

The Saint, Education and Ecofeminism: Analyzing the Empowerment and Development of Children and Women in the Zawiyya Ahansal Morocco

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ABSTRACT

Zawiyya as a place of teaching and spreading Islam in Morocco has had quite a significant influence. An Igurramen, or zawiya leader in the Berber tribe, is able to mobilize the population around him with his religious influence. Zawiyya Ahansal as a place of Islamic teaching in the Atlas Mountains has its own challenges as a marginalized area. The Igurramen collaborated with Cloe Medina Erickson to build the Atlas Cultural Foundation to develop and empower the people around the zawiyya, especially children and women, hence this action shows the collaborative care and awareness between the saint, educator, and ecofeminist. This article aims to provide an analysis of the conditions of children and women's development and empowerment in Zawiyya Ahansal, Morocco.

Keywords: zawiyya, Ahansal, Morocco, ecofeminism

ABSTRAK

Zawiyya sebagai tempat pengajaran dan penyebaran Islam di Maroko mempunyai pengaruh yang cukup signifikan. Seorang Igurramen, atau pemimpin zawiya di suku Berber, mampu memobilisasi penduduk di sekitarnya dengan pengaruh agamanya. Zawiyya Ahansal sebagai tempat pengajaran Islam di Pegunungan Atlas mempunyai tantangan tersendiri sebagai daerah marginal. Igurramen bekerjasama dengan Cloe Medina Erickson membangun Atlas Cultural Foundation untuk mengembangkan dan memberdayakan masyarakat sekitar zawiyya, khususnya anak-anak dan perempuan, sehingga aksi ini menunjukkan adanya kolaborasi kepedulian dan kesadaran antara wali, pendidik, dan ekofeminis. Artikel ini bertujuan untuk memberikan analisis terhadap kondisi perkembangan dan pemberdayaan anak dan perempuan di Zawiyya Ahansal, Maroko.

Kata Kunci: zawiyya, Ahansal, Maroko, ekofeminisme

Introduction

Zawiyya Ahansal is in the Central High Atlas Mountains of Morocco under the province of Azilal, and it is centered on four villages, Amezeray, Aguddim, Taghia and Tighanimin. *Zawiyya* in the epistemological understanding means lodge¹, and the society of Morocco recognizes *Zawiyya* as a place to study Islam or Islamic schools by occupying or staying in a lodge. *Zawiyya* is usually associated with *shurafa* (descendants of the prophet)² because they are the founder of the place, and it was named by the name of the founder. Sidi Said Ahansal was the founder of the *Zawiyya* in the 13th century, and he was an Islamic scholar and a *sharif* as well. He was well known as a saint in the region due to his piety livelihood.

¹ Ernest Gellner, *Saint of the Atlas* (Great Britain: The Trinity Press, 2001), xvii.

² Rachida Chih, "Sufism, Education and Politics in Contemporary Morocco," accessed April 10, 2019, https://www.academia.edu/8074067/Sufism_Education_and_Politics_in_Contemporary_Morocco.

In the political perspective, the power of *shurafa* in Morocco is enormous and be able to attract number of tribes to live around their homes with religious purposes or the concept of getting *baraka* (blessing from God with various form), hence the population in the area was increased and it needs a political system and territory, even in names. Ernest Gellner in his work stressed “the fame and significance of Zawiyah Ahansal of course reflects its religious importance. It was a centre of Agurramhood, of sanctity.”³ In this respect, the name of Zawiyah Ahansal is no longer the name of a building used to study Islam but has developed into the name of a region that has its own political traditions and mechanisms with the descendent of the founder or *igurramen* is the leader of the region.

Sidi Said Ahansal had built the village complete with all kinds of Islamic traditions and culture in order to create civilization in the area. An educated person who builds a civilization that is not only in terms of tradition and politics, but also, and this is often forgotten, their intellectuals. In the socio-political point of view, an *igurramen* must act as a mediator for conflict groups⁴, must have the criteria as a person who is “pious and well-versed in Koranic matters which after all he is supposed (by tribal, genealogical reasoning) to exemplify automatically,”⁵ and the requirements portrayed the method of teaching to the Berber community carried out by saints in a pragmatic way. Indeed, this kind of circumstance is able to adapt and develop in accordance with the needs of society, especially in the current era people need additional social-change actors through quality education. The current leader of Zawiyah Ahansal is Sidi Abdul Malik Ookdim.

Morocco with all its complexity deals with literacy challenges from the pre-colonial era until the 21st century. The education issues in the central government play a domino effect throughout the state and influence job opportunities. Zawiyah Ahansal in the pre-colonial and colonial era, perhaps, needed a traditional education method that was based on Qur’anic teaching and memorization. However, to face globalization, the society needs proper education, and it usually unmeet between the educational system that the government has been made of and the capability of tribes, which need particular concern. Based on the challenges of globalization, the community of Zawiyah Ahansal, with the help of Atlas Cultural Adventure Foundation, attempted to help the millennial generation children in education by building a community center that runs the Atlas Cultural Foundation Tutoring Program. In addition, through the agency, women in the area have been empowered and developed by supporting their activities in agricultural business and sanitary. The women initiate to establish cooperation, Cooperative Feminine Amaguar, that sells saffron, honey, lavender flower, strawberry jam, and many agricultural products. Despite the empowerment and development of women in the area nowadays, the change that has been met with the culture and tradition should need to be taken into consideration. To what extent is the influence of religious leader(s) on this empowerment and development? This paper seeks to analyze the empowerment and development of the children and women in Zawiyah Ahansal, Azilal, Morocco based on a 3-day and two-night field trip (from April 5-7th, 2019) initiated by Atlas Cultural Adventure Foundation and Al Akhawayn University in program of Morocco Rural Life and Community Development: A Global Service Learning and Community Development Field Experience. Despite the

Literature Review

The inquiry on zawiyah in Morocco has been carried out by various researchers (Nagy, 2018), (Lebaddy, 2020), (Kaarsholm, 2014), (Fuji, 2007), (Willis, 2012). They share similar understanding regarding zawiyah as a center for teaching and spreading Islamic doctrines in North Africa, Morocco in particular, making it a place that has a significantly influential on politics in a country. Susan Gilson

³ Op.Cit, 160.

⁴ Ibid, 78.

⁵ Ernest Gellner, “Political and Religious Organization of the Berbers of the Central High Atlas,” in *Arabs and Berbers*, ed. Ernest Gellner and Charles Micaud (London: Lexington Books, 1972), 60.

Miller even stated that in 1895, Muhammad Al-Kattani, a leader of the zawiyaa in Fez, ignited the spirit of jihad against the French protectorate in Morocco with his religious influence.⁶ With this great influence, King Hasan II undermined the role of traditional ulama and zawiyaa, both of which had played an important role in the social and religious life of Moroccan society, by making policies that prevented the centrality of religious leaders. He promoted several zawiyaa in various cities, and founded several modern faculties in Marrakech, Tetouan and Fes to teach Islamic studies (El-Katiri, 2013).

In addition, several zawiyaa in the Atlas Mountains have been studied by a number of researchers (Kantor, 1960), (Gellner, 1972), (Gellner, 2001), (Noorozi, 2020), (Lahmidi, 2020). They attempt to observe, explain, and analyze the historiography of the zawiyaa with an anthropological approach. Meanwhile, not many researchers have discussed the role of women in society around the zawiya. Ann Marie Wainscott (2017) discusses the development of women's roles in general after the changed of Family Code in Moroccan constitutional law. Nevertheless, the development of women's roles in the society of Morocco is spreading in various regions in Morocco, including in the Atlas Mountains. Therefore, this research will provide a small contribution to knowledge regarding the empowerment and development of women's role in Zawiyaa Ahansal, especially in the terms of ecofeminism.

Methodology

Ecofeminism, as an approach that brings together feminism, the environment and ecology, has its own perspective in looking at the phenomenon between women and environmental protection, or at a certain level of natural degradation. Ecofeminism emerged because of the gender dimension in understanding environmental issues. Women are considered more responsive in dealing with environmental issues than men (Mellor, 2003: 12). In this respect, ecofeminism should be read in the cultural context of Moroccan society which is dominated by Arab culture, and there is a paradox in the level of idealistic woman in literature and Arabic patriarchal society. Women are "Characterized by ambivalence, Arabic literature's patriarchal discourse depicts woman as Motherland who is nationally idolized, protected, and associated with the concept of honor, domesticity, and essentialist meanings of femininity and masculinity. Conversely, patriarchy sees women as bodies/lands/nature to be possessed and violated; hence, representations of subjugated women and environmental governance/degradation are inextricably interwoven."⁷ Therefore, there is an old understanding regarding how women should be addressed and a new understanding where women are engaged in external duties related to the ecological issue in the Zawiyaa Ahansal community.

In addition, the research is inherently qualitative because it was searching for processes and influences of religious leader on the empowerment and development of women as experienced by the subject participants.⁸ However, we seek out quantitative data and other secondary data too in order to triangulate so that one data collection method can check on another and either support or falsify another. The primary data consists of covert observations, semi-structured interviews, and a structured survey, and the secondary data consists of several articles and books in the history of Moroccan's tribes, existing literature on zawiyaa in Muslim countries, and a quantitative overview of women empowerment in Moroccan Berber tribes by NGOs. The aim of this process is that even though the observations we made were very limited due to several conditions that are understood as human limitations in research, the data collected was valid. After all, the experience of meeting with the Amazigh community in the Atlas Mountains should not be missed and must be documented.

⁶ Susan Gilson Miller, *A History of Modern Morocco* (USA: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 67.

⁷ Pervine Elrefaei, "Arabic Literature and Ecofeminism," in *The Routledge Handbook of Ecofeminism and Literature*, ed. Douglas A. Vakoch (New York: Routledge, 2023) 126.

⁸ Joseph A. Maxwell, *Qualitative Research Design: An Interactive Approach*, 3rd ed. (USA: Sage, 2013), 73-86.

Despite using an ecofeminist approach, this article exerts an Islamic feminist perspective. In the context of Moroccan society, which is predominantly Muslim, and the community in Zawiyya Ahansal, which is entirely Muslim, it would be very helpful to use this approach. The pioneer of Islamic feminism is Fatima Mernissi (Gray, 2015: 31). She is a Muslim feminist scholar from Morocco who often fights for and voices the rights of Muslim women in Morocco. Some of his famous works have changed Moroccan society's perspective on religion and women (Mernissi, 1987), (Mernissi, 1991), (Mernissi, 1992), (Mernissi, 1996). Islamic Feminism focuses on criticizing Islamic religious doctrine which has patriarchal nuances and almost all religious interpretations rely on the male gender (Wadud, 1992), (Hasyim, 2010), (Aslan, 2013).

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Analysis

a. Literacy Dimension in Ahansal Old and New Fashion

The program of Morocco Rural Life and Community Development: A Global Service Learning and Community Development Field Experience is a global service-learning program and community development experience created for specifically for Al Akhawayn students. The program provides students with the opportunity to experience rural life and participate in community development programs in the remote Zawiya Ahansal region of the Central High Atlas Mountains of Morocco. The program is partnered with the Atlas Cultural Foundation (ACF); a US and Moroccan non-profit organization with the mission of helping underserved Moroccans, especially women and children, improve their quality of life through locally determined development projects in the fields of cultural preservation, education, and community health.

We departed from Al Akhawayn University on April 5th, 2019, early in the morning using two separate groups of shuttle buses. We arrived at the Atlas Mountains and were immediately greeted by the son of Sheikh Sidi Abdul Malik Ookdim and his team. We were immediately taken to the Sheikh's house and saw views of the cold Atlas Mountains covered in white snow and the condition of the village which was under construction of roads and water pipes connecting the spring river with people's houses and excavators passing by. An unbelievable sight in a remote area, I believe. And after arriving at the Sheikh's house, we were greeted by Cloe Medina Erickson, and we were gathered in a warm room complete with seating and a dining table. After an introductory session and presentation of the agenda for three days and two nights in the place, we were briefed on the do's and don'ts of staying in the Sheikh's house, and given a simple pocketbook containing expressions and some vocabulary in the Amazigh language, or Tamazigh, with the aim of being able to mingle with the surrounding community. In Zawiyya Ahansal, most of the tribes living are Berbers, or they call themselves as Imazighen.

⁹ Joseph A. Maxwell, *Qualitative Research Design: An Interactive Approach*, 3rd ed. (USA: Sage, 2013), 73-86.

The first day of the program agenda was an introduction to Zawiyah Ahansal and the orientation of the rules that must be done by all students. Cloe Medina Erickson, the founder of the Atlas Cultural Adventure Foundation, also gave a little explanation about her experience and her early career at Zawiyah Ahansal in empowering local people. For 10 years, many changes have taken place in Zawiyah Ahansal in several stages, ranging from sanitation to autonomy business by local women through the Cooperative Feminine Amaguar that engaged in the production of local agricultural products. All of these cannot be separated from the awareness of local people about the importance of education for both men and women.

The second day we went to two community centers that have a program, the Atlas Cultural Foundation Tutoring Program, in order to tutoring English language. In the places, we analyze the educational dimension through the children experience and information from Erickson. The history of education in Morocco is very complex because of the factors of colonialism, ethnicities, languages, finance, religion and gender. In the old fashion of education, Morocco still used the pedagogical method of rote memorizing a text before its explication¹⁰ due to the influence of the teaching methods of *ulama* or religious experts who taught their students to memorize Qur'an and classical religious books. Aoumar Boum argued that "the Moroccan, according to this psychological model, is a gifted memorizer with a poor ability at critical assessment and abstract analysis."¹¹ He also added that "the colonizer established the poor talent of the colonized and minimized their intellectual potential, restricting social mobility by claiming that the Moroccan exhibited inferior psychological characteristic."¹² The pattern is still able to be seen in the children of Zawiyah Ahansal where they are very obedient to their teachers and are still afraid to ask questions when they do not understand the material of teaching. Hammoudi in Boum argued the same notion that "education is based on obedience and submission to the *fqih*, parents, and by extension the monarchy."¹³ Thus, the past experience cannot be removed easily albeit it passed over generations.

Old fashion education also takes gender discourse. Katja Zvan Elliott in her work argued that "it is important to note that all community data showing school enrollment indicate that there are fewer girls than boys attending school at all levels, including preschool."¹⁴ The social environment of the community also supports the notion that women only focus on domestic work, and it portrayed in Elliot argument that saying "when I asked my interviewees to talk about their image of an ideal women, not one mentioned education as a characteristic of such woman, whereas being a good wife and a mother who is patient, modest, pious, whose voice is rarely heard, and who is honoring local customs were frequently identified."¹⁵ Indeed, such an image is not seen in Zawiyah Ahansal's children right now where girls have cared a lot about education and are also supported by the parents' perspective about the importance of education for their happiness.

To cope with this condition, Atlas Cultural Adventure Foundation with the community of Zawiyah Ahansal agreed to create Atlas Cultural Foundation Tutoring Program, which has a vision "to assist children in conjunction with the government education through help with homework, studying for exams and providing additional opportunities."¹⁶ Erickson argued that "we built the community center in the village of Amezray and it is owned by the local partner association. In Aguddim the building was

¹⁰ Aoumar Boum, "The Political Coherence of Educational Incoherence: The Consequences of Educational Specialization in a Southern Moroccan Community," *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (June 2008): 209.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid, 210.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Katja Zvan Elliott, *The Politics of Women's Rights in Morocco: Modernizing Patriarchy* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016): 145.

¹⁵ Ibid, 147.

¹⁶ Based on Erickson arguments.

built by the government, and we have been given the rights to use the building. The land is tribal land.” It proved that social-change had been made by all stake holders take into action for the sake of their own goodness.

In addition, the program was established due to inconsistency of the government educational system. In this respect, she emphasizes that the challenges of the students “must take exams in French and English. However, they do not speak French at home, and they do not even study English at school, thus students are being tested in languages in which they are not being taught at a sufficient level.” The result after the establishment of the program was wonderful, Erickson was proudly and humbly saying that “after 4 years of the program, the students in Zawiyya Ahansal went from having the lowest sixth grade exam scores in the province to the highest.” Hence, the program is able to be categorized as a successful program.

b. Ecofeminism Dimension in Atlas Mountain Women

The third day we were taken to the house of one of the founders of Cooperative Feminine Amaguar, not far from where the sheikh (*igurramen*) lives. In the house there were several women who managed the Cooperative Feminine Amaguar, and we listened to the story of their journey in establishing this business enterprise which was full of challenges. The story started when women in Moroccan Muslim society were previously not much involved in family financial matters (Deshen, 1983), (Berriane, 2018: 72), (Guessous, 2012) and that is not an exception for women in the Atlas Mountains community. They only receive income from their husband's work to meet their daily needs. There had been no women's empowerment program at all. It was the Atlas Cultural Foundation that initiated women's empowerment by bringing together housewives and unmarried women to form a business community oriented towards utilizing the environment in the Zawiyya Ahansal area. The shaikh fully supported the efforts of Atlas Cultural Foundation by highlighting the importance of science (*'ilm*) from a religious perspective for the women who take part in the program.

After a Q & A session and discussion with them regarding the challenges faced while managing the business along with success in running it, we were then taken to the place where their products are produced, the laboratory, where their agricultural products are packaged and developed. We were shown several products packaged in a modern way and ready to sell, including; dried lavender leaves, saffron, forest honey, strawberry jam, dried chamomile flowers, dried figs, pickled olives in bottles, and several other agricultural products which are all made by women. Zawiyya Ahansal is blessed with favorable ecological conditions, even Gellner believes that “...the explanation to lie in the ecological possibilities of the surrounding area, in the fact that it is almost destined for large scale transhumancy, and this in turn requires some kind of machinery for the adjustment of relations between permanent inhabitants on the one hand, and on the other the annual ‘invaders’ who occupy the high pastures when the snow has receded” (Gellner, 2001: 168). The current population of Zawiyya Ahansal is approximately 10,000-15,000 people including residents, seasonal nomads and transhumants¹⁷, and in the Atlas Mountains as a whole, women have always achieved success story in the movement for financial empowerment in the agricultural sector through the formation of cooperatives.¹⁸ Cooperative Feminine Amaguar Cooperatives Feminine, even though at that time it was already running and its members were able to contribute financially to their daily household lives, was still hampered by marketing and the participation of young women who still hoped to weave success stories outside the Zawiyya Ahansal community. This program made several students willing to help promoting their products to urban areas using online and offline media. All in all, the women's movement at Zawiyya Ahansal has shown that

¹⁷ Ugo D’Ambrosio, ed., review of *Placing High Atlas on the Global Map: Experiences and insights from a cultural landscapes approach to conservation and human wellbeing*, by Emily Caruso, *Global Diversity Foundation*, no. 1 (June 2022).

¹⁸ Ibid.

ecofeminism, in its real form and making many contributions to society, regardless of gender, has taught us many lessons that gender inequality can ultimately change gradually by proving to society about women's abilities. In managing the environment and ecology brings social harmony and balance through many dimensions that do not require negating each other's contributions.

After the program, we were required to prepare ourselves and pack up to go home within the specified time. After finishing packing, we were gathered in a room for the closing ceremony by the Sheikh and Erickson. Our lecturers, as supervisors, Dr. Katja Zvan Elliot and Dr. Doris H. Gray represented the students to express their deepest gratitude to those who warmly welcomed us and provided the best service for us as long as we live 3 days and two nights in there.

Conclusion

The link between saint, literacy, and women in Zawiyah Ahansal is clearly visible in the program of Morocco Rural Life and Community Development: A Global Service Learning and Community Development Field Experience. The openness of the Zawiyah Ahansal community to initiate change with assistance from the Atlas Cultural Adventure Foundation is clear evidence that the saint, in the process of forming civilizations in the region, also supports changes in education, women empowerment and development. Social change often takes a variety of forms, and in this regard the changes that occur will be more accurately categorized as non-contentious social changes where all stakeholders are aware of the need for changes. The Shaikh realized that there was a need for change through the culture, philosophy and religion that had been developing in society. In its formal form, Cloe Medina Erickson also helps answer community needs through programs held by the Atlas Cultural Foundation, and the government ultimately also supports these programs. Last but not least, society as the object and subject of change itself follows the harmonization which is supported by all parties.

The changes desired by society must ultimately start from education due to sustainability of the change itself. In this regard, the younger generation is educated to grasp everything they will deal with in the socio-cultural setting of the Atlas Mountains society setting, especially in Zawiyah Ahansal, in the present and future context. They only need the same opportunities as people in the urban level in the terms of literacy and education to achieve that goal, and it has been proven that the educational program carried out by the Atlas Cultural Foundation, which has been held for approximately 10 years, could bring the young generation to the same level, in terms of literacy and education, as young generation in the urban level. These changes in literacy and education will ultimately lead to other changes that await them in the future. In this program, we enjoyed meeting Zawiyah Ahansal's children who were enthusiastic about learning English and French, even though they used Tamazigh and Arabic in their daily lives. Their enthusiasm for learning and supported by teaching and learning facilities from the Atlas Cultural Foundation made us feel the nuances of the changes they made.

In addition, the connection between women, the environment and ecology in Zawiyah Ahansal looks interdependent. On the one hand, women need permission from men to actively participate in running the economic cycle of their household needs through a fatwa from the Shaikh. On the other hand, they also need education, capital and support from the government related to empowerment and development programs. Atlas Cultural Foundation as a bridge between stakeholders has tried to provide its best efforts for 10 years, thus it is able to establish Cooperative Feminine Amaguar as a real dedication of these programs. Despite in the journey of this cooperative dealing with several internal and external challenges, its members showed their concern for the existence, ecological, financial and sustainability of the business. They realize that the use of the agricultural products they manage is not optimal yet, and they have to intensify their knowledge, as well as the need to promote their products, which is still an obstacle they must be prepared for in the present and future challenges. The program of Morocco Rural Life and Community Development: A Global Service Learning and Community Development Field Experience gives them a shining beacon, at least as a bridge, and agency between them and wider

consumers. The nexus between women, environment and ecology in women's empowerment and development of Zawiyah Ahansal brings the nuances of ecofeminism to the reality conditions in Arab countries with the Amazigh tribe, or Imazighen social context. In this respect, even in a community that upholds patriarchy, at some extent, in the end, it shows that women and ecology are able to co-exist and look after each other, and make harmony at the community level. What they need is just opportunity and equality with men.

The field trip to Zawiyah Ahansal on a 3-day and two-night program of Rocco Rural Life and Community Development: A Global Service Learning and Community Development Field Experience was a wonderful experience. We got the opportunity to witness the success stories of the warriors of the state, even in remote areas such as Atlas Mountains. They did and do not give up facing the reality and the challenges of the communities for the sake of their own goodness. They tried various ways to synchronize and harmonize culture, religion, education, empowerment, and development without causing any conflict, and the result is non-contentious social changes. It takes courage, knowledge, and support from various parties to make comprehensive and sustainable changes. The field trip program may not contribute too much in the term of education and social-change in general, yet we are proud to be the part of an agency of change through their stories, and it is very worthy to be disseminated.

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