

Portfolio Part 5_Lucenti

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A discussion of an academic theoretical work/perspective associated with the study of Muslim politics, and its relevance to contemporary debates

If some authors, in order to resolve conflicts and contradictions within the sources of references of Islamic law - Qur'an and Sunna - have declared the Sunna and the *aḥādīṭ* unreliable and suggest getting rid of the latter source (see paper on Shahrur), other authors believe this operation is not compatible with the presuppositions of the Islamic faith, as the Sunna represents a fundamental source for understanding important aspects of the ethics and belief of Islam. Several authors, while accepting this assumption - the authority of the Sunna - have nevertheless made a distinction between true *aḥādīṭ* and false *aḥādīṭ*, recognising some internal contradictions between certain *aḥādīṭ* and what is instead reaffirmed in the Qur'an, the sacred text "par excellence". The distinction between true and false *aḥādīṭ* was made through a long and scrupulous exegetical analysis of the chain of transmission and above all of those who first orally and then in writing transmitted these *aḥādīṭ*. Some of these transmitters have been discredited and declared unreliable. However, their *aḥādīṭ* continue to be part of Islamic tradition and belief.

One of the authors who embarked on this meticulous research path in the name of exegesis of sacred texts and supported with scientific evidence the presence of false Hadith handed down by religious authorities is the Algerian university professor Maryam Atiya. In her work *Faux hadiths au sujet de la femme* (False *ḥadīṭ* on woman), Maryam Atiya has done a critical work on the nature of the texts attributed to the Prophet, verifying their authenticity. A work of deconstruction, she returns to the sources to highlight the character of non-authenticity and incompatibility with the Qur'an and with the rest of the Sunna of those sayings attributed to the prophet Muhammad, and put into circulation in certain historical contexts with the aim of marginalising women (Breigheche, 2019). The author's research was promoted and funded by the European Forum of Muslim Women (EFOMW), a network that brings together European Muslim women's organisations engaged in the debate on inclusion, empowerment, discrimination and gender equality. If we take into consideration, for instance, the saying "Do not ask a man why he beat his wife", handed down for centuries in certain circles as if it were a *aḥādīṭ*, we first find that several experts of 'Ulūm al-ḥadīṭ (sciences of hadith) and of al-ḡarḥ wa at-ta'dīl (critical science of the transmission chains of *aḥādīṭ*) as Ibn al-Qaṭṭān al-Fāsī, they defined it *mardūd*, that is unacceptable, to be rejected, due to the presence of 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Maslī, considered unreliable, in the sanad (chain of transmitters) of this saying (Atiya, 2013, p. 46). Atiya's research has had strong repercussions on Islamic women's movements and on Muslim women with an important political and religious role. An example is Nibras Breigheche, the first woman "imam" in Italy, who dedicated her master's thesis to the author and claims to have been inspired by her work regarding the integration of fully-fledged women into Islam. Her function as spokesperson for the Islamic community in Italy makes the issue "political". Nibras is frequently invited to political, cultural and media events of great national

resonance¹, as she represents the voice of Muslim women who do not passively accept to be cornered by their own culture and religion - or by their reified version - or by the West. But the question of the unreliability of some Hadith, although explored in a structured way by Atiya, does not arise in a vacuum.

Other authors before have started this delicate operation of exegesis of sacred texts, in order to deconstruct contradictions between the Sunna and the Qur'an regarding women's condition. One of the most important is Fatima Mernissi. Mernissi tells how one of the triggering episodes that gave rise to her book *Harem Politiques* (1987) was a heated discussion in a shop where a customer put her back in her place as a "woman" by citing one of the Prophet's Hadiths, that is "The people who entrusts their affairs to a woman will never know prosperity" (p.7). This episode started a long search in order to verify the veracity of this Hadith. "Fatima Mernissi is one of the rare women researchers who have dared to comment on the words of the Prophet Muhammad. Obviously, this will not be without consequences. Her works on Islam have often raised a huge outcry and her interpretations of religious texts often earned her strong criticism from Islamologists" (Belguechi, 2020, p.260). To the question "can a woman rule the Muslim people?" Mernissi replies yes. And her response is accompanied by historical evidence, a history made up of omissions, which denies women the role they deserve. An example is Aïcha, wife of the Prophet Muhammad. Aïcha, after Muhammad died, took the weapons to a battle called "the battle of camel" and which Mernissi mentioned: "historians will call this confrontation "the battle of the camel", referring to the one that Aïcha was riding, and thus avoiding linking in the memory of little Muslim girls the name of a woman to that of a battle" (Mernissi, 1987, p.13).

An interesting example of questioning this Hadith not at the level of exegesis, but of identity construction, also concerns the Tunisian context. In Tunisia, a new reinterpretation of identity has been carried out since the 1990s, which has seen an unprecedented enhancement of pre-Islamic history (for example in school curricula). This reinterpretation of identity had, among other objectives, to distance itself from the rest of the Arab world and from the phenomena related to a return of traditional Islam under the guise of modernity, the return of political Islam (Abbassi, 2009). At the base of this new identity, female historical or mythological icons of the past have been placed. Among the most important figures is Alyssa, the founder of Carthage. Alyssa is not only mentioned in political speeches as the "mother" of the Tunisian people (Lucenti, 2020), but continues to repopulate the physical and imaginative spaces of the country, reaffirming the ancestral nature of the Tunisian people and the distancing from misogynistic interpretations of Islam afferent to part of the contemporary Islamist movements. This choice wanted to reiterate the importance of women in Tunisian history, women who ruled and founded kingdoms. In addition, the figure of La Kahena, a Berber heroine, who unified the Berber tribes to counter the Arab advance in North Africa is fundamental. "These icons enable women – and men – today's Tunisians, to oppose with awareness and determination the European imaginary on "Arab" women, that are a victim of a misogynistic and patriarchal system, within which they have no possibility of redemption and liberation. Tunisian women can thus "disengage" and transcend their own history and everyday life, not always rosy and with a happy ending, to be reunited with the myth, from which to draw vital sap to reshape their present [...] The Tunisian woman, ultimately, having the possibility to draw on a vast and plural

¹ See: <https://www.lastampa.it/vatican-insider/it/2012/03/08/news/nibras-breigheche-la-prima-donna-imam-d-italia-1.36491728>; <https://palazzoducale.genova.it/evento/nibras-breigheche/>; https://www.esteri.it/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Confronti_Per-un-Islam-europeo.pdf.

imaginative patrimony, can distinguish herself from other Arab women, defining an autochthonous identity model, made in Tunisia, under the auspices of the great women of the past” (Lucenti, 2020, p.87). These examples are exemplified by the political role that the female question has in Islam and the need to find spaces for negotiation. Far from distancing themselves from Islam as a whole, the authors have initiated an important process of rereading the sacred texts in the light of contemporary needs.

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