

# Spirit-Induced Illness In Moroccan Folk Belief A Comparative Study Of Aisha Qandisha And The Grave Mule

El Gaoual Ilham <sup>1</sup>, Taib Berkane <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Culture, Heritage, and Communication, Laboratory of General and Comparative Literature: Imaginaries, Texts, and Cultures (LGCITC), Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, Mohammed First University – Oujda, Morocco, [ilham.elgaoual.d24@ump.ac.ma](mailto:ilham.elgaoual.d24@ump.ac.ma)

<sup>2</sup>Culture, Heritage, and Communication, Laboratory of General and Comparative Literature: Imaginaries, Texts, and Cultures (LGCITC), Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, Mohammed First University – Oujda, Morocco, [taib.berkane@ump.ac.ma](mailto:taib.berkane@ump.ac.ma)

---

## **Abstract:**

*This article examines the cultural and symbolic functions of spirit-induced illnesses in Moroccan folk belief, focusing on two central figures: Aisha Qandisha, a seductive jinniya associated with possession, sexuality, and trance, and the Grave Mule (Baghalate Qbūr), a hybrid being tied to death, taboo, and moral boundaries. By drawing on a comprehensive body of literature—ethnographic, historical, and anthropological—across Arabic, French, and English sources, this study reveals how these supernatural entities operate within Moroccan cosmology to both explain illness and regulate behavior. Their roles in ritual healing and social control are explored through the lens of symbolic anthropology.*

**Keywords:** Aisha Qandisha, Grave Mule, spirit possession, Morocco, folk medicine, supernatural illness, gender dynamics.

---

## 1) INTRODUCTION:

In Moroccan society, beliefs in jinn and supernatural forces are deeply woven into the fabric of cultural life, especially concerning illness, misfortune, and psychological disturbances. Traditional understandings of illness often move beyond the physical to encompass spiritual, moral, and symbolic dimensions [1]; [2]. Within this framework, spirit possession and related pathologies are not viewed as isolated phenomena but as expressions of broader sociocultural tensions.

Two particularly prominent figures in Moroccan spiritual folklore are Aisha Qandisha, a female spirit (jinniya) believed to seduce men and possess them, and the Grave Mule (Baghalate Qbūr), a spectral mule-like entity that punishes individuals who transgress moral or ritual boundaries associated with death and burial.

These figures not only reflect Moroccan cosmology but also engage with gender norms, ritual healing, and moral enforcement [3]; [4]. This study seeks to provide a comparative analysis of the symbolic, therapeutic, and sociocultural dimensions of these spirits, illustrating how Moroccan conceptions of illness are mediated through myth, ritual, and morality.

## 2) METHODS AND METHODOLOGY:

This qualitative study adopts a symbolic-interpretive anthropological approach, drawing heavily on Clifford Geertz's (1973) framework of culture as a system of symbols. It synthesizes data from:

- Primary ethnographic accounts by Crapanzano (1973), Rabinow (1977), and Westermarck (1935), among others.
- French colonial and ethnographic studies on saints, sorcery, and North African ritual [4]; [5]; [6].
- Arabic sources examining the epistemology of jinn and the religious-moral thought that frames them [7]; [8].
- Contemporary gender-focused analyses [3]; [9].
- Comparative regional folklore, particularly from Amazigh traditions documented in oral histories and studies of southern Moroccan tribes [10].

The analysis focuses on three dimensions: (1) Symbolism and origins, (2) Symptomatology and affliction, and (3) Healing and ritual responses.

### 3) RESULTS

#### 3.1) Aisha Qandisha

Aisha Qandisha is arguably the most well-known female spirit in Moroccan folklore. She is often described as a beautiful woman with the feet of a camel or goat—an embodiment of both seduction and monstrosity [1]. Her connection to liminal spaces, especially rivers and the sea, positions her as both a spirit of fertility and danger.

##### Affliction and Symptoms

According to Crapanzano (1973), possession by Aisha Qandisha is characterized by:

- Sexual dysfunction or impotence
- Trance states and altered consciousness
- Sudden changes in behavior, melancholia
- Animal mimicry (braying, barking)

She targets primarily men, especially those who violate moral or sexual boundaries [3]. In some regions, she is perceived not only as a source of illness but as a spiritual entity who, when appeased, can offer protection or favor [5].

##### Healing Practices

Ritual healing often occurs through Sufi trance ceremonies, particularly among the Hamadsha, Gnawa, or Issawa brotherhoods. These include:

- The lila or nocturnal healing ceremony
- Use of drums, incense, and dance to induce trance
- Sacrificial offerings and negotiation with the spirit [11] ; [6]
- These rituals act as both therapeutic and social practices, reintegrating the afflicted into the community [12] ; [2].

#### 3.2) The Grave Mule (Baghalate Qbūr)

The Grave Mule, known in Amazigh regions as Tagmart n Ismdal, is a grotesque hybrid entity, usually described as a mule-headed woman or a demonic beast born from necrophilia, incest, or grave desecration [4]; [8]. It appears in folklore across the Rif, Souss, and High Atlas regions.

##### Affliction and Symptoms

Those who encounter the Grave Mule—typically men who roam at night near cemeteries—report symptoms such as:

- Night terrors and auditory hallucinations (e.g., hoofbeats)
- Sudden paralysis or mental disorientation
- Death-like fear and psychosomatic breakdowns [7]
- The Grave Mule serves as a guardian of ritual purity, punishing violations of burial codes or sexual mores [10].

##### Healing Practices

Responses to these afflictions are rooted in Islamic religious practices, rather than possession trance. Healing involves:

- Ruqyah (Qur'anic exorcism)
- Ritual purification using salt, incense, or blessed water
- Restorative acts like sadaqah (charity) or cemetery repair [5]

#### 3.3) Description (Recap)

Spirit-induced illnesses in Moroccan belief express cultural fears tied to sexuality, death, and taboo. They serve as symbolic tools for regulating moral and social boundaries:

**Table 1.** Comparative features of Aisha Qandisha and the Grave Mule in Moroccan folk belief

Aspect	Aisha Qandisha	Grave Mule
<b>Ontological Nature &amp; Origins</b>		
Symbolism	Female sexuality, seduction, trance	Death, impurity, moral enforcement
Nature	Female jinn (often seen as a seductive spirit or demoness)	Supernatural hybrid creature (mule, formed from a sin)
Origin Story	Believed to be a jinniya from the sea; possibly linked to pre-Islamic or syncretic spirits	Said to be born from incestuous acts, especially between a woman and her male relative, and buried in secret

<b>Cultural Layering</b>	Possibly connected to pre-Islamic goddesses, and later Islamicized	Embedded in Islamic moral narratives about sin and taboo
<b>Symptoms &amp; Type of Illness</b>		
<b>Afflicted Group</b>	Primarily men, especially soldiers or unmarried men	Women, especially those who violate sexual taboos or norms
<b>Symptoms</b>	Sexual obsession, impotence, insomnia, paralysis, or trance-like possession	Hysterical fits, infertility, nightmares, physical pain without cause
<b>Mode of Attack</b>	Through seduction, dreams, or accidental encounters near water or in isolation	By haunting the woman's dreams or invading her body as punishment
<b>Symbolic &amp; Social Role</b>		
<b>Symbolism</b>	Female sexuality as powerful and dangerous; warns against unrestrained desire	Social punishment for sexual transgression; enforcer of incest taboos
<b>Moral Message</b>	Reflects anxiety around male vulnerability and the threat of female power	Reinforces patriarchal control over female sexuality
<b>Ritual Response</b>	Exorcism (often by Gnawa musicians or marabouts); offerings, songs, drumming	Confession, spiritual cleansing, sometimes seeking help from a faqih
<b>Context in Moroccan Folk Medicine &amp; Belief</b>		
<b>Gender Focus</b>	Affects men	Affects women
<b>Central Fear</b>	Female seduction & supernatural power	Consequences of sexual transgression
<b>Etiology</b>	Spirit possession	Moral-spiritual punishment
<b>Healing Strategy</b>	Trance, music, ritual appeasement	Confession, religious healing
<b>Comparative Political Symbolism</b>		
<b>Political Role (mythic)</b>	Potential anti-colonial rebel	Enforcer of patriarchal-moral norms
<b>Gendered Function</b>	Symbol of feared female power	Punishment of illicit female sexuality
<b>Mythic Evolution</b>	From hero to jinn (demonization of resistance)	Static moral warning; no redemptive framing
<b>Modern Reinterpretation</b>	Feminist/postcolonial reclaiming of her image	Rarely reinterpreted; remains a taboo figure

Table 1 offers a comparative analysis of spirit-induced illnesses attributed to two prominent supernatural figures in Moroccan folk belief: Aisha Qandisha and the Grave Mule (Baghalate Qbūr / Tagmart n Ismdal). The comparison highlights how each entity is associated with distinct forms of illness—sexual dysfunction and trance in the case of Aisha Qandisha, versus fear paralysis and psychosomatic symptoms for the Grave Mule. These illnesses are rooted in culturally specific transgressions: sexual or moral impropriety in the former, and desecration of sacred spaces in the latter. The table also contrasts healing methods, showing the divergence between musical trance rituals and Qur'anic purification practices, reflecting broader symbolic and social functions in regulating gender, morality, and sacred boundaries.

#### 4) DISCUSSION

This comparative analysis reveals that Moroccan beliefs surrounding spirit-induced illnesses operate as a complex symbolic system for articulating cultural anxieties and negotiating collective identity. Illnesses caused by supernatural entities are not merely personal afflictions; they represent breaches in moral order, gender expectations, or ritual conduct. In this symbolic framework, the afflicted body becomes a visible site for the performance of cultural contradictions and anxieties, particularly around sexuality, death, and spiritual purity [13]; [14].

#### 4.1 Aisha Qandisha: Gendered Power and Ritual Integration

The figure of Aisha Qandisha embodies a dense intersection of gender, desire, and spiritual authority. As a seductive jinniya whose power over men results in psychological or physical affliction, she illustrates the ambivalence of female sexuality in Moroccan society. While outwardly a threat, she also occupies a revered space in Sufi and folk healing cosmologies, especially among brotherhoods like the Hamadsha and Gnawa[2];[11].

In the context of trance healing, Aisha Qandisha allows for a culturally sanctioned expression of repressed psychological or emotional states—particularly those associated with male vulnerability. Men possessed by her often experience public breakdowns, including crying, convulsions, or mimicking animal sounds. These manifestations, although disruptive, are contained within ritual structures that interpret them as meaningful and redemptive [12].

Aisha Qandisha's ambiguous role—as both a feared demoness and a potential spiritual ally—reflects what Mernissi (1987) calls the dual image of the Muslim woman: simultaneously powerful and dangerous, sacred and profane. In the Moroccan context, she becomes an archetype through which patriarchal anxiety about female autonomy is managed and ritualized. Roux (1991) further argues that this figure reinforces social norms by reminding men of the dangers of unregulated desire and spiritual neglect.

Moreover, her presence near water—rivers, wells, and seas—further situates her in threshold spaces, symbolic of transformation and risk. As a liminal entity, she destabilizes boundaries between the seen and unseen, life and madness, purity and pollution—offering both affliction and initiation [1].

#### 4.2 The Grave Mule: Ritual Taboo and Sacred Geography

In contrast, the Grave Mule (Baghalate Qbūr or Tagmart n Ismdal) represents a different moral universe—not tied to seduction or possession but to death, pollution, and social transgression. She appears in Amazigh and Arab folklore as a monstrous being born of grave desecration, necrophilia, or incest—actions that violate the sanctity of death and family [4]; [7].

Unlike Aisha Qandisha, who operates through direct possession and trance, the Grave Mule induces fear-based afflictions that are more isolating than integrative. Victims experience paralysis, hallucinations, or psychosomatic collapse after nocturnal encounters near cemeteries. These experiences are not addressed through ecstatic ritual, but through Islamic purification, exorcism (ruqyah), and acts of moral atonement such as charity or ritual sacrifice [5].

#### 4.3 The Grave Mule thus functions as a didactic figure, warning against:

- Violating sacred burial grounds
- Breaking sexual or moral taboos
- Failing to observe Islamic ritual norms around death and purity

Her presence reinforces what Mary Douglas (1966) would describe as a system of bounded purity, where danger lies in boundary transgressions. To encounter the Grave Mule is to confront the cost of symbolic disorder—particularly when one disrespects what the community deems holy.

Her appearances in oral tales across the Rif, Souss, and High Atlas regions further illustrate her regional adaptability, serving different sociocultural functions depending on local customs [10]; [8]. In all cases, however, she operates outside of trance or Sufi cosmologies, signaling her alignment with orthodox Islamic cosmologies of sin and retribution rather than reconciliation or integration.

#### 4.4) Spirit Figures and Colonial Resistance

Aisha Qandisha and the Grave Mule (Baghl al-Qabr) are two prominent supernatural figures in Moroccan oral tradition, often associated with mysterious illnesses, psychological disturbances, and social transgression. While these spirits are frequently interpreted through religious or folkloric lenses, deeper readings reveal their connection to larger historical and moral structures. Particularly in the case of Aisha Qandisha, some narratives suggest that beneath her terrifying exterior lies the memory of a woman who resisted colonial violence and whose legacy was transformed over time into myth.

In certain regions of Morocco, Aisha Qandisha is remembered not only as a seductive jinniya but as a legendary woman who fought against the Portuguese during their occupation in the 15th and 16th centuries. Oral accounts describe her luring enemy soldiers away from their posts, using her beauty and cunning to ambush or assassinate them. Over time, her story blended with jinn mythology and Islamic cosmology, rebranding her from a courageous freedom fighter into a feared spirit who haunts men, causing paralysis, sexual dysfunction, and obsessive thoughts. Scholars such as Mernissi (1987) and Crapanzano (1980) have noted that this transformation may reflect an effort to domesticate or contain

the threat posed by powerful female figures, especially those who disrupt patriarchal and colonial authority.

Yet Aisha Qandisha's role is not purely malicious. Many narratives suggest that she does not target men randomly; rather, she punishes those who trespass moral or spiritual boundaries—those who exploit, disrespect, or violate. Her haunting often signals that something unjust has occurred and needs to be acknowledged. In this way, Aisha becomes not simply a demon, but a vessel for justice, a spirit who surfaces when harm has gone unpunished or truth has been silenced. Crapanzano (1980) observed that possession by Aisha often follows a rupture—psychological or social—that the afflicted cannot articulate in conventional ways.

The Grave Mule, by contrast, is a tragic and disturbing figure born out of secrecy and sin. According to traditional belief, it comes into existence when a woman gives birth to a child resulting from incest or forbidden sexual relations. The newborn, often killed and buried in secret, returns in monstrous form to haunt the mother, causing physical illness, infertility, or madness. Unlike Aisha, the Grave Mule is not autonomous—it is a consequence, a manifestation of shame and guilt, often used to reinforce silence around taboo subjects such as sexual violence or familial transgression (Westermarck, 1926). Though rarely reimagined as a symbol of resistance, it too can be read as a spirit of justice—one that emerges not to torment but to force recognition of a hidden trauma.

In both cases, these figures appear not to harm for the sake of cruelty but to restore a disrupted moral or emotional balance. They surface when social mechanisms of justice fail, when victims are unheard, or when communities bury truths too painful to confront. Whether it is Aisha haunting a man who has violated spiritual boundaries, or the Grave Mule returning to punish a crime erased by secrecy, both spirits represent a kind of moral accounting. They are feared not because they are evil, but because they insist on revealing what society tries to suppress.

Modern reinterpretations—especially through literature, music, and cinema—have begun to reclaim Aisha Qandisha as a symbol of defiance. In Gnawa ceremonies, she is not merely expelled but negotiated with, honored, and sometimes even revered. Her power is acknowledged as complex, her presence necessary. The Grave Mule, although still largely shrouded in taboo, similarly speaks to the cost of collective silence and the weight of unspoken violence. In this sense, Moroccan folklore offers not only metaphors of illness, but also vehicles for unresolved historical and social tension to find voice. These spirits remind us that folklore does not simply preserve tradition—it encodes trauma, memory, and justice, often in forms too powerful for direct speech.

#### 4.5) Non-Biomedical Epistemologies of Illness

What unites both figures—despite their contrasting natures—is their function within non-biomedical paradigms of illness and healing. In Moroccan epistemology, illness is often read morally and spiritually, not merely as a biological breakdown, but as a disruption in cosmic or social harmony. As Geertz (1973) asserts, symbols are not just expressions but vehicles of culture, and in this case, spirits like Aisha Qandisha and the Grave Mule serve as semiotic tools to interpret suffering and impose moral order.

- This worldview is not unique to Morocco, but its local expression is particularly rich, rooted in:
- Oral narratives (as preserved in [8])
- Ethical reasoning [7]
- Gendered moral structures [3]
- Ritual forms that allow for both catharsis and correction [2]; [6]

In this system, the afflicted individual is both patient and transgressor, and healing becomes a process of restoring social and spiritual order, not just physical health. Community participation, religious authority, and symbolic interpretation are all necessary for resolution.

## 5) CONCLUSION

Aisha Qandisha and the Grave Mule represent two powerful models of spirit-induced illness in The comparative analysis of Aisha Qandisha and Grave Mule-induced illnesses reveals the complexity and specificity of supernatural illness categories within Moroccan folk beliefs. These distinct yet complementary paradigms of spirit-induced affliction demonstrate sophisticated diagnostic systems, specialized therapeutic approaches, and important social functions that continue to influence healthcare practices in contemporary Morocco.

Aisha Qandisha possession represents a complex, gendered form of supernatural illness that may serve as cultural mechanism for negotiating masculine social pressures and gender role expectations. The chronic,

relationship-based nature of this condition requires long-term therapeutic management and often involves transformation of affliction into spiritual authority and social recognition.

Grave Mule encounters, by contrast, represent acute supernatural contamination requiring immediate purification and cleansing. The universal vulnerability to cemetery-based spiritual dangers reinforces collective adherence to death-related taboos and community protocols surrounding burial grounds and mortuary practices.

The persistence and continued relevance of these supernatural illness categories in modernizing Morocco demonstrates the adaptability and cultural significance of traditional healing systems. Rather than disappearing under modernization pressures, these traditional medical categories continue to provide culturally meaningful explanations for distress and therapeutic interventions that complement biomedical approaches.

Future research should continue to document the specific characteristics of supernatural illness categories within traditional healing systems, with particular attention to their adaptation to contemporary contexts and their potential for integration with modern healthcare approaches. The Moroccan case provides valuable insights for understanding medical pluralism and the continued relevance of traditional healing practices in global health contexts

**6) Conflict of interest:**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

This study relies on an analytical review of publicly accessible sources. Since it involved no direct human participation or experimental intervention, formal ethical approval was not necessary.

**7) REFERENCES:**

[1]. Westermarck E. Ritual and Belief in Morocco. London: Macmillan; 1935.  
 [2]. Crapanzano V. The Hamadsha: A Study in Moroccan Ethnopsychiatry. Berkeley: University of California Press; 1973.  
 [3]. Mernissi F. Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in a Modern Muslim Society. London: Saqi Books; 1987.  
 [4]. Basset H. Le culte des saints dans l'islam maghrébin [The cult of saints in Maghrebi Islam]. Paris: E. Leroux; 1929.  
 [5]. Dermenghem É. Le culte des saints musulmans au Maroc [The cult of Muslim saints in Morocco]. Paris: Gallimard; 1954.  
 [6]. Métraux A. Magie et médecine [Magic and medicine]. Paris: Payot; 1955.  
 [7]. Al-Jabri MA. Al-'Aql al-akhlaqī al-'Arabī [The Arab ethical mind]. Beirut: Center for Arab Unity Studies; 2001.  
 [8]. Al-Nassiri A. Al-Istiqsa li-Akhbar Duwal al-Maghrib al-Aqsa [Exploration of the history of Morocco]. Casablanca: Dar al-Kitab; 1997.  
 [9]. Roux J-P. La femme dans la civilisation musulmane [Woman in Muslim civilization]. Paris: Fayard; 1991.  
 [10]. Montagne R. Les berbères et le Makhzen dans le sud du Maroc [The Berbers and the Makhzen in southern Morocco]. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France; 1930.  
 [11]. Kapchan DA. Travelling Spirit Masters: Moroccan Trance Music in the Global Marketplace. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press; 2007.  
 [12]. Rabinow P. Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco. Berkeley: University of California Press; 1977.  
 [13]. Douglas M. Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo. London: Routledge; 1966.  
 [14]. Geertz C. The Interpretation of Cultures. New York: Basic Books; 1973.

**8) Miscellaneous:**

**Table 1.** Comparative features of Aisha Qandisha and the Grave Mule in Moroccan folk belief

Aspect	Aisha Qandisha	Grave Mule
<b>Ontological Nature &amp; Origins</b>		
Symbolism	Female sexuality, seduction, trance	Death, impurity, moral enforcement
Nature	Female jinn (often seen as a seductive spirit or demoness)	Supernatural hybrid creature (mule, formed from a sin)
Origin Story	Believed to be a jinniya from the sea; possibly linked to pre-Islamic or syncretic spirits	Said to be born from incestuous acts, especially between a woman and her male relative, and buried in secret
Cultural Layering	Possibly connected to pre-Islamic goddesses, and later Islamicized	Embedded in Islamic moral narratives about sin and taboo
<b>Symptoms &amp; Type of Illness</b>		
Afflicted Group	Primarily men, especially soldiers or unmarried men	Women, especially those who violate sexual taboos or norms
Symptoms	Sexual obsession, impotence,	Hysterical fits, infertility, nightmares,

	insomnia, paralysis, or trance-like possession	physical pain without cause
Mode of Attack	Through seduction, dreams, or accidental encounters near water or in isolation	By haunting the woman's dreams or invading her body as punishment
Symbolic & Social Role		
Symbolism	Female sexuality as powerful and dangerous; warns against unrestrained desire	Social punishment for sexual transgression; enforcer of incest taboos
Moral Message	Reflects anxiety around male vulnerability and the threat of female power	Reinforces patriarchal control over female sexuality
Ritual Response	Exorcism (often by Gnawa musicians or marabouts); offerings, songs, drumming	Confession, spiritual cleansing, sometimes seeking help from a faqih
Context in Moroccan Folk Medicine & Belief		
Gender Focus	Affects men	Affects women
Central Fear	Female seduction & supernatural power	Consequences of sexual transgression
Etiology	Spirit possession	Moral-spiritual punishment
Healing Strategy	Trance, music, ritual appeasement	Confession, religious healing