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Women and Sainthood in Marrakesh

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ملخص

عرفت مراكش عبر تاريخها بأرض التصوف والمتصوفة والأولياء الذين ذاع صيتهم في مختلف بقاع العالم الإسلامي والذي أعطى للمدينة الحمراء أحد أسمائها كأرض السبعة رجال الذين ليسوا إلا خيرة صلاحها، كما عرفت مراكش بأنها المدينة التي يوجد بها صالح في كل خطوة. بالطبع كانت الإشارة هنا دائما إلى الصلاح الذكور ولم تكن هناك إشارة أبدا إلى الصالحات وكأن الصلاح مقتصر على الرجال دون النساء. لذلك فالسؤال الذي يطرح نفسه بحدّة هو: إذا كانت مراكش أرض الصلاح وإذا كان كل قدم فيها بصالح ما نصيب الصلاح النسائي من هذا الكم الهائل من الصلاح الذين خصصت لهم المئات من المؤلفات والكتب التي لم تكلف نفسها عناء ذكر الصالحات حتى فيما يخص النزر القليل. فالكتب التي ذكرت بعض الصالحات تكاد تعد على رؤوس الأصابع. إذن ماذا يمكن أن يقال عن الصلاح النسائي في مراكش؟ ما هي مميزاته وخصائصه؟ وهل هو نفس الصلاح عند الرجال أو يختلف عنه؟ للإجابة على هذه الأسئلة، قررت القيام بهذا البحث الميداني الذي استمر من سنة 2004 إلى غاية سنة 2015 وكان من نتائجه المادة التي يحتوي عليها هذا المقال.

الكلمات المفتاح: تصوف، ولاية، مراكش، الولاية النسائية،ميزات، تأثير.

Résumé

A travers son histoire, Marrakech était connue comme la ville des soufis et des saints ce qui lui a valu le nom de la ville des sept saints. Marrakech et aussi connue comme la ville dans laquelle il y a un saint à chaque pas. Cette référence aux saints a bien sûr toujours été aux hommes auxquelles la littérature soufie a consacré des centaines de livres et de références. Mais la question qui se pose est la suivante : si Marrakech est connue pour son grand nombre de saints et si à chaque pas il y a un saint, quand est-il des saintes ? Y'avait-il des saintes à Marrakech? Quelles sont les caractéristiques de leurs soufisme et de leurs sainteté et quelles étaient leurs effets sur leurs vies et sur la société? Pour répondre à toutes ces questions, j'ai mené un travail de terrain dans la médina de Marrakech de 2004 à 2015. Ce travail m'a permis de découvrir toutes les informations contenues dans cet article.

Mots clés : Soufisme, sainteté, saintes, Marrakech, caractéristiques, impacts.

Abstract

Throughout its history, Marrakesh has been known as the land of Sufism, the land of prominent Sufi figures including more particularly the famous seven saints of Marrakesh who gave the city one of its names. This huge number of saints who lived in the city also contributed to its reputation as the city in which there is a saint in every step, and the reference has always been to the male saints, of course, as if sainthood was related to men only. But the question which poses itself in this respect is the following: if in every step of Marrakesh there is a saint, what about the women saints? Were there any women saints in Marrakesh? If yes, what can we say about them, about their place among the male saints and about the characteristics of their Sufi practice? Was it the same or different from men's Sufism? What impact did it have on these women's lives? In order to answer these questions and many others, I conducted a field-work in the Medina of Marrakesh which lasted intermittently from 2004 to 201 and which provided me with most of the information presented in this article.

Key words: Sufism, sainthood, women saints, Marrakesh, characteristics, impact.

Introduction

The answer to the main question asked above is that if Marrakesh is the city of saints, it is also the city of women saints who contributed a great deal to Sufism and who can be considered the pride of the city. We can even say that in Marrakesh there is a saint or a woman saint in every step, for "we are not in front of a society of male saints only but of female saints as well."¹ In Marrakesh, women were pioneers in the domain of Sufism. Their adherence to it "started at the same time as Sufism among men"² in the 6th century AH (After Hegira) at the end of the al-Muravid's rule and the beginning of the al-Mohads', and continued until the beginning of the 20th century. Though historical books have most of the time ignored women's sainthood and have hardly ever mentioned it, the latter's existence is a historical fact whether recognized by history or not, for we know that history is masculine and all that pertains to men has been considered as serious and worth recording while what pertains to women has been considered as trivial and unworthy of attention or recognition. It is because of this injustice that has been exercised on women, in general, and Sufi women, in particular that the importance of the present paper stems. In order to show that women's

¹ Rachid, Qattan. In Mohamed Janubi. *Al-Awliya fi al-Maghrib: ad-Dahira baina at-Tajaliyat wa Ljudur at-Tarikhiya wa Socio Taqafiya*. Canal Publications, 2006, p.169

² Mohammed, al-Qabli. In Abdessalam, Gharmini. *Al- Madaris as-Sufiya al-Maghribiya wa al-Andalussiya fi al-Qarn as-Sadis al-Hijri*, Dar ar-Rashad al-Haditha, Casablanca, 2000, p. 252

sainthood is as serious and as worthy of attention as men's, I have chosen to deal with Sufi women in Marrakesh, especially those who attained the status of saints. Hence, this study can be considered an attempt to bring the women saints of Marrakesh back to life and to give them some space in history and make them known to the public who knows but a little or nothing about them. In order to deconstruct the myth of the male dominance and the non existence of the women saints which historical books totally neglect, it took me many years of field work and tedious search in every Derb and corner of the Medina of Marrakesh. The starting point was from books on Sufism in which only few women were just mentioned without any depth or serious research on their lives, deeds or ranks. But the outcome of the field work which I conducted intermittently between 2004 and 2015 was very rewarding as it enabled me to discover thirty-nine women saints that nobody could imagine and a sainthood which has nothing to envy male sainthood. These women were as pious as and as devoted to Allah as men and enjoyed some very high Sufi ranks enjoyed by men despite the disparities that have always existed because of gender discrimination.

1. The Saint: A Definition

The first use of the word “wali”- for which the English term “saint” is often used- in the context of religion goes back to the Qur'an. There are many Surahs in which this term occurs. But because of the difficulty to define it and delimit its range, it was only with the advent of Sufism that it started to gain more scholarly attention from critics like, Qushayri, *ibn Ata Allah al-Iskandari* *Naqshabandi*, *al-Ifrani*, *al-Murakushi* to name but these prominent figures. This word “was first employed in association with Sufism by *at-Tirmidi* in the third century AH. It was this thinker who delimited the main lines and broad dimensions of sainthood (the *wilaya* or *walaya*) in Islam”¹

In the fifth century AH, *Qushayri*², one of the scholars who set up the doctrine of Sufism wrote a book entitled *ar-Rissala al-Qushayriya*, in which he defines and explains the main principles of Sufism. His work has been a reliable source on Sufism and his definitions of the terms used in Sufism have been adopted by many writers and critics long after him. Concerning the term “wali”, *Qushayri* thinks that it has two different but complementary meanings. First it is used to refer to Allah who is the “wali” i.e. the protector, the helper and the friend of the elect among his believers: “for my protector is Allah, who revealed the Book and he will choose and befriend the

¹ Ali, *Shudguivitch*. *Al-Wilaya wa Nubuwa Inda Muhyi Din Ibn Arabi*. Trans. Ahmed Tayib, Dar al-Qubba al-Khadra, Marrakech, 1999, p. 34.

² Abu al-Qasim, Abd al-Karim, Ibn Hawazin al-Qushayri, *Ar-Rissala Al Qushayriya fi Ilmi at-Tasawuf*, Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-Arabi, p. 117.

righteous”¹ and also “Behold! Verily on the friends of Allah there is no fear, nor shall they grieve.”² So the saint is the one who is protected, supported and taken care of by Allah. This idea of protection and support is also enhanced by Ibn Arabi in his definition of saints: “saints are those who are supported by Allah in their struggle against the four enemies: passion (al hawa), the carnal soul (an-nafs), worldly life (ad-duniya) and Satan (ash-shaytan).”³

The other meaning of the word “wali” refers to the people who choose to make of Allah their own protector by worshipping Him and obeying Him continuously, without going astray, for righteousness (istiqama) is the essence of sainthood: “As to those who turn (for friendship) to Allah, His Apostle, and the fellowship of the Believers, it is the fellowship of Allah that must certainly triumph”⁴ Ibrahim Ibn al-Adham is reported to have said to a man “do you want to be a saint?’ The man replied ‘yes’. Ibn al-Adham explained: ‘do not desire anything from this life nor from the other; be devoted to Allah and turn your face to Him He will turn to you and protect you.’”⁵

This idea of protection which is so enhanced by Sufi people also presupposes the idea of mutual closeness: Allah’s closeness to the most devoted among His believers and the latter’s closeness to Allah thanks to their great devotion to Him and obedience of His commands: “Saints are the ‘closest’ (al-muqarrabun) to Allah among his believers.”⁶ So the word “Wali” refers both to Allah and to the believer. According to Qushayri, the two meanings are essential for the sense of this word to be complete. Allah chooses to protect the elect among his believers who are in their turn supposed to be on a high level of devotion in fulfilling their religious duties in order to get Allah’s protection since “it is the condition of the Wali to be protected as it is the condition of the prophet to be infallible.”⁷ This idea of protection is very important in the condition of the Wali. Al-Isbahani considers it one of the main characteristics of saints. According to him, saints are protected from strife and affliction as the prophet expresses it in one of his Hadiths: “Among the most devoted believers are those that Allah feeds on his blessing and keeps forever safe; those are the people who undergo dire strife but are immunized against it”⁸ So in order to be protected by Allah, the believer needs to be on a high level of piety and holy

¹ Araf, 196, p. 176.

² Yunus, 62, p. 216.

³ Shudguivitch, p. 33.

⁴ Maida, 56, p. 11.

⁵ Qushayri, p. 117.

⁶ Ibn Taymiya, In Shudguivitch, p. 33.

⁷ Qushayri, p. 117.

⁸ Hafiz, Abu-Naim, Ahmed, Ibn Abd Allah, al Isbahani. *Hilyat al Awliya wa Tabaqat al-Asfiya*, 4th ed. Vol.2. Dar al-Kitab al- Arabi, 1985, p. 6.

knowledge of the divine realm and of its veiled secrets. Once he realizes this, he /she becomes one of those who “have been dressed in Allah’s intimacy after endurance, embraced the soul and achieved sainthood after struggling with the carnal self.”¹

The idea of intimacy with Allah refers to closeness, as it has been mentioned above, but it also refers to another important characteristic of saints, namely the hidden state which the Sufi and Sufi scholars insisted on, their self-denial and abandonment of worldly life. For the Sufi, saints are “Allah’s brides hidden under the veil of intimacy”², and for Allah, “the most cherished believers are the pious, discrete people who are not missed when absent and not recognized when seen; those are the epitome of righteousness and the lamps of gnosis.”³ The Ayahs, the Prophet’s Hadiths and Sufi sayings on this idea are legion but for more clarity we will mention one of the mostly cited Qudusi Hadiths⁴ in which the Prophet (PBUH) reports what Allah says about saints:

*The most blessed among my saints is a believer whose possessions are light, who is devoted to his prayers, who worships and obeys Allah well and in secret, who is never pointed at by people and who is patient even when having just the minimum.*⁵

Hence, if the Sufi are the elect of Muslim people, saints are the elect of the Sufi and since people cannot be described as Sufi unless they embrace all the principles of Sufism they cannot bear the title of saints unless they are the most perfect of the Sufi and unless they achieve the status of intimacy with Allah by reaching the end of their spiritual journey, and seeing Allah’s divine grace.⁶

This elevated status of saints which exceeds even that of people who are higher than them in rank has induced the Prophet (PBUH) to express one of the most striking remarks concerning them:

¹ Qushayri, p. 118

² Ibid.

³ In Shudguivitch, p. 42

⁴ “A Qudusi Hadith is a speech inspired by God and uttered through the prophet’s mouth. This type of Hadith is situated between the Qur’anic speech, of divine essence, and the prophet’s Hadiths with its human dimension”. (Karim, Ben Driss. Sidi Hamza al- Qadiri Budshish : Le Renouveau du Soufisme au Maroc, Alburaq-Archè, Beiruth, 2002, p. 51)

⁵ Shudguivitch, p. 32

⁶ Cf. Qasim, Ghani. *Tarikh at-Tasawuf Fi al-Islam*, Trans. Sadiq Nashat, Maktabat an-Nahda al-Misriya, Cairo, 1972, p. 335

Thou should know that Allah has servants (ibad) who are no prophets, nor are they martyrs, whose convivial assemblies (majalis) and closeness (qurb) to Allah are envied by prophets and martyrs ... On Judgment Day Allah sets up pulpits of light on which he seats them and makes their faces radiant...those are the saints of Allah.¹

Owing to all the above mentioned attributes of saints, Allah loves those who love them and forsakes those who do not because the believers' "love of Allah is manifested through their love of his saints"² and anyone who hates saints hates Allah as well and deserves His punishment. According to a Hadith related by Aisha, the Prophet's wife, the Prophet (PBUH) said "Allah says: 'I notify of war whoever sets himself against any of my saints.'"³

This religious dimension of sainthood which I have been dealing with so far is not the only prerequisite for a person to be a saint; moral and personal qualities, namely truthfulness, kindness and purity are also crucial in achieving sainthood. It is said that some people asked the Prophet about saints: "how did they obtain their status of saints? Was it by fasting or by praying?" He answered them 'by Allah! they obtained it neither by fasting nor by praying but by the generosity of their hearts, their great truthfulness and the purity of their souls'"⁴ and repeated the last quality three times showing, thus, that apart from their worship of Allah, saints have to be distinguished by their moral personal qualities.⁵

Taking into consideration all the afore mentioned characteristics and qualities of saints who exceed all the other believers in piety, devotion, self-negation, generosity and purity it is obvious that in order to enjoy the status of sainthood, the women saints of Marrakesh must have reached unequalled levels of devotion, piety and moral purity to be chosen among Allah's closest believers and deserve his protection, a fact which their biographies illustrate.⁶

¹ Shudguivitch, p. 32

² Al-Isbahani, In Mohammed, as-Saghir al-Ifrani. *Durat al Hajjal fi Manaqibi Sabatu Rijal*. 1st ed. Annotated by Hassan Jellab. Marrakesh: Al -Matbaa al-Wataniya. 2002, p.47 and Qushayri, p. 118

³ Qushayri, p. 117

⁴ Abu Yaqub, Yussuf Bnu Yahya, at-Tadili, Ibn az-Zayyat. *At-Tashawuf Ila Rijali at-Tasawuf*. Annotated by Ahmed at-Tawfiq, Faculty of Letters Publications, Rabat, 1984, p. 45

⁵ These moral and humane personal qualities are what Hassan Ali al- Murrakushi (Cited in al-Badissi, 1982, pp. 20-21-23-24) enhances in his classification of saints.

⁶ Cf. Malika, El Ouali. *As-Salih al-Murakushi*. Marrakesh: al-Matbaa al-Wataniya, 2016.

2. The Main Factors behind the Emergence of Women's Sufism in Marrakesh

Among the main factors that contributed to the development of Sufism among women in Morocco, in general, and in Marrakesh in particular, were the Ribats whose role was so crucial that the emergence of Sufism is very often associated with them. When the latter were first built, they were meant for military purposes as they were set up in places where foreign attacks were mostly expected; then, they started to be used as places where people could find shelter, namely in periods of conflicts and social and political unrest. Later on, the Ribats were replaced by the zawiyas which started to fulfill the same function: giving shelter and food to both men and women, especially in times of conflicts. Because there were not many worldly occupations in zawiyas, women devoted themselves to worship, an activity which culminated in adopting the principles of Sufism which were preached by Sufi Sheikhs who were delivering religious lessons in these zawiyas. In this respect, history "confirms that the worse the social conditions become the more isolated Sufi people become by avoiding all contact with others."¹ Another factor which contributed to Sufism among Moroccan women, in general, and Marrakshi women, in particular, is family background. In many cases, the women saints were initiated to Sufism either by their fathers, their husbands, their relatives, or simply their neighbors. The most representative examples in this respect are Lalla Zahra al-Kush whose father was one of the greatest Sufi of Marrakesh and who was famous for his zawiya, Lalla Nejma as-Sugratiya whose father also had a zawiya which she had to take care of after his death and Lalla Mahalla who was initiated to Sufism by one of Cadi Ayyad's disciples who taught her the Fiqh, the Hadiths and different religious sciences. The other factor which encouraged Sufism among women was "the travels some women undertook to the Muslim East either for pilgrimage, commerce or education. This is why Moroccan Sufi women were in some respects influenced by the Sufi women of the East"² the most prominent example of whom was Rabéa al- 3adawiyya. To all these factors, one has to add another important one which is Morocco's proximity to Spain. During this historical period (the 6th and 7th centuries AH) the Muslim empire in Spain was thriving and people were constantly moving between Spain and Morocco, which facilitated the exchange of knowledge and ideas among which were Sufi ideas. This is how many of the great thinkers, Sufi

¹ Ibrahim, Harakat. *As-Siyassa wa al-Mujtamaa fi al- Asr al-Amawi, al-Afaq al-Jadida*, Muhamadia, 1990, p.273

² Hassan, Jellab. "Al-Haraka as-Sufiya Fi Murrakush al-Muwahidiya». In *Murrakush Mina at-Ta'sis Ila Akhiri al- Asr al-Muwahidi*, Faculty of Letters & Human Sciences Magazine, Marrakesh, 1988, p.186

and religious people moved from Spain to Morocco even to far places like Marrakesh and the south of Morocco.

Among the first Sufi women in Marrakesh, we can mention Lalla Mimuna Tagnaout who lived in the sixth century AH and who can be considered among the most famous Sufi women in Morocco as her biography is mentioned in most Sufi references. There is also Lalla Mhalla who lived in the same period and was known for being educated and very knowledgeable about the Qur'an and its explanations as well as in other religious disciplines. She used to assist Cadi Ayyad in his work as a judge this is why her tomb is located close to his in Bab Ailan. She was also known for mediating between people and helping them solve their problems, one of the factors that gave her the name of « Mhalla » which derives from the word « halla », to solve in Arabic according to popular beliefs. Lalla Zahra al Kush, Lalla Aouish al-Majdubah and Lalla Uda as-Saadia, as popular people call her, are also worth mentioning as famous women saints of Marrakesh.

3. Spatial Distribution of the Women Saints of Marrakesh

One of the most striking remarks to make about women's sainthood in Marrakesh is its spatial distribution in the city. Most of them are located inside the fortified walls in the eastern part which historically extends « from Bab Fes to the north until Bab Ghmat to the south with the eastern part of the walls constituting its eastern borders. »¹This very fact is emphasized by Tadili in his book on Sufism in which the eastern part of Marrakech is very recurrent in Saints' biographies: « It seems that the recurrent mention of the eastern part means to highlight Sufism in this particular part of the city. »² Only six women saints are located outside the walls of the Medina. This can be accounted for by the fact that the eastern part of Marrakesh is among the oldest parts of the city and is historically known for the settlement of Sufi people in it. "It was the place of settlement of many communities whose geographical and tribal origins were not from the Haouz region."³ There were people from "Ceuta, from Tudgha and from Tadla, in addition to many others who came from very far places like Seville in Andalusia."⁴ Moreover, the eastern part of Marrakesh hosted many mosques, bakeries and handicrafts, which explains why many Sufi people were artisans. Because of this factor, a big number of Sufi women settled in this area, in places like Bab Ailan, Bab

¹ Mohamed, Rabitat ad-Dine. *Murakush Zaman al-Muwahidine: Jawanib Mina al-Majal wa al-Insan*. 1st ed., al-Matbaa al-Wataniya, Marrakesh, 2008, p. 246

² Mohamed, Rabitat ad-Dine. *Qadiyat al-Janib as-Sharqi*. In *Murakush Mina at-Ta'sis Ila Akhir al-3asr al-Muwahidi*. p. 149

³ Ibid., p. 148

⁴ Mohamed, Rabitat ad-Dine. *Op.cit.*

Khemiss, Bab Debagh and the Mukef indicating that women's Sufism is part and parcel of the whole Sufi movement in Marrakesh.

The big number of Sufi women in Marrakesh can be accounted for by its proximity to Ribat Shakir which played a decisive role in the development of Sufism, in general, and in Women's Sufism in particular. This Ribat attracted Sufi people from many parts of Morocco, especially that it hosted two main Mussems that Sufis people used to attend in Ramadan and in the Mawlid to celebrate the Prophet's birthday. These Mussems were attended not only by Sufi men but by Sufi women as well. Lalla Mimuna Taghnaout is even reported to have said that in one of the Mussems of Ribat Shakir there were one thousand women: "some of the disciples who attended the Mussem in Ribat Shakir with Munya informed me that she said that one thousand Sufi women had attended the Mussem."¹ What is also noteworthy is that "as Sufism was at its beginning related with preaching to people and guiding them through the principles of Islam, there were circles for this very purpose in Arabic and in Berber."² What is certain is that there were women among the preachers and Lalla Mimuna Taghnaout is said to have been one of them, which proves that women were active and knowledgeable about religious matters.

4. Who are the Women Saints of Marrakesh?

The field work I conducted along with the documents I consulted show that the women saints of Marrakesh belong to different historical periods extending from the time Sufism officially started in Morocco, that is from the 6th century AH to the 14th century AH, the pre-independence period. Moreover, from the collected information, we can divide these women into two main categories. The first category is that of educated women who had great knowledge of the Qur'an, the Hadiths and other religious sciences and who were initiated to Sufism mainly by family members, husbands or family friends, which means that they had access to Sufism like the other disciples as they grew up in an environment which prepared them with knowledge on Sufism as mentioned above. Lalla Zahra al-Kush stands as a prominent example of this category as she was the daughter of a Sufi who was famous for his high ethical values, his great piety and devotion to Islam and his generosity which Lalla Zahra inherited and used to transmit to women, for she used to teach them the principles of religion. Ibrahim Harakat confirms this when he says: « she had solid knowledge of religious sciences »³ This

¹ Tadili, p. 316

² Gharmini. 2000, p. 25

³ Ibrahim, Harakat. *As-Siyassa wa al-Mujtamaa fi al-Asr as-Saadi*, Dar ar-Rashad al-Haditha, Casablanca 1987, p. 342

category comprises mainly women who belonged to wealthy and educated families whose daughters could have access to religious knowledge and Sufi disciplines. In this category, we can also mention Khadija Bent Mubarak at-Tadili who was among the people who had deep knowledge of the Qur'an and Lalla Mhalla who is said to have learnt the *Mudawwana*. As one can see, the number of educated women among the Sufi women of Marrakesh is very limited, which is not surprising given the historical period in which they lived and during which women were confined in houses to get married and to give birth to children.

The other category which represents a majority of the women saints is that of women who were uneducated and who did not have access to Sufism through initiation but through their individual efforts or through the *Jadhb*; and these are classified within what some Sufi critics call popular Sufism. This accounts for the fact that many of them were *Mejdhub*s¹ and among whom we can mention Lalla Aouish al-Majdhubah, Lalla Aisha Hssayen, Lalla Zahra as-Sussiya Lalla Aisha Aryant ar-Ras. However, the fact that these women were uneducated does not demean them, for "whether saints are educated or not they are knowledgeable; they are the ones who know the truth. The saint is not the one who can have a *Karama*² but divine knowledge is the characteristic of the saint".¹

¹ In Arabic, the verb "*Jadhaba*" means to attract, and the noun "*Jadhb*" means attraction, and in the domain of Sufism "*Jadhb*" refers to Allah's attraction of the believer towards him. The *Mejdhub*, which literally means attracted person, "is the believer whom God chooses to make closer to him and within his intimacy and who wins all the Sufi states and ranks without effort or pain".¹ (Abu al-Hassan, Ali Bnu Mohamed, Bnu Ali al- Jurjani. *At-Taarifat. Ad-Dar at-Tunussiyya Li an-Nashr*, 1971, p. 107) This is why Sufi people hold that *Mejdhub*s do not reach their status of saints by their own endurance (*mujahada*) and personal efforts but because God chooses them and attracts them to him without mediation from a *Shaykh* or a teacher. In other words, Sufi people believe that the *Jadhb* is "a light that God puts in the heart of the believer and by means of which the latter moves on his/her path to Allah through divine help, without education or practice... It is as if the person accomplished the stages to Allah in no time or that he/she reached their status of election without purgation ".¹ (Abdellatif, Ash-Shadili. *At-Taswuf wa al-Mujtamaa: Namadhij Mina al-Qarn al-Ashir al-Hijri*, Matabi Sala, Sala, p. 89.) The *Jadhb* phenomenon started in Morocco in the 6th century AH. It increased in the AH10th and 11th C and reached its peak in the AH13C/AD19C. (Harakat. *Al-Maghrib Abra at-Tarikh*. 2nd ed. vol.3., Dar ar-Rashad al-Haditha, Casablanca, 1985 p. 556)

² The *Karama*, (whose plural is *karamat*) is, according to Sufi people, a gift from God, "an honour conferred by God on the elect among his believers" (Gharmini, p. 112, Margaret, Smith. *Muslim Women Mystics: the Life and Work of Rabia and Other Women Mystics in Islam*. Great Islamic Thinkers Series. Oxford: One world, 2001, p53.) Mohammed, as-Saghir, al-Ifrani defines it as "the occurrence of

As far as their social status is concerned, these women were not limited to a particular social class but came from all walks of life. They included queens and princesses like Lalla Uda as-Saadia, al-Mansur ad-Dahbi's mother and Lalla Tahdrit who is a Merinide princess, women from rich, well known families like Lalla Zahra al-Kush and Lalla Nejma as-Sugratiya, and women from common ordinary people like Lalla Aouish al-Majdhubah, Lalla Aisha Hssayn and others. What is sure, however, is that the number of Sufi women coming from common, ordinary milieus is more dominant and this is only natural as Shudguivitch argues: "although there are many Sufi people from noble families, we can say that Sufism has always been associated with common ordinary people"² and with poverty rather than wealth. As a matter of fact, one of the main appellations of a Sufi person is "faqir" which means poor in Arabic. Sufi people prefer to be poor than rich because true wealth for them is spiritual since they believe that "poverty is the motto of the saint and the ornament of the pure."³

What is also noteworthy about women's sainthood is that it does not concern only one age group but it concerns young and old women which is a very important hint that Marrakshi women's Sufism was not restricted to old women who because they reached the end of their life journey busied themselves with religious life in preparation for death. It was far from this. Most of the women saints were in the prime of life. Some of them were excessively beautiful which means that they could have opted for a well established married life but they forsook all this and preferred to follow the

a supernatural event at the hand of a person known for piety and for following the prophet Mohamed's creed" (pp.75-76) . At-Tussi sees it as " a supernatural event unaccompanied by a prophet's message and occurring at the hand of a person known for devotion and for following the prophet Mohammed's creed."²(Abu Nasr, Abd Allah, Ali, as-Sarraj. *Al-lumaa Fi Tarikh at-Tasawuf al-Islami*. Annotated by Kamil Mustapha Hindaoui. Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiya, Beiruth, 2001. p.103) According to Sufi people, the Karama may consist in "making food appear out of season, causing water to spring in a period of drought or thirst, traversing a huge distance in a very short time, rescuing a person from an enemy whether human or beast, hearing a voice which guides or directs when one is lost etc..."²(At-Tussi, p.103.) It may also include "walking on water, moving in the air, traversing the earth and riding on the heavens..."² (Smith, p.53) as well as acts of healing and reading people's minds and predicting the future. Vincent J. Cornell, divides these Karamat into epistemological ones like (mind reading, insight and vision), power miracles (subsiding wild animals), and food and water miracles, finding treasures, traversing great distances, and commanding spirits"² (Realm of the Saints. Texas: University of Texas Press, 1998, p.115).

¹ Shudguivitch, p. 20

² Ibid., p .10

³ Qushayri, p. 122

path of Allah. The mention of some of the saints' beauty is a very important element, especially as we know how important beauty has always been for a woman to get a good suitor in the Moroccan traditional society. Some of the above mentioned saints like Lalla Zahra Al Kush were very beautiful and well to do. The latter was even courted by Zaidane Ibn al-Mansur ad-Dahbi's son but she declined his offer to sacrifice herself to Allah. Lalla Mina Buzid, Lalla Mhalla and Lalla Yeza and many others also rejected marriage to devote them selves to Allah. This shows how strong their will was and how true their faith and their convictions were.

5. The Impact of Sainthood on the Women Saints' Lives

Based on the data I collected on the women saints, I have noticed that sainthood is very important in empowering women and enabling them to achieve equality with men in the religious domain and in creating a new identity that gave them a sublime, ethical dimension and a social status that they could never have realized without Sufism. Sainthood gave women their own personal status regardless of their families and enabled them to realize a certain freedom as they could have access to the world of men via religion. In other words, piety and righteousness conferred on women a considerable amount of respectability and made them achieve equality with men in the domain of worship.

6. The Impact of Sainthood on Women Saints' Religious life

On the religious level and as far as the worship of Allah and devotion to him and to his recommendations are concerned, the women saints showed that there is no difference between women's and men's sainthood and also in the status that pious, devoted worshippers can attain whether they are men or women. In front of Allah, all that matters is the believers' true worship and purity of the heart.

Thus, what researchers and critics say about men's sainthood applies to women's sainthood as well. At-Tussi asserts that "the major characteristic of saints and what really distinguishes them from the rest of people is forsaking what does not concern them and giving up all that can stand between them and their main objective, for their only goal is Allah. They are also known for being satisfied with very few things, and getting only the bare necessities of life concerning food, clothes and so on, preferring poverty to wealth, hunger to satiation and forsaking haughtiness and arrogance."¹ This means that if male Sufi are characterized by "austerity and eating only what satisfies their

¹ At-Tussi, p. 61.

hunger”¹, women saints also live up to this characteristic as the case of Lalla Mimuna shows. In this respect, Tadili says about her: “I visited her; she was an old woman whose skin was black and stuck to her bones because of excessive worship.”² The women saints were as strict as men about the nature of the food they ate. They insisted on eating only food that was halal as the example of Lalla Mimuna shows again: “once a merchant invited me for dinner; when food was served, it talked to me and said ‘do not eat me; I am haram’. I was embarrassed in front of my host so I put a little piece of meat in my mouth then I put it down. I forsook my prayers for three days and voices calling at me: this is what is done with dogs who are led by their bellies.”³ Concerning the renunciation of worldly life and total devotion to Allah Qushayri states that “the signs of saints are three: their preoccupation with Allah, their escape to Allah and their concern with Allah.”⁴ These three signs are a major feature in the women saints who had no other preoccupation but forsaking worldly life to worship their creator. This is what explains the rejection of marriage by many of them as mentioned above.

Thanks to their great devotion and their high level of worship, these women were highly respected and many of them reached high ranks in the hierarchy of sainthood. As a case in point Lalla Mimuna Tagnaout was among the Afrad (individuals) which, according to Sufi people, is the rank from which the Qutb (pole) is chosen. This means that apart from the category of the Aqtab (poles), there is another category which Sufi people put at the top of the hierarchy and which is that of the Afrad or perfect individuals. For many Sufi people, the Afrad belong to the highest category of saints thanks to their high spiritual fulfillment. Ibn Arabi thinks so highly of them that he calls them “saints’ prophets”⁵ because they “have reached the highest rank in the hierarchy of saints, a rank that no other saint can trespass”⁶.

If male saints are very often remembered for their Karamat, though Karamat are not a condition of sainthood and are very often mingled with legends, women too had their Karamat. Many of the women saints included in this study had some clear signs and confirmed Karamat supporting their sainthood. Among the signs that are associated with saints and sainthood, in general, there is Allah’s answer for their prayers, the realization of their wishes, the light seen in their presence in their life or around their tombs when they die, the vapor or smoke

¹ Gharmini, p. 136.

² Tadili, p. 316.

³ Ibid., p. 318.

⁴ Ibid., p. 118.

⁵ Shudguivitch. p. 65.

⁶ Ibid.

that emanates from their graves, predicting future events like wars or catastrophes, predicting their death or other people's. These signs also exist in the case of the women saints. The illustration can be taken from three women saints' biographies, namely Lalla Mina Buzid who refused the marriage that her father was trying to impose on her while she preferred to devote herself to Allah's worship and because of this she implored Allah to strike her and her future husband dead on the very day of their wedding. It is believed that thanks to her true worship Allah answered her prayers and she died along with the groom on their wedding night. Popular memory remembers this until today, and on her site there are two tombs: hers inside her family house in Bab Ailan and the supposed groom's on the house threshold. The two other examples are those of Lalla Mimuna Tagnaout who predicted her own death and Lalla Zahra as-Sussiya who predicted Mulay al-Hassan the First's death.

This great devotion to worship did not only enable these Sufi women to reach high ranks in Sufism but to be among the saints known as "Ashab al-Khutwa" (the people of the step) "who are the saints who have the capacity to move from one place to another in one single step"¹ as Ibn Arabi and many other Sufi people think. In this category, one can mention Lalla Mimuna Tagnaout and Lalla Aouish al Majdhubah. According to Ibn Arabi, this characteristic is attributed only to the highest category of Sufi. The reason behind this according to him "is that thanks to the saint's link with the spiritual world to which he/she belongs, his/her status as a saint liberates him/her from the laws of space, for he/she is not confined to the areas that determine the cognition of the ordinary person. His/her place is nowhere and 'where' is non-existent, as al-Hallaj says in his famous Quatrains"² Ibn Arabi relates this with the idea of "'al-fath al-Ilahi' which negates the saint's perception of the limits of time and space thanks to the direct relationship with Allah. With this relationship the 'where' vanishes and the 'what' disappears and time and place become void, meaningless terms, for there is no morning and no evening for the saint, as Abuzaid al-Bistami says."³

7. The Impact of Sainthood on the Women Saints' Personal Life

Concerning this aspect of sainthood, it can be said that on the personal level, sainthood had first and foremost allowed many women to evade marriage which was the destiny of all women whether they desired it or not. We know that in the traditional Muslim society, women could escape marriage for a certain time in case they had the right to choose their partners, but they could not escape it forever. So sainthood was a means of salvation

¹ Faouzi, Skali. *Saints et Sanctuaires de Fès*, Marsam, Rabat, 2007, p. 113.

² Shudguivitch, p. 91.

³ Ibid.

for many of them. Thanks to sainthood, women could also transcend the restricted family environment to create their own personality, though they had yet to abide by the laws and traditions of their society at that time: “woman transcended the micro-social level of domestic and parental habitual relationships to be recognized as a personality with its own specificities though the latter consists in fitting within the context of the social conventions.”¹ Hence, through sainthood, “these women imposed their existence as human beings by means of other criteria than the social, and parental relationships”² In addition to this, sainthood enabled women to carve a new, ideal image through their spiritual fulfillment and high irreproachable moral values, for “people are united about the fact that Sufism is morals”³. In other words, through sainthood women could impose their competence in the religious domain as spiritual, virtuous beings and make their entity as women melt into the entity of spiritual beings who have reached the top of spiritual fulfillment and gnosis which represents the highest and most perfect stage any Muslim man or woman can ever achieve. Thanks to all these achievements, these women were no longer perceived within the stereotyped image rooted in the society but as partners in the domain of religion which made them enjoy more freedom. Many women were able to go out and even visit men and receive them in their places as the case of Lalla Mimuna illustrates, a thing which was unconceivable at that time. Women were also able to attend Sufi Mussems and celebrations. This very freedom contributed to “creating a new image of them instead of the stereotyped image of women as sex objects.”⁴

8. The Impact of Women’s Sainthood of on the Social Level

The moral qualities that Sufi people are known for like truthfulness, righteousness, charity and loving people and helping them in difficult times have made people venerate them throughout Moroccan history. These moral qualities were of course known among Sufi men; but Sufi women were no exception to this. Many of them were famous for their acts of charity and altruism towards others. But the woman who exceeded all the Sufi women in this is Lalla Uda As-Saadia, Masuda Bent Ahmed al-Wazgitiya, Ahmed al-Mansur ad-Dahbi’s mother. Her belonging to a royal family did not prevent her from being a very sociable person who never detached herself from the causes and preoccupations of her people and thanks to this she gave a very positive image of women in that historical period. She was famous for being good and charitable. Common people considered her the emblem of spiritual beauty and the embodiment of virtue and generosity:

¹ Skali, p. 107.

² Ibid., p. 109.

³ Shadili, p. 81.

⁴ Skali, p.112.

She was the emblem of piety, devotion and courage... a great worshipper and adorer of Allah whose ritual ablutions conferred on her the signs of election. She was the mother of generous initiatives, always walking on the path of charity alleviating the daily sufferings of people by protecting orphans, sheltering widows and abandoned women, and helping young men and women who wanted to start their marital life.¹

This idea is confirmed by Ibn Ibrahim who says that “she was a very pious and generous woman known for her sympathy with the poor and her countless acts of charity ... such as financing the construction of the mosque of Bab Dukalla, as well as many bridges and the restoration of roads in the city of Marrakesh and in its rural areas.”², Harakat says about her “Uda (Masuda) al-Wazguitiya, al-Mansur’s mother was a great worshipper of Allah who contributed a great deal to works of charity, construction and restoration. Until today some of the works she accomplished are still standing as evidence of her greatness. In addition to the school of Bab Dukala and its mosque, she financed the construction of hostels on the roads of caravans.”³ She died in AH 1000 AD 1591.

What seems to have distinguished Masuda’s sainthood was mainly her great devotion to Allah and her acts of charity so praised in hagiographic books. In fact, her acts of charity have a story which many people still keep alive and many biographical books have recorded. It is said that one day as she was pregnant, she was walking in the gardens of her royal palace in which apricots, peaches and pomegranates were ripening. She desired some peaches and pomegranates and forgetting that she was fasting and that it was the sacred month of Ramadan, she ate some. She then realized what she had done and as act of repentance she ordered the construction of the mosque of Bab Dukala as well as bridges and other things. Common people even add that she ordered the Nefar to announce from the mosque minaret that Lalla Uda ate peaches and pomegranates while people were fasting in Ramadan.⁴

¹ Mohamed, Bargash. *La Femme Sans Voile Dans l’histoire du Maroc*. Casablanca: Editions Maghrébines, 2000, p.104.

² Al-Ilam bi Man Halla bi Murrakush Mina Al-Alam, 2nd ed. Vol° 7. Rabat: al-Matbaa al-Malakiya, 1997. pp. 269-271

³ Harakat, Al-Maghrib Abra at-Tarikh Vol° 3, p. 372

⁴ Mohamed, Salih al-Amrani, Ibn Khaldun. Sab Sayidaat Murrakushyat Bistihqaq. Marrakesh: Marrakesh Li at-Tibaa wa an-Nashr, 2009. p. 155

Conclusion

As the present study has tried to show, though the number of male saints exceeds that of women and though the hagiographic literature of Marrakesh mentions women saints only rarely compared to the bulk of literature devoted to male saints, the latter have contributed to the phenomenon of sainthood and have set a model of worship and asceticism. Marrakshi women's sainthood started as early as that of men in the fifth century AH and continued throughout the history of Marrakesh. The study has also showed that by entering the world of sainthood which is the expression of Muslim perfection, women created an ideal image of themselves at a very early stage of Moroccan history when women had no individual existence or personality. Through sainthood, women achieved equality with men and proved that the quest for truth and elevation in worship know no sex barriers and leave no room for men or women. In front of Allah, all human beings are equal. What distinguishes them is their degree of devotion to Allah rather than their being men or women. It is this that accounts for the importance these women had in people's lifetime and it is this that explains why many of the streets of the Medina carry the names of many of these saints, especially as we know that it is a common practice in Morocco to name streets and places after eminent personalities.

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