



## ENCYCLOPEDIA OF WOMEN AND ISLAMIC CULTURES

Dr. Suad Joseph  
General Editor

Distinguished Professor of Anthropology and Women and Gender Studies, University of  
California, Davis

<http://sjoseph.ucdavis.edu/ewic>

### Religious Practices: Preaching and Women Preachers: Sudan

2007 EWIC Volume V

“Practices, Interpretations and Representations”

By Souad T. Ali

The position of Sudanese women religious scholars and preachers is a part of an old tradition in Islamic history where women played a unique role in the transmission and dissemination of Islamic knowledge.

The Qur’ān makes no distinction between men and women in this regard, and in a famous ḥadīth the Prophet Muḥammad advised his companions to “learn half of your religion from that woman,” in reference to his wife ‘Ā’isha, who transmitted “some 2,210 ḥadīth” narratives to the “foremost early Muslim traditionists” (Ahmed 1992, 73). Sudanese written sources such as *Kitāb al-ṭabaqāt* by Muhammad al-Nūr Ibn Dayf Allāh briefly discussed some women preachers as prominent figures citing Fāṭima bint Jābir as one of the earliest women educators in Sudan (al-Nur Ibn Dayf Allāh 1985, 46). Today, at least four categories of female preachers can be cited in Sudan: Independent, Islamist, Ansār al-Sunna, and Republican Sisters. While the latter are relatively new to Sudanese society, independent women preachers have deeper roots in Sudanese life.

Historically, from the fifteenth century Sudanese women were active participants in *khalāwī* (sing. *khalwa*, religious seminary) as teachers of the Qur’ān and Islamic education. Women's *khalāwī* specialized in female education in order to eliminate their religious illiteracy and to teach them elementary religious sciences. Women used to memorize the Qur’ān and learned *tartīl* (the art of recitation) and *tajwīd* (perfection of recitation), in addition to some of the Shari’a principles (Kāshif Badrī 1984, 58). By the eighteenth century, many women preachers were as famous as their male counterparts. Among them were Shaykha bint ‘Aṭā, Shaykha Rājiyya bint ‘Abd al-Qādir, and Shaykha Khadīja al-Azharī. Khadīja was the sister of one of the highest ranking *fuqahā* (jurists) during the Turkiyya (1820–85) in the Sudan, Aḥmad al-Azharī. Khadīja and Aḥmad were the son and daughter of Shaykh Ismā‘īl al-Wālī, the founder of the Ismailiyya Sufi path in Kordofan. Khadīja directed her seminary and provided religious instruction for women in their homes (*ibid.*, 7–8). In eastern Sudan in 1945, a group of women, including Zaynab Muḥammad Aḥmad and Khadīja ‘Umar Kashūy, established women's *khalāwī* that are still in operation. Women's preaching continued throughout the centuries and today a good number of female preachers are active participants in daily preaching in Sudanese society. Layla Sayyid Khidr, known as Layla Jābir (b. 1938) is an independent preacher in Khartoum who began preaching in mosques in 1980. Khidr holds a bachelor's degree in psychology from Cairo University, Egypt. She preaches in four major mosques, seven times a week, in the affluent ‘Amārat and Riyād neighborhoods of Khartoum. She began her preaching in discussion groups with only a few women in attendance. Over the years an increasing number of women began attending her preaching and she moved to bigger mosques to accommodate her larger audiences. Khidr related that her decision to become a preacher followed a severe illness that confined her to bed for over a year. It was during that time that she began reading religious texts and was deeply inspired by them. She is critical of “doom and gloom” preachers who tend to frighten women and claims that her intention is to make women more aware of their rights under Islam and to instruct them in their duties in a positive tone. These women's detractors often criticize them for being non-specialists in the religious

sciences, and therefore not qualified to preach. Their defense is that they are only preachers and do not issue fatāwā (sing. fatwa, formal legal opinion) on matters of juristic fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence).

The second category of women preachers evolves around the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood movement. ‘Ā’isha al-Ghabshāwī (b. 1947) is a well-known religious scholar/preacher in Sudan. She received a Ph.D. in 1986 in theology and Islamic philosophy from Omdurman Islamic University, Sudan, where she is currently professor of Islamic studies. Al-Ghabshāwī gives lessons to women's groups on subjects related to religion and life. Her lessons, which began in the 1970s, were initially given in response to invitations she received from various women's groups. She began her public appearances on Sudan's national television when she interviewed the late Egyptian Islamist Zaynab al-Ghazālī, in 1978. Al-Ghabshāwī then began her own television show, “The Muslim Family,” which aired for ten years. In 2000, she began anchoring her new television program, “Risāla khāsa” (A special message), which continued until 2004 when it was transformed into a television lecture entitled “Majālis al-Humayrā” (Councils of al-Humayrā). The new program included segments on advising women on social issues, such as marriage, raising children, and family life.

Other Islamist preachers/scholars include Su‘ād al-Fāṭih, member of the National Congress ruling party; Umm Kulthūm Ismā‘īl, Dean, College of Family Studies and Society Development at the University of Sudan; Fāṭima ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, Dean, Students Center of the Quran University in Omdurman; and Fathīyya Mīrghanī, professor at Omdurman Islamic University.

The third group of preachers is the Anṣār al-Sunna, to which Maryam ‘Abbādī (b. 1954) belongs. ‘Abbādī gives lessons on Islamic studies to women in homes in the Khartoum North neighborhoods. Having studied tartīl and tajwīd in Saudi Arabia, she focuses on teaching women how to correctly recite the Qur’ān and avoid making mistakes in pronunciation.

The fourth category of female preachers developed as part of the Republican Brotherhood movement. The Republican Brothers Party was established by Maḥmūd Muḥammad Ṭāhā in 1945. However, women did not become active preachers until the 1960s when al-Akhwāt al-Jumhūriyāt (Republican sisters) group was formed and “women members participated fully in all... activities” through their roles as leaders of activist groups on university campuses, in public parks, and even on street corners (Ṭāhā 1987, 6), preaching and distributing party booklets. However, the execution of Ṭāhā in 1985 by the military rule of Ja‘far Nimayrī was a severe blow to the party and both its male and female activism.

By Souad T. Ali