EXAMINING THE WRITINGS OF NANA ASMA’U: AN INVESTIGATION OF PASTORAL CONNECTIONS AMONG CONTEMPORARY SUFI WOMEN

A Thesis
submitted to the Faculty of
The School of Continuing Studies
and of
The Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Master of Arts in Liberal Studies

By

Laurence Mazella, B.A.

Georgetown University
Washington, D.C.
3/26/12
EXAMINING THE WRITINGS OF NANA ASMA’U: AN INVESTIGATION OF PASTORAL CONNECTIONS AMONG CONTEMPORARY SUFI WOMEN

Laurence Mazella, BA
Mentor: Dr. John Voll, PhD

ABSTRACT

Nana Asma’u, the daughter of a prominent Nigerian shaykh held a leading role in providing religious instruction to the women of the Sokoto Caliphate in the 1800s. Asma’u is an example of many Sufi women whose role and contribution have provided them the opportunity to develop pastoral connections. Those connections consist of imparting religious teachings as well as dispensing religious guidance.

This thesis explores the topic by establishing the presence of Sufi women alongside men early at the beginning of Islam. Some of these women contributed in valuable ways to the growth of the Sufi way. Highlighting that point demonstrates an early involvement of women in Sufism. The subsequent chapter delves into the biographies of female Sufi saints; the nature of that discussion is to draw the saintly characteristics that are distinctly feminine. Also, by citing the examples of Sufi women’s biographies, the discussion provides a basis for their important contributions not just in Sufism, but in Islam as well. The biography genre is very important in the Islamic scholarship tradition. It denotes the significance of the subject’s accomplishments. In this case, it was those of women. Rabi’a of Basra, the most famous and early mystic in Islam is treated in this chapter.
The central piece of the analysis is the development of pastoral connections based on the writings of Nana Asma’u, whose father had encouraged the instruction of women in his family. Later, he placed Asma’u in a leading role to promote women’s education in his caliphate; she gained a lot of influence not only as religious instruction and in her political position. Her instructions reached many women across northern Nigeria thanks to her writings based on a form of poetry. Her poems are still taught today and female Sufi leaders have retained their leading role in the instructions of women.

The last chapter treats the pastoral connections found among women in contemporary tariqas. Their continuing participation has not changed, but the social context where these women teach and nurture the spiritual growth of other men and women has. Yet their function has not changed and demonstrates their resilience and relevance in an ambiguous social environment. Finally, the education of women continues to evolve with the emergence of a class of well-educated Muslim women. The thesis closing remarks show how the Sufi women’s involvement can be traced from the early years of Islam and how women’s current involvement reflects not only Nana Asma’u’s contributions, but also those of her predecessors going back to those early saints.
PREFACE

This project was developed from my interest in Sufism that grew larger and deeper by following the process of discovering women’s involvement in Sufism. It has served to help me realize the vast contributions of Sufi women. Yet few revelations are available in print because women’s participation in Sufism has yet to be chronicled in a consistent and thorough way as men’s have been. My goal is to contribute to the scholarship by offering some insights about female Sufi contributions in the tariqas based in sub-Saharan Africa.

I want to thank my mentor, Dr. John Voll for his priceless guidance and for accepting my mentor request despite his very busy schedule. I also want to thank Dean Anne Ridder of the Liberal Studies Department for her patience and endless assistance. Last, I want to thank my dear friends who have shown so much support and interest in my topic. Their encouragements have been invaluable in the completion of this project.
# CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ......................................................................................................................... ii  

PREFACE .............................................................................................................................. iv  

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS ................................................................................................. vi  

LIST OF TABLES ................................................................................................................ vii  

CHAPTER 1. HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS OF SUFI WOMEN: AN OPENING  
DISCUSSION ON A LONG PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN BROTHERHOODS  
(TARIQAS) ......................................................................................................................... 1  

CHAPTER 2. BIOGRAPHIES OF FEMALE SUFI SAINTS: EXAMPLES OF  
EXTRAORDINARY WOMEN TRANSFORMING SUFISM WITH THEIR SAINTLY  
QUALITIES ........................................................................................................................ 14  

CHAPTER 3. THE EXTRAORDINARY WRITINGS OF A SUFI WOMAN: NANA  
ASMA’U, DAUGHTER OF SHEHU UTHMAN DAN FODIO ............................................... 38  

CHAPTER 4. SUFI WOMEN IN CONTEMPORARY TARIQAS ........................................... 65  

CLOSING REMARKS ........................................................................................................... 90  

APPENDIX .......................................................................................................................... 93  

BIBLIOGRAPHY .................................................................................................................. 116
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1: Shehu Dan Fodio’s Scholarly Lineage .......................................................... 45

Figure 2: Map of the Caliphate circa 1820 ................................................................. 52

Figure 3: Painted portrait of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse in Dakar, Senegal ................. 80
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: List of the Earliest Gnostic or Mystic in Islam ........................................... 30
Table 2: A Sample of Significant Events in Shaykha’s Asma’u’s Life ............................. 49
Table 3: A Sample of Nana Asma’u’s Writings .............................................................. 59
CHAPTER 1

HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS OF SUFI WOMEN: AN OPENING DISCUSSION ON A LONG PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN BROTHERHOODS (*TARIQAS*)

“Abdusa served the Sufis of her country for thirty years. A man once asked her, ‘what is your spiritual state?’ ‘Asking about one’s spiritual state is folly,’ she replied.”

The quote was attributed to a woman who lived in Damaghan (present day Iran) probably around the 10th century CE. The significance of this quote is to show the existence of Sufi women early in Islam and the value they afforded Sufism in its beginning. This is in essence the initial purpose of this chapter: to present the involvement of early Sufi women alongside men and developing their distinct experiences.

The reason for providing this preliminary discussion is to support the main point of the thesis, which is to delve into the participation and contribution of Sufi women based on the literary production of Nana Asma’u, an Islamic scholar from 19th century northern Nigeria. Nana Asma’u’s writings reflect a long tradition of female participation and contribution in Sufi brotherhoods (*tariqas*) alongside men in the Central Sudanic region. Continuing the tradition of composing meaningful works like other distinguished Sufi women, Nana Asma’u provides distinct reflections on Islam from a female point of view. This discussion aims to show the relevancy of the writings of Nana Asma’u by

---

investigating the pastoral connections of Sufi women in modern *tariqas*. A pastoral connection is defined as women’s passing of spirituality and imparting guidance.

The investigation of pastoral connections is organized according to themes: religious authority, political empowerment, and spiritual autonomy. Nana Asma‘u’s works provide evidence into those pastoral connections. Her virtues as evidenced in her writings remain true with Sufi women in contemporary *tariqas*.  

Subsequent chapters will develop these points in details.

*Participation Of Women Reflected In Medieval Works*

This section will address the burgeoning development of pastoral connections. The intent is to assess the involvement of women at the beginning of the Sufi movement alongside their male contemporaries. The importance of their involvement is illustrated with discussions pertaining to their influence among early male Sufi writers.

*Understanding the literature: Religion and history versus gender and feminist theory.*

Before delving into the details of the historical foundations, I believe it is important to explore the kinds of literature examining women’s participation in Sufi orders to distinguish women’s impact in Sufism from those of men. A survey of the literature revealed a set of standards in that Sufi women’s contributions have been addressed from two perspectives. The first addresses women and Islam as a combined subject. That perspective values the contributions of Muslim women from a theoretical feminist perspective. Also, that point of view highlights Sufi women alongside Muslim women

---

2 I will use the term *tariqa* throughout the thesis instead of brotherhood.
and tends to amount to a small discussion in publications; those work tend to focus on the overall contributions of Muslim women. Women are also contrasted and depicted in their differences from men. Sufi women are treated, but are usually not the primary subjects. The examination of Muslim women treated through the filters of gender and feminist theory renders their contributions in a deconstructed approach that tends to reduce their religious contributions and distinct personal values. Leila Ahmed’s text *Women in Islam* illustrates the problem of treating Muslim women in the context of Islam from a gender and feminist construct. Women’s religious experiences are treated as well, but the problem is the absence of their personal and distinct values. Ahmed discusses the presence of learned women and female mystics but leaves out them out as significant actors in early Islam. Nonetheless, Ahmed acknowledges Sufism and the early Sufi mystics in her discussion to include the early interaction of Sufi women alongside men, as was the case of Rabi’a Adamiyya. I will elaborate on Rabi’a Adamiyya in the next chapter and place her in the context of other female Sufi saints. Her qualities and influence will be highlighted in details then.

Conversely, publications addressing Sufism and Sufi masters take three distinct paths: the aspects of Sufism, biographies and hagiographies of Sufis; and Sufi

---


4 Ibid., 96-97.

5 Jamal J. Ellias, “Female and Feminine in Islamic Mysticism,” *Muslim World* 78, no. 3-4 (1988): 209-224; this article is particularly interesting because it investigates Islamic mysticism from two premises. The first is the Muslim women participation in religious activities; the other is the Islamic concept of the feminine. However, the article does not include the concepts’ relevancy in pastoral connections. The feminine aspect is the primary feature in this thesis. While the concepts are included in my discussion, I will emphasize the value of the feminine concept in Sufism.
brotherhoods. Women can be included in those subjects, but are not the primary topic of discussion. Also, the perspective leans towards a historical and religious point of view. Therefore, defining the role and contributions potentially is a difficult subject to discuss because women’s contributions are extracted from two different sets of literature.6

On the other hand, John Spencer Trimingham’s *The Sufi Orders in Islam* is a comprehensive examination of the Sufi brotherhoods with details highlighting their characteristics. The work distinguishes the identity and influence of *tariqas*, but does not address women separately. Nonetheless, the text treats the involvement of women in Sufi circles. Trimingham’s remarks are brief, but make a note by mentioning women’s distinct involvement from men. He also revealed how women marked their participation by forming their separate circles, which provided them safe outlets and were different from men’s circles. Women’s circles were prominently located in several major Islamic centers in Aleppo, Baghdad, and Cairo.7

The baseline to establish women’s lengthy involvement in Sufism is Rkia Cornell’s *Early Women in Sufism*. The significance of the text is based on a translation of an old manuscript whose author, Abu Abd ar-Rahman Al Sulami was a prominent Sufi scholar of the 11th century. Cornell’s work is substantial because it presents 82 female mystics and substantiates the participation and contribution of Sufi women.

6 I have identified a gap in the scholarship, which will require additional attention beyond this thesis; I sincerely hope that the undertaking of this project will help begin filling the gap.

*Early Sufi Women* is an authoritative text on spiritual Muslim women.\(^8\) The central subject is the analysis of short biographies of early Sufi women who had an active role in *tariqas* or influenced their contemporaries with their ascetic qualities. The impact of the text is the revelation of the Sufi women by a well-known male Sufi scholar; the author, Abu Ad bar Rhaman al Sulami penned the biographies of dozens of Sufi women. By considering dozens of women, he succeeded in tracing their notable imprint in mysticism. Cornell’s translation of Al Sulami’s *Book of Sufi Women* provides the premise for ascertaining the role of women; she identifies the presence of women in men’s circles, which is of significance because of the mix in genders during congregations. Cornell also explains how mysticism has a distinct quality because of women’s involvement.

Cornell’s analysis of Al Sulami’s text also offers other initial ideas tracing the historical foundations. It initiates the record of their participation and the development of female circles and demonstrates that the female experience is dissimilar from those of men. Not only does it begin the construction of the record, but it also supports the notions which are chiefly female in Sufism. From the onset of Sufism, it is likely women began developing their proper chains of pastoral connections.\(^9\) Al Sulami’s *Book of Sufi women* presents a treatment of women alongside men by considering their writings and scholarships. The recovery of his


works provides a baseline for an examination of women’s biographies in early Sufi movements.

Abu Ad bar Rhaman Al Sulami (d. 937) was a prominent Sufi scholar whose major writings comprised three specialties: Sufi hagiographies, Sufi commentaries, and essays on traditions and customs. One of his writings is the basis for Cornell’s text, which is a manuscript recovered only 20 years ago. The prominence of Al Salumi consists of his role, which grew from his upbringing among learned individuals in the Sufi tradition.

The aspect of Al Sulami’s work relevant to this discussion is his appreciation for women’s contribution that subtly emanates from his scholarship; this analytical comment comes from the commentary provided by Cornell in her text. More importantly, this appreciation is transcended through the religious and historical approaches of the analysis. His writings are also significant for the recognition and acknowledgement of the influence of female mystics at a time when few contemplated their value. His remarks also highlight a gender imbalance in covering the contributions of women. Al Sulami realized women were different transmitters of knowledge because of a difference in their role.

Early in Islam, women were responsible for passing on knowledge to others and to impart teachings they had leaned. Yet, the chronicling of their participation changed with a decreasing trend in subsequent generations. A significant shift was the


11 Cornell, Early Sufi Women, 32.
transmission between women changed the most according to Ruth Roded.\(^{12}\) Also, the evidence lending support for female transmitters was also recorded unevenly and fewer accounts included female scholars.\(^{13}\) Roded contends women have been overlooked because Muslim scholars differentiated the involvement and contributions of women; for instance, Roded substantiated her remark by examining the role of women who provided details to the Sabaha. Roded explained about “1,000 women companions of the Prophet” yielded information relating to the prophet.\(^{14}\) Yet, few Muslim scholars relied on female sources for their scholarly collections. Roded further identified male scholars whose works grossly neglected the significance of women in transmitting the Prophet’s words.

**Contributions Of Sufi Women In The Context Of Early Islam**

Rkia Cornell’s translations of Al Sulami’s *Book of Sufi Women*, is groundbreaking for the sole reason that is devoted to women only. Also, in the context of Al Sulami’s other works, his analysis differed from his contemporaries. He contrasted and challenged certain notions held against Sufi women; he believed they were early participants in the “public aspects of spiritual life.”\(^{15}\) Al Salami’s works essentially illustrated some of the problem with male scholars writing about women. His text was transformed into a setting where he captured women’s

---


\(^{13}\) Ibid., 69.

\(^{14}\) Ibid., 65.

\(^{15}\) Cornell, *Early Sufi women*, 20.
influence and their contribution that achieved the same level of knowledge, if not surpassed them at times; these women who served with men in Sufi circles also supported Sufi men with financial support.\textsuperscript{16} Al Sulami’s family ancestry may help explain how Al Sulami demonstrated his appreciation of Sufi women’s involvement and experience. His father, Al Husayn Muhammad Al Azdi, was a follower of the Malamatiyya; he was also a fervent follower of the Quran and Sunna. Following his father’s death, Al Sulami’s name changed to that of his mother’s. Cornell addresses that by informing this was a tradition Al Sulami’s great-grandfather had began.\textsuperscript{17}

\textit{Progression Of Notions Among Sufi Women: Taking Ownership Of Tariqa Concepts.}

In her translation, Cornell also presents women’s notion of initiating religious pursuit and achieving spiritual autonomy. She asserts a level of independence to female mystics thanks to their chosen paths that institutionalized Sufi practices for women. Cornell’s analysis of Al Sulami’s work provides an early regional trajectory originating in a distinct female construct.\textsuperscript{18} Cornell’s discussion of doctrinal elements in different schools in Syria and Iraq show the subtleties Sufi women had developed based on their location.\textsuperscript{19}

\begin{enumerate}
\item Ibid., 30.
\item Ibid., 7.
\item Ibid., 63.
\end{enumerate}
In addition, the translation of the *Book of Sufi Women* provides meaningful observances and early, albeit tepid acceptance of women’s contributions with the practice of key spiritual rites. Al Sulami’s text exposed key spiritual notions offering women the opportunity to find freedom and liberation from their physical nature that originated in men’s beliefs that women’s physical nature hampered their religious lives. Women’s religious lives were further complicated if they were married and convinced some of them that it would be difficult to carry out a life of devotion while also serving their traditional roles of wives and mothers. Al Sulami’s discussion of spiritual servitude consisted of supporting the women who needed an outlet to fulfill their religious lives, especially those who sought to distinguish themselves from other women. Religious women seeking a life of spiritual devotion obtained the freedom to pursue their path and were unburdened from the restrictions placed on most women for unaccompanied travel, socialization with men, and religious instructions for them and men.20

Al Sulami’s fostering of women’s spiritual lives was an acknowledgement that Sufi women could reach a level of spiritual servitude, which distinguished them from other religious women. For him, spiritual servitude functioned as a duality by working inwardly and projecting outwardly; that duality was based on technical characteristics with inward servitude represented by “the attribute of fear (*khawf*), worshipfulness (*‘ibada*), gratitude (*shukr*), and reliance on God (*tawakkul*)”.

---

20 Ibid., 56-57.
Outwardly, spiritual servitude consisted of “abstinence (wara), patience (sabr), poverty (faqr), and humility (tawahu).” Inward servitude was designed to overcome the human being from becoming a slave to passion. Cultivating the outward attributes helped resist and succumb to passion.\(^{21}\)

Intellectual prowess was the most distinctive quality Al Sulami’s anthology of Sufi women captures; this is particularly important because it indicates the beginning of the female pastoral connections. Not only are women able to master the spiritual practices as well as men, but they can also begin to develop their distinct institutions.

Rkia Cornell’s analysis highlights another quality of female Sufi practice found in Al Sulami’s manuscript. The practice of chivalry was key among Sufis and the interpretation of the concept was one of Al Sulami’s expertise. His use of a term futuwwa, which referred to institutionalized chivalry, closely followed the concept of spiritual servitude.\(^{22}\) Cornell also links futuwwa to other Sufi scholars who preceded Al Sulami. She makes references to other shaykhs who acknowledged the practice of a separate form of chivalry among women; one was Abu Nasf of Nishapur and Ahmad ibn Khadrawah who belonged to the Malamatiyya.\(^{23}\)

The concept of chivalry is a behavior that conveys a sense of selflessness, kindness, and giving to God, but also towards others. According to Cornell, Al

\(^{21}\) Ibid., 58.

\(^{22}\) Ibid., 66.

Sulami had bestowed feminine terms to Sufi women to connect them to their male counterparts. This approach is significant because it characterizes early in the scholarship the distinct feminization of Sufism; also, this approach can be understood as a means to distinguish and elevate Sufi women’s contributions. Al Sulami’s terminology consisted of *niswa* and *niswan*, which were linked to the masculine *fitya* and *fiytan*.

Ascertaining the notion of discipleship among women is a challenging analysis. Early Sufi scholars provided some information of Sufi disciples whose teachers were women; however, the difficult task is in identifying the Sufi scholars who offered indicators and supporting materials of a teacher-disciple relationship. As discussed earlier in the chapter, there were instances of female Sufi teachers imparting their knowledge to male students. However, with their role frequently restricted to the Sufi circles and other obstacles placed before them due to their gender, the teacher-disciple relationships were often overlooked or they were neglected.

The visibility some Sufi women achieved with their own accomplishments generally related to their scholar writings or the financial wealth that permitted them to devote time and effort in Sufi circles. The literature tends to support women as adepts and disciples rather than as teachers. However, as evidenced with Al Sulami’s *Book of Sufi women*, the yet undiscovered texts and manuscripts could lend more support to the contributions of women as disciples among early Sufis. Also, it’s likely other scholars have yet to attribute women the role of masters.
 Besides Rabi’ a of Basra who is often cited as an example of the discipleship, but is unlikely to have been the first woman to develop that relationship. 24

Conclusions

The intent of this chapter was twofold; first, the chapter was organized to establish the historical foundations of early Sufi women involvement and participation in spiritual life. Also, the chapter aimed at presenting the substantive and lengthy contributions of women in Sufism. To trace the historical foundations of early Sufi women, I analyzed the kind of literary support available, which discussed Sufi women. The scholarship examining Sufi women is from either a feminist perspective that tends to overlook the religious contributions of Sufi women. The other types of scholarly texts delved into Sufism, but have not particularly focused on women’s participation.

Nevertheless, Rkia Cornell has successfully offered new insights into the contributions of early Sufi women with an analysis and translation of a manuscript published in the 11th century. The work authored by Al Sulami, a prominent Sufi scholar who specialized in biographies and hagiographies presented the valuable qualities early Sufi women offered. The terminology used to identify and elevate the values of Sufi women yielded new knowledge about women’s rich and fulfilling spiritual lives.

24 Elias, “Female And Feminine In Islamic Mysticism,” 222.
Women had established themselves early in Sufi circles and have thrived despite religious scholars' neglect in chronicling their contributions and participation in the Sufi path. Their contributions will be highlighted with more substance in the next chapter with the dissection of biographies of female Sufi saints.
CHAPTER 2

BIOGRAPHIES OF FEMALE SUFI SAINTS: EXAMPLES OF EXTRAORDINARY WOMEN TRANSFORMING SUFISM WITH THEIR SAINTLY QUALITIES

“…there will continue to be more and more stories of women of Spirit on the Sufi Way to share as women in the current era rediscover more and more their rightful role as equal partners on the spiritual path as well as in the world of daily human duties.”¹

Women were prominent mystical teachers and saints in early Islam as well as men. Like men, some women in early Islam were also elevated to the status of sainthood. The early women saints established standards for sainthood that need to be examined because they are an important, if often ignored, part of the traditions of Islamic spirituality. Our analysis begins with a definition of sainthood to clarify the meaning of the term and how that definition applies to women.

*Defining Sainthood in Islam*

Achieving sainthood in Islam is realized in a tradition without the rules and guidelines often found in Christianity, which requires a nomination process, and a religious body tasked to examine the merits of the individual selected for canonization. Such is the case in Roman Catholicism, which has a designated authority, the pope who can promote and elevate the status of a man or woman to sainthood. Furthermore,

---

sainthood is a concept specific to Sufism and one that involves controversy. While the mystical aspect of Islam is conferred to Sufism, sainthood is not confined to Sufis.²

Nonetheless, sainthood in Sufism is a state that can be achieved during someone’s lifetime and after death; and can be a man or woman (even a child). Valerie Hoffman proposed the following definition to establish a baseline for sainthood:

“[Nonetheless,] the concept of sainthood forms an essential component of popular Islam throughout the Muslim world. A saint is anyone—man, woman, or child—who is popularly recognized as having an especially close relationship with God.”³ In essence, I understand Hoffman’s definition to offer the basic elements for sainthood.

The prototypical qualities of a saint support and refine the definition; they are primarily derived from attaining closeness to God. Saints are known as servants of Gods and often hold special powers, not in a magical sense, but more in channeling special qualities that render their spiritual connection to God especially powerful. It is that connection that separates saints from other Sufis in their community. The saints are recognized first as unique individuals by revealing their connection to God through their actions. This distinction applies to both men and women.

Furthermore, gender differentiation is rendered immaterial once an individual reaches a level of spirituality; only humanity is of importance. One could even argue that the feminine and masculine are blurred in matters of spirituality. When a man or

² Sufi saints have received a lot of attention because some are viewed as imposters or a self-professed saint; while there is no distinct path to achieve sainthood, the concept of sainthood is certainly quite problematic for Islamic scholars.

woman achieves a level of *naf*, gender looses significance; the person’s religiosity trumps other gender identity. Also, taking into account the literary writings of prominent Sufi writers such as Rumi and Ibn Arabi, their poems did not distinguish the gender of those they venerated. The problem was due in part with the language that does not distinguish the gender of the admired person.⁴

Women saints reached their status by completing deeds that sometimes lasted a lifetime. The pace at which a saint achieved its saintly status is certainly another characteristic that is of importance. The process is by no means one that can be fast tracked even by popular modern standards. Female saints are treated equally with that standard. It is often only after their deaths that women were recognized for their saintly value. *Early Sufi Women*, Cornell’s text is filled with examples of women whose writings were examined probably after these women had passed away. While their sainthood might not have been recognized then, certainly their position as saints could be argued in their favor for their achievements lasted a lifetime.

As their male counterparts, female Sufis became leaders in their community and were concerned with the welfare of their constituency. Their ascendance usually was achieved over time after they had demonstrated not only their closeness to God, but also their value in spiritual leadership. A deep and intimate connection to God affords that person a saintly recognition by other Sufi leaders. That closeness is also a determinant for ranking saints; the hierarchical structure begins at the top with a *qutb*, but that term is

---

also known as the *ghawth*. Yet most Sufi followers will identify the saint by his or her “ability to work miracles, dispense blessing, and function in an intercessory capacity for those in need.”

These attributes are not only equally distinct and meaningful, but they are also requirements to achieve sainthood. Male saints also competed for the number of miracles they performed because their ranking increased with more miracles performed. In addition to the miracles, communication between saints and their disciples occurred between distant locations. Simultaneous appearances also gave Sufis their saintly designation. One example was the story from witnesses who attested to concurrent appearances of saints showing up for Friday noon prayer on the same day in two different villages.

The richness of a saint is in his or her worth beyond the living years. A saint is able to maintain contact with disciples and followers even after death. That particular attribute is well recorded and addressed by many Sufi scholars. For instance, Ibn Arabi recorded in his writings that meeting in person was not a barrier for passing knowledge and wisdom to other saints. Death does not inhibit communication with many Sufis

---

5 Hoffman, "Muslim Sainthood, Women," 93.
6 Ibid., 98.
7 Ibid., 98.
8 Ibid., 111.
crediting saints both living and deceased for instructions passed on to them. In fact, that imparting of knowledge also took place while awake as well during dreams.9

One more attribute of a saint is his or her hiddenness. Most Sufis believe that it is the most meaningful aspect of a saint. Sufis believe a saint can be most effective and most helpful by hiding among people. Saints exist at all level of society and in contemporary society even hold low-level occupational positions in their communities. Sufi scholars who professed the hiddenness served as a form of protection on unwitting people who would oppose a saint and disobey his or her instructions.10

Saints are also important parts in the lives of Sufis and other members of the community. Sufis perform regular visits to the tomb of stains; the devotion to a shrine provides a place where Sufis can pray and receive an answer to their prayers. In Morocco, saint’s tombs function as a social gathering space instead of a religious space.11

Female Saints Qualities

The analysis progresses with a presentation of the qualities of these female saints and how their accomplishments earned them sainthood. So far, the discussion has touched on saints’ qualities irrespective of gender. Yet most of the literature has covered sainthood from a male perspective meaning that discussions of male saints have

______________________________

9Ibid., 110.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., 101.
prevailed over female. From this point on, the analysis will attempt to provide the female point of view; the objective is to orient sainthood from a feminine aspect.

Sexual politics in Islam cannot be overlooked in this discussion for the following reasons. While the worth of women’s spirituality is believed to equal those of men’s, significant differences exist in their treatment. Support for an uneven treatment can be found in multiple scholarly texts from prominent Muslim writers who are critical of women and often assign blame on women. Furthermore, male disregard towards Muslim women in everyday life provides such additional evidence in contemporary times.

Western female scholars who have written about Sufi women have addressed this issue by including the Prophet’s understanding of women in the Quran. They also conveyed a view of women in Islam spanning a period covering pre-Islamic to contemporary times. Margaret Smith’s authoritative writings on Rabi’a Al Adawiyya included a section debating the position of women in Islamic lands.  

Smith noted a shift in women’s freedom heading towards deterioration in the third century of Islam. She wrote the social lives of women were far less restricted in pagan Arabia for instance. In many lands where Islam was eventually implemented, most women also had more leeway in their contemplation of marriage as well as their religious lives. Cultural norms did not compete with religious obligations. Or in some

---


instances, where Islamic law was not enforced, women enjoyed more freedom and choices in their lives. ¹⁴ However, subsequent changes rooted in Islam did not provide improvements for women in specific areas. This was particularly true for women’s religious lives; by imposing restrictions on women’s social interactions, Islamic scholars prevented the education of women, particularly in the religious arena. This is where Sufism provided relief for the women who sought a meaningful and rewarding religious life.¹⁵

Second, Valerie Hoffman addressed the differences in women’s treatment in her discussion on women’s sainthood in Islam. She discussed the problem of men contemplating women as creatures more susceptible to immoral behaviors and “women are seen as disruptive element in society.”¹⁶ While this is also a subject of discussion in Cornell’s text *Early Sufi women*, she contrasted it with a new approach from Al Sulami’s understanding. Al Sulami’s (d. 1021) understanding of women’s role in mystical life transcended the pervasive view of women as the primary sinners. Hoffman drew from Ibn Arabi’s exploration of the subject to promote a similar view. She described how Ibn Arabi’s view of women shifted from repugnance to love; in essence, love of God can be just as intimate with women as it is with men.¹⁷

---

¹⁴ Smith, *Rabi’a the Mystic*, 111-133.


¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 228.
A Chronology of Female Saints

In the analysis, it is important to introduce examples of female saints using important aspects of their biographies since the inception of Islam. The examination draws on selected examples of female saints whose contributions not only enriched Sufism, but also made their role distinct and telling. The discussion is based on a chronological approach to highlight some of the difficulties of chronicling the contribution of women. As Abu Abd Al Rahman Al Sulami presented in his book of *Early Sufi women*¹⁸, the identification of the individuals is complex and necessitates interests on the part of the biographer or chronicler. I will elaborate further on this point later in the analysis.

Before proceeding with the chronicles of female saints, I would like to briefly address the data on early Sufi saints; the information is primarily compiled in hagiographies, which are essentially a type of biographies. This point is important to understand how the Saints achieved their status. A hagiography focuses on providing a laudatory picture of an individual. The hagiographical account then provides a model for other Muslims. In some instances, basic biographical information is left out either by design or unintentionally. While the individual is presented in a good light, there is also a problem with the completeness of the subject presented. Also, it does not seem the authors in putting together their accounts relied on data transmitted from one person to

---
another, but tracing the information back to the original source might not lead to the same person.\textsuperscript{19}

The hagiographical genre is a very important literary type of scholarship.\textsuperscript{20} This genre is attributed to many important Islamic authors such as Al Sulami. His scholarship is a good representation of the hagiographical genre. In fact, he produced many sacred biographies of saints or the work of famous Sufis.\textsuperscript{21} The \textit{Book of Sufi Women} falls in that category. This type of scholarship has passed the test of time with foundational aspects of particular works making their way into subsequent texts by different authors. The sacred biographies of Al Sulami represent a feature with many subsequent scholars of the 11\textsuperscript{th} and 12th centuries making reference to his biographies of Sufi women in their own writings.

In her text, Rkia Cornell attributes the genre, especially the writings of Al Sulami as a significant contribution towards “…tracing the origins of Sufi practices to the example set by the Prophet Muhammad, his Companions, and other major figures from the first generations of Islam.”\textsuperscript{22} The subsequent publications on Sufi women revealed sacred biographies including women and elevating their status to “the ranks of honorary men.”\textsuperscript{23} This is a profound statement because it addresses the ranking of women among

\textsuperscript{19} Roded, \textit{Women In Islam and the Middle East: A Reader} (New York: I.B. Tauris, 1999), 128.

\textsuperscript{20} I believe the Arabic term for hagiography is Manakib.

\textsuperscript{21} Cornell, \textit{Early Sufi Women}, 39.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 45.
the Sufi adepts. The standing of women is also an indication their place in Sufism not only mattered, but also influenced the development of an Islamic spiritual path. Cornell notes also the production of other sacred notes (less biographical) published by Ibn al-Jawazi in *Sifat as-Safwa*. Al Jawazi composed the text after al Sulami’s and treated Sufi women in details by including over 240 entries on them. Cornell underscores the significance of their inclusion by highlighting the influence of the Hanbali School on Al Jazali, which made him more an opponent of Sufism than a supporter. Yet his discussion followed many of the examples Al Sulami had provided in his *Book of Sufi Women*. Once more, female relatives molded the education of this scholar’s early in life.²⁴

Last, the importance of the sacred biography genre is its origin in *tabaqat*, one of the oldest forms of Muslim historical writing. *Tabaqat* serves in identifying the chain of transmission between a source and the author. For Al-Sulami, the identification and knowledge exchange conformed to the intent of the *tabaqat* genre to interpret the role of Sufi women in terms of their intellectual capacity and insight. This is particularly significant because it accentuates the revelations in the *Book of Sufi women* as an important basis for achieving sainthood.²⁵

*Attaining Sainthood: an Arduous Task for Women*

This part of our analysis relies on a source that offers a few reflections. First, Margaret Smith’s writing *The Life and Work of Rabi’a and other Women Mystics in

²⁴Ibid., 46.

²⁵Ibid., 48-50.
Islam remains a solid and authoritative baseline that chronicles the presence of female saints in Islam. The text presents a selection of female saints whose mark in Sufism is noted and is representative of the contributions of women in mysticism. These individuals’ influences are not only substantial, but they are also exhaustive in accomplishments.

Smith’s text provides two important aspects; it emphasizes on the biography of Rabi’a of Al Adawiyya who is famously known as Rabi’a of Basra and commonly labeled as the most important female saint. Perhaps, she would rank high in the hierarchy of female saints; although it’s improbable there is a separate hierarchy for female saints in Islam. Margaret Smith suggested Fatima, daughter of the prophet would rank at the top of the Qutb for she began a journey on the mystical path first.26

The second half of Smith’s text depicts other female saints in a chronological order and is represented in the table below. Those individuals do hold the attributes of saints discussed earlier in the chapter. Those features are present for several of the female saints; their connection to known male saints is their common characteristic.

Before delving into the details of Rabi’a’s life and works, I believe it is worth mentioning the sources from which Margaret Smith relied as well as subsequent Western scholars writing on female saints. The chronicles presenting Rabi’a’s deeds and saintly qualities were attributed to the Persian poet Farid al-Din Attar, Rabi’a’s main biographer and Ahmad Al-Ghazali, a Sufi whose writings propelled Sufism into general acceptance in popular Islam. Other sources consisted of numerous Sufis who were students or

26 Margaret Smith, Muslim Women Mystics: The Life And Work Of Rábi’a And Other Women Mystics In Islam (Oxford: OneWorld, 2001), 20.
contemporaries of Rabi’a’s. Also, many of the biographies or hagiographies were not produced until significant time had passed. Another biographer of Rabi’a was Ibn Khallikan who showed some confusion between Rabi’a of Basra and Rabi’a of Syria. Some stories were bestowed on the former, when they actually apply to the latter. Last, Margaret Smith credited Abd al Ra’if al Mundawi for providing the authoritative source of Rabi’a and other female saints. Smith also noted Abd al Rahman al Sulami’s had not penned a biography of Rabi’a.\footnote{Smith, Muslim Mystic Women, 2-11.} However, this omission was probably due to the fact that his Book on Sufi women was thought to have been lost.

Rabia’s biographical depiction is the most relevant piece in this section for it sets the standard of female sainthood. Rabi’a’s role and contributions are divided into two parts. First, her life choices from her youth onward laid a distinct path in her religious growth. Second, Rabia’s teachings and writings encompassed important elements of Sufi doctrine.

The early years of Rabi’a of Basra began with a difficult living situation; she was left an orphan when she was really young and was sold into slavery. Smith’s account of her freeing was essentially the result of a divine intervention while Rabi’a was praying. Rabi’a’s master witnessing the divine presence one night feared the sight so much he felt compelled him to free her. Following her release, Rabi’a continued to seek independence from the material realm while journeying across the desert. Smith’s wrote how stories depicted her rejection of help by many seeking to help when travelling
across vast distances. Smith also wrote that Rabi’a’s reliance on God and detachment from the world were striking and became legendary.\(^{28}\)

Rabi’a’s other life choices were paramount for achieving sainthood. First, she elected to live a celibate life despite many reported accounts of marriage proposals. Of note were stories of how Rabi’a declined marriage offers from prominent men, even though a few of them had embraced spiritual preferences. Smith wrote about two individuals in particular who pursued Rabi’a; one man was Abd al Wahid b. Zayd, the learned Muslim scholar and Muhammad b. Sualyman al Hashimi, the Emir of Basra. It was truly remarkable that Rabi’a’s rejected a marital life and most likely the opportunity of having a family of her own. Instead, she preferred to seek love of God and a union with Him.\(^{29}\)

Rabi’a’s relationships with men were strictly spiritual and related to the pursuit of finding God’s love and closeness with the divine. Reportedly, Rabia’s visitors and friends included men who sought her spiritual companionship and guidance. These connections tied her to men from different levels of the community such as Hasan al Basra, the famous Sufi scholar\(^{30}\) and with individuals from abroad such as the Egyptian Sufi Dhua al Nun al Misri. Al Misti was a promoter of the heavenly gnosis (Ma’rifa) that emphasized a personal and devout connection with God rather than a learned experience. Furthermore, Rabia’s other companions worth mentioning were Abd Al Aziz b.

\(^{28}\) Ibid., 24-26.

\(^{29}\) Smith, Rabi’a the Mystic, 11-12.

\(^{30}\) Smith writes he sought her hand in marriage as well, but is doubtful the event actually occurred.
Sulaymna Abu al Rasibi of Basra; Abd Al Aziz was a deeply pious man whom Rabi’a called “the chief of devotees.” While Rabi’a’s companions were for the most part men, she did not exclude female friends. Smith accounted for the presence of women in Rabi’a’s life, but stressed the involvement women were less frequently recorded. A few of Rabi’a’s female friends were Mu’adha al Adawiyya and Layla Qaysiyya, both ascetic women.

Rabi’a’s saintly qualities were denoted by her view of the ascetic and the prayer life she conducted in following that view. Rabi’a’s understanding of a spiritual life was viewed as a harsh detachment from life. She assumed the life of a hermit living in a cell first, and then retreated to a house near Basra where she received visitors, but the dwelling functioned like a refuge away from the world. She frequently fasted during the day and lived under austere conditions. Despite offers of help and support from friends, Rabi’a often refused assistance and relied on her prayers for understanding and healing. In times of grave illnesses and pain, Rabi’a found comfort and relief in her love of God. In fact, Smith provided anecdotes from her friends and visitors who had witnessed Rabi’a’s trying times to demonstrate the singular spiritual life Rabi’a had chosen to undertake. Love and longing for God brought her joy and peace; she had a deep and intense intention to unite with God.

____________________________

31 Ibid., 17-18.

32 Ibid., 19.

Rabi’a earned her sainthood thanks to the countless miracles attributed to her. Margaret Smith drew on several examples to illustrate the miracles Rabi’a had supposedly performed. It seemed her chroniclers who recorded the stories from mostly male sources accounted for significant and believable episodes of miracles. One miracle was the story of a thief who entered Rabi’a’s cell and stole her veil; when he proceeded to escape he could not find the exit. The scene went on repeatedly until he decided to give up his loot; then, he was able to leave. Another miracle was a gift of bread loaves for Rabi’a. The saint had given her bread loaves to a beggar instead of serving them to her visitors who were anxious to eat Rabi’a’s bread. Upon receiving a gift from a neighbor she did not accept for the bearer had kept two of them. When Rabi’a refused the gift because she believed there were too few bread loaves, the bearer returned with the proper number of loaves.34

\textit{Rabi’a’s Teachings and Writings}

Rabi’a Al Adawiyya’s teachings were rooted in elements of Sufi doctrine. She belonged to a class of true believers concerned solely with finding a path for communion with God and disconnected to scholarly teachings. The Sufi doctrine was defined as a preparation for a life of asceticism, which consisted of purifying the soul (\textit{nafs}) from its sins; desires for the self (\textit{shahwat}) were the sources of the sins. Once the soul was purified from the sins, it could proceed on to the path leading to union with God.35 Rabi’a’s spiritual journey contributed to the Sufi doctrine. The Sufi way was attained

\footnotesize{34} Smith, \textit{Rabi’a the Mystic}, 31-37.

\footnotesize{35} Ibid., 49.
through the passage of several stages. Sufi writers offered a number of stages of varying orders beginning with penitence (tawba), patience (sabr), gratitude (shukr), hope (raja) holy fear (khawf), and voluntary poverty (faqr).36

Rabi’a’s spirituality amplified by observing those stages; her adherence to the various steps helped refine the characteristics of each stage. Those experiences distinguished her achievements and contributions in the writings of subsequent Sufi scholars. She was deeply repentant (tawba) and her grief was a constant presence in her life. Absolution was not enough according to Rabi’a for sins were the source of a fissure between the soul and the beloved. Furthermore, Rabi’a’s chroniclers drew on many examples in her personal hardships to show how she practiced patience (sabr). Rabi’a’s prayers depicted how she practiced and imparted gratitude (shukr). Rabi’a reflected on her thankfulness and the praise for what He gave her. Additionally, she was also thankful for her struggles and pains and perceived them as encouragements to yearn for more closeness to God. In that regard, Margaret Smith claimed that she surpassed other Sufis.37

Concerning hope (raja) and fear (khawf) Rabi’a’s approach was detrimental in developing those stages. The saint believed hope and fear were interferences in attaining closeness with God. Smith wrote “[Rabi’a] held the motive of fear of punishment or hope of reward to be altogether unworthy of the saint of God.” While she was fearful and trembled at the mention of the word hell, her main fear was to be judged

---

36 Ibid., 50-51.

37 Smith, Muslim Women Mystics, 77-86.
as a sinner and prayed for thinking she might have sinned. Furthermore, Rabi’a was believed to have kept her head lowered for forty years not looking up to the heavens and was understood as a sign of deference to God.38

Living a life in voluntary poverty marked Rabi’a’s ascetism. Rabi’a rejected financial support, choosing love of God over a life of material comfort. She lived in a modest dwelling with few possessions. The story of Rabi’a using her teeth instead of a knife, which she did not own, was legendary. She turned away from all that could distract her from her path to God. Her willingness to forego all for union God lasted for thirty years. Rabi’a had placed her will into God’s will finding salvation from Him.39

Table 1. List of the Earliest Gnostics or Mystics in Islam

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of the saint</th>
<th>Relationship</th>
<th>Region of origin</th>
<th>Disciple and school connection</th>
<th>Saintly Attributes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amina</td>
<td>Mother of Mohammed</td>
<td>Mecca</td>
<td>Prophet</td>
<td>Ascetic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fatima</td>
<td>Daughter of Mohammed</td>
<td>Mecca</td>
<td>Prophet</td>
<td>Ascetic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Umm Haram</td>
<td>Daughter of Milhan, kindred of Muhammad</td>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>Prophet</td>
<td>Tomb in Lamarka, Cyprus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rabi’a bint Isma’il</td>
<td>Married to Ahmad al Hawari</td>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>Disciple of Abu Sulayman</td>
<td>Contemporary of Rabi’a of Basra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mu’Adha al Adawiyya</td>
<td>Daughter of Abdallah al-Adawi</td>
<td>Basra</td>
<td>Student of Hasan al Basri</td>
<td>Like Rabi’a of Basra, she walked with her head</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

38 Ibid., 93.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of the saint</th>
<th>Relationship</th>
<th>Region of origin</th>
<th>Disciple and school connection</th>
<th>Saintly Attributes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shawana</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Basra</td>
<td>Student of ghufayra al abida</td>
<td>lowered for forty years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nafisa</td>
<td>Great-grand daughter of Hasan, son of Khalifa Ali</td>
<td>Mecca and Medina</td>
<td></td>
<td>Miracles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ishi Nili (referenced by biographer of the shaykh)</td>
<td>Contemporary of Shaykh Abu Said B. Abi al Khayr</td>
<td>Nishapur</td>
<td></td>
<td>Servitude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shuda</td>
<td>Daughter of Abu Nase Ahmad Ibn al Farajb. Umar al-Ibrai</td>
<td>Dinawar, Persia</td>
<td>Instructor</td>
<td>Known as Fahkr al Nisa (the Glory of women) and Al Katiba (the woman scribe)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fatima</td>
<td>Daughter of Mughal emperor Shah Jahan and sister to Dara Shakuh</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Student of Mullah Shah</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Umm Abd Allaj A’isha bint M.B. Abd akkah</td>
<td>Sister of Sayyid Ahmad</td>
<td>Morocco</td>
<td></td>
<td>Divine illumination while awake</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name of the saint</td>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td>Region of origin</td>
<td>Disciple and school connection</td>
<td>Saintly Attributes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sidqi</td>
<td>Daughter of Qnur Muhammad</td>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>Poetess</td>
<td>Celibate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zarrin Taj</td>
<td>Daughter of Haji Mulla Salih (Sage of Qazrin)</td>
<td>Persia</td>
<td>Also known as Qurrat al Ayn Manifestation of God</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source:* Margaret Smith’s *Muslim Women Mystics* and Annemarie Schimmel’s *My Soul is A Woman.*

*Note:* The objective of the chart is to present a long-standing tradition of female saints in Islam from the earliest days of Islam forward. The list is not inclusive, but supports the premise of female saints.

Table 1 is designed to present other prominent women saints whose contributions were noted in Sufism. The names are provided in a chronological order from the earliest mystics to more recent Sufi women; these women’s religious lives also served as input in the development of Sufism and in the understanding of female sainthood. Also, the table provides a few elements worth highlighting. The geographical distribution of the women’s saints is concentrated over a few regions. One region is the land of Syria, probably concentrated in Damascus. The other is Persia with Nishapur as a pole for Sufis. Basra was another center for Sufis where women attained prominence in Sufi circles. The table shows the women of Basra were contemporaries of Rabi’a Adawiyya. Furthermore, the table addresses the connections of women to holy men whose spiritual life was a significant influence on them. This point will be examined in the next chapter with a close analysis of Nana Asma’u dan Fodio, a Sufi woman in West Africa.

The earliest women to earn the recognition of sainthood were directly connected to the Prophet. Amina, the prophet’s mother and Fatima, the prophet’s daughter were
bestowed the status of saint and enjoyed veneration from Muslims. While these women achieved sainthoods, their positions were not connected to Sufi circles. A woman who preceded Rabi’a was most likely connected to Mohammad the Prophet through her father Milhan. She received a message from God in a dream to engage in holy war and subsequently joined her husband on a mission. She was killed during the campaign that took her to Cyprus and she was buried there in a marked tomb. She was also credited for miracles.  

Rabi’a of Syria was another remarkable woman in her own right for she used her wealth to support her husband, Ahmad al Hawari’s spiritual endeavors as well as those of his brothers’. Rabi’a of Syria had wealth she gained from her late husband’s business. Her marriage to Al Hawari was of convenience for he was a renowned spiritual teacher and she was seeking to pursue a spiritual life. She was noted for her fasting and prayers; Rabi’a spent entire nights in prayers. She also performed miracles and many visited her seeking her guidance in spiritual matters. It is understood that her husband viewed her spiritual life as superior to his. Finally, Rabi’a of Syria held a position among the people of Syria similar to the one Rabi’a Adawmiyya held in Basra. 

One more early saint worth mentioning is Shawala, a Persian woman who was married and had a son. Her family life did not prevent her from living a deeply spiritual life and attaining the status of saint. Shawala was recognized for her deep sorrow and

40 Smith, Muslim Women Mystics, 167-169.

41 Ibid., 170-173.

her weeping during prayers. 43 Others praying with her or seeking guidance from her would found themselves weeping upon hearing her words and with their eyes falling upon her. Shawala was credited for following the way of love as Rabi’a had done. 44

While this discussion is not exhaustive of most early saints, it is designed to highlight the many instances of female contributions in the Sufi way from its inception. The presence of women possessing saintly attributes and functioning alongside men in Sufi circles placed them in a position of influence in the realm of spirituality.

_A Long Line of Sufi Women_

In _Women of Sufism_ Camille Helminski traces the existence of Sufi women with an anthology of biographies in a chronological order. The text accomplishes the incredible task of presenting the female representatives of most religious orders that developed across continents; the women introduced in the text characterize the accomplishments of many more who are responsible for enriching and advancing the Sufi way. The women’s contributions spanned teachings, writings, and a deep spiritual connection to God. Helmisnki provided many examples of the women’s writings; many covered the prayers they recited. Other writings are poems so many wrote to honor other women, saints, and God. The compositions are as rich and meaningful as their authors. Also, it is worth noting most of these women’s devotion was more or less the result of a man’s influence. This was true for Nana Asma’u, a Qadiri Sufi from West

---

43 Ibid., 39-41.

44 Smith, _Muslim Women Mystics_, 174-176.
Africa. Her influence originated from her father’s spiritual leadership as well as the other women in her family.

As presented earlier in the chapter with Valerie Hoffman’s definition of sainthood and the qualities of saint, the devotion to a saint continued after their death. Shrines were erected at the site of the saints’ tombs and pilgrimages were made to those places to honor and venerate the Sufi saints. Saints also appeared in dreams of their followers and even communicated in that form with them. Some believed that a saint’s personality did not end after death. This was the case of followers of Rabi’a of Basra and Shawala. Other female saints such as Lady Nafisa was also bestowed the honor of a shrine with many believers visiting the site seeking her intervention during prayers. Of interest was the shrine of Fatima, daughter of the prophet whose tomb is visited by believers from all over the world. While technically a saint, Fatima’s status was outside of Sufi circles. Sayyida Zaynab, another woman and family member of the prophet’s family also had a shrine.\textsuperscript{45}

The veneration of female saints has continued with the establishment of religious orders; some of these orders originated at the beginning of Islam and multiplied over time with the spread of Islam and the expansion of the Sufi way across the continents. The growth of these confraternities facilitated the institutionalization of Sufism as well as its internationalization. The Sufi path grew from being a predominantly experience to inductions into Sufi schools. From the numerous orders, one of the most influential \textit{tariqa} is attributed to Shaykh Abd Al Qadir Al Jilani. Al Jilani’s order was founded in

\textsuperscript{45} Smith, \textit{Rabi’a the Mystic}, 177-179.
Baghdad and branched to numerous branches from Africa to Malaysia. In this order, the transmission (silsila) or chain of authority remains within the order. Shaykh Al Jilani’s order probably remains the most influential tariqa for that reason. While the order grew wide and large, it did not occur until after the 15th century.46

Conclusions

The intent of this chapter was to support the contributions of women saints in Sufism from the early days of the Sufi way. By outlining the accomplishments of these women and establishing their status as saints, the chapter provided a baseline to show that Sufism’s growth and expansion was due in part to the contributions of women. Of note, the chapter also offered a definition of sainthood from the perspective of men because the archetypical attributes of saints were primarily derived from men.

The chapter also remarked the recordings and chronicling of female saints’ deeds and contributions were collected by men; whether the saint was man or woman, the accounts were dominated by stories of other Sufis and were primarily male. While it was true that female saints enjoyed the companionship and scholarship of other women, men dominated the space of women saints.

Furthermore, by drawing on examples of early Sufi saints, I established the position of women as substantial agents of influence in Sufism. I provided several examples of women saints whose spiritual accomplishments earned them mentions by Sufi scholars of significance prominence. One of the saints I drew extensively from was Rabi’a al Adawiyya. She remains the most well known female saint in Islam; Rabi’a

46 Tringham, Sufi Orders, 18, 40-44.
earned the saintly title for her profound devotion to the mystic life. More importantly, her experiences of the divine helped set new standards in Sufi doctrine. That kind of influence has been replicated only by few others whether men or women.

Additionally, the chapter set to demonstrate that women are instruments who can influence the scholars in writing about the Sufi way such as Ahmad al Ghazali. His writings generated new interest from followers who subsequently became influential Sufi leaders. One of these followers was Shaykh Abd al Qadir Al Jilani, the founder of the Qadiriyya. With persuasive and dominant Sufi shayks crediting women saints in their writings and teachings, the establishment of women in Sufi circles began its solidification, but it also facilitated the thriving of women in the religious orders. The next chapter will examine the influence of one woman of the Qadiri order in West Africa whose influence and teachings helped many women.
CHAPTER 3

THE EXTRAORDINARY WRITINGS OF A SUFI WOMAN: NANA ASMA’U, DAUGHTER OF SHEHU UTHMAN DAN FODIO

…The ascetic women are all sanctified
For their piety they have been exalted.
They prayed ceaselessly to be delivered from the Fires of Hell
Take this to heart, my friends.
I have written this poem to assuage my heart:
I remind you how they yearn for God….

- Nana Asma’u, Sufi Women

These are a few verses of a poem Nana Asma’u wrote at the age of forty-three.¹

The poem was written to honor the spiritual aspirations of women. The author, Nana Asma’u, a Sufi woman from present-day northern Nigeria, was an influential woman whose role and contributions to Sufism served the spiritual needs of women in the region. Her lifelong pursuits of love of God profoundly affected her, but also enriched the lives of countless women close to her and in areas beyond her immediate reach.

In this chapter, I intend on exploring the role and contributions of Nana Asma’u’s to establish connections between Sufi women and how those bonds developed a sense of pastoral spiritualism. First, I will define the meaning of pastoral connection to underscore the connotations of Nana Asma’u’s writings. Next, I will provide a biographical summary of Nana Asma’u and discuss the accomplishments of Shaykh Uthman Dan Fodio, her father. This will accomplish two things: it will show how her

father and her brother, Mohammed Bello, directed her spiritual development and how Asma’u’s growth and leadership helped serve the community. This will be followed by a discussion of the Arabic literary tradition in the Sudanic region. The literary contributions of the Sufis in that part of the world enriched the Islamic scholarship. Finally, I will delve into the writings of Nana Asma’u to emphasize the role and position she gained in the Sufi community.

Quality of a Pastoral Spiritualism

The development of pastoral spiritualism is based on passing spirituality and imparting guidance. The two are distinct yet connected. The first is to share a common interest in longing for a divine connection with God. The second refers to the religious instruction that will sustain the growth of spirituality. This is very important for that is what the previous chapter helped define. The women who sought a religious life did so by embracing their spirituality and sometimes supporting the expansion of a spiritual network by joining an order or providing spiritual guidance to those who sought them. Imparting religious teachings was a defining quality for the women who held a position of spiritual leadership. The roles and positions of those women helped them achieve the status of saint during their lifetime.

I believe introducing Nana Asma’u biographical details will assist in understanding how she became such a prominent female Sufi figure in Nigeria. Nana Asma’u possessed these attributes from an early age and nurtured them throughout her life with help from influential relatives. Her birth year was 1794; Asma’u was a twin and the other was a brother named Hassan. Their mother was Shaykh Uthman’s senior
wife, Maimunatu. Her father chose Asma’u’s name, as was the tradition; she also gained an endearing title of Nana to highlight her special place. Her father’s imprint was evident on many levels; I will discuss this further in the section on Asma’u’s scholarship.

Uthman Dan Fodio’s daughter grew up in a family of learned individuals; many of her relatives, both men and women were scholars or had been taught in the tradition of the Quranic scholarship. In her text, One Woman’s Jihad, Jean Boyd and Beverly Mack showed a genealogical chart illustrating of Asma’u’s lengthy ancestry of distinguished scholars going back ten generations.\(^2\) Asma’u received her instruction from other women in her clan as well as from her father. Those formative years extended beyond the memorization of the Quran; it included a language proficiency in Fulfulde, Hausa Tamachek, and Arabic.\(^3\) Her education was not typical for a woman of her time, but her father was the one who supported it the most. Nana Asma’u was one of many women who enjoyed an education in the Fodio family. The women, step-mothers and elder sisters conducted the instruction.\(^4\) “The aim was to produce young men and women of character, soundly versed in the Islamic sciences, which included grammar,


\(^3\) Ibid., 12.

literature, poetry, logic and mathematics as well as the different branches of Theology; the medium of instruction was Arabic.”

Aside from the education Nana Asma’u received, she grew up during a turning point in the life of her father who was a spiritual leader under the King of Gobir. She lived with her family in the village of Degel until she was ten years old. When Shaykh Dan Fodio’s life and those of his followers were threatened, he moved his family and community out of the area. Differing views of Islam were at the source of the rift between Shaykh Uthman and the rulers of the Hausa kingdom of Gobir. The removal of the Shehu was the precursor of a military campaign waged against the Hausa rulers. Nana Asma’u witnessed these events and absorbed them very carefully. From the time of the onset of the Jihad against the Hausa rulers, the Shehu’s daughter life was marked with activities designed to support her father’s battle until the foundation of the Sokoto caliphate and its preservation. Her life was also attached to the survival of her father’s teachings. In summary, the strongest influences in Asma’u’s life were men holding strong leadership (spiritual, military, and scholarly) positions in her community; these men, her father, brother, uncle, and husband were responsible for shaping her role and for fostering her contributions to the Sufi fellowship.  

---


6 Boyd, The Caliph’s Sister, 10.
Shehu Uthman Dan Fodio

Shehu or Shaykh Dan Fodio altered the development and implementation of Islamic precepts in most of present-day northwestern Nigeria. The Shehu was responsible for spreading religious teachings to thousands of believers. He enjoyed notoriety and popularity in the region for readily sharing his religious teachings. His biggest accomplishments were the scholarship he produced leading to the foundation of the Sokoto Caliphate; he led a jihad that began in 1804 to topple the rulers of Gobir. The Gobir rulers were fearful of his recognition. In addition, the Shehu had realized their religious inclinations had deviated from his vision of an Islamic community.

Furthermore, the eminence of Shaykh Uthman corresponded with the revival of the Sufi movements across the Maghreb and the Sudanic regions. There were numerous reasons for the revival, but a few stood out in importance. The decline of the Ottoman Empire, which had eclipsed Islam’s dominance, had become a corrupt entity. Another was the expansion of colonial powers into Sub-Saharan Africa reaching Islamic communities in many areas further inland. One more reason was the increasingly assertive Wahhabi movement whose conformist and orthodox teachings seeking to redress innovations and divergence from the early Prophetic precepts.8

Uthman Dan Fodio’s recognized proselytizing calling was grounded in the Qadiriyya order; he drew his chain of transmission (silsila) from the initial leader and

---
7 Shaykh Uthman Dan Fodio is substituted with Shaykh Uthman. Shehu, and Shaykh Fodio in the thesis. The names refer to the same person every time.

founder of the order, Abd al Qadir Al-Jilani. His teachings shaped his spirituality and formed the basis for his community. At the root of the Shehu’s education were also many important Sufi scholarly works from Ibn Arabi and studied al Fazazi’s Al-Ishriniyyat (The Twenties). The text praised the prophet by imitating his example; the work consisted of a basic Sufi teaching. The Shehu learned the theology of Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali, and even possibly developed one of his own works after Ghazali’s text known as Ihya ulum al-din. When the Shehu was relatively young in his twenties, he used his learning and understanding of Sufi precepts to teach his brother Abdullah b. Muhammad.  

Shaykh Uthman’s instruction began among women when he was a young man; his mother and grandmother provided him with the foundations of his early education. He was also surrounded with women of religious distinction such as his aunt Inna Kabo (Mother of Women with children). This understanding of women compelled him to rely on his daughter later to lead women’s education.  

The Fodio clan relied on the formation of a tight community with the men married to women who shared a similar religious education. Most of these men were placed in positions of authority to enforce the teachings and dogma of Shaykh Fodio. The Fodio family embraced the traditional Islamic education that fostered a formal learning of Islam beginning with children as young as four and continued until they reached the equivalent of graduate level education. This type of education was deemed

9 Ibid., 60-61.

10 Mack and Boyd, One Woman’s Jihad, 34.
essential and required as well a shared spiritual practice for most members of Shaykh Uthman’s relatives. The necessity of an education was central to achieve a high level of spirituality. The Shehu, his brother, Abdullahi, his son Mohammed Bello, and finally Nana Asma’u achieved a high level of scholarship through the pursuit of education.\textsuperscript{11} The Fodio’s family’s level of devotion was based on religious goodness and holiness based on an education that allowed them to remain concerned with the problems of daily life; the Shehu’s daughter, Asma’u achieved such a level of religiosity conversing in philosophy of religious as well as understanding the struggles of daily chores, which she performed like everyone else in the Fodio family.\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 8.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 10.
The diagram above is designed to highlight the intellectual connections of the Shehu in his studies of the hadith (Uthman b. Fudi in the diagram); this was a very important point to consider because the training provided the foundation on the major Islamic sources of guidance. Also, most of Nana Asma’u’s writings supported the direction of the Shehu’s teachings. One link worth noting was to Shaykh Jibril b. Umar, a prominent Tuareg teacher who instructed Shaykh Fodio. These ties also represented the extent of his instruction and intellectual endeavors. Shaykh Uthman was highly trained and educated from some of the most important scholars in Islamic centers such
as Timbuktu and Cairo. The Shehu’s literary texts travelled with him during the time of jihad; the works were stored in leather bindings and placed on camels while the Fodio clan was displaced until their settlement near Sokoto.\(^\text{13}\) Nana Asma’u understood the importance of preserving the texts; like the rest of the Shaykh’s family, she placed a lot of emphasis on safeguarding the materials.\(^\text{14}\)

At this point, it becomes essential to address the historical context of the Sudanic literary tradition. As mentioned earlier, the Jihad took place at a time of Islamic revivalism with Sufi orders enjoying a lot of popularity in the Maghreb and the Sudanic region. The significance of the works of the Fodio clan surpasses many of the other writings of the era; this was due to the transformation of a large area based on his spiritual vision. Certainly, in numbers the Shehu’s accomplishments eclipsed those of his daughter’s, but the relevance and importance of her achievements remained remarkable.

Present day northern Nigeria counted and probably still amounts for a significant potion of the Arabic literary tradition produced in Sub-Saharan Africa. The history of Arabic writings is lengthy with texts produced over the last 800 years. The use of Arabic was a determinant for contributing to the Islamic scholarship, so that it could be shared and distributed along traditional trade routes.

The writings of the Fulani scholars were some of the most prolific with Shaykh Dan Fodio, his son Mohammed Bello, and the Shaykh’s brother Abdullah leading in the production. John Hunwick estimated that between the three scholars, over 300 texts

\(^\text{13}\) Hiskett, *The Sword of Truth*, 63-69.

were produced. The works covered prose and verse compositions as well as the occasional poems. The contributions of Nana Asma’u placed the range even higher with many composition attributed to her only. The Shaykh’s writings covered a wide range of Islamic scholarship: “…fiqh (jurisprudence), tawhid (theology), tasawwuf (Sufism), tafsir (Quranic exegesis), hadith (Prophetic tradition), lugha (Arabic language), adab (manners), wa’z (paranaenism), tibb (medicine), and ta’rikh (history)…”

As addressed earlier, Uthman Dan Fodio originated from a long line of scholars; that line of Fulani scholars has continued around Sokoto with subsequent generations.

The Fulani center was not the only pole of Islamic scholarships; others grew in adjacent regions such as Kano, Kaduna, and Zaria. Nevertheless, the scholarship produced fell into distinct categories: “research and teaching, polemical, devotional, and ‘secular.’” The productions of academic (research and teaching) materials were composed in prose; they usually covered different disciplines and sub-disciplines as well as commentaries. The materials treating disciplines focused on the fiqh, tafsir, and lugha.

The Shehu’s son produced biographical works dealing with the scholarship of his father as well as early scholars. He also composed a hagiography on the four Sufi saints, Mifah al sadad. He authored a text devoted to pious Muslim women as well

---


16 Ibid.

17 Ibid., 214.

18 Ibid.
known as al-Nasiha al-wadi’a. The deeds and achievements of the jihad leaders of 1804 and their descendants later became the subjects of biographies by subsequent scholars, who have continued the tradition until present day. The “revolution” was recorded and shared in details over many decades. ¹⁹

Shaykh Uthman’s prolific writings served to support his decision to emigrate from Degel and later to undertake the Jihad as well as to treat the problems he faced dealing with unbelievers. While John Hunwick does not categorize these works as polemical, they certainly fall on the fringe of a passionate argument when compared to those that accused the Hausa kings of falling under the influence of evil. Mohammed Bello did address a subject of a “secular” nature and the Jihad was the subject of chronicles from members of the Shehu’s family as early as 1813.²⁰

Shaykh Uthman’s rule was dominated by war and fighting off rivals’ empires surrounding the Sokoto Caliphate. The empire reached settlements over vast distances and encompassed large cities such as Kano and Katsina; those were important cities because they consisted of major trade posts. The military campaigns continued when Asma’u’s brother, Mohammed Bello succeeded his father. His ascension took place in 1817, when Asma’u was about twenty-three years old. She had been married for several years by then to Bello’s trusted friend Usman Gidado Dan Laima; he became known by the nickname of Gidado.²¹ Bello and Gidado were close allies for many years before

¹⁹ Ibid., 215.

²⁰ Ibid., 217-218.

²¹ Mack and Boyd, One Woman’s Jihad, 33.
Bello’s succession to his father. Bello was responsible for settling the caliphate in Sokoto in 1809. He placed his trust in Gidado and retained him as his military advisor (waziri).  

The expansion of the caliphate was based on plans that had been the subject of thorough discussions between the Shehu and his allies. In fact, Shaykh Uthman composed scholarly works focused on the implementation of a religious order. Some of those he wrote with his brother, Abdullahi. Shaykh Dan Fodio had to contend with more than religious teachings once he consolidated his empire; however, the premise was based on the sacred law of Islam. The principle of Fodio’s rule was a central authority that dispensed justice and legislated. In theory, Shaykh Uthman Fodio ruled the empire directly, but it was his son, Bello who firmly established the administration. While the Shehu accomplished an outstanding transformation of a political entity into an imamate, his daughter’s deeds reflected the inspiration the Shehu had in bringing religion to those he governed.  

Table 2: A Sample of Significant Events in Shaykha’s Asma’u’s Life

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Age of Asma’u</th>
<th>Event in Nana Asma’u’s Life</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1793-4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Birth of the Asma’u daughter of Shaykh Dan Fodio and his senior wife Mainamatu. Asma’u arrived as a twin.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1798</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Education begins at home in her home village of Degel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1804</td>
<td>10-11</td>
<td>Asma’u leaves Degel with the rest of the community to begin the Hijra; the Jihad begins with fights for control over the Gobir Kingdom</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

22 Hiskett, *The Sword of Truth*, 139.

23 Ibid, 144.
The table lists some of the most significant events in Asma’u’s life; her successful life in writing and teaching was connected to the evolution of the Caliphate. The events covered life-changing occurrences for the entire Fodio family. A change in one of her relatives affected her and resulted in the production of a text, poem, or prayer. It further echoed the closeness of the clan members as well as the probable esteem she had for them.

_Nana Asma’u’s Writings and Contributions: Knowledge of a Remarkable Woman_

Nana Asma’u was the product of Shaykh Dan Fodio’s dual sides: his search for a spiritual life and his appreciation of Islamic edicts. When the shaykha’s mother died, her stepmothers took over the responsibilities for raising her and her brother. These women initiated an influence on Nana Asma’u early in her childhood. She began learning about the Quran when she was about five years old. From there, Asma’u’s studies continued
with the study of Arabic based traditional texts. She also learned about the *Tawhid*, a basic Islamic principle. Nana Asma’u’s training extended beyond the memorization of the Quran; she studied “Islamic philosophical texts on prayer, mysticism, legal matters, *fiqh* (which regulates religious conduct)….”

Her training was also rigorous in its structure; it consisted of copying a portion of a book, which she would then read it back to her instructor to make sure errors were corrected. The intent of this kind of instruction was to allow the teacher to explain the passage with comments and to allow the student to explain it back to the teacher. Once, the teacher was satisfied she understood, Nana Asma’u could then proceed with another section of a text. The aim was to imprint the text in Asma’u’s mind until she had it memorized. This approach served her well when Asma’u devised ways to teach other women. This method also served her to compose texts and poems. She enjoyed this form of instruction until the time of the Jihad when she was about ten years old.

---


25 Ibid., 11.
Nana Asma’u’s father was heavily involved in her education as well. She inherited her father’s charisma (Baraka) and grew her personal Baraka too. She developed that quality by following four precepts: “scholarship, piety, therapeutic gifts, and good works.” Her journey in helping her community began as soon as the jihad started in 1804. The entire community led by Dan Fodio undertook the Hijra; that meant men, women, and children were uprooted from Degel shortly before the Shehu began the invasion of Alkalawa. Being so close to the fight, Asma’u was a witness to the casualties, deaths, and most of all the insecurity and fear that accompanied the fighting. The intensity of the Jihad marked Asma’u permanently; her writings reflected the physical struggles as well as the spiritual toughness she endured to pull through those
difficult moments. Her father’s formidable leadership was also the inspiration for her resilience.  

The conquest of territories also meant the capture of towns and villages as well as the residents of those areas. The map in the previous page shows the vastness of the conquered territories. Once the Shehu realized he had become responsible for the souls of these individuals, he believed both men and women needed religious instructions. Shaykh Uthman had also realized that men had neglected the education of women. It was Bello, her brother who entrusted her with that role and those responsibilities on Nana Asma’u to instruct them. While her instruction had begun earlier in life, it continued under her brother’s tutelage as well. He nurtured her scholarly training; his wife Aisha also assisted in her training. The endeavor then fell upon Asma’u to organize the women of the caliphate.  

Nana Asma’u daily activities consisted of instruction in a building that remains in use for that purpose until today. She was an attentive counselor who listened to the concerns and problems covering a wide range of topics; she was well versed in the legal aspects of Islam and could address a problem of that amplitude. She also retreated to work in a private area to compose her works, prayed to God while remaining secluded in

\[\text{\footnotesize 26 Boyd and Mack, Collected Works, 5.}\]
\[\text{\footnotesize 27 Koko and Boyd, Nana Asma’u, 43.}\]
\[\text{\footnotesize 28 Boyd and Mack, Collected Works, 6-8.}\]
those reserved quarters. Quiet and composure were required when travelling through the compound housing her private room.\textsuperscript{29}

By selecting Asma’u as the leader of women, Bello and his father were building on an existing traditional female authority. Besides their own understanding of the significance of the role of women in Islam, Shaykh Dan Fodio and his son counted on Asma’u to facilitate the transition and conversion of the women from their indigenous beliefs to Islamic teachings. Boyd in her text \textit{The Caliph’s Sister}, wrote that “her [Asma’u] position must have been perceived by many of the ordinary captive women she came in contact with in terms of the roles played by traditional leaders, even though Asma’u’s functions were very different from theirs.”\textsuperscript{30}

The existing structure of leadership in the conquered territories also relied on a female relative of the local chief. The relationship of Bello and his sister fell under a concept they understood. As a result, Nana Asma’u’s appointment was not fitting, but it was also relevant for the tasks at hand. The proselytization of women was critical to ensure the education of their children would follow Islamic teachings because women held the role of child rearing.\textsuperscript{31}

Her new role in the community consisted of a vast array of activities to assist her new audience. She gained a title among the conquered female population; Sarkin matta duka (chief of all women) was her new designation. Asma’u was also recognized with other titles among the population. She was called a shaykha and guided many young

\begin{footnotesize}
\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{29} Boyd, \textit{The Caliph’s Sister}, 11-12.
\footnotespace
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 44.
\footnotespace
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.
\end{footnotesize}
women in unhappy marriages; Asma’u also mediated divorces initiated by the women.
She remedied ailments by turning to prayers and looking for encouragement in her
beliefs to help the sick and frail. Asma’u’s inspirational spirit was exemplified in the
religious education of women, especially in rural areas.  

Bello and his father recognized the amplitude and degree of conversion required
for the new groups incorporated into the caliphate. The men and women relied on a
belief system centered on Bori, a type of magical principle, which the Shehu and Bello
viewed as poisonous and satanic. In the indigenous structures of those conquered areas,
some of the women held powerful positions. In the Kingdom of Gobir, a prominent
woman (Inna) named Yunfa was responsible for rejecting her brother’s decision to
submit to the Fodio clan and instead convinced him to fight the Shehu’s arm. Asma’u’s
position was among other women who held significant power as well. It was also clever
on the part of Asma’u’s father and brother to rely and trust one of their most educated
women to reach out to the female population now under their control.  

The Education of Women

Asma’u’s biggest task consisted of educating the women, so that they could pass
on the Sufi beliefs to subsequent generations. She was methodical in her approach and
was careful in selecting the women responsible for teaching others. Asma’u selected
women who showed maturity and displayed intelligence. These women were delegated

---

32 Boyd, The Caliph’s Sister, 48-49.

33 Ibid., 47.
the task for providing a religious education to women sometimes located in the most remote areas.

Asma’u was deliberate in her arrangements to organize women. It was during a ceremony called nadi Asma’u transferred her authority to leading women. They were called jaji (leader). She also used a traditional hat Gobir mafla to designate the jaji of each village; they received a red strip of cloth to tie around the brim of the hat as well. The formality of the ceremony underscored the significance of the women’s positions. By using a ceremonial format, Asma’u conferred authority on women the same way men were empowered with clout. Asma’u’s sponsorship elevated the status of these women, which also afforded them the freedom to travel unescorted. This freedom allowed them to reach and organize those women wanting a religious education. The jajis also arranged to bring young girls and older women to Asma’u, so that they could confer with her. ³⁴

The primary role of the jajis was to disseminate the works of Asma’u to others in the rural communities. These women relied on the oral tradition of the area to instruct their pupils in schools and in the privacy of homes. The dissemination of materials covered two aspects of life: basic life skills to adjust to a life under a new leadership and spiritual teachings to lead a pious life. The work jajis performed earned them an exceptional position in the Caliphate with the opportunity to organize a network of women across the regions. These new sisterhoods developed based on the works performed by the jajis and all the other women who gained a sense of community and a

³⁴ Boyd, The Caliph’s Sister, 50-51.
bond shared over religious beliefs. This achievement was phenomenal for the time; it relied on the pastoral approach Asma’u had devised to connect the women.  

Nana Asma’u transformed women’s religiosity thanks to her leadership and with the help of the *jajis* who gave so many men and women an education and consequently a richer spiritual life; it afforded many a sense of direction in their role as many women were adjusting to a new life in a growing region. The teachings of Asma’u supported the overarching goal of the Caliphate to integrate a diverse population into its vision of Islam as well as to support the residents’ daily activities, which were vital to support the empire.  

Asma’u’s poems were probably the most accessible for most women; they emphasized ways to view religious beliefs according to Sufi principles by drawing on examples of ancient mystic women as well as to provide advice on the basic aspects of life. Her message also focused on faith and right living in support of community worship and generosity and patience on aspects of daily life.  

*The Scholarship of Nana Asma’u*

Nana Asma’u was one of many women who contributed to the Islamic scholarship in the Sudanic region. Female intellectuals preceded her like her grandmother Hawa and great grandmother Rukayya who, as already discussed, actively participated in the religious instructions of the children and other women; other

---


36 Mack and Boyd, *One Woman's Jihad*, 76.

37 Ibid., 78.
distinguished women intellectuals belonged to other clans in other areas of present day northern Nigeria. All produced a level of scholarship, although probably not to the same degree as Nana Asma’u.

Further highlighting the Fodio family, some of female scholars were Hadiza Doio (d. 1846); she wrote on the subject of the Guided One. Her cousin, Aisha Fodio (d. 1870) treated the subject of forgetfulness in prayer. Maryam Fodio (d. 1890), Asma’u’s sister was known as a saintly woman. Her influence was felt in Kano where she had married the Emir. Another shaykha whose influence centered on Kano was Hussaina Bint Dabo (d. 1900), who wrote in praise for the victory of the Jihad leaders. She also married Shaykh Uthman’s son Isa. Two more shaykhas whose influence reached the 20th century in Kano were Hauwa Gawram and Hajiya Yar Shehu. Hauwa was a jaji, an itinerant teacher of the tradition Asma’u had organized. She wrote poetry and taught religion; she had received training in Islamic scholarship by her father, an imam. Hajiya Yar Shahu was also trained by her father and sought religious knowledge. She was a distinct writer who wrote poetry in the local traditions.38

The following table provides a sample of the writings Nana Asma’u composed over her lifetime. The list is far from being comprehensive, and it is not the objective of this essay to offer a complete list of her works. The table is also designed to comment on the type of writings the shaykha produced over the course of a tumultuous life.

The table further illustrates some of the points discussed earlier. Her materials revealed she was of importance in her time for she followed in the tradition of her family

---

to promote education and writing. She used the numerous skills she accumulated to yield a large number of writings, but also to convey important messages to other scholars and more importantly for other women. Nana Asma’u was dedicated to her family legacy, her husband, and above all to her spiritual connections with God.

Table 3. A Sample of Nana Asma’u’s Writings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Heading of Writing effort</th>
<th>Inspiration and Objective</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Language</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1817</td>
<td>Collecting and copying of the Shehu's papers</td>
<td>Conservation of the Shehu's</td>
<td>Asma’u and Gidado</td>
<td>Fulfulde, Hausa, and Arabic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1820</td>
<td>Text titled <em>Tanbih al Ghaofilin</em></td>
<td>A book about morality, punishments and rewards</td>
<td>Asma’u</td>
<td>Arabic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1822</td>
<td><em>Fa’inna</em></td>
<td>Poem</td>
<td>Asma’u</td>
<td>Fulfulde</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1829</td>
<td><em>Sonnore Abdullahii</em></td>
<td>Elegy for Abdullahi B. Fodio (her uncle)</td>
<td>Asma’u</td>
<td>Fulfulde</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1830</td>
<td><em>Sunago (Suras of the Quran)</em></td>
<td>Teaching</td>
<td>Asma’u</td>
<td>Arabic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1834</td>
<td><em>Wa’azu I Fulfulde (admonition); Ministare (forgiveness)</em></td>
<td>Prayer</td>
<td>Asma’u</td>
<td>Fulfulde</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1836</td>
<td><em>Tawassuli Ga mata masu alballa/Tindinore Labne</em></td>
<td>Poem on Sufi women</td>
<td>Asma’u</td>
<td>Hausa and Fulfulde</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1836</td>
<td><em>Gawakuke famarde</em></td>
<td>Poem about the victory for the battle at Gawakuke</td>
<td>Asma’u</td>
<td>Fulfulde</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1837</td>
<td>Collecting materials to draft texts on Uthman Dan Fodio and Mohammed Bello</td>
<td>For the leaders of the jihad</td>
<td>Asma’u and Gidado</td>
<td>Multiple</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1837</td>
<td>Translation of her brother’s writing titled <em>Kitab; It becomes known as Tindinore and Tawassuli</em></td>
<td>For Mohammed Bello</td>
<td>Asma’u and Bello</td>
<td>Arabic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1837</td>
<td><em>Sonnore Bello and Marthiya Bello</em></td>
<td>Elegies about Mohammed Bello</td>
<td>Asma’u</td>
<td>Arabic and Fulfulde</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1838</td>
<td><em>Gikko Bello</em></td>
<td>Text on her brother’s character</td>
<td>Asma’u</td>
<td>Fulfulde</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1838</td>
<td><em>Sonnore Mo’Inna</em></td>
<td>Elegy for Fatima</td>
<td>Asma’u</td>
<td>Fulfulde</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1838</td>
<td><em>Sunago</em></td>
<td>Translation of her</td>
<td>Asma’u</td>
<td>Hausa, Fulfulde</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Author</td>
<td>Title or Description</td>
<td>Language</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1839</td>
<td>Tadshir al jkhwan</td>
<td>Medicine of the prophet</td>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1839</td>
<td>Sonnore Buhari</td>
<td>Elegy for her brother Buhari</td>
<td>Fuludo</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1840</td>
<td>Kowini i Shehu/Laharan Shehu</td>
<td>Account of the Jihad leaders and close followers of Shaykh Uthman</td>
<td>Asma’u FULLUDE/Hausa</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1842</td>
<td>Godaben Gaskiya</td>
<td>Text accounting for sins and their penalties with emphasis on Gobir dissidents</td>
<td>Asma’u Hausa</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1843</td>
<td>Manatore Arande</td>
<td>For the prophet; teaching materials</td>
<td>Asma’u Fuludo</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1844</td>
<td>Temedde</td>
<td>Translation to commemorate a victory over Gobir</td>
<td>Asma’u Fuludo</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1844</td>
<td>Alhinin mutuwar Halima</td>
<td>Elegy to honor a neighbor named Halima</td>
<td>Asma’u Hausa</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1848</td>
<td>Sonnore Gidado</td>
<td>Elegy for Gidado, Asma’u’s husband</td>
<td>Asma’u Fuludo</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1851</td>
<td>Jonde Wurno</td>
<td>Account of the foundation of Wurno idealizing the men who could live there</td>
<td>Asma’u Fuludo</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1855</td>
<td>Moyta Mayaki</td>
<td>Reprimand on the Chief of Gobir</td>
<td>Asma’u Fuludo</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1855</td>
<td>Sonnore Bingel</td>
<td>Elegy for a young women who worked for Asma’u</td>
<td>Asma’u Fuludo</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1856</td>
<td>Sonnore Mustafa</td>
<td>Elegy for her brother Mustafa</td>
<td>Asma’u Fuludo</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1857</td>
<td>Sonnore Zaharatu</td>
<td>Elegy for a midwife</td>
<td>Asma’u Fuludo</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1858</td>
<td>Gawakuke Ma’uncle</td>
<td>Poem accounting for a battle at Gawakuke in 1836</td>
<td>Asma’u Fuludo</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1858</td>
<td>Sonnore Hawa’u</td>
<td>Elegy for a Jaji, one of the women leaders</td>
<td>Asma’u Fuludo</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1860</td>
<td>Tсораре-тсорачен тсаин AlkiyamalDarme-darngal</td>
<td>Text dealing with the fear of Judgment day</td>
<td>Asma’u Hausa and Fuludo</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1860</td>
<td>Sonnore Mallam Halilu</td>
<td>Elegy for Halilu, the Emir of Gwando who was Asma’u’s nephew</td>
<td>Asma’u Fuludo</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Work</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Author</td>
<td>Language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1861</td>
<td><em>Dailin</em></td>
<td>For her pupils; reasons for seeking God</td>
<td>Asma'u</td>
<td>Hausa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1863</td>
<td><em>Tilfin</em></td>
<td>Polemical text dealing with Bawa, the Chief of Gobir</td>
<td>Asma'u</td>
<td>Fulfude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1865</td>
<td><em>Sonnore Fatima</em></td>
<td>Elegy for Fatima, her sister</td>
<td>Asma'u</td>
<td>Fulfude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1865</td>
<td><em>Bi Yalli</em></td>
<td>Poem denouncing the behavior of a member of her clan, Dan Yalli</td>
<td>Asma'u</td>
<td>Fulfude</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source, Boyd and Mack, Collected Works.*

Nana Asma’u’s abundant writings reflect certain qualities. The shaykha made her work accessible to her students. She developed the pastoral connections with her approach. She wrote in Fulfude and Hausa; those languages were well understood in the Caliphate. By presenting her work in a vernacular and using verses to teach and instruct on Sufism, Asma’u expanded her reach through the *jajis* to remote areas and isolated women. These women continued the development of those pastoral connections. They helped facilitate the pastoral spiritualism Asma’u conveyed in her writings.

Nana Asma’u’s complicated task was to educate women she did not know. She made use of composition techniques to convey multiple layers of meaning; essentially, Asma’u imparted sophisticated knowledge in an unassuming approach. I believe this quality reveals a very smart and focused woman whose intent was to enlighten both men and women in the Sufi way and impart teachings that fostered pastoral spiritualism. She used the vernacular and composed poems to be memorized and sung; one example is “Prayer for Rain,” which suited itself to all women whether working on her compound or in the farms away from the city.
Illiterate women could memorize the prayer and sing it together leading to a bonding connection between these individuals. 39

Asma’u’s materials were published in multiple languages, which occasioned in communicating with other scholars and teachers alike concerning her work. While her endeavors emphasized the training and empowerment of women in their religious lives, Asma’u was also keen on promoting the accomplishments of her family. She certainly admonished accusers and detractors of the Shehu’s teachings and legacy.

Furthermore, Asma’u’s writings denoted the roles she held throughout her life. Her collaboration with her husband demonstrated the closeness she held with him and the commitment she had for him. Although not presented that way through her writings, Asma’u certainly enjoyed a level of political influence by holding a position of leadership and authority. She made use of her position in a diligent way, which did not interfere with her primary educational function. While Asma’u did not seem to have labeled her roles and contributions, her personalism in her writings tend to convey a deliberate approach to communicating and developing relationships over long distances.

Of the numerous works she produced, Nana Asma’u’s composition of Sufi Women illustrates the recognition of past Sufi women’s contributions and the appreciation of those who supported her work and efforts to instruct. The poem known as “Sufi Women “functioned to help women remember the Islamic teachings

39 Boyd, “Distance Learning from Purdah,” 12.
and to pull them into the community. Last the poem, according to Mack and Boyd, “is intended to mobilize women, to mutate their will and make them obedient to the Muslim ethic.” In addition, Asma’u composed many other works on women who were part of her life or had an influence on her. She wrote eulogies for her sisters, mostly upon their passing. Asma’u composed about women who had mundane positions in daily life, but whose work she found inspirational.

Conclusions

The aim of this chapter was to capture the works of Nana Asma’u, the daughter of Shaykh Uthman dan Fodio. The Shehu’s Jihad was a prominent feature in Asma’u’s life; those events shaped her life and her understanding of struggles, both physical and spiritual. It later became the subject of many texts and compositions. These events also molded the lives of those who were captured during the battles. It was that recognition Asma’u had in mind when she composed some of her notes.

Asma’u drew from her family’s legacy of education, instruction, and devotion to accomplish two major goals. The first was the education of women and the second was the production of scholarly materials. The Shehu and his family worked very hard to compile and produce significant scholarly texts that enriched the Arabic literary tradition of the Sudanic region. In fact, Shaykh Uthman’s materials stood out in terms of numbers, but also with regard to substance.

---

40 Boyd and Mack, Collected works, 70.
With support from her family, Asma’u completed her first task. This remarkable woman built an extensive network of leading female instructors who provided a religious education to their female students. The second goal was completed by following in the tradition of the Shehu’s family to write considerably. Finally, Nana Asma’u’s legacy was a continuation of the previous accomplishments of Sufi women in her family as well as other ascetic women.

Asma’u also accomplished both goals by building connections between women to nurture their spirituality. Asma’u’s writings were designed to impart those teachings that fostered pastoral care and the enlargement of pastoral connections. She encouraged, supported, and counseled men and women on many different matters.

By developing a network of women, Asma’u nurtured the notion of developing pastoral connections. Asma’u’s jajis conducted the work and facilitated the instruction of men and women. Their devotion to Asma’u and the trust she placed in them sustained the building of pastoral spiritualism.

While her writings focused on religious education as well as imparting knowledge that would help women gain a spiritual life, Asma’u’s mastery of Islamic knowledge was impressive that it helped her to deal with complicated problems. Yet it was her personal approach that gave women a sense of direction in their religious lives. Thanks to her, many women who never met Amsa’u had a richer and more meaningful religious life.
CHAPTER 4

 SUFI WOMEN IN CONTEMPORARY TARIQAS

A bookseller in Fez showed me many old works of hadith and fiqh, all attributed to male authors. When I asked if it were possible to find works by women he said it was not, but added that that did not mean that women did not write. He insisted that it was quite common for women to compose, but for propriety’s sake they would never sign their own names; they would sign their husbands’ names instead.1

-Beverly Mack

The quote is attributed to Beverly Mack whose research has focused on Sufi women’s scholarship and religious education in Sudanic Africa. I believe the quote illustrates two points; the first is the breadth of women’s scholarship is difficult to ascertain because it is overlooked or women sign their production under their husbands’ names. The second point is women contribute to Sufism in other forms for the propagation of Islamic teachings. For Muslim women, especially Sufi followers, religious education offers them the opportunity to develop their own spirituality as well as their own network and special connections.

The intent of this chapter is to examine the Sufi traditions of the Sudanic region and of parts of northwest Africa that allow women to gain a level of authority, political empowerment, and autonomous spirituality. The teachings of Nana Asma’u presented in the previous chapter demonstrated how her scholarship benefited the women of the Sokoto Caliphate. In this chapter, our analysis will show how her teachings continue to support women’s spiritual growth not only in northern Nigeria, but also in other Sufi networks across the Sudanic region.

Sudanic Sufi Networks

Nana Asma’u’s writings were part of a broader tradition in the Sudanic region. This topic explored earlier emphasized the presence of significant networks of Sufi followers who not only exchanged religious ideas, but also expanded their influence across large bands of the region. Nana Asma’u’s teachings fitted well at a time of spiritual revival of Islam and existing Sufi tariqas expanded and new ones were blossoming. For the purpose of this discussion, the analysis focuses on a few tariqas to show how women like Nana Asma’u have their own networks and develop their pastoral connections separately from men. The emphasis is on the Qadiriyya and Tijaniyya.

Another order originating within the Maghreb is the Darqawi tariqa that also facilitated the religious education of women, especially in rural areas. However, the development of pastoral connections is irrespective of the environment.

The strengths of these three orders are distinct for two reasons; first, they grew popular during a time when Sufi movements regained power, mainly thanks to the influence of several male scholars beginning in the late 17th century such as Ahmad al Tijani, Ahmad ibn Idris, and Abu Hamid al Arabi al Darqawi. The most important difference with Al Tijani and ibn Idris is the establishment of reformed orders while al Darqawi’s style drew from a traditional Sufi approach originating from the Shadili tariqa. The Qadiriyya enjoyed a revival as well with some of its resurgence spreading from Morocco into North African countries. While not exclusively Moroccan, the revival of tariqas has most of its roots in the Maghreb.  

2Trimingham, Sufi Orders, 106.
Also, many young Sufi adepts who later achieved prominence in reviving tariqas studied in northern Morocco in Fez under different Sufi authorities. It was a frequent occurrence for a young Sufi disciple to spend time with a leading shaykh from one tariqa and then to move on to study the Sufi way under a shaykh of another tariqa. The significance of this point is shaykhs who established new tariqas drew from various influences during their Sufi training. They also learned to appreciate other sensibilities they might not have attained otherwise.\(^3\)

The significance of the Al Darqawi tariqa was a popular approach drawn from the Shadilli tariqa; al Darqawi reignited a desire for a contemplative life. While he did not create a new order, his followers who studied with him created their own branches in North Africa. The Darqawi tariqa enjoyed much success, but has diminished in importance in comparison with the influence the leading shaykh held with the rulers of Morocco in the middle of the 19th century. In fact, al Darqawi’s influence was misused to lead revolts in Algeria and Morocco, which subsequently landed the shaykh in prison for several years. The home zawiya of al Darqawi at Bu Berih still enjoys visitors performing pilgrimage. The shaykhs of the Darqawiyya retained their attachments to the original zawiya when they established their own branch. The tariqa spread mainly throughout North Africa with most offshoots still in Morocco and Algeria; a few also remain in Libya. The primary factor for its continued popularity is its focus on the poor,

\(^3\) Ibid., 108.
the inclusion of women, and the education of men and women regardless of background.4

Ahmad al Tijani’s involvement in reforming Islam and initiating the revival of Sufism profoundly affected the spread of Islam in West Africa. By establishing his tariqa, the Tijaniyya Shaykh Al Tijani changed the face of religious education where the tariqa found roots. The Tijaniyya quickly reached areas such as present-day Senegal, Mali, and eventually spread to Nigeria with a new branch originating in Senegal. The Tijaniyya is an exclusively African order in its roots and practice.5 The only other tariqa present in West Africa is the Qadiriyya. It’s important to note the Muridiyya is a contemporary tariqa that is distinctly from Senegal and has remained confined to Senegal. The Muridiyya grew mainly as a result of the French colonial presence.67

The introduction of the Tijaniyya in West Africa is attributed to Umar Tall, a Fulani scholar who undertook a jihad after Shaykh Dan Fodio’s in the 1840s. Umar Tall was briefly successful in establishing an empire across a region called that covered most of present day Mali and parts of Mauritania and Guinea. His decision to undertake the Jihad followed his affiliation to the Tijaniyya. It was at that point the tariqa began its firm establishment in West Africa. Umar Tall was a contemporary of Shaykh Uthman Dan Fodio’s son. In fact, Umar Tall spent several years in Sokoto with the shayhk’s son,

4 Ibid., 110-111.
5 Triaud and Robinson, La Tijaniyya, 17.
6 Trimingham, Sufi Orders, 106-110.
Mohammed Bello. Shaykh Tall was also initiated by Muhammad al-Hafiz al-Shinqiti, a direct disciple responsible for initiating the spread of the Tijaniyya into West Africa before him. During his Hijra to Mecca, Umar Tall followed extensive studies under another direct disciple of Ahmad al Tijani, Muhammad al-Ghali. His prolific writings contributed to the Islamic scholarship, but the distinct point of Umar Tall was his dissension of other Sufi networks, which he accomplished by elevating the teachings of the Tijaniyya over the other tariqas in the region.  

It is important to note the role of Umar Tall in West Africa despite the brief establishment of his empire; he along with Shaykh Dan Fodio were the only two Muslim scholars who undertook Sufi inspired military campaigns in the region. Islam was firmly established with a strong support base in the Sudanic region.

The emergence of the Tijaniyya was significant because of the notable qualities of al Tijani. Originally from southern Algeria, Al Tijani’s emergence on the Sufi scene occurred after spending time wondering in the desert. Once he completed his retreat, he moved to Morocco and began his apostolic mission near Fes. Tijani’s doctrine considered basic elements that facilitated its adoption across the region. He focused on few obligations and did not require a time for retreat and punishment. He also restricted the rituals to elementary forms. Yet Al Tijani firmly believed on having an intermediary believers and God; those intercessors were him and his disciples. He invoked the prophet for supporting his instruction by citing Muhammad’s intercession with God. Al Tijani

---

8 Ibid., 609.

9 Ibid.
believed his disciple needed to follow that example and he insisted on a strict rule that restricted the association of his disciples to any other shaykhs. As a result, Tijani’s successor maintained a direct chain of transmission (silsila) to the Shaykh.\textsuperscript{10}

Al Tijani’s popularity gradually grew thanks to its practicalities. His approach to discipleship was fairly simple; it occurred by bestowing his representation on those who desired it. He did not require extensive training for his representatives (muqqadam) who wanted to profess his teachings, except for an elementary yet thorough initiation in his rules and teachings. Furthermore, he also placed emphasis on a silent recitation of his teachings (dhikr) and prohibited participation in holy celebrations. While the tariqa appeared restrictive at first with a few changes in religious rituals, his followers grew closely connected to his tariqa.\textsuperscript{11} After Al Tijani passed away, the tariqa maintained its influence in Algeria and Morocco. As previously mentioned, the tariqa expanded south and west thanks in part to Shaykh Umar Tall. Other branches were established in West Africa following a pilgrimage to Fes at the tomb of Al Tijani.\textsuperscript{12}

The expansion of Al Tijani’s tariqa into West Africa following Umar Tall’s jihad originated in Senegal. In the mid to late 19\textsuperscript{th} century, two prominent shaykhs founded independent branches of the Tijaniyya. First, Shaykh Malick Sy (d. 1922) founded his branch of tariqa and attracted many followers, but he was not as influential as Shaykh

\textsuperscript{10} Tringham, \textit{Sufi Orders}, 108.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
Abdallah (d. 1922) Niasse whose base in Kaolack grew large in followers and influence in most of West Africa thanks to his son, Ibrahim Niasse (d. 1975).

Tracing the adoption of the Tijaniyya in West Africa is important because it reveals the personalities of the most important shaykhs responsible for spreading Sufism across the region are men. Also, the scholarship shows that the focus has been on men’s influence in the Sufi revivallist movement. The interesting part is how these new and independent networks allowed the inclusion of women and the development of their circles.

*Women in Contemporary Tariqas in West Africa and The Maghreb*

The presence of women in Sufi circles is a long-standing phenomenon the previous chapters have demonstrated. The involvement of women in Sufi circles of West Africa is not only fervent, but it is also an essential element for the education of women, especially for their religious knowledge. The developing tradition of women in Sufi orders has continued to enlarge the contributions of women. The appreciation of women’s role among Sufi circles is also a difficult subject due in part to the Islamization process that has taken place in places such as northern Nigeria and Algeria. Nonetheless, women have retained a role in religious life and have continued to preserve their pastoral connections.

Much of the literature investigating the significance of Sufi movements in West Africa often addressed the male leadership and discipleship. The scholarship also reveals men in those tariqas might not have been aware of women’s involvement. While that may seem ironic, it might not be too surprising for women to maintain their
separate circles in order to focus on their own endeavors. In contemporary times, the education of women has continued the tradition established over the past 150 years with women like Nana Asma’u. Her involvement in support of the Caliph was replicated elsewhere under different circumstances.

The pastoral connections among Sufi women in West Africa are grounded in the region’s history with Islam. Those connections began as exchanges between a mix of scholars (both men and women) in the regions. This was the case for prominent shaykhs whose combined influence extended most of western Sudanic region that comprises modern day southern Morocco to Nigeria. The influence of scholars such as Shaykh Uthman Dan Fodio permeated across the region and was a significant contributing factor for supporting women’s education. Nana Asma’u also had her own connections with male scholars based upon the examination of her works by Mack and Boyd. As seen with the jajis of the Sokoto caliphate, the educations of women took place out of the public eye and separate from men most of the time. Today, the educational effort has remained with the same segregation of boys and girls early in their religious education. Adult education tends to follow a similar pattern.

The religious influence on developing an educational tradition has served women well both as providers of the education as well as the recipients of instruction. Women’s roles shaping their communities consist of essential positions such as women’s

---

13 Mack, "Muslim Women Scholars," 165.
14 Mack and Boyd, Collected Works.
involvement in young children’s education as well as the development of circles often solely devoted to adult women and designed to enrich women’s religious endeavors. This is particularly important for countries with large populations, as is the case of Nigeria, a country of about 150 million that is supposedly half Muslim.

The objective of Nana Asma’u was to make religious education accessible to women; therefore, she designed a “curriculum” based on traditional Islamic scholarship alongside other structures with the aim to teach and guide by memorizing poems. The approach was creative because it did not rely on literacy to spread new teachings to a large audience. This method was very successful and maintained a personalism in building connections between a leading female authority with known and unknown women. It provided a bond between women as well as a connection with God. That connection was well formed too. The previous chapter presented, in the form of a table, some of the texts Nana Asma’u penned over the course of her life. Some of those included the translation of her father and brother’s works. When she completed the deeds, Nana Asma’u signed it with her name.16

The method and authorship remain true today with studies revealing the education of West Africa women taking place in various forms. The premise for an education is often tied to religious beliefs and spiritual fulfillment, so that women find satisfaction in their role in a society that is often defined with a patriarchal hierarchy.

Based on separate case studies in Senegal, Algeria, Nigeria, and Niger, the remainder of the analysis focuses on how the education of women takes place. The contentious point is going to be how education is perceived from a western point of view instead of the perspective of religious women. This notion is important because the western approach tends to focus on the secular education while the women’s point of view contends the western style education and prefers the religious education.

Beverly Mack’s contribution to *The Meanings Of Timbuktu* (2004) addresses the value of investigating the past to appreciate the present. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, historical roots explained the significance of men and women’s past contributions. Mack also captured the impacts of past scholars with contemporary female scholars. She explained how the women of Mauritania and Nigeria have not forgotten the value of the basic Islamic teachings, some of them offered through the works of other women, such as Nana Asma’u’s. Her observations were collected from across the western Sudanic region.

First, Mack pulled from two separate sources to offer support for women’s education. She made reference to a study of Hausa women in Kano by Barbara Sule and Patricia Starratt designed to explore female Islamic leadership in contemporary northern Nigeria. The study highlighted women who grew up around the time of Nigeria’s independence until the 1980s. The findings showed women pursued both a religious and western style education that benefitted them by providing them with a role as teacher of young children and in adult education programs. The study also revealed that the basis

---

17 Beverly B. Mack “Muslim Women Scholars.”
for most education consisted of Islamic texts to include the memorization of the Quran. These women also ran local schools designed to nurture spiritual learning and established a leadership role with an intimate knowledge of *tafsir.*

The other source was Mack’s observations during her fieldwork in Kano. She noted that women of the Kano palace informed her of two types of learning. Children began with a religious education mainly memorizing the Quran; this was the kind of education rooted in a traditional learning experience. The other form was the western education system also implemented. Students split their day between the two types of schooling during their primary education. Moving on beyond a secondary education, children then had options for pursuing a higher learning. They could choose between institutions that provided a curriculum that extended between the western-type school and Schools for Arabic Studies. Mack also discussed the options for women who married young and could no longer attend schools. Private schooling and tutoring were options for those women who found it satisfactory to continue their education while maintaining their domestic obligations. The women also had the opportunity to attend classes either day or evening, which were sponsored by the State of Kano. The women who lived in the Kano palace also had the option to pursue their own education as well as to attend to the religious education of the women who lived at the palace. They also taught other women outside the palace by organizing neighborhood schools.

---

18 Mack, “Muslim Women Scholars,” 175.

19 Ibid.
The memorization process for learning has suited both men and women for several reasons. First, many seemed satisfied with oral transmission and retention. In fact, Mack explained that some believed the written word was an obstacle to understanding and adopting the meaning of religious teachings. An example of knowledge transmission is the use of *Tebra* by Moorish women in Mauritania. The *Tebra* is a poetic form exclusively used by women to recount their experience in Moorish culture in a country largely dominated by men and with few women’s positions only recently reformed. The poetic usage forms part of a tradition that preserves the Moorish culture. The compositions use the vernacular and are designed to deal with women’s issues. While this form of oral tradition is not specific to religion, it highlights the use of poems as ways for women to share their knowledge of problems with others. It is a very creative and resilient approach to preserve the stories of women and give them a voice.  

The emergence of women’s religious authority has been well documented in Senegal. While the bulk of the literature on Sufi networks in Senegal has focused on the Tijaniyya or the Murid order, the scholarship produced covered men’s participation and contributions. However, the fieldwork conducted over the last few decades has yielded some new and interesting scholarship focused on Sufi women.

The Senegalese shaykh Ibrahim Niasse (d. 1975) appointed women leaders in his order. He first accepted women as disciple who also taught other men and women. Based on the literary review, it is hardly noticeable that women were part of the

extensive networks. Yet these women have held extensive roles in the *tariqa*. A few reports highlight their roles and their contributions as well as placing context to clarify the obscurity with their involvement.

Most recently, Amber Gemmeke provided new and insightful information on shaykhas from Dakar, Senegal. She noted the presence of leading female who held traditional roles as leading marabouts, a position that gave them a religious authority alongside men. In her analysis Gemmeke brings forward the difficulties in ascertaining the role and contributions of women in contemporary *tariqas*. While she mentions the role of women as healers in pre-colonial times, Gemmeke emphasized the need for finding additional evidence of women’s current roles in the *tariqas*. 21 This is worth noting because the research on Sufi women in contemporary *tariqas* suffers from serious gaps.

Nevertheless, Gemmeke presents a series of women related to prominent sheikhs from both different brotherhoods who were appointed in leading religious roles; she notes the role of Shaykh Niasse’s daughter Sonja Mainmouna Mbacke who has taken residence in Niger and supports a local non-governmental organization promoting access to education for girls and women. Niasse’s daughter’s authority is tied to her familial connections, but other women also hold positions that enable them to promote religious education and guidance.22

---


22 Ibid., 134.
In Gemmeke’s article, women’s visibility in the Sufi community is illustrated with a brief portrait of two women who hold leading positions in their communities. The two female Sufi leaders are successful in building a network of followers who seek their advice and guidance for practical matters. These women dispense services as well in a neighborhood where male marabouts dominate the market for guidance. Gemmeke informs the success of these women is built on adopting certain qualities. First, the women rely on their divine blessing (baraka). They follow the examples set by their leaders in their respective tariqas by speaking and dressing in similar forms. They also are unmarried women who can support their claim to purity by pointing to their martial status. This quality is reminiscent of discussions early Islamic scholars had on the first Sufi women.23

These women also hold their authority by drawing on their knowledge of Islamic teachings and their affiliation to their brotherhoods. Not only do these women follow in the ways of their teachers, but they also draw their authority by displaying firm beliefs in the teachings. Their assertive attitude combined with their unique role as women project a powerful image that lends them credibility and compels followers in seeking their advice.24

The significance of these Sufi women’s success is their ability to have a strong following among men and women despite lacking the familial connections to the various tariqas in Dakar. Their example shows the possibilities for women to hold leading roles.

23 Ibid., 138-139.

24 Ibid., 140.
in their communities in spite of what seem like adversities. These women’s choice in choosing a *tariqa* over another generates attention concerning the adaptation and pragmatism these women have in making decisions that benefit them and their families, but also their communities. That aspect is also reminiscent of the level of humanity women display in decision-making process. They show their ability to develop connections, but not at the expense of their communities.

In his article focused on women's authority building new religious circles and expanding existing one, Joseph Hill presents additional examples of leading religious women in Dakar. The discussion provides a detailed analysis of the qualities of women who hold those leading positions. Their contributions are also based on their personal qualities that provide a supporting role to the existing hierarchy of the *tariqas*. Women appointed *muggadama* (female disciple) tread a difficult position because of resistance from men in accepting their leadership. Yet it is women’s qualities that have compelled male Sufi leaders to bestow the title of disciple upon them.25

---

In his report, Hill conveys how women navigate their positions of spiritual authority by displaying moral authority based on the acquisition of hidden knowledge. But these women are also compelled to remain pious and submissive to nurture their spiritual qualities and to remind men that their submission is not just to Islam, but expectations in their roles as wives and mothers as well. This contrast is one that is a complicated task for them to undertake. Yet, Hill argues that their interiority is the compelling element making them properly suited for their roles as Sufi leaders. The roles and contributions of these women are not in challenge of the men. Certainly, the appointment of women disciples and leaders under the Niasse family was a common occurrence and even encouraged. The difficulty is the awareness and acceptance of
these women, which might be less complicated than presumed. Because these women provide for a segment of the population, mainly the youth, they are in a fitting position thanks to their gender. Their traditional roles as mothers are already an accepted norm in the Senegalese society. The women depicted in Hill’s article project similar behaviors as those portrayed by Gemmeke; the women are respectful and appreciative of their lineage, and remind their audience of their positions.

What these articles continue to describe and analyze are about women holding positions of power and authority that yield substantial contributions to the communities of men and women. The acceptance of women in Senegal is reminiscent of the influence of Nana Asma’u over 150 years ago. She held a prominent position for she was supporting the establishment of her father and brother. What these women are doing in contemporary times has not changed dramatically in substance; the more important shift is the context surrounding their functions. For those reasons, western scholars seek to redefine their positions to highlight their roles and contributions; those scholars also realize the need to further explore the roles and contributions of women.

Margaret Rausch presents an interesting case of women’s education taking place in southwestern Morocco among Ishelhin women. The main point of her article is the transmission of knowledge by women to other women using the didactic poetry for members of the Darqawi Sufi order. Rausch offers evidence of Sufi women leading religious instructions for other women mainly in their local dialect Tashelbit and

---

26 Ibid., 400.
27 Ibid., 378.
reaching other women in rural isolated areas. The use of itinerant teachers combined with chants based on religious instructions shows how women are receiving religious instructions by building on an older form of communal ritual. As a result, the remoteness of the women’s location does not deny them a spiritual education.\textsuperscript{28}

The instruction of Sufi women is also an older tradition in Morocco with many local Sufi scholars sending their daughters also trained in Islamic teachings to reach women in the surrounding villages. This tradition has continued until today, albeit in a different context. Teachers relied on the didactic poetry method because it afforded uneducated women a religious instruction. But the use of didactic poetry also lent itself to the use of the vernacular. The composition of Tashllebit poetry was designed for memorization. This method has been a common form of instruction in traditional Islamic schools. This form of poetry has been in use since the 16\textsuperscript{th} century; nowadays, the poems are available in cassette tapes in local markets designed to instruct the local population today with a segment still illiterate.\textsuperscript{29}

The context in which these Ishelhin women receive their instruction is interesting. Rausch provides information on the availability of instructions with western style schools, Sufi and traditional Islamic schools. Yet, the oral tradition remains the preferred form of instructions in Sufi circles, especially for the women and men in

\textsuperscript{28} Rausch, “Ishelhin1 Women Transmitters,” 174.

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 175-178.
isolated areas.\textsuperscript{30} The lessons and chants are based on Quranic passages and Sufi concepts focused on the closeness to God and communion with God.\textsuperscript{31}

Sufi women instruct other women by providing religious instructions in the form of lessons and also by relying on chants structured on the didactic form. The female instructors are composed of local women who are literate and often have received their instructions through their husbands. The instruction of women takes place in small congregations in the villages; instruction is not the only form of pastoral care. Women dispense advice usually for marital problems. The result is the creation of networks of women in rural areas that nurtures the development of spiritualism.\textsuperscript{32}

While women have persisted in providing religious instruction and support for a spirituality, the numbers of teachers and followers trend in decline according to Rausch. She informs the influence and preference for an education that often omits the teachings in the local language, Tashelbit. Yet, women remain active participants because of their strong desire to preserve their rituals and grow in their local communities.

Sossie Andezian provides an example of the place of women in Sufi rituals. She demonstrates how the women view their role during a pilgrimage. In essence, Andezian suggests the Sufi women of a local order, the Zidaniyya understand the value of their authority in terms of participation in the rituals. Andezian uses the example of the \textit{tariqa}’s annual pilgrimage in western Algeria. While the women are active participants

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 182.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 187.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 183-184.
in the pilgrimage and use the ritual to rejoin as sisterhoods, they are also the individuals who have to overcome additional obstacles during the ceremonies. Andezian explains that men tend to show suspicion of the women due to their mingling in different circles and with non-related men. Andezian’s *Expériences Du Divin Dans l’Algérie Contemporaine* provides a detailed ethnographic account of the lives of Sufi women to include their relationship with saints, their connections with other women, and their beliefs in the importance of a religious education.

Nonetheless, women’s participation in the pilgrimage is as important as that of the men’s. Their attendance and performance of the rituals take place in very similar ways as the men’s. The difference is in the separation of women in performing the rituals and enjoining in the performance of music. The most important point of the article is the distinct characteristics of women’s participation that enable them to define their religious spirituality in a country that was dominated by Islamists who have repressed Sufi orders and what they considered unorthodox Islamic practices.

*Religion and Education*

This next section is designed to discuss the education of women through the study of women’s education, political, and religious spheres. As previously discussed, women have found ways to hold positions of authority in the religious sphere. While

---


these positions and their contributions are significant in the power the Sufi women yield, it is also important to understand where else women hold positions of influence.

In a detailed analysis of women in West Africa, Barbara Callaway and Lucy Creevey established a relationship between the education of women and their positions of influence.\textsuperscript{35} Their study examines the potential for women’s education with respect to politics and religion. The premise is the influence of religion on education as well as access to education from the government authorities. The study is primarily comparative in its approach drawing mainly from previous research on Senegal and Nigeria both scholars had already completed. While the study considers a feminist approach in the analysis of the data, the perspective does not limit the usefulness of the information.

What is significant in the text is the information devoted to the status of women in a religious context, which actually grows in contrast to the education women received in state (secular) schools. The differences between Nigeria and Senegal are negligible from the view that women are able to receive an education as long as the male hierarchy approves of it. While the authors analyze the relationship of women’s education in connection to the women’s status in contrast to those of men’s, Callaway and Creevey realize that women’s education can take place as long as men understand the value from a religious point of view. The importance of Islam in both Senegal and Nigeria cannot be undermined; the political organizations of both states are very different, but the primary religious actors are similar. In Senegal, the Family Code of 1972 preserves

\footnote{\textsuperscript{35} Barbara Callaway, and Lucy E. Creevey, \textit{The Heritage of Islam: Women, Religion, and Politics in West Africa} (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1994).}
certain rights for women, while Shari’s law covers most family matters in Nigeria. Nonetheless, in Senegal and Nigeria, local Islamic leaders will facilitate women’s education as long as they convey the value to the community.

Education does influence the lives of girls and women; the authors of the study indicate that women’s access to education improves their personal lives with access to resources and greater involvement in family decisions. However, this improvement tends to show up as an urban phenomenon. In rural areas, the changes are not as significant with women’s access to education is less than ideal. This is where I contend local religious instruction partially fills the gap.

The development of educational program in northern Nigeria was the result of women’s influence in the political domain. Their involvement, even though small and limited in comparison to men, has resulted in the expansion of programs designed to teach women basic skills to undertake economic activities and cope with social changes. The programs have not interrupted the development of pastoral connections. The goal of these women is to expand their religious and political influence while maintaining a spiritual autonomy. These women have accomplished such things as demonstrated earlier with the examples of marabout women in Senegal. These women showed how they were able to connect to other women and contribute to their communities in that respect.

---

36 Callaway and Creevey, The Heritage of Islam, 43.
37 Ibid., 47-48.
38 Ibid., 85.
The political influence of Muslim women in Nigeria has afforded the development of programs designed to educate both girls and women. These programs under the Federation of Muslim women’s Association of Nigeria (FONWAN) for instance have been in place since the 1970s and 1980s until present day. The pursuit of education for women is rooted in Islam and is designed to enhance the status of women. Based on Quranic interpretation, women’s rights are promoted to improve their status based on cultural characteristics.\(^{39}\)

Nigerian women’s understanding of education has changed as well. Thanks to efforts from organizations like FONWAN combined with foreign funding and government funding of schools, women have gained access to traditional Islamic schooling giving them opportunities to hold positions such as teachers in schools and colleges. The women who have reached a higher level of education found new opportunities to define their role and contributions as Muslim women. They also hold positions that give them the option of influencing their students with their views as women and shape their understanding of a woman’s role in an Islamic context. However, since women have been opting for a higher education only in the last few decades, it is difficult to ascertain the reach of their participation due to the lack of statistics for female enrollment.\(^{40}\)

---


Conclusions

The expansion of Sufi *tariqas* across the Maghreb and West Africa facilitated the spread of Islam in present day Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, and Nigeria. The presence of Sufi shaykhs in these areas transformed the education of both men and women by making religious education available to anyone who desired bringing God into their lives. Tijani shaykhs prominently featured in bestowing the title of disciples on women whose roles contributed to many segments of society. More importantly, women used their characteristics as female religious agents to share their knowledge with other women and young people.

Their role in imparting Sufi teachings remains an essential task much like Nan Asma’u undertook in her time and, as did the female saints who preceded her. The teachings serve a very important purpose: giving women the opportunity to gain a spiritual life and to nurture that spirituality with the connections they built in their instruction. The religious teachers not only care for the religious education of their “flock,” they also provide pastoral care much like Nana Asma’u by dispensing advice to women who needed it.

The chapter provided insights into those women responsible for carrying out the teachings with examples of Marabout women in Senegal. Some women earned their roles through familial connections, but others also gained their status in their own rights without the help of those family connections. These examples illustrate the resilience of women in a patriarchal society that accepts, albeit somewhat reluctantly leading female authorities as long as men understand the
value of women’s roles in offering religious guidance and education to men and women.

Last, this phenomenon represents the willingness of women to take a leading role in their communities where educational opportunities greatly vary between rural areas and urban settings. For those women who receive a formal education, they get the opportunity to influence men and women in their understanding of the value of an education. For those whose education is limited in option, female Sufi teachers fill a void in attending to a mass that still needs nurturing.

The chapter also closes with a note on the need for additional research on the role and contribution of women in contemporary tariqas. By drawing from past examples of Sufi women who held leading roles in looking after other men and women, we can value their accomplishments with more appreciation. It is evident additional work on this topic would be beneficial for the fields of religion, history, and women’s studies.
CLOSING REMARKS

The intent of the analysis was to show the relevancy of the writings of Nana Asma’u by investigating the pastoral connections of Sufi women in modern tariqas. I drew on the historical precedence of women’s involvement early in Islam as well as the distinct feminine aspects of Islam those early ascetic women displayed. The record of their burgeoning qualities was of particular importance because they showed distinguished role women held early in their involvement in the Sufi way.

Early Islamic scholars who noticed the feminine aspects realized the significance and a few texts collating the women’s biographies were produced as a result. One of these texts is the Book of Sufi Women by Al Sulami written in the 11th century. The work attested to the influence of those women based on their holy qualities. That work was groundbreaking as well because the author relied on the biography literary genre, which has been a traditional form of Islamic literature to produce a text of substance. That type of work combined with the prominence of Al Sulami established the presence of mystical women alongside men in Islam.

Continuing the tradition of the female saints’ biographies, women’s influence in the Sufi way continued to be chronicled with the same literary genre. Those historical chronicles showed how the women’s entrenchment in Sufism grew larger over time and also expanded in regions well beyond their origins in the Arabian Peninsula and Persia.

The relevance of those biographies matters because many female scholars have relied on them to support women’s involvement in Sufism with reference to a
few in particular. While many Islamic scholars have often overlooked the involvement of women in Islam and even more so in Sufism, some have often cited the biography of Rabi’ā of Basra to explain the presence and contributions of women in Sufi circles as well as to show women sainthood could be attained.

Female Sufi saints have lived alongside men and can be found in many different places in India, northern Africa as well as sub-Saharan Africa. One female saint whose influence provided tremendous benefits to other women was Nana Asma’u. Her scholarship exemplified the contributions of women in Sufism.

Her writings completed in 19th century northern Nigeria reflects a long a continuing tradition of women’s role and contribution in Sufi brotherhoods (tariqas) in the Central Sudanic region. Continuing the practice of composing meaningful works like other distinguished Sufi women, Asma’u drafted many poems and other works solely for women’s religious instruction. That form of instruction has been retained and introduced in other places in West Africa for people who rely on memorization of religious poetry to foster their spirituality. Asma’u’s work remains relevant because women not only use her poems, but also it is often the only form of instruction that is available to them. The saintly qualities Asma’u displayed were also a reflection of those qualities from early Sufi women. Her contributions centuries after those of Rabi’ā’s for instance show the path women have followed to demonstrate their valuable contributions. The lengthy involvement as illustrated with Asma’u, is a more recent example of female sainthood that has been brought forth. Many other female saints continue her path
as well and duplicate her contributions as well as those of the women who preceded them. The pastoral connections exist between these women across geographical boundaries with the use of similar teachings and methods. It is women who have nurtured most often other women’s spiritual needs; they have offered pastoral care as many other female saints have done before them. It is not the thought of following in those footsteps that concern these women most; I believe it is the growth of connections that is of concern for them.

The connections between the early Sufi women to modern times are the continuation of a path forged with women that has made Sufism with distinct female qualities. Female saints are still found today, but are still overlooked. While their actions might be as profound as those of Rabi’a’s or Asma’u’s for instance, they still maintain an important role that sometimes allow them to exert great influence among their contemporaries. That influence is often soft-spoken and has not clashed with a patriarchal hierarchy, something early saints also demonstrated early in Sufism. The pastoral connections have reached not only across regions, but have been tested with the passing of time. I truly hope these connections continue as women will continue to benefit from having spiritual and pastoral bonds. These ties are also directly linked to the well-being of their communities.
APPENDIX

A TRANSLATION OF A PASSAGE FROM "EXPÉRIENCES DU DIVIN DANS L’ALGÉRIE CONTEMPORAINE" (2001).

The author, Sossie Andozian wrote the text based on her extended fieldwork in the Tlemcen region in Algeria. The book is mainly devoted to female mystic rituals and practices among local Sufi tariqas.

The translation is representative of the points and themes captured in the thesis, mainly the meaningful involvement of women in Sufism, the leading role women have in educating and nurturing a spiritual connection among women in contemporary tariqas. Those experiences are not only significant, but they relate to the difficulties some women face in a country with conflicting religious ideologies.

In the translation below, I used to refer to one of two individuals: the author or one of the women participants. I tried to stay true to the writing style in the original text, but sometimes felt compelled to clarify a subject or pronoun.

WOMEN’S SECRET IN THE SHADOW OF A SANCTUARY

Following [Algeria’s] independence, the ties with saints are understood in Algeria as a typical form of feminine religiosity, which would not be based on scripture, but magic, emotion. As a matter of fact maintaining ties with saints is a common practice among men. The feminization of the practice of this phenomenon is explained by its value in the public domain and delegation in the private area. A zayira is also known, in addition to an act of devotion, as an occasion for social connections between women, the equivalent of a coffee shop for men.
Furthermore, the principle of sexual division of the space makes the *qubba* or the *zawiya* a privileged place for religious practices of women as opposed to a mosque considered a male space. Last, women were less affected than men by the reformist ideology, which was first a political ideology disseminated mainly in men’s social places (mosques, coffee shops...). Few women from urban areas indoctrinated in the reformist ideology were taught in the schools of *Islah*. During the late 1980s, women who had access to education in large numbers women are found in higher numbers in the islamists movements.

Other than the informal visit to the saints’ tombs, women of Tlemcen meet in in the *qubba*, a *zawiya*, or a residence to celebrate the saint’s memory. Known as *djama*-s, these reunions which are held Friday afternoons and during religious feasts, are led by a *muqqadima*. There are two types of *djanas*: those that take place to organize the activities of a woman’s group connected to a *tariqa* and those that are not connected to any organizations. The *djana* presented in this chapter belongs to the second category.

Sidi Msahhil is the patron saint of a neighborhood of Boudghene. A self-proclaimed women *muqqadima* organizes weekly *djanas*. Even though she is a member of the Qadiriyya, she does not lead meetings under that title, but as follower of Sidi Msahhil. She claims following (netteb’uh) Sidi Msahhil, connecting to him (nshedd fih) and serving him (nekbdemlub). I (the author) does not know much on the conditions of adopting this saint, nor on the access to the zawiya. I must clarify I did not try to inquire about information my informants did not reveal
straight away. I accepted only what was willingly offered and to listen and understand, especially given the spoken words and rituals performed for me which held the value of a gift for the visiting outsider from far away. On the day I ask her permission to record prayers, the answer of the muqaddima is clear: I do not want you to say that I went to Algeria and I was harassed. If my access to information was tied to the intensity of my involvement in exchanges with my informants, I could decide in their place of the implications in these exchanges. I believed these women were free to accept or reject my inquiries. I then respected those basic rules of hospitality.

I knew the zawiya of Sidi Msahhil thanks to young administrative employees of the university of Tlemcen. Being aware of my interests in local religious traditions, they offered to take me there. What these young women from old families of Tlemcen, who belonged to the city middle class, found in those meetings with old women uninformed of the religious life (according to some Tlemcen residents)? I went to the zawiya for several weeks every Friday as well as during religious feasts in 1982 and 1983. In the following paragraphs, we will read the narrative of one of those meetings that was particularly significant from the perspective of the occurrence of such an activity in the lives of women on one end, and the role of the muqqadima from the other.

An Ordinary Session

Like every Friday afternoon for about a month, I go and meet one of those young women, S., who usually takes me to the djama. Her mother refuses to let her
leave under the excuse she did not complete her cleaning chores at home. After bitter supplications, S. is successful in being freed from the maternal hold, promising to return as soon as possible to complete her chore she’s responsible for on her day of rest. “I work outside during the week and on Friday I want to relax some. Unfortunately there is nothing to do in this town, the djama is our only leisure. But each time, my mother tries to keep me from going; she worries about what might be said, so she prefers I stay home. I spend every morning on Friday cleaning the house, I do not want to spend the afternoon watching TV. At the djama, I meet other women my age confides S.” as soon as we get in the car.

Women take out hammam in the neighborhood. Cleaning, hamman, family visits, those are Friday activities.” A few women try to find a way to access the space reserved for them in the mosque. Only older women go, at whom men will not look. Those who feel like praying would rather go to the djamas where they feel freer.

Sons of the muqqadima guard the entrance of the sawiya. In the room that contains the casket of Sidi Msahhil covered by a green sheet, the muqqadima placed blankets and pillows on the floor to welcome the visitors. She greets us and even introduces people I was meeting for the first time. After greeting each participant, we take our place among the group of young women. We shared news from the week while seeping lemonade served by the muqqadima. A visitor serves dates as gift and thanks for Sidi Msahhil. Upon our arrival, the muqqadima was before the casket of the saint whom she thanked by lighting candles and incents. The muqqadima tells me several weeks ago, a woman informed me of a problem with
her daughter. We asked for the intervention of Sidi Msahhil, the one who disentangles all complicated situations. “I offered a piece of sugar another woman had presented to the saint, meaning sugar with Baraka from the saint, and I advised her to boil it in water and give it to her daughter to drink the water.” “I did exactly what you told me to and God complied answered the woman.” “See how saints are real continues the muqqadima in my regard why do we deny their reality?”

Certainly she does not miss the occasion to underscore before her visitors, and even more so before me, the effectiveness of saints and guarantor of his legitimacy. The assembly comments on those facts and each observe the blessings received thanks to the intervention of Sidi Msahhil.

The room is full and the conversations are more animated. The mothers send their children to play outside. Now that we have drank and eaten and that we have met one another, we can begin the session of dhikr declares the muqqadima. Feet disappear beneath the skirts and heads are covered, eyes are closed as soon as the muqqadima sings in a melodious voice the Fatiha. Surrounded by older women others respectfully call hadjajas (respect often affected), the muqqadima sings the procedure of the Sshabada that the assembly sings in chorus and lightly adjust to the canonical text from one version to another.

The litanies, more precisely the Prophet’s eulogies referring to his roots, accompanied by music this time. A metal tray, glasses and forks serve as instruments. The muqqadima solicits the mediation of the prophet, to ask God to place the meeting under the protection of the Virgin Mary. Also, she invokes the
blessing of Fatima, daughter of the prophet upon the assembly. Then, she names the names of the prophet’s companions, in particular Moses, Jesus, and Gabriel, the Archangel. Calling him the most beautiful man, she recalls his loving ties to women most notably with his mother Halima and his favorite wife, Aysha. Finally, the exceptionality of God is reiterated and the divine blessing of the prophet is implored. In the last litany, the muqaddima addresses the praises directly to the prophet and expresses love and gratitude for his kindesses.

Supporting by hand clapping, body movements, calls of joy, tears, the recitation of the litanies which are true messages of love for the Prophet, results in the excitement of the assembly. The sole evocation of the name Mohammed is enough to create such outbursts. The young women are the most enthusiastic. Intoning of the Sshabada and of the Fatiha, eyes closed and the palm of their hands held towards the heavens end this initial session. The participants cross their arms across their chests and commend each other while wishing much Baraka upon one another.

After a long while of rest devoted to eating the food provided by the participants (bread, dates, milk, couscous), accompanied by refreshments and followed by tea or coffee, the muqaddima begins a second session of prayers called du’a. We ask (nettelbu) what we would like: work, health, marriage for the young women, success in school studies, but we have to ask only for good. Once, a woman asked for a misdeed upon someone who had wronged her, but it was her who received the misdeed. That is how a regular participant introduces this sequence.
The muqaddima has already collected a number of requests from the visitors. She specifies the requests reach God when they are requested collectively. The more participants who support someone’s request for God’s favor, the more important Nuua becomes and the more important Baraka can be obtained.

The request ritual is organized. The requestor who is silent, despondent, likely worried, slightly retreated from the room. The muqaddima calls her and shows her attentiveness. The assembly attention is fixed on the person anxious to express her difficulties. Women who are related to the requester and motivated by jealousy called on a magician who cast a spell on her to destroy her family happiness. The nefarious effects of their evil action impacted her marriage with unexplained anger with her husband. The behavior of these ill intentioned relatives is largely condemned and each woman relates similar situations within their families. The muqaddima recommends not answering the ill intentions with more ill intentions. While affirming that the only recourse against meanness, against people resides with God, with the intermediary of the Prophet, and his saints. She reassures the requester of the support from the assembly.

The prayers begin with the convocation of the saints' assemblies and with the reminder of the pious visitors goals that is the pursuit for a divine blessing. In the following litanies, the most familiar saints are invoked with the most experienced: Sidi Abd Al Qadir al Djilani, patron of the tariqa the muqaddima belongs to who is sometimes called by his name or his nickname Sidi Djallul; Sidi Msahhil, patron of the zawiya, Sidi Yahya a saint from the Moroccan town Oujda
located on the other side of the border; Mulay Idris, patron of the Moroccan town that bears his name; the saints of Ain el-Hout, the village where the *muqaddima* resides; Lalla Khayra, mother of Sidi Abd al-Qadir al Djilani; Lalla Mghnya from the *Gnawa tariqa* which rituals are also practiced in this type of women’s meeting. As in the previous litany, the *muqaddima* specifies the requests are addressed to God and God covers the favors to be obtained. The invocation of Allah moves her profoundly to the point she sheds tears.

The last phase of the *du’a* sequence is reserved for the vows from the *muqadima* intended for the participants. The first wish that is expressed is to achieve the trance. God’s help is requested to satisfy the requests from the participants as long as they are declared with a pure intention: assistance for the poor, success for the children in all aspects of their lives; marriage for unmarried people, and fecundity for your married women. The assembly yields each time by answering “Amin” (and also with you) in chorus. As customary, the Prophet and the saints are solicited for the requests to reach God.

Clapping by the young women interrupts the account of the wishes and results in laughter from the assembly. “They want to get married! Who would not like to get married? declares the *muqaddima.” She teases the women who wear make up and are dressed up, implying that they’d like to be courted. When the young women leave the *djama*, she teases them again suggesting they’ve found a future husband. Next, followed a long discussion on marriage, family, and the place of women in the family and society. The necessity of marriage is recalled as the
only guarantor to maintain the social order despite the difficulties it represents: higher cost of living, shortage in housing, unemployment... The development of education and employment of women is called into question, when those young women are opposed to their parents’ selecting a spouse. The young woman feels equal to the man and men do not find them appealing; that is what the parents fear and have to keep their daughters at home, it compels them to urge the daughter to marry without taking into account the order of the child among her siblings. Some parents allow their daughters to leave the home without a trousseau and do not ask for a dowry. The financial problems getting larger among residents drive fathers to reject any notion of transaction during the marriage proposal of their daughters. “My daughter is not a cow, she is not merchandise, take her hand if you wish to do so.; in any case, I do not have the means to make her a trousseau told me my father to people asking my hand in marriage (according to a young woman).”

If marriage of young women seems a relief for the parents, especially for mothers, the women are the first to rejoice at the prospect of leaving the control of the men of her family, especially the bothers which is sometimes expressed with physical violence. The saying “she is freed from her brother” meaning she got married, underscores this point. Some mothers praise those violent brothers because “they educate their sisters whose reprehensible behavior shed bad light on the family. Leaving the home without permission or a reason, standing on the terrace or the window, wearing make up to attract men justify, from these women’s views, the violence of the guilty brothers. Those women who encourage their sons
to correct their sisters, with only a few present in the assembly, are quickly targeted by those young women and also by married women who condemn any kind of physical violence regardless of the purpose. They emphasize the illogicality of those brothers who court the sisters of others’, but do not tolerate any glances from men towards their sisters. A young woman beaten by her brother the night before with still visible marks on her face remarks under the watchful eye of the *muqaddima* that those same brothers, so strict with their sisters, are unrecognizable once they are married. They submit to their wives, who do nothing at home, who do not even wash their children’s diapers. Current circumstances have made men women’s prey retorts a mother who approves of her son’s violence towards her daughter. Marrying sons has become as difficult as marrying daughters adds another participant. “We need to marry them young so that they only have eyes for their wives.”

The discussions continue: young women mention the high numbers of divorce caused by discord between daughter in laws and their mother in laws. As the same time, they realize marriage is the only means to hold a real status in Algerian society. Some women advocate early marriages to prevent the multiplying numbers of young single mothers compelled to give up their newborns whose family refuses to accept in their homes.

The *muqaddima* ends the discussions by invoking God’s help during those difficult times. To her mother who informs her it’s getting late, a young woman says “see how the women do not feel like leaving; they have other things to request
yet.” In fact, some participants would like to ask the muqaddima to interpret their dreams.

One woman recalls: “a man appeared before me in white and shiny clothes and told me: lay beside me, and don’t be afraid and he gave me a ring. I refused, I felt embarrassed, and I left without taking the ring.” The interpretation is quick to come. “The man you saw is Sidi Abd al Qadir al Djilani concludes the muqaddima. Had you accepted the ring, you’d be with child.” “Oh no, muqaddima, I already have seven children, I do not want anymore.” The explanation ends there. Other accounts of dreams are presented. The muqaddima's answers are terse, but they seem to satisfy the inquisitors. As with the Dua, the attention and participation of the assembly are solicited. The method is the same each time: attentive listening of the dream recalled, molding of the dream in a good or bad prediction; identification of the characters (relatives dead or alive, saints); decoding of the message (originating from a family event, damage request, acceptance request), identifying the steps to take in response of the message (offering, sacrifice, visit to a saint,...) Then, the muqaddima deciphers the presence of the supernatural during the invocation, such as the arrival of a visitor with offerings or the hallucination either hearing or visual, as messages of good prediction.

The clock continues to turn. The muqaddima collects herself and recites one last time the Shabada and the Fatiha. Then, she professes well wishes upon the assembly. Some of the participants leave: those women who left their children with their older relatives, those women who came to attend the djama without their
husband’s permission, those young women who did not complete their household chores, they thank the *muqaddima* for the good deeds during the *djama* and they leave money tokens (*ziyara*). The *muqaddima* thanks them in return and spays them with perfume “symbol for Baraka” she specifies. The mother of the beaten daughter reminds her she needs to come home before nightfall unless she wants to feel her brother’s anger. The *muqaddima* gently advises her to go home and invites her to a gathering she plans to organize to celebrate the *Maulid*. The young woman feels deferential and agrees to leave while rejoicing at the thought of spending a whole at the zawiya.

Those women who are free from domestic obligations stay around late. The *muqaddima* shows interest in each one of them and invites the most private women to confide in her. ‘Here, you are among family, even secrets do not leave this space; it is ill advised to keep to oneself; otherwise, you’ll get sick. In any case, we are God’s creatures and we all go under the same difficulties in life; you may as well share them.’ One woman who spends every Friday at the *zawiya* restarts the *djama* session: ‘we come here to joke, talk, to relax; those who feel like praying should pray, those who feel like reciting the dhikr should recite the dhikr, those who feel like talking should talk. ‘The young women echo those words expressing their joy such activity provide them. Visibly satisfied with those reactions, the *muqaddima* invites them to the next session and begin to tidy the room with the help of a few participants. A few women fear their mother’s impending anger at home ‘but I feel
so much better after reciting the *dhikr*, to see with my friends, that I do not regret leaving the house against my mother’s wishes.’

*The Social Devotion*

Under Sidi Msahhil and much like other places, the *djama* sessions take place Friday afternoons, holy day in Islam, but also weekly day of rest and especially day of purification for women who generally go to *hamman* for the ritual bathing. The visitors cannot go during the time of their menses, after giving birth, or after relations with their husbands. The session can also take place on a Monday, blessed day for the birth and death of the Prophet. Even though meetings are held at a specified time and place, these reunions are informal and fall under the category of socialization, the *djama* being one place for female sociability. The participants arrive at any time in the afternoon and stay as long as they need. The average attendance ranges between twenty and thirty people and reaches one hundred during the celebration of a feast. The regular attendance of the weekly sessions is not required, but the connections between the participants and the saint on one hand, and the ties between the participants and the *muqaddima* on the other hand generate relations of obligation. The *muqaddima* feels compelled to organize the *djama*; in her absence, she is replaced by her mother or by her husband (who only makes sure the zawiya is open to allow the visits to the saint, but cannot host a women’s meeting).

Most of the participants are from families who are knowledgeable with this type of practices. Children, young women (students, employees, laborers), and stay
at home mothers mingle for the afternoon. Some are faithful attendants, others come when they can; last are those who accompany relatives and friends with promptness to make a request.

The sessions take place between two sequences of prayers and are formed with the same sequential rituals: opening and closing with the Fatiha, dhikr, prayers for requests, chants, dances, discussions, meals, and offerings. But the substance of the sequences and their length vary from one to another. The dancing ritual and practice is not systematically done. It is usually observed with ceremonies, important by the number of participants and the event being celebrated.

The participants’ motives are very diverse, but most attend mainly to make requests to Sidi Msahhil “cherished saint (ma’zuz) from which we get what we can.” In any case, it is about restoring a normal path in a disrupted life caused by an incident. The requests are made by those women affected, but also by a third party. The role of the muqqadima is to ascertain those requests, to lead the meetings, and to encourage discussions. “it is women who organize, who fulfills the djama each one contributes to its success by bringing something, with a pure intention, love of God, information, advice, gifts; the benefits the participants will take vary from the sessions and the degree of their participation; the larger the number of participants and the more intense their desire for love of God, the more valuable Baraka will become.’ Harmony between participating women is more than ever necessary to establish communication with the saints. From that perspective, any request to the
saints has to be preceded with a long preparation during which the rites such as sitting down, drinking, eating, exchanging welcome greetings, inquire about individuals are of the greatest importance. The *muqaddima* serves the food and shares it among her participants without leaving anyone out.

In the *djama*, prayers are interrupted with discussions. Religion, specifically the saint’s life, constitutes a favorite subject. Spiritual experiences and religious knowledge are exchanged: pilgrimage to Mecca, visits of the sanctuaries, saint’s apparition in a dream, practice of the trance, obligations, interpretation of the Quran and the Hadith. The *muqaddima* relates her numerous visits to other zawiyas and gives descriptions with many details on the substance of the ceremonies.

Besides religious themes, the discussions cover social and political problems. The discussions, led by the *muqaddima* emerge from the participants’ stories on diverse topics. The opinions vary according to the actions of those involved in the stories. Those are evaluated according to good and bad criteria, and the ones who are accountable are judged according to the presence or absence of *niyya* in their heart. The women’s standing on political questions occurs when the question has direct consequence on the social and family areas. The plan of reopening the border between Algeria and Morocco, discussion of relevance at the time of this investigation, is desired from the prospect of family being reunited and who have been separated for many years. Finally, we solicit the intervention of the saints to help politicians in their tasks and to protect them.
Discussions flow up and down and the perspectives are defended with vigor. But all is done as if the group looks to establish a consensus on the topics treated during the discussions. References to the past are a constant occurrence. For some, the past (bekri), suspended time that is muddled with the time of the prophet, should stay the same with the traditions, the ways of speaking and doing like the ancient ones. For others, the passage of time is an unavoidable reality. In the absence of good role models, the assembly turns to God to differentiate good from evil.

Individual request, the ziyara in the frame of the djama, becomes a collective task by creating a feeling of belonging among the women united by the same faith, the same ties with their patron saint, and the same preoccupation. The ordinary gatherings and the special meetings facilitate the spiritual communion supported by sacred and collective meals. As a matter of fact, with religious emotions, the participants share a feeling of equality before the divine authority, despite the differences in their social standings. To use the terms of M. Gilseman (1973), one could argue while making the same movements and the same symbolic acts, while pronouncing the same word, the women find themselves connected in such a way that each one experiences a collective subjectivity. The insistent requests from the young women to recite the dhikr signifies their desire to attach themselves to the past, from which they are further disconnected.

Place of worship, the djama proves to be at the same a place for managing the female independence. The feminine world is unveiled, the women freely
express their thoughts, their feelings, and their emotions. The relationships that develop between different generations of women enable the discussions of problems between sisters in laws, and more importantly, to approach problems related to the women’s situation. The listening of the muqaddima who plays the role of big sister, mother, aunt, grandmother or an understanding neighbor helps them to talk without any fear.

*The Muqaddima Or The Ability To Mediate*

This type of woman who is a self-declared mediator between the real world and the world beyond, is very common in Algeria. Illiterate, her religious information limited to the knowledge of a few verses from the Quran learned during childhood, legends of the saints, the dhikr of the *dua*, musical rhythms, the *muqaddima* justifies her role with her capacity for memorizing “a divine service more important than the mastery of the writing.” Unlike the *muqaddima* of the tariqas, they do not depend on any hierarchical authority. Her role consists of looking after the saint while keeping her sanctuary clean and welcoming and to allow visitors to visit if they need to, to organize the collective prayer meetings intended for other women. They are not paid for their work, but they accept gifts from their visitors.

The regular attendants call her (the *muqaddima*) Khalil M, the expression “Khalti” (my maternal aunt) denoting a significant closeness. Originally from the village of Ain el-Hout, she did not enjoy a good reputation. Rumors circulated clouding her morality. She was supposedly imprisoned, fact confirmed by various
sources, consisting of her defenders as well as her detractors. Those individuals accused her of hiding in her sanctuary jewels stolen by one of her sons, who was juvenile at the time. Among her followers, the version is magnified: she was a victim of rumors accusing her of meeting men in her sanctuary. She was found guilty of using illicit musical instruments such as the tambourine. The muqaddima refuses to comment on that part of her life, simply confirming only her work in service of the saint is a testimony that reflects her faith.

Even if she is placed outside of the sphere of religious authority, the muqaddima insists on God’s selection for her quality to retain (rafid) and to transmit the dhikr: "the memory is more precious and more unfailing than the pen of the faithless ulama and without niyaa who pray in silence like the Christians and the Jews, who do not recite the Dhikr, when God loves the dhikr. The human likes to uplift him/herself with the drums, he/she is filled with faith, pure intention and love of God." She recalls a meeting with the Ibrahimiyin (referring to the representative of the reformist movement in the region, shaykh Ibrahim who settled in Tlemcen in 1938 to spread the new ideology) and the way she embarrassed them because they did not know certain prayers: “it was me who finished the prayers, they were embarrassed, their faces paled, they were quiet covered by shame.” Women admire reassurance. The dispute over her religious status by members of the ulama who reproach her to worship stones is connected, according to her, to the dispute by the ulama on the existence of saints. Her legitimacy is a tribute to that of the saint’s whose path she chose to follow. The
legitimacy of Sidi Msahhil is founded, she says, on (besides his association with the prophet’s lineage) the length of the sect. The visits he’s received for thirteen centuries, in other words, since the beginning of Islam, consist of an irrefutable proof in her eyes.

Whether the arguments presented by this woman to justify her actions are true or not, she benefits from the support of the many followers of the saint. It is them who in the end back her legitimacy by sanctioning her actions. If the role of the *muqaddima* assumes the ability of retaining prayers and litanies, it also necessitates significant capabilities to exert influence. This woman is gifted in this area. Her bond [with the saint] places her in the obligation to increase the *baraka* of the saint, while increasing the requests from her visitors to the saints. She regularly reminds she serves the women who solicit the saint and her invocations pertain to those who love her as well as to those who don’t.

If it appears that she enjoys prestige among her followers, her respect is not definitely acquired. Her position is threatened as much as the social structures, in which her function is defined, that have been shaken by the upheavals in Algerian society. In this context, the work for self-legitimacy required for the *muqaddima*, becomes more demanding. The *muqaddima* regularly insists on the effectiveness of her work. Each time she is solicited, she recalls the success of those interventions with the nearby persons as her witnesses. Those women multiply the number of accounts of her success mixing facts with legendary actions and exaggerating her exploits. In case of completed requests, the followers come to announce the news
bearing gifts in their arms. The *muqaddima* hurries in disseminating the information with ostentation and insistently repeats to her female visitors: “I told you that your requests would be successfully answered; I was sure of it.” She presents in length the problems resolved thanks to her intervention. While describing all the necessary steps, she enumerates all the requests that were granted by divine favor in the structure of the *djama*.

The presence of a large numbers of female followers is essential, first to increase the efficacy of the *djama*, then to promote the actions of Sidi Msahhil. My own interest in the story of the saints is considered as another proof of their legitimacy as well as the *muqaddima’s*. In case of failure, the *muqaddima* is quick to disengage while reminding she’s only an intermediary between people and saints and the success of her intervention is dependent upon the divine involvement.

The power of the *muqaddima* is limited to the interior [space] of the zawiya and does not have any other forum for expression. She is opposed to the exposure of her activities in the *djama* on the outside. When she lets me record the session, she makes me swear to not play her voice to men other than those of my family. Also, the transition to the writing for this portion of my work was endlessly interrupted until the moment when it was clear that the scientific community, for which I am writing this text, could be measured as my family.

(Voluntary omission of a portion of the chapter that does not enhance the discussion; the information in the original text pertains to the place of women in
the Islam. This is a point we addressed in the first two chapters of the thesis. Also, this portion of the chapter discusses the recognition of women as saints. This is another point we analyzed at length in chapter 2.

A Contested Religious Account

The inclination of women to moderate their religious activities away from men’s views has old historical roots. During the fight led by Maghreb reformers opposed to mysticism over several periods, women were easy targets. They were accused of honing illicit practices (that is how these reformers view the dhikr and the trance) and tainting the essence of Islam.

The female followers of Sidi Msahhil defend those practices with strong arguments: the dhikr is valid because it celebrates God and claims its accord and perfection. In fact, the Muslim profession of faith, according to which a Muslim believer attests, as only the divinity of God and Muhammed as his messenger is the litany the most heard during the meetings. The dhikr is considered just as legitimate because it is orally transmitted, and is supported by its recollection. While the sacred texts constitute a foundational reference for women, with most of them illiterate, the word is valued that much more. The aptitude to memorize the dhikr is considered more valued than the writing skills because it (aptitude) is viewed as a divine favor. Memories are more reliable than the writing of the ulama as a mode of transmission for the divine worship and the prayers.

The words of mystical women as opposed to the writings of the reformers was noted by C. Opitz (1991) in his text on the female Christian mysticism between
the thirteenth and sixteenth century, citing the examples of Italian illiterate saints who claimed their preference to the oral tradition. The primacy of the word over the writing would be a universal feature of the feminine mysticism? Yes is the answer of other specialists regarding this question notably D. Regnier-Bohler (1991). Also referring to the medieval women's mysticism, the author underscores the specificity of the language of the mystical women at the time who present an affirming word, affectionate, inventive in the face of the language of reason held by men, and who integrates the body as sensory support with shouts and cries. Women feel the mystical experience both physically and spiritually. Must we specify that as far as women's experiences are concerned, with whom I was in contact, that spirituality is expressed through sensory channels, which explain the violent feature that dancing trances display. This experience seems to fall under the order of the indescribable because I was never successful using terms conveying physiological states to describe the sensations resulting from what women call “the love and desire of God.”

How not surprising that reformers, both Muslims and non-Muslims, always tried to guide the feminine mysticisms, but end up considering it a deviance, because it overwhelms their usual understanding of a pious devotion? Muslims women practicing mysticism are feared even by their male counterparts who accuse them of chatting (women's cackling, another stenotype of women's mysticism) instead of reciting the dhikr, to allow evil spirits to possess them instead of taking in the divine love thought the ritual of the trance. This is to explain the
repression of female practices of mysticism in the Maghreb over time, for fear of the disorder their behavior causes among men. This fear means the persisting mythical representations related to the evil nature of women.

In Muslim societies, the image of the “impure” woman, immature, with a doubtful faith, is common, which ends up with the marginalization of women in the religious arena. This phenomenon is a continual factor in monotheistic religions believes R. Hock-Smith and A. Spring (1978) supporting the work pertaining to the place of women in religion from different societies during different periods of time.

The instauration of monotheism comes with the suppression of religious specificities to build homogenous societies. When the Algerian reformists target women by denouncing the illegitimate feature of their religious practices, it is because they constitute an obstacle to the dissemination of their ideology founded on the uniformity and the rationalization of the systems of belief, thought, and acting. If the repression appears harsher today, it is because the actors, the Islamists, display their opinions in a more radical way than the reformers of the 1930s who were more focused on drawing from Islam's sources in accordance with their time. Women end up as the favorite target of such ‘inquisitors’ because their legal status is usually degraded in comparison to men’s. Therefore, the segregation Muslim women are forced to suffer in the religious spaces is not connected to their natural conditions; it is the consequence of their social status.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


