

Religion and Politics in the life of Arwa Al- Sulayhia: A Historical Analysis

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Introduction

- ▶ Throughout the history of Islam the status of Muslim woman was always a controversial topic, and a lot has been said about several forms of discrimination against her.
- ▶ Nevertheless, the Islamic history preserved several examples of successful Muslim women who contributed to their societies and played an active social, economic, educational and political role in their respective local communities and nations.

Introduction...

Many examples of active Muslim women can be cited such as:

- a. Khadijah,
- b. Aisha,
- c. Sakina Bint al-Hussein,
- d. Sit al-Mulk (sister of the Fatimid Imam, Al-Hakim)
- e. Asmā and Arwa the Sulayhids in Yemen,
- f. Shajarat al-Dur Mamlukids.

Introduction...

Arts and education also witnessed great female contributions, such as:

- a. The poetry masterpieces of walladah Bint al-Mustakfi in Andalusia,
- b. The mathematician and head of library Lubna of Cordoba
- c. The philanthropy efforts of Fātimah al-Fihri of Morocco.

Objectives

- ▶ This paper investigates the role and the leadership traits of a great wise Muslim princess Arwa The Sulayhids of Yemen, through the analysis of her personality, vision and contribution to politics, peace and religion. In fact princess Arwa was a Muslim woman who tried to establish bridges of peace and tolerance between faiths as she was the first woman to be nominated as hujja in the Ismaili sect.

The Isma'ilis' Doctrine and Leadership

- ▶ The Isma'ilis Fatimids were a Shi'a subdivision which advocated a message that of *ahl al-Bayt* are the rightful inheritors of the Caliphate beginning from Imam Ali Ibn Abi Talib and through Imam Ismail Ibn Jafar al-Sadiq.
- ▶ They denounced as wrongdoers and traitors those who ripped off the Caliphate from its true meritorious.
- ▶ Like in the other branches of Shi'a, the Isma'ili creed advocates Ali Ibn Abi Talib to succeed the Prophet (pbuh) before the other companions.
- ▶ *Imamate* literally means 'to lead'; *al-imam* means 'the leader'.

The concept of *Imamate*

- ▶ Among the Sunnis the term is derived from Imam, which refers to the leader in the Friday prayer at the mosque; any pious Muslim may function as imam.
- ▶ The term has also been used as a synonym for caliph.
- ▶ The Shi'ites, with their numerous denominations throughout history have developed specific meanings for the term.

The concept of *Imamate*...

- ▶ The Isma'ilis view *Imamah* and *Khilafah* as synonymous. (The Imam is the *Khalifah* and the *Khalifah* is the Imam)
- ▶ The *Imamah* which is reserved for the descendants of Ali Ibn Abi Talib combines religious and political authority because it is in its original nature embodies the religious and worldly power to lead the *ummah*.
- ▶ Such power to lead is not obtained by election or selection, neither because of natural or acquired charismatic faculties; rather, it is a divine decree and choice just as the prophethood.

The Implication of the “Religious” on the “Political”

- ▶ The Ismaili Fatimids reigned over Egypt and North Africa from A.D. 908 to A.D. 1171.
- ▶ The Isma'ilis get their name from their acceptance of Ismail bin Jafar as the divinely appointed spiritual successor (Imam) to Jafar al-Sadiq, wherein they differ from the Twelvers, who accept Musa al-Kadhim, younger brother of Ismail, as the true Imam.

The Implication of the “Religious” on the “Political”

- ▶ According to Daftary, “the Fatimid caliphs were acknowledged as the rightful Imams by the main body of the Isma’iliya not only in their own dominions but also in many other Muslim lands.”
- ▶ The truthfulness, rightfulness, submissiveness to his authority is absolute because the right to command and to be obeyed is of divine origin: God has the ultimate authority and the Imam’s authority was instituted by God himself.

Imams and the education of women

- ▶ The Fatimids adopted unprecedented policies for the education of women.
- ▶ From early on in the reign of the founder of the dynasty, ‘Abd Allah ‘Ubayd Allah al-Mahdi (297-322/909-34), the Fatimids organized popular instruction for women.
- ▶ From the time of al-Mu‘izz (341-65/953-75), more formal instruction was developed for women, culminating in the Majalis of al-Hikma [sessions of wisdom] on Ismaili doctrines.

Imams and the education of women

- ▶ As a result of such educational policies and the generally tolerant attitudes of the Fatimids, there were many educated women in the Fatimid royal household and in the lands under their sovereignty.
- ▶ Among the prominent women figures who played a significant political role in the royal Fatimid palace we can mention Sitt al-Mulk, the sister of imam al-Hakim, and al-Mustansir's mother.

Imams and the education of women

- ▶ Another key feminine political figure was al-Sayyida al-Hurra Arwa al-Sulaihiya. A widow princess who rose to political leadership and prominence in Yemen.
- ▶ Her religious, educational, and political qualities qualified her to obtain the Imam's blessings and authorization of both religious and political power.
- ▶ Arwa's status and achievements can be better understood and evaluated in a historical context.

Arwa Al Sulayhia: A Historical Biography

- ▶ She is **Arwa bint Asma** *Muḥammad ibn Ja'far ibn Mūsá ṣ-Ṣulayḥī al-Ismā'īliyya*, c. 1048–1138, died 22nd Shaban, 532 AH).
- ▶ She was the long-reigning ruler of Yemen, firstly as the co-ruler of her husband and then as sole ruler, from 1067 until her death in 1138.
- ▶ She was the greatest of the rulers of the Sulaihid Dynasty and was also the first woman to be accorded the prestigious title of *hujja* in the Isma'ili branch of Shia Islam, She is popularly referred to as *as-Sayyidah al-Ḥurrah* "the Noble Lady" and sometimes the Little Queen of Sheba

Arwa's Ascension in the Fatimid Da'wa

- ▶ Simultaneously to her assumption of effective political authority, Arwa played an important role in the affairs of the Yemenite da'wa, which culminated in her appointment as the Hujja of Yemen by the Fatimid Imam al-Mustansir shortly after the death of her husband in 477/1084. The highest rank accorded to any individual in the Ismaili da'wa in Yemen.
- ▶ The Fatimid al-Mustansir's designation of Sayyida as the hujja of Yemen was corroborated by the contemporary Yemenite Ismaili author al-Khattab b. al-Hasan (d. 533/1138), who uses various arguments in support of this appointment and insists that even a woman could hold that rank.

Arwa's Ascension in the Fatimid Da'wa

- ▶ The queen Arwa was also officially put in charge of the affairs of the Ismaili da'wa in western India by the Fatimid caliph-imam al-Mustansir.
- ▶ As a result of Arwa's Sulaihid efforts, a new Ismaili community was founded in Gujarat (India) by the da'is sent from Yemen starting around 460/1067-68. The Ismaili community founded there evolved into the modern Tayyibi Bohra community.
- ▶ The queen Sayyida recognized al-Musta'li as the legitimate imam after al-Mustansir. She, thus, retained her ties with Cairo and the da'wa headquarters there, which now served as the center of the Musta'lian da'wa. As a result of Sayyida's decision, the Ismaili communities of Yemen and Gujarat along with the bulk of the Ismailis of Egypt and Syria joined the Musta'lian camp.

Arwa's Political Power

- ▶ Following the death of Abu al-Hasana Ali al-Sulaihi in 1067, Sayyada Arwa's husband Ahmad al-Sulaihi became ruler of most of Yemen. However, after a fatal injury he was unable to rule being paralyzed and bedridden.
- ▶ He gave all of his power to his wife Arwa, and her name began to be mentioned in the khutbah directly after the name of the Fatimid Caliph (Al-Mustansir Billah), signifying her authority to rule.
- ▶ She reigned as co-regent of her mother-in-law until the latter's death in 1087.

Arwa's Political Power...

- ▶ Arwa conducted her state councils in person and thus mixed with men, and refused to hide behind curtains.
- ▶ One of her first decisions was to move the capital from Sana'a to Jibla in order to be in a better position to destroy her Najah enemies. She lured their ruler Sai'id bin Najjar into a trap in 1088 and killed him, hence avenged her father-in-law's death.

Arwa's Achievements

Religious policy

- a. Arwa supported Al-Musta'li to be the rightful successor to al-Mustansir Billah.
- b. Adopted tolerant policies towards the religious denominations in Yemen.

Arwa's Achievements

Economy and construction policies

- a. In Sana'a, Arwa had the grand mosque expanded, and the road from the city to Samarra improved. In Jibla, she had a new Palace of queen Arwa and the eponymous constructed. She is also known to have built numerous schools throughout her realm.
- b. Improved the economy, taking an interest in supporting agriculture.
- c. Supplying the area of Jund with water that was transferred from Khanwa.
- d. Construction of roads and highways.

Arwa's Achievements

Educational and social policies

- a. Establishment of schools, endowments, charities, and paying salaries of teachers and master scholars.
- b. Empowering women and consolidating their role in the Yemeni society.
- c. She spread peace, and established stability in the dominions under her rule.

Arwa's Titles and honors

- ▶ She was granted the position of Dai al-Duat by the Imam al-Mustansir.
- ▶ She earned several honorary titles, such as: Assayyidah al-hurra, Wahidat al-Zaman, 'Umdat al-Islam, Sayyidat Mulook al-Yaman, Dhakhirat al-Din, 'Ismat al-Mu'mineen, Kahf al-Mustajibeen, Waliyyat Amir al Mu'mineen, and Kaafilat Awliyaaehi al-Mayaameen.

Conclusion

- ▶ Although the status of Muslim women has always drew plenty of controversy, the Islamic history preserved several examples of successful Muslim women who contributed to their societies and played an active political, social, economic, and educational role in their respective local communities and nations.
- ▶ There is a dialectical relationship between culture and religion in its Islamic context. At certain circumstances the political power may overcome the power of the culture like in the case of Arwa the Sulaihid, who defied all cultural barriers, and ruled parts of medieval Yemen for an extensive period of time.

THANK YOU

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