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Female religious agents in Morocco: Old practices and new perspectives

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General Conclusion

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

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

Chapter One gives a first indication of my hagiographic sources, and describes my fieldwork throughout several regions in Morocco. It discusses the scholarly research on Moroccan female saints thus far, and indicates the researches on which I build. Some important concepts of my thesis are discussed in this chapter; one of them being Sufism's main characteristics, especially in its popular version. The concept of baraka is also discussed and defined. Thirdly, my understanding of rituals in this thesis comes to the fore, namely as performative acts. Following this, I discuss a few theoretical approaches that related to the concepts of embodiment, agency, empowerment and patriarchy. Embodiment refers to the fact that the body is modified by social categories and thus lives – embodies – its social and spiritual environment. Theoretical debates about agency, such as they currently take place among anthropologists, often refer to the works of Judith Butler, Michel Foucault and – recently – Saba Mahmood. Like Mahmood's study, this thesis builds on the final Foucault's ethics and the conceptual tools it presents, such as 'ethical self-formation' and 'ethical self-techniques,' both of which refer to embodied ethical ways of life. But unlike Mahmood's

work, this thesis also employs Foucault's ethical concept of 'freedom practices,' which Mahmood totally obliterated. Freedom practices are ethical self-practices that involve ethical self-formation, and which create new ethical ways of life in opposition to existing forms of domination. The concept of empowerment is defined as the expansion of people's ability to achieve certain ends, and the concept of patriarchy is taken up as a conceptual tool to analyze concrete historical social patterns of domination of women. Finally, the chapter introduces the concepts 'equality effects,' and 'egalitarian effects' such as developed in the work of the Dutch historian Siep Stuurman. Discourses and texts – and we add: ways of life and life stories – can express notions and thoughts of equality and egalitarianism, without any explicit reference to these terms.

In Chapter Two, the tradition of Sufism is discussed in more depth, especially in relation to gender. It explores the basic principles of Sufism as formulated by al Ghazali, which form the basis of orthodox as well as of popular Sufism, with the latter being additionally characterized by the practice of saint veneration. The *ribāt* is discussed as the space where this veneration of saints takes place. Sufism's relation to gender is discussed primarily in relation to the works of some Sufi scholars of the past, which make it explicit that women are included in Sufism, in as far as they can reach the highest ranks of spirituality and sainthood just like men do. Sufism's relation to gender is further discussed by approaching Sufism as a strand of Islamic mysticism that finds its basis in the Qur'an. Several contemporary Muslim authors argue that the spiritual side of Islam, such as can be found in the Qur'an, is egalitarian in character. These works thus argue for intrinsic gender equality at the heart of Islam, much like the Sufi scholars who came long before them. Against this background I finally discuss some examples of female Sufi mystics, such as Rabī'ā al-`Adawiyya, and Fāṭima of Cordova, who, from the narratives, come forward as living their lives on equal footing with their male counterparts.

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

involves an acceptance of the foundational texts, beliefs and practices of orthodox Islam. Here so as to underscore some similarities and overlapping points between popular and orthodox Sufism in the Moroccan context, I discuss Sharifism and maraboutism, as well as sainthood and Baraka. The chapter closes with a discussion on Islamic and Moroccan hagiography. It follows up on Chapter One's first discussion of hagiography in that it focuses on its main characteristics amidst other laudatory genres. Moroccan hagiography is then discussed as being basically similar to Islamic hagiography, though with an additional emphasis by way of lengthy narratives on the saints' miracles, personality and piety. Several Moroccan hagiographies are discussed in chronological order. In a further elaboration the diverse content of Moroccan hagiography is discussed. Many types of saints come to the fore in Moroccan hagiography, as is clear from their inclusion of women saints. The authentic character of these hagiographies is a topic of debate among scholars. We follow Cornell (1998), Kugle (2007) and others who argue that the hagiographers remained true to the saints' cultural space and time, and reveal how people understood sainthood. The chapter ends with a brief survey of the Moroccan hagiographies that were consulted for the inventorying of Moroccan female saints in history, such as presented at length in the Appendix.

Chapter Four focuses on Moroccan female sainthood. It discusses the stories of female and male saints belonging to Morocco so as to explore the ways these saints achieved a friendship with God, which turned out to be mostly similar in character. Only some examples of non-Moroccan female saints are included, where they elucidate that female saints' positions and strategies were not different from those of their male counterparts. Life stories found both in the archives and oral literature show that these saints employed self-techniques that empowered them to become saints. Some of the main self-techniques used by male and female Sufi are the practicing of piety, acquiring learnedness, the performing of miracles, practicing *jadhb* (Divine attraction), the taking up of social and political roles, or the practicing of 'ordinary sainthood' in the context of the family. The practicing of piety itself also contains a set of self-techniques such as searching initiation, practicing domestic piety, creating a sacred body, crying and the refusal of marriage.

The self-technique of searching for knowledge was seen as crucial to reach God's closeness. Women like men developed themselves into knowledgeable personalities. Moroccan history includes exemplary women who achieved orthodox religious education and reached high decision-making positions. Life stories show how women and men saints are able to perform miracles to publicly display their sainthood. *Al-Jadhb* was another self-technique used by men and women to become friends of God. Both women and men found

themselves attracted to the Divine and endowed with a Divine grace. Taking up social and political goals, or choosing for ordinary sainthood instead, were self-techniques of female and male saints alike. The stories studied thus show that the self-techniques that men and women employed for their ethical self-formation, namely to achieve sainthood, are mostly similar. Some minor exceptions are that some more female saints than males practiced indoor piety, and that female saints are more lovingly towards their disciples. However, in their description of the similar self-techniques of male and female saints, the narratives convey equality and egalitarian effects. In the context of the patriarchal patterns the women saints lived in their self-practices – i.e., their ethical self-formation through applying certain ethical self-techniques – come forward as ethical freedom practices: they created new ethical ways of life for women that were in opposition to forms of domination. Their transgression of patriarchal patterns is furthermore illustrated by a discussion of the lives of three interesting and notable women saints: Lalla `Azīza al-Saksāwiyya, Lalla `Āyisha al-Idrīsiya and Fāṭima Muhdūz. These exemplary women saints cultivated personalities in a way that gained them power and authority. They impacted their communities with their personalities and marked history with their legacy.

Chapter Five discusses the way historical women saints are received by Moroccan women today. I document the impact historical women saints have on a variety of contemporary women, including the venerators of women saints, women attending mosque lessons and *murshidāt*. The chapter shows how these contemporary religious women transform themselves to become religious agents, like their holy predecessors. Women visit shrines and mosques to live their piety and spirituality. In mosques women live a direct relationship with God. But in shrines, women live an indirect relation to God through the saint. In the shrines, women perform different rituals to express their piety and their strong veneration to their women saints. The rituals celebrated within shrines include, trance rituals, *dhikr*-rituals, sacrifice rituals, marriage and fertility rituals, besides the celebration of mainstream religious feasts. Within the shrines, venerators are free to choose the kind of ritual and the ways to express their love and respect to their women saints. There are also functionaries of the shrines, including *muqaddamāt*, women healers and *faqīrāt*, who play important active roles. These women display women's leadership in the shrines in their centrality in leading rituals and in their overall religious agency.

Women venerators use women saints' shrines as a self-technique not only for *baraka*, so as to find solutions for the hardships of their modern lives, but also to develop their spirituality and construct a pious personality. Both northern and southern Moroccan women

found in their women saints a source of empowerment for a new ethical self-formation. They defined women saints as their role models and moral exemplars. Some of them started to search for religious knowledge by attending mosque lessons headed by murshidāt and wa‘idāt. As such, Moroccan women show an interest in seeking orthodox education so as to become active religious agents.

Both the murshidāt and women attendants integrate women saints in their discourses as empowering role models so as to change themselves into religious agents. Murshidāt’ religious knowledge empowers them to engage in activism and to question women’s status in contemporary society. They refer to the rights that Islam gave women, and they question cases where these rights are violated, such as oppressive marriages and other dominant conventional norms. The conclusions of Mahmood (2005) on the Egyptian mosque women movement do not apply to the Moroccan context. Moroccan women venerators, women attendants and murshidāt, by using various self-techniques- in which women saints of the past do play a certain role create religious personalities, in ways that involve a transgression of patriarchal patterns, thus making their self-practices count as ethical freedom practices.

The sixth chapter of the thesis deals with the way activists in current Moroccan women’s movements receive women saints in their discourses. It focuses on Islamist activists’ attitude towards historically exemplary women and their legacy. Both Islamic and secular strands of Moroccan women’s organizations show a positive attitude towards women saints. They consider women saints as role models who – among other exemplary women in Islamic history - occupy an important place in their agendas and discourses. They consider women saints as women whose self-formation challenged their patriarchal communities. The chapter starts with a brief historical review of the Moroccan feminist movement which draws its historical development from the colonial until the modern era. From my interviews with Islamist activists it turns out that the Islamist associations, al-‘Adl wa al-Iḥsān, al-‘Adāla wa al-Tanmiya and Muntadā al-Zahrā’, have similar strategies, objectives and activities. In contrast to some researchers’ writings that describe Islamist women activists as being conservative and traditional towards women issues – my interviews show that these activists, like their secular counterparts seek political, social and economic empowerment of women and equality with men. Islamist feminism’s discourse on men and women’s equity, instead of equality, involves the private sphere only, and even there they are also after egalitarianism. This egalitarianism is clear from the strategies Islamist associations employ to underpin women’s empowerment and women’s rights. They base their struggle for women’s crises on different sources. They account on the primary sources of Islam, the Qur’an and Sunna and

on their own interpretation of these sources. They strongly believe that the Maliki jurisprudence definition of women's status is a patriarchal interpretation of Islam and the primary cause of Moroccan women's oppression and discrimination. More importantly, Islamist associations also refer in their debate on women's issues to Islamic history and to Moroccan local cultural heritage. They continually organize meetings to discuss the position of Muslim and Moroccan women, while referring to exemplary women in history and the way they developed themselves into great ethical personalities.

Finally, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights constitutes another source that Moroccan Islamist activists account on their discourses on women issues. They strongly believe that the humanism advocated by human rights discourses is part of Islam. The female Islamist activists thus come across as feminists, fighting patriarchy as secular feminists do. The Islamist activists reject saint veneration but do admire and respect the women saints as a source of empowerment that enables them to engage in activism, education and learning. Women saints thus are used in the discourses of Moroccan feminists, secular and Islamist, as a source of empowerment in the context of their own self-techniques and their striving for ethical self-formation.

From the material studied and explored in the chapters above, the overall conclusion can be that in spite of the obvious contextual differences, there is continuity in the presence of female religious agency in Moroccan history. Moroccan women saints of the past – in the context of Sufism – applied a set of self-techniques to define construct and create a saintly personality that at the same time challenged male domination. Likewise, contemporary Moroccan women, especially feminist Islamist and secular activists, develop religious agency in ways that challenge dominant patriarchal patterns. Their reception of women saints, amidst other exemplary women in Islamic history, turns out to play a role as a source of empowerment. Moroccan women's religious agency displays a continuity as well, in as far as the women saints of the past continue to exert agency through the women who venerate them. The main continuity that we found, however, is that we find ethical freedom practices among Moroccan women of the past and the present: new ethical ways of life for women, in opposition to domination. Moroccan women throughout history, have created new practices or revised or transformed existing ones, in order to achieve a wide range of goals, many of which have been directly or indirectly linked to a felt need to make a difference, to achieve a new ethical self-formation, to express their views, to have a voice in their communities, to become leaders, teachers, scholars, and activists, to counteract and attempt to change the conditions of their own lives, of their communities, and of the society at large.

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Moroccan women religious agency that started with women saints in the past continues with Moroccan women today, as in the examples of venerators who make women saints of the past still present in contemporary Morocco; and with *murshidāt*, mosque women and activists who continue to develop their religious personalities and change them according to their understanding of the Islam.

Theoretically, I have based my research on Mahmood (2005) whose concept of agency- analogous to Foucault’s work on ethics– emphasizes women’s self-techniques in the construction of religious personalities in terms of an ethical self-formation. From my research we can conclude that Moroccan women, both as historical and as contemporary religious agents, similarly developed their religious personalities. However, contrary to Mahmood’s findings, which found that her respondents rejected personal freedom and wished to remain within the limits of the patriarchal patterns they live in, my research demonstrates that Moroccan women’s religious agency, whether in the past or in the present reveals their

individual choices and their own voices. The research reveals that Moroccan women's agency has challenged patriarchy and continues to do so.

I have dealt with Moroccan women's religious roles as a sociopolitical phenomenon. I have studied written and oral records on women who played a role in historical and contemporary Morocco, and I have discussed the way these women achieved a religious status in an environment that was purely masculine. The results of my research show that historical women who were excluded from the practice of religious orthodoxy created for themselves a space where they lived their piety and spirituality and achieved saintly personalities. Popular Islam or popular Sufism opened its gates so as to let the marginalized to live his/her piety and spirituality. Mysticism did not exclude women from the practice of religion. Rather, it offered them a space to practice their religion. Sufism did not take gender into consideration where it concerned the achievement of sainthood, but rather was and continue to be gender neutral in this respect. There are some historical women who had the chance to mark their presence in religious orthodoxy, but their number is small. In Moroccan history Sufism was the only religious space for women to actively construct their religiosity. But women's education in this context empowered them to challenge the dominant politics and to prove their religious active agency.

Contemporary female religious agents draw on historical women saints as saintly personalities to support their struggle against women's discrimination and male dominance. Thus, history as such turns out to be a crucial source for women in their defense of women's rights. Historical Moroccan women's religious agency thus has positive effects on modern Moroccan society. Moroccan women today have come to believe that it is very important to re-consider the past in dealing with women's issues and women's religious rights today. History's importance for the revising of contemporary women's roles and positions necessitates more research. An abundance of research still has to be done particularly on the historical manuscripts that await editing and analysis. More study also needs to be done on the contexts that enabled these historical women to become saints with miraculous abilities and active religious and social agency.

What also emerges from my study of women saints and their reception by women today is that gender equality and egalitarianism are highly stressed as a fundamental Islamic principles. It turns out that Moroccan women, like men, desire to realize the ultimate goals of religion and thus engage in a struggle to achieve God's closeness. The women also express that God disregards gender differences and favors equality, and that equality and egalitarianism reside at the heart of Islamic religion.

From this other recommendations follow. Moroccan women's education is crucial for the development of female personalities that are able to achieve a public and orthodox religious activity. Education must be highly encouraged particularly among women because it enables women to play a public religious role. More importantly, sensitizing women to the gender question particularly in religion is important so as not to repeat the mistakes of the past by interpreting Islam as a patriarchal religion, thereby inhibiting women's abilities to become active and public religious agents. This can also be achieved when the Moroccan state continues to widen women's rights and democratic dimensions regarding human development. This solution can become all the more effective when conservative mentalities that denigrate women's religious participation are eliminated and an Islamic and democratic culture based on gender equality is widely recognized.

Moroccan history bears a historical feminine presence not only in the religious sphere but also in other domains of life that deserves to be highlighted. Historical records in the form of manuscripts bear the names of many women who marked history but whose lives remain unknown. These manuscripts need to be edited so as to uncover these women's historical roles. The two components of the feminist movement -feminist writings that empower women as individuals and activism in feminist associations- should assign a great importance to Moroccan history and to women's role in it, so as to support their advocacy for the feminization of the contemporary public religious sphere.

By understanding more of women's role in Shari'a and in history, future research will enhance women's religious agency and insertion into the public religious spaces, particularly in the performance of imāma (the religious leadership), which conservative mentalities still consider to be an exclusively male authority.