



Women scholars of Hadith

Written by Muhammad Zubayr Siddiqi
islamic-answers.com

History records few scholarly enterprises, at least before modern times, in which women have played an important and active role side by side with men. The science of hadith forms an outstanding exception in this respect. Islam, as a religion which [unlike Christianity] refused to attribute gender to the Godhead ¹, and never appointed a male priestly elite to serve as an intermediary between creature and Creator, started life with the assurance that while men and women are equipped by nature for complementary rather than identical roles, no spiritual superiority inheres in the masculine principle. ² As a result, the Muslim community was happy to entrust matters of equal worth in God's sight. Only this can explain why, uniquely among the classical Western religions, Islam produced a large number of outstanding female scholars, on whose testimony and sound judgment much of the edifice of Islam depends.

Since Islam's earliest days, women had been taking a prominent part in the preservation and cultivation of *hadith*, and this function continued down the centuries. At every period in Muslim history, there lived numerous eminent women-traditionists, treated by their brethren with reverence and respect. Biographical notices on very large numbers of them are to be found in the biographical dictionaries.

During the lifetime of the Prophet, many women had been not only the instance for the evolution of many traditions, but had also been their transmitters to their sisters and brethren in faith. ³ After the Prophet's death, many women Companions, particularly his wives, were looked upon as vital custodians of knowledge, and were approached for instruction by the other Companions, to whom they readily dispensed the rich store which they had gathered in the Prophet's company. The names of Hafsa, Umm Habiba, Maymuna, Umm Salama, and A'isha, are familiar to every student of *hadith* as being among its earliest and most distinguished transmitters. ⁴ In particular, A'isha is one of the most important figures in the whole history of *hadith* literature - not only as one of the earliest reporters of the largest number of *hadith*, but also as one of their most careful interpreters.

In the period of the Successors, too, women held important positions as traditionists. Hafsa, the daughter of Ibn Sirin, ⁵ Umm al-Darda the Younger [d.81 / 700], and Amra bin 'Abd al-Rahman, are only a few of the key women traditionists of this period. Umm al-Darda' was held by Iyas ibn

1: Maura O'Neill, *Women Speaking, Women Listening* [Maryknoll, 1990 CE], 31

2: See M. Boisiers, *L'Humanisme de l'Islam*, [3e ed. Paris, 1985 CE], 104-110

3: al-Khatib, *Sunna*, 53-4, 69-70.

4: See above, 18, 21.

5: Ibn Sa'd, VIII, 355.

Mu'awiya, an important traditionist of the time and a judge of undisputed ability and merit, to be superior to all the other traditionists of the period, including the celebrated masters of hadith like al-Hasan al-Basri and Ibn Sirin. ⁶ 'Amra was considered a great authority on traditions related by A'isha. Among her students, Abu Bakr ibn Hazm, the celebrated judge of Medina, was ordered by the caliph Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz to write down all the traditions known on her authority. ⁷

After them, 'Abida al-Madaniyya, 'Abda bin Bishr, Umm Umar al-Thaqafiyya, Zaynab the granddaughter of Ali ibn Abd Allah ibn Abbas, Nafisa bint al-Hasan ibn Ziyad, Khadija Umm Muhammad, 'Abda bint Abd al-Rahman, and many other members of the fair sex excelled in delivering public lectures on *hadith*. These devout women came from the most diverse backgrounds, indicating that neither class nor gender were obstacles to rising through the ranks of Islamic scholarship. For example, Abida, who started life as a slave owned by Muhammad ibn Yazid, learnt a large number of *hadiths* with the teachers in Median. She was given by her master to Habib Dahhun, the great traditionist of Spain, when he visited the holy city on this way to the Hajj. Dahhun was so impressed by her learning that he freed her, married her, and brought her to Andalusia. *It is said that she related ten thousand traditions on the authority of her Median teachers.* ⁸

Zaynab bint Sulayman [d. 142/759] , by contrast, was princess by birth. Her father was a cousin of al-Saffah, the founder of the Abbasid dynasty, and had been a governor of Basra, Oman and Bahrayn during the caliphate of al-Mansur. ⁹ Zaynab, who received a fine education, acquired a mastery of *hadith*, gained a reputation as one of the most distinguished women traditionists of the time, and counted many important men among her pupils. ¹⁰ This partnership of women with men in the cultivation of the Prophetic Tradition continued in the period when the great anthologies of *hadith* were compiled. A survey of the texts reveals that all the important compilers of traditions from the earliest period received many of them from women *shuyukh*: every major collection gives the names of many women as the immediate authorities of the author. And when these works had been compiled, the women traditionists themselves mastered them, and delivered lectures to large classes of pupils, to whom they would issue their own *ijazas*.

In the fourth century, we find Fatima bint Abd al-Rahman [d. 312/924] , known as al-Sufiyya on account of her great piety; Fatima [granddaughter of Abu Daud of *Sunan* fame] ; Amat al-Wahid [d. 377/987] , the daughter of distinguished jurist al-Muhamili; Umm al-Fath Amat as-Salam [d. 390/999] , the daughter of the judge Abu Bakr Ahmad [d.350/961] ; Jumua bint Ahmad, and many other women, whose classes were always attended by reverential audiences. ¹¹ The Islamic tradition of female *hadith* scholarship continued in the fifth and sixth centuries of *hijra*. Fatima bin al-Hasan ibn Ali ibn al-Daqqaq al-Qushayri, was celebrated not only for her piety and her mastery of calligraphy, but also for her knowledge of hadith and the quality of the *isnads* she knew. ¹² Even more distinguished was Karima al-Marwaziyya [d.463/1070] , who was considered the best authority on the Sahih of al-Bukhari in her own time. Abu Dharr of Herat, one of the leading scholars of the period, attached such great importance to her authority that he advised his students to study the Sahih under no one else, because of the quality of her scholarship. She thus figures as a central point in the transmission of this seminal text of Islam. ¹³ As a matter of fact, writes Goldziher, '*her name occurs with extraordinary frequency of the ijazas for narrating the text of this book.*' ¹⁴ Among her students were al-Khatib al-Baghdadi ¹⁵ and al-Humaydi [428/1036 – 488/1095] . ¹⁶

⁶: Suyuti, *Tadrib*, 215

⁷: Ibn Sa'd, VIII, 353.

⁸: Maqqari, *Nafh*, II, 96..

⁹: Wustenfeld, *Genealogische Tabellen*, 403.

¹⁰: al-Khatib al-Baghdadi, *Tarikh Baghdad*, XIV, 434 f.

¹¹: *Ibid.* , XIV, 441-44.

¹²: Ibn al-Imad, *Shsadhara al-Dhahah fi Akhbar man Dhahah* [Cairo, 1351] , V, 48; Ibn Khallikan, no. 413.

¹³: See Maqqari, *Nafh*, I, 876; cited in Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, II, 366.

¹⁴: See Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, II, 366

¹⁵: Yaqut, *Mu'jam al-Udaba'*, I, 247.

¹⁶: COPL, V/i, 98 f.

Aside from Karima, a number of other women traditionists 'occupy an eminent place in the history of the transmission of the text of the *Sahih*.' ¹⁷ Among these, one might mention in particular Fatima bint Muhammad [d.539/1144] ; Shuhda 'the Writer' [d.574/1178] , and Sitt al-Wuzara bint Umar [d.716/1316] . ¹⁸ Fatima narrated the book on the authority of the great traditionist Said al-Ayyar; she received from the *hadith* specialists the proud title of *Musnida Isfahan* [the great *hadith* authority of Isfahan]. Shuhda was a famous calligrapher and a traditionist of great repute; the biographers describe her as 'the calligrapher, the great authority on *hadith*, and the pride of womanhood.' Her great-grandfather had been a dealer in needles, and thus acquired the sobriquet al-Ibri'. But her father, Abu Nasr [d. 506/1112] had acquired a passion for *hadith*, and managed to study it with several masters of the subject. ¹⁹ In obedience to the *sunna*, he gave his daughter a sound academic education, ensuring that she studied under many traditionists of accepted reputation.

She married Ali ibn Muhammad, an important figure with some literary interests, who later became a boon companion of the caliph al-Muqtadi, and founded a college and a Sufi lodge, which he endowed most generously. His wife, however, was better known: she gained her reputation in the field of *hadith* scholarship, and was noted for the quality of her *isnads*. ²⁰ Her lectures on *Sahih* al-Bukhari and other *hadith* collections were attended by large crowds of students; and on account of her great reputation, some people even falsely claimed to have been her disciples. ²¹ Also known as an authority on Bukhari was Sitt al-Wuzara, who, besides her acclaimed mastery of Islamic law, was known as 'the *musnida* of her time', and delivered lectures on the *Sahih* and other works in Damascus and Egypt. ²² Classes on the *Sahih* were likewise given by Umm al-Khayr Amat al-Khaliq [811/1408 – 911/1505] , who is regarded as the last great *hadith* scholar of the Hijaz. ²³ Still another authority on Bukhari was A'isha bint Abd al-Hadi. ²⁴

Apart from these women, who seem to have specialized in the great *Sahih* of Imam al-Bukhari, there were others, whose expertise was centered on other texts. Umm al-Khayr Fatima bint Ali [d.532/1137] , and Fatima al-Shahrazuriyya, delivered lectures on the *Sahih* of Muslim. ²⁵ Fatima al-Jawzdaniyya [d.524/1129] narrated to her students the three *Mu'jams* of al-Tabarani. ²⁶ Zaynab of Harran [d.68/1289] , whose lectures attracted a large crowd of students, taught them the *Musnad* of Ahmad ibn Hanbal, the largest known collection of hadiths. ²⁷ Juwayriya bint Umar [d.783/1381] and Zaynab bint Ahmad ibn Umar [d.722/1322] , who had travelled widely in pursuit of *hadith* and delivered lectures in Egypt as well as Medina, narrated to her students the collections of al-Darimi and Abd ibn Humayd; and we are told that students travelled from far and wide to attend her discourses. ²⁸ Zaynab bint Ahmad [d.740/1339] , usually known as Bint al-Kamal, acquired 'a camel load' of diplomas; she delivered lectures on the *Musnad* of Abu Hanifa, the *Shamail* of al-Tirmidhi, and the *Sharh Ma'ani al-Athar* of al-Tahawi, the last of which she read with another woman traditionist, Ajiba bin Abu Bakr [d.740/1339] . ²⁹ 'On her authority is based,' says Goldziher, 'the authenticity of the Gotha codex ... in the same *isnad* a large number of learned women are cited who had occupied themselves with this work.' ³⁰ With her, and various other

¹⁷: Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, II, 366.

women, the great traveller Ibn Battuta studied traditions during his stay at Damascus. [31](#) The famous historian of Damascus, Ibn Asakir, who tells us that he had studied under more than 1,200 men and 80 women, obtained the ijaza of Zaynab bint Abd al-Rahman for the *Muwatta* of Imam Malik. [32](#) Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti studied the Risala of Imam Shafii with Hajar bint Muhammad. [33](#) Afif al-Din Junayd, a traditionist of the ninth century AH, read the *Sunan* of al-Darimi with Fatima bin Ahmad ibn Qasim. [34](#)

Other important traditionists included Zaynab bint

when still a child, acquired all the Islamic sciences then being taught, including theology, law, history, and grammar, and then travelled to pursue *hadith* with the best traditionists of her time in Cairo and Mecca. She was also celebrated for her mastery of calligraphy, her command of the Arabic language, and her natural aptitude in poetry, as also her strict observance of the duties of religion (she performed the hajj no fewer than thirteen times). Her son, who became a noted scholar of the tenth century, showed the greatest veneration for her, and constantly waited on her towards the end of her life. She pursued an intensive program of learning in the great college of Cairo, giving *ijazas* to many scholars, Ibn Fahd himself studied several technical works on *hadith* under her. [44](#)

Her Syrian contemporary, Bai Khatun [d.864/1459], having studied traditions with Abu Bakr al-Mizzi and numerous other traditionalists, and having secured the *ijazas* of a large number of masters of *hadith*, both men and women, delivered lectures on the subject in Syria and Cairo. We are told that she took especial delight in teaching. [45](#) A'isha bin Ibrahim [760/1358 – 842/1438], known in academic circles as Ibnat al-Sharaihi, also studied traditions in Damascus and Cairo [and elsewhere], and delivered lectures which eminent scholars of the day spared no efforts to attend. [46](#) Umm al-Khayr Saida of Mecca [d.850/1446] received instruction in *hadith* from numerous traditionists in different cities, gaining an equally enviable reputation as a scholar. [47](#)

So far as may be gathered from the sources, the involvement of women in *hadith* scholarships, and in the Islamic disciplines generally, seems to have declined considerably from the tenth century of the *hijra*. Books such as *al-Nur al-Safir* of al-Aydarus, the *Khulasat al-Akhbar* of al-Muhibbi, and the *al-Suluh al-Wabila* of Muhammad ibn Abd Allah [which are biographical dictionaries of eminent persons of the tenth, eleventh and twelfth centuries of the *hijra* respectively] contain the names of barely a dozen eminent women traditionists. But it would be wrong to conclude from this that after the tenth century, women lost interest in the subject. Some women traditionists, who gained good reputations in the ninth century, lived well into the tenth, and continued their services to the sunna. Asma bint Kamal al-Din [d.904/1498] wielded great influence with the sultans and their officials, to whom she often made recommendations - which, we are told, they always accepted. She lectured on *hadith*, and trained women in various Islamic sciences. [48](#) A'isha bint Muhammad [d.906/1500], who married the famous judge Muslih al-Din, taught traditions to many students, and was appointed professor at the Salihyya College in Damascus. [49](#) Fatima bint Yusuf of Aleppo [870/1465 – 925/1519], was known as one of the excellent scholars of her time. [50](#) Umm al-Khayr granted an *ijaza* to a pilgrim at Mecca in the year 938/1531. [51](#)

The last woman traditionist of the first rank who is known to us was Fatima al-Fudayliya, also known as al-Shaykha al-Fudayliya. She was born before the end of the twelfth Islamic century, and soon excelled in the art of calligraphy and the various Islamic sciences. She had a special interest in *hadith*, read a good deal on the subject, received the diplomas of a good many scholars, and acquired a reputation as an important traditionist in her own right. Towards the end of her life, she settled at Mecca, where she founded a rich public library. In the Holy City she was attended by many eminent traditionists, who attended her lectures and received certificates from her. Among them, one could mention in particular Shaykh Umar al-Hanafi and Shaykh Muhammad Sali. She died in 1247/1831. [52](#)

[44](#): Sakhawi, *al-Saw al-Lami li-Ahl al-Qarn al-Tasi* [Cairo, 1353-55], XII, no. 980.

[45](#): Ibid., no. 58.

[46](#): Ibid., no. 450.

[47](#): Ibid., no. 901

[48](#): al-Aydarus, *al-Nur al-Safir* [Baghdad, 1353], 49.

[49](#): Ibn Abi Tahir, see COPL, XII, no. 665 ff.

[50](#): Ibid.

[51](#): Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, II, 407.

[52](#): al-Suhuh al-Wabila, see COPL, XII, no. 785.

Throughout the history of feminine scholarship in Islam it is clear that the women involved did not confine their study to a personal interest in traditions, or to the private coaching of a few individuals, but took their seats as students *as well as teachers in public educational institutions*, side by side with their brothers in faith. The colophons of many manuscripts show them both as students attending large general classes, and also as teachers, delivering regular courses of lectures. For instance, the certificate on folios 238-40 of the *al-Mashikhat ma al-Tarikh* of Ibn al-Bukhari, shows that numerous women attended a regular course of eleven lectures which was delivered before a class consisting of more than five hundred students in the Umar Mosque at Damascus in the year 687/1288. Another certificate, on folio 40 of the same manuscript, shows that many female students, whose names are specified, attended another course of six lectures on the book, which was delivered by Ibn al-Sayrafi to a class of more than two hundred students at Aleppo in the year 736/1336. And on folio 250, we discover that a famous woman traditionist, Umm Abd Allah, delivered a course of five lectures on the book to a mixed class of more than fifty students, at Damascus in the year 837/1433. [53](#)

Various notes on the manuscript of the *Kitab al-Kifaya* of al-Khatib al-Baghdadi, and of a collection of various treatises on *hadith*, show Ni'ma bin Ali, Umm Ahmad Zaynab bint al-Makki, and other women traditionists delivering lectures on these two books, sometimes independently, and sometimes jointly with male traditionists, in major colleges such as the Aziziyya Madrasa, and the Diyaiyya Madrasa, to regular classes of students. Some of these lectures were attended by Ahmad, son of the famous general Salah al-Din. [54](#)

[53](#): COPL , V/ ii, 54.

[54](#): Ibid. , V/ii, 155-9, 180-208. For some particularly instructive annotated manuscripts preserved at the Zahiriya library at Damascus, see the article of Abd al-Aziz al-Maymani in *al-Mabahith al-Ilmiyya* [Hyderabad: Da'irat al-Ma'arif , 1358], 1-14.