INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH AND INNOVATIVE STUDIES
ISSN: 2820-7157
www.ijsrisjournal.com

October 2025 Volume 4 Number 6 239-245

Received Date: 20 October 2025 Accepted Date: 11 November 2025 Published Date: 1 December 2025

Trance and the Semiotic Body: An Analysis of Gnaoua Possession Rituals in Morocco

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Abstract

In this article, we propose a semiotic analysis of Gnaoua possession rituals in Morocco, placing the body in a trance state at the centre of the analysis. Drawing on the theoretical framework of Peircean semiotics, Marcel Mauss's contributions on bodily techniques, Gilbert Rouget's phenomenology of ritual music, and the anthropological work of Ioan M. Lewis, we seek to demonstrate that the body of the possessed: the maalem or the initiate in trance, constitutes a complex semiotic text, articulating iconic, indexical and symbolic signs. Gestures, colours, musical rhythms and ritual scents form a coherent and coded system of meaning, the deciphering of which provides access to the deep grammar of the lila ritual. Drawing on ethnographic observations, we demonstrate how the body in trance becomes a mediating semiotic operator between the visible world and the invisible world of the spirits (mluk). This approach contributes to renewing studies on possession rituals in North Africa by integrating the conceptual tools of contemporary semiotics.

Keywords: Gnaoua; trance; semiotic body; possession ritual; lila; semiotics; Morocco; mluk.

1. Introduction

The question of trance and ritual possession has long occupied an ambiguous place in the humanities and social sciences. Long relegated to the realm of the irrational, superstition or pathology, it has gradually gained epistemological legitimacy thanks to the seminal work of Erika Bourguignon, Ioan M. Lewis and, in the Maghreb and African context, Gilbert Rouget. In Morocco, the ceremonies of the Gnaoua, a Sufi brotherhood of sub- n origin, constitute one of the most spectacular and most studied manifestations of trance possession, attracting the attention of anthropologists, musicologists and, more recently, researchers in semiotics and the linguistic sciences.

This article forms part of this discourse by proposing a reinterpretation of the lila ritual in the light of contemporary semiotics. Our central hypothesis is that the body in a state of trance cannot be reduced to a neurophysiological phenomenon or an ineffable mystical experience: it is a semiotic body, that is to say, a device for the production, transmission and reception of signs. This conception draws on Peirce's triad of signs—icon, index, symbol—and on Mauss's notion of 'techniques of the body' to analyse the postures, gestures, colours and sounds that structure the Gnaoua ceremony as a genuine system of meaning.

From a methodological perspective, this article combines ethnographic data with semiological analysis. We employed participant observation, semi-structured interviews with maalemîn (Gnaoua master musicians) and audiovisual recordings of ceremonies, with the consent of the participants concerned. The transcription of the data drew on tools from ethnomusicology (Lortat-Jacob, 1994) and the anthropology of the body (Csordas, 1994).

The article is structured in six parts: following a historical and socio-cultural contextualisation of the Gnaoua in Morocco, we will outline the theoretical framework drawing on semiotics, the anthropology of ritual and ethnomusicology (section 3). Section 4 describes the structure of the lila as a ritual text. Sections 5 and 6 form the core of the analysis, examining respectively the body in trance as a producer of signs, and music, colours and scents as symbolic systems. A concluding discussion will situate these findings within the broader context of studies on possession rituals in North Africa and beyond.

2. The Gnaoua: Historical, socio-cultural and geographical context in Morocco

2.1. Origins and historical trajectory

The Gnaoua brotherhood (also spelled Gnawa or Jilala in certain regions) emerged from the trans-Saharan slave trade that supplied Morocco with sub-Saharan slaves from the 16th to the 19th century. According to Viviana Pâques (1991), these populations, originating mainly from the Sahel, Mali, Senegal, Guinea and Nilotic Sudan, were integrated into the Sharifian armies, particularly during the reign of Moulay Ismaïl (1672–1727), who established an army known as the Abid al- Bukhari, before gradually forming communities organised around syncretic religious practices blending Islam, animist beliefs and ancestor worship. Abdelhafid Chlyeh (1998, pp. 23–24) emphasises this foundational syncretism: ‘the Gnaoua have successfully integrated forms of Moroccan Islam—Sufism, the cult of saints—whilst preserving symbolic elements of sub-Saharan origin’.

The etymology of the term ‘Gnaoua’ remains a matter of debate. Three main hypotheses have been put forward: that it is derived from ‘Guinea’, referring generically to Black Africa (Pâques, 1991; Ould Braham, 1993); a connection to the Berber root agnaou, meaning ‘mute’ or ‘black’ (Chlyeh, 1998); or a link to the city of Djenné in Mali (Hammoudi, 1997). Whatever the accepted etymology, the Gnaoua today define themselves as a religious and therapeutic brotherhood whose primary mission is the healing of people suffering from imbalances linked to possession by spirits (mluk).

2.2. Geographical distribution and institutionalisation

Although present throughout Morocco, the Gnaoua are particularly concentrated in the cities of Marrakesh, Essaouira, Meknes and Fez. Since 1998, Essaouira has hosted the Gnaoua and World Music Festival, which has become one of the most important cultural events on the African continent, attracting over 500,000 visitors annually (Kapchan, 2007; Mouna, 2010). This festival has played a decisive role in the heritage recognition and internationalisation of Gnaoua practice, propelling it onto the global world music stage whilst sparking debates on the authenticity and commodification of the sacred (Kapchan, 2007; Salmi, 2014).

In 2019, the cultural, ritual and artistic practices of the Gnaoua were inscribed on UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, marking an international recognition that has not been without internal tensions within the community between those who advocate a closed ritual and therapeutic practice and those who support a more open approach to heritage (Mouna and Belmkadem, 2021; El Harras, 2020).

3. Theoretical Framework: Body, Sign and Ritual

3.1. Peircean semiotics applied to ritual

The work of Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914) offers a conceptual framework particularly suited to the analysis of possession rituals. His triadic conception of the sign — linking the representamen (the sign itself), the object (that to which the sign refers) and the interpretant (the effect produced on the recipient) — enables us to grasp the complexity of the signifying systems at work in the lila (Peirce, 1978; Eco, 1988). The three categories of signs — icon (relationship of resemblance), index (relationship of causal contiguity) and symbol (relationship of convention) — constitute a particularly effective analytical framework for describing trance postures, ritual objects and sound configurations.

Following Umberto Eco (1988, pp. 56–57), who emphasises that ‘every cultural phenomenon can be studied as communication’, we postulate that the Gnaoua ritual is a structured act of communication, in which the body in trance occupies the position of a meta-sign: a sign of all other signs. This approach has been partially explored by Omar Bencheikh (2005) in the context of Moroccan healing rituals, and by Paul Stoller (1989) for Songhay rituals in Niger, but it has not yet been systematically applied to the Gnaoua.

3.2. Marcel Mauss and body techniques

The concept of 'techniques of the body' coined by Marcel Mauss (1934) refers to the range of ways in which societies make use of the body in traditional and learned ways. These techniques—walking, dancing, posture, breathing—are not natural but culturally determined and transmitted. In Gnaoua ritual, the bodily techniques specific to the trance state—the rotation of the head, the undulation of the torso, the dissociation of the limbs—constitute a body of embodied knowledge, transmitted from master to initiate within an initiatory chain spanning generation (Chlyeh, 1998; Jouad & Lortat-Jacob, 1979).

Pierre Bourdieu (1980) expanded upon and sociologised this Maussian insight with his concept of habitus — a system of enduring dispositions acquired through social experience and embodied in the body. The Gnaoua adept who enters a trance mobilises a specific ritual habitus, acquired through repeated participation in ceremonies, which enables them to recognise the musical sequences corresponding to 'their' spirit (their mlek) and to respond to them with codified gestures and postures. Trance is not a loss of control but a controlled deployment of embodied dispositions (Becker, 2004, p. 133).

3.3. Music and trance: Rouget's synthesis

Gilbert Rouget's seminal work, *La Musique et la Transe* (1980), is the essential reference for any study of the relationship between musical induction and dissociative states. In * *, Rouget distinguishes trance from mere emotional exaltation and establishes a rigorous taxonomy of the various forms of trance across world cultures. With regard to cultures where music plays a central role in inducing trance — of which Gnaoua rituals are a paradigmatic example — Rouget shows that music is not merely a physiological 'trigger' but a complex symbolic operator that codes access to the spirit world.

More recently, Judith Becker (2004) refined this analysis by introducing the concept of 'deep listening', referring to a mode of listening that engages the whole body and induces a trance-like state in the listener. This approach aligns with our semiotic framework: deep listening is in itself a semiotic act, through which the body learns to decode musical signals as calls from specific spirits.

3.4. The anthropology of possession: Lewis, Turner and Csordas

Ioan M. Lewis's theory of ritual possession (1971), despite the criticism it has attracted, remains an essential point of reference. His distinction between central possession (socially integrated) and peripheral possession (an expression of marginalised groups) applies in part to the Gnaoua: a brotherhood founded by former slaves, their practice initially fell under the category of peripheral possession before being gradually reintegrated into Moroccan society and even sanctified (Hammoudi, 1997; Chlyeh, 1998).

Victor Turner (1969), in his analyses of ritual as a process, highlighted the liminal structure of trance—a transitional state between two statuses, two worlds. The body in trance is a liminal body, neither fully human nor fully spiritual, but mediating between these two ontological orders. Thomas Csordas (1994), with his concept of 'embodiment', definitively established the body as the primary site of culture and meaning, transcending the body/mind dichotomy inherited from Cartesianism. These perspectives converge to place the body in trance at the centre of any semiotic analysis of Gnaoua ritual.

4. The Lila as Ritual Text: Structure and Sequence

4.1. Architecture of the Ritual

The lila (an Arabic term literally meaning 'night') is the central ceremony of the Gnaoua brotherhood. It is convened for therapeutic, commemorative or festive purposes, and generally takes place from nightfall until dawn. Its structure is rigorously codified— —organised around a series of musical sequences corresponding to as many spirits (mluk) grouped into chromatic 'families' (Chlyeh, 1998; Pâques, 1991; Fath Allah, 2009). Our field observations confirm the classical description of the lila as documented in the ethnographic literature, whilst highlighting significant regional variations between Marrakesh, Meknes and Essaouira.

The lila begins with a preparatory phase (al-tabyit), during which the ritual space is purified by the burning of specific incense (bakhur), the musical instruments — gimbri (three-stringed lute), qraqeb (metal castanets) and tbel (drum)—are tuned, and the participants arrange themselves around the central space. This is followed by a long sequence of praises (derdeba) addressed to Allah, the Prophet and the patron saints of the brotherhood, before the ritual enters its main phase with the successive invocation of the various families of spirits.

4.2. The families of spirits (mluk) and their colour code

The mluk system forms the semantic backbone of the ritual. Each spirit belongs to a 'family' identified by a specific colour, scent, animal, geographical location and musical sequence. Pâques (1991) proposed the first systematic mapping of this symbolic system, distinguishing seven main families, the list of which varies slightly depending on the

sources and regions. Subsequent work by Chlyeh (1998) and Fath Allah (2009) has refined and expanded this description. The table below summarises the main correspondences:

Table 1. The main families of mluk and their symbolic correspondences (based on Pâques, 1991; Chlyeh, 1998; Fath Allah, 2009; field data, 2018–2023).

Family / Mlek	Colour	Scent / Bakhur	Associated space	Musical sequence	Therapeutic effects
Sidi Mimoun	Black	Tar (qatran)	Sea, abyss	Bâb Gnaoua	Epilepsy, fear
Sidi Moussa	Blue	Blue amber	Water, springs	Bâb Sidi Moussa	Water troubles
Lalla Mira	Yellow / Gold	Yellow musk	Gardens, flowers	Bâb Lalla Mira	Barrenness, melancholy
Sidi Hamou	Red	Henna, saffron	Fire, volcano	Bâb Sidi Hamou	Anger, violence
Sidi Ali	Green / White	Pink, white amber	Forests, mountains	Bâb Sidi Ali	Headache, benign jinn
Lalla Aicha	Blood red	Benzoin, myrrh	Cemeteries, night	Bâb Lalla Aicha	Serious possession
Sidi Brahim	White	White incense	Desert, sky	Bâb Sidi Brahim	General purification

4.3. The maalem and the haddarates: roles and interactions

The maalem (master musician) is the central figure of the lila. He is at once conductor, therapist, interpreter and medium. His main function is to ‘summon’ the spirits through music and to guide the devotees (haddarates, most often women) through their trance journey, adjusting the tempo, intensity and tone of the music according to the state of the possessed person. This musical mastery of the trance forms the core of the maalem’s expertise and involves a constant reading of the bodily signs emitted by the participants through postures, tremors, limb movements, etc., which indicate to him which spirit is present and what musical treatment to apply (Lortat-Jacob, 1994; Chlyeh, 1998; Salmi, 2014, pp. 89–91).

5. The Body in Trance as a Producer of Signs

5.1. Bodily Icons: Resembling the Spirit

In the Peircean sense, an icon is a sign that bears a resemblance to its object. In the lila, the postures and movements of the body in trance constitute icons of the possessing spirit. The person possessed by Sidi Moussa (spirit of water) adopts undulating, fluid movements, imitating the flow of water; the person possessed by Sidi Hamou (spirit of fire) performs sudden, jerky movements, imitating the bursting of flames. These correspondences between bodily movement and the attributes of the spirit are documented in our field data and corroborate the observations of Chlyeh (1998, pp. 67–72) and Pâques (1991).

This bodily iconicity extends to the objects handled by the possessed person at the height of the trance: the person possessed by Lalla Aicha sometimes seizes a knife or embers, an iconic expression of this spirit’s power over the boundaries between life and death (Lewis, 1971; Lambek, 1981). These acts, which astound uninitiated witnesses, are integrated into the brotherhood’s symbolic repertoire and interpreted by the maalemîn and initiated followers as manifestations of the spirit’s power, not as deviant behaviour (Bourguignon, 1973; Lambek, 1981, pp. 44–46).

5.2. Bodily indices: the body as a symptom

A sign is a marker that maintains a causal or existential relationship with its object. In Gnaoua ritual, bodily indexical signs are of paramount importance for the ritual diagnosis carried out by the maalem. Intense sweating, tremors, half-closed or rolled-back eyes, changes in the voice, and the dissociation of limbs—all these indexical signs signal the onset of trance and enable the maalem to identify the spirit present and adapt his musical response.

Our interviews with maalemîn confirm that they have developed a veritable clinical semiology of trance, capable of distinguishing between different states: incomplete trance, deep trance, parasitic possession (intrusion of an unexpected spirit), based on patterns of bodily signs. Maalem Abdellah Guinéa, whom we met in Marrakech in 2021, told us: “I read the body like a text. Every shudder, every way of placing the feet, every breath tells me where the person is and which mlek wishes to manifest itself. I respond with my music, and their body responds to me again.” This semiotic reciprocity between the possessed person’s body and the maalem’s music lies at the heart of the ritual’s therapeutic function (Lortat-Jacob, 1994; Stoller, 1989).

5.3. Bodily symbols: the conventional gestural code

The Peircean symbol rests on an arbitrary convention between the sign and its referent. In the lila, certain gestures of the body in trance are symbols in the strict sense: their meaning is conventional, learnt by the initiates and opaque to the uninitiated. Thus, the gesture of crossing one's arms over the chest signals to the members of the brotherhood the presence of the spirit Sidi Brahim; grabbing one's own hair and swaying from right to left is a conventional sign of Lalla Mira's call. These symbolic gestures constitute the brotherhood's secret code, transmitted solely through initiation (taqlid) and inaccessible to the uninitiated (Chlyeh, 1998; Fath Allah, 2009).

6. Music, Colours and Fragrances: Symbolic Systems of the Lila

6.1. Music as a Semiotic System

Gnaoua music constitutes in itself a complex semiotic system in which each sequence (bâb, literally 'door') functions as a musical signifier corresponding to a specific spirit-signified. Rouget (1980, pp. 312–314) had already noted that in rituals where music plays a role in inducing trance, 'the relationship between music and the spirit is not mechanical but semiological: it is the recognition of the musical sign that triggers the bodily response'.

The gimbri: a lute with a soundbox made of camel skin, featuring three plucked strings, serves as the principal semantic instrument: its ostinato melodic lines are the musical identifiers of the mluk. The qraqeb (metal castanets) fulfil a rhythmic and pragmatic role: their metallic, piercing sound serves to 'call' and 'anchor' the spirit within the body of the possessed. Jouad & Lortat-Jacob (1979, pp. 78–82) documented the modal and rhythmic structure of the Gnaoua repertoire, demonstrating that each bâb is defined by a unique combination of mode, tempo and rhythmic formula through a triple articulation that constitutes the semiotic signature of the invoked spirit.

6.2. Ritual colours: a chromatic semiotics

The chromatic system of the lila constitutes one of the most elaborate examples of colour semiotics in African and North African possession rituals. Each mlek is associated with a specific colour that manifests itself in the clothing worn by the possessed, the veils stretched across the ritual space, the lit candles and even the food offerings placed on the altars. This chromatic semiotics functions both as an icon (the yellow of Lalla Mira evokes gold and light, attributes of this benevolent spirit) and as a symbol (the convention associating black with Sidi Mimoun, spirit of the abyss, is arbitrary and conventional).

Lévi-Strauss (1962, p. 49) had drawn attention to the classificatory function of colour systems in mythical and ritual thought: colours do not merely 'represent' spirits; they organise a symbolic topology of the cosmos, distributing spiritual entities according to a system of oppositions and analogies. In Gnaoua lila, the fundamental opposition between black (death, the abyss, danger) and white (purity, the sky, healing) structures the entire chromatic system, with the other colours arranged within a spectrum of intermediate symbolic valences (Pâques, 1991; Hammoudi, 1997).

6.3. Perfumes and offerings: olfactory and gustatory semiotics

The olfactory dimension of the Gnaoua ritual has been relatively little studied in academic literature, even though it constitutes a semiotic system of remarkable richness. Each spirit is associated with one or more specific fragrances (bakhur), the burning of which serves both as an invitation to the spirit and a signal to the possessed individual. The olfactory recognition of the bakhur corresponding to one's personal mlek can, on its own, trigger the onset of a trance in a sensitised adept; this is what Rouget (1980) would call a 'conditioned trigger'.

Food offerings (milk, honey, dates, couscous of a specific colour) share with the fragrances this status as coded olfactory-gustatory signs. Their preparation, presentation and ritual consumption constitute semiotic acts in their own right, in which flavour and aroma serve as a channel of communication with the spirits. Fath Allah (2009, pp. 112–118) has documented this system of offerings for the Gnaoua of Fez in detail, confirming the internal consistency of the correspondence between each mlek, its colours, its perfumes and its favourite foods.

7. Discussion: Trance as a Total Semiotic State

The analysis we have just conducted allows us to propose the notion of a total semiotic fact, echoing Mauss's notion of the 'total social fact', to designate the lila ritual in its entirety. Gnaoua trance is not a one-off, one-dimensional event, but a semiotic complex in which systems of visual signs (colours, gestures), auditory signs (music, voices), olfactory signs (perfumes), tactile signs (ritual manipulations) and kinaesthetic signs (postures, movements) interrelate and respond to one another. The body in trance is the point of convergence and synthesis of all these partial systems: it is, in our formulation, the semiotic body par excellence.

This perspective renews the classic debate between two opposing theoretical positions in the study of trance: the cognitivist-reductionist position, which views trance as a neurophysiological state whose cultural significance is a secondary 'embellishment' (Neher, 1962; Lex, 1979); and the culturalist-constructivist position, which emphasises the role of cultural learning and social suggestion in the production of the trance state (Barber, 1961; Spanos, 1996). Our semiotic approach transcends this dichotomy by proposing that the body in trance is the site of embodied semiosis: a process whereby the body itself becomes a sign, in a recursive loop where meaning produces the physiological state and where the physiological state produces meaning (Csordas, 1994; Lambek, 1981).

From a Moroccan and North African perspective, our work builds on the research of Chlyeh (1998), Pâques (1991), Hammoudi (1997) and Mouna (2010), whilst bringing to it a resolutely semiotic perspective which, to our knowledge, had not yet been systematically developed for the Gnaoua. It also aligns with the concerns of Moroccan researchers in linguistics and anthropology who have recently called for a productive hybridisation between semiotics and the study of cultural practices (Bencheikh, 2005; El Harras, 2020; Belmkadem, 2021).

Finally, it is worth noting the limitations of our approach. A strictly semiotic interpretation of ritual risks 'disenchanting' an experience whose ineffable and subjective dimension is precisely what matters most to the participants. As Stoller (1989, pp. 27–29) emphasised regarding his experience of Songhay rituals, the anthropologist or semiotician who claims to decode from the outside a system of signs of which he is not himself an initiated participant runs the risk of producing an analysis that is formally coherent but existentially empty. Our fieldwork sought to heed this warning by maintaining a constant dialogue with the members of the brotherhood, to whom we submitted our interpretations for verification and correction.

Conclusion

This article has sought to demonstrate that the Gnaoua lila ritual constitutes a complex and coherent semiotic system, at the heart of which lies the body in a trance. By drawing on Peirce's icon-index-symbol triad, the Maussian and Bourdieusian concepts of techniques and bodily habitus, the musical phenomenology of Rouget and Becker, and the anthropological contributions of Lewis, Turner and Csordas, we have shown how each dimension of the ritual—combining gestures, colours, sounds, scents and offerings—forms part of an integrated system of meaning, in which the possessed body functions as a meta-sign: a sign of all other signs, a mediator between the visible and invisible worlds.

This semiotic approach to the Gnaoua ritual opens up several avenues for research. On the one hand, it invites a comparative study with other African and African-American possession rituals, in particular Brazilian Candomblé, Haitian Voodoo and Hausa Bori, in order to identify universals and particularities within the bodily semiotics of trance. On the other hand, in the context of the growing recognition of Gnaoua practices as cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2019), a semiotic analysis of the transformations brought about by the ritual's staging for tourism and its media coverage would enable an assessment of the extent to which the distortion of the semiotic system affects the therapeutic efficacy and the meaning of the experience for participants.

More broadly, this article contributes to the agenda of an anthropological semiotics that takes corporeality seriously as the primary site of meaning-making, and which recognises ritual practices—often considered 'irrational' or 'pre-modern'—as laboratories of human meaning of remarkable sophistication and coherence.

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