

Female Mystics in Medieval Muslim Societies in the Period between the Ninth and Thirteenth Centuries

Authors : Arin Salamah Qudsi

Abstract : Female piety and the roles that female mystics played in Muslim landscapes of the period between the ninth and thirteenth centuries are topics that attracted many scholarly endeavors. However, personal aspects of both male and female Sufis were not thoroughly investigated. It would be of a great significance to examine the different roles of Sufi women as spouses, household supporters, and, mothers based on Sufi and non Sufi sources. Sisters and mothers, rather than wives and daughters, are viewed in anthropological studies of different cultures as women who could enjoy a high social status and thus play influential roles. Sufi hagiographies, which are our main sources, have long been regarded in a negative light, and their value for our understanding of the early history of Sufism is held in doubt. More recently, however, a new scholarly voice has begun to reclaim the historical value of hagiographies. We need to approach the narrative structures and styles of the anecdotal segments, which are the building blocks of the hagiographical body of writing. The image of a particular Sufi figure as portrayed by his near-contemporaries can provide a more useful means to sketch the components of his unique piety than his real life. However, in certain cases, whenever singular and unique appearances of particular stories occur, certain historical and individual conclusions could be sought. As for women in Sufi hagiographies, we know about sisters who acted as a solid support for their renowned Sufi brothers. Some of those sisters preferred not to be married until a late age in order to "serve" their brothers, while others supported their brothers while pursuing their own spiritual careers. Data of this type should be carefully considered and its historical context should be thoroughly investigated. The reference here is to women, mostly married women, who offered to maintain their brothers or male relatives despite social norms or generic prohibitions, which undoubtedly gave them strong authority over them. As for mothers, we should differentiate between mothers who were Sufis themselves, and those who were the mothers of Sufi figures. It seems most likely that in both types, mothers were not always unquestionably the effective lightning trigger. Mothers of certain Sufi figures denied their sons free mobility, taking advantage of the highly esteemed principle of gratifying the wishes of one's mother and the seminal ideal of ḥaqq al-wālida (lit. mother's right). Drawing on the anecdotes provided by a few sources leads to the suggestion that many Sufis actually strove to reduce their mothers' authority in order to establish their independent careers. In light of women's authority over their brothers and sons in Sufi spheres, maternal uncles could enjoy a crucial position of influence over their nephews. The roles of Sufi mothers and of Sufi maternal uncles in the lives of early Sufi figures are topics that have not yet been dealt with in modern scholarship on classical Sufism.

Keywords : female Sufis, hagiographies, maternal uncles, mother's right

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