

Fatima al-Fihriya: The Woman Who Founded One of the World's Oldest Universities

Bogdana Todorova

Institute of Philosophy and Sociology – Bulgarian Academy of Sciences

bonytodorova@gmail.com

Фатима ал-Фихрия – жената, основала един от най-старите университети в света

Богдана Тодорова

Институт по Философия и Социология при БАН

bonytodorova@gmail.com

Abstract: Fatima al-Fihriya, the founder of the al-Qarawiyyin mosque, one of the oldest universities in the world, is a historical figure of great significance. Not only is it intriguing that a university was established at such an early time, but it was also built by a Muslim woman. Although her life details are not extensively documented, her legacy persists to this day. The main goal is to present women's roles within Islamic society. Fatima al-Fihriya is an early example of the powerful leadership roles that women have played in the Muslim world, both historically and contemporarily. The article concludes that Fatima al-Fihriya adopted an unprecedented policy concerning feminine education. She pioneered the model of higher education that has been adopted across the world.

Keywords: Fatima al-Fihriya, religious center, education, university.

Резюме: Фатима ал-Фихрия, основателка на джамията “Ал-Карауийн”, превърнала се впоследствие в един от най-старите университети в света, е историческа личност от голяма величина. Интригуващ е не само фактът, че университет е създаден в толкова ранна епоха, но и че е построен от жена мюсюлманка. Въпреки че подробни данни за живота ѝ не са документирани, нейното наследство продължава да е актуално и днес. Основната цел е да се представи ролята на жената в ранното ислямско общество. Фатима ал-Фихрия е пример за ръководната роля, която жените са играли в мюсюлманския свят в исторически план. Фатима ал-Фихрия възприема уникална за времето си политика по отношение на женското образование. Тя е пионер с модел на висше образование, възприет по-късно от целия свят.

Ключови думи: Фатима ал-Фихрия, религиозен център, образование, университет.

Introduction

In the Introduction of the work entitled “Becoming Visible: Medieval Islamic Women in Historiography and History”, the fact is mentioned that works on Islamic History give little information on women and, when they do, they concentrate on themes such as the use of the veil, polygamy, concubinage, and the harem. The author concludes, therefore, that Muslim women intellectuals are not well-known, since most researchers ignore them, considering them “invisible”, reinforcing the stereotypes of Muslim women (Hambly 1998).

Fatima al-Fihriya is a good example of feminine piety and philanthropy, who not only demonstrated a renewed tolerance in religious matters but also adopted an unprecedented policy concerning female education. It is a fact that women can exercise real power on men’s behavior in the domain of the private; in addition, there are good reasons to break with the idea that their religious power was insignificant. Fatima’s figure introduces Muslim women not as victims or as passive spectators, but as active members of Islamic societies.

This article pays attention to two dimensions of the al-Qarawiyyin center, which gained immense renown among both Muslims and Christians: *as a religious center* (founded to unite a community of devout believers in the Almighty) and *as a center of higher education* (many of its graduates became renowned scholars who deeply impacted Islamic history, such as Ibn Rushd (1126-1198), Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406), the Jewish philosopher Maimonides, and Gerbert d’Aurillac (Pope Sylvester II (999-1003)).

In addition to the historical approach, an anthropological approach has also been applied here, as it is more conducive to qualitative research and is attuned to intricate details of a believer’s life inspired by religion. Different theoretical lines/narratives, methods and different primary sources are used to study the role of this woman.

In the past, Islamic social system enabled women to assert their presence, leave their mark, and actively contribute to society. An exemplary figure like Fatima Al-Fihriya serves as a reminder of the substantial historical contributions women have made and brings attention to the importance of education. She remains an inspiration for Muslim women worldwide who dare to envision pioneering change and the pursuit of *ilm* (knowledge) despite the challenges of our present reality.

There is little information about the lives of women in the early Islamic epoch. Before the eleventh century, most historical accounts were limited to elite women, and legal sources do not shed much light on the emotional and live experience of non-elite women. While still limited, there is more information about women living in medieval Islamic societies. Women’s lives were affected by religion, but they were also influenced by their socioeconomic status and the political environment around them.

Fatima Muhammad Al-Fihriya Al-Quraysh is a historical figure of great significance (Benchekroun, 2011:171).¹ She is the founder of the al-Qarawiyyin mosque (857-859) – a school complex that became the oldest extant university in the world.² There are disputes whether this educational institution can be classified as a university in the modern sense, but it was undeniably the first to grant diplomas. Not only is it intriguing that a university was established at such an early time, but it was also built by a Muslim woman. There are no detailed records of her life due to the burning of the al-Qarawiyyin's archives in 1323. Although her life details are not extensively documented, her legacy persists to this day. She stands out as an early example of the powerful leadership roles that women played in the Muslim world, historically.

The university is still in operation today, attracting visitors and students alike. It boasts one of the oldest libraries in the world with over 10,000 manuscripts, 30,000 volumes. It even has Fatima's diploma on display.

A Religious Center

Fatima and her sister inherited a considerable fortune after the death of her father. Due to Islamic inheritance laws, the girls could spend the money as they saw fit. She used them for something thoughtful – to build a mosque for her community (al-Qarawiyyin mosque) and a place where Islamic wisdom and knowledge could flourish. She and her sister grew up in a learned family and studied Fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence) and Hadith (verified stories and sayings from the life of the prophet Muhammad). Around 859 to 860 CE, they founded two mosques which are known as al-Qarawiyyin and Al-Andalus (at the right side of the river in Fez, Morocco). Many Muslims just like Fatima's family in the northern city of Morocco came to Fez from various places such as Cordoba (Southern Spain) and Kairouan (Northern Tunisia) (Girard 2009).

Deeply devout, Fatima understood that her talents and resources were a gift meant to be used in service. What is interesting, is that she did more than just donate her money to the building of al-Qarawiyyin mosque. Throughout the time that the mosque was being built, she fasted and assisted in various ways with the construction, according to the Moroccan historian Abdelhadi Tazi.³ She unified all the immigrated people and soon, they formed a community of deep believers in the Almighty and religious knowledge. This unity of people was ready to accept the challenges

¹ Little is known about her personal life, except for what was recorded by fourteenth-century historian Ibn Abi-Zar' (Benchekroun, Chafik T. 2011. *Les Idrissides: L'histoire contre son histoire. Al-Masaq*, 23 (3): 171–188). Contemporary historians (Jonathan Bloom, Ian D. Morris) state that the traditional story of the founding of the mosque belongs more to myth than to academic history and point out that no part of the mosque today is older than the tenth century (Bloom 2020: 42).

² The Arabic name of the university means "University of the People from Kairouan" where Kairouan is the place of provenance of Fatima al-Fihriya's family in Tunisia. The French colonization of Morocco has resulted in several different orthographies for the romanization of the university's name, including al-Qarawiyyin, a standard Anglicization, and Al Qaraouiyne, following French orthography.

³ "Fatima Al-Fihriyya Umm Al-Banin, Founder of the First University in the World" (April 9, 2019). *Ejadidanews.com* (in Arabic). Archived from the original on November 1, 2020. Retrieved September 9, 2019.

presented by their geographic position and history. Nearer to the Attarine madrassa, the al-Qarawiyyin was originally (857) fairly small and was subsequently repeatedly enlarged, embellished, and renovated. In 933 it was transformed into khutba mosque and in 956 it received a fine minaret.⁴ In 1135, the Almoravid sultan Ali ibn-Yusuf gave it its present size and form. Today it is the only example of Almoravid building still in use. The madrassas al-Misbahiya, al-Seffarin, and al Cherratin were built around this great and ancient place.

Fatima possessed a great power entrusted to her by the people due to of her knowledge, faith, and competency. Such domination over others in those days proves inherent growth, sincerity, and human values. IN this way, her figure evoked the words from the Holy Quran: "... and she possessed everything⁵ in the world that could be possessed, and she has a mighty throne" (The Ants 27:23).⁶ Allah offers human beings the values, character, and hidden forces that are all manifest in women. The main role played by women in the manifestation of these divine characteristics becomes more obvious. This sovereignty's influence in which a woman was a ruler of the place showed it as a progressive place in its own time. We can consider her role in two dimensions: a manifestation of the Creator and a good example of piety, dignity, and knowledge.

When we talk about a personality who has a presence in all aspects of humanity, we can refer to Fatima el Fihriya. A woman who is chaste like Fatima al-Zahra (Mohammad's daughter who was called "*Tahereh*" since she was chaste), knowledgeable like Belquais, present in all critical moments like all women during Moses' time, brave like Sara, and patient like Hadjar. She was the best manifestation of Allah, concerning nobility, dignity, and eminence.

Islam makes no distinction between man and woman on their path to *al-Hak* (the path to God). The natural and human rights of men and women require a difference in some legal rights, which are related to a certain philosophy of rights and the principle of justice, as one of the main pillars of Islamic theology and Sharia (laws of Islam). It is this principle that sets the rule for harmony between reason and religious law in Islam. In the past, the Islamic social system allowed Muslim women to claim their space and be active members of society. Let's remember how the Prophet invited Fatima al-Zahra⁷ to attend the 'Mobahala event',⁸ which is a clear example for all virtuous women. Fatima al-Zahra was brave enough to attend the event, and Fatima al-Fihriya was brave enough to follow the right path and act by her own will. It was understood that she had a high status in her own time and that Allah

⁴ A 'khutba' is a Muslim sermon read by an imam during the Friday midday service in the mosque and also on holidays.

⁵ Here, it seems "everything" means not only material properties but also the knowledge to govern and unit.

⁶ Throne or 'Arsh' in Arabic is a sign of an influential and comprehensive power.

⁷ The daughter of the Islamic prophet Mohammad and spouse of Ali ibn Abi Talib, the mother of Hassan and Hossein.

⁸ The Event of Mubahala is an event in Islamic history in which the Prophet and a Christian delegation from Najran (present-day Yemen) met to do "mubahala": that is, an attempt to reveal who was lying about their religious differences. The Prophet invited the Christians to discuss theology and, specifically, the status of Prophet Jesus in Islam. Some verses of the Quran (3:59–61) refer to this episode.

created human beings to be independent, each with her/his own set of duties. The woman is more sensitive, not as an expression of gender division, but as a divine sign. The woman in Islam is a real legal entity, especially in traditional societies.

The past shows how during the time of Caliph Umar, women argued with him in the mosque, proving their rights and often forced him to admit: “Women are right, Umar is wrong”, i.e. they participated directly in the public discourse. For early Islam, religious women were no exception. Many Muslims acknowledge that Islam has its learned women, particularly in the field of hadith, starting with the Prophet’s wife Aisha. And several Western academics have written on women’s religious education. About a century ago, the Hungarian Orientalist Ignaz Goldziher estimated that about 15 percent of medieval hadith scholars were women, unlike today when there has been no significant female figure in the field for more than 200 years (Power 2007).

A woman’s abilities and work should not remain within the closed circle of the family, but her participation in public life is necessary, as an individual act, not a collective privilege, as an expression of her own identity. Fatima al-Fihriya and Umm al-Darda (a prominent jurist in seventh-century Damascus who issued a fatwa, still cited by modern scholars, that allowed women to pray in the same position as men), used to sit with male scholars in the mosque (even today many Muslim women still don’t dare to pray in mosques) and to teach hadith and fiqh.

Shifting the aesthetics of the masjid space offers an enriching pedagogical tool to reflect different embodied leadership models. A woman occupying the place of ‘minbar’, symbolized and conveyed an important message of equality.

Her attitude towards religion inspires faith and hope for a better future and in the moral qualities of humanity. It is a social hope which is inspiring and humbling at the same time. This is the meaning that René Girard (2009) puts into saying that “religion solves social problems and thus preserves society”. She suggests a new understanding of religious belief, as a kind of cognitive challenge.

A Center of Higher Education

Fatima’s primary passion was education. This pursuit culminated in the establishment in 859 of al-Qarawiyyin University, which predates Al-Azhar by nearly 100 years. Similarly, European higher education took place in Christian cathedral schools and monastic schools (*scholae monasticae*), where monks and nuns taught classes. The institution focused heavily on Islamic theology and law. An interesting fact is that in the first European universities, law was the main subject at Bologna, while in Paris it was theology. Following the Gregorian Reform’s emphasis on canon law and the study of the sacraments, bishops in Europe formed cathedral schools to train the clergy in canon law, and also in the more secular aspects of religious administration, including logic and disputation for use in preaching and theological discussion, and accounting to control finances more effectively (Rüegg 1992). Later, it expanded beyond these subjects. At its height, students were immersed in poetry, philosophy, logic, rhetoric, grammar, geography, science, mathematics, and other

subjects of study. All of these courses were provided free of charge. Many of the practices established at al-Qarawiyyin are still practiced today in universities around the world (Makdisi 1981 and Qazi 2017).

Fatima followed the principle of Islam as a religion based on wisdom. The university is a place where discourse is tied to the search for truth and there is a reflexive exchange of arguments. The brief historical review shows this university gained a crucial place in early Islamic society. The transformation of the university toward a proactive and societally engaged rational organization, shaped by the local parameters, also carries the imprints of the historical legacies. The configuration of the university is based on a model of an integrated Islamic society, which would later underpin Humboldt's ideal of a community of scholars and students in the common pursuit of truth. The university plays a significant role based on universalized principles and locally transcended truths, in and for society. Education has been both a contributor and beneficiary of knowledge and its regional implementations in the context of Islamic society.

Starting from the premise that the family is the main moral and ethical pledge for the existence of the 'ummah' (a unified system where there is no room for the superiority of any group, but only for the fraternal community) and that every person is endowed by Allah with rights, she draws attention to the fact of how important education is and that the university is a rational organization, transferring values (the redefined 'common good').

Students travelled 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, by Pope Sylvester II (Auvergneli Gerber, famed for bringing from the Muslim world to Medieval Christendom), who also studied there. If we accept this last as our criteria for what a university is, then before the advent of Bologna (established in 1088), it is possible to say that there were Islamic universities, built alongside mosques. One such institution, although not referred to as a university, was built in the eighth or ninth century in Harran, near Urfa in modern-day Turkey. The institution in Fes, Morocco, is widely recognized as the earliest university to grant diplomas.⁹ Syed Farid Alatas has noted some parallels between madrasahs and early European colleges and has inferred that the first universities in Europe were influenced by the madrasahs in Islamic Spain and the Emirate of Sicily (Alatas 2006). Of course, there are differences in the structure, methodologies, procedures, curricula, and legal status of the "Islamic college" (madrasah) compared with European universities (Makdisi 1970).

Many of its graduates have become renowned scholars who deeply impacted Islamic history, such as Ibn al-Arabi who studied there in the twelfth century, North

⁹ The University of Al-Qarawiyyin is considered the most ancient university in the world according to UNESCO and Guinness World Records. It still exists, operating and running well in this present world. In 2017, a prize was created in Tunisia in Fatima's honor. It rewards initiatives that encourage access to training and professional responsibilities for women. Furthermore, an academic program and a scholarship given to students from Europe and North Africa pay tribute to Fatima al-Fihri.

African historian and economist Ibn Khaldun in the fourteenth century, the Jewish philosopher Maimonides, while in “medieval times, al-Qarawiyyin played a leading role in the transfer of knowledge between Muslims and Europeans” (Eng 2016). Later, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, European scholars such as Nicolas Claynaerts and Jacobus Golius visited the university. Al-Qarawiyyin University has since provided hundreds of years of education on Islamic religious and legal sciences, classical Arabic grammar/linguistics, and Maliki law with the later introduction of French and English.

Fatima founded a library, as a part of the al-Qarawiyyin mosque. While early universities in Western Europe developed from Christian cathedral schools, early universities in the Arab world developed from Islamic education centers in mosques. The creation of the library is its way of (trans)shaping the environment through imagination, a kind of responsibility of the endowed with reason, towards the “worldliness”, understood in the sense introduced by Edward Said much later. The most famous scholar to use the library was the Arab geographer Leo Africanus, whose notebooks and manuscripts were for over 400 years one of Europe’s chief sources of information about Islam (Oswald 2017: 75). The original version (dating back to the fourteenth century) of Ibn Khaldun’s ‘Muqadimmah’, is kept in the library. The library boasts more than 4,000 rare books and ancient Arabic manuscripts dating back to the ninth century. An original manuscript by Ibn Rochd on Maliki jurisprudence written in Andalusian style calligraphy is also kept there.¹⁰

The university library underwent a recent process of restoration in 2016 because at risk were centuries of knowledge contained in the many ancient manuscripts that were under threat of being lost forever. The official reopening was celebrated in mainstream news, bringing Fatima’s story to center stage once more. It is also important to note that the architect who oversaw the design of the library was a Muslim woman too. This is Aziza Chaouni (a Fez native and an architect in Toronto). Chaouni added a new lab to treat, preserve, and digitize some of the oldest texts, which include a ninth-century Quran, written in Kufic (the oldest form of Arabic calligraphy) on camel skin. This collaboration of old and new, woman to woman, is a deeply poignant moment in modern Islamic history.

In 1963, the university was incorporated into Morocco’s modern state university system under the supervision of the Ministry of Education. A new campus was established in another part of Fez while the mosque and library remained. Today the University offers undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral programs, and produces five periodicals: *Revue al-Qaraouiyine*, *Revue d’al-logha al-arabia-Marrakech*, *Revue d’ach-charia-Fez*, *Revue d’ach-charia-Agadir*, and *Revue d’Ossouliddin-Tetouan*.

Fatima pioneered the model of higher education that has been adopted across the world, demonstrating the university as the producer of knowledge and societal values. She is a woman, challenging commonly held assumptions about the contribution of women in Muslim civilization.

¹⁰ See: <https://www.trtworld.com/arts-and-culture/a-walk-through-the-worlds-oldest-library-in-fez-morocco-13084373>

Conclusion

After a life of service, piety, and generosity, Fatima al-Fihriya died in the year 880. Her tenacity, vision, and commitment left an indelible mark on the world and continue to inspire countless men and women. Al-Qarawiyyin, a monument of Islamic intellectual achievement, fulfils this vital role thanks to the vision of this woman. She played a great role in the civilization and culture of the Islamic society.

We need to walk with current phenomena by adding our historical knowledge in an advanced way. In general, many researchers, scholars, and religious speakers publish Islamic content online on different platforms but we also need to give an example of other great historical contributors such as Fatima Al-Fihriya for bringing the importance also awareness of education and women's rights.

She is a great icon of leadership and dignity, a well-learned woman, and she managed the entire construction of the mosque with modesty. That's the reason she is still respected by the title of 'Umm al-banine' ('the mother of the children') in Tunisia as well as in Morocco (Tahami 2013: 106).

Throughout history, Fatima Al-Fihriya has become a symbol of Muslim women's place in academia. She was a testament to one of the fundamental messages of Islam: to encourage believers to seek knowledge – both men and women in the same regard.

Fatima al-Fihriya, is an inspiration for the next generations, bringing to light the hope that young people, boys and girls, men and women from all nations, will be inspired to work toward a better future. The heritage needs to live.

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