Chapter Five: Moroccan Women’s Reception of Historical Women Saints

My research explores the various ways women exercise agency in the religious sphere in Morocco’s past and present. In the preceding chapter I discussed the exemplary lives of female saints. In this chapter I explore the impact these devoted women have on contemporary Moroccan women. For that purpose the focus will be on four types of contemporary Moroccan female religious agents: the functionaries at female saints’ sanctuaries; the women who visit and venerate female saints; contemporary women preachers and the women who attend the preachers’ instructional sessions. I research the active ways these women transform themselves to achieve a new level of moral selfhood - i.e., their ethical self-formation - and the role of their holy predecessors in this process.

This chapter is made up of two sections. In the first section I will discuss the different female agents, custodians and visitors, and the various rituals performed within women saints’ shrines. How do the women concerned judge the ways in which female saints and saint veneration impact their lives? The second section will explore contemporary women preachers (wā‘izāt) and spiritual guides (murshidāt) and their religious and social roles inside and outside mosques. I will pay particular attention to the way they receive women saints as historical female preachers. The chapter concludes with an investigation of women attendants’ reception of these women preachers.

5-1 Women Saints Veneration

5-1.1 Religious Spaces and Women's Preferences

In Morocco both the mosque and the shrine are public religious spaces. In each one of them a particular set of prayers and religious practices take place. While the mosque visitors try to focus on a direct relation with the Divine, in the shrine the visitor can establish an extra, indirect relation with God through the saint. This view is stressed by the social scientist Valery Hoffman (1995):
The mosque merely directs prayer toward the spiritual center, [whereas] the shrine contains its own spiritual center and the saint, [as an indirect] link to heaven.\textsuperscript{365}

Sossie Andezian (1997) considers the shrine to be an area where religion is practiced through different performances:

> The sanctuary not only contains the religious memory of the religion, it is also a symbol of liberty. It is a space where love for God and for the saint is expressed with words, songs and ecstatic dancing.\textsuperscript{366}

This quote underscores the central role of the shrine in the achievement of a private and liberal relationship with the Divine. In the shrine the relation is more personal and tangible than in the mosque. The holder of Divine grace is present, the pilgrims have access to the saint,\textsuperscript{367} and, if necessary, the functionaries of the shrines (muqaddamāt and others) help them to enhance and improve this relation. Moreover, stories and legends about the saint's karāmāt (miracles) can be heard. These accounts can not be found in written historical sources, but are part of the local oral history. The shrines' functionaries and venerators have preserved them for generations and perpetuate the rituals that they inherit from their ancestors.

![Timzgid Ufala (Mosque Above) in Sūs region](image)

\textsuperscript{365} Hoffman 1995, 104
\textsuperscript{366} Andezian 1997, 211
\textsuperscript{367} Gibb 1997, 30
Women employ both the mosque and the shrine to experience their spirituality, renew their piety and construct religious personalities. However, Moroccan women are marginalized in the mosques. They are given small spaces for their prayers and religious activities. They are not permitted to view the imām while listening to his prayers and sermons. They have access to the imām’s speech only through a loudspeaker. They also feel constraint in mosques, finding themselves obliged to follow the instructions for attending masjid (mosque). Especially in the past, they weren't supposed to do more than to pray and leave. Today, their number still remains small in comparison to that of their male counterparts. In the countryside this discrepancy is even stronger.

Although this situation is slowly changing, as we will see in what follows, their marginalization in the mosques has forced women to turn to the shrine to live out their religiosity. Moroccan women’s relationship to shrines of both male and female saints is very strong. Because of the specific character of these shrines, they feel more at ease.

5-1.1.1 Shrines: General Features

The shrines of male and female saints in Morocco have similar characteristics. They consist of saints' graves that are located in the center of the sanctuaries. Over the grave of the saint

368 Mazumdar and Mazumdar 2002, 165-78. See also the next section.
369 Mernissi 1977; Tapper 1990
370 Ibid.
there is a darbūz (sarcophagus), which is covered by a green cloth. There is a cupola supported by white walls and decorated by Qurʾan verses and large candles. On the floor of each shrine, there are multicolored carpets, sheepskins and pillows for pilgrims and devotees to rest on. The shrines consist of several rooms, including public kitchens filled with utensils for pilgrims to use in ritual. Most shrines are attached to mosques.

A mosque shrine

The sanctuaries of holy men or women are surrounded by different objects that have a role in their sacredness. In the courtyard you often find large fig trees, which have tattered pieces of cloth tied to their branches, exemplifying votive rituals performed by devotees. There are also shops where people can buy items such as bread, sugar, tea, oil, sweetly scented incense sticks for ritual burning, tasbīḥ's (strings of beads; rosaries) and other necessary items for the performance of ziyāra (visitation) rituals.

Some saints’ shrines are attached to traditional religious schools. The gender of the saint is no hindrance, as the example of Ta’lat’s shrine shows, but only male (Sufi) disciples and students are allowed to study the Qurʾan and fiqh there. The schools offer preliminary training for lower level positions and preparation for more advanced study of the Qurʾan and other Islamic sciences at the Qarawiyyīn University in Fes.
5-1.2 Similarities and Differences between the Female Saints’ Shrines and Veneration

The research here focuses on the shrines of the three selected female saints that were discussed in the preceding chapter - ‘Azīza, ‘Āyisha and Fāṭima, for the following reasons. They are all popular and have quite a number of venerators, whereas other women saints’ shrines are rarely visited by women or men. Moreover, the custodians and/or the numerous venerators of the selected women saints were willing to give me a chance to observe different rituals and religious practices. Next to the similarities, differences exist between the shrines and veneration of the women saints concerned.

The shrines of the three saints are all simple, but ‘Azīza’s shrine is considerably larger. Having living blood relations is an important point of difference between the selected three female saints. Women saints in the Sūs region of southwestern Morocco like ‘Azīza Al-Saksāwiyya and Fāṭima al-Hilāliyya have descendants, who uphold a strong relationship with them. This relationship impels the descendents to actively take care of the shrines and to organize a moussem (annual festival) in honor of their women saints. By contrast, women saints in the North have no known descendants organizing annual festivities; they have even recently started to witness a reduction in the number of visitors to their shrines. This is the actual case of the woman saint ‘Āyisha. No one observes her sanctuary. Clearly, different dynamics are surrounding saints in the North and South.
The explanation for the recession in saint veneration activities in the North is orthodox religious education, which has started to gain popularity among educated Moroccans there. Orthodox Moroccans consider religious hierarchy and the veneration of saints to be un-Islamic practices. By propagating their views, they have started to weaken the relationship between saints and their devotees. This, however, does not mean that people in the North have ceased to venerate saints altogether. It is true that Āyisha al-Idrīsiya’s shrine was closed, and the rituals celebrated around her were reduced. But many who stopped partaking in saint veneration still feel esteem, respect and love for their female saints, as we will see from what follows.

In the South, the situation is completely different. Orthodoxy has much less influence on the people. Southwestern Berber women saints still enjoy a great popularity. They are part and parcel of their religio-cultural and ethno-linguistic background. Saints venerators believe that these female saints, who are friends of God, are able to offer assistance to people in need. They are intermediaries between the believers and God and also have curative powers themselves. In their pursuit of healing, pilgrims also find moral assistance and refuge at a sanctuary. How does this work in practice?

5-1.3 Rituals

A visit to a sanctuary is called a ziyāra. Pilgrims undertake daily, weekly, monthly and annual visits to saints' shrines. People’s visits to saints are primarily enhanced by the power of baraka. As discussed in previous chapters, baraka in Morocco is the quality of sacred grace and salvation that saints possess and are able to transmit to others. It is a force that endows women and men with capacities to meet their daily troubles and to protect themselves against misfortunes such as evil eye, bad luck, illnesses and accidents. Regular visits and various rituals aim at a strong relationship with the saints to enhance the achievement of this sacred supernatural force that they incarnate. Moroccan women actively participate in these rituals. In shrines more than in mosques, their religious agency becomes highly visible. This is especially the case on Fridays, l-yum l-embrek (the blessed day), when hundreds of women visit saints' tombs, and the number of females far exceeds that of males.

In all the shrines I visited, the women performed similar rituals, including trance rituals, dhikr-rituals (repetitive recital of mystical poetic phrases), sacrifice rituals, marriage and fertility rituals, next to the celebration of mainstream religious activities. Venerators are
free to choose the ways to pay respect to their women saints are equally free to perform the rituals they need.

Men and women in a saint’s shrine

Researchers interpret the rituals of ziyāra related to saints as therapy that cures physical and psychological conflicts.\(^{371}\) Trance is a special cure that is called ḥaḍra in the Moroccan native dialect. This Arabic word emanates from the root ḥ-d-r meaning “to be present.” ḥaḍra, then, is a religious expressive performance for seeking the Divine presence. The participants submit to the rules of the rituals and put their physical bodies at stake. They cry, scream, devour their energy, and faint, hoping to meet the spirit of their women saints. The women believe that they are possessed by the spirit of the woman saint or by other supernatural beings.\(^{372}\) Therefore, the trance is a way to live the spiritual world, to glean some of its divine grace and to be cured from different illnesses.

Venerators performing şalāt ritual in a saint’s shrine

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\(^{371}\) Mernissi 1977; Crapanzano 1981
\(^{372}\) Crapanzano 1981, 7
Besides women’s acts and deeds, women’s utterances in the trance are equally important. Women in the North and in the South chant religious ritual texts in their gatherings in the shrines. The texts reveal women’s Sufi orientation by their expression of disinterest in the material world and the wholehearted devotion and love for God, the Prophet and the community of holy men and women. The significance and impact of positive relations between relatives and members of the whole society is also emphasized in women’s poetic texts. Altogether the songs express their desire for spirituality and good social relationships.

5-2 Women in Shrines Today

The women I will discuss in this section are women functionaries at shrines and women venerators.

5-2.1 Female Functionaries at Shrines

Not only women saints but also female functionaries at shrines are important to fulfill the needs of pilgrims. They are muqaddamāt (custodians), ṣaqārāt or ḥeḍḍārāt (pious and/or Sufi women in charge of trance dances) and healers. All functionaries display women’s leadership and mediation in rituals and the centrality of women’s active religious agency.
Muqaddamāt

The muqaddamāt are crucial. Whether or not they are descendants of their women saints’ and heirs of their baraka, they are all empowered to behave as the overall leaders of most of the shrines’ activities, as the guides of the venerators’ rituals and worship, and the teachers of women. They help women in crises and satisfy their needs. They serve God and people by respecting the instructions of religion. The muqaddama Rqiya\(^{373}\) confirms that she does indeed play a wide range of religious and social roles:

The venerators are always asking me to lead the gathering, prayers and other rituals. Most women ask me for baraka that I inherited from my great grandmother Lalla `Azīza. They also ask me to resolve their conflictual relations either with husbands, children or other people. I spend the whole day in the shrine solving people’s problems.\(^{374}\)

Muqaddama Ṛḥma adds:

When I swallowed my grandmother’s blessed saliva, my life changed. I became more pious than before, and I started to assign all my time to people’s needs. I knew I became a holder of a Divine grace, and it was this Divine grace that enabled me to learn by heart the Qur’an and to teach it to people. Women are always around me, some of them ask for my baraka, others want me to offer them solutions to their problems.\(^{375}\)

I saw Zayna, another muqaddama of Lalla `Azīza, in action when a family brought a ram as an offering. In southwestern Morocco pilgrims offer sacrifices during their visits to saints. The sacrificing of an animal was referred to locally as al-ma`rūf. Before the slaughtering of the ram started, the muqaddama painted the ram’s head with henna and its eyes with kohl. These acts, in the opinion of the muqaddama, increased the amount of baraka and ajr (religious merit) obtained by the sacrifice. As she explained, this embellishment and the healthy state of the ram or any other sacrificed animal are necessary for the veneration of saints. According to her, the spirit of the saint will be very pleased and satisfied and her blessings will be bestowed in great amounts on the supplicants. In short, the muqadamat’s doings were supposed to generate more powerful effects for the pilgrims.

\(^{373}\) I have used pseudonyms to avoid recognition.
\(^{374}\) Rqiya, interviews, February 2010
\(^{375}\) Ṛḥma, interviews, February 2010
In other instances, I observed pilgrims whose financial situation did not allow them to offer a ram as a sacrifice. Instead, they sacrificed a chicken. The old male descendants were the ones who slaughtered the sacrificed animal. When the ram was still bleeding to death, I saw the muqaddama take a bowl and filled it with this blood. She then asked the family that offered the animal to sprinkle their hands with some of this blood and to expose the rest to the sun until it became dry. She advised them to put the dry blood in a piece of cloth and use it as an amulet against evil eye. The descendants cut the right shoulder of the sacrificed animal and offered it to the family that brought the animal to the woman saint. Then they cut the rest of the ram into pieces and distributed them to people in the shrine or attendants at the celebration of the sacrifice. Some of the people cooked the offered meat and ate it. Others had chosen to take their portions of meat to their relatives.

When simpler items are brought in, it is the muqaddama who takes care of their distribution. I saw the muqaddama of Lalla Fāṭima serving couscous to men and women in the shrine. In many ways she plays the role of an intermediary. She said:

This couscous is an offering from a young man living abroad. Whenever he feels he has worries, he sends me the money to organize a ritual meal on his behalf in honor of our holy woman. He asks me to perform this offering to our holy woman in his place and perform his prayers.\footnote{Muqaddama, interviews, February 2010}

Other women in the sanctuary asked the muqaddama to say a prayer for relatives who are absent. One of these women says: “I come here for my sister who lives in France.” The woman gave the muqaddama her offerings such as a large green cloth as a cover for the grave, and other items like bread, date, tea, and milk. She asked the muqaddama to pray for her sister and transmit her wish.
A muqaddama kissing Lalla Aziza’s grave

**Fqirat**

Fqīra (plural: fqrāt) just refer to be very pious female pilgrims, but inside shrines the term may also refer to the Sufi women who lead the trance dance and prayer rituals. They may also be called ḥeḍḍārāt, after the ḥaḍra', the name of the trance dance, as for example, in the shrine of Lalla ‘Azīza:

Both in the north and the south of Morocco trance attendance was much larger on Friday than other days. On Friday women living near and far went to shrines or zāwiya's to participate in the ḥaḍra. The room where these trance dances were held was so crowded with women that no empty space was left to stretch out one’s legs. It started in the early hours of the afternoon and lasted until sunset prayer. The muqaddama, as the leader of ḥeḍḍārāt (the women who perform the trance), ordered women to prepare musical instruments such as bindir's (circular frame drums with skinned covered surface), drum and ta’rja's (small tambourines). Each used a particular instrument while waiting for their muqaddama to open the session. The muqaddama started with the recitation of Sūrat al-Fātiha and some Qur'an verses. Afterwards, she began to drum and chant poetic texts. Some women used the musical instruments, and others chose to clap their hands. When the rhythm of the chanting quickened, women got up, formed a circle and started moving up and down. A middle aged woman whom I called Nejma got in the center of the circle of women and started to jump up and down. I was told that she was in the trance. Her
helper held her jellaba from the back to break her fall. The other women carried on their chanting and ecstatic dancing. Nejma was left in a corner to have a rest. No one paid attention to her anymore. Women carried on repeating their poetic verses ‘Allah ḥayy’ (God is alive) following the new rhythm of chanting. Other women collapsed and sank to the floor too. Their stretched bodies occupied the whole space. Suddenly, one of these women rose and said: “I like to participate in hadra because I feel well in my being and health”. Once the trance was finished, a sweet tea with mint was served with a piece of bread.

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In Lalla ʿAzīza's sanctuary, Zayna is the leader of the fāqrāt, a widow, like most of her fellow chanters. I saw her sitting on a sheepskin close to the grave, reciting from the Qur'an. After she performed her prayers in the shrine, she got up and went to a room adjacent to the room of the grave. The room was large. It was furnished with carpets and sheepskins. Its white walls were decorated near the ceiling. Her seat was marked by a white blanket, a pillow and a low table. The other fāqrāt sat on the carpet leaning against pillow lining the walls with scarves on but their malḥāf dropped around their shoulders. Zayna opened the session with the recitation of the Qur’an and the praising of the Prophet. In Tashlḥit dialect Zayna and the other fāqrāt chanted poetic texts.377 When the mu’azzin called for the afternoon prayer, Zayna ordered women present in the shrine to place themselves in lines to perform a collective prayer. After ṣalāt (obligatory prayer), a woman entered the room accompanied by her son, who was holding lit incense sticks. The fragrance pervaded the whole space. The mother and her son dropped to their knees in front of Zayna to pray for her ill son. Zayna performed a supplication and gave a piece of sugar to the son to eat. I was told that the piece of sugar contains a lot of baraka. At sunset, Zayna prepared to leave the shrine. Before doing so, she gathered up all the donations she had collected during the day and distributed them to the poor fāqrāt. She also gave some money to the keeper of the shrine. He said to her “Allah yerḥam al-wālidīn.”378

377 The gatherings of women within shrines to chant poetic texts are called Agraw. These poetic texts treat different religious issues, as will be discussed below. For more details see also Rausch (2004).
378 Allah yerḥam al-Wālidīn means “May God have mercy on the parents”: a way of saying thank you in Moroccan dialect.
Healers

Mediation roles may also be played by female healers. Rqiya, a descendant of Lalla Fāṭima and a healer at her sanctuary, explained that in order to cure ill venerators she bestows her holy foremother’s baraka on them. She does so by spitting, like all saints and their heirs used to do:

Rqiya asked two women holding a paralyzed old man to put him on the ground. Rqiya put her right hand on the man’s paralyzed legs. Then, she started reading an incantation over him. This performance in the Moroccan context is called “kat’azam ‘alih” (reciting Quranic verses over him). That is, the woman healer started to recite bismi Allah al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm (in the name of Allah, the merciful, the compassionate). Then, Rqiya recited several Qur'anic chapters and supplicated God and the Prophet. Once she finished the incantation, she spit on the paralyzed parts of the ill man murmuring the following words: Allah huwa al-Shāfī (God is the healer) three times. She sprinkled the patient’s legs with tar (qatrān). Then, she took a nail (mismār), put it on the patient’s ill body parts for a while and threw it. This is a symbolic gesture meaning extracting bad omen and getting rid of the illness.  

5-2.2 Women Venerators of Female Saints

379 Rqiya, interviews, April 2010
Women venerators of female saints cover a wide range of categories: young and old, illiterate and literate, sick and healthy. Most of them are in the midst of an emotional or social crisis; many have failed to meet the requirements of the conventional roles. For instance, marriage plays an important role in Moroccan culture. It is a religious and social duty that enables men and women to be labeled real adults and mature Muslims. Marriage is especially important to women. It brings them status. Unmarried women, whose independent lives are not accepted, occupy a third-rate position at the social ladder of Moroccan society. However, the same applies to married, but barren, women. Women in Morocco always consider themselves primarily to be the cause of failures of fertility and reproduction, whereas men always regard themselves as fertile. Married women may also have problems with their co-wives and their husbands’ families. Many women fear divorce because divorced women become subjected to negative designations. The position of women who are left behind is also a precarious one.

All these women's problems and inabilities to live up to the cultural norms urge them to search for spiritual comfort, peace of mind, and relief from daily-life pressures. Many rural, illiterate women with no financial means find in the veneration of women saints a budget solution to their health problems. The women visitors in the sanctuaries explained in concrete terms that they come in pursuit of Divine blessing and favors such as a good marriage partner, conception of a male child, and a safe delivery.

Women visiting Lalla Aicha al-Bahriya’s shrine

Other temporal wishes may include a cure from an illness, a good harvest, success in studies, employment, finding lost relatives, and passing an exam. Of course, there are also
women who have no problems. These women simply seek to live out their spirituality. In addition to the earlier mentioned examples, the daily routines in the sanctuaries of Ta’lat and Fāṭima provide an insight in the endeavours of women venerators to achieve all these purposes:

My host Raḥma, a fifty year-old woman, and her daughter Fadma were always talking about their tagurrramt and about the day of the visit to her shrine. Raḥma said: “Friday is the day of visit to our tagurrramt.” With a string of beads in her hand, she turned to me and said: “Do you want to go to Lalla Ta’lat this afternoon?” My host’s neighbors shared Raḥma’s opinion and we all agreed to make a collective ziyāra to Lalla Ta’lat. Raḥma’s painted her eyes black with kohl (antimony) and her teeth brownish with siwāk (walnut twigs) and put on a malḥaf (traditional cloth for covering the entire body). Raḥma took an empty basket and put some loaves of bread, a box of sugar, some tea, oil, dates, incense sticks, and a bottle of rosewater in it. Once we arrived at the shrine, Raḥma and her daughter went directly to the darbūz and kissed its four corners. While they were circambulating the darbūz, they recited the first chapter of the Qur’an, Sūrat al- Fātiḥa (The Opening). I also heard them praising the Prophet and performing their prayers (du`a”s). The following prayer supported Raḥma’s desire to find a partner for her thirty year old daughter: “Hope in God, hope in the Prophet, hope in the woman saint. Please! God, help my daughter to get married.” Once Raḥma and Fadma had finished their prayers, Fadma cut a piece of cloth from her malḥaf and tied it to the window of the shrine. She said: “I make an oath to the holy woman to answer my prayer.” She then took a bottle of rosewater from her basket and sprinkled it on the grave as well as on [the] women sitting in the shrine and on the outstretched bodies of other sleeping women. Raḥma asked me to sprinkle my hands and my face with rosewater to gain the woman saint’s blessing. She turned to her daughter and asked her to take some of the earth from the grave because she believed it contains a lot of baraka (blessing). Many girls and women were also seeking to implore Lalla Ta’lat’s baraka by bathing in the holy water of her well hoping to end their life of celibacy and to fulfill other purposes and

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380 Men who also take parts in the rituals, as well are primarily concerned with finding solutions to their social and psychological problems of sexuality, fertility, masculinity and other crises. In fact their stress hinders them in the performance of the typical male roles. See Crapanzano 1981, 9
381 A Berber word meaning “a woman saint”.

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wishes. Zayna, the muqaddama of the shrine and the leader of the fqīrāt (devotees) smiled and led Fadma to the bathroom at the back of the shrine. The bathroom consists of a room with only a curtain in the door opening. A suffocating smell of incense hit the newcomers. The smoke permeated the whole space so that the bodies of women were like ghosts. In a corner of the bathroom, there were undergarments abandoned by women, as a symbolic gesture, which signifies leaving behind “tab’a” (bad omen). Raḥma’s daughter had a bath with the blessed water from the well; she put on new clothes, lit candles and left the bathroom. Once back in the shrine, Zayna was surrounded by fqīrāt chanting, repeating the following words: Subḥāna Allāh al-‘aẓīm (Glory be to God the Sublime One). Raḥma and her daughter started chanting with Zayna and other fqīrāt. Once they finished their chanting, they hurried out of of the shrine hoping to reach their home before dark.  

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An anonymous woman venerator says:

I always came to the shrine and asked Lalla Fāṭima to help me to get married. One day, while I was sleeping in the shrine, I dreamt of an old man offering me new shoes. When I told the muqaddama of what I had dreamt of, she said to me that being offered new shoes meant that I would soon get married. In fact, one week after the dream, a teacher asked me for marriage. It is now more than ten years that I have been married to this teacher. It is for this reason that I always visit my woman saint.  

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Rabḥa is thirty-five years old. She got married to her husband ten years ago. She is barren. “I come here [to the shrine]” Rabḥa says, “to ask Lalla Fāṭima to find me a solution. You see, sister, I am an ordinary woman. Who am I to prevail upon Allah? The woman saint is close to Allah and through the holy woman saint I bring my problems before Him. I have already visited a faqīh. He recited an incantation over me. He prepared some olive oil mixed with his saliva for me to sprinkle on my womb for three days. He also made me a taʿwīdh (amulet) for conceiving children. He instructed me to dissolve it in water and to drink a little of the water each day for seven days in succession. It has now been two

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382 Participant observation, April 2010
383 A venerator, interviews, April, 2010
years since I did what the faqīh told me, but I have seen no change. Finally, I decided to visit Lalla Fāṭima hoping to find a solution for my case. I killed a chicken and spent three days in her shrine.  

Orthodox rituals equally take place around saints’ tombs. Most of the women within the shrines perform the ritual prayer (ṣalat). There are women who had chosen to perform prayers of either two, four or even more raka‘āt (sing: rak‘a, prostration). Its meaning differs from that in the ordinary mosque since women consider the shrine a holy place where the ajr (religious merit) of prayer ritual is doubled. I also observed women fasting and breaking their fast in the sanctuaries. They all chose to celebrate their ifṭār close to their favorite women saints. One of the fāqīrāt (very pious women) said: “We always gather here to do our prayers, fasting, and reading of the Qur’an. Each Friday we cook couscous and offer it to poor people.”

The religious rituals that these women, both in the North or in the South, perform nowadays are similar to those described by earlier researchers such as Edward Westermack (1926), Fenneke Reysoo (1977), and Kelly Pemberton (2004).

5-3 Spiritual Development and Empowerment through Saints’ Rituals

Mernissi (1978) and Bartels (1994) stress the functional goal of women’s visits to the shrines. They conclude that Moroccan women’s religious rituals around women saints only serve practical goals. However, from my research I found that women venerated gain more from their strong attachment to pious women, namely spiritual development.

While venerated of women saints visit shrine to strengthen themselves to cope with daily life issues, they also use the cults for spiritual self-development. They may learn a lot from the functionaries in the shrines, who in many cases experienced a period of growth and learning themselves. Raḥma relates:

When I swallowed my grandmother’s blessed saliva, my life changed. I became more pious than before, and I started to assign all my time to people’s needs. I knew I became a holder of a Divine grace, and it was this Divine grace that enabled me to learn by heart the Qur’an and to teach it to people.

384 Ibid.
385 Ibid.
386 Raḥma, interviews, April 2010
The baraka that Raḥma passively inherited from her saintly foremother empowered her and made her feel responsible to actively search for more knowledge and to have other women profit from it.

A woman in trance

Fāṭima, the muqaddama of `Azīza’s shrine, offers another powerful example for women venerators. During my fieldwork in that shrine, I forged a deep friendship with the fifty-year-old Fāṭima. The latter had completed secondary education, was married and had two children. During my continuous encounters with her in the shrine, I came to know that Fāṭima has been the muqaddama for more than twenty years. She had visited the saint from an early age:

I have started visiting Lalla `Azīza in my childhood. I used to go with my mother to her shrine each Friday. Each time I visited her tomb, I met other women. We chanted the dhikr and prayed together. My mother taught me how to venerate Lalla `Azīza. After her death I carried on learning the cult of saints and participated in its ritual practices until I became a muqaddama of the shrine. I cannot separate myself from the shrine and from guiding people’s religious practices because these kinds of works render a lot of ajr, I am primarily seeking a good afterlife. I am now accustomed to being present everyday in the shrine. When I don’t come to the shrine, I do not feel well.  

387 Fatima, interviews, April 2010
She appeared to be very experienced in the art of saint veneration. She also called herself an expert in the teaching of the cult of saints and in the teaching of religion. Like all muqaddamāt, she headed women’s religious circles in the shrines and guided women’s rituals. Due to her strong religious personality she appeared to be a woman with power and authority. How had she achieved that status?

In the field I saw Fāṭima focused on the notion of good intention (niyya) as the primary condition of saint veneration. I heard her advising a woman to venerate `Azīza’s shrine with good intention. She says: “diri niyya temshi b-ḥajt-ek maqḍiyya”388 “Maintain positive intention and your request will be accomplished.” Here niyya is a standard of saint veneration and the achievement of a desired religious life-style and a strong spiritual personality. The muqaddama insisted on its consistent embrace. Her conversation proceeded as follows:

The good intention is important not only while visiting ṣaliḥīn but also in our daily contacts with people. Without niyya one can not get what one wants. God also insists on one’s positive niyya. If I act without niyya, I will be a hypocrite because I don’t feel it inside of me, and my visit to the shrine contradicts my inner intention and my natural feelings.389

The muqaddama encourages women venerators to cultivate niyya in themselves while venerating their woman saint. In fact, Niyya is more important than anything else in the construction of pious selfhood. That is why the women feel free to express their love to God in the way they want: by words, songs or ecstatic dancing.390 They take liberties that can't be taken within mosques and that also meet resistance from orthodox Muslims. Saint veneration is important issue in the debate among Moroccan believers, men and women alike, especially in the North. Many women venerators are fully aware of that. Still, they adhere to their choice to participate in saint veneration. It is a practice that reasonates with their inner feelings by allowing them to develop spirituality on a personal level. Fāṭima firmly stated:

The Islamists come to the shrine to warn women against saint veneration. They want to close the shrine. I don’t care about their preaching. These people don't have niyya ḥasana (good intention). I won’t do what the ikhwān (the Islamists) say and leave the shrine and the

388 Ibid.
389 Ibid.
390 Andezian 1997, 211
veneration of saints.

Rqiya, an old woman sitting near us, interrupted our conversation to say:

My relationship with Lalla 'Azīza is very old. I have been venerating Lalla 'Azīza for about twenty years now. Each time I visit her, I put on new clothes and make myself very beautiful. In the past there were a lot of visitors to her shrine. These people used to have niyya. But people now have lost niyya (...). Of course it is al-Madrasa (schools), which makes people stop visiting saints. These people are hypocrites because some of them still have a desire to be with saints and to visit them (...). Look at me, although I went to school to learn how to write and how to read, I did not let the school affect my relationship with Lalla 'Azīza. Each Saturday I visit her shrine and stay the whole afternoon in her shrine. I cannot spend the week without visiting our tamghart.

Caroline Humphrey (1994) calls this process “ritual commitment.” In this case, it means that women created for themselves a strategy to preserve their relationship with women saints and saint veneration. Given the backgrounds of women saints, they also commit to their cultural heritage and to their ethnic identity. For example, all the rituals I observed in the South are performed in Berber language. During the religious gathering in women saints’ shrines, they chant poetic dhikr-texts in the local Tashlḥit. There are even some rituals such as, such as the tying of rugs to windows and trees, that still exist and that date back to the pre-Islamic period. In the north of Morocco, women use their native Arabic dialect in the performance of their rituals. Women chant poetic texts that they composed themselves or that they inherited from their Andalusian forefathers. Women in contemporary Morocco seek self-expression in rituals they see as fit for themselves. They defend their popular religion.
Women venerating the saint’s grave

This shows that although women’s religious actions have been interpreted as passive and marginalized performances, women are active religious persons, constituting their own religious voices. However, as we will see in what follows, the female venerators’ opposition to Islamists and Islamism does not mean that they have a negative attitude towards orthodox Islamic education as such.

5-3.1 Empowerment by Association with Saints

Both in the north and the south of Morocco, pilgrims are keen to hold close personal relationships with their favorite women saints, but many like to go one step further. They want their families to get involved, too. Women may buy small gifts from shops close the shrines to offer them to the relatives left at home. Their goal is not only to transmit the saints’ baraka to their family members, but also to encourage them to establish independent relationships with their favorite women saints. In this way their own bond with the sacred shrines grows even tighter, while the number of venerators of their women saints increases. Venerators as I will discuss below derive empowerment from saint veneration because it inspires them to actively change themselves, and take their life into their own hands, so as to become a servant to God and people.

Not surprisingly, these women devotees are eager to learn about the lives and deeds of their women saints. They are observed spending the whole day within their shrines. More importantly, the association with a widely respected female saint gains devoted women respect in their environment. Their overall status is enhanced with the perfection of their religious and social personalities. No one can deny the achievements of great women saints
and the benefits to learn from them. This is especially the case when these saints are also considered as the foremothers of their families or founders of their tribes.

![The venerated of Lalla Aziza al-Saksawiyya](image)

### 5-3.1.1 Holy Female Founders

In Morocco, saints were the usual founders of patrilineal and patrilocal society. They passed on sainthood to their descendants. The extended saintly families came to have clans, which developed into tribes. The latter increasingly displayed their blood relationship to their saintly ancestor, and not without result. There were even tribes that associated with a saint figure who was not really their biological forefather or ancestor, as we saw in the preceding chapter. The continuous relationship with neighboring saintly clans made them followers to their saints. The male saint here is the hub, the center of segmented tribalism.\(^{394}\) Interestingly, in the field, foremothers of saintly families proved not to be uncommon with many women consider themselves as their proud descendants.

Most of the saints’ venerated acknowledged that both male and female saints could become founders of saintly families and that both had followed the same strategies to be the head of a lineage. Some venerated interpreted a woman saint as a foremother of their lineage in terms of the baraka or Divine grace that God bestows on her. Khadija, an illiterate female venerator, simply stated that baraka makes people venerate saints (either women or men) and remain attached to them as the forefathers and foremothers of their tribes and saintly

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\(^{394}\) See Gellner 1969
families. Other venerators interpreted the way a woman became a founder of a saintly family in terms of her continuous struggles to have a great piety and faith in God. These efforts resulted in her being admired by God and offered sainthood, and consequently, in becoming the foremother of tribes. An old female venerator, whom I called Bamou says:

Lalla Fāṭima had niyya (intention) to become pious. She devoted the rest of her life to God and ignored the dunyā (material life) … the dunyā is deceitful. It makes one lose one’s faith in God. But Lalla Fāṭima chose to be with God, who made her a saint.  

Bamou referred to niyya as a driving force for cultivating strong piety. According to her, Fāṭima al-Hilāliyya had the intention to become a saint, and she engaged in piety and in the marginalization of material life. Another devoted female venerator of Fāṭima al-Hilāliyya stressed the role of piety in making a woman saint into the founder of tribes. This old woman contended:

Our tagurramt used to be a great tafqīr. She prayed to God day and night. I remember my grandmother telling me that Fāṭima was very patient. Her husband was very cruel to her. He brought a second wife into the house, and he did not give her a share of the housework. She did all the housework with her mouth shut. She never complained. In the night she threaded wool garments and her heart was reciting the names of God.” The female venerator stopped for a while and continued: “It is her ṣṣabr which made her have all of these”. She was saying this and referring to the cupola and the venerated. 

Here, ṣṣabr is not just a personal feature or characteristic but a self-technique that women saints actively used in facing the hardships of life and in the fulfillment of a highly mystical life: ṣṣabr does not mean passiveness because it has an explicit and positive goal. Fāṭima al-Hilāliyya embodied the practice of patience to become a saint. Her patience, as the old female venerator puts it, gained her a shrine where pilgrims have venerated her until today. It urged people to affiliate with her sacred lineage. More than thirty tribes claimed to be the descendants of Fāṭima al-Hilāliyya. Similarly, a great number of rural tribes and clans still

395 Bamou, interviews, April 2010.  
396 Ibid.  
397 Tafqīr is a Berber word meaning “a very pious woman.” It is the equivalent of the Arabic faqīra.  
398 A woman venerator, interviews, April 2010
venerate `Azīza al-Saksāwiyya as the foremother of their saintly family.³⁹⁹ This shows that
gender is not taken into consideration in the veneration and the affiliation to historical saints.

Holy women brought strength to families, clans and tribes. Whole villages are named
after them. It is not surprising that in the south of Morocco women saints like Fāṭima and
`Azīza are called by the Berber word tamghart, meaning “leader or greatest.”⁴⁰⁰ “She is the
greatest in spirituality and piety and all the people here are strongly attached to our
tamghart,” a woman venerator of Fāṭima explained.⁴⁰¹

![A woman venerator](image)

### 5-3.1.2 Women Saints as Empowering Role Models

Most venerators in the north and the south of Morocco stressed that the women discussed in
the preceding chapter are qudwa's (examples) in religion and piety. Whoever takes these
women saints as role models gains their strength and empowerment.⁴⁰² Others added that
they perceive them as such because they succeeded to achieve a level of piety which was
even stronger than that of male saints. With the achievement of a stronger baraka these
exemplary women were able to impress both females and males.⁴⁰³ A woman venerator of
Lalla Fāṭima says:

³⁹⁹ Ibid.
⁴⁰⁰ By contrast, small domestic women saints who had not served their society in a similar way did not receive
such honorific titles. This hierarchy of sainthood applies to men, too.
⁴⁰¹ Rqiya, interviews, April 2010
⁴⁰² Ibid.
⁴⁰³ Ibid.
I have already visited Mūlāy Abū Ya`qūb, Mūlāy Ibrāhīm and other male saints, but I prefer Lalla Fāṭima because she has a strong baraka, and she answered all my prayers. I prayed for her to bestow her blessing on my unmarried daughter, and my daughter got married. I also prayed for her to cure my ill husband, and he was cured. It is her strong baraka that makes her highly venerated and respected.\(^{404}\)

The shaykh of zāwiya al-Ṣiddīqiyya described Āyisha as his favorite woman saint. She played such a big role in his spiritual growth that he considers her to be his spiritual mother:

One night I saw her in a vision. She told me to stop visiting the male saint Sīdī Brāhīm who is the grand-forefather of my saintly family. From that time I had this vision, I decided to be her follower.\(^{405}\)

Here the shaykh who usually performed weekly visits to his forefather Sīdī Ibrāhīm whose tomb is close to Lalla `Āyisha's decided to develop a strong relationship with her. Lalla `Āyisha gave birth to his desire of spirituality and made him become more pious than before. He says:

This vision doubled my interest in piety. I began to read a lot about saintly women and men and to visit their shrines. The Islamists of our city called me al-Qubūrī (an addict to grave visits) because of my continuous visits to saints’ tombs. However, what they don't understand is that my visits to saints don't mean that I am seeking their baraka, but that I am seeking their example. Lalla `Āyisha makes me believe in women’s abilities to become saints. A woman is like a man. She can reach the stage of iḥsān.\(^{406}\)

Women saints do not only show that women can achieve the highest states of learning and spirituality, but that they may also choose the lives they want in order to get there. Many venerators appreciated the way women saints lived their piety and sanctity, Raḥma says: “Lalla `Azīza refused marriage and dedicated her life to God. She decided to remain unmarried in order to better worship God and to devote herself to Him.” The imam of the mosque where `Āyisha al-Idrīsiyya’s tomb is located contended that `Āyisha was highly

\(^{404}\) A venerator, interviews, April 2010
\(^{405}\) Ibid.
\(^{406}\) Ibid.
knowledgeable and advanced in religion, and if one wanted to become like her one had to work hard.  

More importantly, venerators actively put forward women saints as role models. They do so in various ways. The shaykh of the zāwiya al-Ṣiddiqiya mentioned above says:

In the zāwiya I give my murīd's a weekly course on Moroccan saintly figures including women. I explain them the saints’ life stories that I found in hagiographical books. My aim in this course is to take these saintly people as examples to imitate.

The shaykh did not only strive to familiarize his disciples with Moroccan saints and Sufis, but he also taught them that women were able to become saints with miraculous deeds and to render themselves public religious figures. He propagated that they are worthy examples to be followed by everyone.

Many women venerators who praise women saints' religious lives in their songs actually follow her path of piety. Devotees of Lalla Fāṭima prayed and fasted over long periods of time. They also distributed food and gave charity to poor people because, as some older ladies put it, Fāṭima also used to do so during her lifetime. Their visits to women saints shrines didn't have therapeutic purposes, they just aimed at improving themselves by creating a moral personhood, in other words, an ethical self-formation.

And that was exactly why most of the venerators interpreted their relationship with women saints as a form of empowerment. The fqiqrāt I met in the shrines of the women saints I studied regularly contended that their frequent visits to women saints empowered them to think of their piety and the way to perfect their religion and spirituality to achieve their women saints’ perfect spiritual and social status.

5-4 Mutual Empowerment

Fact is that venerators do not only gain power from women saints, but that they themselves also invest power in these holy women. Venerators seek help and empowerment from their saintly women to overcome their hardships and crises. They seek these women's sacred blessing as a counterforce to gender injustice and discrimination. But these women

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407 Ibid.
408 Ibid.
409 Ibid.
410 Ibid.
venerators also empower these historical women saints. This is evident from their continuous visits to their tombs, the rituals that they perform within shrines and the chanting of stories about their lives. One might notice here that venerators unconsciously revive the memory of these historical women saints and keep their legacy alive within their contemporary modern environment. They indirectly offer them a space to remain alive and present in their modern life. They give them the status they feel the women saints deserve. They empower them to empower them. This conclusion is similar to that of Jansen, Hermkens and Notermans (2009), who also acknowledge the accidental relationship of empowerment existing between women saints and venerators.411

Venerators in the annual pilgrimage (Moussem) of a saint in Meknes city

Venerators in the annual pilgrimage of Imma Hugga ali (19th century), a woman saint in south-east of Morocco

411 Jansen, Hermkens and Notermans 2009, 8
5-5 Contemporary Women Preachers

At one instant during my fieldwork in the shrines, I heard the women venerated discussing a religious course that they attended in one of the mosques in the old medina of Qaṣr al-Kabīr. My curiosity was raised so I asked them why they followed these courses. A forty-year-old venerator, whom I called Khadīja, told me she had heard about instructional courses by women preachers from friends and more particularly from Moroccan TV channel al-Sādisa.

Khadīja has a primary level of education and decided to undertake an extra strategy to educate herself. She is not satisfied with the shrine and its traditional religious cults alone, so she also started frequenting the orthodox religious institution of the mosque. Khadīja and other women venerated believe in saint veneration and in orthodox Islamic education at the same time. For them, visiting saints and visiting mosques are both important strategies that help them to construct a stronger religious personality and to gain God’s forgiveness (ajr).

Khadīja contends:

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\begin{align*}
\text{What we learn in the course in the mosque helps us to pray to God directly, while in the shrine we pray to God through Lalla ` Āyisha al-İdrisiya. What are we in front of Lalla ` Āyisha? Of course we are nothing! Lalla ` Āyisha is a friend of God, and we pray to her to pray God on our behalf.}^{412} \\
\end{align*}
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Khadīja admired Şafiyya, the woman preacher in the mosque: “I like Şafiyya’s way of teaching the Qur’an and the Hadith. I regularly attend her lessons”. Her views on Şafiyya prompted me to do further research on murshidāt and voluntary women preachers and highlight their active religious agency and the way they achieved a religious personhood.

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412 Khadija, interviews, July 2010
5-5.1 Official Feminization of the Religious Practice

Over the last decades, Moroccan society has undergone a radical transformation within the religious sphere. The growth of urbanity and education has prompted ruptures with the traditional life styles and conduct rules. In response, Morocco worked to combine the traditional and the modern in all walks of life including religion and gender.

The state has contributed enormously to changes in religious gender roles. Some of these changes were initiated and realized under the reign of the current king, Mohammad VI. Moroccan women who had fought to achieve the highest level of education, succeeded in gaining approval for their employment in different fields of society. Among these fields are politics and religion. The latter stopped to be an exclusively male domain on the official level due to Morocco’s reform project to democratize the institution of religious authority. The main objectives of the reforms were first to modernize the religious sphere; second, to make the transmission of religious knowledge national, and, finally, to promote the state’s new perspective on the management of religion.

One of the most remarkable moves introduced by King Mohammad VI and the Moroccan authorities was to incorporate women’s religious knowledge and authority in the public national network of religious affairs. Women became members in the High Council of

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413 Sadiqi 2008
414 Ibid.
415 Ibid. See also Rausch 2011
‘ulamā’ and set out delivering religious lectures during al-Durūs al-Hasaniyya organized by the Ministry of Religious Endowments and Islamic Affairs during the month of Ramadan.

From 2005 onwards, the Ministry of Religious Affairs has started an annual program in which fifty women are trained in religious matters. The graduates, called murshidāt or “religious guides” receive a training that consists of Islamic courses in the Qur’an, Hadith, fiqh, Muslim history, and courses in social sciences, humanities, law, technology and foreign languages. The combination of Islamic and modern courses is important for them, because their job is not only to transmit Islamic knowledge by preaching and education but also to serve women, offering them help for their social and personal problems. To be accepted by the state as a religious guide, the applicant has to be under forty years of age, hold a Bachelor’s degree in Islamic studies, Arabic language or literature.

Murshidāt are still to be distinguished from murshids, the male counterparts of murshidāt. The murshidāt whom I interviewed said that the only difference between them and their male counterparts is the Qur’anic recitation as a condition for admission to the program. The male religious guides are supposed to recite the entire Quranic text; whereas the female religious guides are supposed to memorize just half of the holy book. Yet another difference between the female and male religious guides is the kind of works and activities they perform. Both are trained to work as preachers and guides in religious and public institutions throughout Morocco. However, the murshid plays the role of “imam” and can lead prayers while murshidāt are not allowed to do so, at least not in formal public settings, like mosques. By consequence, the male murshids have more steady jobs in mosques or institutions because they are temporarily asked to replace the imams and lead prayers and deliver sermons. The murshidāt who are denied this role of leading prayers serve as religious guides in a more scattered range of mosques, youth houses, hospitals and prisons. Finally, the roles of the murshidāt are given more priority than those of the murshids. This priority is clear in the Ministry's decision to make women religious guides very visible. Their work is more highlighted in the media.

Murshidhs can play the role of imams, but imams are not necessarily murshids. The imam's job needs less education.
Some female preachers write articles on Islamic issues and publish them in monthly religious magazines, such as *al-Tadhkira* and *al-Tabshīra* that are affiliated with the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, under whose auspices they work. Others present a daily religious program or weekly courses on the radio or on TV for the network al-Sādisa. In addition women preachers answer women’s text messages or phone calls to give fatwa’s (legal advices). One female preacher says:

I can’t turn off my mobile phone. People call me a lot asking me about different religious matters and social problems… Some of them ask me about the perfect way to perform ṣalāt for example, or about the ones who deserve to be given alms (ṣadaqa). Others ask about their conflict with their children and many other issues.417

They may also make use of the internet and send their sermon texts by mail to their followers. Moreover, the Ministry organizes trips for female religious guides outside Morocco to serve Moroccans living abroad and offer them religious knowledge.

Besides the murshidāt, other highly educated women appear in the official religious realm, albeit without being paid. These expert volunteers are called wā‘ıţat. They have varied backgrounds and educational experiences. They are not required to undertake the murshidāt's long training program. Nevertheless it is also expected from them to learn half of

417 Wa‘ıţa, interviews, October 2011
the Qur’an and to present a lecture as parts of the evaluation process. As soon as they are admitted, they are offered spaces in mosques to preach and serve women and men.

Graduated Murshidāt

Due to the reforms, much has changed in the Moroccan religious sphere since 2005. The mosques, which used to assign a small space to women for worshipping God, have started to open more doors to women and to provide them with prayer rooms to exercise and learn religious knowledge. In my fieldwork, I observed murshidāt instructing women and men in the large, in the central space of the mosque and in other public institutions such as universities, hospitals and schools. However, what is striking here is that it is the women preachers who took the initiative to extend their religious activism to other audiences beyond mosque attendants. Nezha, an active woman preacher who consciously developed an independent life style that is not dictated by traditions, was the ultimate campaigner. As a murshida, she not only accounts on her official training, she also uses her own personal development in her preaching. She says:

I always participate in meetings in the administrative center (mandūbiyya). I frequently proposed to the director that I and other sisters (akhawāt) offer our courses in schools, hospitals, prisons, orphanages and other institutions. I told him that we have to think of people who can not come to the mosque and listen to

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418 Dwyer 1978; Mernissi 1978; Tapper 1990
419 Mandūbiya is an administration affiliated to the Ministry of Islamic Affairs.
When I met the director of the mandūbiyya, I asked him about Nezha’s proposals. He confirmed her demands. In fact, Nezha’s proposals were officially accepted. Indeed, Nezha and other female preachers and religious guides got permission to expand their religious activities to other institutions. Their strong desire to proliferate religious knowledge and to help a large number of people impelled them to exert great energy and effort. The success of their activism greatly exceeded that of their male preacher counterparts. Nezha explained:

Female preachers and religious guides work better than male religious guides and male preachers. Our activism has yielded positive results. All the students, prisoners, orphans and patients admired our preaching and friendship. They told me that they liked our way of teaching and our way of advising them in dealing with their social crises.

Nezha stopped for a while and then continued:

If I compare my work with that of the imam, I can say that I work harder and better than him.

When I asked her in what way she says:

If you notice the imam’s work, you will find that his work is limited only to the mosque. He leads the daily five prayers, and he rarely presents a religious course to the mosque attendants. I have never seen him engaging in activities in other places.

Here Nezha was fully aware of her important role. Though her religious activity was not led by traditions, she still achieves recognition among large audiences. Her notoriety and authority far exceeded that of the imam. The same applies to her preaching sisters.

Consequently, women preachers in Morocco enjoy more egalitarian educational and employment conditions than their female colleagues in Egypt. Their position can’t be equated to that of the Egyptian women preachers in their mosque movement as described by Mahmood (2005), either. The latter just operate within the (largely traditional) women

Murshida, interviews, July 2011
Ibid.
section of the mosque and their opportunities to get public attention are minimal since they have no access to the media. Since they never preach for a mixed audience, their recognition by men is limited. In contrast, by entering spaces and practices previously closed for women, Moroccan female religious agents transgress the traditional limits imposed on women.

5-6 Female Religious Guides’ Activism and Education

Nowadays, the institutions of murshidāt and wā`īzāt are well-known in Morocco and finding several women religious guides proved to be rather easy, although not all of them wanted to talk to me.⁴²² I already mentioned activist Nezha. In the mosques of Rabat and Salé, I became acquainted with two other women preachers whom, I will call Naʿīma and Amīna. Naʿīma is married and has children. She worked as a university teacher in the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences in Rabat. She taught Islamic studies for more than thirty years. When she retired, she dedicated herself to giving religious lectures in mosques.

In one of the mosques of the old medina of Rabat, I found Naʿīma sitting on the minbar (the imam’s pulpit). She was preparing to deliver a lecture on the rules of Qur’anic recitation. Both men and women were sitting on the carpet facing Naʿīma, listening attentively to her dars (lesson). Through a loudspeaker, she opened her religion lesson by reminding the attendants of the last lesson. Then she started to explain other new rules of Qur’anic recitation. “Today’s dars,” Naʿīma explains, “is on the way to pronounce the letter al-Hamza while reciting the Qur’an.” According to Naʿīma, the pronunciation of al-Hamza depends on the context in which it occurs. She adds that the pronunciation of this letter is called iẓhār, meaning “to make its pronunciation heard”. Its non-pronunciation is called ičḍghām. Naʿīma based her course on Nāfi` a Moroccan religious scholar.⁴²³ Before she closed her session, she asked one of the male attendants and one of the female attendants to recite some Qur’an verses applying the rules she had just explained. Her aim was to see to what extent her attendants had understood her lecture. The next time I went to the mosque, I found Naʿīma speaking about other rules of Qur’anic recitation. There was also a cameraman filming her delivering her lesson. I was told that the Ministry of Islamic Affairs wanted to present Naʿīma’s lecturers on the Moroccan religious TV channel al-Sādisa so that the Moroccan public could benefit from her religious courses.

⁴²² Up till now however, the vast majority of women preachers has worked mainly in urban areas. In the countryside they are more sparse, and hardly touch the influence of zāwiya’s.
⁴²³ See al-Marghani 2007
It was in Masjid Badr in Rabat that I met Amīna, who gave weekly lessons in this mosque. Amīna was fifty years old, married and had two children. One Friday I found women sitting on the carpet in the room assigned to women in the mosque waiting for the arrival of Amīna. When Amīna arrived, she went directly to sit on her armchair, and women were sitting shoulder-to-shoulder facing Amīna. Her religious discourse in the mosque was different from that of Naʿīma. In the course of four Fridays, Amīna gave lectures on good fasting during Ramadan. She instructed women on the importance of Ramadan in the life of a Muslim. She explained to women that the embrace of the virtues: patience, help, love, faithfulness and others was very important in the sacred month of Ramadan in ensuring God’s acceptance of one’s fasting. She also advised women to do a lot of praying and reading of the Qur’ān since the performance of these duties and good deeds during Ramadan is greatly rewarded `ajr. Ajr in Ramadan, Amīna explained, is doubled. She continued advising women to do their ṣalat (prayers) on time, to feed the poor and fasting people, and to remember God. At another meeting, Amīna recites some Qur’anic verses and explains their contents to women. According to Amīna her performances help women to understand Islam and to improve their worship of God.

5-7 Achievement of Religious Agency

Morocco's reforms did indeed enhance the position of female religious agents, but still women needed qualifications in order to be admitted to these positions. How did the murshidāt and the wāʿizāt get this far? An upbringing in a devoted family proved not to be decisive. The women preachers I interviewed, including Naʿīma and Amīna, came from families with very divergent religious backgrounds. Some of them belong to families who are widely known for their piety and religion. Others come from ordinary religious families.

Naʿīma, for example, belongs to a Sufi family. She says: “I was brought up in a Sufi family. When I was still young, I would spend my free time with my grandmother in her chamber reciting the Qur’ān and chanting dhikr's.”424 In fact, Naʿīma’s grandmother had cultivated the seeds of piety in Naʿīma. In contrast, Amīna belongs to a family with an ordinary religious background. According to her, her family is wealthy and involved in business. Her family members, Amīna contended, were not religious, meaning not totally devoted to religion. They led a modern life in which religion is not the main purpose. Her father, Amīna said, was very liberal and against the strict application of Islamic instruction

424 Naʿīma, interviews, September 2011
and guidelines. He did not want her to put on the veil and to preach in mosques. Nevertheless, she resisted him, and she became an active preacher. Amīna added that her husband had become pious only after marrying her. Hence, these Moroccan women, either belonging to religious or non-religious families, succeeded in becoming active religious agents and women preachers.

More importantly, Amīna's and Naʿīma's religiosity and piety emanated primarily from their own education. These wāʿiẓāt have religious relatives, but neither of them is associated with a specific religious figure or was guided by a religious master, either male or female. Naʿīma added, “Although my grandmother is very pious and guided my religious education, I personally developed a desire to be pious and to become a highly educated religious person.” Similarly, Amīna confirmed her own choice in becoming religious and practicing her religion. She contended, “My family is not religious. My desire for religion impelled me to rely on myself to be a preacher.” They developed themselves into religious agents who forged their own path, seeking different strategies to acquire religious knowledge and to participate in the women's preaching program.

Most of the women preachers I interviewed considered education to be the primary and most important tool for becoming active in institutions of religion. Most of them hold university degrees. Naʿīma received a PhD in the Shariʿa in 1984 from the Faculty of the Shariʿa in Fes. Her higher degree in religion qualified her to teach the Shariʿa in the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences in Rabat. Ṣafiya, another female preacher, received her PhD in fiqh in 2004 from the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences in Rabat. She currently

![The Qur’an](image-url)
works as a muftiya (legal expert)\footnote{Also thanks to the reforms of 2005 women can now become muftiya’s.} in al-Majlis al-’Ilmi in Rabat. The last female preacher I interviewed, Nezha, received her BA in 2005 in Islamic studies from the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences of Salé. She is now working as a murshida in one the mosques of Salé. Certainly, all of these female preachers hold degrees in religious matters, which prepared them to become actors in public religious spaces more easily.

However, other female preachers have degrees in non-religious matters and followed a parallel religious education in training program outside the university, in religious centers. Amīna, for example, studied medicine. She received her PhD in 1982 from the Faculty of Medicine in Rabat. She says:

> When I got my baccalaureate degree, I went to the university to study medicine. But whenever I had some free time, I went to the Dār al-Qur’an-institute to study Qur’an recitation. When I finished my academic studies, I devoted all my time to the study of Islam. I regularly attended the religious meetings and participated in Islamic debates. I learned a lot from these religious meetings. I was very interested in preaching, and I thought that preaching was available to anyone with only a modest amount of knowledge of religion. However, when I became a preacher, I discovered that preaching necessitates an university level of religious education. Thus, I decided to enroll in the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences to follow Islamic studies. I succeeded in obtaining a BA but I noticed that even a BA was not enough preparation for preaching in religious institutions. I decided, then, to carry on by undertaking post-graduate studies in Islamic affairs to attain the necessary level of expertise.\footnote{Amīna, interviews, September 2011}

Whatever their circumstances, the women preachers Amīna and Na’īma shared similar perspectives, goals and self-techniques. According to them, the more knowledge a female preacher has, the more self-confident she will become. Knowledge transformed their lives, it gave them access to leadership and authority. They, like other women, benefit from this transformative education.

The women preachers also emphasize the importance of their non-Islamic knowledge and modern university education in serving people and gaining their respect. At the same time, the women kept extra focus on continuous research of the Qur’an and Sunna, the
primary sources of Islam, to perfect their own religiosity as well as that of their attendants. Rachida, another religious guide, says; “The more I read about Islam, the better I do my prayers and become a good Muslim”. Na`īma, the shaykha of Majlis al-‘ilmi in Rabat, contended that women preachers train themselves to seek religious knowledge until the habit of seeking becomes internalized. Na`īma says: “I personally couldn’t spend an entire day without doing some kind of research. I am accustomed to doing that”.

Religious guides and religious preachers as participants in a national conference on ‘Alimāts, wa‘īzāts and murshidāt organized in 2009 in Skhirat/Rabat

5-8 Suppression of Women as non-Islamic

Importantly, acquiring religious and social knowledge makes the women preacher and murshidāt able to distinguish between what is Islamic and non-Islamic. According to women preachers and religious guides it is the strong attachment to the local customary laws that hamper men and women in employing the right Islamic discourses in their daily lives. Rachida, the murshida, again contends: “It is this mixture of Islam and local customs that causes our misunderstanding of the right Islamic instructions”.

Women preachers’ knowledge also impels them to redefine women’s status in Islam. Their continuous study of the Qur’an and Sunna constitutes an important strategy for the reconsideration of women’s current oppressed position. Knowledgeable women preachers

427 Ibid.
428 Na`īma, interviews, September 2011
429 Rachīda, interviews, September 2011
become able to state in front of their audiences in mosques and on television that the fiqh is misogynistic and the primary cause of women’s discrimination. Most of them condemn the fiqh as the patriarchal interpretation of Islam. Mālika, the preacher, says: “Women’s situation gets worse because of the fiqh which privileges man and discriminates against women”. Rashida again says: “It is good to know the rights that Islam gave to women in order to correct wrong views and the limitations imposed on women”. Thus, women’s advanced religious education empowers them to redefine women's roles.

A woman preacher

5-9 Modern Female Preachers and Women Saints.

Although murshidāt and wā’izāt appear to be a new phenomenon in Morocco, modern women religious preachers have many common points with the historical women saints I discussed in the preceding chapter, such as several of their self-techniques. Unlike the women saints they are not divinely ordained but their religious and social activities are similar.

Women saints and modern women religious guides and preachers all brought about change. They did not want to stick to the conventional norms and gendered local values. They had a strong desire to achieve vast religious knowledge in order to become powerful women. ’Azīza al-Saksāwiyya, Mu’mina al-Tilimsāniyya and Maḥilla were all faqīhāt (sing: faqīha), scholars of jurisprudence. They all studied the Qur’an, Hadith, fiqh and other Islamic topics under the guidance of axial saints and jurists. Their religious knowledge is probably

430 Ibid.
431 Ibid.
the most important factor in their self-presentation in their environments. They become more qualified to play social and religious roles that help them to gain respect and assert authority.432

Like the exemplary women saints, murshidāt and wāʾizāt use their Islamic knowledge to serve people by teaching, preaching and offering help and sustenance. Here, they are making their religious agency known to the public. Although historical women saints’ societal roles were limited – they could not practice their religion in mosques, and they were not allowed to take part in institutionalized religious activities433 and although they were not highlighted in written history, there are some exceptions of women saints who clearly stepped out, as we have seen in the preceding chapter.

Lalla `Azīza al-Saksāwiyya studied religion and propagated it among men and women of her tribe. Her hagiographer, Ibn Qunfudh, describes her delivering a sermon to men and women. Also, Ibn `Askar tells how his mother Lalla `Āyisha was teaching the Qur’an and dhikr to women in her zāwiya. The woman saint Lalla Maḥilla, who studied the fiqh under the famous Sufi jurist al-Qāḍī ʿIyād, gave women Islamic courses, too. Although modern murshidāt and wāʾizat like Amīna and Naʿīma do deliver their religious sermons in a much wider range of public religious spaces, alongside men and to large and mixed audiences, in general it is safe to state that their religious activism is clearly rooted in Moroccan history. Consequently, most women preachers regard women saints as role models.

5-9.1 Women Saints as Role Models for Women Preachers and Religious Guides

Most of the twenty contemporary voluntary women preachers I interviewed acknowledged the exemplary status of women saints. They told me for example that they were fond of the Berber woman saint `Azīza al-Saksāwiyya and fully aware of the challenges she had encountered in her family and her community in order to become who she wanted to be: a religious scholar, and a saint who performs miracles and who is a political leader of her tribe. The preachers admired her abilities to defend her Saksāwa tribe against enemies and secure

432 Still it is discutable to what extent a woman's sermon, course or fatwa holds ground if compared to similar utterings by a male colleague. Since meetings of the Religious Council are not open to the public, it is also difficult to judge whether or not the voices of ʿālimāt are marginalized in that official religious institution. Whatever the current situation, the female religious functionaries are surely backed up by the Moroccan authorities.

433 Instead they have to live their religion and organize gatherings in private houses and zāwiyas.
its sovereignty. The woman preacher Nūra especially admired `Azīza’s way of becoming a highly visible religious and socio-political active figure. She approved of her celibacy, which she chose in order to become a religious actor. She contended that `Azīza should be taken as a role model by women, who refuse conventional marriage in order to devote their lives to their religious cause.434

Other women preacher interviewees also expressed their approval of the reception of women saints as role models.435 However, they were not always able to justify their answers in detail. Unlike Nūra, Khadīja was not familiar with Moroccan religious history, and responded as follows:

I believe in women saints and in their religious status (…) As for the woman saint `Azīza al-Saksāwiyya (…) I am sorry I don’t know of her (…). On the whole, historical women saints can be considered examples for women since they managed to achieve great piety.436

Other female preachers I interviewed agreed with Khadīja’s response. They asserted that, although they were not familiar with all of Moroccan feminine religious history, and had little knowledge of women saints’ life stories, the saints could serve as models in the achievement of a real religious personality. The mere fact that these religious women had succeeded in becoming well-known saints sufficed for them. Nūra stated explicitly: “We must follow the path that these historical women saints followed to become saints and emulate their religious lifestyles.”437

5-10 Cultivating Feminist Consciousness

Given their extensive knowledge of women's rights in Islam and the examples of strong saintly women in Morocco's past, women preachers and religious guides feel confident to cultivate feminist consciousness in their attendants’ minds. As religious agents they consciously work to plant the seeds of gender equality in men and women. Conventional ideologies that present women as passive individuals are challenged by all means.

On one occasion during my fieldwork, Şafiyya assigned a session to explain to women the Qur’an verse that stresses gender equality. She says: “God creates us, men and

434 Nūra, interviews, October 2011
435 Ibid.
436 Ibid.
437 Ibid.
women, from the same soul. This means that women and men are equals.” One of her attendants sitting on the carpet asked:

If men and women are equals, why are we treated differently? I notice males are more privileged than females, and women are accustomed to this unjust treatment.438

Another woman asserted: “It is foolish to identify a woman as equal to a man.” Ṣafiyya responded to her by explaining that gender injustice does not find its roots in the Qur’an but in earlier cultural traditions, which privileged masculinity and discriminated against femininity. She adds:

We are brought up in traditions that marginalize females, and we come to behave unconsciously in accordance with these dominant customs until our daily practice of gender injustice becomes a habit.439

It is clear that Ṣafiyya is engaged in changing repressive ideologies inherent to the local patriarchal system. She wanted to correct her attendants’ views, which marginalize women’s social position. More importantly she wants women to understand that gender equality was divinely ordained. Ṣafiyya contends:

My task is to educate women and to sensitize them to their rights in Islam. I wanted women to be conscious of gender equality and to apply it particularly in the education of their children, the future generation.440

Ṣafiyya is striving to make women conscious of their rights within Islam and to create new mentalities and a new generation with a new and non-dominant ideological perspective. Mothers should no longer treat their children differently by privileging boys.

Munā, another woman preacher, is doing the same. She always keeps delivering stories on the role of women in the history of Islam. On Morocco's National Women's Day (the eight of October) she delivered a sermon entitled 'The status of women before and after Islam'. Part of it went as follows:

438 Ibid.
439 Ibid.
440 Ibid.
Al-Salām `alay-kum. Today I am going to talk about women before and after Islam. What I mean by before Islam is the period known as al-Jāhiliya (days of ignorance) in which the Arabs did not have messengers among them and were devoid of any religious guidance. In most cases women’s situation in this time was awful. Women of this period lived under critical conditions. They were hated for their femininity. This is clear in people’s hate of new born girls. The Arabs used to bury their female infants alive because they hated them and thereby they left them dying under the earth. God says in Sūrat al-Nal 58-59: “and when news of the birth of a female child was brought to any of them, his face would become dark and filled with grief. He hides himself from the people, because of the evil that he has been informed of. Shall he keep her with dishonor or bury her in the earth? Certainly, evil is their decision.” Allah again says in Sūrat al-Takwīr 8-9: “And when the female child who was buried in the ground will be questioned – for what sin was she killed?” A baby girl who was buried alive was called a maw’ūda. What is worse is that if the girl was spared from being buried alive, she found herself living a life of degradation. She was not allowed to inherit any portion of her relatives’ properties. It was only men who had the right of inheritance. Women’s situation got worst particularly when they were considered as part of their husbands’ estate, just as their money would be distributed in inheritance. Women used to live awkward situation in polygamous marriages where injustice and discrimination were highly observed. Women lived in these conditions for centuries.

But when Islam came, it alleviated women’s oppressed lives. It returned to women their honor and self-esteem. God says: “O mankind, indeed We created you from the same soul.”\(^{441}\) So, Allah says that man and woman are equals and both equal partners and are rewarded and punished for actions performed. Allah says again: “Whoever does good deeds, whether male or female, while he or she is a true believer, to him We will give a good life and We shall pay them certainly a reward in proportion to the best of what they used to do.”\(^{442}\) Allah says again: “So that Allah may punish the male and female hypocrites and the male and female

\(^{441}\) Quran Sūra al-Hujurāt, 13
\(^{442}\) Quran Sūra al-Nahl, 97
polytheists.\textsuperscript{443} God also stresses women’s right in inheritance and forbids the consideration of women as a possession to be inherited from her dead husband’s estate. God says: “O you who believe, you are forbidden to inherit women against their will.”\textsuperscript{444} These are very few examples of how Islam privileges women and gave them rights. The time does not allow me to mention also the rights and the emancipation God gave women.

Women’s situation today is awful. Women lost the rights Islam gave them and come to live again the dreadful life they lived in al-Jāhiliya period. There are enemies who deprived women of their rights and their honor. These enemies are non-believers who do not want to achieve the development of their societies. They confine women to their private spaces and houses and prevented them from their rights to education. These people consider women as cheap commodities exhibiting themselves to those people of lustful inclinations. These people forget the messages of God towards women and ignore women’s abilities and capacities to prove themselves as real and effective agents. Women today in the Muslim world are distracted from their duties in the home and in outside work. We Muslim today violate God’s instructions and put women in critical situations. In the end, I would like to say that it is our neglect of our religion and its instructions that make Muslims privilege males and discriminate against women. We want to regain the first years of Islam during which women like the Prophet’s wife Ṭayyiba, and His companion’s wife, Umm Salama, who enjoyed emancipation and proved themselves to be active agents like males. We want to revive these examples of women.

I advise you dear sisters and brothers to return to our religion that privileges both men and women. I advise you to respect the Islamic instructions of the Qur’an and Sunna, and I advice to think of education. Without women’s educations we cannot implement God’s instructions and thereby we cannot achieve progress and development. I insist on education because our religion insists on ‘ilm and its achievement. Thank God we come to observe among us numerous highly educated women, but we still need more.

\textsuperscript{443} Qur’an Sūra al-‘Aḥzāb, 73
\textsuperscript{444} Ibid.
In her sermon, Munā didn't only mention notorious women who lived in the Prophet's time. She also pointed to a number of Moroccan women saints and Sufis such as Zaynab al-Nafzāwiya and ʿAzīza al-Saksāwiyya. For Munā gender equality and social justice are rooted in Islam, and history cannot deny the examples of Muslim women who achieved powerful personalities which impacted their communities. The rarity of such exemplary women in today's Muslim world is, according to her, entirely due to Muslims’ neglect of their religion and their lack of respect for God’s instructions, particularly those related to women.

It was already stated that women preachers considered education crucial for their own development and the advancement of women's positions in general. According to them, illiteracy is women's main enemy in the Muslim world since they suffer the most from this backwardness. It results in conservatism, a denial of their rights and downright oppression since men and women don't quite get the true messages of the Qur'ān and Sunna. That's why Munā strongly encourages women to educate themselves, to return to their cultural heritage and to understand for themselves that rights Islam gives to women. Education means empowerment. It makes women question the local patriarchal traditional system and social injustice. Many attendants agreed that the murshidāt and wāʿīzāt already do this, and very successfully, too.

5-11 Attendants of Murshidāt

During my fieldwork in the mosques of Rabat and Salé, I became friends with two women whom I will call Itto and Nūra. The former is fifty, the latter thirty five-years old. Itto has a secondary level of education, whereas Nūra has a BA in law. Both are unmarried and work as employees in the administration. They are eager to learn more about Islam and they work hard to develop religious perfection. The main purpose of their endeavors is to ensure a happy hereafter. They want to do what is best for their own personal growth and welfare.

5-11.1 Women Attendants’ Reception of Murshidāts

In their search for religious knowledge both Itto and Nūra have experienced a wide range of instructors: male Islamic authorities like imams and women professors who teach religion in

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445 In many instances women preachers also relate how the Prophet helped his women in the household and was looking after the children.
schools and other religious institutions. Yet nowadays they are loyal attendants of murshidāt. One of their favorites is Amīna. They are very outspoken about why they prefer her to the traditional teachers. Itto says: “I like Amīna’s style of preaching. It is relaxed, whereas, that of the imam is frightening.” Nūra elaborates:

Amīna is different from professors of religion in schools who teach only religious issues. Amīna instead speaks about the daily problems that are of concern to every Moroccan woman and man. She also deals with how to become more self-confident, how to plan objectives in life and how to keep harmonious relationships with others. I also prefer Amīna’s preaching to that of male preachers because she speaks directly to us. Male preachers speak to us only through a loudspeaker. We feel close to her and free to tell her about our crises.

Other women attendants whom I spoke to admired the women preachers’ style for similar reasons.

What’s more, they were also particularly interested in the women preachers as persons, including their style of behavior and private life. Attendants even developed relations of friendship with their women preachers. Mobile phones and internet greatly

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446 Nūra, interviews, October 2011
447 Ibid.
enhanced the strengthening of their mutual bonds. Women told me that these bonds helped them to learn how women preachers achieved their careers. For that reason Nūra was very happy to learn about her friend Nezha's life story. Nezha herself contends:

When I was a child, I used to read a lot of religious stories, and I wondered how I could become a remarkable person. I studied religion at the university, and once I finished my studies and got my BA, I committed myself to religious preaching and similar activities. I sent an application to the Ministry of Religious Affairs (Awqāf) to work as a preacher in mosques. Once accepted, I preached in mosques, and participated in debates and conferences. I delivered lectures in Dār al-Qur'ān institute, too. My aim in life is to be an active person (insāna fā`ila), to call for what is good, for people to remember me after my death.⁴⁴⁸

Nūra admired Nezha’s ability to work from sunrise to sunset, setting aside most of her time for her listeners and their problems.⁴⁴⁹ Other interviewees highly esteemed her determination in becoming not only a simple female preacher but also a public personality. More importantly, the women attendants considered the women preachers to be contemporary role models.

⁴⁴⁸ Nezha, interviews, October 2011
⁴⁴⁹ Ibid.
5-11.2 New Ways of Life of Educated Women

Many of the followers of women preachers feel personally connected to them. Obviously, they have much in common. Not only do they all like to increase their religious knowledge, but they also want to improve the position of women. Many challenge the patriarchal system by choosing an independent life of their own, much like my friends Itto and Nūra who preferred to remain celibates.

Nūra’s and Itto’s ages exceeded the average of marriage. Nonetheless, they talked about marriage, a common subject for women in Moroccan culture, without shame or hesitation. Both women were clearly not against marriage as such, but refused to marry a man just for the sake of marriage. By reference to their friends, they were both too familiar with the outcomes of such opportune decisions. After marriage many of them were no longer allowed to study or to work, and they were forced to stay at home. Some of them even endured physical abuse.

Nūra openly referred to a man who had asked her hand in marriage. He was sixty years old, already married and with children. Nūra is against polygamous marriages because they have negative effects, so she had felt no need to consult anyone and simply declined him.
I cannot marry a man I don’t like. For the rest, I feel pity for men who failed to see my personality and perfect qualities. These men must have failings that blinded their eyes to approach me for marriage. Really, I feel pity for him and not for me.

Itto shared Nūra's view:

Look at me… I did not marry because I didn’t find the suitable husband. I have chosen to live a celibate life instead of living a hard marital life. As you see I am happy with my life.  

Indeed, many Moroccan women employees, doctors and other highly educated women have chosen this path of freedom and individual life and they like it. When I asked them about their celibacy, the first expression I heard repeatedly was: “silibatair u-bi-khīr”, I am celibate and good. Jamīla is thirty-six years old, and the manager of a private company. She says:

I left my parents’ house at an early age and I discovered for the first time the right meaning of the word “independence.” I became independent from my parent’s authority because I hated their routine questions: Where have you been? Where are you going?… Their continuous questioning had made me stricken by madness. I refused relationships with men when I got my material and psychological independence and I claimed in a high voice that I am against any kind of relationships because I know well that I am unable to assume any husband’s and children’s responsibilities. I have chosen this lifestyle in which I feel good and at ease. You know good men are rare nowadays. And if you have a chance to meet someone, you can be sure that most of the time he will impose an awful life on you, and that doesn’t meet my ambitions. So as not to fall into this awful situation I follow the popular proverb which says: nebqa ‘azba w-la zwāj al-qahra (I prefer to remain celibate than leading an oppressed marriage).

Maryam, an engineer, asserts:

450 Ibid.  
451 Ibid.
My age has exceeded forty years, and I am still living alone. To engage in a relationship is not easy for me. I have always nurtured the dream of finishing my studies and taking up a job. I don’t regret my lifestyle. My work is part of my success. It is true that I sometimes feel lonely, and I did search a man who respects me and with whom I can share my loneliness, but I didn’t find him. I am a woman who refuses marriage with men who don’t show respect for women. As you know most of men are known by their authority and lack of respect. I don’t want to be like those women who accept to marry any man just for the sake of being married and spent black days with their cruel husbands. My choice is very difficult to justify in an environment where marriage is sacred and highly advocated. I heard people saying to me: “al-bayra” (spinster). But I don’t care about what people say because I am convinced that I am created to be emancipated.452

Yusrā, a teacher, is another woman I interviewed on her choice of celibacy. She says:

My age is thirty-eight and I am still single. Celibacy for me is a choice that I am proud of. I refuse engagement with men, and I don’t need them. I tested all types of men, and I found that they all want to put women under their control. I hate domination and constraints, and I love freedom and emancipation. My life, thank God, is better than that of married women because I do whatever I want and nobody is waiting for me to cook for him, wash his clothes and serve him.453

As I mentioned before, women attendants did take a great interest in the personal life of their befriended women preachers. Nezha was a special favorite of Nūra. According to her, Nezha refused marriage and devoted her life to her religious cause. Nezha herself acknowledged:

I want to marry but I don’t find the man I want. I have chosen celibacy rather than living an oppressive marriage.454

She was by no means the only unmarried murshida. Here, the rightfulness of Nūra's (and other women's) own choices in life were confirmed by a women with considerable Islamic knowledge who despite their unmarried status had gained respect and authority.

452 Ibid.
453 Ibid.
454 Ibid.
In general, marriage and having children prove are no longer the only ways for a woman to achieve status. Itto states:

Even my friends who live a hard marital life don’t make you feel bad that you are not married. They advise you not to marry any man who is not a good match for you. Their recognition is crucial.  

Nūra adds:

You know … things have changed. Being married or unmarried does not count anymore. It is sufficient for a woman to be a highly educated person with a good job. Everyone around her will respect her.

In more limited circles divorced women who ended their marriages with harsh, unjust men, regardless of what people said, ended up gaining respect for their strong personalities. Their divorce highlights their self-confidence, self-emancipation, and self-esteem. Itto is proud of her divorced friend:

My friend has the courage to face her difficulties. She refused to remain silent in front of hardships. She chose to free herself. She also refused to be patient in front of difficulties… It is true that patience is a virtue that God highly appreciates. But you know that patience has limits. ‘li-ṣbar ‘ala liḍru shiṭān gharu’ (the one who is patient in front of sufferings is deceived by Satan).

In this way Itto and Nūra and the others seem to embody a cautious trend of highly educated Moroccan women who are starting to have a new lifestyle according to their personal choices. They use celibacy as a self-technique, choosing it over marriage, particularly in a space where marriage is highly desired. Most of them disapproved of the patriarchal ideologies that reside in the family. The personal lives of women mosque preachers clearly have an empowering impact on them as do the female saints whom they present as role models in their talks.

455 Itto, interviews, October 2011
456 Nūra, interviews, October 2011
457 Itto, interviews, October 2011
In this chapter, I have discussed four types of female religious agents in Morocco. There are the women venerators, who still preserve a strong relationship to women saints through the rituals they perform around their graves. They do not only visit the shrines to receive empowering baraka to solve daily-life issues, but also for spiritual reasons. Devotees regard women saints as role models to be imitated to achieve religious authority and power. The female functionaries at the shrines surely embody these goals in practice. In fact, contemporary women and historical women saints have a relationship of active mutual empowerment. We concluded that, like the female saints, the women venerators are after the creation of a moral personhood, in other words, an ethical self-formation.

In order to gain more religious knowledge, some women venerators have also started to frequent the courses of Morocco's modern women preachers. These highly educated women have struggled and succeeded to achieve an active orthodox religious agency. Their knowledge empowered them to engage in religious and social activism and to question the status of women with reference to Islamic history. Women preachers are eager to point out to their audiences that equality between men and women is rooted in Islam itself. For them, literacy and education are required in understanding women's rights in the way they are meant by the Qur'an and the Sunna. Women attendants in mosques consider female preachers as role models. In case these preachers have chosen a life of celibacy and learning they may gain even more respect. Highly educated women highly esteem them and feel recognition for their own celibacy and independent life styles that many of them prefer for themselves.

Moroccan women’s religious agency thus seems to contradict that of Mahmood’s respondents. Moroccan women within both the historical and the contemporary religious space display strong desires and commitments to shape themselves in a way that does not necessarily conform to the politics of the local culture. Their agency displays their desires to re-shape the religious sphere that was (once) reserved exclusively for males. They also aspire to render themselves active agents within private and public religious institutions.

Similarly, contrary to Mahmood’s respondents, they seem to break with the stereotypical views on Moroccan women as obligated to marry: in Nūra's and Itto's discourse, both attendants of mosque lessons referred to patience (ṣṣabr) in a manner totally different to that of Mahmood’s respondents. According to the latter, ṣṣabr “is to preserve patience in the
face of difficulty without complaint.”

Mahmood’s Egyptian women cultivated patience to endure their terrible marital status. In contrast, these Moroccan women attendants refused women’s practice of patience because it keeps them stuck in negative situations.

In the next chapter, I will discuss the arena of secular and Islamist women movements in Morocco. What is the attitude of women activists in these movements towards the historical and contemporary women religious agents we came across thus far?

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458 Mahmood 2001, 220
459 Ibid.