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NURTURING FAITH:

THE ROLE OF FEMALE SCHOLARSHIP IN MUSLIM WOMEN'S SPIRITUAL
GROWTH

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In the Name of God, The Infinitely Compassionate

and Ever-Merciful. May salutations be sent upon our beloved Messenger Muhammad

صلى الله
عليه وسلم

For Yusra, my most beloved blessing.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABSTRACT

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Growth
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This study explores the historical role of female scholarship in Sunni Islam, emphasizing
the necessity of direct interaction between women and female scholars for their holistic
religious and spiritual development. From Islam's inception, female scholars have played
a crucial role in nurturing women's religious identity and spiritual connection. However,
today in the American Muslim community, the presence of female scholars and spiritual
guides remains largely absent in most local communities, limiting opportunities for
women to access religious mentorship and leadership. By examining two historical
female scholarly archetypes—their early lives, teaching methods, and approaches to
spiritual modeling—this analysis identifies the factors that granted them religious
authority while also exploring the diversity in their educational, cultural, and social
strategies to enhance religious connectedness among women and their communities. The
study is underpinned by the framework of Spiritual Modeling by Doug Osman and Carl
Thoresen, along with Syed Attas's Islamic Education model, which exemplify the
necessity of interpersonal relationships between teachers and students, fostering women's
spiritual growth through modeling. By analyzing historical practices, this research
addresses these contemporary realities of female religious authority. The study concludes
with recommendations for institutions to better engage and support local female scholars
and learned women, ultimately aiming to strengthen women's spiritual identity and
communal belonging.

ABBREVIATIONS

ﷺ   This a glyph for the Arabic term *Salla Allāhu 'Alayhi Wa Sallam* meaning "peace and blessing be upon him," used to revere the Prophet Muhammad out of respect and admiration. This glyph will follow his name each time he is mentioned.

GLOSSARY

Allah	The Arabic word for God.
Ahadith	Multiple verified sayings of the Prophet Muhammad that has undergone rigorous transmission. A singular saying is called a "hadith".
Imam/a	Refers to a religious leader who is responsible for leading prayers at the mosque. The /a denotes the feminine version of the word.
Muhammadan	This is a commonly used way of referencing the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ community after receiving revelation in 610 CE.
Sunnah	This refers to the practices and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. It literally translates to "a path to water" or way of life.
Sunni	This refers to the largest branch of Islam worldwide. Their delineation reflects the group of Muslims that follow the Ahl-Al- Sunna, which means "people of the tradition."
Tarbiyyah	Arabic word pertaining to the nurturing of people through rearing them. This is typically used in the context of raising children. It is considered a process that aims to develop Muslims spiritually, intellectually, socially, and physically.
Ustadh/a	This is a common term used to refer to a learned teacher in the Islamic sciences and/or spirituality. The /a denotes the feminine version of the word. Application of the term is vague.
Ummahat Al Mumineen	This refers to an honorific title given to the wives of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ translating to "Mother of the Believers."
Ummah	Refers to the entirety of the Muslim community globally, centered around being connected through the belief of Islam.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Uthman reported that the Prophet (ﷺ) said, "The best among you (Muslims) are those who learn the Qur'an and teach it."[1]

Background

Women were critical in the studying, proliferation, and transmission of the Islamic tradition across the intellectual, spiritual, and cultural sciences. Since the inception of Islam when the first Qur'ānic revelation to the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, "Read in the name of your Lord,"[2] women around the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ were integral in disseminating the revelation of the Qur'ān and transmitting the *Sunnah*. They were memorizers of the Quran; scholars, poets, mentors, educators, and nurturers, who were seen as an integral part of the fabric of Islamic knowledge and its dispensation.

However, when looking at the landscape of religious leadership in Muslim spaces throughout the United States today, one notices a glaring absence and under-representation of women in the studying, proliferation, and transmission of Islam. Muslim women have been marginalized in religious spaces. This is not only as attendees or congregants of community attendees, but more significantly, in building inclusive communities as authoritative voices in religious scholarship. The American Mosque survey[3] by the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU), found Muslim

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[1] Muhammad ibn Isma'il al-Bukhari, *Sahih Bukhari*, Hadith 5207

[2] Qur'ān 96:1, all citations from Quran are drawn from Mustafa Khattab translation.

[3] Ihsan Bagby, "The American Mosque 2020: Growing and Evolving Report 1," Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, June 2020, https://ispu.org/report-1-mosque-survey-2020/

women felt marginalized in mosque spaces due to physical barriers, lack of leadership

opportunities, and unwelcoming environments.[4] Based on this, the ISPU demonstrated

that mosques that are perceived to be more inclusive for women would report higher

levels of community engagement and spirituality vitality. Among the recommendations

provided, the ISPU included that mosques need to make concerted efforts to increase

female religious leadership.[5]

Though the ISPU survey was helpful to understand what female Muslim

congregants need to feel more welcoming in spaces, they did not study the role of female

religious leadership and their impact on those spaces specifically. There is a lacuna in

extant literature on the impact of women in religiously scholarly leadership positions.

Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research published a report titled, "The Personal and

Professional Lives of American Muslim Religious Leaders in North America."[6] This

survey was conducted to highlight the challenges and strengths of American religious

leaders and imams on their personal and professional levels. However, female religious

leaders were not cited as direct participants of the survey. If one is to understand this

survey as a litmus test for the realities of religious leadership in America, one could ask,

where are female religious leaders in this conversation?

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[43] Ihsan Bagby, "The American Mosque 2020: Growing and Evolving Report 2," Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, June 2020, https://ispu.org/report-1-mosque-survey-2020/.

[5] Bagby, "The American Mosque 2020:Resport 1

[6] Mohamed AbuTaleb, Osman Umarji, Tamer Desouky, and Ibrahim Hindy, "The Personal and Professional Lives of Muslim Religious Leaders in North America," Yaqeen Reports, Feb. 5, 2024, Yaqeen Institute, https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/data/reports/the-personal-and-professional-lives-of-muslim-religious-leaders-in-north-america

The lack of detailed information on the role of female religious leadership in American Muslim communities brings to light an important question: How might communities function socially and spiritually, if female scholarship were fully recognized and valued? Within Muslim communities, there is a longstanding cultural precedent that positions men as teachers, preachers, and leaders. For example, *Imams* are hired to lead congregational prayer for both men and women. According to the Sunni orthodoxy of Islam, this function can only be fulfilled by a man[7] when leading a mixed group. As a result, men are more readily accepted in Muslim leadership roles by default.

A significant factor contributing to this issue, is the absence of a formal authoritative clergy in the United States within the American Muslim community. The question of religious authoritativeness due to lack of formal clergy is not exclusive to only a women-based issue. Dr. Tamara Gray, the founder of Rabata Institute and author of Teaching from the Tent: Exploring the Role of Muslim women Leadership in Digital Religion, touches upon this issue. She notes that the lack of formal clergy leads to challenges in establishing religious authority for both learned men and women.[8] Pertaining to the fears associated with women in front-facing position of leaders, she asserts the emergence of the lack of women in leadership position stemmed from a fear of modernity and its impact on the roles of women in society. She notes, "Women who

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[7]Shazia Ahmad, "Why Can't Women Lead Men in Prayer?" Seekers Guidance The Global Islamic Academy, May 15, 2021, https://seekersguidance.org/answers/general-counsel/why-cant-women-lead-men-in-prayer/

[8] Tamara Gray, "Teaching from the Tent: Muslim Women's Leadership in Digital Religion" (PhD diss., University of St.Thomas, 2019), 6.

expressed their religious life as caregivers or teachers children were welcomed."[9] But women who desired leadership were viewed as breaking the virtues of modesty."[10] In addition to the fears of modernity within women roles, historically, women were viewed as being legally unqualified to hold leadership roles, a notion that affects contemporary perceptions and practices.[11] Reducing women to the idea of being intellectually or legally unequal through legal proxy is harmful and dissuades from growing a community that is holistically organic to the realities of their constituency.

The concept of communal wellness through the *Ummah* is a core component of the Islamic tradition. One must then question, what are the deeper consequences for a community's spiritual well-being and the guidance available to its women when it marginalizes its knowledgeable female teachers and scholars, depriving them of the recognition and influence they rightfully deserve?

Statement of the Problem

This thesis seeks to examine how women have uniquely experienced their spiritual development and religious knowledge acquisition through female scholars historically. It explores the benefits of having female scholars available within local communities for women to engage with. It analyzes how female scholars historically held their communal leadership and the ways in which they cultivated women. The lack of

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[9] Gray, "Teaching from the Tent," 35.

[10] Gray, "Teaching from the Tent," 35.

[11] Farjana Mahbuba and Sumaiya Rabeya, "Female Leadership in Muslim Societies," *Australian Journal of Islamic Studies* 8, no. 2 (2023).

recognition for female scholarship and religious authority, along with the insufficient integration of knowledgeable women within their communities, prompted this study. This analysis seeks to:

1. Identify the social, cultural, and religious norms that allowed for the women scholars of historical analysis to engage with general and women-specific audiences.

2. Explore the various teaching modalities of women scholars for meeting the needs of women, and the unique experiences of women in learning.

3. Analyze how Spiritual Modeling aligns with the holistic objectives of Islamic Education for scholars.

4. Determine implications and recommendations to make female scholars and their disciples more accessible to women in Muslim communities.

Methodology

To meet these objectives, this thesis will exam two historical female religious leaders within the Sunni tradition. They were chosen to showcase a diversity in teaching modalities, their unique ways of nurturing congregants, and their accessibility to the broader community. These women fit the "resident scholar" role, as define by Dr. Gray, which is one of five overlapping types of American Muslim leadership: local administrative mosque leaders, leaders of national and regional organizations, public intellectuals, imams and chaplains, and religious scholars."[12]

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[12] Gray, "Teaching from The Tent," 22.

After looking at historical figures for analysis, I set out to address issues of authority in scholarship. Firstly, the researcher cites liturgical evidence by the Qur'ān and Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammadﷺ. This is to showcase the scriptural encouragement of scholarship and teaching for women. Then, the researcher utilized the theoretical Concept of Islamic Education by Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas[13] and the definition of the *Murabbi*[14] by Faki Ali Malengon and Hazizan Md.Noon. Together, these frameworks suggest the responsibility of Islamic education is more than an intellectual endeavor of imparting knowledge. Inherit to education is instilling character, etiquette, and morality through social interactions. This emphasizes the aspect of experiential learning for true knowledge acquisition within an individual and requires the concept of modeling to take place. Thus, this framework contributes to the discussion of how women benefit from the presence of scholarly women in their local communities, highlighting the advantages of having a woman serve as a resource for female congregants.

After understanding the multifaceted components and objectives of Islamic education, the theoretical framework of Spiritual Modeling[15] by Doug E. Oman and Carl Thoresen, are highlighted to ground this study. They sought to better understand the

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[13] Syed Al-Attas, *The Concept of Education In Islam a Framework for an Islamic Philosophy of Education* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, 1999), https://archive.org/details/the-concept-of-education-in-islam/page/n2/mode/1up.

[14] Faki Ali Malengo and Hazizan Md Noon, "Teachers' Perceptions on the Concept of Murabbi in Islamic Integrated Schools in Zanzibar," *International Journal of Recent Research in Social Sciences and Humanities* 4, no. 4 (2017).

[15] D. Oman, and C. E. Thoresen, C. E. "Spiritual Modeling: A Key to Spiritual and Religious Growth?" *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion, 13* no. 3 (2003): 149–165

relationship of an individual's spiritual growth through observing behaviors of modeling. Their work emphasized that spiritual exemplars, whether historical figures, religious leaders, or everyday individuals play a crucial role in shaping beliefs, behaviors, and personal growth of individuals. Bringing this concept questions the benefit of religious scholarly- role modeling, supporting the assertion that women will benefit from having access to female scholarship because they can see an aspect of themselves in the scholar or esteemed educator. These frameworks will be later expanded upon in Chapter Three.

Reflexive Statement

My personal involvement serving in the American Muslim community began at nineteen years old after my involvement with Islam on Campus, the Muslim Student Association at the University of Florida. This was the sixth largest student organization at the time. I witnessed Terry Jones threatening to publicly burn the Qur'ān in Gainesville Florida.[16]I then became the MSA president during the controversies of Draw Muhammad Day[17]. These experiences bolstered me into different areas of community leadership and service, and during that time I became interested in Islamic studies class offerings. Overtime I realized many women would come to the mosque, classes, socials, or conferences, yet a gap existed between women and the predominantly male teachers,

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[16] Eyder Peralta, "Pastor Terry Jones Arrested Before Planned Qur'ān Burning," *National Public Radio*, September 11, 2013, https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2013/09/11/221528510/pastor-terry-jones-arrested-before-planned-Qur'ān-burning.

[17] Jim Bitterman, Pierre Meilhan and Holly Yan, "Free Speech or Incitement? French Magazine Runs Cartoons of Mohammed," *CNN*, September 19, 2012, https://www.cnn.com/2012/09/19/world/europe/france-mohammed-cartoon/index.h

chaplains, and educators. Women would attend a program and leave, with little to no interactions with the speaker. I reflected on the idea that an persons potential to holistically internalize the knowledge being taught, would happen more organically through socialization with the teacher.

I met my first feamle teacher at twenty through the confines of other homes. I realized that there was something spiritually powerful and unique about having a female teacher, someone you could learn from more intimately. I recognized that even in women-led spaces, many women in my networks had studied traditional Islamic sciences both abroad and within the United States. However, the broader community remained largely unaware of them as sources of knowledge and wisdom. When these women were recommended for their scholarship or spiritual guidance, their qualifications were often questioned. While questioning this is not inherently a problem, it became evident that men locally were not subjected to the same scrutiny.

Observing these gaps of engagement and the inconsistences surrounding scholarliness over the past fifteen years led me to asking the questions of this paper. I became curious around spiritual modeling as a necessitation for women to holistically grow. I recognize the significant expansion of opportunities for women to participate in online classes, providing greater flexibility for attendees, and the concept of distant based learning. The growth and accessibility of digital communities and retreats have been invaluable in answering the questions I raise here. However, I am particularly interested in the idea of fostering communal connectedness, where women can model from each other in person to nurture, guide, and learn from people within their communities.

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Limitations

While this paper includes a historical analysis, I utilize it to provide insights to current issues and solutions of women's scholars meeting the needs of women currently. This paper does not provide insights of interaction between teachers and engagement by socio-economic or racial background between scholars and community as its primary focus for current issues. Nor does it address particular issues of female scholarship between immigrant Muslim American communities and comparing this to the native Muslim community of America, the African American Muslim. While very important, I believed it best to use this as a further point of analysis and study.

Delimitations

This paper focuses on the American Muslim Community, specifically looking at Sunni Muslim leadership and their affiliated institutions. This is because this is the community I served for over fifteen years and the one I have observed issues with based upon the thesis in question. Out of the five types of common leadership as identified in the introduction by Dr. Gray, I am looking at the function and impact of the resident scholar and educator in local communities historically, and currently. I was curious to understand if there were factors historically that contributed to women scholarship being seen as authoritative, and wanted to look for solutions that may help in addressing this issue currently.

Definitions

Since the central theme of analysis revolves are the concept of looking at the "resident scholar" it is imperative to then define what constitutes scholarship. Given the issues of an authoritative clergy, and the subjective nature of scholarly qualifications depending on one's community, the following categories of religious educators are considered scholarly. These are the definitions that Dr. Gray references in relation to issues of clergy between men and women.[18]

Sheikh and related titles. The term sheikh usually means an advanced teacher, one who can be trusted to impart accurate information and sound advice. In the Sufi tradition, a sheikh is a close advisor and mentor on the spiritual path (Mayer, 2005). Other terms that stand in for sheikh include: *habib, anse, ustadh,* and *ustadha*. The term sheikh is used for men and sheikha for women.[19]

Ustadh and Ustadha are classical Arabic terms that literally mean "one who is accomplished in a subject and capable of teaching it" and are used to refer to either an advisor/teacher of religion and/or a teacher of secular subjects in scholars. [20]

Teacher-leader- refer to someone who was a religious leader in Muslim communities. In this case her primary focus was the leading, teaching, and upbringing of community members, whether that community was local, global, online and/or offline. An academic who was also a practicing member of the religion and the community, would be inclined as a teacher-leader. [21]

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[18] Gray, "Teaching from The Tent," 16.

[19] Gray, "Teaching from The Tent," 24.

[20] Gray, "Teaching from The Tent," 24.

[21] Gray, "Teaching from The Tent," 26.

CHAPTER 2

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE RISE AND DECLINE OF FEMALE

RELIGIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

Introduction

This section analyzes the ways in which women learned during the life of the

Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. Given that this is considered the first community of Muslims,

this period contributes towards a greater understanding of how the Prophet ﷺ modeled

others to teach women. It also identifies how women were perceived as transmitters of

knowledge. This section will address the ways the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ taught the

community generally and women specifically, and how women learned from the Prophet

ﷺ and the women in the Prophetic ﷺ household. The section concludes with

commentary on the decline of female scholarship after the Prophet ﷺ death and

contributing factors.

Systems and Structures for Female Scholarship and Learning

during the Prophet's Life

Upon receiving revelation from the Angel Gabriel, The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ

was known to share insights and explanations in various modalities of learning, through

action, inaction, teaching, and the like. In his essence, the Prophet was a teacher who

came to guide all of humanity, as a mercy for the world.[22] This Qur'ānic verse sets the

foundation that the Prophet was to be modeled after in all ways, including how he taught.

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[22] Qur'ān 21:107, Khattab.

According to Dr. Akram Nadwi, author of *The Muhaddithat*, he describes four

educational modalities the Prophet utilized when teaching women specifically.

> The first was that the Prophet Muhammad would sit in gatherings publicly and
> teach both men and women. Secondly, women learned from the wives of the
> Prophet as they had intimate details of his behaviors and actions within the home,
> pertaining to affairs between husband and wife, home manners and etiquettes, and
> the behaviors of the Prophet in his household. Thirdly, women married into
> scholarly families, and lastly, there were women who had their own personal
> interests of the din, and would ask questions to him directly. The Prophet was
> known to set aside time for female companions to ask questions individually on
> their own time. This time was allocated and in a public setting for women to
> gather in an open forum format. [23]

From this we can infer that the Prophet valued cultivating women around him,

ensuring they had multiple avenues of access to learning from him. In addition to the

ways in which women uniquely experienced their learnedness from the Prophet, they

taught to those directly within their reach as well. Husbands were known to narrate from

their wives, and children were known to have narrated from their mothers.[24] Women were

recognized as "senior" in social order in which authority was explicitly based upon

commitment to and knowledge of the religion.[25] This is of particular interest, as it

suggests rather than the concept of age being a primary factor for authority, women as a

grouping were revered in a high manner. Here the concept of ageism is not present.

Rather, the culture precedent indicated that women around the Prophet were respected

and revered. Additionally, the Prophet ﷺ permitted for women to travel with him in

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[23] Muhammad Akram Nadwi, "Women as Seekers and Students of Hadith," chap. 2
in *Al-Muhaddithat: the Women Scholars in Islam* (Oxford: Interface Publications, 2016), 45-47.

[24] Nadwi, *Al-Muhaddithat,* 140-142.

[25] Nadwi, *Al-Muhaddithat,* 140.

order to learn from him.[26] This also dissuades the premise of the fear of intermixing for knowledge as alluded to in Chapter 1, by more contemporary jurists after the Prophet Muhammad's death.

During the Prophet's lifetime, women were seen as an authoritative source without any dissimilarity. I infer gender was not a means to dissuade learning or engagement. Rather the contributing factor of who was a source of authority between the companions was multifaceted. It combined the time they spent with the Prophet ﷺ directly and their proximity to him. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ was known to have stressed the importance of protecting women and ensuring their rights. His Sunnah advocated for women's dignity and societal participation.[27] This was further reinforced as a reminder in his last sermon. From this we understand that education was a lived, social enterprise between men and women.

Challenges Contributing to the Decline of Female Scholarship
After the Prophet's Death

There are multiple factors that caused a decline in female scholarship reaching the public masses, only less than three decades after the Prophets death. Dr. Zainab Alwani cites pinpointing an exact reason as to why this occurred throughout multiple Muslim societies is difficult to specify, given that women's status in Muslim societies were not all

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[26] Nadwi, *Al Muhaditthat*, 59.

[27] Umar Bensheikh, Feri Eko Wahyudi, and Muh Yunus, "Prophet Muhammad's Legal Politics," *Mazahibuna: Jurnal Perbandingan Mazhab* 4 no. 1 (June 2022): [Page #], https://doi.org/10.24252/mh.vi.26243

the same in approach of the involvement of women in the public realm generally.[28] Each

had their own set of expectations, regional customs, and local traditions affected

opportunities for women to teach and engage. Dr. Alwani notes that a major contributing

cause can be attributed to the resurgence of tribalism and its competing efforts with

upholding the ethos of Islamic values that occur with the resurgence of dynastic

tendencies within the Muslim Caliphate.[29] Dr. Alwani indicates tension begins to occur

between religious values and political authority, something that was not in occurrence

during the Prophets lifetime. This is partially due to the centrality of both religious

authority and political authority was central to the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. Due to

these issues, women were no longer able to be in forward facing roles that the Prophet

and his four rightly guided caliphs encouraged. Rather, their contributions shifted from

them to being extended through their male kin.[30]

Marcia Hermanson reaffirms that the onset of issues pertaining to a female

theology and scholarship began only after the Prophet's death. This coincides with the

perception of gender roles within Islamic theology is impacted by structural impediments

and societal expectations that prioritize male scholarship and authority.[31] Fatima Mernissi

indicates the emergence of a hadith stating, "Never will succeed such a nation as makes a

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[28] Zainab Alwani, "Muslim Women as Religious Scholars: A Historical Survey," in *Muslima Theology The Voices of Muslim Women Theologians,* eds. Ednan Aslan, Marcia Hermansen and Elif Madani (Peter Lang AG, 2013).

[29] Alwani, "Muslim Women," 49.

[30] Alwani, "Muslim Women," 56.

[31] Ulrika Mårtensson and Eli-Anne Vongraven Eriksen, "Accurate Knowledge: Implications of 'Lived Islamic Theology' for the Academic Study of Islamic Disciplines," *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations* 29, no. 4 (2018).

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women their ruler" contributed towards growing discrimination towards women in general, which would begin to extend to the sphere of scholarship.[32] By hearing this hadith, one may assume that its function is meant to hinder women's aspirations for leadership positions. However, there is a disagreement regarding the meaning of the hadith, especially around the issue of what is meant by "leadership." These contentions eventually grew into theological justifications, which excluded women from learning over concerns of gender mixing due to potential seduction by male jurists.

A core concern of this stemmed from the belief that jurists thought the interactions between men and women could lead to "moral decay and deviation" from the societal norms prescribed in Islamic texts.[33] This view was reinforced by cultural customs that connected modesty to gendered spaces.[34] In this regard, modesty was equivalent to being hidden or not in the public realm outside of familial obligations, which was the gendered expectation. This premise still exists today in certain cultures, and greatly influences the way in which Muslim women interact with religious obligations and institutions. We can infer, this may also shape the way religious leaders of said institutions choose to integrate women and male religious institution hose to integrate women and male teachers within their communities, especially when assessing the cultural background of the institution at hand. Similar to the issues of gender-mixing,

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[32] Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1975). Her chapter on the hadith is reprinted in "A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Is lam," in *Liberal Islam,* ed. Charles Kurzman, 112-126 (New York: Oxford, 1998)

[33]Ade Daharis, "The Role and Position of Women in the Family According to Islamic Law: A Critical Study of Contemporary Practices," *LITERATUS* 5, no. 2 (Oct. 2023): [Page #], https://doi.org/10.37010/lit.v5i2.1475

[34] Daharis, "The Role and Position of Women in the Family According to Islamic Law."

Hermansen brings up the issues of informalized clergy and its impact upon genders. She writes:

> Since Islam does not have a formalized clergy, there were no strictly theological barriers to leadership. But without an ordination process, the question of authority and legitimacy, and who 'counted' as a religious leader remained vague. Unlike their sisters in other Abrahamic faiths, Muslim women did not have a formalized body of clergy to rail against for systemic patriarchy or to turn to for legitimacy.[35]

Hermansen's commentary provides context to some of the issues experience by women in Muslim communities today. It seems as if not much has changed for women, in of being recognized as a formal authority. As an example, there is currently no authoritative body within the United States that dictates how each mosque or nonprofit can determine what a "scholar" is. This is not an issue just for women, but a larger issue in general of the American Muslims communities within the West. Since there is no official spiritual pedagogy that is widely accepted between all communities, each community determines what they deem appropriate. This can often be subjective or guided by things other than religious scholarliness, such as cultural influences or spiritual methodologies. As an example, often one may see a religious leader, primarily male being called "*Shaykh*" or, "*Imam*" when they both may have the same credentials or qualifications or have lesser qualifications than themselves or female counterparts.

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[35] Marcia Hermansen, "Introduction: The New Voices of Muslim Women Theologians," in *The New Voices of Muslim Women Theologians* eds. Ednan Aslan, Marcia Hermansen and Elif Madani (Peter Lang AG, 2013), https://doi.org/10.3726/978-3-653-03238-3.

A Subset: Surveying the Landscape of Female Religious Leadership
in the United States

Viewing the current landscape of Sunni Muslim institutions in the United States is important to understand the depth of the decline of the presence of female religious authorities in these spaces. To exemplify this through an example, I chose eight Sunni Islamic seminaries in the United States that provide one or two-year Islamic study intensive programs for analysis. These programs are focused on providing Arabic and traditional Islamic science course study options that occur in- for both men and women. These seminaries varied between geographical regions in the United States and were chosen to showcase the variety of geographical accessibility and offerings to the American Muslim Sunni Community. A basic analysis of male to female faculty ratios were calculated based upon information on each seminary's website. This was compared to enrollment rates of male and female students for specific programs. Enrollment rates and ratios were obtained by phone calls with faculty and staff from institutions since this information is not publicly available. I acknowledge some information is missing and still coming in. All information regarding enrollment for this year is approximate. A common theme when collecting data was the fact that students may drop in and out of programs throughout the year due to personal circumstances, so the numbers may slightly shift. Data will be amended upon receiving information.

Diagram 1.1 – Full time Faculty among American Muslim Religious Seminaries offering in person programs.

Institution	Program of Analysis	Location	Male Scholars	Female Scholars	Total Scholars Count	% Female Scholars	% Female Students
Dar Al Qasim Seminary	Sheikh Al Hind One Year Program	Chicago, IL	21	1	22	4.5%	32%
Maqasid Seminary	Classical Arabic.& Islamic Studies	Allentown, PA	7	0	7	0%	
Miftaah Institute	Miftaah Seekers	Warren, MI	22	0	22	4.5%	
Madinah Institute	Year One Program	Atlanta, GA	10	1	11	9.1%	
Tanwir Seminary	Prophetic Guidance Year One Program	Fairfax, VA	2	0	2	0%	60%
Dar As Salaam Seminary	Tanwir Intensive One Year	Chicago, IL	12	0	12	0%	
Tayseer Seminary	Year One Islamic Studies Program	Knoxville, TN	4	1	5	20%	
Qalam Seminary	Year One Arabic Intensive Program	Dallas, TX	12	5	17	35%	65%
Total			90	8	98		

This data was gathered preliminarily to highlight a subset that exists within the Muslim community, showcasing the discrepancies between male and female scholarship. From this data, we see there is a significantly smaller integration of female scholars across these institutions. For the seminaries who were able to provide enrollment

information on there is a considerable population of women attendees in these institutions, yet little to no integration of women in lead teaching positions, If they exist, they may not be featured on public websites. As an example of this discrepancy, in my conversation with the Dar Al Qasim representative, I was informed that their year one program specifically only same gendered teachers for the first year. The women who teach here are considered *Ustadha's,* but this information is not reflected on their website. From this demarcation, I understood that *Ustadha* here is of less caliber than *"Shaykh"* or *"Mufti"* through Dar Al Qasims hierarchical methodology of religious authority. One can infer that the lack of data available could imply that the gender of faculty may not be seen as a metric of utmost importance when formulating programs from the aspect of same-gendered spiritual modeling. Rather, it seems that said institutions are more concerned with ensuring their faculty is the "most knowledgeable", though this has been discussed as not mutually exclusive to women. Interestingly, This subset study highlights the challenge of women in religious leadership positions as they connect to students, from the lens of spiritual modeling. While female students are enrolled, they do not necessarily have a female teacher to model after or approach directly. From the aspect of knowledge acquisition, this may not pose an issue. However, from the aspect of spiritual modeling and the implementation of that knowledge, this may pose a larger factor. The lack of female scholarship opportunities also presents the dilemma of female students not having a pipeline to share their studies or take on positions once they graduate.

CHAPTER 3

MURABBI MODELS

Introduction

This section provides an overview of frameworks that assert the necessitation of

female scholarship. Liturgical evidence from the Qur'ān, and supplemental evidence

from the *Sunnah* are listed to emphasize the divine commandment encourage women to

seek and teach knowledge is introduced. This is supplemented by three theoretical

frameworks discussing the importance of modeling and morality as the objective of

Islamic education.

Scriptural Evidence

Religious scholarship in Islam is based on the revealed sources including the

Qur'ān and the collected Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, which explains the

Qur'anic teachings in lived action.[36] Muslims regard the Qur'ān as the ultimate reference

for human affairs and believe it to be safeguarded by God from distortion.[37] The Qur'ān,

which literally means "The Recital," refers to the Islamic sacred text that was revealed to

the Prophet Muhammad by God through the Angel Gabriel. The Qur'ān consists of one

hundred and fourteen chapters, each consisting of varying stylistic nature of verses

regarding all aspects of the human existence and explaining Gods commandments. The

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[36] Zainab Alwani, "Muslim Women as Religious Scholars: A Historical Survey," in *Muslima Theology: The Voices of Muslim Women Theologians*, eds. Ednan Aslan, Marcia Hermansen and Elif Madani (Peter Lang AG, 2013), 46

[37] Alwani, "Muslim Women as Religious Scholars."

Sunnah, literally translates to a way, or path of life. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ life is considered the Sunnah that Sunni Muslims follow, to provide a lived example of the Qur'ān and its higher objectives in action. It is infamously stated by the Prophet Muhammad's wife, Aisha, that he was considered "The Walking Qur'ān."[38] The Qur'an regards the Prophet as a role model for humanity[39]. Hence from the perspective of Islamic jurisprudence, the authentic Prophetic Sunnah explains, clarifies, and demonstrates how to implement the teachings of the Qur'an.[40]

The Qur'ān greatly sets the foundation for both men and women to seek and learn about Islam for themselves. While there are numerous Qur'ānic verses that discuss the importance of seeking out God, there are a few that call a Muslim to seek knowledge specifically, some of which are mention for reference.

> Allah will raise in rank those of you who have faith and those who have been given knowledge. (Qur'ān Chapter 58:11)[41]

> Are they better, or those who worship their Lord, devoutly in the hours of the night, prostrating and standing, fearing the Hereafter and hoping for the Mercy of their Lord? Say, 'Oh Prophet', Are those who know (religion) equal to those who do not know? None, will be mindful of this, except people of reason. (Qur'ān Chapter 39:9)[42]

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[38] *Sahih Muslim* 746, "The Prophet's Character Was the Noble Qur'ān," reprinted in Daily Hadith Online, August 11, 2012, https://www.abuaminaelias.com/dailyhadithonline/2012/08/11/prophet-character-quran/

[39] Qur'ān 33:21

[40] Alwani, Zainab. "Muslim Women as Religious Scholars," 46.

[41] Qur'ān 58:11

[42] Qur'ān 39:9

Seeking knowledge and teaching knowledge are considered worthy of merit. This is further reinforced through numerous *ahadith*, where the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ shared the benefits of knowledge and teaching. While there are many that reflect the benefit of teaching, I have selected three to provide a general understanding revering nature of embarking upon the tradition of scholarship and learning.

> Abu Dadra reported: The Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, said:Verily, the angels lower their wings for the seeker of knowledge. The inhabitants of the heavens and earth, even the fish in the depths of the water, seek forgiveness for the scholar. The virtue of the scholar over the worshiper is like the superiority of the moon over the stars. The scholars are the inheritors of the Prophets. They do not leave behind gold or silver coins, but rather they leave behind knowledge. Whoever has taken hold of it has been given an abundant share.[43]

> Anas ibn Malik reported: The Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, said, "Seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim."[44]

> Narrarated by Uthman: The Prophet said: The Best among you (Muslims) are those who learn the Qur'ān and teach it.[45]

From these liturgical proofs, it is understood that seeking knowledge to teach it holds immense spiritual reward, and is a religious responsibility upon Muslims. The extent to which one can engage in it, however, is left to the individual. The purpose of knowing God is not merely an act or intellectual exercise but rather a means of reflecting upon oneself and obtaining a better understanding their greater purpose of their time in

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[43] *Sunan Abī Dāwūd* 3641, "Regarding the Virtue of Knowledge," reprinted in Sunnah.Com, https://sunnah.com/abudawud:3641.

[44]*Sunan Ibn Mājah* 224, "The Virtue of the Scholars, and Encouragement to Seek Knowledge," reprinted in Sunnah.Com, https://sunnah.com/ibnmajah:224.

[45]*Sahih al-Bukhari* 5027, "The Best Among You are Those Who Learn the Qur'an and Teach It," reprinted in Sunnah.Com, https://sunnah.com/bukhari:5027.

the world. While this is affirmed through many verses, one of particular benefit to this discussion regards the interaction of the Qur'ān as a source of knowledge. Do they not reflect upon the Qur'ān, or are there locks upon their hearts?[46] This premise confirms that contemplating and interacting with the Qur'ān, serves as a means to unlock ones heart to seeing for itself how it behaves and understands the world. Without the engagement of understanding the Qur'ān and its desired approaches to life, a person lives in stagnation. Therefore, the teaching and engagement of this is critical to both teacher and student. While the Qur'ān is considered the ultimate authority, The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ affirms that his existence is the role model to be learned from. He states, "Verily, Allah did not send me to be harsh or obstinate, rather He sent me to teach and to put at ease."[47]

The Qur'ān presents itself as a source text meant to be embodied by believers, serving as a safeguard in the world. Additionally, the Prophet Muhammad is established as the spiritual model for Muslims to follow in their faith and practice. Given these foundational principles, it is essential to understand how the Qur'ān calls women to its study and teaching as a sacred text. It is also important to explore how women should model themselves after the Prophet. Shaykh Akram Nadawi writes in The Muhaddithat:

> "The Qur'ān as a text, refers to women and men generally, and specifically. It refers to women as distinct beings, each called individually to God just like men. does not associate womanhood with inferiority or deficiency of any sort, or any

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[46] Qurān 47:24, Khattab.

[47] Ilyas Patel, "Is it Permissible to Teach in a Non-Muslim Public School?" Seekers Guidance, October 30, 2022, https://seekersguidance.org/uncategorized/is-it-permissible-to-teach-in-a-non-muslim-public-school/.

primordial sin, or any disposition to sin not also found in men. By calling women to Islam directly, the book compels men to recognize them (women) establishes for women a distinct legal individuality through rights of property and inheritance and marriage contracts. The independently and that this is the grounds upon which the final judgement of their actions is based is the case for men. One can infer that Gods Law does not place a barrier of women acquiring knowledge to understand and teach Islam. It is a duty for them to do so, just as it is for the man."[48]

This section implies that there are not barriers for women to be teachers of knowledge because God divinely calls women to Islam and knowledge. Dr. Alwani in her writing Muslim Women as Religious Scholars: A Historical Survey, supports the notion of women being called to teach religion, specifically citing a specific narration calling the women of the Prophets household to teach the community. She references the Qurānic verse "Remember [and proclaim] what is recited in your houses of God's revelations and wisdom (wadhkurna mayutlafi buyutikunna min ayatAllah wa-l-hikma) for God is all subtle, all aware (innaAllah kana latifI chabir)."[49]

Here she explains that the command of the wives of the Prophet as its subject and means not only remember, but "recite, read, make known, and publish the message." One can extrapolate that this required the *Ummahat Al Mumineen* to embody the messages they were receiving with the Prophet within their own essences. Reciting and reading infers they were asked to prioritize memorizing Qur'ānic passages and teachings. The concept of make known can be understood as a commandment of teaching directly. Therefore, the *Ummahat Al Mumineen* are the first examples of women who were actively engaged in teaching. The above verse is directly followed by a strong

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[48] Qurān 33:34, Khattab.

[49] Alwani, "Muslim Women as Religious Scholars,"48.

confirmation of the equal merit of men and women who are submissive to God (al-muslimin wa-l-muslimat): Truly, submissive men and submissive women, believing men and believing women, obedient men and obedient women, truthful men and truthful women, steadfast men and steadfast women, humble men and humble women, charitable men and charitable women, fasting men and fasting women, the men who guard their private parts and the women who guard, and the men who remember God often and the women who remember—God has prepared for them forgiveness and a rich reward."[50] Dr. Alwani comments on these verses:

> The verses mentioned above serve to illustrate the responsibility that God bestowed upon the women of the Prophet's household as well as the equal plane upon which God placed men and women of Muslim character.[51] The verse (33:34) highlights their duty to remember, proclaim, and share divine revelations and wisdom. This command underscores the historical precedent for women as teachers and scholars within Islam, positioning the wives of the Prophet as the earliest female religious educators. The subsequent verse (33:35) further strengthens the argument for gender equity by explicitly listing both men and women as equal in their devotion, obedience, humility, and righteousness. By pairing men and women together in each characteristic, the Qur'ān affirms their equal spiritual and moral worth. This passage serves as a direct counter to any claims of inherent gender-based moral deficiency or inferiority.

The recognition of the Prophet's wives as transmitters of knowledge set a foundation for future generations of female scholars. Although their initial involvement may have been influenced by their proximity to the Prophet, their participation was neither incidental nor diminished over time. Instead, it established a framework within which women could engage in the intellectual and religious spheres of Islam. These verses directly challenge the contemporary narrative that relegate women to secondary

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[50] Qurān 33:35, Khattab.

[51] Alwani, "Muslim Women as Religious Scholars," 48.

roles in religious discourse. They also underscore the depth of significance the *Ummahat Al Mumineen* played as scholars and educators. Deductively, the two verses paired together can been seen as a divine framework that upholds the responsibility of equity within scholarship as a theological concept.

The above section provided an overview of the religious authority for women granted by Sunni Islamic traditional sources of law and spirituality to engage in scholarly pursuits. With this we can now venture into understanding the multidimensional aspects of what is required of scholarship and teaching. This is essential for this thesis, as it supports the notion that merely sitting in a class or attending a lecture is not sufficient for the grandeur objectives of traditional Islamic knowledge.

Conceptual Framework

Spiritual Modeling

Doug Oman and Carl E. Thoresen proposed the concept of Spiritual Modeling, as a way of understanding the totality of spiritual formation and individual religious acquisition. They argue that understanding and facilitating spiritual modeling experiences may be a key, but relatively neglected role of traditional religion and contemporary spirituality[52]. Central to spiritual modeling is the concept of observational spiritual learning. This is how learning of spiritually relevant skills or behaviors through observing other people.[53]

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[52] Carl E. Thoresen and Doug Oman, "Spiritual Modeling: A Key to Spiritual and Religious Growth," *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 13 no. 3 (2003):149.

[53] Oman and Thoresen, "Spiritual Modeling," 150.

This model was an extension of Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, which posits that people learn through observational learning and limitations.[54] He suggested that all religions have attempted to foster the following four processes to promote spiritual growth. These four main processes govern observational learning: attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation.[55] Observational spiritual learning can be facilitated by positive emotional experiences.[56] This is critical because a positive emotional experience that a person gets from spiritual modeling can lead them to the stages of attention and reproduction, that depend at certain stages upon the broadening of "thought-action- repertories."[57] Broadened awareness requires one to give attention to the spiritual modeled practice that was observed, which will then affect how it is plausibly reproduced [58] The authors provide the example using the idea of loving thy neighbor requires a broadened awareness of the neighbor themselves.

People can acquire abstract principles but remain in quandary about how to implement them if they have not had the benefit of illustrative exemplars[59] Spiritual modeling emphasizes the idea that religious knowledge is to be transformative, not just

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[54] Albert Bandura, *Social Foundations of Thought and Action: A Social Cognitive Theory* (Prentice Hall, 1985).

[55] Bandura, *Social Foundations.*

[56] Martin E. P. Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, "Positive Psychology: An Introduction," *American Psychologist* 55, no. 1 (2000): 5-14. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066x.55.1.5.

[57] Oman and Thoresen, "Spiritual Modeling," 154.

[58] Oman and Thoresen, "Spiritual Modeling," 154.

[59] Oman and Thoresen, "Spiritual Modeling," 154.

intellectually, but through a character endeavor, because this in itself is a proponent of religious values and beliefs.[60]

The framework identifies components that contribute to spiritual modeling, including the influence of role models, the contextual factors that shape spiritual experiences, and how individuals internalize spiritual values and practices. This modeling can occur in various environments, such as family, community, and religious institutions, highlighting the importance of social interactions in spiritual growth. Furthermore, the framework acknowledges the increasing pluralization of spiritual interests in modern society, suggesting that spiritual modeling is not confined to traditional religious practices but can also encompass a wide range of spiritual expressions.[61]

In addition to its theoretical underpinnings, Oman asserts that this framework can to organizational work dynamics. Workplace spirituality can improve organizational behavior and employee engagement. This suggest that fostering a spiritually supportive environment can enhance overall workplace dynamics.[62]This is of critical importance in Chapter five, when providing recommendations of how religious institutions can be better utilize female scholars.

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[60] Eknath Easwaran, *Meditation*, 2nd ed. (Tomales, Calif.: Nilgiri ; Hi Marketing, 2001)

[61] Oman and Thoresen, "Spiritual Modeling," 156.

[62] Faki Ali Malengo and Hazizan Md Noon, "Teachers' Perceptions on the Concept of Murabbi in Islamic Integrated Schools in Zanzibar," *Intenrational Journal of Recent Research in Social Sciences and Humanities* 4, no. 4 (2017), 20.

Murabbi

This section outlines the concept of the *Murabbi*. The definition was proposed by Malengo and Noon in their article Teachers' Perceptions on the Concept of *Murabbi* in Islamic Integrated Schools in Zanzibar. They eloquently articulate the definition of the *Murabbi* and its significance in functionality of teaching, which will be the definition used when referring to the characteristic of a *Murabbi* as it pertains to the ways scholars should function as educators with their students. Malengo and Noon write:

> A murabbi is a person who combines a life of learning with a life of virtue, and hence an ideal person to learn from. Secondly, A murabbi is the one who can show what difference the truth of the theoretical knowledge would make to someone who accepts it. Third, he is the one who has high ability of asking further questions, interpreting, understanding and judging both routines and ordinary experiences in the light of the truth of knowledge. In this and other appropriate contexts, when the term used, it also includes „she" unless it is stated otherwise. He is a living proof of why one should accept a body of knowledge, why and how truth of that knowledge matters. Every murabbi tries to bridge the gap between knowing and acting. Knowledge that can only be communicated through personal interaction with the students. The personal knowledge is important because it can guide his judgements regarding matters and experiences of everyday life. And this is what education is all about. [61]

The concept of the *Murabbi*, an imparter of lived knowledge and wisdom, highlights the significance of women as inheritors and givers of knowledge. Since the Murabbi is a lived example of the value of knowledge and practical application, female Murabbi's are crucial for demonstrating lived knowledge to women in a relatable and accessible way. A component of the function of the *murabbi* is the idea of constructing knowledge through personal interactions with students. These type of interpersonal relationships can help guide students in practical knowledge and life skills.

Adab and Education

Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, a Malaysian philosopher, produced a holistic

approach to education through his work, the Islamic Concept of Education. This

framework weaves together the idea of *ta'dib* as a central objective of educational

endeavors. *Ta'dib* is defined as moral education, with a focus on upbringing and

traditional Islamic education, and the ethical responsibilities of imparting knowledge as

it relates to an individuals growth. Contrasted to the concept of *tarbiyyah* as the central

theme to Islamic education, Attas claims that *ta'dib* is much more inclusive of the greater

goal of Islamic education. He asserts the goal of education should be to cultivate morally

upright generations, who are aware of their responsibilities towards themselves and

society. In doing so, they can promote personal development and social harmony[63].

His definition of education is here for reference:

> The recognition and acknowledgement, progressively instilled into man, of the
> proper places of things in the order of creation, such that it leads to the
> recognition and acknowledgement of the proper place of God in the order of
> being and existence.[64]

Within this definition, the following excerpt includes his definition of Adab as it relates

to education, thus the concept of *ta'dib*.

> Adab is the discipline of body, mind and soul; the discipline that assures the
> recognition and acknowledgement of one's proper place in relation to one's
> physical, intellectual and spiritual capacities and potentials; the recognition and
> acknowledgement of the reality that knowledge and being are ordered
> hierarchically according to their various levels (maraàtib) and degrees

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[63] Muhammad Arsyad, "Konsep Manusia Dan Pendidikan Dalam Pandangan Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas: Catatan Awal," *SIASAT: Journal of Religion, Social, Cultural and Political Sciences* 3, no. 2 (July 2019).

[64] Al-Attas, *The Concept of Education In Islam A Framework for an Islamic Philosophy of Education* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, 1999), 20.

(darajat).Adab is a reflection of wisdom, and with respect to society.Adab is knowledge that preserves man from errors of judgement. Adab is recognition and acknowledgement of the reality that knowledge and being are ordered hierarchically according to their various grades and degrees of rank, and of one's proper place in relation to that reality and to one's physical, intellectual and spiritual capacities and potentials. [65]

Al-Attas's educational philosophy encourages a more holistic view, where the objective of teaching a student is to nurture them to become 'good' individuals. Those who teach should strive to focus on nurturing character and instilling ethical values to help students recognize their purpose in life and their connection to God, society, and the natural world[66].This vision is one that infers a civilizational aim rather than merely an intellectual one.[67] Thus, through *ta'dib*, Al-Attas believes it can transform educational practices to foster not only intellectual capabilities but also character development that aligns with Islamic values and ethics. Al-Attas further refers to the statement of the Holy Prophet:

"My Lord has instilled *adab* in me (*addabani*) and so made my education (*ta'dibi*) most excellent." Al-Attas has carefully translated the verb *addabani* in that hadith as has educated me, and has rendered *ta'dib* as education, hence: "My Lord has educated me and so made my education most excellent." Linguistically, *Adab* refers to manners or etiquette. In this instance however, Al-Attas renders *addabani* as "has educated me."[68] This suggests that *adab* is deeply connected to holistic education. *Adab*

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[65] Al-Attas, *The Concept of Education in Islam,*22.

[66] Muhibuddin Muhibuddin, "Gagasan Islamisasi Ilmu Pengetahuan: Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas Dan Intelektual Muslim Indonesia," *At-Tafkir* 15, no. 2 (2022).

[67] Nisa Lisyani, Sobar Ghazal, and Ahmed, "Analisis Konsep Pendidikan Islam Menurut Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas Dengan Orientasi Pendidikan Islam," *Bandung Conference Series: Islamic Education* 3, no. 1 (2023).

[68] Al-Attas, *The Concept of Education in Islam,* 26.

and education, are therefore inseparable from moral and ethical formation. In short, knowledge must cultivate good character, and good character must come from a moral education. This challenges secular educational approach, which separates moral development from knowledge acquisition as an inherit structure. As it pertains to my assertion, understanding this infers that scholarship should be accompanied by moral integrity and a sense of responsibility. Through this framework, the *adab* of education is maintained in a safe and empowering space where both religious and social concerns could be properly addressed between scholars and the lived realities and circumstances of the women they serve. This supports the notion that spiritual modeling incurs this aspect of moral education through its theory.

Summary

In summary, these three frameworks offer valuable insights into how we will approach the historical scholars of investigation, Aisha bint Abi Bakr ana Nana Asma'u, who are introduced in Chapter Four. Spiritual modeling emphasizes the role of modeling individuals through transformative character development with knowledge. Both women were examples of living piety and knowledge. In their existence, they provided a model that women observed and emulated from personally. The concept of the Murabbi directly correlates to the stylistic presentation of Aisha and Asma'u. in the ways they educated others. The concept of *ta'dib* as outlined by Syed Muhammad Naquib Al Attas, will further extend upon the educational methods of Asma'u and Aisha. Since a core component of this framework is centered alongside morality and character development

whilst learning, this will directly align with the teaching modalities and strategies of both women.

CHAPTER 4

HISTORICAL SPIRITUAL MODELS

Introduction

With an understanding of the factors influencing the rise and decline of female scholarship societally, as well as the conceptual frameworks highlighting the importance of women's' scholarship, I introduce the two historical figures for analysis. The first is Aisha bint Abi Bakr, the wife of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, known for her prolific hadith narration. She shaped early Islamic scholarship and is considered instrumental to the first Muslim community. The second is Nana Asma'u, the founder of the Yan Taru movement. She was a pioneering women scholar, poet, and educator in the Sokoto Caliphate. The following section will explore their early lives, the religious and socio-political contexts shaping their scholarship, and the distinctive ways in which they nurtured women's education.

Aisha: The Scholarly Narrator

Early Life

Aisha bint Abi Bakr was born in Mecca in 614 CE. She was the daughter of Abu Bakr As-Siddiqi, who was the first Rightly Guided Caliph after the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ death, and his closest friend. Aisah died in 678 CE in Medina and lived until age of 64, and while she had no biological children, she is considered a Matriarchal Mother of the religion. She was born into the tribe of the Qurāysh. Her father was deeply committed to the Prophet's mission and along with her family, played a critical in the development

and proliferation of Islam throughout the Prophet Muhammad's lifetime and beyond. She was born approximately five years into the beginning of Prophethood. From her household, she grew up observing firsthand the struggles and commitment of her father and those to the causes supporting the Prophetic message. She herself was immersed in that commitment, being a part of one of the first families to convert to Islam.

Aisha was eventually married to the Prophet and was his third wife. While there is contention over Aisha's age within the marriage of the Prophet, this is not a focal point of reference for this paper. Rather, due to her youthfulness and exposure of Islam from a young age, she observed the dispensation of Islam over time. She was praised for her intellect, memory, and general demeanor. She was an astute student, one who centered her understanding around the words of God, and set about to best understand the Prophet's words in their light.[69] Throughout her service to Islam, Aisha was known to have narrated over two thousand *ahadith*, and is considered one of the most prolific hadith narrators within Sunni Islamic history. [70]This is the most hadith narrated of any between men and women when looking at the Sunni Islam Hadith tradition. Considering that a foundational aspect of the Sunni Islamic legal tradition developed in the eighth century is informed from hadith literature, Aisha's contributions are innumerable.

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[69]Sofia Rehman, "Aisha and the Ḥadīth Tradition an Emergent Methodology," in *Gendering the Ḥadīth Tradition*: Recentering the Authority of Aisha, Mother of the Believers (Oxford University PressOxford, 2024), 20.

[70] Nuriddeen Knight, *40 Hadith of Our Mother 'Aisha*, 2nd ed. (pub. by author, 2018).

Authority as Female Religious Leader

Aisha was seen as an authoritative source of Islamic knowledge for the first community of Muslims, and for generations afterwards who inherit the Sunni Muslim tradition, primarily through her role of hadith transmission. Aisha's methodology in transmitting hadith exemplifies a critical engagement with the tradition. She employed a self-defined approach to assess the authenticity and applicability of hadith in relation to the Quran and her understanding of Islamic teachings, which underscores her analytical capabilities.[71] This can be inferred in various ways, due to her positionality as one of the *Ummahat al Mumineen*. This was a honorific title given to the mothers of the believers, who are considered to be the Prophet Muhammad's wives. As stated in Chapter Two by Dr. Alwani, God divinely commands the *Ummahat Al Mumineen* to teach the community. Therefore, others perceived her as authoritative considering that they believed in God's commandments as a creedal principle to obey. Additionally, there are numerous *ahadith* regarding the Merit of Aisha's teaching ability.

Mentions of Merit Through Hadith

The following are hadith that revere Aisha, the Prophet's Wife as a Prolific Teacher:

> Abu Musa reported: We never had a problem occur to us, the companions of the Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, but that we would ask Aisha and find that she knew something about it.[72]

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[71] Sofia Rehman, "Aisha and the Ḥadīth Tradition an Emergent Methodology."

[72] *Sunan al-Tirmidhī* 3883

> Abdul Malik ibn 'Umayr reported: Musa ibn Talha said, "I have not seen anyone more eloquent than Aisha, may Allah be pleased with her."[73]

Aisha was accepted as an authoritative figure through this commandment, but also through social acceptance as the Prophet Muhammad's ﷺ wife. Her firsthand accounts of their interactions together in their home life were invaluable insights to the Prophetic community. Additionally, the surrounding companions viewed her as someone of keen intellectual merit. In Chapter Two, I reference the hadith of Abu Musa, where the companions would know to go to Aisha if they had a question more than. This infers that while God gave her an authoritative position, the community also echoed that in their pursuit of seeking knowledge from her. It can also be understood that since the Prophet ﷺ gave his authority to Aisha through this divine commandment, other companions would not have issues of her authority of religious teachings. More importantly, Aisha was a scholar who discoursed with the companions, if she believed they were narrating and understanding incorrectly. Sofia Rehman's book, *Gendering the Hadith Tradition: Recentering the Authority of Aisha, Mother of the Believers*, proves numerous examples of how Aisha challenged understandings of hadith narrations and Qurānic verses between companions, displaying her level of authority. Provided below is a synopsis pertaining to one interaction of narration contentions between herself and Umar n. Al Khattab, which is paraphrased below:

> Umar came upon a man, Amr, and asked him what he will be doing with a garment he had in possession while in the market. Later, Umar comes across Amr

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[73] *Sunan al-Tirmidhī* 3884, Grade: Sahih (authentic) according to Al-Albani.

again and asked him what came of the garment. Amr replies that he gave the garment to his wife. Umar questioned his understanding of charity, implying that he could not give it to his wife, if he wanted the garment to be considered charitable. Umar is inferring here, his understanding that a gift to a wife is not considered a charitable act. Amr asks to go to Aisha, where he asked her (regarding the garment) "I implore to you by God, did you hear the Messenger of God(the Prophet) say, Whatever you bestow upon them (womenfolk) that is charity for you?" Aisha responded with "by God, yes! By God yes! Umar then speaks to himself rhetorically and asks where he was at the time of this, and infers he was busy at the market during this incident.[74]

This is an important example to help understand of rank and status amongst the Companions that clearly established a hierarchy based on understanding and knowledge, at the top of which were situated the wives of the Prophet, and from amongst whom Aisha was most exceptional and most knowledgeable.[75] When thinking of the etiquette of display, Amr, the companion in question, was not frustrated or upset by Umar's questioning of him. Considering that Umar was considered more "senior" than him in terms of his proxy and relationship with the Prophet he did not deter his concern, and instead, recommended going to Aisha to seek authority from Aisha. who verifies it. While Aisha is correcting Umar's understanding, she does so with an etiquette. Umar then obeys her authority. His submittance shows a great deal of humility and obedience to the recognized authority of Aisha an *Ummahat Al Mumineen*. This highlights the social dynamics and hierarchical structure among the Companions, where the greater concern was not the desire to be "right" but rather, the desire to ensure they had an accurate understanding of the Prophet's words. Her ability to contextualize prophetic sayings gave

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[74] Rehman, "Aisha and the Ḥadīth Tradition an Emergent Methodology."

[75] Rehman, "Aisha the Jurist," in *Gendering the Ḥadīth Tradition*: Recentering the Authority of Aisha, Mother of the Believers (Oxford University Press, 2024).

Aisha way to nurture the ethical and spiritual life of the Muslim community. Much of the legal jurisprudential sciences that begin in the 1st and 3rd century, and hadith sciences that develop throughout the 2nd-8th century are largely in part contributed to Aisha's discourse and stylistic methodology of hadith preservation and teaching.

Accessibility

Aisha's teaching modalities were vast, and she spent time teaching both men and women. Dr. Akram Nadawi cites the ways in which Aisha would teach, which is listed below:

> Women would visit her at her home to learn from Aisha. She would also visit women in their homes, and attend women – specific gatherings to impart knowledge. She was often asked female-specific questions on issues of intimacy and sexual relations, menstruations, dynamics after childbirth, and physical descriptions of the Prophet Muhammad. She prioritized answering these questions,but would also encourage women to not over think about the specifics. She would visit women and attend women gatherings in their homes or respective centers. Lastly, she taught men directly in public spaces.[76]

Aisha's availability to the community was multifaceted. Her pedagogical approached utilized the concept of discussion and dialogue with those who came to her as a primary way of teaching, which aligned with the Prophets way of teaching, as described earlier in Chapter Two. Throughout the discourse of teaching, Aisha played a nurturing role to both male and female companions. Aisha's engagement in Hadith and her role as a mentor offered early Muslim women a source of empowerment that challenged the

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[76] Muhammad Akram Nadwi, "Women as Seekers and Students of Hadith," chap. 2 in *Al-Muhaddithat : the Women Scholars in Islam* (Oxford: Interface Publications, 2016).

prevailing notions of exclusion from religious discourse.[77] Due to her accessible nature,

she was able to interact with women regarding women specific issues and build levels of

trust and understanding.

Nana Asma'u: A Case of Decentralized Knowledge

Introduction

Nana Asma'u was a devout Muslim, spiritual matriarch, scholar, poet, and

politician. She was the daughter of Usman dan Fodio, *The Shehu* during the Sokoto

Caliphate in the early 1800's. Asma'u descended from a lineage of Islamic scholarship

and political engagement. Her writings were used to help *the Shehu* break the practice of

Islam in Husaland, increase conversion rates in relation to the uprising of the *bori cult*

and help the newly reformed community of faithful Muslims maintain their Islamic

practices.[78] She is most widely known for her significant contributions to Islamic

scholarship, women's education, and creating systems of learning and spiritual growth

through the development of the *Yan Taru*, translating to "The Associates." She also

transformed the tradition of women as the first teachers of Islamic religious knowledge

through this system. Nana Asma'u educated children, men, and women, through the

Yan-Taru, a school of women teachers who traveled to rural areas to improve Hausa

women's educations.[79]

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[77] Asma Sayeed, *Women and the Transmission of Religious Knowledge in Islam* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015

[78] Sayeed, *Women and the Transmission of Religious Knowledge.*

[79] Alaine Hutson, "Asma'u, Nana," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

The formation of the Yan Taru provides insight on how women scholars and their students of knowledge impacted the identity development of women connectedness. The following section provides insights to Asmau's upbringing into her scholarly life, providing socio-political circumstances that bolstered her as a spiritual figurehead for women. It also reflects her original works and poetry to disseminate knowledge, and highlights the system of the Yan Taru.

Early Life

Nana Asma'u was born in 1793 in Northern Nigeria, and died in 1864, at approximately seventy- one years old. She was the daughter of the Fulfulde-speaking Fulani Muslim Scholar, Usman De Fodio. The name Fodio identified him as belonging to a family long associated with Islamic scholarship. He was nicknamed "the Shehu", and descended from the Toronkawa clan, which converted to Islam as early as the ninth century. The Shehu was known as a political leader and excellent scholar, who was also invested in carrying out the tradition of teaching and learning of Islamic education and spiritual practices.[80] He taught his children the practices of the Sufi Qadariyya order. While being spiritually cultivated, the Shehu ensured that Asma'u was well educated in the tradition of the Qur'ānic and spiritual sciences. [81]

When Asma'u was five years old, the establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate of 1808 began to take shape, where it was customary that she would begin to attend a

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[80] Jean Boyd and Beverly Mack, *The Collected Works of Nanu Asma'u Daughter of Usman 'dan Fodiyo (1793-1864),* African Historical Sources (Michigan State University Press, 1997), 18.

[81]Jean Boyd and Beverly Mack, *Educating Muslim Women : the West African Legacy of Nana Asma'u 1793-1864* (Leicestershire: Kube Publishing, 2013).

village school in Degel. She practiced writing and memorizing Quran, and eventually

went on to memorize the Quran.[82] Her father betrothed Asma'u to Usman Gidado,

Asma'u's brother's best friend, whom she was well acquainted with. She married him at

the age of twelve, which was a customary tradition.[83] Her father was deeply concerned by

the educational opportunities of women and advocated for the Islamic education of

women. He strove to create systems and opportunities for women to be educated. This

encouragement would later develop the *Yan Taru* educational movement, spearheaded by

Asma'us concern for women throughout the caliphate.

The Yan Taru

The development of the Yan Taru as a system of education came as a response to

the cultural and religious emergences of the *Bori* cult, which competed for the allegiance

of women and girls in the Sokoto Caliphate. The emergence of the *Bori* was considered

dangerous to the Caliphate because of the stylistic way the *Bori* cult brought in followers.

Their primary mode of engagement was through music and instruments.[84] Additionally,

the *Bori* cult had a prominent matriarchal guide the *Inna,* who was considered the leader

of all women, who had special knowledge and inclinations for situations of need, despair

and remedies.[85] Out of fear of this guiding people astray from Islam, Asma'u recognized

she needed to make herself knowledgeable about the interests of women. She

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[82] Boyd and Mack, *The Collected Works of Nanu Asma'u,* 25

[83] Boyd and Mack, *The Collected Works of Nanu Asma'u,* 35.

[84] Boyd and Mack, *The Collected Works of Nanu Asma'u,* 95

[85] Boyd and Mack, *The Collected Works of Nanu Asma'u,* 98

strategically focused on befriending captives of war, welcoming them into the culture of the Caliphate. Rural women were the main captives, with little context of Islamic traditions.[86] These women were considered on the fringes. To combat the musical piece, Asma'u began to construct poetry for women to learn.

Nana Asma'u created the system of the *Yan Taru*, which translates to the Associates. The Associates themselves were referred to as *Jajis*. These delegates would represent their respective town or group of women. Their responsibility was to learn from Asma'u and then share what they had learned with their communities. Communities of impact saw their *Jaji's* as authoritative, knowledgeable, and spiritually insightful, with a mutual benefit in their exchange. Teachers were able to impart knowledge and carry on traditions while others could learn. Through the '*Yan Taru,* women formed circles of reading the Qur'an and other texts, promoting literacy and intellectual independence.[87]

This approach showcases Asmau's commitment to women's education but also broader societal implications as this fostered a culture of literacy and moral education among women that provided them with practical and spiritual tools for community integration.[88] Furthermore, her advancement of these educational practices allowed women to emerge as both scholars and spiritual guides, fundamentally transforming

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[86] Boyd and Mack, *The Collected Works of Nanu Asma'u in English,* 100.

[87] Beverly B. Mack, "Women in Muslim Northern Nigeria," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History* (Oxford University Press, 2022).

[88] Yolanda Covington Ward and Jeanette S. Jouili, eds., *Embodying Black Religions in Africa and Its Diasporas* (Duke University Press, 2021)

social expectations regarding female participation in Islam.[89] Stylistically, Asma'u wrote

and orated poems for the *Jaji's* to learn and take back to their communities. These poems

were written to ease the process of memorization of Islamic concepts. When thinking of

this in relation to the response music of the *Bori* cult, Asma'u's poetry utilized cultural

expression to deliver spiritual thoughts, legal guides, and intellectual ideas. The poem

below is considered to have been one of her first works, putting the women of Islam

firmly in the culture of art and knowledge. Boyd and Mack assert this may have been

compiled due to emergence of the *Bori* cult specifically, with a desire to squander their

influence as quickly as possible.[90] The poem is eighty-three lines long. The first the

fifteen verses were selected to showcase the type of poetry Asma'u orated. The format of

the poem directly reflects the way the authors showcased the preservation of the poem.

Sufi Women

Tawassuli Ga Mata Masu Albarak/Tindinore Labne

1836/1827-1252/1253

Language of Original: Hausa/Fulfide

Source of Text: Bella Sa'id Thesis p 253-259(Hausa)

Waziri Junaidu (Fulfulde)

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[89] Beverly Mack, "Nana Asma'u's Instruction and Poetry for Present-day American Muslimahs," *History in Africa* 38 (2011).

[90] Boyd and Mack, *The Collected Works of Nanu Asma'u in English,* 68.

1   Alhamdulilahi, we thank God

      We invoke Blessings on God's Messenger.

2   We invoke blessings on his Family and Companions

      And those who followed them, thus we gain self respect.

3   We invoke blessings on the Companions of the Prophet

      Who are now sanctified.

4   My aim in this poem is to tell you about the Sufis

      To the great one I bow in reverence.

5   I am mindful of them while I am still alive

      So that they will remember me on the Day of Resurrection.

6   The ascetics women are all sanctified

      For their piety they have been exalted.

7   They prayed ceaselessly to be delivered from the Fires of Hell

      Take this to heart my friends.

8   I have written this poem to assuage my heart:

      I remind you how they yearn for God.

9   I swear by God that I love them all

      In the name of the Prophet the Messenger of God.

10   The scent of their yearning engulfs me

      Its intensity exceeds the perfume of the musk.

11.   To the Prophets disciples who draw close to God

      I bring all the Muslims to Aisha.

12   Aisha, the noble daughter of Al-Siddiq

The believer, an honest man, Abubakar the esteemed.

13   To Muslim women I speak of Zainabu Jahshi

I cherish them, Lord of the World.

14   You made her to exceed, according to Aisha,

She was held in esteem by the Prophet.

15   I speak of all the mothers

Who were wives of the Prophet.[91]

Their commentary on the impact of the Sufi Women poem is below:

> Sufi Women was meant to make students feel involved in the mainstream of
> Islam, to feel part of a tradition of women's scholarship and piety which had its
> roots in the family of the Prophet himself Although it is addressed to women, the
> poem also implies that men should have a change of heart, for after all, women
> could not be expected to eschew worldly possessions if men did not. The poem is
> intended to mobilize women, to mutate their will and make them obedient to the
> Muslim ethic. Ultimately, therefore, it is about winning the political battle, and
> ensuring peace without the application of force. (follow-up citation needed)

In reading this poem, one can conclude that Asma'u sought to connect the *Jaji's* to the

greater legacy of female scholarship and piety as a means of instilling a sense of pride

and connectedness.

Intergenerational Approach

When assessing Asma'u's stylistic approach to education, it seems that many of

Asma'u's gatherings were intergenerational. Women were often surrounded by younger

girls in gatherings with Asma'u, as they travelled in groups to seek her knowledge

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[91] Boyd and Mack, *The Collected Works of Nanu Asma'u in English*, 72-74.

together. This may be because this was a social normative custom, since in a traditional patriarchal society, mothers were considered the caretakers of their children. Asma'u's educational framework relied heavily on peer mentoring, where older and more knowledgeable women educated younger ones. This method strengthened community bonds and reinforced the commitment to education among women.[92] This invites the idea of revitalizing intergenerational spaces for women specifically to gain access to scholarship. The Jaji's are still a functioning system of knowledge today, with branches throughout the United States and globally.

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[92] Alaine Hutson, "Asma'u, Nana," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Discussion of Findings

This section connects the previous chapters together. It takes the decline female

scholarship in Chapter Two, and brings into conversation the conceptual frameworks with

practical application. This practical application is viewed through the historical lens of

Asma'u and Aisha. By bridging these discussions together, the section aims to present a

cohesive analysis of the relationship between theory and practice. This integration

provides valuable understanding into the challenges and contributions of female

scholarship in historical and contemporary contexts.

Female Religious Authorities Matters

As mentioned in chapter three, God calls women of the Prophets household, the

Ummahat Al Mumineen to teach,[93] affirming women have a divine calling to scholarship.

In chapter three, this indicated she was a scholarly person given authority. This

demonstrates that female scholarship has a role in the teaching of religious matters, and

in it is both benefit to men and women who learn from women. When analyzing what

gave permittance to Aisha to be seen as authoritative, a few aspects are inferred. The first

is her unique authoritativeness was given to her by God. Her family lineage and the

societal precipitation. also contributed given their proximity to the Messenger of God. In

Chapter Three, Aisha was able to correct understandings of Prophetic sayings in a

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[93] Alwani, "Muslim Women as Religious Scholars,"48

constructive manner, where the objective was to preserve his teachings.[94] Much of the hadith literature tradition that the Sunni *maddhabs*[95] deploy are in large part due to Aisha's authoritative positions on Prophetic sayings. [96] As stated by Dr. Nadwi, women were generally seen as senior in terms of social order.[97] Her brilliance in specific fields was recognized by her contemporaries,[98] who placed great confidence in her and frequently sought her guidance in various matters. Additionally, the societal framework of the time acknowledged her authority, viewing her as divinely endowed with wisdom. The Muslim society saw her as an asset of value and wisdom, meaning they were receptive to her as an entity of knowledge. This is in contrast to my observations in the local Muslim community in America now, where there is an implicit understanding that women, if they are well learned, primarily function in minimized roles. These roles are ones such as teaching children or youth only. They do not at large teach other women, or men in public facing settings, and this is due in part to the lack of acceptance of their knowledge as authoritative. This brings the question, how can communities reframe the necessity of women in leadership positions.

Nana Asma'u, like Aisha, has aspects of authority given by her positionality in the Sokoto Caliphate.[99] These findings suggest a greater issue faced contemporarily.

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[94] Sofia Rehman, "Aisha and the Ḥadīth Tradition an Emergent Methodology."

[95] Term refers to the four jurisprudential schools of Islamic law which utilize hadith and Quran to determine rulings.

[96] Alwani, "Muslim Women as Religious Scholars," 47.

[97] Nadwi, *Al-Muhaddithat,* 140.

[98] Sofia Rehman, "Aisha and the Ḥadīth Tradition an Emergent Methodology.".

[99] Boyd and Mack, *The Collected Works of Nanu Asma'u,* 25.

While lineage may not necessarily be a factor that communities assess in the acquisition of female scholars, this finding infers there was an endorsement of their scholarship from male peers. This becomes an issue within local communities as it suggests that if this endorsement is not present, there are chances that qualified female scholars may not have the same accessibility to teach. This extends to cultural implications within Muslim spaces of how these spaces function.

As the daughter of Usman De Fodio who was also cultivated in the spiritual and Islamic sciences, a critical aspect of Asma'u exceptionality is firstly, through God divinely selecting her as a light for the world. Asma'u was given authority by the Caliphate as the daughter of the Shehu.[100]

Both Aisha and Asma'u were impactful based upon their divinely guided personalities, spiritual depth, and intellectual acumen. When thinking of these dynamics in relationship to the definition of the *Murabbi*, both demonstrated the transformative power of theoretical knowledge when accepted and applied, particularly through the refinement of narration itself,[101] and for Asma'u, in the translation and oration of poetry. They both exude the premise of knowledge transference is dependent upon personal interaction.[102] However, their recognition as learned authorities was equally recognized by the men in their communities. As a common theme, men of their communities saw it as a spiritually responsible act to follow the teachings of Aisha and Asma'u. They saw their knowledge as a necessity for the wellness of the whole collective, and a religious

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[100] Boyd and Mack, *The Collected Works of Nanu Asma'u,* 28

[101] Al-Attas, *The Concept of Education In Islam,* 20.

[102] Al-Attas, *The Concept of Education In Islam,* 21.

responsibility. In today's communities, for women to be recognized as authoritative figures in mixed-gender spaces—such as mosques or educational institutions—male endorsement of their scholarly contributions is crucial. This process begins among scholars and must extend to institutional acceptance at the board level. When a community collectively acknowledges someone, regardless of gender, as an authority, it not only instills confidence in the congregation but also strengthens trust in the scholarship, affirming the legitimacy of their knowledge and leadership. It begs the question of how the Muslim community sees the acknowledgement and benefit of female leadership in their communities as a spiritual responsibility.

Importance of Accessibility of Female Religious Authority

Both Asma'u and Aisha utilized different pedagogical modalities, and made themselves available to both men and women to learn from. Asma'u taught mainly through poetry and oration, while Aisha prioritized memorization and oration of Quran and hadith. Aisha made herself accessible to just women, meeting their needs of their most intimate questions.[103] Asma'u made intentional attempts to meet with women who were otherwise disenfranchised.[104] Between the two, a core principle one can extract is their intentionality of meaningfulness in their interactions with women. Asma'u sought out people who were otherwise ignored, out of concern for them, while Aisha sought to preserve understandings of the Prophet, even if it meant that it would challenge or cause correction to his closest companions. The intention of accessibility and transparency gave

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[103] Nadwi, *Al-Muhaddithat,* 140

[104] Boyd and Mack, *The Collected Works of Nanu Asma'u,* 26.

way for this. Like the previous section, this accessibility was also encouraged by the men of their community and seen as an imperative function of their society. If we notice, their accessibility guided generations, even after their deaths. While authoritative in their lifetime, their works accessibility gave future generations the ability to read and plausibly, model from them or their students, which is addressed in the next section.

Spiritual Modeling

Aisha and Asma'u exemplify the concept of Spiritual modeling for both women and men in different ways. Their practices align closely with the mechanisms identified in social cognitive theory, where modeling exists as a pathway for individuals to not only learn but also embody spiritual and ethical ideals.[105] This imitation behavior is fundamental for individuals to personally integrate spiritual values, which aligns with Oman and Thoresen's insights on the importance of role modeling in spiritual cultivation.[106]

Aisha exuded spiritual modeling in a multitude of ways when assessing her modalities of teaching and correcting hadith narration as mentioned in chapter three. Moreover, the dynamic communication style she exhibited, as analyzed by Akbar and Vebrynda, reflected an adaptive approach that enhanced both her influence and her ability

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[105] Oman and Thoresen, "Spiritual Modeling,"150.

[106] Doug Oman, "Spiritual Modeling and the Social Learning of Spirituality and Religion," in *APA Handbook of Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality (Vol 1): Context, Theory, and Research* (American Psychological Association, 2013).

to convey complex spiritual teachings effectively. [107] This aligns with Oman's assertion that for spiritual modeling to be effective, it incorporates observability and practicality in transmitting spiritual skills.[108] As discussed in chapter three, spiritual modeling emphasizes the transmission of spiritual attitudes and practices which take shape. In the physical sense, as an example, the *Ummahat al Mumineen* were obliged to cover themselves with the hijab, but also included a face veil. While the commandment for the face veil was only required for the Prophet's wives, it modeled the premise of dressing modestly for those around them and generations to come as a recommended tenant of faith.[109] As stated in chapter three, spiritual modeling occurs through observational spiritual learning, which if driven by positive experiences can lead to positive reproduction of the action.[110] Through observing the way Aisha interacted with the companions and her husband the Prophet, women around her too learned the best methods of interaction between genders, between themselves, and between their families. Since she was divinely authoritative, women could then believe that by embodying Aisha's ways for social interaction and speech, they themselves would be acting out of a way that was pleasing to God. Thus far, commentaries on hadith narrations from Aisha that showcase her displeasure with making corrections or transmitting in a negative way were not found.

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[107] M. Audha Fareza Akbar and Rhafidilla Vebrynda, "Communication Style of Rasulullah to His Two Wives: Khadija and Aisha," *Journal of Islamic Communication and Counseling* 1, no. 1 (2022).

[108] Oman, "Spiritual Modeling and the Social Learning of Spirituality and Religion".

[109] Qurān 33:60, Khattab.

[110] Eknath Easwaran, *Meditation.*

Asma'u spiritual modeling taught women the power of knowledge, by encouraging them to seek knowledge as a means of drawing closer to God. The spiritual modeling framework heavily relies on the concept of role models and the contextual factors that shape spiritual experiences.[111] Through the *Yan Taru* system, Asma'u trained and developed women to role model for each other in a way that culture had not experienced before. Her teaching methodology incorporated storytelling, poetry, and oration, which resonate with the attention component of the social cognitive theory stated by Albert Bandura in Chapter Two. The Jaji's functioned much like the *Murrabi* for their respective communities in their ability to role model. Through Bandura's social cognitive theory, the Jaji's went through all four phases governing observational learning: attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation. [112]

When thinking of women's-specific issues, such as child bearing, rearing, and menstruation, all of these physical issues can greatly impact the way a woman is able to function or approach themselves spiritually. As an example, women on their menstruation in Islam, are not required to pray. Similarly, women are not required to pray up to the first 40 days after childbirth, if they are still bleeding post delivery. This dispensation is seen as an ease for them, given the depth of their bodies changes during this time, and the time is seen as a means of physical rest. This does not mean however, that a woman should neglect remembering God for every menses or female-specific condition she has. From the information inferred, Aisha and Asma'u were more than capable of guiding women

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[111] Oman and Thoresen, "Spiritual Modeling," 154.

[112] Bandura, *Social Foundations*.

how to connect to God during times where their physical standards of connection, such as performing prayer, were not accessible. Spirituality can greatly influence the way a woman experiences these changes. Moreno- Avila highlights how spirituality influences women's experiences of motherhood, emphasizing its importance in navigating existential challenges during child-rearing.[113] This underscores how women scholars enrich the discourse surrounding female spirituality through their lived experiences. A core aspect of their influence lies in strengthening the overall family cohesion, by strengthening the woman within the family. Studies show that women who have higher levels of spirituality, experience improved family dynamics and emotional responses among their children.[114] With this in mind, we must consider the holistic impact of the community as it pertains to the women of the community having access to female scholars, who can guide and nurture women through their everchanging positions and states within themselves. I believe that the ability for women to have this type of access, would reflect a rooted, moral community education that Attas speaks of in Chapter Three. Conversely, the idea that spiritual modeling must occur between genders only would also be an inefficient approach. It is evident through the simple fact that most of the Sunni orthodoxy is understood through the modeling of the Prophet Muhammad, which both men and women can take after and can inculcate. Similarly, both men and women took after the teaching modalities and stylistic presentation of the *Ummahat al-Mumineen.*

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[113] Isabel Del Mar Moreno-Ávila et al., "Muslim and Christian Women's Perceptions of the Influence of Spirituality and Religious Beliefs on Motherhood and Child-Rearing: A Phenomenological Study," *Healthcare* 11, no. 22 (2023).

[114]Aisha T. Asby, Angela M. Bowman Heads, and Joseph W. Dickson, "Living with Maternal HIV: Spirituality, Depression, and Family Functioning," *American Journal of Health Sciences (AJHS)* 7, no. 1 (2016).

Disseminating Religious Knowledge

Both Asma'u and Aisha pioneered systems of education for their respective

communities, both of which we still experience today and have access to. For Aisha, the

concept of hadith literature and narration is attributed to her memorization and

dispensation of Hadith. Hadith preservation preserved the prophetic society for

generations to inherit. It came as a response of love for the Prophet.

Asma'au on the other hand, created an educational system to ensure that women

did not fall into religious error and disbelief of the *Bori* Cult. Both modalities emphasized

a great love of preserving Islam and Prophetic practices as a living source of guidance.

Through the Yan Taru system, Asma'u decentralized herself as the sole carrier of female

religious authority within the Sokoto Caliphate. This educational system was

groundbreaking, as it granted women from surrounding towns legitimacy of authority

through female sources. This system was referred to as the Yan Taru, meaning "the

associates."The Jaji's. were the appointed delegates from respective towns that traveled

to gain knowledge and insights from Asma'u. A significant component, here as

mentioned earlier in Chapter three, is the concept of the Murabbi as an educator,

considering that Asma'u was able to model education for the Jaji's, they could then

model this back to the women in their homes. While they were not as scholarly as

Asma'u by their educational background, they were well learned, spending time with a

sage of spirituality. Additionally, these modalities of teaching did not always take place in

public settings between men. Honoring that women scholarship does not need to be in a

public- facing platform does not deter its significance. The teaching modalities of Aisha

and Asma'u reclaim the idea that scholarly engagement and transference can occur in private areas. Therefore when institutions are evaluating how to utilize female scholars, they do not necessarily have to use them in the same-exact fashion as male scholars.

To address the lack of perceived female scholarship in the American Muslim community, we can look to this style of decentralizing education and re-think our definition of scholarly authority. Broadening our perspective to include women who have taken time as learned students of knowledge, like the *Jaji's*, can serve as front facing Murabbi's in local Muslim communities. This might increase the amount of interpersonal relationship building that women could have with learned teachers. This is especially important, because it also requires that women believe in the authoritativeness of women in their communities.

Implications for Practice

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made for Sunni Muslim Spaces within the United States:

1. Reframing the Integration of Women Scholars through the concept of Spiritual Modeling.

    1.1 If the issue of lack of female religious authority and learnedness in institutions is merely seen as a staffing issue, or an women- specific issue, this will stay as a performative endeavor. Institutions should realize that sidelining qualified female authorities will cause a decline in congregational unity. Institutions can reframe their approach through the *ta'dib* and spiritual modeling framework.

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1.2 Institutions should consider the benefits of acquiring female scholars through the lens of spiritual modeling. Assessing the impact for both female and male congregants.

2. Community Resource Mapping & Reallocating

   2.1 This requires communities making a concentrated effort to find learned women that already exist within local communities. To do so, institutions need to reframe what they understand as scholarly and encourage the involvement of women in their spaces for the community at large.

   2.2 Communities can assess where their female educators, scholars, and chaplains, are currently being utilized based upon their areas of study and skill set and proposing a reallocation of them as resources.

3. Hire Female Religious Authorities and Plan for them in Budgets

   3.1 Institutions should prioritize the recruitment and development of women scholars and community educators by hiring them or providing a platform of endorsement for communal collaboration. To do so, there should be an understanding of what is considered scholarly enough to teach, for community members. Institutions can analyze personal biases pertaining to this dynamic between learned male and female community members.

   3.2 To create institutional stability, having a budgetary allocation for women scholars to fulfill roles in their religious office or imams department can allow for long-term involvement in the community. It also, by the department they are hired into, showcases a by-in of authority.

4. Make Female Religious Authorities Accessible

4.1 Utilize tools like a survey to get a sense of what female congregants need and are looking for in female religious authorities so that the institution can better utilize their resources. This creates a greater sense of communal connection and buy in between women and leadership.

4.2 Like the *Jaji* System, institutions could begin to evaluate the systems of traditional learning that women in their communities have participated in to create an pipeline of female- female mentoring and modeling.

5 Diversifying programming that is led by Female Religious Authorities

5.1 Given that it may be difficult for women to come to programming at certain locations, institutions can diversify when, where, and how women scholars are utilized for women's development by diversifying the localities of where religious gatherings take place.

6 Reframe the concept of women within the Community

6.1 While the previous recommendations are structural, having mosque leadership through khutbas and classes can inspire women to be a part of the masjid. They can do this by having a committee of women in the community and women's scholars contribute to the formation of khudbah topics every week. This allows issues pertaining to women to be addressed in a relevant platform, with the input of female leadership.

6.2 Women can lead after prayer halaqas or reminders as a way of introducing their merit to the community. Since religious institutions hold five daily prayers, communities can offer rotational spots of female religious leadership to lecture.

Recommendations for Future Research

The following are ideas of future research pertaining to this thesis. These questions aim to focus on understanding issues of religious authority pertaining to female scholarship, the need for women to experience spiritual modeling, and humanizing the lives of women in religious leadership positions.

1. A comparative analysis of the criteria for male and female religious authorities in the Sunni Muslim community in the United States, exploring the discrepancies and challenges that lead to men being more readily recognized as religiously influential, even when women may have equal or greater qualifications but are not acknowledged as such. This analysis will contribute to the ongoing discussion regarding the discrepancies between why many learned women are not seen as sources of religious knowledge, in comparison to their underqualified male counterparts. This is especially significant with the rise of social media Islamic influencers and creators as it pertains to the religious titles given to both men and women.

2. An exploration of the aesthetics of religious leadership. Through an analytical analysis this could examine how men and women present themselves through style, clothing, personal demeanor, and approachability. The study would investigate how these factors alongside racial and cultural presentations, influence the reception of religious leaders by their target audience and affect their perceived credibility. Understanding the role of visual and behavioral presentation in shaping perceptions of intellectualism and wisdom, could offer valuable

insights into the dynamics of religious leadership. This is especially significant for the contrasting titles of leadership given to male leaders and female leaders.

3. Conducting a longitudinal study examining the experiences of Muslim women enrolled in American Muslim seminaries in relation to their female Muslim scholars. This study would assess the efficacy of spiritual modeling in shaping their religious identity formation and spiritual well-being of the attendees both during and after their enrollment in religious seminaries over a ten year span. This study aims to explore the impact of female scholarship on womens' faith development, sense of belonging, and long-term spiritual wellness.

4. Developing a survey and report on American Muslim female leaders. This would produce a women-centric paper that explores their personal and professional lives. The goal of this research is to understand what factors contribute towards or negate female leaders in their unique positionality, following a framework and dataset collect similar to the Yaqeen Institute paper referenced in Chapter 1.

CONCLUSION

According to ISPU's research on inclusive mosques, "women (ages 18-29) are more likely than men to say religion is very important to them (75% to 53%), highlighting the importance of spaces that meet women's needs." Women show more interest in engaging in religion, and yet are underrepresented in leadership and scholarly positions in our Muslim institutions. While women are more likely to say religion is important to them, they are less likely to attend a mosque than men, [115]Mosques in The United States have improved in their women friendly score over the past decade, yet still over half of mosques score below 'excellent' or 'good'.[116] While this paper did not limit itself to analyzing mosques, it has discussed the importance of holistic wellbeing of Muslim women being directly connected to access to a female scholar.

As shown in the historical analysis of Aisha bint Abi Bakr and Nana Asma'u, through spiritual modeling one can find a sense of belonging, guidance, and connection that cannot be replicated with distant or impersonal interactions. Aisha bint Abi Bakr and Nana Asma'u exemplify the immense value of female scholarship and the transformative potential of spiritual modeling. Their legacies highlight the necessity of fostering direct and meaningful interactions between female scholars and women in Muslim communities. Without this direct connection between female student and female teachers, women are more likely to measure their spirituality or religious identity through a male

[115] "Findings on American Muslim Women from the US Mosque Survey 2020" excerpted from Ihsan Bagby, "The US Mosque Survey 2020," March 27, 2022, *Institute for Social Policy and Understanding*, [Page #], https://ispu.org/muslim-womens-day/.

[116] "Findings on American Muslim Women from the US Mosque Survey 2020."

lens, and assess themselves against what is commonly observed through a masculine driven theology and physical representation.

It is crucial to examine how the absence of female modeling impacts women's religious identity development and to consider the broader implications of this fragmentation on communal well-being. We cannot separate the health of Muslim women from the health of the larger Muslim community. Women play a key role in contributing towards society, through households and upbringing of the next generation. Therefore, their spiritual healthhas a direct impact on the spiritual health of the larger community. When women lack access to female religious mentorship, they are deprived of vital models of faith, leading to a gap in religious knowledge transmission and spiritual belonging. The findings suggest that increasing visibility, accessibility, and institutional support for female scholars can contribute to a more inclusive and spiritually enriched community.

The way Muslim institutions have been structured across The United States thus far places no emphasis or prioritization on creating specific positions for female scholarship in a scholarly or communal teaching capacity. The only place this has been done, to some extent, is in executive committee and board positions - where the majority of mosques allow women to run for these leadership positions. Mosques that do have women in these positions of leadership have higher levels of community and political involvement.[117] This is one area where we can see women in visible leadership roles have an impact on how the Muslim congregation will uplift the community it lives in. Imagine

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[117] "Findings on American Muslim Women from the US Mosque Survey 2020."

a community which female scholars, *ustadhas*, *ulama*, spiritual guides, and wise elders are given visible roles in our communities. The impact they could have is not just on the spiritual health of Muslim women, but for the spiritual modeling benefits of the entire congregation.

From my brief subset research of Islamic Seminaries in The United States, we can see there is a large disparity of percentage of female scholars compared to female students enrolled at these institutions. In most of these institutions, female students make up half or more of overall students enrolled. Yet, the majority, if not all, of the scholars teaching are male. They graduate from these programs, arguably disadvantaged by not having female scholars as primary role models. They can then go on to be a part of Muslim communities that have no institutional structure with roles prioritizing their learnedness. This paper points to how women are more inclined to identify religious identity as important to them, more likely to enroll in further Islamic studies, but are not given genuine outlets to equip them with spiritual knowledge and roles to share that knowledge if acquired.

The modeling that can come from female scholarship to women is an endeavor that allows for an organic inheritance of the spiritual lineage and actualizations of the Prophet ﷺ in a contextualized way. This instantiation is critical to the authenticity of Muslim communities. Communities who do not elevate the status of learned women to be community educators contribute to the fragmentation of the prophetic legacy. If the goal of our educational framework is morality, rethinking the current principles exuded in creating religious authority currently is necessary. I am interested to see how the spiritual resilience of the Muslim community will grow when it prioritizes the integration of the

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spiritual bearers of women into the fabric of its community. Female leaders have long

been a part of Islamic tradition, yet their presence has often been overlooked or

underappreciated. More than an issue of absence, there is a lack of willingness to

acknowledge their roles, celebrate their wisdom, and affirm that their educational and

spiritual pursuits hold equitable value for the enrichment of community. The findings

emphasize the importance of proactive efforts to reclaim them as part of the community.

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