



**Rachid El Hour and Manuela Marin.-
*Memory and Presence of Female Saints in
Ksar El Kebir (Morocco): Oral Transmission
and Written Tradition.* Trans. by Nicholas
Callaway (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 165p.**

Hagiography has always been an important source of historical narratives. Notwithstanding, hagiographic literature remains male-dominated *per se*. The absence of female saints in the hagiographical compendiums is due to the scarcity of their biographies, albeit with their presence on the pages of many male saints' texts. Maghrebi hagiography is no exception. In this respect, *Memory and Presence of Female Saints in Ksar El Kebir (Morocco): Oral Transmission and Written Tradition* is a contribution to filling this hiatus. The book adopts gender as an approach to dismantle the hagiographic narratives of both written and oral sources. It examines male and female saints more on the history of sainthood in Ksar El Kebir. The reason behind choosing this city is to recuperate oral memories of female saints. The authors were first triggered by the 1905 Edouard Michaux-Bllaire and Georges Salmon's study, which highlighted the high number of female shrines and tombs in Ksar El Kebir (viz ten). The originality of the book emanates from its methodology as the authors adopt a triple conflux basing their results on scrutinizing written sources, oral accounts, and physical traces of memory in the city, such as shrines and tombs.

The book is divided into eight chapters. The first chapter is entitled "Male and Female Saints in Medieval Islam," and it proffers an overview of sainthood in the Islamic East and West. El Hour and Marin begin by addressing the emergence of saints as a result of the development of ascetic trends in Islam. Indeed, Sufism (Islamic mysticism) brought up people who were considered models because of their righteousness and their behaviour which made them venerated, and their tombs served as pilgrimage sites. The writings of biographies of Muslim saints began as early as the third/tenth century. In fact, Sufism and sainthood, which most of the time overlap, started growing at that time; therefore, there grew a need to document the lives of Muslim saints even if it triggered, sometimes, issues within the theological groundwork as to the oneness of God. El Hour and Marin point out that the Western interest regarding the Muslim saints flourished when Ignaz Goldziher (1850-1921) published his work on saints. It is one of the important works that inspired the authors to question the presence of women within the sphere of sainthood. Other prolific writers who dwelt on female saints, including Nafisa and Sayyida Zaynab, as well as Rabia Al-Adawiyya, who is considered one the founders of Islamic Sufism. The latter was the subject of abundant studies by many authors like Margaret Smith

(1884-1970), a specialist in Islamic and Christian mysticism, who found that – based on early Arabic and Persian sources – Muslim women achieved an equal level of sainthood as men. Nonetheless, the ratio of female saints remains low compared to their male counterparts. Another focal point pinpointed in this chapter is the criteria and process by which one is considered a saint. In fact, death, life, and charisma (*baraka*) are all elements that demystify a saint. The notion of venerating the body of the saints outlives the saint. The memory of saints is ensured to be handed down by means of oral tradition. Of fear of loss, those oral accounts were collected as biographies first of Ulama. However, women did not find it easy to join their male counterparts within the compendium. Therefore, they were later given a space of their own as a supplement to the lavish volumes devoted to men in Ibn Sa'd's (d.230/845). In doing so, hagiographies declassified women and gave them a secondary position. According to El Hour and Marin, the written memory of female saints portrays the ambivalence of a patriarchal society that segregates women socially even though they are meant to be equal to men religiously. This contradiction was also depicted in Annemarie Schimmel's (1922-2003) work which follows the medieval paradigm, relegating women within a hagiographical compendium regardless of the plentiful sanctuaries dedicated to female saints in many regions in the Islamic world. Unlike Western scholarship, Arabic hagiographical texts were brought to light until recently.

Exploring the Maghrebi hagiographic written texts, the second chapter provides a study of Maghrebi saint literature. The scarcity of the number of women documented reflects the limited presence of women in the religious sphere in Medieval Maghreb. This is illustrated in the collection of Ibn al-Zayyat al-Tadili whose work encompasses 278 biographies of saints, where only six of them are women. Both male and female biographies are similar, stylistically speaking. The charisma and terminology are the same, which could imply that patriarchal segregation that occurs socially is not practiced within the realm of sainthood. The six biographies do not differ from those of their male counterparts but are still different from one another. The difference lies in the accounts themselves. Some biographies are short, while other female saints belong to the category of the “unknown saints” whose memory has been preserved even after the loss of their names. Some saints have not even reached puberty and lead a life of religious devoutness, while other accounts revolve around adult women who have chosen a life of asceticism (who may have been widows) like Munayya bt. Maymun al-Dukkali and Um Muhammad who were considered holy figures. It is striking, the authors claim, that the most eminent Sufi women are described as “men.” It is as if those women have neglected their gender. The chapter also foregrounds other outstanding hagiographical texts, including the work of Ibn Qunfud (d.810/1407-08), who followed Ibn al Zayyat Al-Tadili and contributed with a smattering number of female saints.

Addressing ‘Orality and Maghrebi Hagiography,’ AL Hour and Marin explore oral traditions and the memory of sainthood via shrines and tombs in rural and urban Morocco. The authors evoke Edmond Doutté, who is an Orientalist ethnographer. The

latter stated that in 1900, collecting accounts of female saints through oral tradition had become challenging. As an alternative source, he offered to interview uneducated people, mainly elderly women. He affirms this is the best method since, according to Douted, Muslims with religious knowledge would not reveal or even revamp this tradition. Al Hour and Marin mention that although many colonial ethnographers succeeded in gathering considerable information on sainthood and regardless of their visits to shrines and seasonal celebrations (*mawsim*), the veneration of female saints remains by far less than male ones. This could explain, according to the authors, the scant of female sainthood in ethnographic narratives, mainly in the second half of the twentieth century. Additionally, El Hour and Marin further point out that male European researchers during that era might have had their own biases as to the status of women in society. The authors' claim was backed up when mentioning Lalla Minnana, who was an object of colonial attention. This saint is considered the patron saint of Larache. It was puzzling for colonial observers to have this woman having equal esteem as other male saints in other cities like Marakesh and Safi unless she belonged to a prestigious Sherifian family. On the other hand, those prejudices are not found when comparing female saints. Indeed, even if Lalla Minnanna and Lalla Mimuna, who is a black woman, probably a slave according to the authors, are socially different, they both enjoy the same religious merits. Her race did not hinder her from being the object of high veneration due to the supernatural stories related to her. The memory of female saints is not only preserved in orality but buried in their tombs or *qubbas*. Into the bargain, memory, nowadays, is preserved through road signs, maps, and photographs. Memory and space have a complex relationship. Aside from shrines, tombs, and sanctuaries, other places such as fountains, caves, mountains, and hills draw their sacredness from saints. These places live on the memories and accounts that the inhabitants circulate and generate to expound their presence. The likelihood of a real presence of a female saint could be, withal, a mere reflection of imagination; there might have been a need to explain certain phenomena or aura, as the authors claim, linked to certain objects or places. Be it for their healing or protective power, male and female saints likewise sought to accomplish the same function.

The remaining chapters in El Hour and Marin's book, namely chapters four, five, six, and seven, are devoted to female saints in Ksar El Kebir. Drawing back to history and sainthood, the Spanish colonial gaze and the veneration of saints to ending with biographies and hagiographies of female saints in Ksar El Kebir. Indeed, the city eminently appears in history, such as in the battle of the Three Kings, and as the bases for the expeditions of caliphs into the Andalus. Ksar El Kebir has always been linked to sainthood. The authors mention the patron saint of the city – Sidi Bu Galib, whose full name was Abu l-Hasan Ali b; Halaf b. Galib b. Masud al-Ansri al-Qurasi (484-568/1091-1173). He died in Ksar El Kebir, where he is buried. His shrine is considered one of the most significant and sacred places in the city. The emergence of an organized group of scholars and students is said to be in Sidi Bu Galib's period. Additionally, the authors find it salient how Ksar El Kebir equally held a group around

an emigrant woman from Al Andalus Fatima al-Andalusiyya and whose shrine is still in the city. Henceforth, various Sufi mysticism found fertile ground in Ksar El Kebir. As mentioned earlier, the close relationship of the city with the Iberian Peninsula made it the object of observation in a number of colonial literary works as well as by anthropologists and sociologists. Bernardo de Quiro (1873-1959), the geographer Juan Dantin, and Zoologist Angel Cabrera have all indistinguishable views of the city, linking it to the Spanish Toledo and La Mancha. In their accounts, they referred to Sidi Bu Galib of Toledo and Fatima al-Andalusiyya of Seville. Knowing that none of the aforementioned saints are from Spain reflects the avid interest in dwelling them in a holy space shared by Spaniards and Moroccans.

The scarcity of female saints in oral and written canon does not reflect their actual presence in real life. Many accounts do not hold a detailed biography of female sainthood but resort only to a superficial description of their behaviour and piety. There is a tremendous number of preserved shrines and sanctuaries of female saints which are not documented in hagiographical texts. Like many other anthropologists and researchers, El Hour and Marin faced hindrances as to the gathering of oral tradition. By the same token, it was stated that coming up with information about the veneration of male saints was challenging, let alone female ones. In fact, the informants sometimes regard this topic with mistrust or try to alter or hide what they know. The use of oral tradition, together with the written hagiographic texts, proves that regardless of it being seen as unstable and not fully reliable, it plays a significant role in documenting a subject matter. Both the written and oral accounts, most of the time, overlap. It also makes it easy to trace back the identical written text of an oral testimony. The outcome of the study, both the fieldwork and the written sources, resulted in collecting a list of twenty-one female saints.

Examining female sainthood in *Memory and Presence of Female Saints in Ksar El Kebir (Morocco) Oral Transmission and Written Tradition* remains a pioneering study. The book adopts a gender approach and offers a platform for female saints to explore their presence compared to their male counterparts in the hagiographical compendiums, their memory in oral traditions as well as in shrines, sanctuaries, and celebrations. El Hour and Marin touched upon the issue through an exhaustive reading of hagiographical literature and an original approach that intertwined written, oral and physical spaces to recall and preserve memory and record a narrative of female sainthood. The memory of female saints will not only be preserved through written records and oral tradition but also through the preservation of material memory from loss, such as shrines. The decay of such spaces will engender the loss of identification with saints and, therefore, their loss within the forgotten histories. Moreover, the book fits within the hagiographic study and proffers rich and interesting interviews, biographies, maps, and illustrations. Rich as they are, all these sources give a close and vivid image to potential researchers or passionate readers interested in female sainthood.

Soukaina Aouaki
Hassan II University
Mohammedia