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Female religious agents in Morocco: Old practices and new perspectives

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Preface

My encounter with my first interviewee whom I met in the shrine of Lalla `Āyisha al-Baḥriya, a shrine on the outskirts of Azmour, and her words about women's abilities to achieve selfhood left an enduring impression on me. Her advanced age rendered her wise and knowledgeable, but her knowledge emanated not from any kind of formal education, as she is illiterate, but from her extensive experience with the practicalities of life. "Look !" she said to me, pointing to the grave of Lalla `Āyisha al-Baḥriya. "These are the lovers of God... and the lovers of people." She chose these words because she felt my strong desire for knowledge about the woman saint. "But Lalla `Āyisha is a woman," I began in response. She interrupted me before I could finish, explaining, "... I am a woman and you are a woman too. But Lalla `Āyisha was also just another woman."

My assumptions about approaching the study of women saints were changed by this old woman's words of wisdom. Our conversation in the shrine inspired me to rethink my research questions. It helped clarify the issues I would examine in this thesis, issues regarding the paths undertaken by women Sufis to cultivate saintly personalities and the challenges that these paths posed to the conventional gender norms. It became clear to me that I would have to consider the way women saints undergo self-formation and what made them different from conventional women. Furthermore, it aroused my curiosity about the reception of their legacy, particularly among contemporary Moroccan women in general and among today's Moroccan women activists.

This thesis examines the way women's agency in the religious sphere violates conventional cultural norms and the way their agency is portrayed in the discourses of Moroccan women. My analysis of archival material and fieldwork data suggests that women saints as moral exemplars impacted and continue to impact society. I invite the reader to reflect on women Sufi saints and on the undefinable historical importance of their development of counter-cultural social and religious personalities. The stories of these historical female exemplars impel us to rethink the relationship between women and Islam.