

Following in the Steps of ‘Ā’isha: Ḥassāniyya-Speaking Tijānī Women as Spiritual Guides (*Muqaddamāt*) and Teaching Islamic Scholars (*Limrābuṭāt*) in Mauritania

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DOI: 10.5192/215409930502225

ABSTRACT

Women in Ḥassāniyya-speaking Sunnī Muslim communities in Mauritania have long served as spiritual guides (muqaddamāt) and as teaching scholars (limrābuṭāt) for other women. Yet those who have done so have tended to come from a small number of prominent scholarly families. Furthermore, their activities have usually remained hidden outside of their immediate social circles and are actively excluded from the historical record. In recent years, however, a boom in Islamic learning has led to a diversification in the social backgrounds of women acting as Islamic teachers and spiritual guides. At the same time, women’s spaces of Islamic learning have become increasingly visible. This article illustrates these changes in women’s exercise of Islamic authority by recounting the life stories of several female spiritual guides and teaching scholars in Nouakchott who adhere to the Tijānī Sufi order. It also draws on historical documents and government survey data to contextualize these changes. The stories presented here highlight important aspects of women’s performance of religious authority. One is the centrality of the concept of “knowing Islam,” which entails familiarity with the Qurʾan and a range of other Islamic texts. Another is the centrality of historical models, especially that of the Prophet’s wife ‘Ā’isha, in offering contemporary women justification for engaging in the teaching and production of Islamic knowledge. Ultimately, however, estimating changes in women’s participation in Is-

lamic knowledge and authority remains a difficult task because it has long been hidden and even actively erased from the historical record.

When I strolled in 2007 through the central market of Nouakchott (Mauritania), I stepped into an Arabic bookshop to look at new publications. I found a thin booklet titled *Mashāhīr al-‘ālimāt wa l-ṣāliḥāt min al-nisā’ al-mūrītāniyyāt* (*Celebrated Female Scholars and Upright Mauritanian Women*) authored by Sīdi Aḥmad b. Ma‘lūm b. Aḥmad Zarūq.¹ The author honors famous Mauritanian women grouped into six categories: scholars (‘ālimāt; sing.: ‘ālima), pious and upright personalities (ṣāliḥāt; sing.: ṣāliḥa), poets (shā‘irāt; sing.: shā‘ira), healers (ṭabībāt; sing.: ṭabība), writers (kātibāt; sing.: kātiba), and directors of *maḥāḍir* (sing.: *maḥḍara*), traditionalist institutions for Islamic education.² This categorization is interesting, because it highlights diverse aspects of involvement in spreading knowledge about Islam and other issues. I will look closer at one of these categories in this article, namely the directors of the *maḥāḍir* who engage in teaching Islamic knowledge in contemporary Nouakchott. Such teaching female Islamic scholars are called *limrābuṭa*. Further, I reflect on female spiritual guides from the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Tijāniyya Sufi order, whose spiritual center (zāwiya) is located in the region of Li‘gul in southwestern Mauritania (Trarza).³ This center is directed by scholars who speak Ḥassāniyya, the dialect of Arabic spoken in Mauritania. The female spiritual guides are called *muqaddama*. They guide and initiate adepts of the Tijāniyya. Both the *muqaddama* and the *limrābuṭa* perform Islamic authority among their communities, and both the *limrābuṭa*’s students and the *muqaddama*’s adepts are called *tilmīdh* in vernacular Arabic. This similar term hints at the local perception of the kind of authority that underlies both performances of Islamic authority that is based on Islamic knowledge and specific ways of transmitting it to and guiding the common believer.

¹ Sīdi Aḥmad bin Ma‘lūm bin Aḥmad Zarūq, *Mashāhīr al-‘ālimāt wa l-ṣāliḥāt min an-nisā’ al-mūrītāniyyāt* (Nouakchott, 2006).

² In Mauritania *maḥḍara* (pl: *maḥāḍir*) is the common term used for institutions of advanced Islamic studies after having successfully completed the Qur’anic school (*madrasa al-qur’āniyya*).

³ For a history of this Sufi center(s) and the Tijaniyya among the Ḥassāniyya-speaking population of Mauritania during nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see Britta Frede, *Die Erneuerung der Tiġāniya in Mauretanien. Popularisierung religiöser Ideen in der Kolonialzeit*, ZMO-Studien 31 (Berlin: Schwarz Verlag, 2014), 84–145.

The women I discuss in this article speak Hassāniyya and are affiliated with Sufi communities of the Tijāniyya. However, this does not suggest that female scholars are more frequent among followers of this Sufi path or among Hassāniyya speakers than among others. Female Islamic scholarship is quite common in diverse Muslim communities in Mauritania. Sīdi Aḥmad's list of female teaching Islamic scholars does not specifically concern Nouakchott or the Tijāniyya even though it explicitly mentions Hassāniyya-speaking women only. His list includes ninety-six names of teaching women scholars from all over the country whose religious affiliation is not mentioned. Like the teaching women, the women named in the other chapters of his booklet mostly lived in the twentieth century. Teachers are distinguished from general scholars by their teaching activity, because scholars might achieve and produce knowledge but do not necessarily teach. A teacher and director of a *maḥḍara* might be engaged in knowledge production by writing activities or composing didactic verse (*naẓm*). The knowledge that is produced falls into classical disciplines of Islamic educational institutions, like *ḥadīth*, *fiqh* (jurisprudence), grammar (*nahw*), and so on. Sīdi Aḥmad lists forty-four women in the category of female scholars, all but few living in the twentieth century. In the introduction of the chapter, he explains that Mauritanian society has produced a great number of female Islamic scholars, poets, and pious personalities. Still he could collect little information about them, because in addition to the already difficult safeguarding of cultural heritage in the country, these women authored few texts.⁴ In all of his chapters, he emphasizes that the women listed in his collection only represent a small selection providing a narrow glimpse of the religious engagement of Muslim women in his country.

The difficulty of tracing female Islamic scholars' activities in Mauritania hints at a specific pattern of female performance of Islamic authority. Female authority remains hidden. It hides behind male performances of Islamic authority, invisible from public view outside the female sphere. Further, as this example of Sīdi Aḥmad's booklet confirms, women authorities show up in written records mainly through the mediation of men's voices. Nevertheless, female Islamic authorities constitute an important pillar in Muslim communities. They actively engage in producing and transmitting Islamic knowledge through guiding believers in everyday life. In what

⁴ Sīdi Aḥmad, *Mashāhīr al-ʿālimāt wa l-ṣāliḥāt*, 8.

follows, I shed light on this contradictory phenomenon of female performance of Islamic authority. I first look at different kind of texts produced by male Islamic scholars about female Islamic authorities. Starting with a brief outline of the arguments raised in the introduction of Sīdi Aḥmad's biographical collection of female Islamic scholars in Mauritania, I will then shift to debates concerning women's engagement in Sufi ritual and spiritual guidance of followers of the Tijānī Sufi path during the late colonial and early postcolonial periods. The arguments stated in these debates are based on certain texts to be found in the Qur'an and in hadith collections. Ideals of women's pious behavior refer to these early texts, although the form these ideals take vary through time and space. I therefore briefly discuss the frame of reference used for regulating the performance of female Islamic authority that contributes to the ambiguity and hiddenness of these performances that cannot be reduced to the female sphere only but most probably extend beyond it. Finally, I present traditionalist female scholarship in contemporary Nouakchott, first presenting some findings about its place in the city today and then illustrating them with one specific example of a traditionalist female scholar and her *maḥḍara*. The overall guiding question is how female performance of Islamic authority is shaped by gender-specific understandings and regulations creating a performance of Islamic authority that is in certain aspects distinct from its male counterpart.

Guiding Men's Respect for Female Pious All-Rounder Leads to Progressing the Nation

Sīdi Aḥmad's publication is only one example of recently revealed information about the virtues of Muslim women in the past and present. A growing number of biographical collections about women scholars throughout the world has been published during the last decade, aiming to demonstrate that women are not "victims of Islam" but participate in creating and upholding it.⁵ These works challenge widespread stereotypes

⁵ See, for example, Muḥammad Jamāl al-Dīn, Amīna, *Al-Nisā' al-muḥaddithāt fī l-ʿAṣr al-Mamlūkī wa dawruhun fī l-ḥayāt al-adabīya wa l-thaqāfiya* (Cairo: Dār al-Hidāya li l-Ṭibā'a wa l-Nashr wa l-Tawzīʿ, 2003); ʿĀ'isha Abdurrahman Bewley, *Muslim Women: A Biographical Dictionary* (London: Ta-Ha, 2004); Mohammed Akram Nadwi, *Al-Muḥaddithat: The Women Scholars in Islam* (Oxford: Interface, 2007); Sidi Mohammed Erradi Genoun, *Tijani Women Companions*, trans. El Hassane b. Abdellaziz b. El Hassane

about oppressed Muslim women common in international media and political debates, especially since the events of 9/11 and the launching of the “war on terror.”⁶ The attempt to contribute a vote against common perceptions of Muslim women in global media seems to resonate when reading the introduction to Sīdi Aḥmad’s biographical collection of female Islamic scholars. Sīdi Aḥmad, born in 1963 in Maghta Lahjar (Brakna), is a scholar who has studied in several *maḥḍara* institutions and completed an education as a teacher at governmental schools. According to the book’s back cover, he has worked for the Cultural Ministry and the Council of Mauritanian Islamic Scholars, has engaged in diverse preservation of Arabic manuscripts, and has published a number of books concerning the history of Mauritania.⁷ The way in which he introduces the reader to the issue of female scholarship follows the writing style of “traditionalist” formation, starting with Qur’anic verses followed by hadith concerning the issue of female virtue and ending with citing local texts about the Mauritanian context. He introduces the subject by proving first that God has created men and women as being complementary and supportive to each other, but she is his sister (*shaqīqatuhu*) and not his likeness (*shabīḥa lahu*).⁸ Therefore, he emphasizes women’s equal value while at the same time reiterating their difference in nature. He continues stating that Islam honors women by giving them a place beside their brothers, the men.⁹ This honored place is as mother, as wife, and as daughter, but at the same time she is being honored, the woman as wife must accept a subordinate role to her husband, as he in turn must accept a subordinate role to his parents, especially his mother.¹⁰

After having clarified the honoring of the woman as mother, wife, and daughter and meanwhile outlining the place of each member of the family,

b. Jaafar Dabbagh al-Idrissi al-Hassani (Dar SIRR-Com, 2010), http://www.dar-sirr.com/Tijanismo/Tijani_Women_Companions.html; Asma Sayeed, *Women and the Transmission of Religious Knowledge in Islam* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013); SunnahOnline.com Muslim Women in History, <http://sunnahonline.com/library/women-and-islam/407-muslim-women-in-history>.

⁶ Lila Abu-Lughod, “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Other,” *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 3 (2002): 783–90.

⁷ Sīdi Aḥmad, *Mashāḥir al-‘ālimāt wa l-ṣāliḥāt*, back cover.

⁸ Ibid., 1.

⁹ Ibid., 2.

¹⁰ Ibid., 2–4.

he goes on to emphasize the importance of choosing a good wife as the mother of one's children who follow the religion.¹¹ Further, he refers to the responsibility of the father to provide his children, girls and boys alike, with a good knowledge about Islam and a profound general education. He then continues outlining the husband's role to care for a good education and teaching of his wife as well.¹² In the end of his introduction, Sīdi Aḥmad highlights the Mauritanian situation by stating that Mauritanian women hold an outstanding role as teachers of Islam, because they are from a society in which Islam is deeply rooted and the established customs honor women in an extraordinary way. Further, he argues that she is important in upholding the lineage, teaching the alphabet and primary knowledge about Islam to the children. She cares for the home and the guests and in addition, she even works outside the house as civil servant, trader, and so on. Still, despite all these duties, she follows her studies by memorizing the Qur'an, learning *fiqh*, grammar (*naḥw*), and logic (*manṭiq*), and she launches *maḥāḍir* and Qur'anic schools, thus contributing to the cultural revival of the country (*naḥḍa*).¹³

The introduction to Sīdi Aḥmad's book praises the Mauritanian woman and her efforts in daily life and for the religion. Such an honoring attitude toward women aligns with other observation about the femininity of the nation and Islam. Women are singled out as the "bearers of cultural authenticity" and "serve as boundary markers."¹⁴ The propagation of such images of all-round, ideal womanhood, if followed, would be an impossible burden for any individual. These kind of women seem to carry the whole load of social responsibility by raising children, holding the families together, strengthening social ties through hospitality, work, study, and teaching. The combination of women's societal engagement, family duties, and the achieving and spreading of knowledge as the expression of good moral conduct constitutes a clear defense against Western concepts of women's liberation through asserting that Islam already provides the liberties for which Western women were struggling. The concept of ideal womanhood remains as a counter-concept in which the self-sacrifice for

¹¹ Ibid., 4–5.

¹² Ibid., 5.

¹³ Ibid., 6–7.

¹⁴ Deniz Kandiyoti, "Beyond Being: Obstacles and Prospects for the Middle East," in *Muslim Women and the Politics of Participation: Implementing the Beijing Platform*, ed. Mahnaz Afkhami and Erika Friedl, 3–10 (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 8.

the nation and religion opposes Western feminist movements' individualistic promises of self-fulfillment. Knowledge production, access to education, and the honoring of women therefore serve as arguments to prove the compatibility of Islam with progress.¹⁵ This approach can be seen as a conservative attempt to uphold a patriarchal order, but at the same time, it opens possibilities for women to increase their visibility in societal engagements that might provide a capacity to change established conceptions of religious authority. Further, this position contrasts with other Muslim discourses that emphasize the danger of the female body as sexually corrupting for man, who therefore needs to be protected by the veiling and segregation of women.¹⁶

The Role of Ḥassāniyya-Speaking Women in Transmitting Islamic Knowledge

The engagement of women in Islamic movements of Mauritania is indeed a phenomenon that was already widespread before the resurgence of Islamization during the 1970s.¹⁷ However, these women were rarely remembered in written traditions, as is the case throughout the Middle East and West Africa.¹⁸ Only in poetry are traces occasionally found. One example is a poem written by Ibrahim Niasse (1900–1975) after he visited the Li'gul region in southwestern Mauritania in 1952 and titled *al-Rihla*

¹⁵ For the development of the discourse of Islam and progress in the Middle Eastern context, see Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (London: Yale University Press, 1992), 128.

¹⁶ Adis Duderija, *Constructing a Religiously Ideal "Believer" and "Woman" in Islam: Neo-Traditional Salafi and Progressive Muslims' Methods of Interpretation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 100–115.

¹⁷ The empirical material presented in this part of the paper has been collected during field research conducted in October–November 2006, March–April 2007, and April–May 2009 in Mauritania. The research trips in 2006 and 2007 were funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) as part of my ZMO- (Berlin) based research project "Translocal Discourses on Islamic Reform: The Idaw 'Alī during French Colonial Expansion, 1830–1935." The research trip in 2009 was funded by the Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung (BMBF) as part of my Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO, Berlin) based Ph.D. project "Shaykhāni (Manna Abba ibn Muḥammad at-Ṭulba, 1908–1986) and the Revival of the Tijāniyya in Mauritania."

¹⁸ Ruth Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections: From Ibn Sa'ad to Who's Who* (London: Lynne Rienner, 1994), 2–4; Marilyn Booth, *May Her Likes Multiply: Female Biography and Gender Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

al-Kannāriyya.¹⁹ Ibrahim Niasse was an important renewer (*mujaddid*) of the Tijāniyya, a Sufi movement founded by Aḥmad al-Tijānī (1735–1815) that had spread from Morocco to West Africa around the turn of eighteenth to nineteenth centuries.²⁰ In Mauritania the local branch of the Tijāniyya is known as Ḥāfiẓiyya, referring to its founder Muḥammad al-Ḥāfiẓ (ca. 1758/59–1831/32). He had established a Tijānī Sufi center (*zāwiya*) in the Liḡul region as a mobile tent due to his nomadic lifestyle.²¹ His grandson Aḥmad Maḥmūd b. Muḥammad al-Ṭulba alias Mannabba (1907–86)—known as Shaykhānī—was a disciple of Ibrahim Niasse. He spread the renewal movement, known as Fayḍa in Mauritania.²² By 1952, the renewal movement was already well established and Ibrahim Niasse visited both Tijānī branches in Liḡul.²³ His poem describes his visit and he praises eleven women from the Ḥāfiẓiyya, of whom three held the position of *muqaddama*, thus holding a license allowing them to guide and initiate adepts of the Tijāniyya (table 1). Another two were scholars (*ʿālimāt*), teaching religious knowledge (*ʿilm*), one was a gifted poet, and the other five were pious upright personalities (*ṣāliḥāt*). Further, he praised the sister of Shaykhānī, Murayam bt Muḥammad al-Ṭulba (d. 1993), who assisted Shaykhānī since his early engagement in the Fayḍa in 1933–34 and married Ibrahim Niasse in 1954 for a couple of months, a short marriage that caused numerous rumors. Finally, the daughter of Ibrahim Niasse’s mentor Amīnātu bt ʿAbdallāhi b. al-Ḥājj was a *muqaddama* of the Fayḍa. This exceptionally long list of female religious figures provokes questions of how to interpret Niasse’s poem. Did his list of women really hint at changes in women’s religious participation during the mid-twentieth century within the Fayḍa in contrast to the Ḥāfiẓiyya?²⁴ As I have argued elsewhere, the fact that the majority of those named are Ḥāfiẓī women must be read as signaling Ibrahim Niasse’s respect for the Ḥāfiẓī shaykhs and not as a new recognition of women’s efforts in religious movements.

¹⁹ Ibrahim Niasse, *Majmūʿ riḥlāt al-shaykh Ibrāhīm: Al-riḥlat al-Ḥijāziyya al-ūlā; Nail al-mafāz bi-l-ʿaud ilā l-Ḥijāz; al-Riḥlat al-Kannāriyya wa l-kumāshiyya; al-Riḥlat al-Kunākiriyya*, 105–17.

²⁰ Jamil N Abun-Nasr, *The Tijaniyya: A Sufi Order in a Modern World* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), 102–6.

²¹ Frede, *Erneuerung*, 78–96.

²² Ibid., 291–363.

²³ Ibid., 397–404.

²⁴ Diana Stone, “The Inversion of a Historical Tendency? The Tijaniyya Niass Movement in Mauritania,” paper presented at the “Workshop on Tijaniyya Traditions and Societies in West Africa,” University of Illinois, April 1–5, 1996.

Table 1. List of women in *al-Rihla al-Kannārīya*^a

Name	Activity	Affiliation
Amīnātu bt ʿAbdallāhi b. al-Ḥājīj (d. 1997)	<i>muqaddama</i>	Fayḍa
Murayam bt Muḥammad al-Ṭulba (d. 1993)	Supported Shaykhāni since 1933–34 as one of the first adepts of the Fayḍa	Fayḍa
Fāṭima bt Sidīnā alias Ḥuṭūṭu (d. mid–nineteenth century)	<i>muqaddama</i> (for men and women)	
Maryam Nafīsa bt Aḥmad Maḥmūd (d. 1954)	<i>muqaddama</i> (for women only)	Ḥāfiziyya
Asiyatu bt Aḥmaddu (d. 1954–55)	<i>ṣāliḥa</i>	Ḥāfiziyya
Maryam bt Aḥmāda (d. 1953)	<i>ṣāliḥa</i>	Ḥāfiziyya
ʿĀʾishatu bt Aḥmāda (d. 1981)	<i>ṣāliḥa</i>	Ḥāfiziyya
Fāṭimatu bt al-Sarrī Muḥammadi (d. 1958)	<i>ʿālima</i> (taught men and women)	Ḥāfiziyya
Sāfiya bt al-Bāḥ alias Faffa (d. 1974)	<i>ʿālima</i> (taught women only)	Ḥāfiziyya
Asiya bt Aḥmad Fāl b. Bābā (d. 1952)	<i>ṣāliḥa</i>	Ḥāfiziyya
ʿĀʾi shatu bt al-Bāḥ (d. 1981)	Poetess	Ḥāfiziyya
Sālīma bt Faffa (d. 1972)	<i>ṣāliḥa</i> (sympathizer of the Fayḍa)	Ḥāfiziyya

^a The women named in *al-Rihla al-Kannārīya* are not identified with their complete names or dates. Thanks to an interview with Muḥammad Yaḥya b. Fattan (Baraina, April 2009) I was able to identify their activities and affiliation to the two branches.

As for the question of leadership and authority as spiritual guides or teachers, there seems to be no significant differences between the two branches of the Tijāniyya. A recently published online collection of biographies of female Tijānī figures demonstrates that throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries sisters, wives, and daughters of famous Sufi shaykhs were actively engaged in spreading the Sufi path by teaching,

spiritual guidance, and composing poetry.²⁵ However, their activities are rarely remembered in text and their leadership positions were not visibly emphasized in public. Still, their efforts were similar to those of male companions. The Fayḍa shaykh Muḥammad Yaḥyā b. Khayrī, the brother of the famous Shaykh Ould Khayrī, told me about his mother Fāṭimatu bt Sīdī Aḥmad alias Dāyā (d. 2004), who was a *muqaddama* establishing her own group of followers, and served for years as *intimus* (intimate disciple) of the Fayḍa shaykh Muḥammad b. Ḥājj ‘Abdallāh, known as Muḥammad al-Mishrī (1917/18–1975):²⁶

My mother joined the Fayḍa in 1946–47. When she died in 2004, she had been an active adept [*tilmīdha*] of Ibrahim Niasse for fifty-eight years. Already before her affiliation to the Fayḍa she was an adept of the Ḥāfiẓī shaykh Muḥammad al-Ḥāfiẓ b. Yaḥyā b. Aḥmaddū Fāl. . . . Her father was Sīdī Aḥmad b. Muḥammaddū b. Sīdī Aḥmad b. Muḥammadīn b. Sīdī Aḥmad Ishfaghā Danabjā, a scholar specialized in Qurʾan, *fiqh* [jurisprudence], and grammar. Her mother was Khadjaṭū from the famous Idaw ‘Alī scholar family of Ḥurma b. ‘Abd al-Jalīl. She was very well educated, especially in the fields of *sīra* [Prophet’s biography], *fiqh* [jurisprudence], and Qurʾan. . . .

In 1946–47, during the first big *fayḍa* guided by Muḥammad al-Mishrī, she [Dāyā] became *majdhūba* [being raptured, a specific Sufi state often accompanied with uttering words of ecstasy]. From that moment on, she was actively engaged in the Fayḍa. In 1954 she traveled to Medina Baye [Kaolack, Senegal] to visit [*ziyāra*] Ibrahim Niasse. However, she did not stay for long, because the atmosphere she encountered there was not significantly different from the one in Li‘gul. She was appointed as *muqaddama* during her visit. They filled in the form and Ibrahim Niasse signed it personally. She herself did not want to be a shaykh. She had the *taqdīm* [appointment as *muqaddama*], but never “gave the *wird* [litany; here: initiation into Tijāniyya] to anyone. Nevertheless, she was a *muqaddama* and played an active role as the right hand of Muḥammad al-Mishrī. She organized meetings [*majālis*; sing.: *majlis*] and gave counsel to the adepts.

According to our traditions [*urf*], men stand in the foreground. For women such a position is strange and they do not feel very comfortable, because they have to spend time in between men who are strangers. Often

²⁵ Genoun, *Tijani Women Companions*.

²⁶ Interview with Muḥammad Yaḥyā b. Khayrī, Boubakar, April 2009, rewritten and translated into English from minutes by the author.

women see this fact as a problematic issue. However, it was common that women who were in the close circle of a shaykh played an important role in supervising adepts. She [Dāyā] was the one who filled in that role for Muḥammad al-Mishrī, because she had the necessary requirements: experience of God [*maʿrifa kabīra*] up to the state of *fath kabīr* [great opening] and *fath akbar* [greater opening]; she held the love of God [*muḥibba*] and for God [*maḥabba*]. That is why she was qualified to supervise the adepts. It was the same after the foundation of our village Boubakar [Liʿgul; Trarza] on April 20, 1978. She continued playing the same role as before: she was responsible for *tarbiya* [spiritual education], and organized daily sessions in her house in which she taught about *dhikr* [remembrance of God], Qurʾan, the love for God [*maḥabba*], stories about the Fayḍa [*ḥikāya*], and the rules to be followed along the Sufi path [*fiqh al-ṭarīqa*]. . . .

Muḥammad Yaḥyā b. Khayrī's narration about the activities of his mother Dāyā reveals the extent to which learned women engaged in *ṭarīqa* (Sufi path; Sufi order) activities. They could reach the highest spiritual states and take over the spiritual guidance of male and female adepts. Nevertheless, the fact that she did not "give the *wird*" to new adepts draws a proper boundary to public representative leadership positions. Even if Muḥammad Yaḥyā clarifies that these boundaries are not due to Islam as such, but to local tradition, in practice these boundaries are at work and lead to the problem of tracing female authoritative figures in written sources. Since only male notables initiated new adepts by "giving them the *wird*," they are traceable in written *sanad* (transmission chain) documents; female notables on the other hand stay hidden; they guide adepts spiritually but their names will not be written down, because they don't initiate their adepts into the Sufi path.

Audible or Secret? Debating Women's Religious Practice

Such differences in religious practice concerning leadership positions and general religious practice alike are principally based on the assumption that men and women are equal in religion, but different in nature. For illustrating what this means in practice, I would like to take a closer look at debates about the Fayḍa in Mauritania during its establishment in respect to women's participation. One of the questions to discuss is whether the emergence of gender-mixed (albeit often still gender-segregated) sessions, as it is reported about the Fayḍa in colonial sources, hint at a kind

of women's emancipation propagated by Fayḍa spiritual guides.²⁷ Seesemann concludes that

the frequent remarks about mystical excesses with female involvement in colonial reports can be read as references to instances of *jadhb* ("rapture"; described in chapter 3), experiences where the disciple might temporarily flout the rules and utter words of ecstasy. For the representatives of the Ḥāfiẓiyya such manifestations of mystical extravagance were already reprehensible when displayed by men, but they were outright abominable when they involved women. Although Ḥāfiẓī practice does not bar women from membership, and even leadership, in the Tijāniyya their mystical pursuits were not supposed to become public. It was therefore not the participation of females in Tijānī ritual as such, but rather the greater public exposure of their spiritual experiences that distinguished the Ḥāfiẓiyya from communities affiliated with the *fayḍa*.²⁸

The mixing of men and women in public *dhikr* sessions was not a new entity for the Fayḍa, as even among some Ḥāfiẓiyya gender-mixed sessions were practiced. In a colonial report about the Ḥāfiẓī *muqaddam* 'Abdallāhi b. Muḥammad Fāl from Li'gul we can read the following remark:

Abdallahi o/Mohamed Fall o/Baba—originaire des Ahel Abderrahmane . . . le chef de cette branche est un marabout à doctrine un peu particuliers et il faut signaler : . . . La prière se fait en commun (hommes et femmes), mais sans danse ni chanson.

Abdallahi o/Mohamed o/Baba—originating from the Ahel Abderrahmane . . . the chief of this subgroup is a marabout with a quite particular doctrine and the following is remarkable: . . . the prayers are performed together (men and women), but without dancing and singing.²⁹

However, debates occurred about how women should behave in gender-mixed *dhikr* sessions. The remark that gender-mixed sessions were conducted without "dancing" and "singing" already hints at the central issue of debate: are women allowed to utter the *dhikr* aloud if men are present?

²⁷ Stone, *Inversion*, 7.

²⁸ Rüdiger Seesemann, *The Divine Flood: Ibrāhīm Niasse and the Roots of a Twentieth-Century Sufi Revival* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 168.

²⁹ CAOM 26 EVEOM 1, Le Tidjanisme chez les Idaou Ali, 1947.

It seems that in Ḥāfiẓī communities shaykhs were urging female adepts to practice the silent *dhikr* in the presence of men. Admittedly, the position of Fayḍa shaykhs seems not to differ from the Ḥāfiẓī position: in a letter from Ibrahim Niasse to Shaykhāni in 1952–53 he argued that men and women are equal if wandering along the Sufi path just like the silent *dhikr* (*sirrī*) is equal to the one spoken out aloud (*jahrī*). Women, he follows up, should practice the silent *dhikr*.³⁰ Shaykhāni followed Niasse and composed a poem in which he asked women to practice the silent *dhikr* in the presence of men.³¹ Just like the absence of mention of women's leadership in written license documents (*ijāza* or *sanad*), the women's voice is absent in the soundscape of *dhikr* sessions as soon as men are present.

Therefore, women actively engage in religious ritual just like men but remain hidden by staying silent while male voices will appear aloud. Such an ideal practice illustrates ambiguity at work. Nevertheless, similar debates did not arise for all kinds of ritual. Apart from *dhikr* sessions, even the Friday afternoon *wazīfa*, a specific recitation obligatory in Tijānī ritual, is often conducted in gender-mixed sessions. I myself took part in a *wazīfa* during a brief visit to a small Fayḍa community in Firdous, a village close to Kiffa (Assaba) in 2007. Men and women met outside in a garden. They sat down in a circle; one-half of the circle was for women, the other for men. They recited the *wazīfa* aloud in unison. After finishing the recitation, everybody rose, shook hands, and greeted one another. Men and women only shook hands if their kin relationship allowed, otherwise only greeting verbally. In Tidjikja (Tagant), I was told, the practice is different. Here men recite the Friday afternoon *wazīfa* inside the mosque, while women go to the Sufi center (*zāwiya*).³² In Chinguetti (Adrar) the Friday afternoon *wazīfa* is rarely held in the mosque, but if so only men would be present and women would meet in one of their houses or in the Sufi center. Sometimes the Friday afternoon *wazīfa* is organized in a palm grove or the Sufi center, in which case men and women are both present.³³ In Bara-

³⁰ Ibrahim Niasse [s.d.], *Kitāb jawāhir al-rasā'il wa yalliyyat ziyādat al-jawāhir*, ed. Aḥmad b. 'Alī al-Tijānī, 3 vols. [s.l.], 131.

³¹ Aḥmaddū b. al-Shaykhāni, *Wamaḍāt munīra fī ḥayāt imām al-fayḍa wa l-ṭarīqa al-Shaykhāni b. al-shaykh Aḥmaddū b. al-shaykh Muḥammad al-Ḥāfiẓ al-'Alawī al-Tijānī* (Nouakchott: 'Akāz, 2007), 153.

³² Interview with Maryam bt Tālib Muḥammad, Tidjikja, April 2007.

³³ Interview with 'Abd al-Raḥīm b. al-Khanshī al-Ṣaghīr, Chinguetti, October 2006; interview with Sayf al-Islām, Chinguetti, March 2009; interview with Dr. al-Muṣṭafā Ḥ' madāna, Nouakchott, May 2009.

ina (Li'gul; Trarza) I saw that men frequently went to the mosque for the Friday afternoon *wazīfa*, but women met in a private house. Rarely, the Friday afternoon *wazīfa* is conducted gender-mixed in the Sufi center. In contrast to the debate about the silent *dhikr* for women if men are present, I did not come across a similar debate for the gender-mixed Friday afternoon *wazīfa*. In the one I assisted personally in Firdous, men and women alike were reciting the Friday afternoon *wazīfa* aloud. Therefore, the hidden aspect doesn't seem to be at work in every ritual practice. The existing variations concerning the practice of gender-mixing further indicate that place matters. Rituals performed outside a mosque or Sufi center seem to allow women to speak out aloud beside their male companions.

A third aspect of religious practice in the context of the Mauritanian Fayḍa I would like to consider briefly is the visit (*ziyāra*) to the shaykh in his Sufi center. The facilitation of transport during the colonial period led in general to an increase of movement. While formerly visits to the shaykh's camp might not have been possible for several times a year, after modernized transport was installed and traveling routes were secured, visits could be conducted regularly, but might last for a shorter duration than before. In a letter from 1941, Shaykhāni requested his adepts to visit his Sufi center in Li'gul (Trarza) once or better twice a year. Everybody was obliged to pay him a visit, except divorced women, aged persons, slaves, and employees from the colonial administration.³⁴ Such demands led to an increasing amount of traveling activities among Shaykhāni's female followers, provoking critics from different sides. First in colonial reports, we find remarks about women who left their husbands for traveling without permission and without being accompanied by a guardian to their shaykh.³⁵ Narrations of unaccompanied female travelers from Tagant to Trarza are still told today as stories proving the exceptional conviction of Shaykhāni's female followers on the one hand and his outstanding capacity as a *wālī* (friend of God, in the sense of being close to the holy sphere) on the other hand.³⁶ Further, in a letter from Ali Cissé, the *intimus* of Ibrahim Niasse in Kaolack (Senegal), addressed to Shaykhāni and Muḥammad al-Mishrī in 1952–53, he asked them to stop their female

³⁴ Aḥmaddū, *Wamaḍāt*, 168.

³⁵ CAOM 1 Affpol 2167, Beyries, "Rapport du mission sur la situation de l'Islam en A.O.F.," 1952, 20.

³⁶ Interview with Maryam bt Ṭālib Muḥammad, Tidjikja, April 2007.

adepts from traveling to Kaolack without money and a guardian.³⁷ Therefore, not only did antagonists of the Fayḍa who complained to the colonial administration challenge the new mobility of women, but so did the shaykh himself, who suddenly had to supply accommodation, food, and transport to moneyless female adepts. Generally speaking we can conclude so far that women were called to actively engage in religious issues, but at the same time they were asked to respect the rules by not leaving their *maḥram* (the closer family sphere) more than necessary or without a male guardian's permission. The principal place of a woman is beside a male guardian even if she engages in religious activities. Such a position implies that the fulfillment of the women's wish to participate in certain aspects of religious community life depends on the goodwill of their male relatives to accept their women mixing with men who do not belong to the *maḥram*.

The Right for Women to Practice Their Religion

Gender-mixed religious practice was not accepted by all Mauritians. As I have illustrated elsewhere, colonial reports already hint at the Fayḍa's virulent critics emphasizing the ecstatic intemperance and particularly the immoral behavior of Shaykhāni's female followers.³⁸ The following conversation between a Tijānī disciple, Aḥmad Bū Zayd, and Shaykhāni gives an interesting insight into the arguments used by Shaykhāni to defend his gender-mixed practice, by referring to the proper intention of the believer as an important condition for moral conduct. The conversation most probably took place in Baraina (Li'gul; Trarza) during the early 1980s. It is still circulated today on cassettes among Shaykhāni's followers. Yet, it even illustrates men's obstacles to mixing with women.³⁹

Aḥmad Bū Zayd: But I find something else strange. When the shaykh comes, women come also, and they stay with us and they are with men in the same room. What do you say about that?

Shaykhāni: There is no place that deserves more respect than the tomb of the Prophet . . . and His [God's] . . . house. When we go there, we can

³⁷ Aḥmaddū, *Wamaḍāt*, 221.

³⁸ Frede, *Erneuerung*, 336–39.

³⁹ Frede, *Erneuerung*, 510–11.

find women and men together in a crowd. It can happen that if you look behind you, you will find a woman touching you between your shoulders with her two breasts.

Aḥmad Bū Zayd: Did you ever see any of our scholars or our judges who had a woman's breast between his shoulders?

Shaykhāni: I want to tell you again, there is no place in this world that should be more respected than the house of Allah . . . and the tomb of His prophet. . . . However, the poor woman who wants to make the *ḥājj* [pilgrimage] exactly as you want to do it, do you think she will not do it, because she is scared of touching you with her breast? Imagine there was some food that was just distributed. Do you think it is sufficient that you will touch the women so that she runs away and you can take her part of the food instead of herself?

Aḥmad Bū Zayd: So the woman is the one responsible here?

Shaykhāni: The bad intentions of men must not stand between the poor woman and her needs. The intention is what is most considered by these actions.

Aḥmad Bū Zayd: Let's imagine a man wants to do his *ḥājj* but he forgot about it, because of the mixture of men and women. He starts thinking about women instead of the *ḥājj*.

Shaykhāni: This happened to many people. You can find scholars in the city of Nouakchott, which is not far from here. When they go for *ḥājj* and arrive in Medina [Saudi Arabia], those forty prayers which delete all the sins, they don't do them, because when they come to the mosque and they see that it is full with women, they don't pray, they go back. . . .

Shaykhāni emphasizes in this dialogue that men and women had equal rights regarding their ability to practice religion. If anyone has a bad intention while practicing religious ritual he should work on his intention rather than blame the other sex. The question that remains is whether such argumentation really allows us to conclude that the Mauritanian Fayḍa contributed to a change of the position of women in religious matters or even beyond. Such a possible change of women's position cannot be traced without considering ongoing social transformations. I therefore will briefly spell out some of these transformations of twentieth-century Mauritania that concern the need for a reconfiguration of gender relations.

Transforming the Sociopolitical Order and Economic System

The establishment of money as the dominant means of trade, the introduction of wage labor, the establishment of modern education, and mass settling (known as sedentarization, a development that was enhanced by the several droughts during the first decades after independence) had a complex impact on women's daily lives, bringing new possibilities and hardships. Leila Ahmed concluded for the Middle East that

as early as the first decades of the nineteenth century some women, particularly rural workers and lower class women in countries, such as Egypt and Syria, where European-made goods had made inroads, undoubtedly suffered as a consequence of the shifting economic and political patterns. For women in general the effects of political and cultural encroachment were complicated and, in certain respects, decidedly negative. Nonetheless, in crucial ways the outcome of the process of change the encroachments set in motion was broadly positive, because social institutions and mechanisms for the control and seclusion of women and for their exclusion from major domains of activity in their society were gradually dismantled.⁴⁰

European presence provoked similarly radical changes in Mauritania, yet the consequences of these changes differed, because social institutions for the control of women were not gradually dismantled, but enforced. In-depth studies about the effects of colonialism on women's lives in Mauritania are missing, but it seems that several developments contributed to marginalize women in colonial Mauritania. Despite a few exceptions, a majority of women were until the 1980s excluded from the newly introduced institutions such as modern education and consequently from qualified wage labor.⁴¹

This might be true for sub-Saharan women as much as for Ḥassāniyya-speaking women in Mauritania. However, the effect first of sedentarization and

⁴⁰ Ahmed, *Women and Gender*, 127–28.

⁴¹ Frede, *Erneuerung*, 414–16. The introduction of modern education during colonial times was contested for girls and boys alike. For boys' schooling, the resistance disappeared already during the 1960s, but girls had to wait until the 1980s for a more liberal tendency in girls' schooling. For the general debate among Mauritanian scholars against the modern schools, see Al-Khalīl Naḥwī, *Bilād Shinqīt: Al-Manāra wa l-ribāt* (Tunis: Al-Munazama al-ʿArabiyya li-l-Tarbiya wa l-Thaqāfa wa l-ʿUlūm, 1987), 348–52.

then urbanization especially affected the living conditions of the Ḥassāniyya-speaking population. One of the main causes of Ḥassāniyya-speaking women's marginalization stems from the transition from a nomadic to a settled, urbanized lifestyle. The tent home was gradually disappearing. The first step toward urbanization came along with the construction of colonial posts in the middle of the desert. Here new plantations of palm trees, and high demands for milk, meat, and servant labor, attracted a tribally mixed population who were in need of money-based income opportunities. First small villages developed, and later small towns came into existence, reinforced by the droughts of the 1960s and 1970s, a period when food supply was only possible close to the scarce infrastructure left behind from colonial rulers. In that period, nomads started massively settling along the west-eastern road, called *route de l'espérance*; and at the same time former colonial posts developed into small towns.⁴² If women were coming along from the desert camps to the new "cities," they needed to adapt to a new life in a tribally and socially heterogeneous environment, in which the borders of the *maḥram* surrounded a narrow space of a house or compound. In contrast, in a camp with tents, most of the inhabitants are relatives either by blood or by milk kinship ties.⁴³ Here, the borders of the *maḥram* are drawn differently and give women other more visible opportunities to participate economically in the community. Similar observations concerning the disappearance of women from the fields and streets and their increasing limits in their freedom of choice have been made for other sedentarizing formally nomadic communities, like, for example, the West African Arabs, Fulani, Kanuri, Tuareg, and Tubu.⁴⁴

Further, the implementation of money as an important resource for economic power, by excluding women at the same time from high-income labor, marginalized female economic power. Women who are restricted to activities inside the house might still participate in economic transactions but rely heavily on usually male intermediaries. The involvement

⁴² For processes of sedentarization in Mauritania since colonial times, see Charles Toupet, *La sédentarisation des nomades en Mauritanie centrale sahélienne* (Paris: Champion, 1977) ; Urs Peter Ruf, *Mobil Selbsthafte: Sedentarisierung und Geschichte der Nomaden in Mauretanien* (Saarbrücken: Verlag für Entwicklungspolitik Breitenbach, 1995).

⁴³ For issues of milk kinship in the Ḥassāniyya-speaking society, see Corinne Fortier, "Le lait, le sperme, le dos et le sang? Représentations physiologiques de la filiation et de la parenté de lait en islam malékite et dans la société maure," *Cahiers d'études africaines* 161, no. 1 (2001): 97–138.

⁴⁴ Ousseina D. Alidou, *Engaging Modernity: Muslim Women and the Politics of Agency in Postcolonial Niger* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 67.

of (semi-)sedentary Ḥassāniyya-speaking women living in the Saharan trading oases in long-distance trade activities by using agency contracts (*wakāla*) during the nineteenth century demonstrate that women used their possibilities to obtain income.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, the problems arising for women to sustain their own living if husbands are not able to sufficiently supply the household were manifold. For rural women this often meant that their husbands might leave the family for part of the year to work in urban settlements where labor was needed. Women were often left behind with their children.⁴⁶ In the 1970s rural women increasingly launched co-operatives with local small-scale economic activities like vegetable gardening and handicrafts to achieve a monetary income.⁴⁷

The professional training of women has improved over the last decades, and more and more are working as civil servants or in companies, having left the villages behind and built up a living in the urban settings. Still, women rely quite often on alternative ways to compensate for missing household income, for example, in various institutions of gift-economy.⁴⁸ A strong imbalance of money distribution enhances the patriarchal social order. However, women were and are not excluded completely from the monetary economy, and moreover they have to overcome gender-specific obstacles that might differ tremendously in diverse social environments and are based on modes of seclusion and exclusion from professional formation. These social changes combined with a renegotiation of gender relations are not limited to the non-religious sphere but may affect gendered religious practice, too. If we think about women's seclusion, for example, this is only realistically practicable if an appropriate home can be provided. Therefore, the practice of gender segregation depends on a certain living standard that in a poor country like Mauritania is impossible to provide for every household. Gender segregation might then still be an envisioned ideal, but practice might develop in alternative ways, such as men and

⁴⁵ Ghislaine Lydon, "Contracting Caravans: Partnership and Profit in Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Trans-Saharan Trade," *Journal of Global History* 3 (2008): 89–113, 103.

⁴⁶ See table 2; there is a significant absence of female inhabitants in urban settings that are attractive for male labor migrants like Nouakchott, Nouhadibou, Zouerat in Tiris, and Akjoujt in Inchiri.

⁴⁷ Frede, *Erneuerung*, 473–74.

⁴⁸ A specific study for Mauritanian Ḥassāniyya-speaking women is missing, but for Bamako, see Mariken Vaa, Sally E. Findley, and Assitan Diallo, "The Gift Economy: A Study of Women Migrants' Survival Strategies in a Low-Income Bamako Neighborhood," *Labour, Capital and Society* 22, no. 2 (1989): 234–60.

women eating in the same room without sharing the same plate, or women sitting in the front or back if riding a taxi to avoid sitting close to men not belonging to the *maḥram*. The point I want to make here is that gender practice depends not only on which parts of the Qur'an and hadith are cited but also on circumstances of everyday life. Nevertheless, such tremendous societal changes as I have sketched them for twentieth-century Mauritania demanded revisiting Islamic texts to see what they provide for Islamic authorities to advise their followers on which path to take.

Qur'an, Hadith, and Statements of Spiritual Equality

Undoubtedly, the textual sources provide us with a highly ambivalent image of female existence, allowing interpreters to develop diverse modes of gendered ritual and social practice. To illustrate the ambiguity of female imaginaries in the authoritative textual sources of Sunnī Islam, I will paradigmatically sketch contradictory trajectories that may be drawn from in respect to the question of achieving and teaching knowledge about Islam. First of all, we need to bear in mind that a number of Sunni Muslim scholars have associated feminine sexuality closely with a capacity to trigger *fitna* (corruption, temptation). Such an image is, for example, derived from the Qur'anic figure Zulaykha, who tried to seduce Joseph when he was still young and could only resist with the help of God. As he ran to the door, she tore his shirt to pieces, but her husband Potiphar recognized her perfidity (Qur'an 12:24–28).⁴⁹ Contrary to Zulaykha is the image of Maryam, the mother of Jesus. She is the only woman mentioned several times by name in the Qur'an.⁵⁰ She is presented as an outstanding personality, a woman of strong faith, pious, without mistakes, chosen as best among the women of her time and being close to God as he communicated with her by an angel (Qur'an 3:35–47; 19:16–33; 23:50; 66:12). In a hadith of al-Tirmidhī (825–892) Maryam is said to be together with Fāṭima (d. 632), the daughter of the Prophet Muḥammad (d. 632), and the mistress of the women in paradise.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Irene Schneider, *Der Islam und die Frauen* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2001), 54. For a more detailed description of Zulaykha, see Barbara Freyer Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an, Traditions and Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 50–56.

⁵⁰ Hüseyin İlker Çinar, *Maria und Jesus im Islam: Darstellung anhand des Korans und der islamischen kanonischen Tradition unter Berücksichtigung der islamischen Exegeten* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2007), 29.

⁵¹ Çinar, *Maria und Jesus*, 187–88. (Sunan al-Tirmidhī, Kitāb al-Manāqib, 60 (3899)).

Further, the theologian al-Ash'ārī (d. 935) stated that Maryam was one of six women who have to be considered as a messenger of God (*rasūla*), because anybody to whom an angel has given advice is a messenger.⁵² In the discussion of what characterizes prophethood (*al-risāla* as distinguished from *al-nubuwwa*), the majority of early Sunni Muslim scholars excluded women by referring to passages of the Qur'an in which it was stated that before the Prophet Muḥammad God had sent revelation to men (*rijāl*) only (Qur'an 12:109; 16:43; 21:7).⁵³

Being a mistress of paradise is clearly a kind of leadership position, but in the case of the hadith about Maryam and Fāṭima, this is limited to leadership of women only. In contrast, persons gifted through revelation of God making them a messenger would put the person in a kind of authoritative leadership position for men and women alike. Although Sunni scholars tend to agree that a woman cannot be a messenger (*rasūl*), "man" (*ra-jul*) sometimes is used for describing a morally upright person (*ṣāliḥ*) who could be male or female. Ibrahim Niasse, for example, expressed this in one of his letters to Shaykhāni in 1954 in which he emphasizes the equality of women and men in their ability to achieve *ma'rifa* (cognition [of God]):⁵⁴

But the one who continued strolling after having achieved the state of an-nihilation
 along the well-trodden path of the messenger proceeds to being a master
 of the truth and the appetitive soul
 this is the man [*rajul*] [or read: the walker (*rajāl*)], female or male
 and the secret is for changing harm and danger
 and the virtue of perfectness among men has been made plentiful
 and among women perfectness as well has been remembered [or read:
 made of masculine kind] [*dhukira*]
 and the obligatory condition for having the secrets is [to be] God-fearing

This poem ends with Niasse's suggestion to the female followers to recite the *dhikr* silently. However, these verses disclose the complexity of gender and try to bridge contradictions between the spiritual equality of men and women and their difference in nature expressed in different ritual practice, the silent and the loudly recited *dhikr*. The vocabulary used in this poem

⁵² Ibid., 191. The other women are: Eva, Sāra, mother of Moses, Haqār, Āsiya.

⁵³ Ibid., 192.

⁵⁴ Aḥmaddū, *Wamaḍāt*, 257. Translation into English by the author.

contains diverse meanings and therefore allows diverse interpretation. Neither *rajul* nor *dhakara* are Arabic terms with a monolithic definition. *Rajul* means in modern Arabic “man,” but it is the *nomen actionis* (verbal noun; *maṣḍar*) of *rajala* signifying “to be a man according to the élan and male qualities,” or simply “to be a man in difference to woman.” Despite these slight nuances the verb *rajala* can even stand for “walking on foot”; the *nomen actionis* (verbal noun; *maṣḍar*) then is read *rajal*. In the Sufi context, where the adept has to stroll (*salaka*) along the Sufi path it would even make sense to read *rajal*, therefore to state that the male or female adept who continuously walks along the right Sufi path proceeds to being a master. Nevertheless, even if read *rajul* we can understand the term as “man in difference to women” or as “being a man according to male qualities.” The second understanding would allow one to call a woman who behaves according to male qualities “man.” Further, the verb *dhakara* contains several meanings from two semantic fields that are of interest here: “to remember” or “to make something masculine,” “to be of masculine kind.” If understood as “has been made of masculine kind” despite “has been remembered,” we can suggest that Niasse intended to tell his adepts that women can fulfill the qualities ascribed to man and therefore, they can obtain equal spiritual rank.

The two lines of Niasse’s poem about the perfectness being much among men and remembered among women allude to a hadith transmitted by Abū Mūsā al-Ash‘arī:⁵⁵

Kamula min al-rijāl kathīr wa lam yakmul min al-nisā’ illā Maryam bint ‘Imrān wa Āsiya imra’a Fir‘awn wa inna ‘Ā’isha ‘alā l-nisā’ ka fadl al-tharīd ‘alā sā’ir al-ṭa‘ām.

Many of the men became perfect, but among women, the only ones to become perfect are Maryam the daughter of ‘Imrān, Āsiya the wife of Pharaoh, and verily ‘Ā’isha is among women like the pleasure of the *tharīd* [favorite dish of the Prophet, broth with pieces of meat and bread] compared to other dishes.

In contrast to the hadith, Ibrahim Niasse emphasized in his verses the achieved perfection of women without explicitly stating they are few. Further, he formulated his verses in a way that allows semantically more than one interpretation. In contrast, the hadith is quite clear in defining what

⁵⁵ For example, Muslim, *Kitāb faḍā’il al-ṣaḥāba*, 12 (2431). The same hadith can be found by Bukhārī and al-Tirmidhī.

female perfectness should look like: it is the model of “Maryam the daughter of ‘Imrān and Āsiya the wife of Pharaoh,” and not the position of the mother whom even men would have to obey.

Exceptional Women as Models: The “Mothers of Believers”

Women mentioned in the Qur’an and the wives of the Prophet play an important role as models for contemporary understandings of female authority. This hadith emphasizes further that Maryam and Āsiya, the two pious female models of the Qur’an and the “perfect” women of their time, are linked to the wife of the Prophet. Another hadith transmitted by ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 661) does the same for Khadīja (d. 619), the first wife of the Prophet, telling that “khayr nisā’ihā Maryam ibna ‘Imrān wa khayr nisā’ihā Khadīja” (the best of her women is Maryam daughter of ‘Imrān and the best of her women is Khadīja).⁵⁶ In the Qur’an Maryam and Āsiya are presented as the quintessence of pious women. From the second hadith it is obvious that Khadīja is seen as the pious model for Muslim women. But in other hadith even ‘Ā’isha (d. 678 C.E.) is presented as exceptional, and the Prophet’s daughter Fāṭima holds an exceptional position among the female companions of the Prophet.⁵⁷ Beside these three exceptional women, all wives of the Prophet model female piety and good conduct. All wives are collectively named “mothers of the believers” (*umahāt al-mu’minīn*) in the Qur’an (Qur’an 33:6). In most of hadith literature, the “mothers of the believers” are ideals to be followed in respect to their commitment to safeguarding Islamic norms and values. Their closeness to the Prophet made them specialists on ritual performance and models for all believing women in respect to modesty, veiling, and seclusion.⁵⁸ Further, their support for their husbands’ activities is often reported, and as ideal wives they were presented as modest and obeying their husbands.⁵⁹ Female piety as it is modeled in hadith concerning the wives of the Prophet is described by ascetic lifestyle, the rejection of wealth, and providing the poor with alms and charity.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Muslim, *Kitāb faḍā’il al-ṣaḥāba*, 12 (2430). The same hadith can be found by Bukhārī and al-Tirmidhī.

⁵⁷ Denise A. Spellberg, *Politics, Gender, and the Islamic Past: The Legacy of ‘Ā’isha Bint Abi Bakr* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 152.

⁵⁸ Stowasser, *Women in the Qur’an*, 115.

⁵⁹ Manuela Marin, “Exemplary Women in Early Islam,” in *Christian and Islamic Gender Models in Formative Traditions*, ed. Kai E. Børresen (Rome: Herder Verlag, 2004), 149–62, 153.

⁶⁰ Stowasser, *Women in the Qur’an*, 117.

‘Ā’isha, as the youngest and favorite wife of the Prophet, is further connected to the transmission of valuable knowledge. She is considered to have been the most educated of all of his wives, because the Prophet took care of her education since her childhood. She is especially regarded as a specialist of hadith, but also in the fields of healing and poetry.⁶¹ When the Prophet died she was only eighteen years old, and she held an authoritative position after his death. It is told that men and women, old and young, companions and people who later joined Islam all came to seek advice and knowledge about Islam from her.⁶² However, in contrast to the Prophet’s first wife Khadīja, her integrity is contested by reports of two incidents leaving a doubtful imprint on her reputation: the “Accounts of the lie” (*ḥadīth al-ifk*) during the lifetime of the Prophet and later after his death her role as an opponent of ‘Alī in the “battle of the camel” (656 C.E.).⁶³ Nevertheless, Sunni Muslim scholars (in contrast to Shi‘i Muslim scholars) praised her sincerity and uphold her as an important transmitter of reliable hadith.⁶⁴ ‘Ā’isha holds an outstanding position as transmitter of hadith in Sunni tradition, being credited with 2,210 hadith, but other wives, his daughter, and female companions are also credited with having transmitted several hadith, for example, Umm Salama (d. 680 C.E.) with 387, Maymūna (d. maybe 681 C.E.) with 76, Ḥafṣa (d. 655 C.E.) with 60, and Zaynab (d. 641 C.E.) with 11.⁶⁵

Teaching Activities of Female Scholars in Contemporary Nouakchott

Female scholars in contemporary Nouakchott frequently refer to the role of ‘Ā’isha as a transmitter of Islamic knowledge.⁶⁶ For example, Sāfiya

⁶¹ Ghassan Ascha, “The ‘Mothers of the Believers’: Stereotypes of the Prophet Muhammad’s Wives,” in *Female Stereotypes in Religious Traditions*, ed. Ria Kloppenburg and Wouter J. Hanegraaff (Leiden: Brill, 1985), 89–108, 98.

⁶² Stowasser, *Women in the Qur’an*, 117.

⁶³ Spellberg, *Politics*, 61–99, 101–49.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 174–79.

⁶⁵ Ascha, “The ‘Mothers of Believers,’” 94.

⁶⁶ The empirical material presented in this part of the paper was collected during field research conducted in February–March 2012, November 2012, and September 2013 in Nouakchott, Mauritania. The research trips were funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) as part of the research project “Epistemological Fundamentals of Difference in Sunni Islam: Traditionalists, Reformers and Islamists in Contemporary Africa,” directed by Rüdiger Seesemann (Islamic Studies, University of Bayreuth, Germany).

bt Muḥammad al-Ṭulba (b. 1980), director of the Maḥad Zaynabu bt Muḥammad al-Ṭulba (founded 2005), told me that she teaches children, adult women, and men, including Ḥassāniyya speakers, sub-Saharan, and foreigners in the field of Qurʾān and other disciplines like grammar (*nahw*), recitation (*tajwīd*), and *fiqh* (jurisprudence). I asked her if she ever was confronted with hesitations about her teaching activities among men. She then answered that ‘Ā’isha taught men and other women have taught men just as men have taught women, so both are considered normal in Islam. Further, she continued, in addition to ‘Ā’isha other female companions taught men about Islam. She concluded that Islam honors women.⁶⁷ Indeed, that female Ḥassāniyya-speaking scholars teach men seems to be a quite common practice. Of five female scholars I interviewed in 2012, four of them reported to me that they taught men. Four of these female scholars were educated in the traditionalist Islamic educational institutions, the *maḥḍara*, in the region of Trarza. All of them grew up in Tijānī-dominated communities. If such practice seems to be common in this traditionalist Tijānī environment, this is not the case for all Mauritanian Muslim communities. I interviewed three Ḥassāniyya-speaking female scholars who have studied in modern Islamic universities and followed the Salafī *manḥaj* (felicitous pathway). They studied with male teachers, but themselves taught women and girls only. The same applied to the Haalpulaar and Wolof female scholars I interviewed, some of whom are in a Tijānī and others in a Salafī community, none of whom had taught men. Yet most are reported to have been taught by male scholars. Therefore, we can conclude what Sāfiya bt Muḥammad al-Ṭulba stated as common practice in Islam, the teaching of men by female scholars is not common practice in contemporary Mauritania as such, but common practice among certain contemporary Mauritanian Muslim communities. Yet the opposite case of male scholars teaching girls and women is a common practice all over Mauritania. However, if looking at teaching activities, we find again the same ambiguities toward gender-mixing as in the performance of Sufi ritual. In practice we can find cases where women hold authoritative positions vis-à-vis men. Still, such cases are not accepted naturally by all Muslims.

We can ascertain that Ḥassāniyya-speaking women were not excluded from Islamic learning in general. However, women’s participation

⁶⁷ Interview with Sāfiya bt Muḥammad al-Ṭulba, Nouakchott, March 2012.

in Islamic knowledge transmission beyond the Qur'an seems to have been mainly accessible to women who are close to scholarly families.⁶⁸ In several countries, authors stated that they recognize a significant rise since the 1990s in the number of traditionalist Islamic institutions and of faith-based schools and universities that facilitate offering Islamic education to women.⁶⁹ As for Mauritania, it is difficult to estimate the rise in numbers of Islamic education as such, because the Mauritanian scholarly tradition is an important cultural heritage embedded in the national identity and has therefore never been challenged in the same way as in neighboring countries by secular education. Islamic scholarship is a symbolically loaded subject closely connected to the efforts of Berber and Muslim scholars and the old trading centers, like Chinguetti, Tichit, and Walata.⁷⁰ However, we have neither a proper idea about the number and quality of Islamic educational institutions in Mauritania during the last century nor an idea of the number of students enrolling in such institutions. Further, we have no material concerning the number of female scholars teaching Islamic knowledge or the number of female students studying in such institutions. We only know that institutions like this were established during precolonial times and that they produced a number of outstanding male scholars, although there is little trace of female scholarship as such.

The Ministry of Islamic Affairs conducted a general survey in 2009–10 registering and counting institutes of Islamic education all over the country. The results are not yet published, but I was kindly provided with a first sample of the evaluated data for Nouakchott. In this survey, gender is not recorded as a variable, but from the name of directors, we can at least extrapolate the number of traditionalist institutions for Islamic education directed by women. Further, the survey indicates the date of foundation

⁶⁸ Frede, *Erneuerung*, 318–31.

⁶⁹ Muhammad Sani Umar, "Mass Islamic Education and the Emergence of Female Ulama in Northern Nigeria: Background, Trends, and Consequences," in *The Transmission of Learning in Islamic Africa*, ed. Scott Reese (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 99–120; Dorothea Schulz, *Muslims and New Media in West Africa: Pathways to God* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 115–26.

⁷⁰ The narrative follows what has been already published in the early twentieth century. See Sīdī Aḥmad b. al-Amīn al-Shinqīṭī, *al-Wasīṭ fī tarājīm 'udabā' Shinqīt: Kalām 'alā tilka l-bilād taḥdīdan wa taḥqīqan wa 'ādātuhum wa ahlāquhum wa mā ta'laqu bi-dhālika* (Nouakchott: Mu'assasat Munīr, 1989 [First edition: Cairo 1911])

and the number of students enrolled in the institution. This single data set of course does not allow us to draw a definitive conclusion about the development of Islamic education in the city, but it gives an important database to allow a preliminary account of some general trends and the position of female scholars in the landscape of Nouakchott's traditionalist Islamic education. Modern Islamic education is not registered in this survey, because such faith-based schools and universities are not governed by the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, but by the Ministry of Education, whose policy for private schools and universities I did not examine in my research. Thus, the following interpretation of data concerns exclusively Qur'anic schools and *maḥādir*. Both types of educational institutions are referred to here as traditionalist Islamic education. The use of the terms differs, as sometimes Qur'anic schools might be called *maḥḍara* while sometimes there is an institutional difference between both. In principle, a Qur'anic school teaches the Qur'an as a base for further studies of Islamic knowledge that then is named *maḥḍara*. These traditionalist institutions for Islamic education follow a curriculum that has been established since precolonial times and is taught based on didactic texts often composed centuries ago either by local scholars or from the larger world of Arabic Sunnī Islamic scholars. All institutions registered in this survey receive a small amount of funding from the ministry. In my own research, I realized that not all teaching female scholars I interviewed are registered in that list. Further, female scholars even teach in more informal settings like learning circles in mosques, private teaching in their houses or the houses of their students. In addition, female activists of faith-based NGOs tend to organize teaching sessions concerning diverse disciplines of Islamic learning. Therefore, the survey of the Ministry for Islamic Affairs only allows a glimpse of the development of teaching activities in the disciplines of Islamic knowledge in numbers going on in contemporary Nouakchott.

Before looking more closely at the data of the ministry's survey, I want to point out some specificities that distinguish Nouakchott from other places in Mauritania. Nouakchott was founded during colonial times and has been the main destination of internal migration in Mauritania since independence. It is the capital with the headquarters of governmental institutions and the country's only state university. However, Mauritania's economic center is not Nouakchott but Nouadhibou in the north. Nouakchott as Mauritania's educational and political center has a tremendously growing population. From 1959 to 1975 it grew from 4,800 to 104,000 inhabitants.

Table 2. Female population in Mauritania: census 2000^a

Region	Female population	Total population	% Female population
Brakna	130,146	247,006	52.69
Gorgol	126,104	242,711	51.95
Guidimagha	89,184	177,707	50.18
Trarza	138,560	268,220	51.66
Adrar	36,091	69,542	51.91
Nouhadibou	32,670	79,516	41.08
Hodh El Chargi	144,828	281,600	51.39
Hodh El Gharbi	111,972	212,156	52.78
Assaba	128,466	242,265	53.03
Tagant	40,289	76,620	52.58
Tiris-Zemmour	17,882	38,360	46.62
Inchiri	5,554	11,500	48.30
Nouakchott	263,509	558,195	47.21
Total	1,265,255	2,505,398	50.10

^a Data published online at <http://www.mauritania.mr/ain/RGPH-2000-Nouakchott.htm>.

During the end of the 1980s the population is estimated to have surpassed 500,000.⁷¹ In 2009, the CIA Fact book counts around 709,000 inhabitants.⁷² Further, the general census of 2000 indicates that Nouakchott has more male inhabitants than other regions of Mauritania (table 2). In the Mauritanian Ministry for Islamic Affairs' survey the data is organized along the two categories of traditionalist institutions of Islamic education: Qur'anic schools (*madrassa al-qur'āniyya*) and *maḥādir*. The difference between the ministry's categories and the vague vernacular usage of these terms become clear when looking at the names of the institutions. Numerous institutions categorized by the ministry as "Qur'anic school" included *maḥḍara* in their names. The Mauritanian *maḥḍara* is often described as a "university on the back of a camel" and is perceived as something distinct from the madrasa of the wider Islamic world, because it developed in and adapted to the nomadic lifestyle of the desert. In contrast to the modern schools, the *maḥḍara* offers education for all age groups, the number of students can vary from

⁷¹ Ruf, *Mobil Sefḥafte*, 164.

⁷² <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/mr.html>.

Table 3. Density of traditionalist institutions for Islamic education in Nouakchott

District	Population ^a (census 2000)	Qur'anic school ^b total number (per inhabitant)	<i>Maḥḍara</i> ^c total number (per inhabitant)
Sebkha	63,427	50 (0.00078)	11 (0.00017)
Arafat	102,169	266 (0.00260)	34 (0.00033)
El Mina	95,011	157 (0.00165)	41 (0.00043)
El Ksar	43,531	39 (0.00090)	14 (0.00032)
Riyad	42,413	92 (0.00217)	29 (0.00068)
Teyarett	46,351	71 (0.00153)	26 (0.00056)
Toujounine	56,064	173 (0.00309)	26 (0.00046)
Tevragh Zeina	48,093	34 (0.00071)	23 (0.00048)
Dar Naim	61,089	164 (0.00268)	19 (0.00031)
Total	558,195	1,046 (0.00187)	223 (0.00039)

^a Data published online at <http://www.mauritania.mr/ain/RGPH-2000-Nouakchott.htm>

^b Based on unpublished data collection of Ministère des Affaires Islamiques et de l'enseignement original/Programmation de la Statistique et de la Coopération from 2009 to 2010 kindly allocated to me in March 2012.

^c Ibid.

5 to 200, and the schools differ tremendously in the level offered for teaching.

The ministry's survey tries to handle these variations by introducing two categories distinguishing elementary education from advanced studies but integrated even a category of "without a proper classification" into its data. In Nouakchott the ministry counted 1,690 traditionalist Islamic institutions: 1,046 Qur'anic schools; 169 without a proper classification; and 223 *maḥāḍir*. All together, the ministry counted 59,041 students, 32,000 of whom study regularly and the other 27,041 who visit the courses occasionally. One-third of the students (19,003) are female. The demand for Qur'anic education is much higher (69 percent of students) than for advanced Islamic education (27 percent of students). Interestingly, most of the traditionalist institutions of Islamic education operating in today's Nouakchott were founded during the 1990s and 2000s (tables 3 and 5). Only a few institutions predate the foundation of Nouakchott, like two *maḥāḍir* located in Riyad that have operated since 1909 and 1920 or a

Qur'anic school in Toujounine founded in 1945 (tables 3 and 5). Seemingly, these institutions have moved from the desert to Nouakchott during the last decades. Among the directors of these educational institutions, the percentage of female scholars is much lower than the numbers of female students: only 25 percent of Qur'anic schools are directed by female scholars (table 3). They teach 21 percent of students, a slightly lower percentage (table 4). This image changes dramatically if looking at the *maḥādir*, where only 9.4 percent are directed by female scholars who have registered only 6 percent of students (table 5 and 6). This data suggests either that the percentage of female students enrolled in *maḥādir* are much less than in Qur'anic schools; or that female scholars are less trusted in advanced Islamic education than male scholars.

If we have a closer look at the diverse districts of Nouakchott, the data reveals further interesting patterns. Institutions of Islamic education directed by female scholars in the districts of the city with a high percentage of Wolof, Soninke, and Halpulaar populations are exceptionally low, like, for example, in Sebkha with 4 percent Qur'anic schools and no *maḥādir* directed by a female scholar (tables 3 and 5). When searching for female scholars from Halpulaar or Wolof origin during my field research in September 2013, it was quite difficult to find women teaching a level surpassing Qur'anic lessons. Nevertheless, people told me that they do know female scholars in their villages of origin who teach advanced Islamic studies, but in Nouakchott they are rare. Concerning the density of educational institutions, we realize that Sebkha as a stronghold of Nouakchott's sub-Saharan inhabitants is not the center of Nouakchott's traditionalist Islamic education; such remains in districts with a predominantly Ḥassāniyya-speaking population. Moreover, in districts like Dar Naim and Arafat, where the total numbers of institutions is high, if we factor in the number of inhabitants we see that we find there a significantly higher number of Qur'anic schools but fewer institutions of advanced study than in other districts (table 7). Both districts have a high percentage of Haratine (former Ḥassāniyya-speaking slaves and their descendants) and are known for being a stronghold of the Tawassoul Party, who see themselves as being inspired by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.⁷³ The highest density of Qur'anic schools can be found in Toujounine, a district dominantly populated by Ḥassāniyya-speaking families from the eastern regions

⁷³ Interview with Muḥammad Jamīl b. Maṣṣūr, Nouakchott, March 2012.

of Mauritania, like Hodh, Tagant, and Assaba (table 7). The highest density of *maḥāḍir* can be found in Riyad, a district with a majority of Ḥassāniyya-speaking population originating predominantly from Trarza and Brakna (table 7).

All these numbers reveal that the presence of traditionalist learning institutions in Nouakchott differs from district to district. The ethnic and social composition of the districts tends to be homogenous. That is to say, people originating from the same rural areas tend to settle in the same districts of Nouakchott.⁷⁴ Still, we know little about the rise in number of these institutions in Nouakchott and their origin. The survey also tells us nothing about who the founders of these institutions are, whether they are newcomers in Nouakchott, and whether they taught before coming to the city. Further, taking the growth of the city's population into account, we cannot ascertain that the number of traditionalist educational institutions per inhabitant has really risen over the last decades. First, this survey does not tell us anything about the number of traditionalist institutions of Islamic education existing in 1960 or 1980, so we cannot reconstruct a historical trajectory. The high number of traditionalist educational institutions founded during the 1990s and 2000s can be interpreted in many ways. The rise in numbers, for example, could reflect the rise of population. Still, this could mean that some might stop learning while others might start. The dominant presence of Qurʾānic schools in districts with a significant population of Haratines, for example, suggests that social groups who were formally more or less excluded from Islamic learning have become more involved. Such indicators go hand in hand with the notion of ʿĀʾishatu bt Mukhtār b. Ḥāmidun (b. 1946), who stated to me that during the last decade the demand for Islamic knowledge has risen dramatically, but that people have less time than before and rarely surpass the level of elementary Qurʾānic teaching.⁷⁵ However, female students and teachers who engage in state-registered traditionalist institutions of Islamic knowledge transmission are definitely smaller in numbers than their male counterparts are. This still tells us little about private efforts to achieve Islamic knowledge beyond state-registered institutions.

⁷⁴ Amselle Choplin, *Nouakchott: Au carrefour de la Mauritanie et du monde* (Paris: Khar-tala, 2009), 140–43.

⁷⁵ Interview with ʿĀʾishatu bt Ḥāmidun, Nouakchott, November 2012.

Table 4. Number of state-registered Qur'anic schools in Nouakchott according to date of foundation and district^a

District	1960s schools total (sdf) ^b (sdf in %)	1970s schools total (sdf) (sdf in %)	1980s schools total (sdf) (sdf in %)	1990s schools total (sdf) (sdf in %)	2000s schools total (sdf) (sdf in %)	Without date schools total (sdf) (sdf in %)
Sebkha		3 (0)	8 (1) (12.5%)	12 (0)	20 (0)	7 (1) (14.29%)
Arafat	1 (0)	4 (2) (50%)	23 (9) (39.13%)	63 (20) (31.75%)	170 (40) (23.53%)	5 (1) (20%)
El-Mina	1 (0)	7 (2) (28.57%)	14 (6) (42.86%)	43 (10) (23.26%)	86 (8) (9.30%)	6 (1) (16.67%)
El-Ksar		4 (0)	2 (0)	11 (2) (18.18%)	22 (4) (18.18%)	
Riyad	1 (1) (100%)	2 (0)	14 (5) (35.71%)	28 (10) (35.71%)	41 (17) (41.46%)	6 (1) (16.67%)
Teyarett		–	6 (3) (50%)	28 (6) (21.43%)	35 (5) (14.29%)	2 (1) (50%)
Toujounine	1945					
	1 (0)	4 (2)	23 (7)	50 (19)	89 (24)	4 (2)
	–	(50%)	(30.43%)	(38.00%)	(26.97%)	(50%)

Tevragh Zeina	1 (0)	2 (0)	1 (0)	9 (1)	20 (2)	1 (0)
	–	–	–	(11.11 %)	(10.00%)	
Dar Naim	2 (1)	5 (4)	27 (7)	32 (9)	93 (21)	5 (2)
	(50.00%)	(80.00%)	(25.93%)	(28.13%)	(22.58%)	(40.00%)
Total	9 (4)	31 (10)	118 (38)	276 (77)	576 (121)	36 (9)
(%)	(44.44%)	(32.26%)	(32.20%)	(27.90%)	(21.00%)	(25.00%)
Total:						1,046 (259)
						(24.76%)

^a Based on unpublished data collection of Ministère des Affaires Islamiques et de l'enseignement original/ Programmation de la Statistique et de la Coopération from 2009 to 2010 kindly allocated to me in March 2012.

^b sdf = Qur'ānic schools directed by female scholars.

Table 5. Number of students in state-registered Qur'anic schools in Nouakchott according to date of foundation and district^a

District	1960s students total (sdf) (sdf in %)	1970s students total (sdf) (sdf in %)	1980s students total (sdf) (sdf in %)	1990s students total (sdf) (sdf in %)	2000s students total (sdf) (sdf in %)	Without date students total (sdf) (sdf in %)
Sebkha		75 (0)	386 (150) (38.86%)	603 (0)	934 (0)	242 (80) (33.06%)
Arafat	100 (0)	137 (60) (43.80%)	893 (322) (36.06%)	2,209 (635) (28.75%)	5,473 (1,311) (23.95%)	151 (18) (11.92%)
El-Mina	15 (0)	338 (46) (13.61%)	1,127 (174) (15.44%)	1,849 (331) (17.90%)	4,398 (516) (11.73%)	321 (34) (10.59%)
El-Ksar	–	182 (0)	55 (0)	334 (41) (12.28%)	723 (162) (22.41%)	
Riyad	10 (10) (100%)	33 (0)	480 (125) (24.04%)	1,219 (432) (35.44%)	1,905 (573) (30.08%)	230 (77) (33.48%)
Teyarett	–	–	163 (55) (33.74%)	865 (204) (23.83%)	1,278 (134) (10.49%)	85 (40) (47.06%)
Toujounine	1945 36 (0)	168 /76	664 (145)	1,925 (515)	3,240 (850)	87 (57)
	–	(100%)	(21.84%)	(26.75%)	(26.23%)	(65.52%)
Tevragh Zeina	145 (0)	175 (0)	40 (0)	732 (14)	631 (50)	40 (0)
	–	–	–	1.91 %	(7.92%)	–

Dar Naim	30 (30) (100.00%)	164 (114) (69.51%)	912 (173) (18.97%)	1,237 (335) (27.08%)	3,684 (788) (21.39%)	158 (65) (41.14%)
Total	405 (109) (26.91%)	1,097 (296) (26.98%)	4,720 (1,144) (24.24%)	10,973 (2,507) (22.85%)	22,266 (4,384) (19.69%)	1,314 (314) (23.90%)
Total:						40,775 (8,754) (21.47%)

^a Based on unpublished data collection of Ministère des Affaires Islamiques et de l'enseignement original/ Programmation de la Statistique et de la Coopération from 2009 to 2010 kindly allocated to me in March 2012.

Table 6. Number of state-registered institutes of *Mahādir* in Nouakchott according to date of foundation and district^a

District	1960s <i>mahādir</i> total (sdf) ^b (sdf in %)	1970s <i>mahādir</i> total (sdf) (sdf in %)	1980s <i>mahādir</i> total (sdf) (sdf in %)	1990s <i>mahādir</i> total (sdf) (sdf in %)	2000s <i>mahādir</i> total (sdf) (sdf in %)	Without date <i>mahādir</i> total (sdf) (sdf in %)
Sebkha	1 (0)	2 (0)	1 (0)	5 (0)	2 (0)	–
	–	–	–	–	–	–
Arafat	2 (0)	3 (0)	4 (0)	9 (0)	14 (0)	2 (1)
	–	–	–	–	–	(50%)
El-Mina	–	6 (0)	5 (0)	13 (2)	16 (1)	1 (0)
	–	–	–	(15.39%)	(6.25%)	–
El-Ksar	1959 1 (0)	–	1 (0)	5 (1)	5 (2)	–
	–	–	–	(20.00%)	(40.00%)	–
Riyad	1909 1 (0)	1920 1 (0)	1958 1 (0)	1970s 2 (0)	14 (2)	–
	–	–	–	(25.00%)	(14.29%)	–
Teyarett	1959 1 (0)	–	–	8 (0)	8 (3)	–
	–	–	–	–	(37.5%)	–
Toujoumine	–	–	–	12 (1)	9 (1)	–
	–	–	–	(8.33%)	(11.11%)	–

Tevragh Zeina	2 (0)	1 (0)	3 (1) (33.33%)	7 (1) (14.29%)	9 (1) (11.11%)	1 (0)
Dar Naim	–	–	4 (0)	7 (0)	8 (0)	–
Total	11 (0)	23 (1) (4.35%)	26 (2) (7.69%)	74 (7) (9.46%)	85 (10) (11.76%)	4 (1) (25.00%)
(%)	–	–	–	–	–	223 (21) (9.42%)
Total:	–	–	–	–	–	–

^a Based on unpublished data collection of Ministère des Affaires Islamiques et de l'enseignement original/ Programmation de la Statistique et de la Coopération from 2009 to 2010 kindly allocated to me in March 2012.

^b sdf = *mahāḍīr* directed by female scholar.

Table 7. Number of students in state-registered *Mahādir* in Nouakchott according to date of foundation and district^a

District	1960s		1970s		1980s		1990s		2000s		Without date	
	students total (sdf)	(sdf in %)	students total (sdf)	(sdf in %)	students total (sdf)	(sdf in %)	students total (sdf)	(sdf in %)	students total (sdf)	(sdf in %)	students total (sdf)	(sdf in %)
Sebkha	65 (0)		120 (0)		147 (0)		522 (0)		240 (0)		—	
	—		—		—		—		—			
Arafat	97 (0)		112 (0)		401 (0)		461 (0)		864 (0)		70 (40)	
	—		—		—		—		—		(57.14%)	
El-Mina	—		625 (0)		444 (0)		2,281 (125)		1,325 (44)		n.n. (0)	
	—		—		—		(5.48%)		(3.32%)		—	
El-Ksar	1959	1960s	—		—		—		—		—	
	72	132 (0)	—		27 (0)		331 (77)		120 (37)		—	
	(0)		—		—		(23.26%)		(30.83%)		—	
Riyad	1909	1920	1958	1970s	—		—		—		—	
	141	20	25 (0)	81	65 (0)		457 (23)		958 (61)		—	
	(0)	(0)	(0)	(0)	—		(5.03%)		(6.37%)		—	
Teyarett	1959	—	—	—	—		—		316 (86)		—	
	81(0)	—	276 (70)	—	262 (151)		474 (0)		(27.22%)		—	
	—	—	(25.36%)	—	(57.63%)		—		—		—	
Toujoumine	—	—	124 (0)	—	165 (0)		519 (30)		472 (20)		—	
	—	—	—	—	—		(5.78%)		(4.24%)		—	

Tevragh Zeina	365 (0)	365 (0)	184 (85) (46.20%)	261 (20) (7.66%)	394 (43) (10.91%)	30 (0)
Dar Naim	—	—	223 (0)	449 (0)	657 (0)	—
Total	973 (0)	1,728 (70) (4.05%)	1,918 (236) (12.31%)	5,755 (275) (4.78%)	5,346 (291) (5.44%)	100 (40)
(%)	—					(40.00%)
Total						15,820 (912) (5.77%)

^a Based on unpublished data collection of Ministère des Affaires Islamiques et de l'enseignement original/ Programmation de la Statistique et de la Coopération from 2009 to 2010 kindly allocated to me in March 2012.

‘Ā’ishatu bt Mukhtār b. Ḥāmidun and the “Maḥḍara al-tarbawīya li-l-ta’līm al-mar’a bi-l-manāhij al-‘asriyya” in Dar Na’im

To illustrate more concretely what female teaching looks like in practice, the following section presents one example of female Islamic scholars in contemporary Nouakchott: ‘Ā’ishatu bt Mukhtār b. Ḥāmidūn and her *maḥḍara al-tarbawīya li-l-ta’līm al-mar’a bi-l-manāhij al-‘asriyya* (educational *maḥḍara* for the teaching of women along the contemporary pathway) located in Dar Na’im. The *maḥḍara* of ‘Ā’ishatu bt Mukhtār b. Ḥāmidun is registered by the state as a Qur’anic school. The *maḥḍara* offers Qur’anic teaching to children and adult women during morning and afternoon hours. Twice a week after Maghreb prayer time they teach courses in *tajwīd* (Qur’anic recitation), and *fiqh* (jurisprudence) for women only. These courses are offered late in the afternoon to give employed women the opportunity to study.⁷⁶ The *maḥḍara* was founded by ‘Ā’ishatu bt Mukhtār b. Ḥāmidun in 1983 in Nouhadibou.⁷⁷ When ‘Ā’ishatu started her teaching activities, she first offered courses in her home. Only later, women started to feel uncomfortable entering the house of an unrelated man. Therefore, they moved the *maḥḍara* out of the private house.⁷⁸ ‘Ā’ishatu herself taught at the *maḥḍara* until 2010. Since then, her youngest daughter Maryam bt Maḥand (b. 1976) has replaced her.

‘Ā’ishatu was born in Atar (Adrar) in a family of famous Ḥassāniyya-speaking Islamic scholars. Her father was the historian Mukhtār b. Ḥāmidun (1897–1994).⁷⁹ Her mother was Maryam bt Aḥmad al-Bashīr, who herself was raised in a famous scholarly family from Chinguetti (Adrar). ‘Ā’ishatu’s father and her older brother Muḥammadan Mukhtār b. Ḥāmidun (d. 1992) taught her. She was a curious young girl, hence she even studied in several *maḥāḍir* in the region of Trarza and Tichit. A number of female private teachers taught her Qur’an, *Qurrat al-abṣār*,⁸⁰ and *al-Akhdarī* (comprehensive work of Mālīkī jurisprudence). The first

⁷⁶ Interview with Maryam bt Maḥand, Nouakchott, February 2012.

⁷⁷ *Sīra dhātiyya*, a one-page text, handed over to me by Maryam bt Maḥand during my first visit at the *maḥḍara*. It is divided in three parts: her studies; her writings; her teaching.

⁷⁸ Interview with Maryam bt Maḥand, Nouakchott, February 2012.

⁷⁹ Islamic scholar and the first and most famous Mauritanian historian, who authored the encyclopedia *Mawsū’a ḥayāt Mūrītāniyā* that until today is only published in part. He moved in 1982 to Medina (Saudi Arabia), where he stayed until he died.

⁸⁰ A poem concerning *sīra* (life of the Prophet and his companions) composed by Abd al-‘Azīz b. ‘Abd al-Wāḥid al-Lamṭ al-Maknāsī al-Maymūnī (1475–mid-sixteenth century).

maḥḍara she studied in was the *maḥḍara* of Maḥand b. Baba b. ‘Abayd, where she had spent a year studying the *Mukhtaṣar al-Khalīl*, a comprehensive outline of Mālikī jurisprudence. Further, she studied in Boutilimit in the *maḥḍara* of Shaykh Muḥammad ‘Alī b. ‘Abd al-Wadūd (known as ‘Addūd; d. 1982) and at the *maḥḍara* of the famous Mauritanian scholarly family al-Awfā who specialize in *ṭibb* (healing). Moreover, she studied in Tichit at the *maḥḍara* of Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Saghīr specializing in *tajwīd*. During her studies in Boutilimit and Tichit she lived with the family of her maternal aunt, only going for the lessons to the *maḥḍara*. Later she studied with her paternal nephews in the *maḥḍara* of the Aḥl Maḥand Bābā in Ma‘ta Moulana (Trarza), further specializing in *fiqh* and *tajwīd*. During her studies at the diverse *maḥāḍir* she earned several licenses (*ijāza*), some of them written, some oral.⁸¹ Written and oral licenses are common practice among traditionalist Islamic scholars in Mauritania. They attest to authoritative transmission of a certain Islamic knowledge and legitimate teaching activities. Among well-known scholars oral licenses were sufficient, because trust was considered as one of the most important principles of teacher-student relations. Written licenses would only gain importance if somebody intended to study outside the scholarly networks of his teachers. Nevertheless, for women it was not taken for granted that written licenses would be handed over to them. Some scholars hesitated giving girls or women written licenses, claiming that achieving knowledge should not be an effort for this life but for the hereafter.⁸²

‘Ā’ishatu married at the early age of eleven and is the mother of eight children. Despite her family duties, she did not stop studying the traditional curriculum of the local *maḥāḍir*. Her husband’s work with the government required him to move often, but he always settled close to well-known *maḥāḍir* so that she could continue her studies. She founded her *maḥḍara* while they lived in Nouhadibou, after which they moved to Rosso, on the Senegalese border. During the 1980s they stayed several months in Mecca and Medina (Saudi Arabia), hoping to settle there definitely after her father had retired in Medina in 1982. While in Medina and Mecca, she continued to teach among the Ḥassāniyya-speaking women living there and to study.⁸³ After her return from Medina, she settled fi-

⁸¹ Interview with ‘Ā’ishatu bt Ḥāmidun, Nouakchott, November 2012.

⁸² Interview with Umm Kalthūm bt Anbūja, Nouakchott, March 2012.

⁸³ Interview with ‘Ā’ishatu bt Ḥāmidun, Nouakchott, November 2012.

nally in Nouakchott and continued her teaching activities. Her *maḥḍara* since then moved only between different neighborhoods of the city in the districts Dar Na'im and Toujounine. The students of her *maḥḍara* live throughout the city. The majority come from districts like Tevragh Zeina, Arafat, and Dar Na'im.⁸⁴ ʿĀ'ishatu has been affiliated to a Sufi community of the Qādiriyya, but recently changed her affiliation to a Sufi community of the Tijāniyya after the death of her Qādirī shaykh in 2009.⁸⁵ Since her childhood, she has collected her own books in different disciplines of Islamic knowledge. She wrote several texts on her own in the disciplines of *tajwīd*, *sīra*, the benefits of the Qur'an, and devotional literature like the explanations of the names of God. Her texts are not published, because she does not have the means to finance the printing.

Since 2010, Maryam bt Maḥand has slowly taken over her mother's teaching in Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and recitation (*tajwīd*), while Maryam's brother replaced their mother in the disciplines of Qur'an and Arabic. Maryam's own specialization is classical Arabic poetry, a field in which she offers private lessons alongside her teaching in the *maḥḍara*. Her private students are mostly men. Maryam attended a governmental school while studying the classical Islamic curriculum at home. Since her mother retired from her teaching activities, Maryam longs for modernizing her mother's *maḥḍara* from within. This modernization concerns especially the teaching methods. She writes important things on the blackboard in front of the room, where she either sits on a chair or stands in front of the students. The students sit on the ground, but rather than sitting in a circle as in the former study circle, they sit in rows as in modern schools. The texts she teaches are typed with her computer and then photocopied for the students so that they can recite and if wanted memorize them at home when preparing next week's lesson. In the beginning of the lesson, the students start reciting the text that Maryam gave them the week before. Most of them read from their papers. Then she explains the meaning of the text. The texts themselves are the same texts already taught by her mother, primarily didactic verse, composed by local scholars since the seventeenth century for teaching *fiqh* and *tajwīd*. In the near future, Maryam intends to add French and English courses. She considers foreign languages important in today's global world. The payment of the *maḥḍara* courses follows

⁸⁴ Interview with Maryam bt Maḥand, Nouakchott, February 2012.

⁸⁵ Interview with ʿĀ'ishatu bt Ḥāmidun, Nouakchott, November 2012.

a regular fee system. For a course in Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), for example, the fee is 3,000 UM (around 14 U.S. dollars) per month.⁸⁶

Women like ‘Ā’ishatu are rare in Nouakchott. From what I have seen during my field research in 2012 and 2013, traditionalist female Islamic scholars, who have achieved such a strong record of prestigious *maḥḍara* education sealed by oral or written licenses, are few. Further, the fact that her daughter has taken over her *maḥḍara* is quite unusual. Most *maḥāḍir* disappear when their directing Islamic scholar retires. Only a few *maḥāḍir* have developed into institutions lasting for several generations led by one family, and these institutions are normally run by male scholars. However, Maryam’s attempt to modernize the *maḥḍara* from within reflects a general trend in Mauritania’s traditionalist education. Reasons for the modernizing trend are to be found in the competition between the traditionalist institutions of Islamic education with faith-based schools and universities. Her intention to offer English- and French-language courses pays tribute to the international demand for Mauritania’s traditionalist Islamic education. A growing number of Muslims from North America and Europe, West Africa, Pakistan, and the Arab world come to study for anywhere between a couple of weeks to years in many *maḥāḍir* both inside and outside Nouakchott. These students need to be taught in a foreign language, a skill most Ḥassāniyya-speaking female scholars don’t have.

There seems to be a recognizable shift in contemporary performances of female Islamic authority with regard to its hidden nature. Many female Islamic scholars, like ‘Ā’ishatu, are no longer teaching in their private houses, but have moved their *maḥāḍir* into specific buildings labeled with a visible sign that highlights this place as a space for Islamic knowledge transmission for women only. One could argue that female achievement of Islamic knowledge is made more visible and present in the public space as an identifiable location. On the other hand, by moving this space into a closed women-only space, female teaching and learning are removed from the public sphere of private houses which in that way become restricted to the *maḥram* and a male public sphere if we consider the salon as a representative (public) room to welcome guests. Still, female scholars teaching male students do this further in the “hidden space” of private lessons. However, once the student becomes a full-fledged scholar, he usually does not mention his female teachers unless they are his family relatives and

⁸⁶ Interview with Maryam bt Maḥand, Nouakchott, February 2012.

therefore underline his noble and pious descent. In contrast, male Islamic scholars teach their specialization in their *maḥāḍīr* to their primarily male students; female students might join the lessons or are taught in private lessons at home. If a male teacher's student develops into an Islamic scholar, they refer to these lessons whether they were given in a *maḥḍara* or privately. The traditionalist institutions for Islamic education come in many sizes and forms. Some of them train a huge number of students for years until they develop into thorough scholars, employing several teachers and offering a broad range of disciplines. Others teach the basics, concentrating on Qur'an and al-Akhdarī. These *maḥāḍīr* might then offer private lessons to the few students who want to learn more in the field of specialization of the teaching scholars.

Maḥāḍīr directed by women scholars in Nouakchott have mainly female students, often adult women. Some of them are ambitious, joining lessons regularly and perhaps envisioning becoming scholars themselves in the end. However, most women learn as a devotional practice. It is a pious way to spend leisure time. Women do have other duties; they manage the family household and may contribute to the household's income as employees. Umm Kalthūm bt Anbūja (b. 1966) is a full-time Qur'anic teacher at the *maḥḍara* of her father who is an imam in Nouakchott. She gives private lessons in *fiqh* to adult women during evening hours. When I asked her if there is a difference between male and female scholars, she told me that the difference is in the level of knowledge. A woman can never achieve the same level, she said, as she will always stand behind a male scholar, because otherwise she would no longer be a good woman. A woman has to fulfill the duties in the service of the wider family. Therefore, according to Umm Kalthūm, she cannot be a great scholar and a good woman at the same time.⁸⁷ The biographical account of ʿĀʾishatu demonstrates that some women can transcend these educational constraints to some degree, yet in her case only due to the goodwill of her male family members like her father, her brother, and later her husband. They recognized her curiosity in Islamic knowledge and her capacity to develop her skills. Further, they had the material means to offer household assistance to free her from cleaning, cooking, and child care. When I asked her how she managed to be married at an early age, to be a mother of so many children, and to continue her studies, she answered that this was not

⁸⁷ Interview with Umm Kalthūm bt Anbūja, March 1012.

a problem. Only during the confinement after childbirth are there restrictions on touching the Qur'an, therefore her teacher would write what she had to recite on the wooden board and put it in front of her, so she could recite without touching the board.⁸⁸ 'Ā'ishatu grew up in a scholar's family, and she did not go to a modern school or work as an employee. In contrast, Umm Kalthūm bt Anbūja grew up in a scholar's family but studied in both modern schools and her father's *maḥḍara*. She sees her family duties as preventing her from concentrating on her studies like men. 'Ā'ishatu stated that the younger generation has less time, because of the different way of life.⁸⁹ She was married earlier than women of the younger generation and bore more children, yet she did not see her circumstance as preventing her from studying.

Conclusion

It seems difficult to estimate how female teaching has changed over time. We know little about the level of teaching of female scholars in earlier generations. The examples drawn from the poem of Ibrahim Niasse demonstrate that female scholars existed before. Like the contemporary Hassāniyya-speaking traditionalist scholars of Nouakchott, they were wives and daughters in scholarly families. Their heritage remains hidden; they did not leave anything behind that lasted several generations or answer questions concerning their level of knowledge and their performance of authority. The important role of women as transmitters and preservers of Islamic knowledge is often emphasized when talking to contemporary Hassāniyya-speaking scholars but rarely materializes in sources that inform us about more than the existence of female scholarship. The same can be stated if thinking about female Sufi guides mentioned in the first part of this article. In the Mauritanian Tijāniyya the first woman named as *muqaddama* was Fāṭima bt Sīdīnā alias Ḥuṭūṭū, the wife of founding figure Muḥammad al-Ḥāfiẓ. She was appointed to this position during the later 1820s and held a strong authoritative position after the death of her husband in 1830–31.⁹⁰ Yet, sources remain surprisingly silent about these female authoritative personalities. Only by coincidence some of them are

⁸⁸ Interview with 'Ā'ishatu bt Ḥāmidun, Nouakchott, November 2012.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Frede, *Erneuerung*, 404–8.

named in Niasse's poem in which he first of all tried to express his respect toward the Ḥāfiẓiyya.

The ambiguity of hiding female Islamic scholarship on the one hand and highlighting it if underlining one's noble scholarly descent goes hand in hand with the perception of women created by Islamic scholars from hadith and the Qur'an. Such ambiguity of the female—oscillating between Zulaykha and Maryam—the seductive and perfidious woman from whom men need to be saved by covering women's bodies and lowering their voices in front of men versus pious motherhood, a female authoritative position to be respected by every man. These two aspects of the female are even present in the often-cited ideal of female transmission of Islamic knowledge, 'Ā'isha. The debates in the context of the Faiḍa concerning the role of women in the Sufi community further reflect this ambiguity. On the one hand women should have the same access and they do have the same capacity to achieve an advanced level of knowledge and therefore can achieve the same status as *muqaddama* as men; yet on the other hand their performance of ritual is supposed to be silent. The same silence is then found in the written sources concerning their performance of Islamic authority and their role as transmitters and producers of Islamic knowledge. Therefore, we can conclude that the performance of female authority includes a strong emphasis on notions of modesty that translate into hiddenness. Nevertheless, it would be difficult to argue that hidden authorities do not have an impact on the development of religious communities. Yet to evaluate such impact, further studies are urgently needed.

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