Female religious agents in Morocco: Old practices and new perspectives

Ouguir, A.

Citation for published version (APA):
Chapter Four: Moroccan Female Sainthood

The first section of this chapter consists of a presentation of exemplary female and male saints in the Moroccan context, through a discussion of the various self-techniques they applied, which are discussed in separate sub-sections. Several types of saints are coming to the fore throughout this discussion, such as šaliḥ, faqīh, majdhūb. As will be seen, women are to be found among all of these. An extensive list of all the female saints mentioned in Moroccan hagiography is included in the Appendix.

From this first section we get an impression of how female saints, as narrated, lived and achieved sainthood next to their male counterparts. Both men and women come forward from the narratives as creating sainthood through their application of self-techniques, most of which come forward as gender neutral. The self-techniques the women use turn out to be basically the same as men’s, with some minor exceptions. The second section of this chapter inventories how, from the narratives, the women saints transgressed the social limits that were imposed on them, and refused the patriarchal patterns that they were supposed to embody. The third section of this chapter furthermore illustrates this transgression, by focusing on the lives of three notable women saints: 'Azīza al-Saksāwiyya, 'Āyisha al-Idrīsiya and Fāṭima Muḥdūz.

4-1 The Construction of Sainthood

As was already discussed in Chapter One, the performing of miracles and the possession of baraka are the important criteria for a religious person to be considered as a saint. As further indicated in Chapter One, my research focuses only on female saints who have a Muslim background. From what we saw in Chapter Two, Sufism is gender neutral and does not make any distinctions between men and women in as far as both can enter the Sufi path and acquire sainthood. From the written hagiographies and oral stories in Moroccan contexts we indeed find that there are basically no differences between men and women where it concerns the main self-techniques that they undertook in order to become saints. This will become clear in the following sub-sections, which discuss exemplary cases of saints, male and female, with a focus on women saints. To elaborate on their position as not being different from the one of their male counterparts, sometimes non-Moroccan female saints are highlighted. This is then indicated in the text.
4-1.1 Piety

Some main self-techniques used by Sufis, as we have already seen in the previous chapter, are the practicing of piety, acquiring learnedness, the performing of miracles, and practicing jadhb (Divine attraction), as will be discussed respectively. The practicing of piety begins with some first steps of initiation into the Sufi path.

4-1.1.1 Initiation

As we already saw in Chapter Two, one of the most important actions a Sufi performs in the beginning of her initiation into the process of developing piety and spirituality is repentance (tawba), a word that describes the person’s desire to change his or her life. Tawba signifies not only turning away from sin and worldliness, but it also conveys a person’s total transformation of selfhood. As comes forward from hagiography, Sufi women, like men, experienced an internal desire to radically change their material existence and to lead a pious life. In Moroccan hagiography, we find many narratives of women and men undergoing an initiation into the mystical life.

One enlightening example of this initiation is found in al-Tādīlī’s hagiographic entry of the female saint ‘Umayya bint Yaghrūsin (12th century), one of the greatest spiritual masters of Aghmāt. One day when she visited ‘Abd al-Salām al-Tūnisī (12th century), she found people waiting in front of his door. They all wanted him to pray to God for them. When her turn arrived, she asked him to pray to God for her as well. She said to him: “Oh Saint! Please pray to God for me”. He replied: “God has forgiven you”. She left him and went to her house where she took off all her clothing and put on a coarse woolen garment. She confined herself in retreat in a cave, where she led a lonely mystical life until she died. ‘Umayya entered in a Sufi life, leaving behind worldliness to pursue piety and spirituality, exactly like her male counterparts did, recall, for example Abū Zakariyā ibn Yughān al-Ṣanhājī (12th century).

Like ‘Umayya, the male saint al-Ṣanhājī expressed a strong desire to become initiated into the mystical life. He was one of ’umarā’ (the princes) of the Ṣanhāja, who was impressed with the wali Allāh, ‘Abd al-Salām al-Tūnisī and wished to become one of his murids. He thus willingly submitted to his masters’ instructions. Al-Tūnisī said to Ṣanhājī:

---

233 See Ibn Manzūr (no date)
234 al-Tādīlī 1997, 112
Climb the mountain beyond the walls of Tlemcen, gather a pile of wood, and carry it on your back into the castle square where all the members of the Ṣanhāja ruling elite will watch you.  

Ṣanhajī followed his orders immediately. Tunusī was so pleased with his murīd’s behavior that he named him: “malik al-Zuhd” (the king of asceticism). When al-Tūnisī died, Ṣanhajī left Tlemcen for the desert where he lived in complete solitude.

Adherence to a ribāṭ or ahl al-Ribāṭ as a step of initiation is equally referred to in hagiographic literature with regard to men and women. In al-Tashawwuf, al-Tādilī refers to the ribāṭ Shākir. He contends that many awliyā’ Allāh gathered sporadically in ribāṭ Shākir to instruct murīds. Women Sufis also visited ribāṭ to learn about and undertake the stages of initiation. One of these women Sufis is the famous Berber woman Muniyya bint Maymūn al-Dukkālī (12th century). She was a šāliḥa (saint) who continually came from Marrakech to visit and participate in the religious activities of ribāṭ Shākir. She met Ibrāhīm Azadī al-Baṣṭī (12th century) in ribāṭ and said to him: “I have never seen a place like this before, and I wish you were here.” He confirmed Muniyya’s presence and participation in ribāṭ Shākir, saying: “I saw Muniyya in ribāṭ Shākir, I guided her prayer and that of other murīds, and then I went away.”

---

235 Ibid., 123-24
236 Ibid.
237 Ribāṭ Shākir was built in the 10th century by the Muslim Shākir in the region of Marrakech to propagate Islam among Maṣmuda Berbers.
238 al-Tādilī 1997, 316. Sometimes the expressions are not easy to understand from the Arab. This is the translation that I found most apt.
239 Ibid.
As narrated, Muniyya recorded with amazement the presence of large numbers of Sufi women in the gatherings in ribāṭ. She said: “One thousand women saints visited ribāṭ Shākir this year.” Moroccan women’s strong desire to become religious and Sufis, impelled them to seek spiritual guidance offered by Sufi orders. They participated in religious meetings and ritual gatherings to learn about, and undertake, the stages of initiation and piety. Women, like men, adhered to ribāṭ to undergo initiation and to develop their spirituality, but there were others who preferred to remain in their private spaces to experience initiation.

4-1.1.2 Piety in the Domestic Sphere

According to Abū Barik (2010), there are some women saints, such as Fassi women saints, who preferred to live their piety within their private families and close to their Sufi family members. Abū Barik calls these women saints ordinary saints. As mentioned earlier, the Sufi path and lifestyle is inward-looking by nature. These Sufi women perhaps considered the interior nature of the soul and the process of spiritual introspection to be at their best in the domestic sphere. From the stories on them, Sufi women asserted that the home is a place where piety and spirituality could best be experienced, as the distractions of worldly existence are left outside. Al-Tādilī describes Fāṭima al-Andalusiyya (12th century) confining herself to her home where she performed daily and nightly prayers and remembrance (dhikr).
She refused to go out and join her Sufi male counterparts, such as Muḥammad Aḥmad al-Zanāṭī (12th century) who invited her to experience with him spirituality outside home.

The non-Moroccan hagiographer Sulamī (10th century) refers to a female saint from Persia, Umm Aḥmad, and to her son, the Sufi ‘Abd Allāh bin Khafīf, both of whom spent the laylat al-Qadr (the 27th night of Ramadan) in prayer, but she remained in her home while her son prayed in the mosque. Once they finished their prayers, they learned that they both had experienced the same practice internally and externally, and both realized that the internal practice of piety is as fruitful as the male’s external mystical practice.242

Women’s desire for piety in the domestic sphere might be explained in terms of women’s refusal of public spirituality. The latter held the potential for haughtiness, which was frequently observed among Sufi males. Such a public way of practicing piety appeared perhaps undesirable to women, being an occasion for displaying arrogance, which was detrimental to the mystical and spiritual life. The female Sufi saint Rabī’a of Baṣra (8th century) rebuked a male Sufi for his public preaching because it revealed his penchant for worldliness.

An example is the Moroccan woman saint Mu’mina al-Tilimsāniyya (14th century), who according to her hagiographer, Ibn Qunfudh (14th century), lived out her piety alone, inside her home in the old Medina of Fes.243 She refused invitations from her male Sufis to experience public piety with them because, according to her, it displayed their haughtiness and arrogance.244 Al-Tādilī also refers to some women saints who spent their lives in caves and isolated spaces living privately their piety and spirituality.

Sufi women’s piety in the domestic sphere might be evaluated in terms of social limits and gendered constraints and seen as following the dictates of the conventional norms that underscored woman’s presence within private spaces, in contrast to the male’s presence in public spaces. However, these accounts should not be taken as recommendations about the appropriate location of women’s practice of piety, but as admonitions to other men who might discount women’s spiritual endeavors and achievements merely because they are not undertaken in public spaces. Sufi women’s indoor piety namely did not hinder them in their agency as Sufis. Women’s domestic piety was believed to be rewarded with the same ajr (religious merit) as that of men’s public piety, as is clear from the story on Umm Aḥmad above, and from many other hagiographic stories which place them on the same level as men.

242 al-Sulāmī 1993
243 Ibn Qunfudh 1965, 80
244 Ibid.
The active nature of women’s participation comes forward from their engagement in strategies to construct piety. One of these strategies was restricting the body to the spiritual demands of the soul (nafs).

4-1.1.3 The Body and Sacredness

In hagiographic and oral narratives, the Sufi body is subjected to certain rules and conditions for developing piety and spirituality. As discussed before, the renunciation of worldliness constitutes the primary condition that Sufis seek to attain. Men and women Sufis are described as similarly purifying their bodies and constraining their emotions and desires against material desires. They are also presented as training their bodies to adapt to the hard ways of life that they chose to endure, in order to cultivate a pious personality. Through asceticism, prayer, remembrance, fasting, nightly invocations and austerity both men and women became pious. Through mujāhada (self-denial), women’s bodies, like men’s, became inhibited and damaged. An example is given by al-Tādīlī when he describes Muniyya bint Maymūn al-Dukkālī. He explained that through self-denial, her body became so thin that her skin stuck to her bones, writing: “When I visited her [Muniyya], she was old, and through mujāhad, she became black and her skin stuck to her bones.”

The non-Moroccan hagiographer Sulāmi also refers to a Sufi woman called Mu‘āda bint Abdallāh al-‘Adawīyya (9th century) who had chosen to perform nightly prayers instead of sleeping. She overcame, Sulami writes, her body’s desire to sleep by walking around the house. She said:

Oh soul! Eternal sleeping is ahead of you. If I were to die, your repose in the grave would be a long one, whether it is sorrowful or happy.

She remained that way until daylight. Mu’nisa al-Ṣūfīyya was an ascetic from Baṣra (9th century), with rough hair. Muḥammad ibn Ya’qūb bin Yūsuf (9th century) commented on her hair, asking her: “Is it out fear of God or love for Him?” She replied: “I learned how to endure sufferings”. Their bodies became the means for achieving God’s closeness, and signs of their successful embodiment of piety and spirituality.

245 al-Tādīlī 1997, 316
246 al-Sulāmī 1993, 88
247 Ibid., 133
In other instances, men and women Sufis forced their bodies to submit to their needs and to their hard spiritual life. Many descriptions present concrete Sufi women as performing daily and nightly prayers and dhikr. Both their emotions and physical organs are engaged in an eternal servitude and remembrance of God. Their bodies experience an endless invocation of the Divine. Al-Kattānī describes a Sufi woman’s spirituality as follows: “She invokes God continuously. When she sleeps, her veins continue invoking and remembering God.”

This reminds me of a Sufi woman I met in one of the shrines of the women saints I selected to study. I saw her sleeping next to the woman saint’s grave, but her fingers kept moving. When she woke up, I asked her why she moved her fingers while she was sleeping. She replied: “It is my body which continues remembering the names of God I started reciting before I fell in sleep.” The body here reflects the woman’s piety and continues performing dhikr and invocation on her behalf after she has lost consciousness either through sleeping or fainting (ighmā’). Thus, the body submits to the power of the pious soul during its spiritual journeys to reach the supernatural world.

In similar ways, hagiography provides references to male Sufis who trained their souls and bodies to construct pious personalities. They used asceticism, prayers, fasting and austerity to purify their bodies from worldliness. They were in continuous struggle against the evil dimension of their souls. Al-Kattānī describes a Sufi who quarrels every night with a woman whom he had beaten severely. His neighbors heard him shouting at her and biting her. Later on, the neighbors discovered that the Sufi man was celibate and that he spent the entire night rebuking the evil dimension of his soul for its penchant for worldliness. Al-Tādīlī also refers to a number of Moroccan male saints who train their bodies to achieve taqwā. He describes the Sufi Abū Muḥammad Abdallāh al-Malījī (12th century) who was so austere that his body became like a thin burning stick (jismu-hu ka al-sufūd al-muḥtariq) and his skin stuck to his bones. Thus, men and women Sufis in similar ways use their bodies as a means to get close to God. There are others who even destroy their physical properties to achieve spiritual illumination. This is true for the majdhūb, the holy madman who is attracted to God, such that the Divine attraction destroys his mental abilities.

Women saints, like their male counterparts, not only ignored their physical needs, but as well chose other ways to destroy the physical properties of their bodies. Women and men saints experienced biological crises, which empowered them to put an end to their

---

248 al-Kattānī 1900, 319
249 A woman venerator, interviews, July 2010
250 Ferhat 2000, 547. See also Dialmy 2008
251 al-Tādīlī 1997, 145
conventional roles. These physiological crises are jadhb (Divine attraction / destruction) and foolishness or insanity (junūn), which made Sufis behave freely and without social constraints, as will be dealt with in a separate section below.

Hagiography contains examples of Sufi women and men whose strong desire for God ever impelled them to put their bodies to death, with the destruction of its life as the ultimate stage of their annihilation in the Divine. Sufi women and men saw death as a way to free themselves from the body, which they sometimes considered not a means to reach God but as a burden that prevented them from reaching God, and that they have to get rid of to be with God. In life stories, many women saints prepared their graves when they felt their death was near. Nufisa, a Sufi woman, would continuously read the Qur’an inside the grave she prepared for herself.

Thus, for the sake of God’s closeness, we equally see women saints inflicting harm on their bodies through praying, fasting and starving. They even longed for death as the ultimate desire to deliver themselves from their sinful bodies, which hindered them from meeting with God and imprisoned their spirituality.

In dealing with their bodies, women saints often undertook double efforts. They believed that the female body is the center of fitna (temptation) and sexual attraction. Like men they constrained its material, sexual and sensual properties, but on top of that most, though not all, of them found it necessary to also veil their bodies. Thus, Sufi women trained their bodies- or even destroyed them-in order to devote themselves to spirituality and piety.

4-1.1.4 Crying

Crying constitutes another self-technique of the Sufi’s achievement of God’s closeness. It emanates from an inner state that reflects the Sufi’s internal feelings while addressing God, such as love, shame, fear and even passion. During the Sufi’s journey to the Divine, his / her eyes did not stop shedding tears. In Islam, crying and weeping are highly respected as behavior which expresses one’s taqwā (piety) and khushū‘ (submissiveness). Many Prophets were described in the Qur’an as crying while asking for God’s mercy and salvation, such as the prophet Abū Shu‘ayb whose eyes did not stop crying until they lost the capacity for sight.

252 Geoffroy 1998, 127
253 Ibid.
254 Sura al-Má’īda, 83
Moroccan friends of God also expressed their desire for God by crying. Abū Abdallāh Muḥammad al-Barāḍī’ī (12th century) feared Allah, and his eyes never stopped crying.  

Abū Shuʿayb Ṣanhājī (d. 561H) also was a Sufi whose eyes dropped tears heavily like heavy raindrops. Abū ʿAlī al-Sharishī (12th century) was another saint who had an alternative name, which was “Bakkāy,” meaning “one who cries a lot.” Women also used crying as an utterance to express their desire for God and for His salvation. Ibn Qunfudh makes reference to an unanimous pious woman who never stopped weeping such that her eyes were stricken by blindness. He adds that one day the Sufi Abū Ḥasan bin Yūnus al-Ṣanhājī (13th century), visited this pious woman in her cave. After she welcomed him, he started to weep so heavily that he fell dead on the ground. 

Al-Hudaykī (18th century) refers to Ḥawwāʾ bint Aḥmad al-Hudaykī (18th century) a very pious woman saint who was always shedding tears to express her fear of God. 

In non-Moroccan context, Ghufayra al-ʿĀbida from Basra (8th century) wept so much that her eyes lost the ability to see. Shaʿwāna (9th century) is another Sufi who always cried and made others cry too. Shaʿwāna wept until we feared that she would become blind. So we asked her:

Why are you afraid by God? [She replied:] Becoming blind in this world from weeping is more desirable to me than becoming blind by Hell-fire in the hereafter.

Men and women Sufis cry not only out of their desire for God but also out of fear for His punishment in the afterlife. Abū Yaḥya Abū Bakr ibn Fakhīr ābidī (12th century) was described as crying and continuously slapping his cheeks (laṭm al-khudūd) as signs of his repentance for his dreadful sins and of his fear of God. The spiritual master Ḥasan ben Yūsuf al-Ṣanhājī always cried in his lectures and made his murūds and attendants cry too. When Ibn Qunfudh saw his crying, he said to al-Ṣanhājī’s disciples: “This man will die from crying.” Although crying afflicts the body by causing Sufis to be stricken by blindness,
Sufi men and women used crying as a performance to construct piety and to express publicly their strong spirituality, all for the sake of God.

The standard cultural interpretations of weeping, which portray women’s crying positively and men’s tears negatively, are not applicable to Sufis. The cultural interpretation of women’s public crying is an accepted practice because it is culturally related to their gender, like other forms of excessive emotional expression, while men’s crying is seen as a negative action as it displays their weakness, and is not relevant in the mystical space. The Sufi women and men discussed above found in shedding tears and crying a remedy for their spiritual crises. Crying is widely used both by men and women Sufis. Both men and women became moved and spontaneously expressed their feelings and emotions through tears.

Women crying while supplicating God

4-1.1.5 The Disturbing Marriage

The Sufi, on his/her Sufi path, engages in celibacy and avoids marriage to preserve himself/herself exclusively for God. Marriage in Islam is important because it has many advantages such as the preservation of chastity, procreation, and the growth of Muslim umma (world community). But marriage is not praiseworthy in Sufism. It is a worldly life that hinders the spiritual life. Al-Tādilī mentions a number of male saints who preferred celibacy to marriage. He also refers to anonymous male and female saints who led celibate lives so as to

---

264 Buffault 1986
265 See al-Bukhārī wa Muslim 2007, 1066
266 al-Ṣahrūrī 1999, 340
live their spirituality freely. He also mentions married male saints who divorced their wives and abandoned their families to live the Sufi path, such as Abū Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Jazālī and Mālik ibn Dīnār (12th century). Many though not all Sufi men consider women a possible source of temptation that must be avoided. Women who embody the dominant patriarchal norms and patterns, such as matrimony, are understood as a part of that worldliness that Sufi males found necessary to eliminate. Did women also consider marriage an obstacle to their spirituality? Did they interpret their male partner’s company as a source of worldliness?

Celibacy also characterized other women and men saints. In al-Tashawwuf, al-Tādilī, as I mentioned earlier, refers to a number of women saints who chose celibacy over marriage. Ibn Qunfudh also included in his compilation the life story of the urban woman saint Muʿmina al-Tilimsāniyya (14th century), who was already mentioned in the section above on domestic piety. According to her hagiographer, ibn Qunfudh, Muʿmina was a very pious woman. He lived near her in Fes, and observed her daily expressions of piety and spirituality. Muʿmina’s spirituality attracted the attentions of orthodox religious scholars such as Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Maqarī, one of the great Sufi-jurists of Fes and Sharf Abū al-Qāsi al-Sharīf al-Tilimsānī (14th century). Throughout her life, she rejected the presence of the Sufis and spiritual masters who came to her door seeking her friendship and love. Instead, she chose to remain a lonely female axial saint and faithful to her Lord. Thus, Muʿmina al-Tilimsāniyya preferred to remain a solitary publicly recognized Sufi saintly figure.

Another example, in a non-Moroccan context, is Rabīʿa al-Azūdiyya (10th century) from Basra, who was proposed to by her Sufi companion Muḥammad of Basra (10th century). When he entered her house, she said:

Oh lustful one! What did you see in me that aroused your desire? Why don’t you ask a lustful person like yourself to marry you?

From the hagiographies, Sufi women consider men to be seekers of sexuality and persons who soil the purity of their bodies (mudnis li-ṭahāratihā). As we already saw, al-Tādilī refers to some anonymous virgin saints who spent their lives in caves worshipping God. These

---

267 al-Tādilī 1997, 327-28
268 Ibn Qunfudh 1965, 86
269 Ibid.
270 al-Sulāmī 1993, 128
271 al-Tādilī 1997, 94
Sufi women found in their celibacy a refuge for living their spirituality peacefully. This, however, does not mean that marriage constituted an obstacle for all women to achieve piety and spirituality.

There are exceptions. Some married women successfully developed not only their own piety but also that of their partners. This is the case with the two women saints, Fāṭima Muḥadūz and `Āyisha al-Idrīsiyya, whom I have selected and will discussed in the final section of this chapter.

Ibn Qunfudh mentions in his compilation a pious woman saint whom he met in Azmour and who guided the piety and spirituality of her husband, Shaykh `Abd al-Wāḥid al-Ṣanhājī (13th century). Her followers said to her hagiographer that, thanks to her, her husband `Abd al-Wāḥid became a spiritual master.272 The rural Moroccan Sufi woman, `Āyisha bint Sāliḥ bin Masʿūd (19th century) developed a strong piety and sainthood that impressed her husband Muḥammad bin Masʿūd (19th century), one of the greatest spiritual masters of the Sūs region. Mukhtār al-Sūsī (1960) says that her husband built her a shrine.273

Rabīʿa bint Ismaʿīl (9th century), a Sufi woman from Syria, rebuked her husband Aḥmad bin `Alī al-Hawārī (9th century) for disturbing her khalwa (retreat). He said:

> Once I called for Rabīʿa, and she did not answer. After an hour had passed, she answered me: “What prevented me from answering you was that my heart was filled with happiness from God most High. For this reason, I could not answer you.”

Another woman saint in non-Moroccan context, Fāṭima bint Muḥammad Hajāfiyya (10th century), a married woman saint from Nishapūr, was always advising her husband, Abū al-ʿAbbās al-Dinnawrī (10th century), while he was speaking on God’s intimacy. She said to him:

> How fluent is your description of that which you lack! If you experienced what you described or witnessed what you speak of, you would be mute.275

Another female worshipper in this context was doing her nightly vigils and prayers while her husband was sleeping. She rebuked him for his laziness and for his lack of worship of

---

272 Ibn Qunfudh 1965, 131
273 al-Sūsī 1960, 152
274 al-Sulāmī 1993, 140
275 Ibid., 180
These examples demonstrate that a married woman was able to live her piety in the company of her husband. Matrimonial relations enabled her to live her spirituality and to guide that of her partner. Women, whether married or unmarried, succeeded in living their piety and playing the role of the spiritual master in guiding their male counterparts’ spirituality.

We have seen thus far that women, like men, lived their piety through the performance of a set of self-techniques. They engaged in initiation and in annihilation of the body through crying, starving and praying. They often chose celibacy to live their spirituality. They trained their feelings and bodies to reach God and to construct piety and sainthood. Women and men used similar self-techniques while searching the friendship of God. In this sense, the practice of Sufism and the construction of sainthood come forward as gender neutral. Both men and women are free to follow the path of Sufism and articulate the same practices to reach God. In addition, the quest for knowledge is another self-technique employed by both men and women to achieve saintly personalities, as will be discussed next.

4-1.2 Learnedness and the Quest for Knowledge

Sufi women, like their male counterparts, marked their personalities within orthodoxy through the quest for knowledge. They engaged in fighting their illiteracy and in learning different sciences. Narratives are pregnant with examples of women mystics who were interested in education and learning. There are some who founded educational centers and built schools and universities from their own money. This is the case of Fāṭima al-Fihriyya (8th century) who built in Fes al-Qarawiyīn the first mosque and religious educational center in North Africa. Zaynab al-Nafzāwiyya (12th century) also built many schools in Morocco and in the Mashreq to teach women about Islam and the Islamic sciences. These women were knowledgeable and wanted others to be so as well. Not only were women knowledgeable, their level of knowledge also impacted their male counterparts.

Moroccan history is also pregnant with examples of women who reached the highest stages of mysticism and Islamic knowledge. Besides the women saints I discussed earlier, there is also the woman saint, Saʾīda al-Tiṭliyya (12th century). According to her hagiographer Abū al-ʾAbbās bin Ibrāhīm (12th century) she lived in the Almohad period. She studied the Qurʾān, hadith and other Islamic sciences. Her desire to propagate her knowledge

276 al-Jawzī 1985, 40
277 al-Tāzī 1992, 24. See also ben Khaldūn 2009
to students and other people enhanced her to become “nāsikha” (copier of books). Her sister also was very knowledgeable and very happy to copy books.

Al-Tādīlī contends that his friend and spiritual master Abī al-Mahdī (12th century) met a woman saint in a cave in the Atlas Mountains. She trained him in the Islamic sciences that he did not know.278 Mukhtar al-Sūsī’s mother, Ruqayya al-’Adūzī (19th century) was another woman saint who always held the board on which she wrote Qur’ān verses to learn by heart. Wherever she went she held her board showing people her strong desire to learn the Divine text.279 Women were able to achieve an educational level that enabled them to be instructors of religion and the Islamic sciences for others. They succeeded in creating strong knowledgeable personalities that greatly impressed male Sufis to submit to their status.

Another example is again that of Mu’mina, as told by her hagiographer Ibn Qunfudh. Her quest for religious knowledge enhanced her status as a female axial saint (quṭb al-Aqṭāb). She was a disciple of Abū Madyan al-Ghūt (13th century), one of the greatest spiritual masters of the Maghreb. Her axial status attracted her contemporary Sufis such as ibn Qunfudh and Ṣāliḥ Abū al-Ḥasan, who became her students and devotees; Ṣāliḥ Abū al-Ḥasan, for example, wrote on her slate (lawḥ) and brought it to her. Ibn Qunfudh studied religion under her guidance. The Sufi scholar Sharīf Abū al-Qāsim al-Sharīf al-Tilimsānī, whom Mu’mina refused as a student and devotee, sought to benefit from her knowledge and spiritual aptitude.280 All of these Sufi scholars sought to be her disciples and benefactors of her knowledge and religious expertise. Hence, Mu’mina impressed male orthodox spiritual masters who appreciated her guidance.

Another example of a woman who achieved the sanctity of sainthood through the acquisition of knowledge is the woman Sufi Lalla Maḥilla (12th century). According to Janbūbī,281 who grounded his research on Sufis in Morocco on written records, Maḥilla dedicated her life to the quest for religious knowledge and the study of the Islamic sciences. Her strong desire for learning impelled her to reject marriage. She spent entire nights reciting the Qur’ān and the names of God. Her nightly and daily prayers convinced her father that she was possessed by an evil spirit. He urged her to marry as a remedy, but she rejected the marriage he arranged for her. He consulted with al-Q āḍī ‘Ayāḍ, one of the greatest seven spiritual masters of Marrakech, about Maḥilla’s behavior. Al-Q āḍī ‘Ayāḍ understood her desire and asked one of his students to train her in religion and the Islamic sciences. Maḥilla

\[ \text{al-Tādīlī 1997, 266} \]
\[ \text{al-Sūsī 1960, 39} \]
\[ \text{Ibid.} \]
\[ \text{Janbūbī 2008, 172} \]
soon acquired the status of a scholar knowledgeable on the Qur’an, Sunna and the Islamic sciences as well as that of a saint. Her reputation spread throughout Marrakech and many people admired her expertise and status. She spent the rest of her life as a religious scholar and instructor of religion. Her shrine was erected beside al-Qāḍī ‘Ayāḍ’s and still enjoys considerable popularity.\textsuperscript{282} Therefore, like Mu’mina, Maḥilla created a saintly personality through the pursuit of knowledge and education.

In a non-Moroccan context, we find Fāṭima al-Nisābūriyya (8\textsuperscript{th} century), one of the pious, ascetic and knowledgeable women of Nisabūr. Al-Baṣri sought her advice on doctrinal matters. He said:

\begin{quote}
There was no other woman like her at this time (… ). In all of my life, I have only seen one true man and one true woman. The woman was Fāṭima of Nishapur. Whenever I informed her about one of the stages of spirituality, she would take the news as if she had experienced it herself.\textsuperscript{283}
\end{quote}

Dhu al-Nūn al-Miṣrī also said:

\begin{quote}
I have never seen anyone more excellent than a woman I saw in Mecca who is called Fāṭima of Nishpur. She would converse wonderfully on matters pertaining to the meaning of the Qur’an …. She is a saint … .She is also my teacher (‘ustādhī).\textsuperscript{284}
\end{quote}

Muḥi al-Dīn ibn ‘Arabī was a disciple of another female spiritual master called Fāṭima bint al-Mutanā. She was his teacher and spiritual guide. Ibn ‘Arabī served her like a murīd serves his shaykh. He learned from her the Islamic sciences and Sufi secrets.\textsuperscript{285} Women saints’ relationship with their disciples was, however, different from that between the male spiritual masters and their disciples. The male shaykh usually exercised a cold, strict authority towards his murīds.\textsuperscript{286} He was rarely observed behaving like a father who should bestow his affection and love on his children (followers). And if he employed a fatherly care towards his students, it was just to impose his power and authority.\textsuperscript{287} The male spiritual masters’ care was cold and not as intense as the one of female spiritual masters. Women saints had a

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{282} Ibid.  \\
\textsuperscript{283} al-Sulāmī 1993, 144  \\
\textsuperscript{284} Ibid.  \\
\textsuperscript{285} Ibn ‘Arabi 1985, vol. 2, 364-65  \\
\textsuperscript{286} Hammoudi 1980  \\
\textsuperscript{287} Abū Barik 2010, 110
\end{flushright}
religious authority, which was full of motherhood and motherly affection and care. We already saw that Ibn ‘Arabī described his spiritual master Fāṭima bint al-Mutanā as his mother. Whenever she wanted to call him, she used the following words: waladī qurrat ‘aynī (my son, my sweetheart). Fāṭima as a spiritual master founded a relationship with Ibn ‘Arabī, which was based primarily on love more than on the authority, which is found intensively in the shaykh’s relationship with his murīds.

We can concur, however, from all examples mentioned above, that for women, like for men, knowledge and education opened the door to become saintly and knowledgeable persons.

4-1.3 Miracles

As mentioned earlier, the Sufi engaged in the Sufi path until he/she reached God’s closeness, which endowed him/her with Divine grace, enabling him/her to perform miracles (karamāt), i.e., extraordinary actions that an ordinary Muslim cannot perform. From the hagiographies, women were also able to perform different kinds of miracles that advanced their saintly personalities. Healing constituted one of the important karamāt that Moroccan women performed widely. In one hagiographic narrative, Muḥammad Abdallāh ibn Ḥal Mālik al-Bayyānī (12th century) went to visit Abū Ya’zā (12th century), one of the greatest saints of Moroccan religious history, to be cured from blindness. Abū Ya’zā said to him: “Go to Fulāna” and asked her to spit in your eyes.” Abū Ya’zā, who himself was a very powerful healer, thus advised the ill Sufi Ḥal Mālik al-Bayyānī to request the holy woman Fulāna al-Andalusiya’s divine grace to regain his sight. This means that Abū Ya’zā believed in Fulāna’s miracles, which were more powerful than his own. For this reason, he advised al-Bayyānī to visit her and to benefit from her Divine grace.

Besides healing, there are other miracles that women performed, such as reading the future, flying in the air and walking on water and others. Fāṭima al-Hilāliya was described teleporting to Arabia to do her prayers in Mecca and saving persons in difficult situations. Thus, women are portrayed as using miracles as a means to prove their sainthood. As we saw before, Rabī’ a of Baṣra surpassed her male counterparts in performing miracles.

---

288 Ibn ‘Arabī 1988, 365
289 See the preceding section.
290 al-Tādīlī uses the name Fulāna as the proper name of a woman saint.
291 al-Tādīlī 1997, 237
292 al-Hudayki 2006, 474-75
The Moroccan saint Muniya bint Maymūn al-Dukkālī, whom we have already met, was a woman whose miracles prevailed even after her death. One day the spiritual master visited her grave and said

I visited Muniya’s grave… I saw a vapor like a stick of light coming out of her grave and it invaded the light of the sun.  

This light symbolizes the spiritual power of a woman saint that displayed the power of her spirituality and her miraculous abilities. Women saints were pictured as being able to perform miracles that exceeded that of their male counterparts.

Another woman saint from the Sūs who played the role of a Sufi shaykh is Tin Slāmt (a Berber word meaning “the peaceful”). Tin Slāmt was another spiritual master with miraculous skills. As a woman saint of the 12th century, Tin Slāmt was one of the fourteen women saints of the Maṣmūda region, many of whom were able to fly or be transported over long distances. In his discussion with other saintly figures on the topic of Moroccan saints who had the miraculous ability to fly, Shaykh Abū Ya'zān ben Wibdān al-Ilānī al-Qadār (19th century) said that “In Maṣmuda region there were twenty males saints and fourteen women saints who could fly or have themselves transported.” Shaykh Abū Ya'zān referred to Tin Slāmt as being among these women, which meant that they had achieved the highest spiritual level like their male counterparts. Her great saintliness enabled her to be the spiritual master of her male saint counterparts. Shaykh Abū Bakr al-Huwayrī admired her spiritual skills and status as a saint bearing the miraculous ability of flight. He said: “I served Tin Slāmt for eight years” because “I want to know how saints fly.” She responded: “Ask God’s forgiveness, and do a lot of fasting”. Abū Bakr al-Huwayrī was not the only saint who sought her instruction and blessing. Shaykh Sajmāt also admired her and came to visit her from time to time. Her devotee, Abū Bakr al-Huwayrī, saw him in her tent conversing with her. Shaykh Sajmāt said to him: “You have chosen the right shaykh”. Tin Slāmt was a saintly master whose spiritual knowledge caused her to be surrounded by male and female saints and disciples. Thus, spiritual leadership is not limited to males but also belongs to women.

293 al-Tādīlī 1997, 317  
294 al-Sūsī 1960  
295 Maṣmoda region is actually called Dukkala (the Moroccan central western region).  
296 al-Sūsī 1960  
297 Ibid.  
298 Ibid.
4-1.4 Al-Jadhb

Al-Jadhb is mad mysticism that Sufis sometimes chose as a medium for becoming saints. In Moroccan hagiography there are many stories of women and men who were stricken by al-jadhb. These are called majdhūbs (mad men) and majnūnāt or majdhūbāt (mad women). They were considered to be in this state because God attracted their minds and hearts to Himself, and they longed for Him in such a way that it caused their mental destruction.

Al-Kattānī presents a number of majdhūbāt in Fes such as Şafiya Lubāda (19th century), whom we have already met. She was called Lubāda because she fabricated lubbād (traditional woolen carpets used for praying). She was very pious, and spent entire nights weaving carpets and remembering the Divine until she was attracted to God and stricken by mental infirmity. As a majdhūba, she left her family and roamed the streets of the medina of Fes. When she went deeply into ecstasy, she took off all her clothes and started to foretell future events.299

Another majdhūba of Fes was Fāṭima bint Khāwa (18th century). She was a Sufi who would sit on the threshold of a public gate in the old medina of Fes called Bāb al-Maḥrūq (the burned door). She put many multi-colored scarves on her head carrying all her stuff with her.300 Her sister Amīna, who was known by Mannāna al-Bastyūniya (18th century) was an absent minded woman saint. She was frequently dressing in a long rug (qashāba). She used speech and sign language. When she met people, she asked them a number of questions such as: Where are you coming from? And where are you going? She meant by these questions: “I was nothing, I came from nothingness, and your mother is the earth.”301 Some people understood her words but others did not.

Drowing from her hagiographic story, Amīna bint al-Qāfī (19th century), was also a mad woman saint. According to her hagiographer al-Kattānī, Amīna hailed from the prestigious Ibn al-Qādī family of jurists and scholars from the city of Meknes. The family moved to Fes to take up official positions in the royal palace. Her father was a judge as his forefathers had been. His daughter rejected the urban respectability of her juridical family, preferring to wander the streets and perform miracles. She fell into trance, gave reports on unseen matters and rebuked wrongdoers.302 Amīna was an admirer of ‘Alī al-Ṣanhājī, a majdhub in Fes. She divorced her husband and took care of ‘Alī al-Ṣanhājī, proudly roaming

299 al-Kattānī 1900, vol. 2, 10
300 Ibid., 192
301 Ibid, 308-09
302 al-Kattānī 1900
the streets of the old medina of Fes with him. She wandered through the market places with this mad man whom she lovingly offered a bowl of olive oil as a token of admiration, since this holy man was fond of drinking olive oil. Her family once locked her in a room and restrained her with chains to prevent her from roaming the streets. When she saw ʿAlī al-Ṣanhājī standing in the middle of the house saying to her: “O Amīna,” she answered: “Yes my lord”. The chains suddenly fell from her, and she left the room and walked out of the house with him while her family watched, unable to stop them. When their attempts to change her unconventional habits failed, her family decided to leave her alone.303

From a non-Moroccan context, there is the story of Maryam al-Baṣriya from Baṣra (11th century). She was one of the majdhūbāt whose deep love for the Divine destroyed her mental abilities. Whenever she participated in lectures on Divine love, she went into ecstasy. Her spleen ruptured and she eventually died.304 Another case in this context is the example of Dakkāra, a female invoker from Baghdād. Abū Hafṣ ʿUmar ibn Maṣṣūr describes her as a mad woman (majnūna):

One day Dakkāra saw me holding a piece of fallūja (kind of sweets or cookies) in my hand and said to me: What do you have? I reply: “Fallūja.” She said again: “I am embarrassed to be regarded disapprovingly by God most high…. Shall I explain to you how to make real fallūja so that you may go home and make it if you are able to do so?” “Certainly,” I said; she said: “Take the sugar of the Divine gift, the starch of purity, the water of modesty, the butter of self-awareness and the saffron of recompense, and strain them in the sieves of fear and hope. Then, place under the mixture a tripod of sorrow, suspend the sauce pots of grief, seal it with the lid of contemplation, light beneath it the five pots of grieves, and spread it out over caution until it is touched by the fragrant breeze of the night vigil. When you take a bite of it, you will become one of the wise and will be liberated from vain fantasies of the night vigil.305

These words from Dakkāra seem to be full of wisdom, which is another indication that the majdhūbs are not mad in the normal sense, i.e. mentally ill.

303 Ibid.
304 al-Sulāmī 1993, 85
305 Ibid.
Oral tradition is another source on the Moroccan female majdhub. Oral stories also convey accounts of Moroccan women and men known for their mad holiness. In the field, I met a majdūba sitting in the shrine of Lalla Maymūna in the North of Morocco. She wore tattered clothes and many strings of beads around her neck and hands. I was told that she used the string of beads to recite the names of God. When she fell into trance, she started rebuking people. She roamed the streets with her unkempt hair uncovered. My respondents said that she was stricken with an intense attraction to God at an early age. Her holy madness made her distribute all that she owned to people. She liked to be with male majdhubas. One of these male mad saints whom she liked to be with was Mūlāy Ḥafīẓ al-Majdhūb. His age exceeded seventy. He had a thin, black body, and preferred to wear white jellabas. He was married and had children, but he never stayed with his family. He was always traveling. His words were not understandable. I saw him put his saliva on his admirers’ heads. He also distributed money to the poor. People said that Mūlāy Ḥafīẓ al-Majdhūb was attracted to God in his early years. His brother told me:

When Mūlāy Ḥafīẓ was a child, my mother bit him. The following day, my mother’s hand was paralyzed. She visited many doctors and many fuqahā’ hoping that her hand would be healed but in vain. One day, a faqīḥ told her that if she wanted her hand to be cured, she had to ask Mūlāy Ḥafīz’s pardon. If not, her hand would remain paralyzed for the rest of her life. Indeed, my mother asked Mūlāy Ḥafīz to forgive her, and she promised never to bite him again. Thus, my mother’s hand was healed. From that day on people considered Mūlāy Ḥafīz a saint.306

Thus oral stories also have both men and women coming forward as living jadhb. Both experience God’s attraction that causes them mental destruction, but also sainthood.

Furthermore, women and men are attracted by a madness that endowed them with sacredness that impacted their environment. Their irrational behavior bestowed sacredness upon them, which enabled them to be highly admired and greatly respected by people. Their relationship with the sacred world shed a positive light on their foolishness and madness. For this reason non-conventional behavior, such as public nudity, public rebuke, and other actions performed by saints were accepted by the local population. This ill behavior did not lead to the women’s punishment. Ṣafiyya Lubāda, as we have seen, deserted her family and

---

306 Hashim, interviews, July 2010
her private space to roam the streets of Fes. She rebuked people but no one tried to stop or blame her. Similarly, Mūlāy Ḥaftẓ al-Majdhūb exposed his madness; he left his family behind and chose to live his life freely. His incomprehensible language was highly respected by the people. Thus, despite their madness, female and male majdhubs’ sacredness made their unconventional behavior highly appreciated in their environment.

Furthermore, the majdhūbs present a new picture of Fes, the city of spirituality and orthodox religious. Fes is described in history as the city of ‘ulamā. It is believed to be the center of orthodox religious and Islamic sciences in North Africa. It is also believed that popular religion left no traces in Fes. However, the presence of majdhūbs and majdhūbāt in Fes shows the opposite, namely that this urban space was not only the location of institutionalized orthodoxy but also of popular religious practitioners. The city belonged not only to the orthodox ‘ulama but also to popular saints and mad holy people, who left their mark on its religious spaces. The majdhūbs and majdhūbāt decorate Fes with their shrines, which still enjoy great veneration.

4.1.5 Social and Political Roles

The majdhūb’s sacredness was highly evident from their attitude to the political corruption of their times. As we saw, Ṣafiyya Lubāda rebuked corrupt people. This concerned not only common people in the street, but the ruling elites as well. When she fell into trance, she would run to al-Qarawiyyin mosque, stand next to its door and start shouting: “Yā ‘ulamā! Yā żalama (oh! religious scholars! oh! unjust!).”307 According to al-Kattānī, Ṣafiyya meant that the members of the ruling elite of that time were unjust orthodox religious scholars.308

Likewise, the male saint Abū Rawayin (16th century), who was a majdhūb from Meknes, rebuked the wealthy and political elite for their greed and injustice. He was described by his hagiographer as openly criticizing the governors’ greed and haughtiness. He would ask the rich to give him money to give to the poor. He said to `Abd al-Wāḥid al-`Arūsī (16th century): “Quick buy from me your future and you won’t come to ruin!” If the rebuked person did not give him the money, Abū Rawayin would say: “You are cut off” or “You are killed”, and shortly thereafter that would happen.309 In another story, Abū Rawayin went to the town of Qaṣr Katāma and climbed the minaret of the central mosque. From there he

307 al-Kattānī 1900, vol. 2,10
308 Ben Mansour 2006
309 Ibn `Askar 2003, 75
commanded the governor `Abd al-Wāḥid: “Buy your power from me or you’ll be removed from your position of leadership within a year.”\(^\text{310}\) Al-`Arūsī’s family did not believe in the power of Abū Rawayin’s utterances and refused to respond to his demands. The following day al-`Arūsī’s family was coerced to leave the country. Abū Rawayin also rebuked the royal elite. When the Sa`diyin rulers conquered Meknes and turned to assault Fes, Abū Rawayin went to the Sa`diyin leader Muḥammad al-Shaykh al-Mahdī and said to him: “Purchase Fes… from me for five dinars.” Shaykh al-Mahdī refused to respond to Abū Rawayin’s demand, and Abū Rawayin said to him: “Then you won’t take Fes this year.”\(^\text{311}\) Indeed, the Sultan failed to conquer Fes, which impelled the Sultan’s son, ‘Abd al-Qādir, to interfere and pay Abū Rawayin. In fact, the Sultan conquered Fes in 1549.\(^\text{312}\)

It is sacredness that empowers either male or female majdhūbs to impose their power on the common people and the elite and to command them to submit to their demands. Thus, madness, which is flavored with sacredness, is highly appreciated and respected by people belonging to different social and political status.

As we will see from the final section of this chapter `Azīza al-Saksāwiyya is another example of this opposing of the political elite. This will be discussed at length. In addition, the woman saint Mu’mina al-Tilimsāniyya, whom we already met before, resisted the political elite of her time by refusing to participate in the orthodox male Sufis’ meetings. She rejected invitations from Ibn Qunfudh and Abū ‘Abd Allah al-Maqrī, one of the great Sufi jurists of Fes. She also refused to meet some of the greatest religious scholars of Fes, such as the famous Sufi scholar Sharif Abū al-Qāsim al-Sharīf al-Tilimsānī. She said to Ibn Qunfudh: “I don’t want to meet any sharīf.” She refused to meet them because of their corrupt and unjust political relation with the Marinid rulers whose power and authority had caused the deterioration of society as a result of their controversial relations over the success of Abi ‘Inān al-Marinī’s reign.\(^\text{313}\) The urban woman saint Mu’mina did not submit to her contemporary political Sufi masters because of their injustice and corruption.

Similarly, Amīna bint al-Qāṭī (19\(^{\text{th}}\) century), rebuked the power of the political elite of her time. Her political role was clear in her resistance to the unjust political elite. In the market places, in the company of other majādhīb, she rebuked the ill political system of the Marinid dynasty. Amīna’s political role was also clear from her participation in jihād against the Iberians (Spanish) and against their invasion of Moroccan port cities. One day, al-Kattānī

\(^{310}\) Ibid.
\(^{311}\) Ibid.
\(^{312}\) Ibid.
\(^{313}\) The death of abī ’Inān al-Marinī was in 1358. See Mahmah 1998, 97
contends, she found herself awake in bed covered with miraculous wounds as if she had been participating in jihād. She was symbolizing the injured Moroccans who participated in fighting the Europeans. She was symbolically called to arms in the male dominated public spaces of Fes. Her wounded body showed how women displayed resistance to the Iberians.\footnote{314} This woman saint thus participated in the struggle for the country’s independence.

Examples of Moroccan female saints who were political and social leaders are again ’Azīza al-Saksāwiyya, as will be clarified in the last section and Khadija al-Tamgdushtiya (19th century). According to her hagriographer, Al-Šūsī, Khadija was a leader of her tribe. She headed a war against another tribe.\footnote{315}

Other pious women who played political roles are Zaynab al-Nafzāwiyya (12th century). She is a holy woman and the wife of Yūsuf ibn Tashāfīn, the Sultan of Almoravids. She helped the sultan in ruling his country.\footnote{316} Suhāba al-Rahmāniyya (16th century) was the grandmother of ’Abd Mālik al-Sa’di, a sultan of Sa’diyin. She was a holy woman who played the role of an ambassador.\footnote{317} Khnata bint Bakār (17th century) was a Sufi woman, who was the wife of Mūlāy Ismā’īl, the sultan of ‘Alawiyin. She also helped her husband in ruling the country and securing peace in most of the Moroccan territories.\footnote{318}

\section*{4-1.6 Ordinary Sainthood}

We do, however, find in the literature a number of other women whose spirituality and sainthood did not empower them to reach Divine distraction and who remained faithful to the spiritual performances that conventional norms advocate. These women chose to live their sainthood within their private spaces and among their family members. Such is the case with the woman saint Sayyida ’Āyisha Bint Shaqrūn al-Fakhār (19th century), who is presented by al-Kattānī as a worshipper, invoker, ascetic, charitable and self-denying woman. She was the daughter of Shaykh Sīdī Muḥammad Shaqrūn al-Fakhār (19th century) and the wife of the Shaykh Sīdī Muḥammad bin ‘Abd Allāh (19th century). Al-Kattānī said of her, “she loved her father … and her husband.” She served them like a murīd serves his shaykh. When her husband called her in the night, she came to him, lit the lamp and provided him with anything

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item \footnote{314} al-Kattānī 1900, 251
\item \footnote{315} al-Šūsī 1960, 304
\item \footnote{316} al-Naṣīrī 1954
\item \footnote{317} al-Marākushī 1983, 58
\item \footnote{318} al-Naṣīrī 1954
\end{itemize}
he wanted. She prayed the dawn prayer with him. Her piety was so strong that her husband said of her: “She was among those women who deserved to be venerated.”

Her daughters, Ruqayya and `Āyisha and her sisters, Amīna, Fāṭima and Ṣafiyya, were described as pious women who were always in the company of their male Sufi relative saints, such as their grandfather Muḥammad bin Ṭabd Allāh al-Muʿīn and their father, Abū al-Ḥasan ʿAlī Bin Muḥammad al-Mughana. In a non-Moroccan context, we already saw how Sulami described Umm Aḥmad Bint Abī ‘Uthmān al-Ḥīrī (10th century) as a mother who was very pious and faithful to the education of her son Shaykh Aḥmad. He said that she confined herself to their home for more than fifty years. These women preferred to live their piety and to study religion with their relatives and within their private domestic spaces.

Female, domestic saints are wives, mothers, sisters and daughters. Sayyida `Āyisha, as referred to above, presented the ideal wife who behaved conform the conventional norms. She was an example of a wife who was devoted to the service of her husband and of a mother who took care of her daughters. The latter followed the model of their mother, serving their male Sufi relatives within their house. These women considered their homes to be a kingdom for their piety and a realm for the construction of their sainthood, which they refused to make public.

Another type of ordinary sainthood is that which is achieved through inheritance. In the field, I met a fifty year old woman healer called Mannāna. She specialized in curing ill children for more than twenty years. According to her story, Mannāna was an orphan. When her mother died, her grandmother, a woman saint and healer, accepted to be in charge of her. Mannāna started to serve her grandmother and to learn from her the way she cured ill children. She said that learning her grandmother’s utterances and deeds is not sufficient to become a woman healer. She added that when her grandmother was on her deathbed, she ordered her to swallow her blessed saliva. Mannāna thus told me that she gained sainthood through inheritance and through serving others. This does not mean that Mannāna is passive and did not construct a saintly personality. Mannāna said that her grandmother transmitted her sainthood to her, but she added that the grandmother placed certain conditions for her on it.

She said:

Before I swallowed my grandmother’s blessed saliva, she ordered me to respect certain shurūṭ (conditions).

---

319 al-Kattānī 1900, 330
320 al-Sulāmī 1993, 218
321 Mannāna Muqqaddama, interviews, June 2010
These shurūṭ are: to be always physically clean and pure, always perform the ablution ritual, perform prayers on time, particularly the dawn prayer and recite the names of God at least one thousand times a day.\textsuperscript{322}

Mannāna found herself confronted with specific instructions so as to have a valid sainthood. She was obliged to train her body through self-techniques (performance of ablution, prayer on time, dhikr ritual…) until it performed these practices spontaneously and unconsciously. She added that during the first days of her sainthood, she had difficulty fulfilling the requirements her grandmother placed on her:

\begin{quote}
In the beginning, I had difficulty (…). But I like to cure ill children. I have been practicing healing for more than twenty years now. It has become normal and habitual.\textsuperscript{323}
\end{quote}

Women thus inherited sainthood but under certain conditions. Mannāna had to develop a pious personality, which she succeeded in doing through the application of self-practices. Although women sometimes inherited sainthood from their predecessors, they should not be seen as passive. As discussed earlier, domestic women saints stand in contrast to the majdhubāt, who displayed an outer spirituality. Unlike domestic women saints, the majdhubāt chose to be servants to the public, through which they gained public recognition.

In conclusion, from the narratives, we see more women saints than men practicing their piety in the domestic sphere—which does not hinder them to be agents in the sense of active constructors of their sainthood—but we as well find female saints that chose more public roles. Another difference we came across from the narratives is the role of the female spiritual master as more lovingly than the one of the male master. But apart from these minor differences we can conclude that men and women saints use the same self-techniques.

The stories discussed show both men and women taking piety and mysticism as realms where they could achieve sainthood. Both expressed their deep devotion to God through similar means such as crying, weeping, loneliness and renunciation of worldliness. Both chose learnedness and the pursuit of knowledge and orthodox religious education to become faqīḥāt. Like male religious scholars, women attained an orthodox education that enabled them to

\textsuperscript{322} Mannāna Muqaddama, Interviews, June 2010
\textsuperscript{323} Mannāna Muqaddama, Interviews, June 2010
become saints, as we can conclude from the small hints of the hagiographers confirming their acquisition of knowledge.

In addition, women and men both developed the ability to perform miracles as an outer sign of their constructed saintly personalities. Finally, jadhāb is experienced by both male and female saints, who as mad holy people had been attracted to God and publicly performed their holy madness. The construction of sainthood comes forward from these stories as basically gender-neutral. From the above, which types of agency do we come across among these women?

4-2 Women Saints’ Types of Agency

What kind of agency did the self-techniques of Moroccan female saints, as inventoried and discussed in the previous section, come down to in the context of the social patterns in which they lived? The next section discusses the various types of agency which these women saints, from the narratives, display.

4-2.1 Ethical Self-formation

As we saw from the previous section, the female saints were applying basically the same self-techniques as their male counterparts. Drawing from our discussion in Chapter One of the concepts of Saba Mahmood - following Michel Foucault - we conceive of these self-practices as the means through which these saints tried to achieve an ethical ‘telos’, which was piety at
the level of sainthood. Their work on themselves, i.e. their applying of all kinds of self-techniques, thus took place in the context of a project of ethical-spiritual self-formation. (Interestingly Foucault uses the term ‘spiritual’ in the context of antiquity’s ethical self-practices, to indicate that not only the mind is involved, but body, heart and soul as well.) They trained their bodies as well as their souls, these being the ethical substance of their ethical spiritual self-formation (see chapter one). They did so on behalf of (their veneration for) God, which is another characteristic of their project of ethical self-formation (see Chapter One). It is this type of agency that we find among Sufi saints, be they male or female. It is the discourse of Sufism which enabled the women to develop their own spirituality and realize themselves as saintly personalities.

Moroccan orthodox religious spaces in the past hardly offered any opportunities and means for women to live their piety and religiosity. They marginalized women. For this reason, women sought a space where they as persons could live their religion. Sufism became a means by which they satisfied their religious needs and developed spiritual skills and abilities. The hagiographic narratives demonstrate the extent to which women forged personal religious paths, and defined their religious selves.

4-2.2 Equality Effects and Egalitarian Effects

The female saints used similar self-techniques as their male counterparts. Their ways of life as narrated in the discourses on them, thus entail equality effects, which sometimes even spill over into egalitarian effects. The gender-neutral self-techniques we found often implied the breaking of conventional rules and values. The hagiographic accounts about women saints are pregnant with instances of their non-conventional behavior. Their choice for mysticism as a strategy to live their piety and to construct saintly personalities differed in many ways from the standards that their local traditional culture imposed on them. These women entered the Sufi path to become other -and more- than their cultural socialization wanted them to be. As we have seen, there are some women who chose to achieve this purpose in the domestic sphere, through their relationship with their Sufi relatives, remaining under their instruction and supervision. Their sainthood did not have a public dimension, but they nonetheless remained challengers to the social construction of femininity.

Another strategy women employed in constructing saintly personalities was spiritual marriage with a saintly male figure, which consequently entailed rejecting conventional marital relations. Fāṭima al-Andalusiya left behind her family in al-Andalus and came to
Morocco to meet her spiritual master Abū al-Madyan al-Ghawth\textsuperscript{324}. Likewise, ʿĀyisha al-Bahriyya came from the Mashreq in search of the shaykh, Mūlāy Būshībū (Abū Shuʿayb) (12\textsuperscript{th} century) to study Sufism with him.\textsuperscript{325} These women saints and pious figures challenged the conventional rules of their society and followed their spiritual male guides, whom they considered to be exemplary models.

Another way of breaking the conventions was through jadhīb. Women and men who were attracted to God were able to give up their gender roles. The examples of male and female majdhûbs described above such as Ṣafiyya Lubāda, Amīna bint Khawā, Abū Rawayin and Mūlāy Ḥāfīz al-Majdhûb, show how they left their families and rejected conventional roles so as to freely live their saintly personalities and spirituality.

Lalla Mannāna’s family convinced her to marry. When she gave birth to her first child, she was afflicted by jadhīb. Eventually, she left home to roam in the medina. Her family brought her doctors hoping she could be healed, but her madness had no cure. Thus, the family took care of her child and left Mannāna to live her Divine destruction freely.\textsuperscript{326}

As we have seen Amīna al-Majdhûba also openly rejected conventional roles. Amīna abandoned her family and the conventional marriage her family had arranged for her. Her jadhīb empowered her to roam the streets freely and to be in the company of her spiritual master, ʿAlī al-Ṣanhājī al-Majdhûb. She married herself spiritually to the man she had chosen

\textsuperscript{324} al-Tâdîlī 1997, 319
\textsuperscript{325} Janbûbî 2008, 93
\textsuperscript{326} al-Kattânî 1900, vol. 2, 330
for herself and spent all of her time with him. Her jadhb empowered her to challenge her family and conventional norms, freeing herself for her mad saintly existence.

Sufi women also explicitly destroyed the beauty of their bodies, compelling them to non-material desires and needs. Their strong devotion to and affection for God made them disregard the beauty and health of their body parts, rather, they became so thin and weak that they attracted pity and disapproval instead of admiration and love. This was another way of breaking with the social standards for women, as was the outspoken refusal of many female saints of conventional marriages. Sufi women’s deep passion for God made them refuse proposals for conventional marriages from their male counterparts. As we saw, among other examples, Rabī’a of Basra outspokenly refused to marry the male Sufi Ḥasan al-Baṣrī.

Al-Tādīlī also refers in his compilation to a number of Sufi women who had chosen celibacy over marriage. The celibate young anonymous woman he met in one of the caves of the Atlas Mountains is an example of a Sufi woman who succeeded in forging her own way of life. These women saints thus consciously showed their desire to live a form of piety of their own making, rather than that of their local environment.

Intellectual forthrightness constitutes another way through which women achieved independence. In the literature, there are cases of women who had access to orthodox education. Amīna al-Zubādiyya learned the Qur’an and reading and writing. She spent her life writing copies of the Qur’an and distributing them to people.327 Fāṭima of Nishapur was called ustādh. Dhū Nūn al-Miṣrī acknowledged her high educational level and considered her his teacher (‘ustādhī). As a great religious scholar, Dhū al-Nūn was impressed by Fāṭima’s knowledge and accepted to call her “my teacher.”328 This means that women proved themselves capable of acquiring an orthodox education, which was thought to be limited only to males and to have impacted only their male counterparts.

Where these women saints come forward as breaking the conventions for women of their time, behaving and developing themselves in ways similar to their male counterparts, we can conclude that their (narrated) ways of life entail equality effects. They convey that women and men are equal, without using the notion as such. And when we hear Rabī’a of Basra (8th century) rejecting a marriage proposal she received, by saying ‘God can give me all you offer and even double it... So farewell’329 it is hard not to conclude for egalitarian effects as well.

328 al-Sulāmī 1993, 144
329 Smith 1984, 11
4-2.3 Ethical Freedom Practices

We have seen that the ethical self-techniques applied women saints are (mostly) similar to the ones of male saints. This conveys equality effects, as I argued above. Moreover, in the context of the patriarchal patterns in which they lived we can conclude that their ethical self-practices, [i.e. their applying of ethical self-techniques in the context of ethical self-formation], can be called freedom practices. Ethical freedom practices, as we saw in Chapter One, invent positive ethical ways of life which implicitly or explicitly oppose domination. From what we have seen above we can conclude that Moroccan female saints invented alternative - publicly visible - ethical ways of life for women, alternative to the dominant patterns that is: they worked on the limits of the patriarchal patterns they lived in.

Many Sufi women took advantage of the flexibility of Sufism to free themselves from societal constraints. Through the vocabulary of Sufism, they challenged the dominant orthodox religious system and cultivated an independent and personal spirituality. It is in that sense that we can speak in terms of freedom practices. The example of Rabi’a of Baṣra (8th century), who devised her own mystical way, encouraged other women to create their own personal spiritual paths as well.

Women’s independence is evident not only in their choice to lead a mystical life but also in the definition of the type of relationship with God that they chose to establish. Sufi women such as Ṣafiyya al-Lubāda and Amīna al-Bustyūnia loved God so intensely that they chose to roam the streets expressing publicly their sense of intimate proximity to Him, as discussed above. The power of this feeling of proximity empowered them to reject their conventional roles (wives, mothers, and daughters) and to live a mystical life.

Women’s decision to live a personal mystical life of piety and solitude, contradicted the norms of their local environment. Fāṭima al-Andalusīyya, Mūlāy Ḥāfīz al-Majdhūb, Abū Rawayin and others proved themselves able to re-orient their religiosity and to cultivate their piety in their own way. They sought and acquired the power to reject the religious style of their local space and to refuse to be led by conventional conservative and traditional norms and values. Thus, Sufi women had the power to forge their own spiritual life, moreover, as a result, they were able to gain and exercise power, thus constructing a way of life as women that was an alternative to the dominant patterns for them.

From the narratives, women saints who engaged in the Sufi path and worked hard to meet God, were rewarded for their strong piety and hard spiritual work by God, who bestowed them with baraka. The latter is a sacred force that enabled them to meet the
hardships of their lives. They easily got God’s answers to their calls and prayers, and they helped people to solve their problems, thus evolving into spiritual leaders. Baraka empowered women saints to exercise power over others.

Their religious leadership is also clear in other respects. Ṣafiyya al-Majdhūba freed herself from her family’s control and faced the ‘ulamā’ of al-Qarawiyyīn mosque, openly criticizing their injustice and corruption. As we saw above, many people gathered around her seeking her Divine blessing. Rabī’a al-‘Adawiyya of Baṣra (717-801) is an important heroine of Islamic mysticism. A former slave she became one of the founders of Sufism. She is well known for her instruction to people that God had to be loved for His own sake and not out of fear of hell.330

Rabī’a of Baṣra again, is another women saint who had religious authority and power. While traveling to Mecca to make pilgrimage ritual to Mecca, she was delayed so the Ka’ba (the holy shrine in Mecca) rose up and went out to meet her. Seeing this, Rabī’a said: “What have I to do with the house, it is the Lord of the house I am seeking”. When Ibrāhīm ibn Adam, Rabī’a’s contemporary male Sufi, traveled to Mecca to perform ritual pilgrimage, he found the Ka’ba was not in its place. He was told that the Ka’ba went to meet a woman. Ibrāhīm ibn Adam felt defeated when he saw the Ka’ba approaching in the company of Rabī’a.331 Women saints’ spiritual expertise and baraka empowered them to impose their strong saintly personalities on their contemporaries.

Women saints’ power and authority is recorded in oral and written sources. Through attaining strong saintly personalities they had – and still have - an impact on people. It was this impact that inspired hagiographers to preserve their life stories. As we already saw in the previous section, they not only developed into spiritual leaders, but into political and social leaders as well. We saw how they became leaders of their tribes among others. And in this respect, it is also noteworthy that many tribes are named after them, such as the Lalla ’Azīza tribe in the Atlas, the Lalla Mimūna (Maymūna) tribe in the Northwest, and the Lalla Ta’lat tribe in the Southwest. Others are the Lalla Zayna tribe in the southwest of Morocco and Lalla Luqaya tribe in Shafshāwun city in northern Morocco.

Equality, and even egalitarian effects of their ways of life as spiritual and political and social leaders once more come to the fore, to such a degree that we can affirm Leila Ahmed’s conclusion - based on Rabī’a of Basra’s independent and powerful way of life - that ‘the beliefs on which feminism rests are an endemic part of Islamic civilization (just as they are an

330 Smith 1984, 98-99
331 Smith 1984, 140
endemic part of Western civilization before the development of the political idiom of democracy).\footnote{Ahmed 1989, 144} From the above we can conclude that Ahmed’s conclusion is applicable in Moroccan context as well.

In what follows, I will study the life stories of three selected women saints and once more evaluate the types of agency they display, in line with my classification of the female saints’ types of agency above.

4-3 Women Saints and Sufis

In this section, I focus on the life stories of three women saints, namely ʻAzīza al-Saksāwiyya, ʻĀyisha al-Idrīsiya and Fāṭima Muhdūz. Each one of them represents different groups of female saints. ʻĀyicha al-Idrīssiya represents the female saints of the north of Morocco. She is an example of Moroccan-Arab, urban, married women saints who engaged in Sufi life and constructed a pious and saintly personality. She also represents North Moroccan-Arab female saints whose conventional roles as wives and mothers did not confine them to the domestic sphere, but who instead actively developed a public spiritual personality.

Lalla ʻAzīza al-Saksāwiya represents the rural Berber women saints of the Atlas. She is an example of Berber women saints who renounce marriage, fertility and family life, and challenge the hardships of rural life, so as to seek piety and achieve the knowledge of God. She is also a representative of Moroccan saintly women who played political roles and marked history with their legacy.

Finally, Faṭima Muhdūz represents southwestern rural Moroccan women saints and Sufis, in particular female majdhūbat and rural married women of this region. She exemplifies women who refused to stick to their conventional roles, such as wifehood and motherhood, through becoming a majdhūba, leaving behind their children, husband and family to live their piety and spirituality. Al-Kattānī refers to a number of majdhūbāt and other women saints of Fes who in this way refused submission to the family order and to the domestic roles that patriarchy imposed on them.

The selection of the three women saints is also based on the detailedness of their hagiographic and oral life stories. In comparison with other entries of female saints theirs are more detailed. The relative abundance of details enabled a more in-depth discussion of their lives, in particular in terms of the different self-techniques they used to transform themselves into saintly personalities.

\footnote{Ahmed 1989, 144}
4-3.1 `Azīza al-Saksāwiyya (14th century)

The primary hagiographic story of `Azīza al-Saksāwiyya is the one found in the hagiographic work entitled *Uns al-Faqīr Waʿizz al-Haqīr* (The Intimacy of the Sufi and the Greatness of the Denigrated) by the Sufi jurist `Abd al-`Azīz ibn al-Khaṭīb who is known by the name of ibn Qunfudh (14th century). As we saw before this hagiographic record is a compilation of saints, Sufis and holy people belonging to Morocco and other Maghrebian countries. It includes only saints who were disciples of the axial saint, Abū Median al-Ghut. Ibn Qunfudh collected his entries from other hagiographic records such as *al-Tashawwuf* and from narrators. He also recorded life stories of the saints he met and lived with. One of these saints was Lalla `Azīza Al-Saksāwiyya whom he met in the Atlas.

Ibn Qunfudh contends that he heard of her in al-Qarawiyyin University in Fes, before he met her in High Atlas. He then records that he travelled to the Saksāwa tribes in the Atlas and met `Azīza there:

I heard of her in al-Qarawiyyīn mosque…. I saw Lalla `Azīza on a mountain called Qihra (free). She blessed me with her Divine grace. I stood with her, and I studied with her. Then, she left me to meet her tribes’ men and women. I saw her putting a veil on her head before she got out to meet her people. She delivered a lecture to men and women who were always around her. She was eloquent in speech and in preaching. Abū ‘Āmir al-Ḥanṭaṭī, the governor of Marrakech who headed an army of six thousand soldiers, had, arrived planning to conquer the al-Saksāwa tribes. He was advancing with his armies, but Lalla `Azīza stopped him and engaged with him in a long conversation. When he finished his conversation with her, he came to me and said: “Oh! Faqīh! What a surprise? This woman is a wonderful person. She answers me before I ask her anything. She knows in advance what I have in my mind. She knows my ideas and my thinking. I have never seen a person like her. I find myself unable to reject her demands. Indeed, her arguments are so pertinent and convincing that I decide to leave the Saksāwa tribe in peace.”

---

333 Ibn Qunfudh 1965, 86
Oral literature constitutes an important additional source on ‘Azīza’s life story. Her living
descendants whom I encountered in her shrine still chant her story to her pilgrims. Her
descendants reported the following story:

Lalla ’Azīza was born in the Saksāwa tribe and grew up
in a Sufi family. From childhood, ‘Azīza learned God’s
words, commands and rules. She also worked as a
shepherd for her family, guiding her into the mountains
where she prayed to God and lived peacefully in retreat.
The Sufi girl was continuously scolded by her father for
leading the goats to mountain slopes where there was no
glass. One day her father followed her to the mountains
and found her praying to God. He shouted at her
because she did not guide the goats to the banks of the river
where grass was in abundant. “Father,” Lalla ’Azīza said
“Look at what your goats are eating.” The father turned
to his goats and found their mouths full of herbs. From
that time on her father and the whole tribe believed that
Lalla ’Azīza was a “tagurramt,” a woman saint” sent to
them by God.

The narrator stopped for a while, then carried on reciting the story:

It is said that one day, Lalla ’Azīza was alone with her
goats in the mountains and a young man who wanted to
marry her followed her. The young man wanted to
kidnap her, but she suddenly disappeared in front of his
eyes. The Sultan of Marrakech also heard about her
sainthood and invited her to live in his castle. There,
Lalla ’Azīza continued to study religion and the Islamic
sciences. People said that she even traveled to Tlemcen
to study in Abū Madyan’s zāwiya, and when she came
back to Marrakech, her sainthood had grown and was
propagated. The Sultan proposed marriage to her, but
she refused his proposal, so the Sultan threw her in jail
and ordered her jail guardian to offer her a poisonous
food, but she refused to eat. Since Lalla ’Azīza finally
could not stand the hunger, she decided to eat the
poisonous food. She said: “In the name of God I will
eat it, and for the sake of God I will die.” It is also said
that the Sultan ordered his servants to build her two
shrines, one in her native tribal territory and the other in
Marrakech. 334

Both the oral and written stories thus provide some details about ‘Azīza’s mystical
development and experiences.

334 Mohamed, interviews, June 2010
4-3.1.1 Ethical Self-Techniques

As the narratives show, 'Azīza undertook different self-techniques to become a saint. She comes forward as overwhelmed by a desire for spirituality since early age. She is presented as a Sufi girl who lived in a Sufi family, but who desires to be in retreat. This is clear from her insistence to be alone with her cattle in the mountainous areas, where she enjoyed God and His universe. Her strong desire for spirituality and piety is also clear from the resisting of her father’s orders. She followed her desire for retreat, and did not respond to her father’s commands but remained alone in the mountains. 'Azīza comes forward as striving to develop her own piety, taking the mountain as a space where she could live in the company of the Divine.

Another aspect of 'Azīza’s piety was her ability to perform miracles. From the stories, 'Azīza developed miraculous skills since her childhood. They tell that she made her goats healthy, and their mouth full of herbs and grace. Her father and his tribesmen were surprised because they wondered how the goats became so healthy though they were always in mountainous spaces where there was no grass. They wondered how the Sufi girl succeeded to perform this miracle. From the oral stories it is her strong piety to God that empowered her to be unlike the other shepherds whose goats were thin and unhealthy.\(^{335}\)

Miracles related to shepherding and the protections of the cattle indicate the importance of this woman saint, since in rural society shepherding and the protection of the cattle constitute the most important source of income. For rural people this woman saints’ miracles and karāma are very powerful, since they meet the hardships of their rural lives. 'Azīza’s miracles allowed her to successfully fulfill the role of shepherd and to support her family economically. Her extraordinary skills made the whole tribe consider her a saint who performed miracles and deserved to be worshipped.

The stories above also describe 'Azīza’s rejection of conventional marriages, thus using celibacy as a self-technique to develop her sainthood. She is presented in the stories as a beautiful Sufi girl who was sought for marriage. Many tribesmen proposed to her, but she refused them all. She was able to live the life of a married woman, but she did not want to. She was even asked for marriage by the Sultan and rejected him as well. Her refusal of marriage displays that her heart was so occupied by God that she had no free space to love a man. 'Azīza refused conventional marriages because she was totally devoted to the Divine and did not want to be controlled by dominant matrimonial relations.

\(^{335}\) See above.
Another equally important self-technique was `Azīza’s pursuit of knowledge to achieve sainthood, and her embarking on the path of religious studies. Her overwhelming desire for religion impelled her to leave her family home, which was located in rural Saksāwa tribal territories, so as to move to Marrakech to study religion. She even traveled to Tlemcen in Algeria to study Sufism in Abū Madyan’s zāwiya. There she became one of his disciples. Once back in Marrakech, her religious reputation spread and people gathered around her to listen to her sermons and lectures.336 This shows that `Azīza refused to remain an ordinary Sufi woman. Instead, she chose to satisfy an overwhelming desire to learn about Islam and Sufism. Her quest for knowledge empowered her to leave her family and her tribe and to become a preacher and a lecturer, enabling her to maintain followers and disciples who benefitted from her knowledge. Her hagiographer, ibn Qunfudh, acknowledges her scholarly status, having already heard of her in al-Qarawiyyīn University. Her religious knowledge gained her great fame and a positive reputation that seemingly reached orthodox religious centers like al-Qarawiyyīn. He also confirms his respect for her status as a knowledgeable and capable teacher, by personally studying with her and seeking to learn from her (see the hagiographic story above). This shows that she was a scholar whose knowledge impressed male Sufi jurists like Ibn Qunfudh. His recognition of her as being superior to him in intellectual and spiritual respect, enhanced `Azīza’s reputation as a scholar and saint, and contributed to making her sainthood and religious expertise more widely known and publicly visible and accessible.

By means of all self-techniques mentioned, `Azīza undertook a lifelong project of ethical self-formation. In what follows we will see that her ethical self-formation did exceed the limits of the patriarchal patterns that were imposed on her and that she succeeded not only in transgressing them but in developing alternative ways of life as a woman in society.

4-3.1.2 Ethical Self-formation as a Freedom Practice

We have concluded that through their ethical self-practices, Moroccan female saints developed alternative ways of life for women, in working on the limits of patriarchal, oppressive patterns and practices. The life stories of the three saints I selected show exactly this.

First of all, `Azīza’s life stories stressed women’s abilities to achieve a Sufi self-formation that resists the dominant order. Like other women saints, `Azīza refused women’s

---

336 Venerators, interviews, June 2010
submissiveness to the dominant conventional norms. Her stories above show how she created a pious personality and how she believed in her abilities to achieve a personal pious life. The stories show that her desire to become a Sufi personality increased since her childhood and developed in the course of her life. Since her childhood, 'Azīza wanted to improve her spiritual status, and she was determined to live the different stages of Sufism and be involved in training herself to reach an advanced stage of piety above the ordinary one. She engaged in retreat, dhikr and the recitation of the Qur’an, as well as charitable actions (see the story in the above section).

Her endeavors to live the hard Sufi path are visible in her success in reaching proximity and God’s union. Her proximity and axial sainthood did not prevent her from serving people. Rather, her saintly personality empowered her to be close to her people and serve their needs. 'Azīza’s new personality made her very aware of her people’s problems, and she decided to use her knowledge, piety and service. Her stories portray her as a knowledgeable woman who delivered her knowledge and education to her tribesmen and as a political leader who sought people’s help, sustenance, justice and peace for her community.

'Azīza’s saintly status and image, which resulted from the way she reached sainthood, empowered her to have and exercise public power. Her saintly personality permitted her to have an impact on the common people as on the elite. Both showed her great respect and admiration. This is clear from the admiration and respect evident in Ibn Qunfudh’s descriptions of her being surrounded by the men and women of her tribe (see the story above). 'Azīza succeeded in achieving a form of popular sainthood that extended into the countryside and urban centers. The power of her sainthood enabled her to play the role of the political leader of her tribe. Her method for dealing with her tribesmen and women when they encountered crises and problems demonstrated her skills in the political arena. She made her tribe a center of refuge, security and reconciliation. She took on the role of the arbiter saint who not only defends tribal territory against the maghzen, but also among tribes in a context where the central authority wielded no authority and where controversial relations over water, lands and animals prevailed.337

Although women were denied political rights and access to decision-making procedures and positions, 'Azīza constituted an exception. She proved to the dominant society her abilities to be a political leader, which was particularly notable in a rural context, where women’s rights and life conditions were significantly disregarded in comparison to those of women in the urban centers. She was the exact opposite of those women saints who

337 Hammoudi 1974, vxx
confined themselves to caves and private spaces and of those male saints who in vain tried to attain public power. `Azīza achieved a mode of orthodox sainthood that empowered her to become a powerful public political and social leader.

To understand `Azīza’s political empowerment, we need to place her story in its historical context, i.e., from the end of the 13th century till the end of the 14th century. `Azīza lived during the last years of the Marinid dynasty. In this era, the Saksāwa tribes were like most other Berber tribes in dissidence (sība). Confrontations between dissident tribes and the central authority were increasing. The Marinid central authority in Marrakech was in its decaying years. It entered into controversial relations with the Waṭāsiyyīn. The dissident tribal territories became a space of refuge for the poor, homeless and refugees. People who fled from the makhzen turned not only to dissident tribes but also to zāwiyas for security. The Iberians (the Spanish) had also started to conquer the coastal regions and port cities. Under these conditions, the Waṭāsid dynasty had defeated the Marinid’s weak political system and conquered Fes which turned the capital of its new dynasty.338

From her hagiographic record, `Azīza was engaged in jihād against the political leaders, not against the Iberians but against the central authority (al-Maghzen) and against its plan to place the Saksāwa tribes under its control. As a leader of her tribe, `Azīza challenged Muḥammad al-Ḥanṭāṭi, the governor of Marrakech, and his plan to put the Saksāwa tribe under his control (see the story above). `Azīza defended the autonomy of her tribe. She acted on behalf of her tribesmen and tribeswomen to eliminate the threat to their stability and autonomy. With her rhetorical speech she inhibited al-Ḥanṭāṭi’s power and its political intentions. Her miraculous religious rhetoric impelled this man of great authority to submit to her demands, change his plans and leave the Saksāwa tribes in peace. Although Ibn Qunfudh did not transmit exactly what `Azīza said to al-Ḥanṭāṭi, it is possible to assume that she called for a respecting of God’s instructions to embrace love, peace, respect and mutual assistance among Muslims, and that she instructed the governor that respect for life was essential. She likely performed the role of a preacher who spoke out against violence, war and destruction. `Azīza’s success in influencing the powerful elite with her strong spiritual image, and convincing them to withdraw from their destructive plans, emanated from the saintly power that she had developed and that empowered her to defeat her enemies.

Another instance where `Azīza’s political power was displayed was in her resistance to the Sultan’s injustice. The story above shows that the Sultan was impressed by

338 al-Nāṣirī 1954, 40-50
339 Saksāwa tribes remained for two centuries in dissidence. See al-Nāṣirī 1954
'Azīza’s sainthood and therefore invited her to his palace. But the growth of her sainthood and its popularity made the Sultan fear her and later on imprison her. This sheds light on the traditional and controversial relations between the political corpus and religious people, which were current in 14th-century Morocco. It also reveals the oppositional relations between, on the one hand the Sufis and saints, whose power emanated from their Divine grace and impelled people in pre-colonial Morocco to respect them, and, on the other hand, the political rulers who had begun to loose their legitimacy. The Sultan failed to realize that 'Azīza’s popularity was due to her developed saintly personality that appealed for justice, love, peace and non-violence. Her resistance to the Sultan shows that a rural Berber woman from the mountains could counteract the power of the political system. She indirectly instructed the Sultan and taught him moral lessons, such as the way to gain God’s love and people’s admiration and support. The Sultan’s failure to follow Lalla 'Azīza’s example resulted in his use of violence against her, which entailed her imprisonment and death.

'Aẓīza’s resistance to the Sultan is exemplified in her choice to die rather than to submit to his wishes. The Sultan tried to make her eat poisonous food. She first resisted him by refusing to eat the poisonous food, but she later resisted him by choosing death rather than living a life of humiliation, injustice and oppression and by imposing on the Sultan the way he should bury her sacred body. The Sultan’s decision to build her two shrines, one in Marrakech and the other in her tribe, demonstrates the power of her saintly personality, which retained its great power even after her death. Having two shrines dedicated to her shows the power of the sainthood 'Azīza developed which survived her death and remained an eternal force among not only the elite but the common people as well.

'Aẓīza’s ethical spiritual self-formation thus involved not only that she changed herself religiously, but she went on changing herself socially and politically as well. Her highly religious knowledge empowered her to access the political sphere. From her hagiographic and oral life stories, 'Azīza was selected by her dissident tribesmen as the leader of the Saksāwa tribes so as to settle her people’s conflicts and attend to their needs. She proved to the public that women were able to reach a political leadership that women in modern Morocco are denied. 'Azīza achieved a political self that impressed her male followers who showed her respect and submission. Her hagiographer, ibn Qunfudh, witnesses how she managed to successfully preserve her tribes’ freedom against the Marinid government that sought to put the Saksāwa tribes under its control.

Her free ethical self-formation entails not only her remarkable self-transformation into a political and social leader, but also her development as a religious scholar through her
quest for orthodox religious science. 'Azīza belongs to a Sufi lineage. The latter marked the history of her region Saksāwa by knowledge and the status of highly scholarly 'ulamā’ and Sufi jurists. She lived in an orthodox religious space that was dominated by men and which ignored women. Through Sufism, she, as a woman, succeeded following the path of knowledge and achieving an orthodox religious education that used to be assigned only to males. 'Azīza’s example is but one among others, as we saw in the preceding chapter, of highly educated women in Marinid Morocco who had chosen education as a tool to change themselves. 'Azīza was impressed by her scholarly religious environment and engaged in the search for knowledge. As her story shows, she wanted to change herself, following the model of murīds traveling from one space to another for the search of education and religion. She achieved the status of ‘ālima through her continual traveling to Marrakech and searching ‘ilm (science) from highly scholarly ‘ulamā’ such as Abū Madyan al-Ghawth and others. She succeeded in transforming into herself to a Sufi and knowledgeable and highly educated woman. She represents the Sunni Sufism in Morocco that stresses the embrace of Shari’s and Sufism. She combines sciences and Sufism in a manner Zarrūq stresses as crucial for the formation of a Sufi personality.

Being brought up in a Sufi family, 'Azīza was able, to develop her own spiritual path, contra what was expected from her. Sufism enabled her to develop a free style of spirituality that, working on the limits of the dominant patriarchal patterns, culminated in an alternative way of life for a woman. In other words, we can conclude that she was able to develop an ethical self-formation in terms of an ethical freedom practice.

From these descriptions of the self-techniques that 'Azīza followed to achieve sainthood, she is not different from male counterparts, such as her master Abū Madyan al-Ghawth (12th century). His strong desire for religious knowledge likewise impelled him to leave his family and go to Marrakech and later to Fes. From the brief description of Abū Madyan’s life story, we learn that 'Azīza and Abū Madyan underwent similar experiences. Both were employed as servants and shepherds by their families, both experienced an overwhelming desire for religious knowledge, which suddenly arose inside them, and both left their families to study and teach about Islam and Sufism. Another point of commonality shared by Abū Madyan and ‘Azīza is that they both relinquished their gender when they

---

340 al-Manūnî 1979
341 See the preceding chapter
342 According to al-Tâdîlî 1997, Abū Madyan was an important contributor to the development of Sufism in the Maghreb. He was an axial saint, and his doctrine of Sufism spread across North Africa. He was born in Ceuta (Spain). He was an orphan and his cruel brothers forced him to serve as a shepherd for their cattle.
entered the Sufi path. Their life stories portray them as having given up the traditional male and female social roles. In order to devote themselves to the contemplation of God, ʿAzīza refused to marry and become a housewife and mother, and Abū Madyan avoided the conventional roles of husband and father. Both of them also founded zāwiyas to train murīds and feeding the poor, sheltering the homeless and rebuking the unjust was of great personal significance to them personally. Thus ʿAzīza was equally experiencing and constructing sainthood as men in her time.

4-3.2 ʿĀyisha al-Idrīsiya (16th century)

One century after the death of ʿAzīza, another interesting woman saint appeared, as is recorded by her son, the hagiographer Ibn ʿAskar al-Shafshāwunī, one of the greatest Sufi jurists of the 16th century. He wrote a compilation, of biographies of Moroccan saints and Sufis of the North, entitled Dawḥat al-Nāshir. Based on oral and written sources, his hagiography includes entries only on the male saints he encountered, lived with or heard about. In Dawḥat al-Nāshir, Ibn ʿAskar, however, also writes on his mother ʿĀyisha:

Among their numbers is the female saint my mother ʿĀyisha bint Aḥmad bin Ṭālib. She was a ṣaliḥa of Sharifian descent. She was always consistent in nightly prayer and dhikr. In her zāwiya in Shafshāwun, she preached to people and recited the Qur’an to them. She fed the poor. She learnt the Sufi path from the great spiritual masters such as Abū al-Baqāʾ al-Ghazwānī, Sīdī Muḥammad al-Habṭī, Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ḥājj Ghazwānī and others. Shaykh al-Ghazwānī said to me that he used to put his hands on Lalla ʿĀyisha’s head, when she was still a child and said: “This young girl will have a great importance (shaʾn ‘azīm).” Lalla ʿĀyisha also cured ill people. She put her saliva on the pained part of the patient’s body, and it soon became healed.

She used to be a woman with good ethics and baraka. Her intercession is much desired by people. Many people asked her to interfere on their behalf to God to achieve their needs. They also asked her to secure them. Through her, God guided people to the right path. My father told me that when he and his friend were kept by the enemies in Tangier and put in a jail under the ground, they lost hope to ever be free again. They spent
ten days in the jail. My father suddenly said that he heard the voices of my mother and of her friend, Umm Raysûnî, saying to him: “never mind, God will soon release your and your friend’s imprisonment.” After a while, my father said, the jail keeper came to them and opened the door of the jail and ordered them to leave. The commander of the jail asked them to return to their country because they were free. When my father returned home, he told his story to my mother. She answered him: “I met shaykh Abû Muḥammad al-Ghazwâni in a dream and told him about your situation and he said to me: go with Umm Raysûnî, to your husband and get him out’. I got up and I called him from my place of prayer and God answered my praying”.

I had a misunderstanding with Muḥammad bin Rashīd, the governor of the north of Morocco. The Sultan al-Ghâlib bi Allâh Abû Muḥammad al-Shafshâwunî appointed me as a jurist and preacher in Qaṣr Katāma. My mother Lalla `Āyisha refused to move with me to Qaṣr Katâma, and she decided to remain in her own zâwiya in Shafshâwun. From time to time I travel to Shafshâwun to visit my mother. Since I was busy I sent just my servant to visit her and meet her needs. Ibn Rashīd was envious and thought the messenger I sent to lalla `Āyisha was a spy. So he went to Lalla `Āyisha and said to her: “Either you cut your relations with your son or you follow him to Qaṣr Katâma.” Lalla `Āyisha answered “God does not allow the breaking of relations among relatives. So I am going to leave Shafshâwun once and for all.” Ibn Rashīd regretted his wrong deed, and he asked her pardon and to remain in her zâwiya. But Lalla `Āyisha refused. Ibn Rashīd said: “We have caused ourselves a serious offense. We hope for God’s forgiveness”. When the Sultan al-Ghâlib bi Allâh heard about ibn Rashīd’s wrong deeds towards lalla `Āyisha and other people, he ordered his army to put him in jail. Ibn Rashīd fled to the Middle East, where he was killed and ripped into pieces.

In spite of her hagiographic story and her name and reputation, `Āyisha’s life story is forgotten in most regions of Morocco. However, she still enjoys great fame in Qaṣr al-Kabîr and Shafshâwun cities. She also has an alternative name, which is Lalla al-‘Āliya meaning “the highest”. During my fieldwork, I asked her devotees, who sitting near the chamber that houses her tomb, about her alternative name. They explained it by saying

343 Ibn ‘Askar 2003, 30-3
that she was once very pious. According to the imam of the mosque nearby, it was because “she was ‘Āliya fi ḍīn,” meaning she had a high level of piety and religion.

While I was leaving the mosque where her shrine is located, I heard a child screaming. I rushed to the door, and I found a forty year old woman holding a sick child whose age did not exceed three years. The woman ran to the closed door of Lalla al-‘Ālyā’s sanctuary, dropped on her knees and put her sick child against the wall of the shrine. Both the mother and the child were weeping, supplicating God and the holy Lalla ’Āyisha to save the child’s life. All the female visitors did this to find favor with Lalla ’Āyisha and secure her assistance. Later on I understood that ’Āyisha al-Idrīsiya was a woman healer. Ghita, a sixty years old woman and a seller of clothes in one of the shops attached to the mosque, says: “Lalla ’Āyisha is a šalīha and a woman healer. This is what I know about her.” Most of the people I interviewed reported that they knew nothing about this woman saint’s life except that she was a pious woman healer.

’Āyisha’s shrine was closed more than seven years ago. However, her venerators keep performing their ziyāra rituals outside the mosque to be more precise, they are usually found sitting in front of the mosque’s door, with all their attributes, shops etcetera.

During one of my routine visits to her closed shrine, one of the rituals being celebrated there attracted my attention. The pilgrims took their seats near the closed door of the shrine where they proceeded to place a variety of foods including bread, olive, tea, and couscous. One of the women started to distribute the food to all the people sitting near the shrine. The women took some of this food back home to their families. Through these rituals, they sought to distribute their women saint’s baraka, the implication being that this woman saint still has an impact on her venerators who try to assure, through their rituals, the continuity and survival of their relationship with their beloved woman saint.

4-3.2.1 Ethical Self-techniques

The story of ’Āyisha informs us of the way she constructed a pious personality. ’Āyisha’s sharifian origin cultivated the seeds of sainthood in her, enabling her to become pious and spiritual. Her sharifian origin made her and her family part of the elite who were highly respected in the hierarchal society they lived in. Her piety emanated from her childhood. Her father’s Sufi shaykh ‘ujāl al-Ghazwānī, predicted her future sainthood during her early

344 Fatima, interviews, September 2010
345 A detailed study of women’s rituals within the shrines of women saints will be given in the next chapter.
childhood. He read in her eyes her ability to construct sainthood, which she developed during the course of her life as her story shows. Her piety, as described in the story, included the self-techniques of continuous performing of nightly prayers, dhikr and reading the Qur’an. Furthermore, she made her zāwiya a space for leading a pious existence with other women, as well as a center for offering social services to the needy. Her charitable acts such as feeding the poor, helping the needy, healing the sick, and curing the injured also marked her sainthood.

‘Āyisha was surrounded in her zāwiya by people who sought her blessing and advice. Al-Ghazwānī visited her to glean some of her baraka, and advised his murāds to visit her to benefit from her baraka too. Her sainthood impressed orthodox shaykhs such as ‘Ujāl al-Ghazwānī’s son, Shaykh Muḥammad al-Ghazwānī. Her piety empowered her to successfully carry out the role of wife and mother, faithfully serving her husband and family. She brought up her son and supervised his education until he became one of the important official orthodox jurists of Morocco during the Sa’diyīn dynasty. She proved herself to be a dedicated servant of her family and devotees in her zāwiya, successfully compromising between private and public responsibilities. This is evident from her desire to remain in her zāwiya and not to move to al-Qaṣr al-Kabīr to live a prestigious life with her son. Her devotion to God and to the service of the people was so strong that she decided to remain a servant of the devotees in her zāwiya (see the story).

Another aspect of ‘Āyisha’s sainthood was her political role as opponent of Ibn Rashīd’s unjust political system, as we saw in the story above. ‘Āyisha lived in the 16th century during the reign of Sa’diyīn dynasty. The country was under the threat of Iberian colonial rule, which had begun to wield power on the coasts. Its port cities, which were invaded by the Christian missionaries, became the site of confrontations between the central authority and dissident Berber tribes. Under these conditions, Moroccans turned to marabouts and holy persons for refuge and help.346 ‘Āyisha had a zāwiya where she treated the injured, fed the hungry, offered shelter to the homeless and taught murāds. Her charitable and spiritual personality enabled her to gain the respect of the Sultan al-Ghalib bi Allah, who rewarded her son with a highly official status, and who chose her site against the unjust governor Ibn Rachid.

Furthermore, ‘Āyisha served as a mujāhida, according to her hagiographer. She did not participate in battles, but took part in the jihād by treating and healing the injured. She would put her blessed saliva on the injured body parts of the mujāhidīn and their wounds

346 al-Nāṣirī 1954
would soon heal. She also cured the ill and rescued prisoners who had been captured by the Iberians. For example, her husband was captured and imprisoned by the Iberians, while participating in the jihād against them. After ten days of imprisonment, he told his friend, who was in prison with him, that ‘Āyisha would rescue them. He had heard her calling to him, telling him that he and his friend would be soon free. Soon thereafter, a guard appeared and the chains suddenly fell from their ankles. From that moment on, ‘Āyisha’s community was convinced that she was a real saint. She not only fought the enemy, but she also saved many Muslims from death.

‘Āyisha’s political role also took the form of resistance to the political elite, which was headed by Ibn Rashīd. This was clear in her reaction to Ibn Rashīd, the governor of the north of Morocco. Here ‘Āyisha had a strong attachment to her zāwiya and to her people. She refused to live with her son because she wanted to be close to her followers and to serve the mujāhidīn. She sacrificed her son’s company for the welfare of her zāwiya and people. As a consequence, she faced the governor with great courage. She taught him an ethical lesson that stressed the importance of the respect of social bonds, norms and Sharī`a instructions. The power of her threat was clear when Ibn Rashīd felt coerced to regret his wrong deeds towards her and her son and went to her zāwiya asking her pardon. From the story above we see that he nevertheless died, which can be caused by ‘Āyisha’s baraka which she bestowed on him in a negative way.

‘Āyisha’s stories show how ‘Āyisha undertook a lifelong ethical self-formation. This process is clear in her strong desire to become pious and in the tools she employed to achieve a pious self. She benefited from her Sufi family, which helped her to become spiritual. But the story describes her continuously practicing self-techniques such as retreat, dhikr, recitation of the Qur’an, fasting and praying rituals to develop her faith in God. Here ‘Āyisha engaged in the Sufi path to improve her ordinary religious self and she reached an advanced status of piety that empowered her to play important roles, including education, preaching and teaching.

4-3.2.2 Ethical Self-formation as a Freedom Practice

---

347 Ibn ‘Askar 2003, 30
348 Ibid.
349 Ibid.
`Āyisha stands for literate mothers who played important social roles. She represents the mothers who educate themselves to fight their illiteracy. Her strong desire to learn about religion is clear in her continuous attendance of her fathers’ Sufi friends’ lectures and in her interest in listening to their sermons. Like `Azīza, `Āyisha took education as a tool to change her ordinary personality. `Āyisha represents the educated mother who can give her son, Ibn ‘Askar the hagiographer of her entry, an important education. This probably helped him to become an important jurist of his time. She most likely transmitted to him her knowledge and what she learned.

In her zāwiya, she was always preaching to men and women and was transmitting her knowledge to them. She did not want mothers to remain illiterate. Rather, she wanted them to revolt against their confinement in domestic private spaces where she thought they remained illiterate and passive. `Āyisha is the symbol of literate mothers whose literacy and knowledge are important for themselves as well as for the education of their children, so as to help them to become good educated citizens. `Āyisha changed herself and wanted people to change themselves as well.

Another example of `Āyisha’s self-formation is clear from her attitude towards the political elites. In her hagiographic story, `Āyisha revolted against the corrupt political regime of her time. Her transformation into a very strong pious woman empowered her to become conscious of the political events that Morocco witnessed at that time. She was criticizing the corrupt and unjust political elite. She empowered herself in a way that she was able to raise her voice and publicly ask for justice, and to have nationalist feelings to participate in fighting the colonisors, the Iberians.

`Āyisha’s story shows her conformity and non-conformity to the patriarchal norms. She accepted marriage and procreation. Yet she subverted these norms through her revolt against women’s confinement in domestic spaces without education and knowledge, as well as through her reactions against an unjust political system. Her strong pious, knowledgeable self demonstrate her challenge to gender divisions showings that women of sainthood are able to transgress the patriarchal order. `Āyisha al-Idrīsiya’s life displayed her power and challenge to the dominant order, and, as such, it can count as an ethical freedom practice.

4-3.3 Fāṭima Muhdūz (19th century)

The hagiographer of Fāṭima Muhdūz is Mukhtar al-Sūsī who wrote a compilation of Moroccan rural saints of the Sūs region, southwestern Morocco, entitled Afwāh al-Rījāl. He
gathered their life stories from oral and written sources, such as al-Hudaykī (2006) and others. The compilation is composed of male and female saints’ entries. One of the Susi women saints mentioned in his compilation is Fāṭima Muḥdūz. Her hagiographer said:

Fāṭima was a rural Sufi woman from Tiznīt. She heard the spiritual master Ṣīdī Saʿīd Ṣūsī al-Maʿādārī discussing the actions an individual must undertake to become a saint one day during his visit to her husband. “Good intention (niyya ḥasana), faithfulness, confidence and self-denial”, Ṣīdī Saʿīd said al-Maʿādārī said, “are the conditions of sainthood.” Fāṭima Muḥdūz heard him explaining these conditions to her husband and said: “I decide to become a saint (...) If my husband fails to be a saint, I will succeed to be so.” She said again: “I get up from my place (...) I know I am still menstruating, but I forget about the husband, children, and the world.”

The following day, Fāṭima confined herself within a room for a number of days. She refused to talk, eat or even feed the child she had just given birth to. Her husband was worried about her and about the child who needed his mother’s breast milk. He brought her many fuqahā’ to cure her, but her illness appeared to be incurable. To save the child, the father brought him a murḍi’a (a wet nurse). But Fāṭima remained in this condition until Ṣīdī Saʿīd al-Maʿādārī visited her husband again. The latter told him about the situation, and Ṣīdī Saʿīd al-Maʿādārī entered her room to examine her. After many months of silence, she started to talk to him about her strong desire to become a saint. After he had left her room, he advised her husband to leave her on her own. She would soon recover he said and left the house.

Lalla Fāṭima’s venerators still preserve her life story. Most of the venerators report what follows:

Our female saint Lalla Fāṭima is our “tagurramt.” She was a pious and holy woman. She was also a shepherd and her goats were always in a healthy state even in time of drought. She lost her parents in her early years of her life. When her piety and sanctity were

350 al-Sūsī 1963, 56-59
351 Ibid.
352 Ibid.
353 Tagurramt is a Berber word, meaning a woman who has a great importance and high status.
spread among tribes, people started to respect her. The
great male saints of Sūs such as Sīdī Aḥmad ʿumoussa,
Sīdī ʿīn Yaʿqūb, Sīdī ʿūdī and Mūlāy ʿībrāhīm came
to visit Lalla Fāṭima in her house. She also visited them
and other saints in zāwiya Ilīgh to do dhikr and give her
baraka to people.

4-3.3.1 Ethical Self-techniques

Fāṭima undertook different self-techniques to become a saint. Her story described above
gives us an insight into the way Fāṭima constructed her saintly personality in an environment
that was purely patriarchal. As we have seen, she was directly interested in the conditions of
sainthood that Shaykh Sīdī Saʿīd al-Maʿādī explained to her husband. She was at that
moment an ordinary housewife and mother who was faithful to her conventional
responsibilities toward her home, husband and family. Like any other woman in the
traditional society in which she lived she eavesdropped on her husband’s conversation with
his guest. Her husband to whom the discourse on the construction of sainthood was
addressed did not take the shaykh’s speech into consideration. The shaykh’s discourse was
formulated in gender neutral terms he did not exclusively or explicitly address males. Fāṭima
was listening to his discourse and took it upon her.

At the outset of her Sufi path, Fāṭima, as the story above shows, experienced
psychological turmoil and anxiety. The visit of Shaykh Sīdī Saʿīd al-Maʿādī to her home and
her overhearing his discourse about the construction of sainthood coincided with her
menstrual period. It was the blood that prevented her from purifying herself and performing
her religious rituals. She therefore found herself in a situation of humiliation from which she
could deliver herself only through the performance of dhikr. Since menstruation kept her
from performing prayer and fasting rituals, she recited God’s names until she saw the light.
Peace and tranquility came over her, and her body stopped bleeding. Thus she entered, and
began to experience, the Sufi path.

One of the important features of her new spiritual life and its impact was the change
in her ordinary daily life. She stopped being an ordinary woman who took care of her
husband, children and home. Instead, she became a transformed woman who insisted on the
fulfillment of her spiritual desire, neglecting her domestic duties and conventional roles. The
spiritual illumination that she began to experience distanced her from her family and the
child she had just given birth to (see the story above). Fāṭima had reached an advanced stage
of spirituality and involvement with God, which requires renouncing worldliness and conventional roles, including motherhood and domestic responsibilities. Fāṭima’s new spirituality was interpreted by her family in terms of junūn (foolishness) and not in terms of spiritual illumination.

Her inner spirituality was understood only by Sufis. It is a hidden and a lonely spirituality that mystics experience. It required the expertise of a Sufi shaykh who easily understood that Fāṭima was on the path to the Divine and had begun to experience spiritual illumination. He was the source of her confidence, and she finally accepted to talk to him after refusing to talk for a long time. The shaykh was the one who detected her distress, which could be cured only by the fulfillment of her spiritual desire (see the story above).

Fāṭima’s illness and physical hardships, which were the first states that the Sufi body experienced, have meanings. Physical crises such as illnesses show the transition of the body from one state to another. Fāṭima left behind her ordinary life, and in her process of self-transformation and ethical self-formation, she experienced a transitional state at the physical and psychological level. Her ill body enabled her to live the transitional life a Sufi experiences between the material and the spiritual worlds. It empowered her to contact the spiritual world. Weakness and illnesses enable the body to have a special position, in as far as visitation, consultation and healing rituals are undertaken. Fāṭima experienced these situations, which demonstrated that her illness was psychological, not physical.

Fāṭima Muhdū’z’s life story encompasses all the aspects that relate to women’s mysticism and their conscious construction of sainthood. The most important aspects of her mysticism included her success in achieving spiritual illumination and sainthood and in fulfilling the instruction of sainthood that her husband failed to undertake. She proved herself able to create a saintly personality that not only impacted not only her familial environment but also her venerators who continue to offer her appreciation and respect.

4-3.3.2 Ethical Self-formation as a Freedom Practice

Fāṭima Muhdū’z’s story describes a process of ethical self-formation and self-transformation that challenges patriarchy. Though she was an ordinary woman faithful to her conventional roles, she refused to remain passive. She wanted to achieve a new self-formation by her engagement in Sufism where men and women are able to develop new religious personalities. Her self-transformation into a Sufi personality involved a work on the limits of the patriarchal patterns she lived in. She created a religious way of life according to her own choices. As a
Muslime woman, she wanted to develop her faith and become a strong pious woman. This desire of piety empowered her to revolt against gendered rules, confining herself in retreat and remembering God until she reached the spiritual light. Her male counterparts in the Sūs region were impressed by her religious personhood and religious leadership, and they gave her a space in their memories.

4-4 Conclusion

The selected women saints, Ḍzīza, Ṭyisha and Fāṭima, succeeded in creating an ethical way of life through the various self-techniques that the discourse of Sufism offered them. These women who belonged to different Moroccan historical eras undertook techniques such as jadhb and the quest for knowledge so as to become ethical spiritual subjects. Ḍzīza, Ṭyisha, Fāṭima Muhduz and other majdhubāt lived in spaces that were even more patriarchal than the contemporary Moroccan environment. In spite of this, these women succeeded to transform themselves and to achieve ethical personalities that challenged the patriarchal conventional norms.

Their self-techniques helped these women not only to be close to God but also to make their closeness to God public and at the service of His people. Women saints were, as Cornell (1998) puts it, expressions of the “Mohammadan paradigm,” which takes the Prophet as a model, encompassing the spiritual, social and political spheres. They were active persons who displayed great integration in the socio-political spaces of their times. They created ethical personalities, which played a role not only in religion but also in socio-political contexts. This conclusion acknowledges Cornell’s definition of walāya and wilāya. Women saints employed the outward aspect of their inner spiritual relationship with God (walāya) and made it public (wilāya). Women’s inner spirituality gained them power that empowered them to become public saints and to exercise their authority in the social space. Moroccan women saints are empowered to perform miracles, empowered to communicate with God, empowered to help the weak or oppressed, empowered to act en behalf of others, empowered to mediate the course of destiny and empowered to affect the behavior of other holders of power.355

---

354 Cornell 1998, 233; see also Schimmel 1975
355 Ibid., 177
We can conclude moreover, that the life stories on the women saints discussed in this chapter entail equality effects - in the sense that the women come across as equally worthy and capable as men. As argued before, their ways of life can also be qualified as ethical freedom practices.

Other Moroccan researchers who studied women’s mystical lives in history, mostly focused on the question whether these women’s religious actions created modes of behaviour that contradicted or conformed to the dominant order. As we have seen before, Moroccan feminist Fatima Mernissi (1977) interprets female saints as ideal persons who refused to submit to local traditional norms, and who constructed saintly personalities that contradict the conventional understandings of masculinity and femininity. According to Mernissi, the female saints’ personalities do not challenge the dominant order. Their role remains that of a therapist who offers her services to people for them to cope with the formal power structure.356

Mernissi argues that women’s deep attachment to, and involvement with, saints in North Africa is linked to their dissatisfaction with existing society, this being the reason why more women visit saints than men do. Women seek the saint’s help to find solutions to their problems. Mernissi considers the saints’ sanctuaries the permitted space where women’s rebellion against oppressive gender relations and social injustices occurs.357 Yet, the existing patriarchal order as such is not threatened by these manifestations. Mernissi writes:

Women invest all of their efforts and energies in trying to get a supernatural force to influence the oppressive structure on their behalf.358

The saint’s supernatural force fails to change the dominant structure of society.

The saint in the sanctuary plays the role of psychiatrist in the capitalist society, channelling discontent into the therapeutic processes, and thus depriving it of its potential to combat the formal power structure.359

Mernissi’s argument concerning women saints’ and women venerators’ inability to change the dominant social order, does not take into account their concrete roles in history that were already challenging the patriarchal system, in as far as they entered the religious space and performed religious roles that used to be for men only. From a more thick description of the

356 Mernissi 1977, 112
357 Ibid.
358 Ibid.
359 Ibid.
lives of concrete women saints next to a discussion of the issue in a general way - the challenging agency of these women would come more to the fore.

Another study on Moroccan women and religion, dealing especially with the Moroccan female saint Lalla ‘Awish and her veneration, is van Beek (2002). The aim of this study on is to uncover women’s presence within Islamic mysticism. Van Beek signals a scarcity of sources on women saints, since most researchers on Moroccan sainthood have focussed only on male orthodox saints. Van Beek focuses not only on written but also on oral sources on Lalla ‘Awish in order to highlight the female presence within Islamic mysticism and the significance of women’s religious practices.

Van Beek analyzes the mystical symbols mentioned in the legends as well as in the rituals on Lalla ‘Awish. On this basis she describes Lalla ‘Awish’s piety merely in terms of a tool to achieve the Divine unity. Van Beek thus does not take into account the hardship of this woman to change herself into a saintly personality and the struggles she had to engage in to do so.

A more outspoken contribution to the discussion on women’s religious agency is Bartels (1993), which investigates the significance of saints for Tunisian women. Bartels focuses on the question whether these women, through their veneration of saints, protest against their subordinate position in society. She seeks to demonstrate that this is the case, and discusses whether that protest is a threat to the existing order.

Both the saints and their venerators play active roles in Bartels’ opinion: saints transmit divine blessing (baraka) to their troubled venerators. Female and male venerators perform certain religious rituals to get the saint’s baraka. Bartels also discusses some parallels that exist between saints and women. Where the saint, as Bartels puts it, is the center of the whole tribe or even the whole region, women are the centres of their families. The saint helps the venerators to cope with their troubles, women likewise satisfy their husbands’, childrens’ and relatives’ needs. Bartels further contends that sexual equity is visible in the space of sainthood in as far as sexual difference is not a criterion for sainthood.

Bartels argues for the double face that saints have. She contends that saints are rebels as well as upholders of the existing order in which men are dominant. Women saints as well as women venerators protest against the patriarchal order and affirm at the same time the patriarchal system to which they are bound. They are, as Bartels puts it, ‘loyal towards both the

360 Ibid., 203
361 Ibid.
362 Bartels 1993, 101
363 Ibid.
dominated and the dominant.' From her fieldwork on Tunisian women’s rituals and their symbolism, she concludes that saints are double face, however, she does not explore the lives of the saints themselves. Bartels’ thus focuses on the rituals of saint venerations but does not provide a thick description of the lives of the saints themselves.

By contrast, my thesis draws on the approach of Mahmood (2005; 2001) by discussing the agency of Moroccan women saints, namely through studying the self-techniques that they followed to change themselves into saints. I build on Mahmood’s new approach of religious women as agents who practice ethical self-formation (see Chapter One). As such my study sheds new light on female saints as active agents, and on their impact on their communities. They come forward as agents who gained power and authority that challenged patriarchy and transgressed the conventional norms of gender ideologies. The impact of their agency is also visible in the venerators’ worship of these women saints. These saints’ lives have a considerable psychological impact on women today who consider them as role models, as will be discussed in the next chapter.

Ibid., 114