

Witches

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Aisha Qandisha, one of the most well-known female jinn figures in Moroccan folklore, both feared and desired, is frequently depicted as an impossibly beautiful woman with animalistic traits below the waist which she conceals until it is too late. She is said to materialize near bodies of water or desolate places at night, bewitching her victims through both mesmerizing beauty and supernatural force. In some tales, men who encounter Aisha Qandisha emerge dazed, cursed, or driven to madness; in others, she compels them to marry her, binding them to a strange half-human, half-spirit realm. The story of Aisha Qandisha is rooted in Morocco's layered geography, where Amazigh, Arab, African, and Mediterranean influences intersect. As recounted by Nadia Arif, a local from Casablanca, Aisha was once a young woman from the Doukkala region near El Jadida, renowned for her extraordinary beauty. During the Portuguese occupation, soldiers raided her tribe while she was away, killing nearly all her uncles, cousins, and the other men. When she returned and found the massacre, she wept day and night until she turned into a jinniyya. From then on, she appeared each night to the Portuguese officers, luring them with her beauty and then killing them one by one in revenge for her family. Other nearby tribes, seeing what she had done, rose up with stones and eventually drove the Portuguese out. Ever since, people say Aisha never died: she became known as Aisha Qandisha, sometimes called Aisha al-Bahriyya when she haunts the sea, or Aisha al-Jbel (Aisha of the Mountain) when she moves through the forests and mountains. Even today, she is said to appear at night to men driving alone, her animal legs hidden at first, seducing them before bringing madness, death, or possession.¹ Some leave candles and henna for her at lonely places, hoping to avoid her wrath or her touch. Her spectral presence stems from a concrete historical trauma. Her acts of vengeance—appearing night after night to seduce and kill the Portuguese soldiers—turned her into an emblem of retribution. Over time she becomes feared as much as she is

1. Aziz Amahjour, "Literatura oral de Marruecos. En torno al personaje de Aisha Qandisha: ¿una lejana hermana gemela de la Llorona?" *Revista de Literaturas Populares* 17, no. 2 (2017): 436–56; Mohamed Saadan, "Aisha Qandisha: de la leyenda 'historiada' al universo inquietante del inconsciente popular," *Meridional: Revista de Estudos do Mediterrâneo* 2 (2022): 118–33.

respected, her revenge transforming into power. The Queen of Sheba, too, became a figure through which anxieties about gender and authority were expressed. In the biblical account she appears as a powerful sovereign of intellect and political acumen, meeting Solomon on equal terms, but in later Jewish and Islamic traditions, she is recast as a seductress, and her command reduced to sexual guile. Her extraordinary qualities are attributed to a jinn mother who gave her hairy ankles, with feet that “are like the hooves of the mule.”²

In Shannon Chakraborty’s portrayal of Amina al-Sirafi, rumored to beguile men with “forbidden magics” and demonized for her sexuality, we see a striking echo of these powerful women cast as both irresistible and destructive. Much like Aisha, Amina is feared for her supernatural allure and the perceived threat she poses to patriarchal order: both women’s agency and expertise (Amina’s command at sea, Aisha’s bewitching enchantments) provoke anxieties that brand them as monstrous or unclean. In each case, the myth of the “sorcerous woman” reflects a social impulse to explain away female autonomy by labeling it as dangerous magic, simultaneously obsessing over, condemning, and desiring the very power denied her. In the preface of the novel, attributed to the scribe Jamal al-Hilli, he writes about Amina’s reputation as: “The smuggler, the pirate. The blasphemer that men of letters accuse of serving up human hearts for her sea-beast husband, and the sorceress—for she must be a sorceress, because no female could sail a ship so deftly without the use of forbidden magics—whose appearance somehow both beguiles and repulses. Traders along our fair shores warn against speaking her name as though she is a djinn that might be summoned as such.”³

This harkens back to older scriptural or legendary narratives, back to the “first witch” figure of ‘Anāq bt. Ādam, daughter of Eve, sister of Seth, whose monstrous transgressions included “subduing the demons” and “performing magic” in broad daylight, as related in works such as *Akḥbār al-zamān* by Ibrāhīm b. Waṣīf Shāh (fl. 968–1070). The Yemenite scholar and traditionist Wahb b. Munabbih (d. 728) describes her with ten or twenty fingers in each hand, each finger having two nails like sharp sickles. This Lilithian figure is the antithesis of Eve, mother of humanity; according to ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, “Ādam— peace be upon him—invoked [God] against her, and Ḥawwā’ was safe. [The lion] attacked her in the caverns, killed her and mangled her limbs. God set Ādam and Ḥawwā’ free from her.”⁴

The motif of the threatening witch finds echoes in a range of premodern sources. For example, Ibn Khaldūn (1332–1406), the renowned North African historian and social theorist, describes the unsettling presence of women who wielded magical authority in the mountains near Tetouan through the tale of a man called Ḥāmīm. Central to Ḥāmīm’s following was his aunt Tabāna‘nat and his sister Dabbū, both feared and sought after as sorceresses and seers whom local people called upon for protection during wars and droughts. Ibn Khaldūn remarks that in these remote Ghumāra valleys it was often older women (*nisā’ ‘awātiq*) and maidens who preserved forbidden knowledge, summoning

2. Jacob Lassner, *Demonizing the Queen of Sheba: Boundaries of Gender and Culture in Postbiblical Judaism and Medieval Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 60.

3. Shannon Chakraborty, *The Adventures of Amina al-Sirafi* (New York: Harper Voyager, 2023), 1.

4. Quoted in Jean-Charles Coulon, “‘Anāq bt. Ādam, the Islamic Story of the Very First Witch,” in *Gender between Law, Religion and Myths: The Surroundings of Fiqh*, ed. Mohammed Hocine Benkheira, special issue, *Hawwa* 17, no. 2–3 (2019): 135–67, at 147–48.

planetary spirits and shaping natural forces beyond the reach of male religious elites. Such women threatened patriarchal order precisely because they could not be contained: they were family elders and ritual specialists embedded in the community yet moving in spaces the law struggled to regulate.⁵ Historian and biographer Ibn al-Athīr (d. 1233) in his *al-Kāmil fī al-tārīkh* similarly recounts how an ‘ajūz sāhira (old witch) in India warded off the Turkic conqueror Mahmūd Ghaznawī with a wet broom, a detail that resonates with, yet predates, the European stereotype of witches mounted on brooms by several centuries.⁶ Across these accounts, the convergence of old age, womanhood, and sorcery came to embody fears of female agency, casting it as “dangerous” knowledge and practice within the historical and religious imagination.⁷

However, Amina’s colleague Dalila is the one who stands at the crossroads of science and sorcery. From her ties to the Banū Sāsān’s secret guilds to her shimmering containers of botanical concoctions, Dalila represents a distinct fusion of art and alchemy, reminiscent of Maria the Prophetess known from the works of alchemist Zosimos of Panopolis (fl. ca. 300).⁸ Some alchemical treatises are even attributed to Cleopatra, including a second-century *Dialogue* where she is depicted as leading a meeting with her pupils or fellow alchemists.⁹ The Cleopatra mentioned in this text is not Cleopatra VII (69–30 BCE), the last Ptolemaic queen and consort of Mark Antony. Rather, like Mary the Prophetess and Zosimos’s Theosebia, this Cleopatra holds a prominent place in the history of alchemy as one of the rare ancient women reputed to have mastered the secret of the philosopher’s stone; some traditions even credit her with inventing the alembic. With her command of nature, she commanded philosophers. She says:

For I tell this to you who are wise: when you take plants, elements, and stones from their places, they appear to you to be mature. But they are not mature until the fire has tested them. When they are clothed in the glory from the fire and shining colour thereof, then rather will appear their hidden glory, their sought-for beauty, being transformed to the divine state of fusion. For they are nourished in the fire and the embryo grows little by little nourished in its mother’s womb, and when the appointed month approaches is not restrained from issuing forth.¹⁰

5. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Khaldūn, *Kitāb al-‘Ibar wa-dīwān al-mubtada’ wa-l-khabar*, ed. Khālid Shihāda and Suhayl Zakkār, 8 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1981), 6:288.

6. ‘Izz al-Dīn b. al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil fī al-tārīkh*, ed. ‘Umar ‘Abd al-Salām Tadmurī, 10 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 1417 AH/1997 CE), 7:761–63.

7. Amanda Hannoosh Steinberg, “Wives, Witches, and Warriors: Women in Arabic Popular Epic” (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2018), 64–65.

8. Lawrence M. Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 15–24; Matteo Martelli, “Maria’s *Practica* in Early Modern Alchemy,” in *Gendered Touch: Women, Men, and Knowledge-making in Early Modern Europe*, eds. Antonella Romano, Francesca Antonelli, and Paolo Savoia, 40–65 (Leiden: Brill, 2022).

9. Matteo Martelli and Maddalena Rumor, “Near Eastern Origins of Graeco-Egyptian Alchemy,” in *Esoteric Knowledge in Antiquity*, eds. Klaus Geus and Mark Geller, 37–62 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 8–9.

10. Quoted in Stanton J. Linden, ed., *The Alchemy Reader: From Hermes Trismegistus to Isaac Newton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 45.

Nevertheless, in Ibn Khaldūn's *Tārīkh* it is the historical Cleopatra who is described as a witch (*sāḥira*) and claimed to have enchanted Antony to make him hers.¹¹

Dalila harnesses in her laboratory centuries-old alchemical principles to craft both lethal poisons and beneficial “pharmaceuticals,” ensuring that her intellect and skill remain her greatest weapons. The very “darkness” society fears in her arts—the knockout gasses and powdered glass—is in truth evidence of a rigorously trained mind determined to reclaim “forbidden” knowledge. In one of the novel's passages, “A Missive to the Wali of Basrah,” which is written to sound like a historical document, the supposed author warns his recipient about Dalila, saying: “Let this murderess pass through... It is rumored she carries sleeping cakes on her person, poison tablets in the ribbons of her headdress, and needs only the barest few drops of liquid to activate the fumes in either.”¹² This should not be surprising as Dalila, we are told, belongs to the renowned Banū Sāsān. They were an itinerant group described as *ghurabā'* (meaning “strangers”) who served as laborers, astrologers, amulet-makers, medical workers, and entertainers. They played a notable role in shaping magical motifs within medieval popular culture—an influence documented in works like 'Abd al-Raḥīm b. 'Umar al-Jawbarī's thirteenth-century *Kashf al-asrār* (“Unveiling the Secrets”). According to al-Jawbarī, the Banū Sāsān practiced a wide range of occult methods, including all kinds of divination and planetary magic. The Banū Sāsān's language functioned as a “mixed language” in which a predominantly Jewish Aramaic vocabulary was fitted into a Persian grammatical structure, reflecting their hybrid cultural and linguistic identity.¹³ Dalila's “othering,” then, reflects a doubled threat. In the anxiety-ridden “Missive to the Wali of Basrah,” the author complains: “Her lot are the most cunning and violent of the criminal guilds under the banner of the Banu Sasan. [...] God preserve us, this is why women are to be guarded! Better they are kept safe at home and rightly guided rather than running about the streets becoming daughters of the Banu Sasan.”¹⁴

From laboratory to library, we come to Dunya, whose ancestors “were priests and exorcists in the old world, the binders of demons and the protectors of childbirth.”¹⁵ Dunya's library stands as a stunning testament to learned magic—a place where the study of Qur'anic sciences, hadith, and jurisprudence sits alongside the occult traditions of India, Persia, China, and the Greco-Roman world. Its shelves hold an impressive collection of magical and astrological treatises, including texts by Abū Ma'shar (d. 886), perhaps the most influential astrologer of the Islamic world and beyond,¹⁶ writings attributed to Jābir b.

11. Ibn Khaldūn, *Kitāb al-'Ibar*, 2:150.

12. Chakraborty, *The Adventures of Amina al-Sirafī*, 57–58.

13. Kristina Richardson, *Roma in the Medieval Islamic World: Literacy, Culture, and Migration* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 30–31, 44, 49, 82–102.

14. Chakraborty, *The Adventures of Amina al-Sirafī*, 57–58.

15. Chakraborty, *The Adventures of Amina al-Sirafī*, 304.

16. Liana Saif, “Abū Ma'shar,” in *Astrology through History: Interpreting the Stars from Ancient Mesopotamia to the Present*, ed. William E. Burns, 1–3 (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-Clio, 2018); Abū Ma'shar al-Balkhī, *The Great Introduction to Astrology*, ed. and trans. Keiji Yamamoto and Charles Burnett, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2019).

Ḥayyān, the foremost authority on alchemy and talismanic science,¹⁷ and *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm*, the famous tenth-century magic text by the Andalusian occultist Maslama b. Qāsim al-Qurṭubī.¹⁸ Meticulously catalogued wax-stoppered brass bottles, intricate astrological charts, and fantastic amulets reflect a command of the occult disciplines. From the life-size relief of an ibis-headed figure to jars holding winged demons and coins inscribed with the names of jinn kings, each artifact testifies to authority embedded in religious texts and occult knowledge.¹⁹ Most significantly, Dunya wields linguistic fluency to weave together these multi-layered traditions of star-lore, incantations, and scriptural languages.

In fact, both Dunya and Dalila are reminiscent of the legendary Sharāsīm al-Hindiyya, the putative author of a treatise on astral magic called *Kitāb Sharāsīm al-Hindiyya*. She is described in some sources as an Indian woman including by al-Jawbarī, who counts her among such ancient sages as Ṭum Ṭum al-Hindī, Bālīnās (Apollonius of Tyana), Plato, Maria the Jewess, Aristotle, and others. In reality, the identity of Sharāsīm remains unclear. *Kitāb Sharāsīm* begins by describing her as the “freedwoman (*mawlāt*) of Abū l-‘Abbās, a client of the commander of the believers,” thus in the service of a close relative of an unnamed caliph. She was thought to be the maidservant of Hārūn al-Rashīd; however, her name, profession and her origins are things of legend. The text uses the term *sīmiyā*²⁰, to refer to astral magic. Sharāsīm also describes it as a “secret of wisdom” (*sirr al-ḥikma*) and the “magic of the intellect” (*siḥr al-‘aql*).²⁰

Yet while Sharāsīm al-Hindiyya describes her craft as a form of wisdom and the exercise of the intellect, the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā²¹, the tenth-century fraternity of esotericists and sages, expose how dominant thinkers worked to strip such female knowledge of its philosophical status. They rank women’s magic as inferior and rooted in the lower faculty of imagination rather than intellect. They describe it as affecting, they say, “idiots among men, women, and youths” through “superstitions (*khurāfat*), old wife tales (*makhārīq*), the nonsense they write, and the incitements and *niranjs* they create,” in contrast to the male-coded, intellectual magic of the ‘ulamā²¹ grounded in cosmological knowledge and talismanry.²¹

17. Syed Nomanul Haq, *Names, Natures, and Things: The Alchemist Jābir ibn Ḥayyān and His Kitāb al-Aḥjār (Book of Stones)* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994); Paul Kraus, *Jābir ibn Ḥayyān: Contribution à l’histoire des idées scientifiques dans l’Islam. I. Le corpus des écrits jābiriens. II. Jābir et la science grecque* (Cairo: al-Khanjī; Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1942–43); Liana Saif, “The Jābirian Kitāb al-Nukhab and Teaching the Science of Talismans in the Abbasid Era,” *Journal of Abbasid Studies* 11, no. 1 (2024): 98–123.

18. *Picatrix: Das Ziel des Weisen, von Pseudo-Maḡrīfī*, ed. Hellmut Ritter (Leipzig: Teubner, 1933); it is widely accepted to be authored by Maslama al-Qurṭubī—see Maribel Fierro, “Bāṭinism in al-Andalus: Maslama b. Qāsim al-Qurṭubī (d. 353/964), Author of the *Rutbat al-Ḥakīm* and the *Ghāyat al-Ḥakīm* (Picatrix),” *Studia Islamica* 84 (1996): 87–112.

19. Chakraborty, *The Adventures of Amina al-Sirāfī*, 154–55.

20. Jean-Charles Coulon, “The *Kitāb Sharāsīm al-Hindiyya* and Medieval Islamic Occult Sciences,” in *Islamicate Occult Sciences in Theory and Practice*, ed. Liana Saif, Francesca Leoni, Matthew Melvin-Koushki, and Farouk Yahya, 317–79 (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 336. Here, Coulon translates *siḥr al-‘aql* as “enchantment of reason,” which evokes Enlightenment notions of reason and suggests an external agent overpowering it, whereas my translation, “magic of the intellect,” aligns with the occult-scientific and philosophical register of ‘aql, presenting the intellect itself as an active agent and the higher faculty of the soul.

21. *Rasā’il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā*², 4 vols. (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1957), 4:79, 284, 313; Liana Saif, “A Study of the Ikhwān

Dalila recognises this pompousness in Falco the Frank who in her words, “compares his intellect to Aristotle’s,” when in reality “he sounds like a drunk witch.” Here, the script is flipped.²²

In reviewing these diverse yet convergent depictions—from the “threatening old woman” of popular epics to towering legendary figures such as ‘Anāq bt. Ādam and Sharāsīm al-Hindiyya—it becomes evident that premodern discourse consistently uses the imagery of female sorcery to discredit women’s capacity for knowledge and power. The supposed threat of the crone or the witch-occultist both enshrines her intellectual authority and demonizes it, underscoring how age, gender, and mastery of the occult were wielded as rhetorical weapons. Amina al-Sirafi’s command of holy verses, Dalila’s laboratory of alchemical marvels, and Dunya’s library of multi-lingual literature all rewrite this script: instead of passive pawns in a male-dominated narrative, Dalila, Dunya, and Amina become stewards of occult knowledge, commanding earth, sky, and seas.

al-Ṣafā’i’s Epistle on Magic, The Longer Version (52b),” in *Islamicate Occult Sciences*, 162–206, at 171.

22. Chakraborty, *The Adventures of Amina al-Sirafi*, 66.