

Fātimah al-Fihri and religious fraternity in al-Qarawiyyin University: A Case Study

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Introduction

- The status of Muslim women is a sensitive issue which has always provoked a lot of controversy.
- A commonly notion among, feminists, scholar-activists and academics, western and non-western is the claim that Muslim women in most of the Muslim world are oppressed and systematically suffer from discriminatory patriarchal gender system and male domination culture.
- Contrary to that claim, conservative Muslim activists and religious scholars deny any sort of mal-treatment and oppression that Muslim women received. Interestingly, most of the literature related to this issue lacks female representation.

Introduction

- Although Islamic rhetorical heritage emphasizes men's supremacy over women, drawing them as genuine makers of history and builders of Islamic civilization, the contribution of Muslim Women in the early, medieval and late Islamic history was significant, and overlaid almost all aspects of life. A number of Islamic history books recorded events of immense contributions made by extraordinary Muslim women in different fields of knowledge. Names such as Al-Shifa bint Abduallah, Rufaydah al-Aslamiyyah, Nusayba bint al-Harith al-Ansari, Labana of Cordoba, Wallada bint al-Mustakfi, Fātimah al-Fihri ...etc stand tall, in an assemblage of distinguished Muslim women.

Ftimah al Fihri : A biography

- She is Fātimah bint Mohammed al-Fihri al-Kairawani. Given the agnomen *Umm al-Banin*- Mother of the Children.
- History books confirm that she migrated with her father Mohamed al-Fihri from Kairawan in Tunisia to Fes in Morocco.
- She was a member of a wealthy and educated Muslim family. Although history books do not offer many details about her life, it was well documented that Fātimah al-Fihri grew up with her sister, later she followed the educational tradition of that time by attending circles of *fiqh*- Islamic Jurisprudence and *hadith*- prophetic traditions.

Ftimah al Fihri : A biography

- **Inheriting a considerable amount of money from her father, Fātimah build a mosque for her community in the year 859 CE, in accordance with another Islamic tradition of contributing to the community by notable, rich and powerful people.**

- **The same mosque was later transformed to a university that is still functioning up to today.**
- **Apparently she was a woman of high virtuous and religious piety. History books also reported that she took upon herself to fast for the sake of God until the construction of the mosque is complete.” Among the nicknames given to her beside Umm al-Banin, she was also referred to as an entrepreneur and a princess.**

Al-Qarawiyyin University: A historical profile

- **Medieval Muslim society had embarked in a magnificent and unique quest for knowledge where by a liberal spirit dominated the world of academia. "Education was considered a ministry within Islam and those who entered it did so out of dedication and a genuine interest in the life of the mind." (Charles Stanton 1990).**
- **Mosques and other medieval educational institutions provide permanent places of instruction, residence, and employment for teachers and students, and also provided lasting endowments to pay the salaries and stipends for both and maintain the building costs.**

Al-Qarawiyyin University: A historical profile

- **Establishing al-Qarawiyyin mosque with an associated school, called *madrasa*, in the year 859CE, was part of a larger tradition of women establishing *waqaf* for founding mosques and other community-needed services in the Islamic history.**
- **In fact al-Qarawiyyin “is a mosque and a university at the same time... This university has continued its activity from that time till today.”**

Religious Fraternity at al-Qarawiyyin

- Despite students' social divide and association with large religious and sectarian spectrum, that included Muslim Sunni (Malikite, Shafi'ite, Hanafite), Muslim Shi'a, all of them got access to education in al Qrawiyyin.

- **Another important characteristic of al Qarawiyyin is the upholding of the policy of tolerance and the promotion of fraternity and co- existence among scholars and students, who usually come from different Islamic *madāhhib* and from different religions as well. “On the world stage, Al-Qarawiyyin played, in medieval times, a leading role in the cultural exchange and transfer of knowledge between the Muslims and Europeans.**

- **Pioneer scholars include Ibn Maymun (Maimonids, (1135-1204) who was taught at Al-Qarawiyyin by Abdul Arab Ibn Muwashah. The famous Al-Idrissi (d.1166 CE) is said to have settled in Fes for considerable time suggesting that he must have worked or studied at Al-Qarawiyyin. Sources also list a number of peers such as Ibn Al-'Arabi (1165-1240 CE), Ibn Khaldun (1332-1395 CE), Ibn Al-Khatib, Alpetragius, Al-Bitruji, Ibn Harazim, and Ibn Wazzan are said to have all taught in Al-Qarawiyyin. Some historic accounts also spoke of Ibn Zuhr (d.1131 CE) spending a great deal of time travelling between Andalusia, Fes, and Marrakech."**

- **students traveled there from all over the world to study Islamic studies, astronomy, languages, and sciences. Arabic numbers became known and used in Europe through this university.**
- **The glory of al Qarawiyyin ... was its body of scholars, the ulema... al Qarawiyyin attracted great numbers of students from all over North Africa, Spain and Sahara. All were eager to learn and defy their ideological and sectarian schism in a unique ambiance adorned by tolerance, peace and intellectual freedom which prevailed under the roof of al Qarawiyyin. Muslim Heritage**

- In addition to the intellectual freedom and the spirit of fraternity, it is worth mentioning here that the *ulama* and *tullab* were free to choose what they want to learn, how to learn and from which books or resources they want to learn

Conclusion

- In conclusion it is evident that the contribution of Fātimah al-Fihri was and still immense. The idea of establishing a mosque-university had preoccupied the mind of a Muslim woman and was realized due to her dedication and commitment. The same idea has led to the foundation of a great hub of knowledge, tolerance and fraternity where Muslims and non-Muslims enjoyed academic freedom. Indeed it is a source of pride that a Muslim woman managed to break the stereotyped depiction of Muslim women in miniatures as beautiful creatures, sex objects who are confined to their bed rooms, harem of sultans and men's entertainers to successful women who contributed to their societies and played an active social, economic, educational and political role in their respective local communities and nations.