



Female Religious Agents in Morocco: Old Practices and New Perspectives
A. Ouguir

Summary

The results of my research challenge the conventional image of passive Moroccan Muslim women and the depiction of women as victims of patriarchal religious ideologies. Instead, my thesis draws an alternative discourse that presents women, whether in the past or in the present, as religious agents, who are actively engaged in creating, re-defining, re-interpreting and transforming their religious roles both in the private and the public sphere.

Cupolas and shrines of female saints still stand throughout the Maghreb, especially Morocco. Little is known about these female saints. Practically the only sources on them are hagiographies and oral stories. From these sources, my thesis discusses these women's construction of sainthood through inventorying the self-techniques they used in this context. My research thus approaches them as agents, analyzing the way they actively sought sainthood, and questioning whether they transgressed the social limits that were imposed on them. It does so in the context of current discourses on Moroccan women and feminism, specifically by researching how the narratives of these female saints are received by Moroccan women today, especially by their venerators, by women preachers and their attendants, and by activists of Islamic women's organizations. My thesis questions whether there is a continuity in Moroccan female spiritual agency throughout history, that can inspire Muslim women today, and others, in defying the negative images of them sketched above.

Chapter One gives a first indication of my hagiographic sources, and describes my fieldwork throughout several regions in Morocco. It discusses the scholarly research on Moroccan female saints thus far, and indicates the researches on which I build. Some important concepts of the thesis are discussed, one of them being Sufism's main characteristics, especially in its popular version. The concept of *baraka* is also discussed and defined. Thirdly, my

understanding of rituals in this thesis comes to the fore, namely as performative acts. Following this, I discuss a few theoretical approaches that relate to the concepts of embodiment, agency, empowerment and patriarchy. Embodiment refers to the fact that the body is modified by social categories and thus lives – embodies – its social and spiritual environment.

Theoretical debates about agency, such as they currently take place among anthropologists, often refer to the works of Judith Butler, Michel Foucault and Saba Mahmood. Like Mahmood's study (2005), this thesis builds on the final Foucault's ethics and the conceptual tools it presents, such as 'ethical self-formation' and 'ethical self- techniques,' both of which refer to embodied ethical ways of life. But unlike Mahmood's work, this thesis also employs Foucault's ethical concept of 'freedom practices,' which Mahmood totally obliterated. Freedom practices are ethical self-practices that involve ethical self-formation, and which create new ethical ways of life in opposition to existing forms of domination. The concept of empowerment is defined as the expansion of people's ability to achieve certain ends, and the concept of patriarchy is taken up as a conceptual tool to analyze concrete historical social patterns of domination of women. Finally, the chapter introduces the concepts 'equality effects,' and 'egalitarian effects' such as developed in the work of the Dutch historian Siep Stuurman. Discourses and texts – and we add: ways of life and life stories – can express notions and thoughts of equality and egalitarianism, without any explicit reference to these terms.

In Chapter Two, the tradition of Sufism is discussed more in depth, especially in relation to gender. It explores the basic principles of Sufism as formulated by Al Ghazali, which form the basis of orthodox as well as of popular Sufism, with the latter being additionally characterized by the practice of saint veneration. The *ribāt* is discussed as the space where this veneration of saints takes place. Sufism's relation to gender is discussed primarily in relation to the works of some Sufi scholars of the past, which make it explicit that women are included in Sufism, in as far as

they can reach the highest ranks of spirituality and sainthood just like men do. Sufism's relation to gender is further discussed by approaching Sufism as a strand of Islamic mysticism that finds its basis in the Qur'an. Several contemporary Muslim authors argue that the spiritual side of Islam, such as can be found in the Qur'an, is egalitarian in character. These works thus argue for intrinsic gender equality at the heart of Islam, much like the Sufi scholars who came long before them. Against this background I finally discuss some examples of female Sufi mystics, such as Rabī'a al-`Adawiyya, and Fāṭima of Cordova, who, from the narratives, come forward as living their lives on equal footing with their male counterparts.

Chapter Three focuses on Sufism and hagiography in the Moroccan context. Here, I briefly discuss Moroccan geography and history in the context of its Islamization, in which proliferation of Sufism has been crucial. Moroccan Sufism is then discussed, as different from the Middle Eastern versions, in that it focuses more on social reality, dealing with people's social matters and crises. The Moroccan Sufi saint is engaged in society: saints in Morocco played spiritual, religious, social and political roles. The approaches of Moroccan Sufism from some important anthropological studies are discussed in several respects. Contrary to these studies it is argued that there is some continuity instead of a sharp distinction between Moroccan orthodox and popular Sufism, given that in many instances the latter also involves an acceptance of the foundational texts, beliefs and practices of orthodox Islam. To underscore some similarities and overlapping points between popular and orthodox Sufism in the Moroccan context, I discuss sharifism and maraboutism, as well as sainthood and *baraka*.

Moroccan hagiography is then discussed as being basically similar to Islamic hagiography, though with an additional emphasis, by way of lengthy narratives, on the saints' miracles, personality and piety. Many types of saints come to the fore in Moroccan hagiography, as is clear from their inclusion of women saints. The authentic character of these hagiographies is

a topic of debate among scholars. We follow Cornell (1998), Kugle (2007) and others who argue that the hagiographers remained true to the saints' cultural space and time, and reveal how people understood sainthood. The chapter ends with a brief survey of the Moroccan hagiographies that were consulted for the inventorying of Moroccan female saints in history, such as presented at length in the Appendix.

Chapter Four focuses on Moroccan female sainthood. It analyzes the stories of female and male saints belonging to Morocco. Life stories found both in the archives and oral literature show that these saints employed self-techniques that empowered them to become saints. Some of the main self-techniques used by male and female Sufi are the practicing of piety, acquiring learnedness, the performing of miracles, practicing *jadh* (Divine attraction), the taking up of social and political roles, or the practicing of 'ordinary sainthood' in the context of the family. The practicing of piety itself also contains a set of self-techniques such as searching initiation, practicing domestic piety, creating a sacred body, crying and the refusal of marriage.

The stories studied show that the self-techniques that men and women employed for their ethical self-formation, namely to achieve sainthood, are mostly similar. Some minor exceptions are that some more female saints than males practiced indoor piety, and that female saints are more lovingly towards their disciples. However, through their overall description of similar self-techniques of male and female saints, the narratives convey equality and egalitarian effects. From the narratives, Moroccan history includes women who achieved orthodox religious education and reached high decision-making positions, similar to men. In the context of the patriarchal patterns the women saints lived in, their self-practices – i.e., their ethical self-formation through applying certain ethical self- techniques – come forward as ethical freedom practices: they created new ethical ways of life for women that were in opposition to forms of domination.

Their transgression of patriarchal patterns is furthermore illustrated by a discussion of the

lives of three notable women saints: Lalla `Azīza al-Saksāwiyya, Lalla `Āyisha al-Idrīsiya and Fāṭima Muhdūz, each exemplary for a certain group of female saints. These women cultivated personalities in a way that gained them power and authority. They impacted their communities with their personalities and marked history with their legacy.

Chapter Five discusses the way historical women saints are received by Moroccan women today, such as the venerators of women saints, women attending mosque lessons and *murshidāt* (women preachers). In mosques women live a direct relationship with God. But in shrines, women live an indirect relation to God through the saint. In the shrines, women perform different rituals to express their piety and their strong veneration to their women saints, such as trance rituals, *dhikr*-rituals, sacrifice rituals, marriage and fertility rituals. Within the shrines, venerators are free to choose the kind of ritual and the ways to express their love and respect to their women saints. There are also functionaries of the shrines, including *muqaddamāt*, women healers and *faqīrāt*, who play important active roles, displaying leadership in leading rituals and in their overall religious agency.

Women venerators visit women saints' shrines not only for *baraka*, so as to find solutions for the hardships of their modern lives, but also as a self-technique to develop their spirituality and construct a pious personality. Both northern and southern Moroccan women find in their women saints a source of empowerment, defining them as their role models and moral exemplars. Venerators sometimes search for orthodox religious knowledge by attending mosque lessons headed by *murshidāt* and *wa'īdāt*, so as to become active religious agents. Both the *murshidāt* and women attendants integrate women saints in their discourses as empowering role models for women, to change themselves into religious agents.

Murshidāt's religious knowledge empowers them to engage in activism and to question women's status in contemporary society. They refer to the rights that Islam gave to women, and

they question cases where these rights are violated, such as oppressive marriages and other dominant conventional norms. The conclusions of Mahmood (2005) on the Egyptian mosque women's movement do not apply to the Moroccan context. Moroccan women venerators, *murshidāt* and their women attendants in the mosque, by using various self-techniques, in which women saints of the past do play a certain role, create religious personalities, in ways that involve a transgression of patriarchal patterns, thus making their self-practices count as ethical freedom practices.

Chapter Six of the thesis deals with the way activists in current Moroccan women's organizations receive women saints in their discourses. The chapter starts with a brief historical review of the Moroccan feminist movement. It then focuses on the attitude of Islamist women activists towards historically exemplary women and their legacy. Both Islamic and secular Moroccan women's organizations consider women saints as role models whose self-formation challenged their patriarchal communities. The Islamist associations, al-‘Adl wa al-Iḥsān, al-‘Adāla wa al-Tanmiya and Muntadā al-Zahrā’, have similar strategies, objectives and activities. In contrast to some researchers' writings that describe Islamist women activists as being conservative and traditional towards women's issues – my interviews show that these activists, like their secular counterparts, seek political, social and economic empowerment of women and equality with men.

Their discourse on men and women's equity, instead of equality, involves the private sphere only, and even there they are also after egalitarianism. They base their struggle for women's empowerment and rights on the primary sources of Islam, the Qur'an and Sunna, and on their own interpretation of these sources. They strongly believe that the Maliki jurisprudence definition of women's status is a patriarchal interpretation of Islam and the primary cause of Moroccan women's oppression and discrimination. Islamist women's associations also refer in

their debate on women's issues to Islamic history and to Moroccan local cultural heritage. They discuss the position of Muslim and Moroccan women, referring to exemplary women in history and the way they developed themselves into great ethical personalities. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights constitutes another source that Moroccan Islamist women activists refer to in their discourses on women's issues. They strongly believe that the humanism advocated by human rights discourses is part of Islam.

The female Islamist activists thus come across as feminists, fighting patriarchy as secular feminists do. The Islamist activists reject saint veneration but do admire and respect the women saints as a source of empowerment for women that enables them to engage in activism, education and learning. Women saints are integrated in the discourses of Moroccan feminists, secular and Islamist, as a source of empowerment.