: the [Zanzibar Revolution](#) transformed the meanings of the land, the communities in it, and the mystical knowledge that enabled humans to protect themselves. While its effects were multiple and deep, one – dramatic, far-reaching [poverty in Pemba](#) – is particularly important for human relationships with jinns. Maintaining good relationships requires money, and, for decades, people in Pemba have complained that they don't have enough to survive. “Will you give a jinn a goat when you can't buy your child's medicine?” a woman asked, explaining that her meagre funds are spent immediately in the realm that most visibly requires her attention. “We can't buy food for ourselves. How can we take care of jinns' needs, too?” a teacher said,



feeling that jinns' requirements were increasingly untenable.

But the peace was uneasy. Eventually, the jinns would ask again.

Upset at this neglect, jinns materialize their dissatisfaction and desires through the bodies of their hosts and of their descendants. Every village has residents whose aura of anxiety and confusion, frequent illness and inability to function appropriately, is attributed to angry jinns. In 1998, an acquaintance took me to visit his old childhood friend. Before the revolution, the family had been wealthy clove plantation owners. They'd excelled in various businesses, partly through their own labor, but also with the assistance of several family jinns brought from Oman centuries before. With 1980's economic liberalization, most of the family left Pemba for the Tanzanian mainland, leaving behind the jinns and the people they spoke through - a now elderly woman and her middle-aged son in an otherwise abandoned homestead.

The absent family didn't want the jinns anymore; also increasingly influenced by Islamic revival, in which humans must avoid contractual relations with jinns, they refused to spend hard-won money on them. The woman's son, whom the jinns had chosen as their host, was suffering from this inescapable,



and now clearly negative, inheritance. The son could no longer work. He filled his



room with twigs and leaves. He hardly spoke, and when he did, it was in the voice of jinns. The woman couldn't help him. They needed meat, rice, and dates, which they hadn't had for months, to placate the jinns.

As neglect of jinns increases, so jinns inflict greater agonies. In 2018, jinns punished a neighborhood of about twenty homes for not having held a *ngoma* in several years. Inheritors became possessed at all hours; locked storerooms were ransacked, goat droppings on courtyard floors where no goat had been. The troubles lasted weeks. The problem ended only when residents across the region chipped in to hire a healer to satisfy the jinns. Assisted by jinns of her own, she held a *ngoma*, with music and food for humans and jinns both, and things went 'back to normal.' But the peace was uneasy. Eventually, the jinns would ask again.

A changed landscape

In this context of mystical agitation, another thread of change contributes to jinns' anger: the landscape is undergoing dramatic transformations. Since the 19th century, Pemba's landscape has been described as 'fertile,' 'forested' and 'rural' – an unchanging description that does not reflect the island today. For landscapes and people's relationships to them are in constant flux. Although most people remain forest-dependent, [deforestation](#) due to greater population and an ever-increasing demand for cleared land have been noted since at least the 1990s. Global warming, soil depletion, the commodification of natural products, and ongoing construction have put relentless pressures on the lived environment.

Locally initiated transformations today include the creation of new clove plantations, the cultivation of previously wild fruits, and, at great collective expense, the continual building of new homes and mosques. Uncultivated land is shrinking. Family compounds grow even as lands are sold. And so humans increasingly compete with jinns for spaces that had long been left to the latter. Their homes, a farmer explained, "are being dismantled".

What should be done with heritage when humans cannot tend to it? What if people disagree about the meaning of a legacy?



In a rural family homestead indebted to ancestral jinns, houses were being built in several directions. Old houses were falling apart and deemed unsafe to occupy. New houses were being built beside them. The elders of this area explained, “When we build, we ask permission. We know we’re pushing into where they live. But in other villages, people don’t ask, they just build, or they clear a field and plant. They say, ‘The jinns are gone,’ or ‘We shouldn’t deal with them.’ They don’t want to know. And they’re surprised when there’s illness and all kinds of trouble”.

At the edges of bigger towns, habitations multiply, sometimes encroaching on areas once treated as important mystical centres. People who hadn’t had relationships with jinns before are now especially vulnerable to attack and the expensive suffering that goes with it. “Jinns are everywhere! They used to stay in the countryside, but we’re building there, too”, a young woman said. For a year, she’d been suffering pains in her arms and legs, from a jinn who’d caught her in an alley on her way back from work. “They don’t have their own place and they get angry at us all”. As land-pressure increases, jinns continue to lose their homes. Without people to take care of them, they are battling for their lives.

Jinns/heritage

I have treated jinns in Pemba as a form of contested, potentially negative, heritage. While they might be termed ‘intangible,’ for human beings in Pemba, jinns are materially experienced, and not ‘intangible’ at all: [they \(are\) matter](#). Taking contemporary challenges posed by jinns seriously suggests several intriguing questions about how the topic of ‘heritage’ might be approached.

What should be done with heritage when humans cannot tend to it? What if people disagree about the meaning of a legacy? While some Pembrans feel that maintaining relations with jinns is essential to maintaining peace, and is part of Pembran identity, others increasingly feel tormented and oppressed. Life has changed, they say, there’s no room anymore for jinns. But thinking about jinns as having a heritage of their own leads to questions that have implications for *human* wellbeing. Might the protection of jinns’ cultural heritage be seen as a



[“foundation for other human rights”](#)? Could, for example, rivers, thriving forests, and ‘wild’ land where jinns once lived, be heritage worth protecting? Could economic wellbeing that permits humans to maintain ancient practices also be considered heritage? Could soil depletion and commodification that lead to deforestation be seen as a threat to heritage writ large? And finally, if non-human agents were viewed as having a heritage of their own, what might humans owe them?

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