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# On individual variations regarding belief

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**Abstract.** The author argues, that anthropology often interprets religious beliefs as shared by the believers and assumes that believers straightforwardly think that their beliefs are true. In her article “On individual variations regarding beliefs”, she shows, however, that the relations between believers and their beliefs are malleable. They vary between different believers and even an individual believer's relation to his beliefs might change from situation to situation. She makes her point with reference to two Moroccan city-dwellers who hold a common belief, namely, in the existence of djinns. However, they ascribe different identities to the djinns and confrontation with a different perspective on djinns strengthens their belief in the truth of their own perspective. Moreover, the validity of beliefs that are firmly embedded in their actions as tacit knowledge becomes suspended when the beliefs become a theme of discourse. Furthermore, believers can differ in how much they doubt a belief. Next the author argues that, an actor's emotions in a specific situation can strengthen his belief. Finally, beliefs can become emblematic for one's cherished way of life and this can make the actor hold on to a belief. The author thus concludes that a shared belief does not imply that the relation towards the belief is also shared. Individuals, as she shows, rather have a relation to their beliefs that is specific to them and specific to their present circumstances.

*[Morocco, djinns, belief, individual]*

## Introduction

What is recorded in writing is never the same as what actually took place: a familiar notion perhaps. But the experience undeniably *exists*. How, using mere words, may we maintain closeness to actual events? This question lies at the heart of this article, which constitutes a combined reflection on the individual, elements of variation, and belief<sup>1</sup>.

One of the first questions I found myself constantly asking after arriving in Morocco was: what is the effect of believing that invisible beings exist (djinns, God, the shaytan, angels, etc.)? What is the effect of thinking that these beings pervade one's everyday existence, and what are the implications for one's interpretation of reality and daily way of life? This question caused me to take an 'everyday' approach to considering religious life – that is, religion and more specifically the act of belief in daily life (Veyne 1983, Piette 2014, Ferrié 2004, El Ayadi, Rachik, Tozy 2007). This is a vast field, one within which

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<sup>1</sup> This text and all quotations in French were translated into English by Jesse Kirkwood.

I have examined only a particular set of questions: those implied by the variation between two individuals in their relationship to djinns. In Muslim doctrine, djinns<sup>2</sup> are invisible creatures created by God from fire, whereas humans are created from clay. They are able to see humans, whereas the reverse is impossible. As in other Arabo-Islamic regions, belief in djinns is widespread in Maroc, and many accounts and stories exist concerning the misadventures and risks linked to encounters with them. Anthropological analysis of djinns has tended to focus on the topics of possession, 'magico-religious' ritual, witchcraft, ethnopsychiatry, power or popular religion. These different approaches tend to focus either on collective knowledge presented as being shared by the entire population, or on marginal individuals or specific cases (for example, possessed or specialist individuals).<sup>3</sup> But the question of how the existence of djinns is experienced on a daily basis has rarely been asked. This will be the focus of this article: what is the nature of the individual everyday act of belief in djinns?

The choice of adopting the scale and perspective of the individual is the result of ethnographic reality, or rather ethnographic reality mixed with a particular ethnographic disposition. During my fieldwork in Chefchaouen, a small mountain town in the western Rif,<sup>4</sup> I had the constant sense that each person I spoke to was unique or remarkable in their own way. Throughout my stay, people went out of their way to describe the temperament of others, or to explain why such-and-such a person in particular was acting in a certain way. As the days passed I saw my 'informants' more and more as individual presences with a distinctive take on the world. My interest was indeed sparked, when in the field, by the singular nature of individuals, depending on sequences of life events and more or less ordinary events. This very real aspect of my ethnographic discussions, which is doubtless experienced by many other ethnographers, is a reality that I cannot ignore and that I do not wish to leave to one side in my recording or analysis of data. Ethnographic fieldwork can lead one to question various assumptions, whether these relate to analysis, methodology or write-up. In my case, the principal revelation was the individual peculiarities in ways of being and doing, which I then had to be able to capture and record both in terms of the oral expression of these peculiarities and in noting individual variations in action.

This aspect of my experience in the field is informed by various commentaries on the particularity of individuals and situations. Alban Bensa, in an approach critical of anthropology where the influence of microhistory is clear, claims that contextual

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<sup>2</sup> In keeping with local oral habits, I have opted for the following spellings of the term: djinn (singular), djennia (feminine form) and djinns (plural). Djnun is another possible form of the plural.

<sup>3</sup> In particular, I refer to the following sources: Aarab (2002), Bacuez (2007), Drieskens (2006), Fahd (1971), Gilis (2005), Maarouf (2007), Nathan & Crapanzano (2004), Radi (2002 & 2013), Rhani (2007 & 2009), Simenel (2002), Westermarck (2014[1926]).

<sup>4</sup> Chefchaouen is an Arabic-speaking town built in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Its layout as a mountain town is particularly unusual in Morocco. With a population of around 35,000, it is considered as a small town under the official Moroccan classification.

events are often entirely ignored, as is the particular nature of different situations, actions, language and temporalities. 'Anthropology believes it has no obligation to distinguish the modern from the ancient, the specific from the general, the situational from the structural' (Bensa 1996:53). The approach taken by Gregory Bateson is certainly a radical one, but it also seeks to restore context to examinations of individual behaviour (Bateson 1971, 1977). This was to be achieved while avoiding 'the risk of a rigid dichotomy where individual and society are viewed as two autonomous entities in opposition' (Bensa 1988:155). In 1951, Siegfried Ferdinand Nadel explained that this familiar antithesis between individual and society is a false opposition, and instead proposed examining the multiple facets of individuals according to social context. Bateson, meanwhile, makes the subject the central focus of his approach. He posits the richness of the subject's expression and attempts to apprehend his or her behaviour in a manner that is both general and multidimensional, according to context and the constant, dynamic way in which it varies. In a very different theoretical approach that goes beyond culture and social relationships, A. Piette (2012) suggests an ontic or 'anthropo-graphic' perspective as a methodological basis, meaning extremely detailed observation of individuals as they go about their existence and move from one situation to another. It assumes that there is more to an individual's existence than social, cultural, and collective aspects. The existential and phenomenographical form of anthropology that he proposes is based on the direct, real-time observation of human and para-human beings 'in situation'. The proposed method consists of following a person closely and continuously over the course of their existence and their various activities. The researcher focuses on presence within action, the rhythm and sequencing of situations, in order to then dissect individual gestures and states of mind and analyse particular moments of being (Piette 2012). This approach, which is proposed elsewhere as a solution for understanding the individual in the rest of the world,<sup>5</sup> accords essential importance to details that are often left to one side (Datchary 2013) and to seemingly trivial gestures that must be described in great detail. Another peculiarity of this approach is that this empirical focus on the individual and specific attention to details is combined with the objective of maintaining this focus for the entirety of the analysis and its recording.

Having established this methodology, which focuses on the behaviour of subjects in context, on specific differences, individual expressions and isolated moments, it is now possible to develop a nuanced view of individual actions, their different or unique aspects as well as areas of similarity, and the way in which these actions develop over time. This approach brings numerous heuristic benefits as long as the focus on the case in question is used to support explanation of more general paradigms: 'thinking by case [...] means proceeding via a detailed exploration of the properties of a singular observable instance, not with the aim of limiting one's analysis, but because one then seeks to

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<sup>5</sup> On this subject, see in particular: Lozerand (2014).

extract an argument of more *general* interest, with conclusions that may be used to develop other areas of understanding or inform other decisions' (Revel & Passeron 2005:9).

As it relates to these concerns regarding the individual 'in situation', the topic of religion cannot be ignored. Often construed as complex structures, religions 'are often treated as synonymous with homogeneous, shared cultural representations, as if adherence, acceptance and the mode of belief were self-evident' (Piette 2014:277). I have therefore chosen to adopt a detailed realist approach when describing how visible and invisible beings exist alongside one another. This represents a continuation from a series of works<sup>6</sup> that, over the last thirty years or so, have enabled 'a move from regarding the question of beliefs as a corpus towards focusing attention on the actors and their registers of action' (Claverie & Fedele 2014:487). Studies of the religious have thus been redesigned to take into account the critical faculty of the actors and enabling the objectivation of their actions and belief statements.

This led me to enrich my ethnographical project using the classical method of participant observation, monitoring individuals in their daily lives with the aim of understanding how invisible beings are part of their everyday existence. I therefore employed this investigative method with individuals whom I was highly familiar with as a result of previous years of fieldwork. Constantly carrying my dictaphone and notebook, it was possible to follow these individuals for long periods of time, often from morning until evening, without my presence altering the course of their activities. This article focuses on Aïcha and Ahmed, who were each closely observed, in turn, as they went about their daily lives. I had also been able to observe and listen to these individuals in various situations over the course of several years of research conducted using the traditional method of participant observation. The data obtained through these two methods contributed to this article, but here we will only analyse certain situations extracted from their everyday life.

What interested me in their relationship with djinns was not the metaphysical or other properties attributed to the djinns, nor the way in which these individuals illustrated the Moroccan repertoire concerning djinns, i. e. the latent representations within their society. Rather, I wanted to consider how Aïcha and Ahmed encountered, lived with and existed alongside these invisible beings. Their perspectives on djinns reveal individual differences that form the basis for an investigation of a complex reality: states of belief, modes of adherence and engagement are crucial elements here, and form a unique laboratory within which we may observe a wide range of individual differences. As my experience in the field has shown that it is indeed individuals who represent, to borrow Marc Augé's phrase, the 'anthropological cement',<sup>7</sup> I seek to record and explore the unique aspects of these individuals as the basis for an analysis of their words and daily actions towards other human or 'non-human' beings. And in the

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<sup>6</sup> For example: Albert (2005); Claverie (2003); Gonzalez (2014); Piette (2014).

<sup>7</sup> Massart-Vincent (2005).

face of such variation between individuals, the question gradually became: How do individuals adhere to what might be termed a common belief in such different ways? Certainly, the question of individual variations in terms of belief is not new, but to my knowledge it has not been posed with regard to djinns, and more attention should be paid to its implications.

Firstly, I will describe the differences between Ahmed and Aïcha in terms of how they experience the existence of djinns on a daily basis. In the second part of the article, I will show how two individuals may adhere to a common belief in different ways. This notion of divergent forms of belief may also apply to a single individual as their situation changes. This will be the subject of the third part, in which I use different modes of belief as the basis for a description of the various modes and states by which an individual apprehends other beings in situation. These systems of apprehension are strongly linked to the individual's experience and development over time, which is the focus of the fourth part of the article. The act of belief therefore becomes the basis for an investigation of variation between individuals – a basis that, while not perfect, does enable a genuine description of *how* humans exist alongside and among other beings.

### **Aïcha and Ahmed: differing conceptions of djinns**

Watching Aïcha and Ahmed go about their lives, and in conversation with them, my interest was first piqued by their differing views of djinns. This provided an initial window onto a wide range of differences. Aïcha is a married woman of around fifty who grew up in the countryside. She left her village more than twenty-five years ago to move to Chefchaouen with her husband, children and herd of goats. A former goat farmer, she never went to school and cannot read Arabic. Ahmed, on the other hand, is a fifty-year-old bachelor, *chaouni* by both birth and descent. After studying for many years to become a teacher or a religious scholar, he eventually became a self-employed leather craftsman instead. Aïcha and Ahmed have never experienced cases of possession first-hand and are both 'non-specialists' with regard to djinns. The following description of their relationship to these invisible beings is the product of data collected in various contexts (daily situations, interviews and group conversations). Aïcha and Ahmed's knowledge of djinns is brought into juxtaposition with the way these beings exist for them on an everyday basis, as revealed by the shadowing of their daily lives.

Let us begin by examining their perspective on djinns. Aïcha believes that they do not belong in an urban environment. She has no doubt that they are absent from the city: djinns do not live in human-inhabited places. They are confined to places like forests, springs, deserts or landfills. She believes that, like humans, djinns can be good or evil, are endowed with reason and have access to paradise. In her opinion, they can be encountered in specific places and under particular circumstances; such meetings are dangerous and a direct consequence of the actions of the person who encounters the djinn. To illustrate this idea, she recounts how three young men from the city once

tried to find some treasure hidden in the mountains. Once they had arrived at the spot, they started digging. But they had not consulted a specialised *fqih*, nor prayed, nor lit incense, and the treasure's guardian, a djennia, awoke. She hit each of the three young men so hard that they were never seen again. In keeping with her beliefs, Aïcha does not encounter djinns in her everyday life, though they are occasionally evoked in invective against children or goats, as reprimands or insults. In this case, the reference to djinns cannot be interpreted literally: the child or the goat designated as a djinn or djennia are not seen as the physical body that the spirit uses to manifest itself. Rather, djinns are alluded to here as representing the opposite of what a child (as a human being) or a goat (as a domestic animal) should be. When djinns do appear in her everyday life, it is only as a function of the other people present in a given situation. Aïcha thus categorically opposes the view that djinns can exist in the city.

Ahmed is more forthcoming on the subject of djinns. Referring systematically to religious texts, he describes them as the work of God, with their characteristics making them an entirely separate species from humans: the Koran is intended for djinns as well as humans, and like humans they will be questioned on judgement day. Ahmed states that djinns are endowed with a soul, will, and reason: like humans, they are incapable of predicting the future. This comparison with humans extends to other features: they have a complex system of social organisation (marriage, lineage, social rules, etc.), and religious affiliation (they can be Muslim, Christian, Jewish or without religion, and in varying degrees of proximity to God). Ahmed also tells me that djinns were created from fire before men, who were formed from clay. Djinns were therefore the first inhabitants of the earth. He explains that, although the arrival of mankind forced them to take flight, djinns are potentially present at all times and in all places, although they prefer to live in particular spaces (sewers and canals, garbage bins and landfills, cemeteries, hammams and toilets, souks, etc.). According to Ahmed, one main difference between djinns and humans is that djinns can see humans, whereas humans cannot see djinns. He adds that djinns are able to manifest themselves to humans either using the intermediary of human or animal bodies, or by their power of suggestion. This is why he considers it necessary to protect himself by uttering the name of God and various formulas invoking Him.<sup>8</sup> Djinns are thus a more noticeable presence in Ahmed's everyday life. Their potential omnipresence, which he evokes in conversation, is reflected in the invocations and prayers for protection that he makes throughout the day. These formulas may be uttered either according to routine or spontaneously depending on spatio-temporal criteria or as a result of a particular situa-

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<sup>8</sup> Djinns are not the only beings that are mentioned or lead to invocations of God throughout the day. Other invisible beings may be concerned (the devil or the evil eye, for example). In addition, the social context of an invocation (courtesy, greetings, congratulations, situations of dispute or conflict, etc.) are as varied as the nature of the requests (protection, healing and health, help with work, financial prosperity, etc.)

tion. Djinnns are also mentioned in various forms of invective. Unlike with Aïcha, this invective (especially when directed at children) can imply that djinnns are actually present at the moment of its utterance, even if they do not manifest their presence. In other situations, the djinn instead manifests itself visibly. In the following scene, the djinn is not identified for certain, but the implied relation with a cat suggests that the animal is not actually – or not exclusively – a cat at that particular moment. The following scene takes place in Ahmed’s workshop-boutique, which he rents as part of a cooperative comprising various artisans. The different studios and shops are situated around a central patio that has been turned into a garden. Two doors provide access to the workshop area throughout the day, allowing tourists, buyers, friends, local children, various passers-by and numerous cats to pass through freely. The last artisan to leave, most often Ahmed who enjoys working in the calm of night-time, is responsible for locking the doors.

Scene no. 1: *Cat – or djinn?*

25 September 2013 – Ahmed’s workshop.

One evening, while we are in Ahmed’s workshop, a cat abruptly interrupts his work. The cat is from the area and has already made an appearance earlier in the day. Ahmed talks to the cat and explains its behaviour and desires to me. Later that evening, the cat appears again. It enters the workshop and settles under Ahmed’s workbench. Ahmed is focused on his work and does not notice. After a few moments, he sees the cat at his feet. His reaction is vigorous: surprised, he jumps from his seat and immediately exclaims:

‘A’udhu billahi mina ash-sahyatni ar-rjim, a’udhu billahi mina ash-sahyatni ar-rjim’.<sup>9</sup>

As he utters these words, he kicks the animal. It immediately runs away. Ahmed murmurs other formulas while moving towards the entrance of his workshop. He observes the surrounding area for a few seconds, then returns to his seat and resumes his work. After a few minutes, I ask:

‘What happened with the cat?’

He answers:

‘I don’t know exactly. But by pronouncing the name of God, we drive evil away. We humans cannot know everything.’

The next day, when Ahmed is listening to an audio lesson that mentions djinnns, I mention the previous day’s events. He then tells me:

‘Yes, it was perhaps an evil djinn. I’ve been thinking about it. That’s why I chased it away! But we can know nothing for certain. We only know how to behave in order to be close to God.’

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<sup>9</sup> A request for protection, sometimes uttered in prayers, which may be translated as follows: ‘I ask for Allah’s protection against the banished devil. In the name of Allah the all forgiving, the very forgiving.’



In the light of existing literature on Morocco, these two points of view can certainly be considered illustrations of parts of the repertoire of discourse found throughout the country. However, the purpose of this article is not to demonstrate the ‘Moroccan’ aspects of Ahmed and Aïcha, nor to use these two individuals as the basis for an analysis of socialisation processes, but rather to examine how they have developed different attitudes towards these inherently animistic and humanoid beings. For Aïcha, djinns exist but are conspicuously absent from her daily life. This absence is observable in the facts of her daily life, in how she speaks and acts. Djinns manifest themselves only episodically, and in precise, almost predictable contexts. Meeting a djinn is, for her, a direct consequence of individual actions that fail to respect the protocol for accessing certain things in certain places – as in the example of the three men and the treasure. ‘Good’ behaviour therefore means that djinns are absent from one’s daily life. Ahmed, on the other hand, comes into contact with djinns at various moments in his daily life, but these situations essentially represent moments of doubt that may be controlled through prayers to God. When djinns become a perceptible presence, Ahmed undertakes a kind of distancing process. The rest of the time, he keeps the djinns away by means of various formulas and gestures that he repeats over the course of each day. In other words, djinns are actively kept at a distance both in critical situations and under more everyday circumstances. Both kinds of everyday relationship with the djinns – keeping them at distance or avoiding any encounter with them whatsoever – are seen to be connected to individual responsibility and appropriate behaviour: what people should (for Ahmed) or shouldn’t (for Aïcha) do. In summary, both Ahmed and Aïcha believe djinns to exist and in conversation attribute generally similar properties to them, though their level of theological knowledge differs. The important difference, however, relates to the actual live presence of these beings. In practice, this difference results in a contrasting experience of djinns: for Aïcha, a corollary of the incontrovertible absence of djinns in urban settings is the idea of ‘not doing’ anything that might provoke an encounter with them; for Ahmed, the omnipresence of djinns necessitates daily actions to keep them at distance and constantly avoid them. Djinns are therefore not understood in a uniform manner, whether in conversation or in practice. Such variation in treatment indicates that the two individuals have different levels of belief: they both believe in the existence of these invisible beings, but the contents of their ‘belief’ differ. In other words, they differ in terms of the properties they attribute to the djinns and the way they identify and relate to them.

### *Djinns – or a gas leak?* Plural truths within a single situation

The following scene shows how the same situation experienced by two individuals can generate a different understanding of the role played by djinns – in other words, how individuals may adhere differently to what might be termed a common belief. These personal variations in terms of experience and belief can be explained by what Paul

Veyne calls ‘programmes of truth’. Veyne proposes the existence not only of multiple truths, but also of segmentary truths depending on context. There is thus variation in the assertion of ideas, the criteria for them, and the way in which they may be acquired (Veyne 1988).

The scene takes place in one of the northern districts of the town, where I was resident for a long period. The ground-floor apartment is rented on a short-term basis to tourists passing through. Aïcha, one of my neighbours, rents an apartment in an adjacent house with her family.

Scene no. 2: Djinns or a gas leak?

27 March 2011

One evening, having returned home after visiting Aïcha, I hear a woman crying out in the street. From the window, I see the young woman who is renting the apartment on the ground floor. She is from Tangier and has arrived that day with her husband for their honeymoon. The young woman is distraught. She is crying, yelling, making wild gestures and can barely stay on her feet.

By the time I get downstairs Aïcha, who lives nearby, has already reached the young woman. She is having trouble breathing and feels dizzy. She says she has been attacked by djinns. Aïcha helps her, trying to calm her down. She makes her sit, tells her to take deep breaths, and seeks to reassure her.

‘There are no djinns here. Don’t be scared. Someone must have left the gas on.’

Aïcha then asks the husband to go and see. He checks. The gas canister has indeed been left on.

Shortly afterwards, the young woman begins to feel better; her breathing and gestures become calmer. She is still convinced of the presence of djinns, claiming that she never normally forgets to turn off the gas, and that if she did so today it must have been their fault. Aïcha again tries to reassure her:

‘It’s not the djinns. It’s just the gas. You’re not breathing it in any more. You’re outside – look, you’re already doing better.’

The husband approaches and takes over from Aïcha:

‘That’s it, it’s over now. The windows are open, the door too. There’s no more gas, no more djinns! Don’t be scared. Let’s go back inside.’

Aïcha and I leave the couple and go back to her house. As soon as she enters her living room, she remarks:

‘People are hypocrites! *They* are the djinns! There aren’t any djinns in town. People don’t take responsibility for their mistakes, like when they do something bad and then say: it’s destiny! But they don’t look in their heart. If you have God in your heart, there are no *shaytans*.<sup>10</sup> It’s people that are the *shaytans*!’

As for the young couple, they leave the next morning.

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<sup>10</sup> The devil.

A comparison of the two women's reactions reveals differing interpretations of the cause of the problem and of the djinns' actions, differing views concerning the nature of the djinns (in terms of their harmful intentions, habitat and the possibility of humans encountering them) and a different course of action, namely regarding the possibility of living in this place. Different perspectives thus arise for different individuals from a shared situation. 'Ultimately, the normal state of society consists precisely in a plurality of worlds, in the fact that the different circles that constitute social life are not completely coherent with one another, do not form one body' (Flahault et al. 2005:237). The idea that djinns exist is a shared one. But the *way* in which they exist for each individual is a source of divergence. These different modes of existence form a multitude of circles that, although they converge in certain areas, are of differing densities that may never completely overlap. The differences in the properties attributed to djinns, as well as the ways in which individuals relate to them, would be effectively nullified if the analysis were reduced to one general, overarching description. The scene evoked above indeed demonstrates that the content of any 'belief', as well as the way it is adhered to, may differ depending on the individual.

Certainly, this scene includes elements characteristic of stories found throughout Morocco recounting dangerous encounters with djinns: as newlyweds are particularly vulnerable to djinns, the reaction of the young woman is in a sense customary and predictable. However, beyond this typification of the situation, the interest here lies in the sequence of repercussions triggered by the interaction between the two women. Indeed, this scene reveals what can happen when there is a collision between two individual perceptions and the effects they produce. In this case, the confrontation of two contrasting interpretations results in their mutual consolidation. The young bride is entirely convinced that her dizzy spell has been caused by djinns, causing the couple to leave the following morning. Her conviction is in no way diminished by Aïcha's explanation and the clear evidence of gas poisoning. She reinterprets and redefines the djinns' effect on her, without doubting their responsibility or malevolence. She moves from the idea of being directly affected by a djinn (with it attacking her) to the djinn inciting her to do or not do something (turning off the gas). Similarly, for Aïcha, the proof of a gas leak confirms her view that djinns are not present. Her experience of the situation has the effect of reinforcing her existing knowledge. Once she is in her own house with the doors closed, she vehemently states her opinion. Confronted with a different position, which she considers as mistaken and can prove to be erroneous, she becomes more convinced of her own view of djinns. Noticing the error bolsters her conviction; it strengthens and intensifies what she considers to be 'true'. Individual adherence to a 'belief', whether shared or not, is therefore susceptible to being reinforced, intensified or, on the contrary, weakened, as a function of daily experience over an extended period of time. The contents of the beliefs are dynamic and change to reflect a given situation. They are constructed as mirror images of each other; their fixity is precarious and their stability relative. 'The truth is that truth varies' (Veyne 1988:118). In the previous example the 'truth', in other

words the content of the beliefs about djinns, varies between Aïcha and the young bride, and the confrontation of these contents leads to their renewal and mutual consolidation.

## The words and actions of belief

Variations in the individual's adherence to a belief are also a product of individuality itself, according to the context and situation. An individual can adhere to various 'programs of truth' in succession or simultaneously, something that Veyne refers to as 'mental Balkanisation'. 'It follows that each individual internalised something of a peaceful coexistence in the field of relations of symbolic force, which resulted in half-beliefs, hesitations, and contradictions, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the possibility of juggling different levels of meaning' (Veyne 1988:42–43). Different individuals possess different ideas, systems and modes of belief. In keeping with this observation, Piette encourages an analysis of the human experience of belief and different ways of adhering to belief (Piette 2014, 2015). As Piette suggests, a consideration of specific variations and individual expression may enable a closer understanding of modes of belief. Human apprehensions of other visible and invisible beings in large part consist in the way that they experience and believe in them. The first discernible mode of belief lies in the difference between the words and actions of a belief, as illustrated by the following scene. The scene takes place on the morning of the day of the Eid al-Kabir celebrations, when the sacrificial animal is put to death. I attend these celebrations at Aïcha's home, in the presence of her husband and two of her sons. Aïcha participates actively in the sacrifice along with her husband and oldest son, while the younger son stands back.

### Scene no. 3: A goat on its way to paradise...or almost

16 November 2010 – Eid al-Kabir celebrations at Aïcha's home.

The sacrifice has just taken place. The fatal blow has been dealt, the jugular vein pierced and now the blood is flowing. The sacrificed goat, lying on its side, gives a few brief shudders.

'Its soul is coming out,' Aïcha tells me, smiling, without taking her eyes off the animal.

A moment of silence follows, while the goat makes its final movements. Aïcha watches it, motionless, until the animal stops moving completely. After a long sigh of relief, she tells me:

'Ah! It's wonderful. He's going directly to heaven!'

Smiling, she then adds that the other goats and livestock (*ksiba*) will also go straight to heaven. So I ask:

‘Do rabbits also go to heaven? And cats?’<sup>11</sup>

She takes a moment to answer, her mouth open, her gaze switching between the goat and I. Then she looks at me for a few seconds, furrows her eyebrows and replies:

‘The cat, no...it’s different...hmm...rabbits...I’m not sure...’

She becomes silent again, before eventually continuing:

‘I don’t know...only God knows! I know that animals like livestock have a soul, and the *eid* is not like other animals...Apart from that, I’m not sure. God has left some things hidden. Only God knows.’

After saying this, she goes to the sacrificial area, sprinkles water on the bloodstained ground and animal’s neck, and prepares to help her husband and oldest son with the skinning.

After the death of the Eid al-Kabir goat, Aïcha spontaneously announces that this animal as well as other livestock, and goats in particular, will go to heaven. At the moment of the sacrifice and this declaration, her belief is firm. The contentment expressed by her smile, her sigh of relief and her enthusiasm – in other words, her emotional language – leaves no doubt in this regard. It is only after my question, when she is asked to define and substantiate the content of her proposal, that she begins to have doubts. To actually assert the belief discursively is problematic. It requires making an overt distinction and comparison with other animals, and considering the status and properties attributed to them. Aïcha is here unable to establish a more general category on the basis of her initial suggestion, and the analogy suggested by the ethnographer leaves her perplexed. Here we see strong evidence for the idea that beliefs cannot be explained by a mentalist interpretation assuming the existence of a mental process governing effects and thoughts (Piette 2014). Further, while Aïcha’s belief is firm when acting, she later has doubts when stating her belief discursively. A consequence is that adherence to a belief may be temporarily suspended when a discursive statement is required, even if the belief is strongly felt at the moment of action. In other words, an intimate and personal belief in action is followed by a suspension of and then abstention from engaging in a propositional belief. This process is similar to that identified by Matei Candea in the relationship between Western scientists and the animals they study. Scientists refuse to recognise that the animal possesses intentionality, but this does not stop them from taking it into account when interacting with the animals. What takes place, in Candea’s words, is a process of ‘bracketing’ and ‘suspension of belief’. His observations build on Alcayna-Stevens (2012) who ‘sees in this alternation the tension between people’s conscious recognition of a potential multiplicity of ontological options, and the need to ‘enact’ one of these options at any particular experiential moment, in the immediacy of a particular set of engagements with other human

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<sup>11</sup> In Chefchaouen people still raise domestic animals such as rabbits, and there are many cats in the city. They are part of the daily life of local residents, without being domestic animals.

and non-human entities. At this point, people usually plump for one ontological possibility amongst multiple available ones – even if only to change again instantly'.<sup>12</sup> Candea shows the existence of a complementary ability, that of abstaining from an existing ontological scheme – a form of ontological indetermination that is not an obstacle to meaningful interaction (Candea 2013:12–13). Whether dealing with 'beliefs' or 'ontologies', individuals act in a variable, discontinuous manner.

The believer oscillates between firm conviction during action to a suspension of belief in discourse. Jonathan Mair (2013) proposes an anthropology of belief with its basis in both an ethnographical sensibility, devoted to comprehending the reflexive relationship of individuals to their own beliefs, and in a comparative anthropological approach that enables an understanding of this relationship. This idea is all the more relevant within a perspective focusing on religion as it relates to everyday life (Ferrié 2004, Piette 2014). Using the conceptual tools supplied by this anthropology of belief, it may therefore be possible to understand the ways in which individuals articulate the properties they attribute to visible and invisible beings ('statements of belief') and the situations in which they interact with these same beings ('acts of belief'). This articulation should be considered alongside the vast reflexive mechanism that individuals operate at all times (i. e. the reflexive relationship between knowledge, experience, situations and intellectual processes), which has a number of reverberative effects. My aim is to understand the properties and characteristics of a person *during* the processes of attributing properties and interacting with others. To do this I will describe certain modes of belief illustrated by the scenes described above, which constitute only a small fraction of the various possible such modes.<sup>13</sup> We will firstly consider certain modes by which 'statement of belief' takes place, and then those pertaining to 'acts of belief'.

The content of discursive statements can be dealt with as it is deployed in a situation, the aim being to 'manage' its content rather than to evaluate it reflexively (Charlier 2013:11). Statements of belief may also be 'semi-propositional statements' i. e. propositions where there is a difference between connotation and denotation (Sperber 1982). The fact that an individual adheres to a belief does not therefore enable one to predict his or her interpretation of it. Sperber's notion of semi-propositional content in fact denotes the content of a mental representation that is not fully established but refers to a more or less vague content that is not appropriated literally. This is highlighted by the comparison of people's ideas about djinns with their ways of actually existing alongside them. Furthermore, discursive statements and beliefs exist in a variety of different modes, including those of doubt and, more specifically here, hesitation. Doubt is an inherent element of the act of belief just as much as confidence (Piette 2014, Charlier 2013, Schlemmer 2004). As Piette suggests, uncertainty and hesitation are not opposed to belief or non-belief, but rather contributes synchronically to the

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<sup>12</sup> Alcayna-Stevens (2013:93), cited by Candea (2013:431).

<sup>13</sup> The different modes of belief are connected to those proposed by Piette (2014).

specific nature and practice of the act of believing. Ahmed reacts to the cat while suspecting that it is more than just a cat at that moment, but he is not sure he is dealing with a djinn. The doubt he feels at that moment can be analysed in a similar way to his daily prayers to God, whether these result from an obligation or not, as suggested by Jean-Nöel Ferrié. In part, the circumstances in which one evokes God are connected to states of uncertainty, 'in other words states where one wishes for a more or less predictable event to occur or not occur, without having the ability to influence its occurrence or non-occurrence or at least believing this to be the case' (Ferrié 2004:109). Hesitation here is a constitutive element of the encounter with the djinn, and thus certainty is not desired. In this situation, another aspect is strongly linked to doubt: 'the affirmed inability to know'. This inability does not impede belief, and subjects are well aware of it. In uncertain situations, Aïcha and Ahmed affirm that they are incapable of knowing the truth, saying 'I don't know' or 'I'm not sure'. This inability is evoked in both situations, and demonstrates the limits of human understanding. Both individuals explicitly assert that this human inability to know anything with certainty stems from God's will to leave some things hidden or beyond human reach. This aspect is closely related to a third typical element in statements of belief: the appeal or reference to theology or religious doctrine.

Three different modes of belief in action emerge from the situations described above. The first of these is assent. In the case of the Eid al-Kabir sacrifice, Aïcha's assent is most clearly expressed by her statement regarding it. Yet this was intimately experienced even before being put into words. Her intense sincerity enables her to develop a strong personal conviction. She therefore constructs in her mind the assent that she feels when faced with this particular situation and her hopes regarding its future development (the goat's access to paradise). The easily identifiable second mode is emotional experience. In all three scenes, different emotions contribute to the individual's belief in the act, according to various processes. The emotions felt in a situation can cause the individual's belief to increase somewhat, leading them to make a statement regarding that belief. Intimately experienced emotions and feelings (such as those of relief and contentment) are a major reason for Aïcha's assertion, immediately after killing the goat, that it will gain access to paradise. The annoyance and exhaustion that she expresses after the young bride's misinterpretation of the gas leak help consolidate her belief, as well as leading her to state her belief and the intellectual process behind it. The effect of her emotional experience is therefore to strengthen her belief. Emotional experiences can equally contribute to the attitude taken during the event. A. Pilette states that emotional reactions connected to semi-propositional contents may contribute to a state of belief, even when this state is ephemeral (2003:69). When Ahmed sees the cat, he acts in surprise, jumping suddenly and then kicking the animal. Emotion, here linked to fear, precedes the perception of a djinn, causes Ahmed to lapse into a particular attitude and pervades the situation. Emmanuel De Vienne has shown how among the Trumai, during encounters with the *denetsak*, emotional state is just as relevant as spatio-temporal context or analysis of the situation (De Vienne 2010).

Emotions therefore contribute to acts of belief in various ways, without necessarily constituting a mediation required by religious fact (Piette 2014). This mode coincides with another: that of 'presence'. Ahmed chases the cat away, but it is God who somehow deals with the djinn. Even if he is unsure, by invoking God he solicits His presence and action, which will then be experienced according to Ahmed's personal interpretation and evocations. Different modes of belief therefore coexist and overlap within a single situation where an individual is interacting with a djinn, an animal or another human. The individual's personal experience is an additional element in this constant intersection, contributing through a reverberative effect. Albert Piette defines 'reverberation' as the way in which at a given moment, a state of belief may have repercussions for the individual's entire range of behaviour and daily attitudes, which in turn feed into moments where belief is enacted (Piette 2003:72–73). This mirroring effect is not only relevant to acts of belief. The situations observed, in which individuals interact with djinns or animals, resonate with one another and are deeply permeated and shaped by life experience.

### **Individual trajectories and the formative effects of experience**

Previous experience affects an individual's experience of the present, shaping one's way of acting and thinking and causing reverberations that are multiple and varied. According to Alban Bensa (1996), this means a continuous development, an accumulation of experience, and a range of diachronic and situational possibilities. Just as contexts must be understood as processes, lived and observed situations themselves constitute temporal sequences in which subjects individually renew and adapt a form of knowledge and a way of relating to the world. As Paul Veyne puts it, one criterion of truth is personal experience. What is true is, in part, that which has been and is experienced. In other words, lived experience has a formative effect. This implies that an individual's apprehension of both visible and invisible beings is the product of formative experience, i. e. the individual's unique development over time.

The variation between Aïcha and Ahmed concerning djinns is a product of their differing experience. For Aïcha, the idea that djinns are only present in specific spaces uninhabited by humans derives from the discourse of her family village and those in other rural parts of Chefchaouen. In this sense she is representative of a rural tendency in terms of the perception of djinns. Yet she has spent more of her life living in the city than in the countryside, and she knows perfectly well that the relationship to djinns is different in the city. The fact that she maintains her perspective cannot only be explained in terms of socialising environments and authorities or in terms of her continuing connection to her region of birth. She is explicit on this point, as demonstrated by her comments in the gas leak scene. Her point of view is strongly linked to her particular opinion on current mental attitudes, which she characterises as a mix of hypocrisy and an inability to accept responsibility. Believing that djinns exist in human



living spaces and blaming daily problems on them is, in her eyes, an error or a kind of mental duplicity. Her stance regarding djinns is therefore intrinsically linked to her view of the way in which people interpret the existence of djinns and 'evil' more widely. Her 'belief', and more specifically the nature of her relationship with djinns, has to do with her moral principles, which are shaped over time and mirror the actions and thoughts of her human contemporaries. As for Ahmed, it would be overly simplistic to reduce his idea that djinns are omnipresent in the city to a mere consequence of being an urbanite. Certainly, the city is the main theatre of his experience. He has always lived and worked in an urban setting and is well educated, even if his trajectory has strayed from the family plan for him to become a professor or scholar. But what he knows and says about djinns does not echo the views of other *chaounis*, starting with the members of his family. This sociological predisposition – being an educated city dweller – is therefore not sufficient to explain his relationship to djinns. Now a modest craftsman, Ahmed maintains an interest in history, literature and Islamic science. He frequently demonstrates his knowledge of djinns – the result of a curiosity that has grown over time, and his strong interest in 'doctrine'. An avid learner, his research is now facilitated by the various modern technologies to which he has access. Almost every morning, he goes to a cafe in order to download religious conferences, lectures or lessons to his smartphone that he can then listen to while he works with leather during the day. This curiosity is linked to his increasingly ardent practice of Islam, which he wants to be as close as possible to the teachings of the Koran. He does not adhere to a particular religious group, and believes that the best option is to be 'salafi' in the literal sense of the word – that is, to follow the example of the prophet and his companions, rather than the politico-religious fundamentalist movement of the same name. This mindset and demand for purity in religious practice is the cause of much criticism from close family and friends.

These two trajectories cannot be explained only in terms of sociological profiles that consider gender characteristics, urban versus rural settings, or even oral knowledge versus written knowledge. Such a dichotomous and sociological analysis would be of limited explanatory value, incomplete, and would obscure what I believe to be the real reason for this diversification: the life experiences that shape an individual's apprehension of their environment and the others who inhabit it. Aïcha and Ahmed conduct their lives in different ways, and have been moulded in particular and individual ways. 'Each of these individuals represents a style, a way of doing things that others also do, of understanding events, people and things, unifying their personality but also constantly altering it. For every form of behaviour, from signing one's name to walking, involves their way of being and actively exposes them to either confirmation or retransformation, questioning their ways of perceiving, appearing, being affected by things and making sense of them' (Macé 2011:22). The individual's experience and mode of existence shape their way of being and thinking, both in situations we observe and the rest of the time. Modes of existence are elaborated through lived situations and give rise to a way of being that is simultaneously a capacity for action.

Therefore, these modes of existence, just like an individual's experience, may be observed in particular situations. The imbrication of everyday situations with past experience is unmistakable, and pervades the daily life of all individuals, though it does not necessarily structure it. Life experiences leave 'traces'. 'The small gestures which escape us through inattention are far more revelatory of our character than any formal attitude for which we have carefully prepared ourselves' (Ginzburg 1980:7). We must therefore examine lived experience and events in terms of the way they are experienced and constantly regenerated in everyday life. Modes of belief and experience overlap, and different modes of belief resonate with different layers or fragments of experience. Ahmed's relationship to djinns is intimately connected to his life choices: his way of conceptualising and practicing Islam, and his understanding of what being a Muslim means. As a unique individual, Ahmed stands out from his social and cultural environment, and this uniqueness has an effect on his relationship to djinns. As for Aïcha, her current understanding is linked both to her rural family environment and to her rules for living, as derived from experience. When watching the Eid goat, her experience as a livestock farmer manifests itself once more. Years spent raising goats led her to develop a special connection with these animals. This powerful, intimate connection meant that, as a livestock farmer, it was impossible for her to sacrifice a beast from her herd under her own roof. Without dwelling on the specific status of the Eid animal (Brisebarre 2002, Benkheira et al. 2005, Benkheira 2000), her statement about goats entering paradise is significant, and undoubtedly resonates with her past experience. Human actions, in this case towards other living beings, therefore also have their own temporality. The history of individuals is an inherent element in the situation and process observed. Michael Jackson (2005, 2013), who proposes a form of existential anthropology, similarly focuses on portraits, existential itineraries and life trajectories. He also suggests taking into account a full description of events, which are considered to be an occasion 'where something vital is at play and at risk' (Jackson, 2005:79). However, he attributes to observed existences a philosophy with Sartrian influences and considers them in terms of narrative, with the crux of a situation lying not in its coherence but rather in the way the subjects are staged, while they themselves act out various existences. Along with a strong focus on individual behaviour in context, Bateson proposes a clarification of the different temporalities in play within the situation being studied (Bensa 1988:164). This means taking into account the multiple temporalities of an individual's life, which consist not merely in the content of their past but also in that of their present existence. Human apprehension of other living beings, whether visible or invisible, is constructed within and through practice. Current experience is enhanced by elements acquired during past experience. Just as biographical exhaustiveness is an illusion, it is difficult or even impossible to determine all the experiences that are significant for an individual. But the scale of the existing individual provides a framework for the understanding and inclusion of the experiences that are generated in a situation. Modes of existence, experienced as contents of beliefs, are dynamic and subject to being constantly restructured and reshaped. This idea also applies

fully to individual understanding of other living beings, both human and non-human. The comparison of different forms of logic and individual modes of action, observed as they develop in real life, reveals the presence, in these situations, of culture and belief systems – as well as that of djinns and other invisible beings.

## Conclusion

The data gathered in Chefchaouen could have been used to claim that belief in djinns is a Moroccan or urban phenomenon, or that it relies on particular socio-geographical criteria. But saying that people believe in the existence of djinns tells us nothing about *how* they actually exist for them – the way that individuals live alongside them, or their presence in the daily lives of most individuals. Aïcha and Ahmed provide an illustration of how, whether the individual remains passive or takes action, their interpretation of minor events and daily actions related to djinns varies dramatically. The variation is striking both from an individual perspective and in terms of the tangible existence of djinns and the methods or strategems for making them more or less present or absent.

The central question is therefore *how* people believe, rather than *why* they believe, with one major proviso: the impossibility of establishing a system on the basis of a single individual, and the exclusion of any kind of typological or classificatory approach. The sequential nature of the religious in everyday life (Ferrié 2004) is complemented by that of individual differences. The issue then becomes restoring the content of the religious fact – in this case, Islam as it is lived on a daily basis as a contrast to actual experience and the ongoing process of belief. The distinction between people's actions and what they think of them is certainly one analytical distinction (El Ayadi 2007:36), but it is through a combined analysis of modes of speech in situation and modes of belief in action that invisible beings and the religious can be investigated by anthropology.

In addition to the benefits of an examination of 'everyday' Islam, which remains a neglected area of study (El Ayadi et al. 2007:33), or a shift in the object of study, with a focus on everyday habits and practical courses of action (El Ayadi et al. 2007, Ferrié 2004), or the observation of the religious in action and the processes by which invisible entities are conceptualised as present (Piette 2014), this study of Ahmed and Aïcha leads us to new ground. It means giving serious attention to individual variations, making use of the tools of an 'anthropology of belief', considering the individual and their beliefs in terms of their own development over time and, in doing so, taking into account the multiple reverberative effects of individual experience on belief. If truth is 'the most historical experience of all' (Veyne 1983:11), this can also be said to apply on the level of the individual and their actions – a vital aspect of contemporary belief in djinns in Morocco.

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