

Female Perceptions of Islam in Today's Morocco

Fatima Sadiqi, University of Fez

Abstract: This paper is based on a survey, 25 interviews, and observation. According to the results so far, Islam means three things for women in today's Morocco: faith, culture, and politics. Islam as faith is generally perceived as a personal relationship with God. Such a relationship is seen as both rewarding and empowering, but also private. Women who perceive Islam as faith observe the Islamic rituals and may or may not wear the veil. Women's perception of Islam as faith is a rather poorly understood topic in research in a heavily space-based patriarchy, probably because of its intimate relationship with the private sphere. However, for many women, Islam as faith constitutes a genuine locus of agency involving identity and the self. Islam as culture is mainly viewed by women as an inherent part of who they are and what sociocultural background they belong to. Unlike faith, which is often considered personal, culture is generally viewed as part of a "package" that includes community and society. A large proportion of the women who view Islam as culture do not necessarily practice the Islamic rituals, and may not wear the veil, but would feel insulted if they were called "non-Muslim." This view of Islam does not necessarily attach Islam to cultural traditions; on the contrary, culture is often perceived in this context as a lively, flexible, and dynamic concept. Women who perceive Islam as politics observe the rituals, wear the veil, and are keen on making their voice heard in the public sphere. The three meanings that women give to Islam nowadays may interact, but for methodological reasons I will deal with each separately. While the three perceptions are dictated by the conditions of a space-based patriarchy, they are differentiated by a number of variables pertaining to the overall sociopolitical contexts, as well as by women's level of education, economic status, and social status.

Keywords: Islam, women, Islamic practice, perceptions of Islam

Copyright by Fatima Sadiqi

Introduction

Introduced in Morocco in the year 712, Islam has ever since been deeply intertwined with the country's politics, culture, and identity.¹ Politically, Islam came hand in hand with monarchy, making the latter the highest political and religious authority (the king is both the head of the executive power and *amir al-imu'minin*—Commander of the Believers).² Culturally, Islam has been a pillar of Moroccan cultures (Arab and Amazigh) and the core of social and family power relations, including relations based on gender. At the level of identity, Islam defines both Morocco (whose successive constitutions identify it as an Islamic monarchy) and Moroccans, who generally define themselves as Muslim.³ As such, Islam has become part and parcel of religion, culture, and politics in today's Morocco.

Perceptions of Islam in today's Morocco may be qualified as overwhelmingly articulated from a male perspective, given the dominance of men in national and local religious councils, as well as in mosques and practically all public instances related to jurisprudence, such as courts of law. This male omnipresence in key religious institutions is historically constructed and sanctioned, as practically all the schools of Islamic jurisprudence were created by and named after the male imams or religious scholars who initiated them.

Thus, the four Sunni schools—Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, and Hanbali—were named, respectively, after Hanifa al-Nu'man, Anas Ibn Malik, Muhammad Ibn Idris al-Shafi'i, and Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, while the two Shi'a schools, Ja'fari and Zaydi, were named after Ja'far al'Sadiq and Zayd Ibn Ali, and the Ibadi school after Abdullah Ibn Ibad. These schools have therefore been imbued with the perceptions of their creators, the male *fuqaha* (male religious scholars who implement *fiqh*, Islamic jurisprudence or legal Islam), and as legal Islam is part of the Moroccans' way of life, these male perceptions have served patriarchy in and outside the family and infiltrated the social and cultural beliefs of the Moroccans in spite of the fact that notable *faqihat* (female religious scholars), such as Aisha and Um Salama (Prophet Muhammad's wives), are recognized and respected (Mernissi 1991). Male perceptions of Islam have resulted in male-biased laws and thoughts that still plague Islamic jurisprudence (Mir-Hosseini 2003). The relatively recent literature on Islamic feminism may be seen as a reaction to these dominant male perceptions.⁴

The central question of this article is to investigate the missing Moroccan women's individual perceptions of the three functions of Islam—religious, cultural, and political—in order to fill a gap in the academic research on women and Islam in Morocco and to open avenues for further studies. The argument on which the article is based is that there are distinct female perceptions of Islam in today's Morocco and that these perceptions defy the hitherto assumed idea that when it comes to Islam perceptions need to be male. The term "perception" is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as "the ability to see, hear, or become aware of something through the senses." As such, perception is related to both thinking and understanding, hence its association with cognitive psychology. However, in this article perception is limited to "understanding" in a broad sense.

This article is based on 25 interviews with Arabic- and Amazigh-speaking Moroccan women living in Fez, Casablanca, Marrakesh, and their surrounding rural areas, as well as on 100 questionnaires distributed or read to women from the same regions. The interviewed women varied between ages 21 and 85, and were selected according to six interacting social variables: geographical origin (rural/urban), class (upper/middle/poor), level of education (literate/illiterate), job opportunities (with or without a salary), linguistic skills (the number of languages spoken), and marital status (married, widowed, divorced, single). These social variables are deemed to allow for a high degree of representativity, as they were tested in my book study of the intersection between women, gender and language in Morocco (Sadiqi 2003). The variables were obtained on the basis of social oppositions and have a direct influence on gender perception, political awareness, self-awareness, independence, critical assessment, and fashioning of modes of resistance. They were also meant to investigate Moroccan women's social heterogeneity. Women are allowed specific social choices according to their positioning within each social variable; hence, for example, an urban, rich, educated, working, married woman has more social choices than a rural, poor, nonworking, illiterate, and unmarried woman.

A Preliminary Note on Gender Power Dynamics in Morocco

Gender power dynamics in Morocco are dictated by a historically shaped space-based patriarchy, where the public sphere is constructed as not only male but authority-laden and the private sphere as not only female but non-authoritative.⁵ Although present in almost all of contemporary societies and cultures, patriarchy manifests itself differently in distinct contexts and uses different tools that fit specific sociocultural conditions. In Morocco, salient among the instruments that patriarchy uses to seat itself in society is *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence or legal Islam), which institutionalizes a gender hierarchy where women are subordinated to men in and outside home (Mir-Hosseini 2003). The authority of legal Islam has been carefully maintained

and transmitted throughout the political history of Islamic politics, and remains strong today (Mernissi 1991). It is most clearly visible in the family law, which, notwithstanding significant reforms, still falls short of equality between the sexes, especially in such matters as custody, inheritance, domestic violence (unmentioned in the family law), etc. (Zvan 2007; Lamrabet 2014). The space-based patriarchy and legal Islam underpin the sociocultural behavior of Moroccans, which not only fails to implement the reforms but sanctions various types of gender-based violence, such as public intimidation and sexual harassment. At the political level, the state and the political parties have used women in two ways. While the state, which self-identifies as the modernizing force in the country (Moghadam 2003), has been investing in the education and recruitment of urban women, and while the modernist political parties have followed suit, the emergence of political Islam and the Islamist parties' need for voters have unintentionally afforded more visibility to Islamist women. These strategies have resulted in the construction of a deeply ingrained ambiguous relationship between religion and culture in anything related to women, hence further fragilizing the relationship between women and the public expression of religion. On the other hand, this ambiguity has strengthened the relationship between men and public religion, having mainly served patriarchy and the maintenance of the status quo. Hence, in spite of significant progress in urban areas, where women today are more educated, earning salaries, etc., problems do persist—with illiteracy, for example, still standing at more than 60 per cent—making the overall improvement since independence in 1956 minimal. Furthermore, even as spectacular technological advances are allowing more and more women to be aware of how Islam may be used to improve their lot, satellite TV is bringing the voices of fundamentalist Islam into urban and rural homes on a daily basis.

All in all, although women in the Moroccan rural areas have traditionally worked outside of the home, tending sheep, working in the fields, fetching water, etc. (Sadiqi et al. 2009), gender power dynamics in the country can be understood only within the space-based Moroccan patriarchal system, whereby women have largely been circumscribed to the private sphere (home) as the keepers of traditional norms and values, with religion intermingling with both. It is against these gender power dynamics that the female perceptions of Islam in today's Morocco need to be understood and appreciated.

Women's Perceptions of Islam as Faith

Faith is generally understood as either absolute confidence in a person or thing, or absolute belief that is not based on tangible or verifiable proof. In the Qur'an, faith is associated with the following verse (Surat 16:3+4,+5–8), which expresses the superiority of Allah:

He has created the heavens and the earth with truth.... He has created man from a sperm-drop.... And cattle He has created for you (men): from them ye derive warmth, and numerous benefits, and of their (meat) ye eat. And ye have a sense of pride and beauty in them as ye drive them home in the evening and as ye lead them forth to pasture in the morning. And they carry your heavy loads to lands that ye could not (otherwise) reach except with souls distressed: for your Lord is indeed Most Kind, Most Merciful. And (He has created) horses, mules, and donkeys, for you to ride and as an adornment; and He has created (other) things of which ye have no knowledge.

For believers to embrace the superiority of Allah they need *al-taqwa* or *al-iman* (the Arabic words for faith), meaning an acknowledgement of the superiority of Allah and the individual's position as Allah's servant who owes Him gratitude for His mercy. Only faith allows this total surrender to Allah. This type of faith seems to be very liberating for many women believers in today's Morocco because in the Islamic

tradition only Allah gives al-taqwa and al-iman to men and women. Here is a testimony of Charafa, a 61-year-old urban middle-class medical doctor:⁶

My faith in Allah is total and it is not dictated by another man, not by my father, my husband or my son; it is not dictated by any other woman either, even my mother; it is a pure relationship between me and Allah because only Allah knows me the way I know myself: He created me just as he created my father, husband or son. Allah is above us all and only He gives al-taqwa to men and women He chooses to give al-taqwa to. No man can do what Allah can.

Izza, an 85-year-old rural poor housewife expressed the same idea but positioned it in a different context:

Allah is my *'win* (provider); I lost all males of my family, but I don't feel alone because Allah and my taqwa are with me. I am not alone...

These and similar testimonies associate faith with women's inner well-being and solace and link this association with their personal lived experiences. While Charafa's statement implies a certain independence from the control of men, Izza's seems to be more related to material provision. However, both women appear to be empowered as individuals by their faith, a relationship to Allah that transgresses the constructed social hierarchy between men and women. In general, women who perceive Islam as faith view this faith as something that transformed their lives positively and that made them proud of who they were. Some interviewees even expressed that they felt "superior" to other men and women in the sense that they were "chosen" by Allah as true believers and they thrived in this choice. They also felt superior to non-Muslims in general, as expressed in this statement by Faiza, a 26-year-old student:

hamdullah (thank God) I am a Muslim and hamdullah I was born Muslim and hamdullah I belong to a Muslim family that has al-taqwa. I cannot even start thinking about what would be the case were I born elsewhere with a different religion.

Women's conception of Islam as faith cuts across social class, level of education, and social status, but whereas it is associated with some kind of abstract spiritual conviction in the statements of educated upper- and middle-class women, it is more likely to be associated with fate and tangible experience by nonliterate lower-class women. Here is what Houria, a 40-year-old upper-class educated artist (musician), had to say when asked to express in specific terms what faith gave her:

My *iman bi llah* (faith in Allah) elevates me and gives me spiritual satisfaction; it is like being literally lost in a sophisticated piece of music and not wanting to share the moment with anyone, even your own children... It is like being alone in a guarded castle surrounded by water; you feel an immense lifting quietude that you wish you could keep forever and ever...

By contrast, Fattouma, a 45-year-old poor rural woman who helps her husband in gathering and selling fruits and vegetables they grow in a small field, answered the same question in the following way:

My iman fortifies me, and I find great joy in listening to the singing of other peasant women in the field... Land is our life and my taqwa brings me even closer to the land, to the beautiful fruit trees. When I die, I will be buried in the land, and I won't be estranged because I am filled with taqwa. I also feel total satisfaction when I gather the fruit and vegetables, what God gave us to survive before we join Him.

The subjective "I" and sophisticated ideas of Houria contrast sharply with the collective "we" and experience-linked ideas of Fattouma. But in both cases, faith seems to be drawn from the various influences that shape women's lives and is therefore very close to their emotions.

The interviews also revealed that through faith urban educated women get acquainted with things (both physical and metaphysical) they cannot explain. Dounia, a veiled 48-year-old owner of a gymnasium, said:

I am an aerobics teacher; I feel at ease with my body, but my soul I cannot control. I don't understand why people suffer and die; my taqwa helps me. I have no time and no mind to study these things, and I endeavor all the time to feel good because everyday life is nothing but problems: I worry about the future of my children, about the infidelity of my husband, the harshness of people.... Time is running, and I may die tomorrow; I don't know what will happen to me, to my body, to my soul, shall be with these children I am giving all my time to... I support my husband's infidelity because of them... I definitely need taqwa to survive...

Assia, a 53-year-old single university teacher, wrote:

With all my diplomas and experience, what I understand of life is very little compared to what I don't understand... I need faith and the certainty that I will meet my maker to survive. I think all religions are the same, not only Islam. Faith helps us survive whether we are Jew, Christian, or Muslim. I happen to be Muslim and I use my faith to enjoy life from the inside. It is fulfilling and soul-lifting.

As can be seen in these samples, women's perceptions of faith are uneven: One senses differing degrees of conviction across their expressions of faith, and a variety of experiences with faith and interpretations of its meaning. It seems that women give faith meanings that make them comfortable. I could glean this from the body languages that accompanied the interviews. Women with intense faith tended to cry or clench their fists when they spoke. For most educated women, faith pushes a person to pursue knowledge as a pious endeavor incumbent upon all Muslims, men and women. As such, these women relate their faith to some kind of hope and trust in a brighter future on earth and beyond death. Upper- and middle-class urban women stress modesty, are prone to charity, and do not readily link their faith to appearance or specific clothing styles; they generally interpret modesty as the wearing of the hijab and *djellabas*, or long garments, some of these being fashion-based and rather costly. For most rural women, modesty is associated with hospitality and helping the others; the majority cover their heads, although it is not clear whether this is based on religious conviction, convenience, or habit. Fancy hijabs, such as some women wear in the urban centers, are rarely seen in rural areas. When directly asked about the specific issue of hijab-wearing, both urban and rural women describe faith as a state of mind: *liman flqalb* (faith is in the heart) seems to be a leitmotiv in the interviewees' statements, as well as in the answers obtained to the oral or written questions.

Research on Moroccan women's perception of Islam as faith is rather scarce (Al-Hibri 1982; Afsaruddin 1999). Most of the works where women are presented as "people with faith" tend to take this faith for granted: Women are supposed to have it! However, women speak of their faith as something they had to work on and strive to pass on to their husbands, children, and other members of the family. Here is what Mounia, a 32-year-old urban pharmacist, told me:

I was born Muslim, but I was not born with faith. As a child, I prayed and fasted because I had to: My parents required it, and my father would not allow any of us to sit at the table and have a meal if we did not complete our daily prayers. It was only at the age of 20 that I felt some kind of satisfaction in praying and fasting. I worked hard to keep the feeling: I would wake up at night, look at the sky, and ask Allah to fill me with faith.

While women cherish their relationship with God, their religious expressions are generally considered part of a taken-for-granted, "popular" religion. I am not aware of any serious sociological, Islamist or modernist, studies that account for this particular perception of women in Morocco. I believe that only a linguistic and anthropological perspective on women's agency in Morocco can explain women's faith as a broad category. Such a perspective would not only include Islam as a framework, but go beyond it to

cover the pre-Islamic era and the Amazigh languages and cultures as an overarching framework. It would root Moroccan women's agency (religious and otherwise) in the 3000-year-old pre-Islamic era, and hence it would be more inclusive.⁷ Furthermore, in highlighting the complex and plural nature of the Amazigh languages and cultures, this perspective forces an unpacking of Moroccan women's agency beyond the usual paradigms and underlines the history of their religious expressions as cultural roots of present-day Moroccan women's perceptions of Islam.⁸ Margaret Rausch (2009) analyzes didactic poetry composed in Amazigh and argues that such local poetry facilitated the proliferation of the knowledge of Islamic dogma, rules of practice, history, and lore among local illiterate inhabitants. Focusing on educational chanting sessions as a method of internalizing this didactic poetry, Rausch notes that such communal chanting sessions were frequently transformed into communal gatherings for ritual worship, in which education constituted a significant component. These ritual women's gatherings still constitute fora in which centuries-old Amazigh didactic poetry is chanted throughout southwestern Morocco. Tracing the roots of these educational ritual events back to an Amazigh religious literary tradition and educational campaign that lasted from the sixteenth to the twentieth century, the text quoted below underlines the significance of illiterate women's often-neglected participation in the transmission of Islamic knowledge and culture. This text was selected and analyzed by Rausch as a prototype of "popular didactic poetry," to be distinguished from the *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) manuals, Hadith collections, and *nasihah* (religious counseling), which were subject to metering and versification (Rausch 2009, 386). A good number of "popular didactic poems" have been transmitted orally from generation to generation and still circulate in various versions. Being often anonymous, such oral texts do not attract the attention of historians.⁹ In her presentation, Rausch observes that, in the text, "the worship of God is inextricable from women's everyday chores" (387), a statement that interestingly echoes some of the testimonies presented above. This type of oral poetry escaped the hegemony of written Arabic and French in schools without losing touch with the expression of religion in a unique way. It also highlights the historical link between the south of Morocco and Sub-Saharan countries, where this type of poetry was immortalized by women like the Nigerian poet Nana Asma'u (1793–1864).

Peace be upon you O Master of Lights, O Flower of everyone who is born.
 Peace be upon you O Master of Lights, O Flower of everyone who is born.
 Peace be upon you. Heal us, O Lord, and grant us our due.
 Peace be upon you. Heal us, O Lord, and grant us our due.
 O Muhammad, you are the Master of Lights.
 O Muhammad, you are the Master of Lights.
 O Muhammad, we want to find you on the Day of Judgment.
 O Muhammad, we want to find you on the Day of Judgment.
 If only we could be your guests in the graveyard.
 If only we could be your guests in the graveyard.
 The houries of paradise, they are standing at the entrance.
 The houries of paradise, they are standing at the entrance.
 The women of this world, they are standing at the gate.
 The women of this world, they are standing at the gate.
 We are better than those who always have what they need.
 We are better than those who always have what they need.
 We are in this world, so our troubles and faults are many.¹⁰

Amazigh women's expressions of the sacred are generally couched in the form of inscriptions, oral and written texts, art motifs, carpet weaving, and rituals (Mernissi 1977; Dwyer 1978; Rausch 2004; Mack 2004; Becker 2006). These expressions combine daily concerns, faith, and spirituality; their appeal resides in their noninstitutional symbolism that has survived for millennia in the collective unconscious of North Africans and southern Mediterraneans.¹¹ The expressions and the ways in which they have been transmitted must have had a deep impact on the way Moroccan women perceive Islam today, which raises the interesting question of whether there are differences among today's Moroccan women's perceptions of Islam depending on their ethnicity, an open question whose answer is beyond the scope of this article.

Women's Perceptions of Islam as Culture

The term "culture" is polysemous, multidimensional, and complex. The Oxford English Dictionary allocates no fewer than three broad clusters of meanings to the term: "the arts and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement regarded collectively, for example the twentieth-century popular culture"; "a refined understanding or appreciation of culture, for example men of culture"; and "the ideas, customs, and social behavior of a particular people or society; Afro-Caribbean culture." As such, culture is related to people's attitudes and behavior characteristics of a particular social group, as well the perception of these attitudes and behaviors. In Morocco, culture is referred to in Arabic as *thaqafa*, which is more akin to the last cluster of meanings in OED and which includes Islam. However, when dealing with women's perception of Islam through the lens of culture, it is important to distinguish culture (way of life, system of values, etc.) from traditions and customs, because whereas the latter are widely seen to function as hurdles for women's free expression of the self and emancipation, the former is more commonly viewed as empowering and bestowing a feeling of belonging to a larger community of like-minded. In this article and on the basis of the contents of the interviews and questionnaires, culture is understood in its broadest double sense of "way of life" and "system of values" that people are generally comfortable in taking for granted and use as support in addressing the challenges of their daily lives.

Islam as culture is the most widespread perception among Moroccan women. It is generally expressed from a social interactional or personal perspective, both of which are sensitive to the six social variables mentioned earlier. Two examples of the social interactional perspective are provided by Samira, a 41-year-old married dentist, and Shama, a divorced rural 33-year-old housewife. Samira links her culture-perception of Islam with her social identity in settings where this identity is important:

I am educated, I have a job and a family, I don't practice, but being Muslim is what really differentiates me from, say, a French or Spanish female (or male) dentist. It is usually when I am abroad, at a conference for example, that I have this feeling, the feeling that Islam represents how I live, eat, socialize, talk, and relate to others.

For Shama, her culture-perception of Islam is related to her belonging to a specific community with specific social habits:

As Muslims, we don't eat pork and we don't drink wine; our religion tells us how to behave and what to think; otherwise we are lost.

The urban/rural difference between these two women echoes the perceptions of faith by women illustrated in the previous section: rural women relate their Islam more to the group than to the individual.

With respect to the personal perspective, educated and noneducated women alike condemn traditions and customs such as forced marriage, forced seclusion, or instant divorce, and associate their culture with an Islam that liberates them from these customs and traditions. This is expressed by Lamia, a 40-year-old urban married beautician (first quote), and Saida, a 36-year-old rural housewife (second quote):

In these difficult times, what I like in our way of life is our blessed Islam, not what ignorant people state, like marrying off a girl as soon as she shows signs of puberty or allowing a man to divorce a woman just because he is fed up with her, or yet the virginity ceremony where blood is the honor of the family!

Islam is not forbidding girls' education or secluding women. It is not *tqaf* [a ritual where a young girl is made to step over the weaving loom to protect her virginity]. Islam is allowing girls to know how to read and write and [a woman to] have a job in case her husband dies and leaves her with children to feed. Otherwise she will have to sell her body as a prostitute in the town in order to feed her children.

Islam as culture is also attested in some women's statements such as, "Islam is like the color of my eyes or the color of my skin; it will go with me to the grave"; "I am born Muslim and I will die Muslim; it just cannot be otherwise"; "I don't even question my Islam, it is part of what I am, full stop." These statements carry the meaning of identity to a deeper level, which involves the body and the soul and is mingled with one's sense of being. Given that we cannot control, let alone question or judge such feelings, the culture-bound perceptions of Islam are strong. They are corroborated by everyday language use.¹² For example, the politeness register in Morocco abounds with words and expressions with a religious origin: "llah is'ad ssabah" (May Allah bless the morning!); "rabbi kbir" ("My God is great" as a reaction to any good news after sickness or any other misfortune); "llah 'alem" (God knows all), etc. In a way, language use in Morocco solidifies the link between women's perception of Islam as culture and their own sense of who they are.

At the sophisticated level of public-sphere expression of feminism, an example of women who view Islam as culture are the secular feminists who, although born Muslim and self-identifying as such, associate Islam and Islamic practices more with the private than with the public space and endeavor to keep their political views separate from their religious views in the public sphere. Here is what Amina, a 56-year-old single secular feminist who coordinates a women's rights NGO in Fez, told me:

My mission is to advocate for Moroccan women's civil rights. What does my religion have to do with this? My religion is part of what I am as a person and what I do at home to perform my religious duties: praying, fasting, etc. Why should I pray in public? To tell everybody that I am Muslim, so what? On the street, I should shout and demonstrate to change the miserable state we are in, I should talk about *ijtihad* [reform based on progressive interactions of legal Islam], but that's not religion, that's politics. My religion and my activism do not intersect so far as I am concerned, and why should they? I find it difficult enough to really concentrate on my prayers at home, let alone in public where I am self-conscious all the time because I feel like I am performing on a stage!

These feminists implicitly or explicitly advocate legal rights, education, job opportunities, financial independence, and reproductive health rights for women in urban and rural areas. They deal with Islam in public mainly in relation to the improvement of these rights. They are also concerned that only the family law (Moudawana) is based on *shari'a* law. Asma, another women's rights activist, 52 years old, married and educated, told me:

Why is the family law the only one based on shari'a? This is the question all of us should ponder. Legal Islam is man-made; maybe this type of Islam was good in the past, but now times have changed, and if the penal

code is based on civil law, why not the family law? Why not secularize this law? Patriarchs in and outside the home want to control us through the family law.

These feminists are conscious that they cannot, publicly at least, do without Islam because the latter is a state religion, so they choose to articulate their legal demands in terms of “liberalizing” society and avoid concentrating on religious texts. They advocate modernity and progress (Sadiqi 2003; Ennaji 2005) and do not see any clash with Islam on this front. It is interesting to note that secular feminists do not attack Islam as a religion; on the contrary, they attack patriarchy, and if they have to use a religious discourse, they highlight Islam’s ethical ideals where men and women enjoy the same rights. In other words, in order to espouse modernity, secular feminists seek to play down the narrowly religious aspect and seek in Islam a characterizing identity and a strategy of liberation that standard Western explanatory frameworks, often based on egalitarian and individualistic assumptions, do not include. Here is a statement by Maha, a 34-year-old married university professor who is a secular feminist:

Mind you, I like Islam, I have no problem with it, it is judging Muslims, especially women, I have issues with!
[laughs]

Maha’s statement is typical of secular feminists’ awareness of the central role of Islam in public life. To carry their projects and avoid being excluded or sidelined as “unauthentic” or “sold out to the West,” they position themselves publicly as “Muslim women” and package their demands together with the right dose of Islamic intensity. Secular feminists do not perceive Islam as politics, but they are aware that political ideologies and practices in Morocco use cultural ideas to enforce their projects. For example, these ideologies and practices link women and their sexual purity to the honor of men and families and “legitimate” this discourse by connecting it with Islam. By so doing, they subject women to the control of men and their surrogates. With the emergence of political Islam, secular feminists are faced with a yet more conservative brand of patriarchy who perceive Islam as ideology. The main battles between the modernists/secularists and conservatives/Islamists are fought with women’s rights and issues in the background: Whereas the former advocate the understanding of women’s rights as civil rights, the latter reduce women’s rights to what legal Islam prescribes.¹³ Fatima, a 29-year-old married journalist, told me:

Women the age of my mother were battling for rights, and they had to face conservatives who resented colonialism and used Islam as a preservation of the Moroccan way of life. But we have to face a fiercer enemy: the Islamists who, however moderate they can be, do not favor women’s freedom of action and individuality. They release all their hatred of the West on us!

With the spread of political Islam that accompanied the new century, many secular feminists wear the veil without adhering to the Islamist ideology. Roqaya, a 49-year-old successful lawyer, said in the interview:

I wear the veil because I am all the time with conservative men, some of whom refuse to shake hands with me. My veil facilitates my interaction with these men and with my clients, most of whom are conservative men or veiled women. Further, I sometimes come home late at night and my veiling lessens the anger of my husband and children. I use the veil to do what I want, but I must admit I sometimes feel the burden of guilt toward myself. The veil facilitates my life but creates guilt.

Roqaya’s sentiments were shared by a couple of other women I interviewed. Maha, the university professor, is also veiled and here is part of what she stated about her veil:

I am convinced that men do not understand the wearing of the veil in the same way that we do. We veil for a variety of reasons. My reason is to please my family and have peace of mind with my husband especially, but men in general associate the veil with convenient obedience.

This gender difference in the perception of the veil applies more in urban areas and to working women.

All in all, the main difference between women's perception of Islam as faith and their perception of Islam as culture resides in what may be termed the degree of religious intensity, but generally speaking, women who perceive Islam as culture do not feel obliged to perform the Islamic rituals such as praying and fasting. However, some of them expressed the desire to perform pilgrimage and one of them, Ilham, a 51-year-old wealthy married businesswoman, actually did. When I asked her why, she replied:

Well, having the title of *hajja* bestows on you more prestige, doesn't it? I bring a lot of material from Mecca and it sells well here!¹⁴

Performing *haj* is socially very prestigious in Morocco, so prestigious that the use of the corresponding title has become a way of addressing people from whom a favor is sought. Thus the title "hajja" boosts a woman's prestige considerably both in and outside the home. It elevates her self-confidence and in a way protects her from verbal and physical violence, as it is not considered socially decent to mistreat, let alone divorce or hit, a hajja. Many women, when asked, acknowledged this fact, as exemplified by Malika, a 58-year-old self-identified secular hajja:

I understand your question. When you come to think of it, when I came back from haj, I did notice that the male members of my close family, especially my husband, have become more deferential towards me; no one orders me about as before performing the haj; my husband consults me on religious things ... good feeling.
[laughs]

Indeed, more and more middle-class, middle-aged secular women are performing haj and seem to enjoy their new identity not only for religious but also for personal reasons, as Malika's statement above implies.

What transpires from my discussions with secular women is their twin insistence on the necessity of securing women's civil rights and their refusal to "politicize" Islam; this is congruent with the argument that secularization in Morocco cannot be successful without securing women's civil rights (Ennaji, Sadiqi and Vintges 2016).

In sum, women's perception of Islam as culture is most impacted by their geographical origin and social class. In the case of urban middle-class women, ethnic belonging does not seem to have any impact; however, ethnicity appears to loom large in the case of poorer rural women, as the testimonies above show. This is linked to the fact that in Amazigh areas, mostly rural, tension between secular and nonsecular views is not as articulated as in urban areas. I have not attested this articulation in the interviews I conducted with rural women, whereas I did when interviewing educated urban women.

Women's Perceptions of Islam as Politics

Women's perception of Islam as politics is a recent urban phenomenon in today's Morocco. It appeared around the mid-1980s, when political Islam reached Morocco in the aftermath of the success of the Iranian revolution in 1979. Since then, a Moroccan Islamist movement has developed into a full-fledged social movement.¹⁵ Although complex and heterogeneous (ranging from charity organizations to associations, political parties, and individual actors), this movement exhibits two major trends, identified respectively with the Justice and Development Party (PJD) and the Justice and Spirituality Association (JS).¹⁶ While both trends are pacifist, they differ as to their stance vis-à-vis the religious authority of the king: Whereas the PJD accepts this authority, the JS contests it, an attitude perceived by the monarchy as "destabilizing," hence its interdiction (Pruzan-Jørgensen 2010). Thus, while the PJD has been functioning within the Moroccan

political party system since the 1990s, participating in the elections and even heading the government since 2011, the JS has rejected the Moroccan constitution and boycotted the elections. With a focus on Arab-Islamic identity, the Arabic language, and a conservative lifestyle, the two trends of the Moroccan political Islam oppose secularization and espouse a rather ambiguous discourse with regard to the promotion of women's individual rights. For example, Bassima Hakkaoui, the Islamist Minister of Solidarity, Women, Family, and Social Development, was slow to condemn the 2012 rape of Amina Filali, the 16-year-old victim who committed suicide when she was forced to marry her rapist. It was the secular feminists who mobilized massively to repeal Article 475 of the Penal Code, which allowed a rapist to escape prosecution by marrying his victim. The mobilization garnered national and international support and put strong pressure on the government, leading to the repeal of Article 475 and replacing it with a law that condemns the rapist to 30 years in prison.

Both Islamist trends include female women's rights activists, but only the PJD counts female politicians. The demands of these activists and politicians share many characteristics, salient among which are a strong belief that Islam provides women with rights, an adherence to the veil, and total loyalty to the ideological tenets of the party/association they are affiliated with. For example, both camps promote complementarity (instead of equality) between men and women and between rights and obligations in the family, a tendency to position women's issues within larger family and social contexts, and a sidelining of the problems women face as individuals. However, there is a difference between the PJD and JS women: whereas the latter focus on wider intellectual issues, the former emphasize women's everyday problems (Pruzan-Jørgensen 2010).

In my sample of interviewees, I included a PJD member of parliament and a JS activist. When asked about her perception of women's rights, Fatima-Zahra, a 27-year-old PJD parliamentarian, responded:

I have always said in the parliament that Islam guarantees our rights as women and that we don't need to seek these rights elsewhere. Of course, we need to be aware of today's women's needs and see what can be appropriated from universal human rights, but our priority is to package these rights in the Islamic language that all women understand and are comfortable with.... First we need to strengthen the institution of the family and promote morality inside the family. If we do that, we will eradicate the social ills of prostitution and abandoned children. In this respect, women are more responsible than men. They are the hope.

She also said:

All Moroccan women need to know that men and women have different rights and obligations, we are not the same, and that Islam forbids violence against women and this is what my party, the PJD, is here for.

As for Wafa, a 29-year-old JS activist, she answered the same question in the following way:

I am not a politician and I don't aspire to be, but if I were, I would promote the idea that women's rights emanate from the spirit of Islam. We need to study hard to reach the spirit of Islam and then look for our rights using the language of law and the legal and intellectual proofs that will guarantee our rights. This is absolutely important, and I see it as the responsibility of both men and women.

When asked about polygamy, neither Fatima-Zahra nor Wafa condemned it; they both tried to justify it if the interests of the children and family are jeopardized. When asked about the hegemony of men within the party and association, Wafa was more critical than Fatima-Zahra. But in general, the two women often associated the ideological views of their party and association with their personal opinions on women, the family, and society at large. In so doing, they wanted to demarcate themselves from the secularist feminists who, according to both, are too influenced by Western views on women's rights and focus excessively on the individual. They also both approved the use of the term "Universal Islamic Declaration of Human Rights"

instead of “Universal Declaration of Human Rights.”¹⁷ Further, Fatima-Zahra’s and Wafa’s perceptions of Islam as politics were constantly cushioned with Islamic identity as “a point of departure and a point of arrival,” as Wafa stated. Between these points, family and society are highlighted as the only contexts where Moroccan women’s issues can be discussed and tackled. In their perceptions of Islam as politics, both interviewees considered the veil and a conservative lifestyle as part and parcel of their political projects.

But it is misleading to generalize here; some independent Islamist feminists are more aggressive in seeking political power. Najat, a 19-year-old student, said during the interview: “I want to use Islam in politics the way my male classmates do. Why not?” Other state-sponsored female Islamists, referred to as Murshidat (religious guides), hold secular views. Here is what Amal, a 31-year-old married and working Murshida, expressed in the questionnaire:

I am trained to spread a moderate and inclusive type of Islam. I preach to women in the mosque of my neighborhood, answer their questions, etc. I don’t use Islam for political reasons; I even prefer that Islam and politics are kept separate in debates about everything including women rights.

Amal also wrote, “Women’s rights are to be found in our religion but not exclusively. I believe in universal human rights.” She is aware that the success of her project to “spread a moderate type of Islam” depends on a clear definition of the roles of women and men in society, and she uses her status as a representative of the state’s official views and the religious sanction of Islam to pass on her messages.

Although they do not share the perceptions of Islam as politics, whatever its dose of moderation, secular feminists consider the very presence of female voices in the field of public religion, a hitherto male-dominated sphere, as a challenge to the male religious establishment. But what they really support is having women engage in new interpretations of the Qur’an in collaboration with the Ulama (religious authorities). It is important to note that this aim is not brought about by the emergence of female Islamist activists and politicians, as the secular unveiled feminist jurists Farida Bennani and Zineb Maadi advocated female interpretations of the Qur’an well before the emergence of feminist Islamist voices (Bennani and Maadi 2000), a view continued by Asma Lamrabet, a veiled secular feminist. It is knowledge production that many secular feminists support when they say they support Islamist feminists, because it is knowledge production on the female interpretation of the Qur’an that is lacking. Neither the PJD nor the JS have added to knowledge production of new interpretations of Islam: Nadia Yassine, leader of the women’s section of the JS, has not been heard from since her father’s passing; she has made attempts at reinterpreting Islam, but her voice has been silenced since 2013.

As with secular feminists, the women who perceive Islam as politics are urban, educated, and savvy, and some of them use the Amazigh issue to score political gains, as the PJD interviewee who states: “When I say all women, I mean Arabs and Amazigh: we all belong to one Islam.” This statement reflects the linguistic and ideological hegemony of political Islam, in which ethnicity and other categories are blurred.

Conclusion

This article set out to investigate and analyze women’s individual perceptions of Islam in today’s Morocco. Four major conclusions may be drawn from my investigation and analysis. First, women’s perceptions of Islam in today’s Morocco are plural, versatile, and complex. Second, the plurality, versatility, and complexity of these perceptions mirror women’s varied lives and experiences and their importance in shaping the perceptions of Islam. Third, if this proves anything, it proves the fluidity of the connection between religion, the self, and politics when it comes to women. Finally, women’s perceptions of Islam in today’s Morocco not

only refute the idea of a uniform Islam in the country; they also inform our understanding of the relationship between individual women and Islam in a dominant male-centric context and attest to women's individual agency—a still poorly researched topic and an interesting avenue of scholarly inquiry that can inform the larger narrative of women and Islam in modern Morocco.

Notes

I register with gratitude the help of two anonymous readers whose comments helped me improve an earlier version of this article.

1. Throughout Morocco's history, Islam was the official religion of both Arab and Berber royal dynasties (Abun-Nasr 1987).

2. The official Islamic school in Morocco is the Sunni Maliki school, itself based on *shari'a* (Islamic law). Shari'a is the sum of judicial "rules" elaborated during the first three centuries of the existence of Islam. These rules are based on a number of Qur'anic prescriptions and on the Hadiths, norms inspired by the behavior and recommendations attributed to Prophet Muhammad, which constitute the Sunna—the path to follow.

3. Christian and Jewish Moroccans have always been present but as minorities whose numbers have gradually been shrinking.

4. For an account of Islamic feminism, see Badran 2005 and 2008.

5. Authority here is understood as power sanctioned by society. For an account of the nature and workings of this type of authority in today's space-based patriarchy in Morocco, see chapter three in Sadiqi 2014.

6. For the sake of protecting the identities of my interviewees, I gave them fictional names. The translations from Arabic or Amazigh into English are mine.

7. I develop this idea in Sadiqi 2014.

8. The major reason for the hitherto absence of the language-and-culture perspective in modern mainstream research on Moroccan women's issues in general may be due to two reasons. First, the official history of Morocco begins with the coming of Islam and, as such, glosses over more than 3000 years of pre-Islamic recorded history. Second, Ibn Kaldun, the medieval father of sociology in North Africa, produced work that forced the polarizing dichotomy "urban vs. rural" (with negative connotations associated to the latter) on subsequent research in the country. The impact of these two circumstances within a heavily patriarchal context makes oral expressions of Amazigh rural women the most disadvantaged category of research. With the advent of colonization and state-building in the middle of the last century, oral languages, especially Amazigh, and women (the great majority of whom use only oral languages) were completely sidelined under the pretext of building a state that belonged to the larger Arab *umma* (nation). But, ironically, rural Amazigh women's orality/orature, didactic or otherwise, escaped both colonial and state censures and managed to survive through oral transmission, thus sustaining a link to both the pre-Islamic era and Sub-Saharan Africa. This orality/orature embodies women's multiple expressions of the sacred, their spirituality, and invocation of the divine, as well as artistic ways of transmitting and perpetuating these expressions, in whose various and complex forms the teaching and possibility of solace go hand in hand with everyday chores. These expressions and interpretations of the divide between spirituality and actual lives are a poorly understood area of research in Morocco and the Arab-Islamic world at large.

9. In Rausch's words, "the scholar of Berber culture Arsène Roux ... described the chanting or recitation of these poems as appropriate for 'little celebrations or parties,' and the Moroccan scholar Mohamed Al-Mokhtar Soussi rarely mentioned such chanting sessions" (2009, 386). The survival of this feminine genre is mainly due to the popularity of poetry in Amazigh culture.

10. The poem was translated from Amazigh by Rausch.

11. After the tragic destruction of most of the southern Mediterranean's rural life in World War II, these expressions may well be the only remaining link between the two shores of the Mediterranean Sea.

12. Four main languages are used in Morocco—Moroccan Arabic, Amazigh, Standard or written Arabic, and French—but only the first two are mother tongues.

13. See Sadiqi 2016 for a deconstruction and discussion of these two political pairings in today's Morocco.

14. The titles "haj" (masculine) and "hajja" (feminine) are generally acquired by the people who have performed the pilgrimage to Mecca, one of the five pillars of Islam that applies to people who can afford it (affordability being contained as a proviso in the designation of the pilgrimage as one of the five pillars of Islam).

15. For an account of the context in which political Islam developed in Morocco, see Tozy 1999.

16. The PJD was founded by Abdelkrim al-Khatib, initially under the name Popular Democratic and Constitutional Movement. This party remained inoperative until members of Chabiba Islamiyya, a clandestine association, created the Unity and Reform Movement and joined the party, which became PJD in 1998. Justice and Spirituality was founded by Cheikh Abdeslam Yassine in 1981.

17. The Universal Islamic Declaration of Human Rights was created by Islamic Councils in Paris and London; it uses the language of Islamic jurisprudence in its restatement of basic human rights.

References

- Abun-Nasr, Jamil. 1987. *A History of the Maghrib in the Islamic Period*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Afsaruddin, Asma. 1999. "Introduction: The Hermeneutics of Gendered Space and Discourse." In *Hermeneutics and Honor: Negotiating Female 'Public' Space in Islamic/ate Societies*, edited by Asma Afsaruddin, 1–28. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Al-Hibri, Azizah. 1982. "A Study of Islamic Herstory: Or How Did We Ever Get into This Mess?" *Women's Studies International Forum* 5 (2): 207–19.
- Badran, Margot. 2005. "Between Secular and Islamic Feminism/s. Reflections on the Middle East and Beyond." *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 1 (1): 6–28.
- . 2008. *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences*. Oxford: Oneworld.
- Becker, Cynthia. 2006. *Amazigh Arts in Morocco: Women Shaping Berber Identity*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Bennani, Farida, and Zineb Maadi. 2000. *Sélection de textes sacrés sur les droits humains de la femme en islam*. Rabat: Friedrich Stiftung.
- Dwyer, Daisy Hilse. 1978. "Women, Sufism, and Decision-Making in Moroccan Islam." In *Women in the Muslim World*, edited by Lois Beck and Nikki Keddie, 585–98. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- Ennaji, Moha. 2005. *Multilingualism, Cultural Identity, and Education in Morocco*. Boston: Springer.
- Ennaji, Moha, Fatima Sadiqi, and Karen Vintges. 2016. *Moroccan Feminisms*. Trenton: Red Sea Press.
- Lamrabet, Asma. 2014. "Evolution du statut des femmes au Maroc: 10 ans après la réforme du code de la famille." Unpublished manuscript.
- Mack, Beverly. 2004. "Muslim Women's Educational Activities in the Maghreb: Investigating and Redefining Scholarship in Northern Nigeria and Morocco." *The Maghreb Review* 29: 165–85.
- Mernissi, Fatima. 1977. "Women, Saints and Sanctuaries." *Signs* 3 (1): 101–12.
- . 1991. *The Veil and the Male Elite*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books.
- Mir-Hosseini, Ziba. 2003. "The Construction of Gender in Islamic Legal Thought and Strategies for Reform." In *Hawwa: Journal of Women in the Middle East and the Islamic World* 1 (1): 1–28.
- Moghadam, Valentine. 2003. *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East*. 2nd ed. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Pruzan-Jørgensen, Julie. 2010. "New Female Voices within the Islamist Movement in Morocco." *IPRIS Maghreb Bulletin* 6: 5–8.
- Rausch, Margaret. 2004. "Ishlhin Women's Rituals in Southwestern Morocco: Celebrating Religio-Cultural and Ethno-Linguistic Identity." *Minority Matters: Society, Theory, Literature. Colloques et Séminaires* 32: 199–224. Oujda: Publications de la Faculté des Lettres.
- . 2009. "Communal ('Lalla Fatima'), 'The Flower of All Earthly Creatures.'" In Sadiqi et al., *Women Writing Africa*, 386–88.
- Sadiqi, Fatima. 2003. *Women, Gender, and Language in Morocco*. Leiden: Brill.
- . 2006. "The Impact of Islamization on Moroccan Feminisms." *Signs* 32 (1): 32–40.
- . 2014. *Moroccan Feminist Discourses*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- . 2016. "The Center: A New Post-Arab Spring Space for Women's Rights." In *Women's Movements in the Post-"Arab Spring" North Africa*, edited by Fatima Sadiqi, 15–30. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Sadiqi, Fatima, and Moha Ennaji. 2006. "The Feminization of Public Space." *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 2 (2): 86–114.
- Sadiqi, Fatima, Amira Nouaira, Azza El Khouly, and Moha Ennaji, eds. 2009. *Women Writing Africa: The Northern Region*. New York: Feminist Press.
- Tozy, Mohamed. 1999. *Monarchie et islam politique au Maroc*. Paris: Presses de Sciences Po.
- Žvan, Katja. 2007. "The Politics of the Reform of the New Family Law (the Moudawana)." MA thesis, University of Oxford.