

WOMEN AND SUFISM: RELIGIOUS EXPRESSION AND THE POLITICAL SPHERE IN CONTEMPORARY MOROCCO

Meriem El Haitami, University of Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdellah

ABSTRACT: *The sociopolitical changes in postmodern Morocco have reshuffled the dynamics of women's in/visibility within the Sufi tradition and redefined parameters of religious authority, especially after the 2003 Casablanca terrorist attacks that prompted the Moroccan government to promote Sufism as a tolerant expression of Islam to counteract religious extremism. This article explores gender dynamics within Morocco's Sufi tradition and women's complex relationship with the public sphere, and traces women's different styles of participation and leadership. This article also addresses the extent to which Morocco's official Islam provides a broader role for women than other forms of Islam and increases their presence and visibility in the religious sphere.*

KEYWORDS: *Morocco, women, Sufism*

INTRODUCTION: SUFISM AND THE POLITICAL SPHERE IN CONTEMPORARY MOROCCO

As a result of the 2003 Casablanca terrorist attacks,¹ Morocco initiated a series of religious reforms. In addition to reorganizing religious councils and structures, these reforms initiated the training of new male *imams* and female religious guides. Many of these religious leaders now work in underprivileged and at-risk areas in the country and provide the residents of these areas with a more moderate religious framework. Religious reforms in Morocco have also placed special emphasis on Sufism as a moderate religious expression and a defining element of Moroccan Islam. Sufism has sustained the sociocultural fabric of Morocco for centuries and has always absorbed members from different social categories, regardless of gender, social class, or age. Sufi orders currently serve as a voice of tolerant Islam

that counteracts various forms of religious extremism. Sufism has thus grown to become an attractive model of religiosity: its more flexible understanding of Islamic teachings has allowed the emergence of modern images of religiosity and an increased adherence among the youth, including a significant percentage of women. Therefore, this article analyzes the intersections between postmodern Sufism and politics in Morocco, especially those Sufi orders that have seen a resurgence in the political arena as a response to challenges posed by political Islam. I argue that the current intersection between Sufism and the political sphere not only reshuffles the dynamics of public religion, it also redefines gender dynamics and reshapes debates on Sufi women's participation and visibility in the public religious and political spheres.

Sufism is a spiritual movement that originated in the eighth or ninth century (Yachnes 2002). It aims to reform the corporeal self and to cultivate virtues in order to attain higher ranks of faith. Its legitimacy is grounded in the fundamental references of Islam: the Qur'an, the Prophet Muhammad's tradition, and the tradition of his companions and followers. By the early Middle Ages, Sufism had developed organizational structures known as *turuq* (sing. *tariqa*). *Turuq* "had become major social organizations by the twelfth century and enjoyed mass popularity by the fifteenth or sixteenth century" (J. Esposito 2003: 302). Sufi orders are not limited to devotional practice but are also involved in political and social action: "Historically, Sufi orders have facilitated interregional interaction, education, and travel, and have supported reform, spiritual revival, and missionary activities. They have also provided organization and support for movements resisting foreign rule throughout the Islamic world" (J. Esposito 2003: 302).

Morocco has a long-standing Sufi tradition. There are numerous Sufi orders in Morocco established by teachers who trace their legitimacy back to the Prophet Muhammad and are authorized to confer initiation and offer spiritual guidance. *Zawiyas* or Sufi lodges have always served as centers of learning and gatherings for the recital of litanies and prayers associated with Sufi orders. Many of these *zawiyas* still operate as living centers for spiritual guidance and enjoy state support.

In his sociohistorical study of Moroccan Sufism, Vincent Cornell states that Sufism was a latecomer to Morocco, and according to the historical record it did not appear in Morocco until the beginning of the eleventh century, about two hundred fifty years after it first appeared in the Muslim East and nearly a century after it was introduced in Muslim Spain. According to Cornell, the earliest traditions of Moroccan Sufism reflect an emphasis on piety and asceticism. This was due in part to the ethical perspective of the Maliki School of Islamic law, which emphasized a strict complementarity between inner belief and outer practice (Cornell 1998: 4).

Institutionalized Sufism in Morocco started in the form of *ribats*. The *ribats* of Morocco were centers of instruction in Islamic dogma and practice. They also had a significant role in facilitating interaction between economic and political networks in rural areas (Cornell 1998: 40). These institutions developed into centers of transregional Sufi orders that recruited mystics from all over the Far Maghrib (Morocco; Cornell 1998: 145).

As Sufism developed, Sufi orders began to take on a significant social and political role; this mainly included securing the social cohesion of local communities in times of political anarchy and breakdown of the central power. Sufi orders committed themselves to the immediate concerns of their communities. Often, they acted as mediators in tribal disputes and protected populations from depredation (Knysh 2010: 246). Some orders challenged the ruling authority, manifested political ambition, and established diplomatic relations with colonial powers, while others demonstrated committed support to the state. In his article “The Second Coming of Morocco’s ‘Commander of the Faithful’: Mohammed VI and Morocco’s Religious Policy,” Abdelilah Bouasria states,

The Moroccan monarchy has long used Sufism as a political card. Historically, its relations with Moroccan Sufi orders waxed and waned according to the resources available to each side. The Nasiri Sufi order fought with the Alaoui dynasty and was the source of its growth. On the other hand, the Cherkaoui order saw its brotherhood destroyed by the *makhzen*² and its leaders arrested. Neither was the stance of a sultan towards Sufism always black and white. For example, Sultan Moulay Slimane (1792–1822) was reputed to be a Wahhabi adversary of Sufism. Yet, he became a friend and mentor of the Sufi saint Ahmed Tijani (1735–1815). Similarly, the current Moroccan monarchy protects and defends the Boutchichi³ order while it wages a non-declared war against *al-Adl wal-Ihsan*.⁴ (Bouasria 2013: 45)

According to Khalid Bekkaoui, the political role of Sufi orders regressed in the colonial period (1912–56) because of the French manipulation and appropriation of some Sufi orders. This decline was also partly due to the anti-Sufi tendencies of the Nationalist Movement, which had a Salafi orientation.⁵ The latter’s critique of Sufism continued in the postcolonial period and engendered an ideological confrontation between Salafism and Sufism. With the rise of Islamic sentiments in the first decade of the twenty-first century, however, Sufi orders emerged on the scene as a new and powerful religious and political force and accomplished a massive recruitment of youth. This was especially true for the Boutchichi order.

Sufi membership has grown in the past few years as result of young people's quest for spiritual fulfillment, and their disenchantment with political parties and Islamist movements.⁶

In 2010, Al Arabiya news published an article on how Morocco fights extremism with Sufism. According to the article, Sufism is currently promoted as a peaceful form of religiosity and is enjoying tremendous state support. Sufism is also promoted in the media: TV channels are dedicated to broadcasting programs on Sufi thought as well as Sufi chanting. A series of lectures and seminars have also been launched recently in order to familiarize Moroccans with the principles of Sufism and its practices (al-Ashraf 2010). According to the same article, Rashid Moqtader, an expert in Moroccan Islamic movements, holds that the Moroccan government deals with emerging powers depending on the nature of those powers and their influence in the political scene: "the state uses one power against another whether directly through financial, legal, or moral support or indirectly through facilitating legal or judicial procedures or even overlooking certain violations." Moqtader notes that Morocco supported Islamists in the 1970s in order to counter the growing influence of leftist leaders. For Moqtader, the decision to use Sufism to curb the influence of jihadist movements and political Islam is also related to the strategy followed by the United States since the September 11 attacks: "In addition to military incursions, the United States has been resorting to Sufism to fight al-Qaeda and similar organizations throughout the Muslim world" (al-Ashraf 2010).

On the other hand, Abbas Boughanem, an expert in Islamic movements and Sufism, says that the government is currently promoting Sufism as an educational rather than a religious trend, "because Sufis are generally not interested in politics and are totally involved in their rituals, they can teach people who follow them some kind of political passivity." According to Boughanem, Sufism encourages religious practice without showing opposition to the regime: "the government is, therefore, involved in a plan to restructure the entire religious scene in Morocco." Boughanem claims that this restructuring includes organizing local and international seminars on Sufism as well as music festivals that spread tolerant values through Sufi chant (al-Ashraf 2010).

The recent political upheavals in the Arab world have led to dramatic changes of political dynamics. Although Morocco managed to survive the Arab Spring, it could not entirely avoid its turmoil.⁷ A number of angry protests took place in major cities, led by the February 20 Movement.⁸ These uprisings, however, did not seem to affect Sufism's relationship with the state. After King Mohammed VI responded by drafting a modified constitution, Sufi orders emerged on the scene of these happenings to show support for the new constitution. The Boutchichi

order, which urged its followers to march in the streets in favor of the constitution, was especially supportive. This march was heavily broadcast due to the imposing role of the Boutchichi order in the religious and political scene in Morocco (El Khamali 2011).

WOMEN'S SPIRITUALITY: A DISCURSIVE SITE FOR NEGOTIATING AND PRODUCING MEANING

Popular Views of Female Spirituality in Islam

While the female body has long been the subject of contentious debate within Islam, this debate provides an opportunity to rethink the cultural meanings attributed to gender, and the extent to which the body itself becomes “constructed” and loaded with social and ethical significance. The social construction of the female body in Islam frequently creates gendered tendencies, thus relegating women to secondary positions and promoting male-dominated systems. The realm of spirituality has, however, allowed space for renegotiating gender relations and social authority. Significantly, when considered in the light of spirituality, the female body becomes reinvented and is able to establish atypical social norms for women. The woman's body becomes, as Scott Kugle states, “no longer the locus of a rational person bound by law, responsibility, and social custom. The bodies of such individuals become ‘empty’ of these social meanings and can stand as a symbol of something greater” (Kugle 2007: 105).

Through (re)discovering the body, Sufi women have managed to blur clearly established boundaries and to achieve more visibility than Muslim women have attained through other forms of religious practice, such as legal scholarship. Yet female mysticism continues to be a veiled tradition; women's authority and their styles of participation remain relatively understudied. More attention has been placed on women's visits to and their participation at shrines and pilgrimage sites as a realm where they construct religious power within their patriarchal milieus and trespass into the public domain, while less attention has been given to their spirituality. As Fatima Mernissi notes:

The insistence on going to the saints' tombs exemplifies the North African woman's traditional claim that she is active, can decide her needs for herself and do something about them, a claim that the Muslim patriarchal system denies her. Visits to and involvements with saints and sanctuaries are two

of the rare options left to women to be, to shape their world and their lives. And this attempt at self-determination takes the form of an exclusively female collective endeavor. (Mernissi 1977: 103)

Pilgrimage sites thus represent a domain of dichotomous contradictions. Mernissi constructs the sanctuary as a woman's public domain, yet she articulates its limited power to affect decision-making structures. Thus, the sanctuary becomes a female space of resistance as well as a space for the reproduction of oppressive systems.

Furthermore, reducing women's spirituality to marginal rituals—such as saint worship, sorcery work, and participation in spirit possession ceremonies and trance rituals—reproduces the popular and dismissive view of women's participation in Islam, namely, that it is irrational and corresponds to social disorder, as opposed to men's official Islam that is logical and compliant with the legal aspect of religion and corresponds to order and social action. Such a reductive approach also reinforces the view that women are incapable of exhibiting religious authority, and thus it negates the historical significance of their voice and their contribution to the religious and spiritual domain. Hagiographic literature, on the other hand, gives a more nuanced view of the way women negotiate power under prevailing patriarchal systems, despite the fact that male sanctity remains relatively predominant. This is especially remarkable because women's hagiographical accounts are written by men rather than the women themselves.

Stories of Female Saints

Hagiography or the *manaqib* literature is “a rich source of socio-historical information about the Muslim polity that may be regarded as charting the checkered terrain of the growing political and communal consciousness of the early Muslims” (Meri and Bachrach 2006: 1. 245). This literature relates stories of paradigmatic figures and produces exemplars of sanctity. It is noteworthy however that female hagiography remains rather limited. If we trace back histories of Sufi women in Moroccan hagiography, we find prototypes of devout women in medieval hagiographic literature. One important example is *Kitab at-Tashawwuf ila Rijal at-Tasawwuf* (The book of insight into the men of Sufism) by Yusuf Ibn az-Zayat at-Tadili (d. 1230), a major hagiographic work that relates paradigms of female sanctity in medieval Morocco based on asceticism and disengagement from corporeal attachments. Later hagiographic literature has also devoted significant space to female sanctity, such as *Salwat al-Anfas wa Muhadathat al-Akyas bi man*

Uqbira bi Fas min al-'Ulama' wa Sulaha' (The comfort of souls and the discourse of the sagacious in regard to the scholars and the pious folk who are buried in Fez), a nineteenth-century biographical account of renowned scholars and righteous men and women of Fez, by Muhammad Ibn Ja'far al-Kattani (d. 1927). *Salwat al-Anfas* details the biographies and burial sites of Fez's saints in a sort of spiral, beginning with Fez's founding father, Moulay Idris, who lived in the heart of the city, and continuing around the city, quarter by quarter. Al-Kattani makes reference to saints he was contemporary with, or knew about (Muhammad al-Kattani 2004: 1.10). Throughout his work, al-Kattani refers to classic hagiographical works on Fez's scholars and righteous folk, which he supplements by collecting oral stories about these men and women by means of fieldwork, which was unprecedented for his time (Hamza al-Kattani 2006).

Through his hagiographic work, al-Kattani presents nuanced voices of female devotion; most of these are women who have walked the spiritual path side by side with their male counterparts, and dedicated themselves to their spiritual vocation. They transcended gender divisions and attended public assemblies, serving as both students and teachers; they thus negotiated constructions of embodied social practice and created new identities for themselves. Al-Kattani relates accounts of saintly female figures who devoted themselves to worship, and observed religious practices. One such woman was Sayyida Ruqayya Ma'an (d. 1676),⁹ who was greatly respected by her brother. He praised her and attributed good to her; he even said: "I used to seek her intercession before God" (Muhammad al-Kattani 2004: 2.331). Many of these holy women were part of a larger family structure in which male or other female members were also considered saintly or scholarly figures. Noble lineage is another aspect that defines female sanctity. Many of these women were involved in family life as wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters, yet they attained high spiritual stations. The latter challenges the established private-public dichotomy and the association of the private with female domesticity and docility, as opposed to the public domain, which often represents the realm of male social and political agency. The success of these women in both the private and the public spheres allows a reconsideration of the ways they negotiate empowerment and assert social agency within the private domain. As Afsaruddin notes: "Empowerment . . . connotes the carving out of public space by women for themselves, sometimes paradoxically by not even leaving the home, through which space they are able to derive benefits for themselves and impose their presence on society at large" (Afsaruddin 1999: 5).

Many of these women were dedicated wives who attended to their husbands and children, including a Sufi woman from Fez, Sayyida Aisha Bint Chaqroun al-Fakhar

(d. 1647), who was a devoted wife. According to al-Kattani: "She was to him, the way a disciple is to his master, she used to love him and respect him, she never opposed him and would obey his commands, if he calls her she would come to him as if the earth is folded up for her, she would stay up at night with him, kindle the lamp, and attend to his needs and pray with him" (Muhammad al-Kattani 2004: 2.330).

Sayyida Fatima is another example of a saint who attained an elevated spiritual status as well as an extraordinary spiritual state (*karamat*) by virtue of her devotion as a wife. When she was asked about how she attained this station, she replied, "by observing God's right in what he commanded of fulfilling the husband's right" (Muhammad al-Kattani 2004: 1.154). Others have chosen the path of asceticism; they observed silence and retreated and withdrew from society, as in the case of Amina Fassi Fihri (d. 1726): "She would remember God constantly, and observe silence, she had a big rosary made of a thousand beads, she would always have it in her hand in all states, and if women gather around her and engage in vain talk, she asks them to leave" (Muhammad al-Kattani 2004: 1.363). Sayyida Aisha Bint Ali Bounafi' (d. 1763) is another example of a dedicated seeker of knowledge: "After the morning prayer, she would attend a study circle on al-Bukhari *hadeeth* collection. . . . Between the sunset and evening prayers, she would attend study circles led by her son" (Muhammad al-Kattani 2004: 1.319).

Women Becoming Like Men

Through spiritual striving, the body becomes a medium for worship, and it has to endure severe ascetic practices to attain this goal. The result of such asceticism is that the bodies of female saints often take on more masculine traits. Hagiography prominently features portraits of women with thin bodies, pale faces, and tear-blinded eyes; all are signs of endurance and victory over the ego or *nafs*. In his *Sifat as-Safwa*, Ibn al-Jawzi relates the story of 'Ufayra, a Sufi ascetic, who "used to cry until she turned blind, so when seeing her, a man said to his friend: 'how devastating blindness is!' 'Ufayra heard his words and said: 'O slave of God! Verily, being veiled from God is worse than being blind'" (Ibn al-Jawzi 1985: 4.33). Al-Kattani also relates the story of a Sufi woman of Fez whose body remained in a state of worship even when she was unconscious; she would mention God constantly, and when asleep the veins in her neck remained in a state of remembrance (Muhammad al-Kattani 2004: 1.319). During the process of sanctification, a woman's body could sometimes be transformed into a man's body, obliterating its femininity and attractiveness. Al-Kattani mentions that one of Fez's female saints "had a beard just like men" (Muhammad al-Kattani 2004: 1.308).

Although rejecting traditional feminine roles can suggest a rejection of her femininity, a woman's ascetic demeanor becomes a way to claim agency and religious choice, and transcend some of the problematic issues surrounding her femininity. Thus, female mysticism becomes disruptive to misogyny as well as to constructed gender identities. In the midst of the mystical experience, the body becomes a discursive site in which power and transcendence take place. In her book, *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir discusses mysticism in relation to her argument that being a woman is a social construct: "one is not born a woman; rather one becomes a woman" (quoted in Nelstrop, Magill, and Onishi 2009: 150). De Beauvoir views female mysticism as a way to transcend male-defined norms and move beyond adherence and allegiance to the patriarchal order by embracing traits of asexuality or masculinity (E. Esposito 2004: 11). Tellingly, de Beauvoir pronounces her admiration for Teresa of Avila, whose spiritual life and intellectualism allowed her to communicate beyond body and beyond sex; she transcended her body and grew to belong to "the rather masculine type" (Mazzoni 1996: 53).

Because female ascetic behavior is usually associated with the purification of the self (*tazkiya*), women are frequently able to challenge gender binarisms, becoming more like men. The male body remains the prototype of devotion; hence the female is to be absorbed into the masculine ideal. In the realm of Sufism, the term man (*rajul*) is applicable to both the male and the female; it is not associated exclusively with maleness. As the Qur'an states: "Among the believers are men who are true to the covenant they made with God" (Qur'an 33:23). In his commentary on this verse, Abu Abdurrahman As-Sullami says: "The truth of manhood lies in sincerity, and whoever fails to step into the domain of sincerity leaves the ground of manhood. 'Umar Ibn al-Khattab was asked: 'who are the men?' He said: 'those who have sincerity and keep their covenants'" (As-Sullami n.d.). When describing Rabia al-Adawiya, Farid-u-Din al-Attar ranks her among the men, saying:

Prophets say, God does not look at your images, utmost importance is attached to intentions . . . ; if people are enjoined to get a quarter of their religion from 'Aishah, the Prophet's wife, then it is possible for women to serve as teachers to men. Surely, women who undertake the path to God alongside their male counterparts cannot be referred to as women. 'Abbasa Tawsi said, "when people would be called 'O men!' on the day of resurrection, the first person who will step forward amongst the men is Maryam (Mary, mother of Jesus)." (Badawi 1962: 142)

In the realm of sanctity, biological and gender dualities are not recognized. As the Qur'an states in an-Nur chapter: "In houses that God has allowed to

be raised, and that His Name be remembered therein, exalting Him in the morning and the evenings are men whom neither trading, nor sale distracts from the remembrance of God and the observance of prayer and payment of alms. They fear a day when hearts and eyes will turn about" (Qur'an 24:36–37). Women are included in this verse and are referred to as men, because they too can equally walk the spiritual path to attain spiritual perfection. There is a common Sufi saying: "When a woman walks in the way of God, she cannot be called a 'woman'" (see Dakake 2006: 138). The construction of female sanctity as contingent upon taking on a male persona, according to Maria Massi Dakake, "denies any natural or normative understanding of the mystical path for women. Only women who are highly exceptional, who are in some sense 'not really women' can have the vocation to 'walk upon the path'" (Dakake 2006: 138–39). Such a construction of female sanctity is controversial because it seems to deny spirituality to women in the very process of praising it. Dakake cites Frithjof Schuon's statement that "to allege that the woman who is holy has become a man by the fact of her sanctity, amounts to presenting her as a denatured being: in reality, a holy woman can only be such on the basis of her perfect femininity" (Dakake 2006: 139). Although the deployment of the concept of masculinity attempts to articulate a reality that transcends biological differences, the fact that spiritual excellence is fundamentally associated with maleness and that women are celebrated only when they are depicted as taking on masculine traits may overlook the complexity of the gendered and embodied religious experience. Such an attitude may also be indicative of the gendered patterns within Sufism, and in other religious discourses and practices that offer limited space for gender equality.

Sanctity through Madness

Sufi women have also managed to blur clearly established gender boundaries by virtue of their mystic madness (*jadhb*). This has a significant presence in al-Kattani's hagiography; he presents the image of the madwoman (*majdhuba*) who is attracted by God and thus attains sanctity. Such a woman subverts social norms and has recourse to unusual expressions of spirituality to legitimate her insistent appropriation of the public space. The term *jadhb* literally translates to attraction; it refers to the "divine attraction" that certain souls experience due to states of violent, sudden cognizance of a superior reality, disturbing everyday human equilibrium. One who is subject to such states, which may be temporary or permanent and which resemble a benign madness, is called *majdhub*, "one attracted (to God)" (Glassé 2003: 233).

The image of the madwoman or the “rationally insane”—as Ibn al-Jawzi prefers to phrase it, in order to draw a distinction between saints who are divinely attracted and those who are truly insane—is central to Sufi hagiography. In a number of hagiographic works, we encounter madwomen who lived their lives in devotion to their Lord. For example, Ibn al-ʿArabi describes his teacher, Fatima Bint Ibn al-Muthanna, by saying, “She was infatuated with the Divine; whoever sees her says that she is insane. She would say: ‘The insane one is he who has no knowledge of God.’ She was indeed a mercy to the worlds” (Ibn al-ʿArabi 1994: 132).

The *majdhubat* described by al-Kattani have renounced the world and negotiated social and spatial confinement. They are liberated from social responsibilities and are able to trespass religious and political boundaries, yet they are not persecuted, nor are they condemned. Rather, they are perceived as saintly figures who are overpowered by spiritual drunkenness and thus are not to be held responsible for their actions. Significantly, al-Kattani presents Fez as a city that produces female fools of God, as opposed to the usual image of Fez as the intellectual and spiritual capital of Morocco that has always cradled scholarship by virtue of its being the homestead of the oldest and continuously functioning university (al-Qarawiyyin) and the center of official Islam, as represented by its male scholars. The *majdhubat* resist male-dominated institutions and reshuffle Fez’s space by means of creating a different form of religiosity; they are celebrated in the popular memory and are greatly respected by many people. Their tombs define Fez’s sacred space, and are converted to devotional sites that people visit and in which they seek blessings (Boubrik Rahal 2010: 143).

Sayyida Safiya al-Labbada (d. 1784) is an example of a Sufi woman for whom normal responsibilities were waived: “She used to make prayer mats, before she was overpowered by *jadhbb*. But after she was overtaken by this spiritual state, she started to roam around markets and speak the language of the fool. . . . She would uncover parts her body with no concern for her action” (al-Kattani 2004: 2.13). Sayyida Safiya challenged social norms and the expectations of the patriarchal society through her behavior, yet she was perceived as a saintly figure and her unclear language became an expression of the spiritual states she experienced; and only the people of gnosis could demystify her symbolic language. Through her state of *jadhbb*, Sayyida Safiya claimed the agency to denounce and challenge religious and political authorities: “She would stand by mosques during the Friday prayer and say ‘O scholars! O unjust ones!’” (al-Kattani 2004: 2.13).

By way of their spiritual state, the *majdhubat* are able to appropriate and reconstruct the public space; they trespass into male-dominated spaces and engage in social exchange; they reshuffle their social context and claim agency, because of

their ability to unveil the hidden and bestow blessing (*baraka*) upon people. They are greatly respected as holy figures, despite their seemingly insane demeanor and their offensive behavior. Such was the case of Sayyida Amina Sagma (d. 1737) who “would sit by the shops in the Qays neighborhood, and the Ghazal market in the Qarawiyyin part of Fez. People would seek her blessings and attribute good and righteousness to her. . . . She would experience spiritual absence, she would sometimes wear a *haik*, but mostly would not; she would wear bracelets reaching over her arm and anklets reaching over her knees” (al-Kattani 2004 3.259).¹⁰

FEMALE SUFI SPIRITUALITY IN THE MODERN WORLD

These traditional patterns of spirituality that equate femininity with self-effacement, disembodiment, and madness, however, need to be reinterpreted in light of contemporary spiritual practices if they are to make sense for women today. These virtues can be problematic for contemporary women since they contravene feminist-inspired values of self-fulfillment and visibility within the public sphere. As Kathleen McPhillips notes: “A post-modern condition opens up discursive spaces and possibilities for religious experience, and one can see the potential for transgressive and alternative readings of sainthood and holiness that challenge the more traditional articulations of such phenomena” (McPhillips 2003: 4). Currently, many women with a full commitment to both family and career seek to enjoy spiritual devotion in new ways. The recent popularity of Sufi adherence, especially among the well-educated and religiously committed Muslim middle and upper classes, subverts the prejudices against Sufism as a deviant and marginal practice within Islam.

Sufi orders exist throughout Morocco. They organize regular gatherings to pray, chant, and debate timely topics of social and political importance. Currently, the Sufi tradition is marked by women’s active involvement through either individual devotion or communal practices within Sufi institutions. Women hold positions of authority as *muqaddamat* (sing. *muqaddama*; female representatives of a sheikh) who determine the affiliations of future adherents. The role and participation of women in Sufi orders is the subject of Mehdi Nabti’s article, “La place des femmes dans le soufisme contemporain: le cas des cérémonies Aïssâwa” (Nabti 2010). The article discusses the active role of women in the Aissawiyya Order as members and as *muqaddamat* who can lead Sufi rituals, teach, and initiate new affiliates into the order.¹¹ In his description of the Aissawiyya ceremonies that are held in domestic spheres in Fez and Meknes,¹² Nabti notes that women are

the ones who are responsible for authorizing these ceremonies and that women also lead the rituals (Nabti 2010: 10). Although women had no access to these ceremonies in the past, they are currently dominated by women (Nabti 2010: 11). According to Nabti, women's spiritual experience is associated with the private domain; thus, hosting these ceremonies in domestic spheres is not only a ritual, it is also a social experience. Furthermore, women are able to reshuffle their domestic space in a manner that enforces their authority and abolishes gender divisions. Because women help to organize these rituals and actively take part in them, the Aissawiyya ceremony allows for subversion of social norms and hierarchies (Nabti 2010: 11). It also allows for ideals that have traditionally been associated with masculine, public space to be integrated within the female domestic sphere (Nabti 2010: 15). As a result, the domestic sphere is reconfigured to function as public space. This process blurs the conventional spatial binary that associates the private sphere with femininity and subjectivity, while the public sphere is reserved for masculinity and objectivity.

WOMEN'S VISIBILITY AND STYLES OF PARTICIPATION

Based on a survey conducted by the Moroccan Cultural Studies Centre, the article, "Moroccan Youth Go Sufi" (Bekkaoui and Larémont 2011), reveals a significant shift in Moroccan youth support from political parties to Sufism. The spiritual values of Sufism, such as introspection, mutual respect, and peace, seem to be attractive to Moroccan youth. Another interesting finding in the article is that the percentage of female youth who are attracted to Sufi orders is higher than that for males, while their participation in political parties tends to be lower. Similarly, a higher percentage of women than men also support the state adoption of Sufism as a component of Moroccan religious identity.

This latter conclusion is also endorsed by the fieldwork I conducted among female Sufi affiliates in different Sufi settings. These settings included the Qadiri Bouchichi order, and different branches of the Darqawi order, especially the Habibiyya¹³ and the Alawiyya,¹⁴ in Fez, Madagh, Nador, and Oujda.¹⁵ My fieldwork methodologies included observer participation: I tried to immerse myself in the settings in which these Sufi group settings exist, as I attended their gatherings, celebrations, and retreats. I also conducted formal interviews and informal discussions with different male and female disciples and key members. In doing so, I attempted to trace women's different styles of participation and leadership in Sufism as well as the ways they approach the spiritual experience. I argue that

Morocco's official Islam, with its strong Sufi component, provides a broader role for women than other forms of Islam; it also increases women's presence and visibility in the religious sphere in different ways. I also aim to present the Sufi experience as is a well-structured organism in which women constitute an element in the larger scope of women's engagement with the religious public sphere, as opposed to the populist view of female spirituality.

The discipleship within the Boutchichi order is of an eclectic nature, attracting a wide range of people from poor peasants to sophisticated urban bourgeoisie. The ages range from under twenty to over seventy, although the order seems to especially attract young women. The order generally appeals to a higher social strata than do other Sufi orders. Women's adherence to the Boutchichi order results from a number of reasons. Many women are second-generation affiliates and thus are born into the order. For others, their devotion often starts with the affiliation of a male member: a father, brother, or husband. Some join the order to nurture a sense of belonging to a community. Yet they all share the spirit of companionship (*sohba*) and love (*mahabba*); their adherence to the order brings them close to God and gives meaning to their lives; it is an institutionalized structure that allows them to express their spirituality.

Sheikh Hamza's female disciples take pride in his openness, and his promotion of women's rights, as well as his respect for them. For instance, Sheikh Hamza strictly forbids his male disciples to take multiple wives. Furthermore, the Boutchichi order counts a number of accomplished female figures among its members, the most prominent of whom was the late Zakia Zouanat, a renowned Moroccan anthropologist and researcher on Sufism and the author of a number of works. Zouanat reflected the modern face of the Boutchichi order as she herself was not veiled. She said in this respect: "The veil is obligatory on one who fears to cause social disorder (*fitna*), however when we participate in public life with our male counterparts, the issue of *fitna* is not of relevance. . . . Also, whoever approaches religion from its spiritual dimension focuses more on the essence of matters, and when society fails to progress, it resorts to covering its women" (Ali Moussa 2009). Zouanat presented a rather liberal stance on the practice of veiling and viewed it as a symbol of patriarchal domination over women, stressing that the Sufi path encourages the spiritual and intellectual growth of women beyond restrictive social codes. Such liberal stances are not uncommon within contemporary Sufi practice; rather, they indicate the richness and fluidity of interpretation that the tradition allows. They also demonstrate the diverse ways in which spiritual expression and embodied piety are conceptualized and cultivated by highly educated women in present-day Morocco.

Nafahat Tariq, a weekly newspaper issued by the Boutchichi order, has dedicated several issues to the role of women within the order. Meryem Lahlou discovered the order through her husband; she was drawn to the spirit of love and brotherhood that prevails within the order: "The order has always given me everything I needed. . . . In our order there is no difference between men and women, we are all equal in our striving on the path." Lahlou emphasizes the powerful presence of women within the order; women attend *dhikr* gatherings three times a week and recite the same litanies as men;¹⁶ therefore there is no difference between the sexes. "This path has offered much to us, especially the opportunity to be under the guidance of a great teacher; his presence brings us close to God and gives us balance in our life. . . . It restores the latent purity of our nature so we can deal with life challenges." Lahlou emphasizes that Boutchichi women are very active in their society: "The Moroccan woman is a woman of good will, when this is combined with divine love and the guidance of a great teacher, then it is the ultimate bliss. . . . Our Sheikh Sidi Hamza encourages us to contribute to the different domains of our society" (*Nafahat Tariq* 2012a: 14).

Karima Azekri is another Boutchichi disciple who has a significant presence in society. She earned her master's degree in law and currently works in the Ministry of Communication; she also works as a journalist. Azekri performs organizational tasks within the order and is in charge of one of the gatherings in Meknes. According to Azekri, women have a powerful presence within the order, and equality is something that religion ordains. Like their male counterparts, the women in the Boutchichi order seek knowledge and benefit from the teachings of the order. Women also fulfill the same responsibilities as men. They are *muqaddamat*, and women who are in charge of the weekly gatherings in the different cities; they organize trips to the mother *zawiya* (Sufi lodge), they organize *dhikr* and learning circles, and they also organize conferences for women that include Sufi chanting (*Nafahat Tariq* 2012a: 16).

Most forms of women's participation follow conventional distributions of gender-specific roles. The main lodges are usually set up to provide separate spaces for men and women; they hold their gatherings and activities separately during the main celebrations and retreats. The Boutchichi order has *zawiyas* in a number of cities, wherein weekly gatherings as well as other social activities are held. Men and women convene on separate days. In bigger cities, gatherings are organized by district. Other gatherings attract a younger congregation. Women of all ages attend gatherings in large numbers. The *dhikr* sessions are composed of a recital of the Yassin chapter, followed by a recital of *La Ilaha Illa Allah* (There is no deity

but God) for thirty minutes and a recital of the Divine Name '*Allah*' for fifteen minutes; this is usually followed by a short discourse and chanting of Sufi poetry.

The leadership structure within the order reflects the extent to which women are respected within the Sufi milieu. The daughters of the Sheikh play a leading role within the main *zawiya*, and within their own circles in the different cities where they reside. They are referred to as *Sharifat* (referring to their prophetic descent); they lead activities and initiate new female affiliates. Lalla Fouzia is one of Sheikh Hamza's three daughters; she resides in a middle-class neighborhood in the city of Fez.¹⁷ The female disciples of Fez regard her very highly, as an extension of her father's spiritual guidance. They frequent her house for occasional *dhikr* gatherings or recital of the Qur'an. They recognize her authority, and rush to kiss her hand when they see her; they sit humbly in her presence, and perform service at her house. Furthermore, like their male counterparts, women take up the position of *muqaddamat* and are responsible for logistics within the order. They preside over the different gatherings in their cities. A *muqaddama* is authorized by the Sheikh to initiate new disciples and assist in guiding people on the different matters of their religious and worldly life.

The Darqawi Alawi order has also a large presence in Morocco and includes a number of sheikhs who trace their legitimacy to Sheikh Ahmed al-Alawi. Women's authority varies depending on how big the groups are; however women do have less significant roles than they do in the Boutchichi order. Women can either form an autonomous space under the leadership of a *muqaddama* or they can participate with the men within segregated structures. Women are usually confined to the space of *khidma* (service), which involves the gendered distribution of work. Therefore women take up "female" tasks such as maintaining the *dhikr* space, cooking, and attending to female guests, while men lead and organize the rituals and receive visitors.

I conducted extensive fieldwork within an Alawiyya group based in Zghanghan (a town in the province of Nador, in northeastern Morocco), under the guidance of Sheikh Buzeidi Boujrafi (1934–2012). The order attracts dozens of female disciples whose age ranges from forty to above seventy. Most of the female disciples are illiterate and have a history being disciples of the former sheikh. However, the female disciples from other cities, such as Oujda, tend to be younger. The *zawiya* is structured so as to offer autonomous space for women to have their activities. Women gather once a week and host celebrations during the Mawlid feast (the Prophet's birthday). While a few women have responsibility for different tasks within the *zawiya*, the leading figure is the Sheikh's wife, a grandiose woman in her eighties. She is highly respected among the women and is referred

to as *Sharifa*, as she is not only the wife of the Sheikh but also the daughter of the former Sheikh. My interactions with her were very limited because of the language constraint as she speaks mostly Amazigh, although she can speak a little Arabic. She is not referred to as a *muqaddama*, for she is more than a *muqaddama* to the women. Dressed all in white as a marker of her purity and status, she conveys a tone of piety. During the gatherings, she leads the praying and singing and presents religious discourses. She has a significant influence on the behavior of her female followers. She initiates women into the order and conducts healing sessions. Many of her followers believe in her *baraka* (divine grace).

In the Habibi order in Meknes, Lalla Zuleikha, the fourth wife of Sheikh Ibn al-Habib, is the leading figure. She leads the gatherings in the mother *zawiya* and initiates people into the order. A number of disciples, including the men, consider her as a Sheikha and a mother. The *zawiya* is a traditional house-like structure. The main area of the *zawiya*, which also is the resting place of the Sheikh, is where the men's weekly gatherings and major celebrations take place. The women usually participate in the rituals from neighboring rooms. The *zawiya* attracts a few hundred people, including a smaller percentage of women. The women who attend the *zawiya* regularly are mostly elderly women who are friends with Lalla Zuleikha and who are longtime disciples of Sheikh Ibn al-Habib, although younger women also attend the major celebrations. Lalla Zuleikha is respected and considered to be the mother of the disciples. She maintains the *zawiya*, receives visitors, and presides over and opens the gatherings. She also initiates both men and women into the order, although this is perceived as only conferring her blessings as a saintly figure, rather than offering spiritual edification to her initiates, because it is not known whether or not she has permission from Sheikh Ibn al-Habib to initiate people into a path of spiritual edification.

NEGOTIATING AND REDEFINING THE PRIVATE SPHERE

Sufi women's participation within the Sufi tradition is of a complex nature. They actively engage in redefining the dynamics of space; at times the private space is more celebrated and demarcates the spiritual experience, whereas at other times there is a shift toward a more visible and public spiritual expression. The private and the public, the inner and the outer, become equally relevant sites for the attainment of knowledge. Although the exoteric knowledge is believed to have been appropriated by the male learned elite over the centuries, it is of importance to consider the types of agency that women construct in the confined spaces

of their homes. This issue is addressed by Amila Butorovic, who notes: "Sufism allowed women to transform their homebound 'orthopraxy' into a symbol of Sufi 'orthodoxy.' In other words, Sufism imbued women with the power to treat their socially constructed space as the principle site of mystical devotion and, in turn, remetaphorize the meaning of Islam—submission. The transformation was therefore experiential, not societal" (Butorovic 2001: 140). Thus, according to Butorovic, the Sufi tradition allows a broader interpretive scope within both mainstream and Sufi Islam, but does not seek to generate gender-based disruption to the social order. Women's spiritual emancipation becomes a means to renegotiate social inequalities and power relations within more institutionalized forms of worship. This is primarily because the Sufi path is centered on the spiritual authority of a sheikh—who in most cases is a man—and the principle of *tawajjuh*, which focuses on the spiritual activity of the sheikh. In this process, the woman becomes "a passive vessel for the inflowing power of the sheikh" (Trimingham 1998: 148). Thus, women function in a more submissive role under the authority of men, since the focus is more on cultivating a pious self rather than on subverting patriarchal hierarchies.

Codou Bop argues against the idea that Sufi brotherhoods offer alternative modes for women's empowerment and believes that a closer examination of the brotherhoods within the Senegalese context reveals that the large majority of women are actually marginalized; they continue to be mere disciples rather than equal religious leaders (Bop 2005). According to Bop, this marginalization operates through the ideological construction of notions of divine grace or *baraka*, which is central to Senegalese Sufism. It is believed that *baraka* is transmitted from the founder of the brotherhood to his descendants. Although women are, in principle, supposed to inherit *baraka* from their charismatic forebear; in practice, this is believed to be primarily a male attribute, transmitted by men to men. Hence, the principle of *baraka* contributes to women's ongoing marginalization within a Senegalese context (Bop 2005: 1113). According to the author, purity and rituals are additional factors that hinder women from gaining religious knowledge and challenging the system. Women's assumed impurity restricts them from performing religious practices and entering sacred spaces and thus blocks their access to knowledge and positions of greater leadership in the brotherhoods (Bop 2005: 1114). Another element is that of the image of the ideal woman. According to Bop, the function of ideology within the Sufi brotherhoods of Senegal is to maintain women as zealous supporters who do not challenge the brotherhoods and their exclusive structures of power. This image is constructed through the role played by the female relatives of the founders, in particular their mothers. Mothers and

daughters of the order's founders are presented as the ideal women whose example is to be followed by other female disciples. "Behaviors and attitudes that support the structures of the *tariqas* are idealized and presented as normative for all women, and alternative interpretations of women and of religious life and organization are severely undermined" (Bop 2005: 1115).

According to Bop, Senegalese Sufi women accept ideologies that legitimate their subordinate positions. "It is not only that women are forced to work within these constraints. Women also find legitimization in these situations and in organizations. Joining such associations and participating in their social, political, and religious practices allow women to present themselves as devout Muslims and devout disciples. It allows women to affirm their Muslim identity and simultaneously be actors (even if minor ones) in the society's religious life" (Bop 2005: 1115). Therefore, these women not only confirm their support to their order but also serve as promoters of Islam more generally.

Women's leadership within Sufi orders can thus be viewed as a mere element within the broader male leadership, especially since they are appointed by and depend on male leaders and mostly serve as counselors to new female recruits and help to initiate a larger female following. It is undeniable, however, that the Sufi path provides an alternative mode for the spiritual empowerment of Muslim women. It encourages them to engage in spiritual cultivation and experiential knowledge (*dhawq*). As Butorovic notes: "Through *dhawq*, women could strategize the ways of administering their spirituality without rupturing their social space" (Butorovic 2001: 161). Through their firm belief in their spiritual equality with men, these women reconceptualize the parameters of equality and piety, and model liberation in different ways.

CONCLUSION

The reconceptualization of spiritual practice allowed by Sufism subverts the dominant current in Islam, which subsumes women within more formal structures of religion. This view frequently results in the dismissal of women's spiritual devotions, which are viewed as more of a cultural expression than as a genuine religious experience. As a consequence, this view narrows the vast terrain of religious expression. However, promoting Sufism as an official religious discourse in Morocco disrupts and (re)shapes the binary of formal and informal religion and opens up discursive space to examine the different realms of women's religious expressions and the ways they engage religious knowledge.

Currently Sufi orders operate within an institutionalized framework that combines ritual performances and social activism. This framework restructures the way(s) that Sufism negotiates power and sociopolitical participation in contemporary Morocco. Sufism accepts a broader definition of piety, one that is not predicated on an ideological confrontation within the political domain. Instead, Sufism contributes to shaping discourses of public piety and morality through the embodiment of religious practice, which reshuffles the dynamics of religious and sociopolitical participation within the public sphere.

Furthermore, Sufi-framed practices have become an essential element for women's access to religious knowledge and have contributed to developing an educational tradition that sees women as both providers and recipients of instruction. Women's activity within the Sufi tradition has grown to become a significant site for female agency, a concept usually associated with more explicit forms of resistance to patriarchal structures. Sufism also highlights women's contributions to the vibrancy and polyvocality of the Islamic tradition, as well as women's active participation in the formation and preservation of the Islamic tradition in their local contexts through their creative input in the spheres of religious scholarship, education, and ritual, as Margaret Rausch asserts (Rausch 2011: 233). Many women currently take advantage of these new forms of education and social participation, along with other forms of religious education and communal religious rituals. Across the different Sufi orders in Morocco, women engage the tradition as both learners and instructors. They construct space not only for ritual practice, but also to teach and receive knowledge. Sufi lodges currently serve as learning centers that host sessions of Qur'an memorization, and the study of different religious disciplines, as well as religious talks to promote spiritual practice. These private spaces thus gain political importance since they influence public spaces. It is now common for female Sufi affiliates to actively engage in organizing and participating in public events and conferences related to Sufi thought and practice, especially since Sufism is strongly promoted by the state as a vibrant constituent of the modern and moderate Moroccan Islam.

NOTES

1. On the night of May 16, 2003, twelve suicide bombers carried out several attacks in Casablanca, Morocco. Forty-five people were killed in these attacks (twelve bombers and thirty-three victims), making this the worst such attack in Morocco's recent history.

2. *Makhzen* refers to the long-standing power apparatus associated with the Moroccan monarchy, it currently denotes the "deep state" that runs the political scene in present-day Morocco.

3. The Qadiri Boutchichi is a major Moroccan Sufi order particularly known for its support of the monarchy.
4. *Al-Adl wal-Ihsan* (the Justice and Charity) is a major Islamist movement that serves as the main oppositional group in Morocco; it is unofficial yet tolerated by Moroccan authorities.
5. The Salafi or Salafist movement is a movement or sect within Sunni Islam that is associated with literalist, strict, and traditional approaches to Islam.
6. Professor Khalid Bekkaoui, personal communication with the author, March 17, 2012.
7. While the precise definition and dates of the Arab Spring are somewhat disputed, the term generally refers to a series of revolutionary protests and demonstrations that occurred throughout the Arab world beginning in December 2010, with the largest number occurring in the spring of 2011.
8. The February 20 Movement is a social movement that was founded by young Moroccan activists in early January 2011 after the fall of President Ben Ali in Tunisia. On February 20, 2011, the movement started nationwide protests that demanded social and political reform in Morocco.
9. *Sayyida* is a title of respect used in formal contexts to mean "Lady" or "Mrs." It is also used as an honorary title to refer to a virtuous woman or a saint.
10. The *haik* is a large outer garment that is typically white and is worn by women in North Africa.
11. The Aissawiyya is a Sufi brotherhood based in Meknes; it is known for its Sufi folk music and trance ceremonies.
12. Fez and Meknes are cities in northern Morocco.
13. The Habibiyya is a branch of the Moroccan Shadhili Darqawi Sufi Order founded by Sheikh Muhammad Ibn al-Habib (d. 1972).
14. The Alawiyya is an Algerian branch of the Moroccan Shadhili Darqawi Sufi Order founded by Sheikh Ahmed Ibn Mustafa al-Alawi (d. 1934).
15. The Habibiyya is a branch of the Moroccan Shadhili Darqawi Sufi order founded by Sheikh Muhammad Ibn al-Habib (d. 1972). The Alawiyya is an Algerian branch of the Moroccan Shadhili Darqawi Sufi order founded by Sheikh Ahmed Ibn Mustafa al-Alawi (d. 1934). Madagh, Nador, and Oujda are cities in northeastern Morocco.
16. The word *dhikr* translates as "remembrance of God." A *dhikr* gathering is a ritual that includes the recitation of devotional formulas.
17. "Lalla" is a title of respect used in Moroccan Arabic to refer to a woman of status.

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