


# Chapter 1

## Mystics as Border– Crossers: The Contestation of Religious Homogeneity and Identity Shaping in Morocco

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### ABSTRACT

*Religion in Morocco is marked by its dynamic landscape, which continues to shape individual and communal identities. While religious pluralism is a key feature of Moroccan culture, it remains a subject of essentially contested debate. This has complicated efforts to navigate Morocco’s diverse spiritual landscape, undermining the visibility of other forms of religious expression. Positioned at the margins of institutionalized Islam, Sufi mystics have served as border-crossers. This long-standing spiritual life has faced ongoing contestation between Islamic orthodoxy and the fluid nature of the saintly and Sufi institutions. This chapter highlights the narratives of Sufi women, particularly those who have been marginalized in religious discourse, such as majdhubat (mentally impaired women). These women have challenged prevailing gender paradigms and institutionalized religious hierarchies, thereby deconstructing exclusionary attitudes toward them and transcending gender and doctrinal boundaries through their female sanctity, saintly authority, and community-oriented practices.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Sufism occupies a central role in Morocco's spiritual and religious identity, but remains marginal within legalistic and institutional mechanisms. While the Moroccan state has resorted to Sufism to legitimize its position and authority, these Sufi orders remained at the periphery of the religious discourse, often incarnating an alternative form of spiritual expression. Devotional practices such as saint veneration, *dhikr*, *sama'*, and retreat challenge Malikite-Sunni homogeneity. It is within this context that the concept of border-crossing emerges as a critical lens through which one can probe and evaluate how Sufis navigate theological doctrines and redefine gendered terrains. Border-crossing designates the ability of Sufis, and more particularly Sufi women (*majdhubāt*), who undermined rigid frameworks and deconstructed fixed categories of religious or spiritual worth and institutional endorsement. Their embodiment of spiritual practices and mystical commitment contests the dichotomies of orthodox and heterodox forms, private and public religious expression, and male and female domains of authority. Spheres of authority have been localized in the hands of male scholars and institutionalized forms of Islamic orthodoxy. Despite these challenges, Sufi women have asserted their agency and gained more visibility, despite their limited representation in historiographical narratives. That said, the current paper examines how Moroccan mystics and female Sufis exemplify the contestation of notions of religious authority and sanctity. Drawing on a corpus of hagiographical accounts, this paper reveals the variegated forms of religious expression these Sufi border-crossers perform. While these narratives of spirituality, devotion, marginality, and sanctity reveal complex layers of Morocco's spiritual and religious landscape, they also call for a reconsideration of conventional frameworks and the gendered nature of spirituality.

## PERIODIZATION OF MOROCCAN SUFISM

Three major turning points in Moroccan Sufism include the rise of *turuq* (15th–17th c.), colonial/postcolonial integration of *zawāyā* (19th–20th c.), and late 20th–21st century reforms incorporating Sufi orders into state programs of religious uniformity.

### Moroccan Sufism and Sufi Identity

A rich anthology of primary texts converges on the essence of Sufism, which is believed to originate from *aşuf* (wool), emblematic of humility and simplicity, or *aş-şafa'* (purity), invoking the spiritual clarity of this esoteric tradition (Shah, 1980; Bouasria, 2015; Sedgwick, 2003; Whitehouse, 2018). While Sufism delineates “the

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