

The Role of Women in the History of Islamic Thought: A Case Study of Women's Ribāth

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ABSTRACT: This research discusses the role of women in the fields of education, social, religious, and spiritual life, focusing on “women's ribāth institutions” (*arbiṭḥah al-nisā'*). The term *ribāth* (رباط) means a bond of brotherhood, solidarity, and a strong spiritual commitment. In the early development of Islam, ribāth served as strategic military defense posts at the borders of the Islamic caliphate. Warriors were stationed at these defense posts in border areas to protect the Muslim population from enemy attacks. They lived simply, deepened their religious knowledge, while remaining vigilant in defending Islamic territory. Subsequently, ribāth developed not only as a military base but also as a center for religious, spiritual, and social education. This study aims to refute the allegations of some orientalists who regard women in Islam as confined, oppressed, and lacking social, intellectual, or spiritual contributions. The study explores various classical literatures and biographical works of female figures who served as leaders of ribāth (*syaykhat al-ribāth*) during the medieval Islamic era. The research successfully identifies the roles of women in the establishment, management, and teaching within ribāth. Many Muslim women played key roles in the formation and development of these institutions, serving as founders, managers, teachers, and religious preachers. Female ribāths were shown to have a significant impact on education, spirituality, and social empowerment. This demonstrates that women in Islamic history possessed autonomy, knowledge, and substantial influence, thereby countering Islamophobic narratives that tend to belittle Muslim women.

KEYWORDS: Ribāth, Orientalism, Women's Empowerment, Spirituality, Shaykhah.

A. INTRODUCTION.

The role of women is often the subject of study, both in academic discourse and public opinion. Some Orientalists consider Muslim women to be oppressed and constrained by patriarchal religious and cultural rules, and lacking social, intellectual, and spiritual contributions. This assessment is reinforced by Islamophobic narratives that position women as symbols of the 'backwardness' of the Islamic world, highlighting issues such as the hijab, polygamy, and women's domestic space. However, this view is unrealistic, as history records many women contributing in various fields of education, religion, and social affairs. One of the pieces of evidence is the involvement of women in Ribāth, an institution that initially served as a military barracks and later evolved into a center for learning, worship, spirituality, and social service. Many ribāths were managed and led by intelligent women with high spiritual capacity, known as Syaykhat al-Ribāth (female leaders of ribāth).

This research is a case study that examines the role of women in Islamic history by highlighting the existence of *arbiṭḥah al-nisā'* (women's ribāth). Using a social history approach and biographical studies, the author presents historical facts showing that Muslim women were not merely passive objects but also active subjects who contributed to driving society. The results of this research can help dispel gender-biased myths that erase the role of women in the Islamic world.

B. MUSLIM WOMEN IN THE THOUGHTS OF ORIENTALISTS

Many orientalists assess that Muslim women live restricted lives, without freedom, confined to their homes, and constrained by religious and social rules. In the writings of 18th and 19th-century orientalists, Muslim women are depicted as a "colony" colonized by the patriarchal structures and laws within Islamic law. For instance, Lord Cromer stated that Islam places women in a lowly position, and he accused the practices of *hijab* and *polygamy* as the causes (Cromer, 1961). Cromer also considered Muslim women to be backward compared to more advanced Western women. According to him, there is a fundamental difference between the two: the faces of Muslim women are covered and isolated from public spaces, whereas European women's faces are openly visible in public. He believed that the alienation of Muslim women negatively impacts Eastern societies, as such isolation narrows perspectives and hinders intellectual growth in Muslim countries (Cromer, 1961).

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The cover of the book *Islamophobia: Making Muslims the Enemy* (2008) by Peter Gottschalk and Gabriel Greenberg features a cartoon image of a Muslim woman wearing a hijab with a negative connotation. This illustrates the connection between Islamophobia and the position of women in Islam. One narrative of Islamophobia is the "alleged oppression of women by Islam," which is based on the narrative of "protecting women's rights," ultimately portraying Islam as a religion that is anti-women (Hasan, 2012).

Cromer also compared the practice of polygamy in the East with monogamy in the West. According to him, polygamy destroys family life, while monogamy strengthens it. He claimed that monogamous Christian marriages respect women, while Islam demeans women. Cromer even quoted the story of an English woman who asked an Egyptian Muslim woman, "How do you spend your time? The woman replied, "I sat on this sofa, and when I was tired moved to another sofa" (Cromer, 1961). For Cromer, this is evidence that Islam restricts and oppresses women's freedom, keeps them away from society, and silences them through the practice of polygamy. In her view, Muslim women are helpless creatures and are unable to do anything except stay at home.

The phenomenon of the 'harem' also becomes a negative focus for Orientalists. They depict Muslim women in the medieval era as imprisoned in harems, symbolizing weakness and oppression. They consider Muslim women to be foolish creatures who satisfy men's desires. Edward Said argues that Orientalist narratives often emphasize sexual elements in women, portraying them as creations of men's imaginative desires, making women foolish yet highly seductive (Herath, 2016). Some Orientalists believe that women are nothing more than figures who are obedient and fully submissive to men. They are depicted as only existing in the 'kitchen, well, and bed' (Said, 2022). Stereotypical images of Muslim culture are formed, with Muslim men depicted as harsh, polygamous husbands, while Muslim women are seen as 'veiled (closed off from the outside world), forced into marriage, and confined within the symbol of the veil.' Muslim women are claimed to be the most unfortunate people in the world, victims of a masculine and repressive Islam (Hasan, 2012).

Such views have influenced the discourse within the Islamic world itself. Leila Ahmed states that in the debate about women in the Islamic world, from the beginning, there has been a call to improve the condition of women, urging the abandonment of various local cultural practices in favor of adopting European culture (Ahmed, 2000). The feminist movement in the Islamic world has largely adopted Western ideas. For example, the influence of British colonialism on Egyptian feminism. Huda Shaarawi adopted Western cultural values in the name of liberating Muslim women. When attending the International Women's Congress in Rome in 1923, she stated the need to follow European steps to awaken women so that Egypt could stand on equal footing with advanced nations (Hasan: 2012).

This idea of "liberating" Muslim women gives the impression that Muslim women are oppressed, confined, and have no freedom. In fact, in the reality of Islamic history, it is the opposite. In the period of jahiliyah (the era of ignorance), that is, before Islam existed, women were considered despised and worthless. In fact, if a baby girl is born, then the father is embarrassed and angry, so he is faced with two choices: let the child live in disgrace, or kill him by burying him alive.

The Qur'an describes the practices in the era of Jahiliyyah (the age of ignorance) with His words: *"And when one of them is informed of the birth of a daughter, his face becomes darkened, and he is filled with rage. He hides himself from his people, feeling ashamed of the bad news he has received: 'Should he keep her with the disgrace, or bury her alive in the earth?' How evil is that which they decide."* (al-Nahl: 58-59).

Islam came precisely to liberate women from the traditions of ignorance. Islam honors women, elevates their status, and grants them rights and justice that are equal. Allah says: *"Whoever does righteousness, whether male or female, while he is a believer, We will surely cause him to live a good life, and We will surely give them their reward according to the best of what they used to do"* (al-Nahl: 97).

In Islamic history, Muslim women played significant roles, especially in the fields of knowledge and civilization. One example is Aisha (the wife of Prophet Muhammad), who had a major role in education. She became a teacher at the Prophet's Mosque, where Muslims came to learn and ask her questions. She also nurtured and cared for orphans and the poor. Aisha is among the most prolific narrators of hadith in Islam (al-Nadawī, 2010).

In medieval Islamic society, a social-religious institution called *ribāth* also developed, which served as a residence for the poor and needy, as well as a place for prayer, religious study, and spiritual activities. In many cases, there were special *ribāths* for women, managed and led by women. The leader was called *Syaykhat al-Ribāth* (female leader of the *ribāth*), who was responsible for providing guidance and teaching religion and knowledge to the residents of the *ribāth*. This shows that scholarly and spiritual activities were very vibrant among Muslim women at that time.

C. CONCEPT AND HISTORY OF RIBĀTH

The term *ribāth* has its root in the word "*rabatha*," which means "to bind" or "to tie". *Ribāth* refers to something used for binding. In military terminology, *Ribāth* refers to the activity of guarding the borders against enemies (al-Naisaburi, 1955). The term *Ribāth al-khayl* means to tether and prepare warhorses. This word can also mean diligence or commitment in a certain matter (Manzhūr, 1994).

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Ibn Manzhūr quotes the hadith of the Prophet Muhammad: “Do you want me to show you deeds by which Allah forgives sins and raises ranks?” They replied, ‘Of course, O Messenger of Allah.’ The Prophet said, ‘Perfecting ablution in difficult conditions, increasing steps towards the mosque, and waiting for prayer after prayer, that is Ribāth’. From this hadith, Ribāth is understood as a form of diligence in righteous deeds, and is equated with the activities of struggling and guarding on the battlefield (Manzhūr, 1994).

Ibn Manzhūr recorded the opinion of al-Azharī, who interpreted the Prophet's saying as referring to the words of Allah: “O you who have believed! Be patient, strengthen your patience, and remain vigilant (*murābaṭah*)” (Āli Imrān: 200). Ibn Manzhūr explained that *murābaṭah* signifies steadfastness in upholding religion, confronting enemies, and struggling against them. Initially, Ribāth referred to defensive structures built on the borders of the Islamic state as dwellings for warriors who guarded the territory against enemy attacks.

The Dutch orientalist, Reinhart Dozy, referred to Ribāth as a military barrack built on the frontier and inhabited by pious people to strive for reward, similar to Islamic soldiers fighting against infidels (Dozy, 1979). Meanwhile, George Marçais viewed it as an Islamic *zawiya* protected by a fortress, originally a gathering place for knights preparing for military expeditions. According to him, from the beginning the term *Ribāth* referred to a religious and military institution typical in Islamic tradition and closely associated with the defensive system of Islamic states (Houtsma, 1998).

Hussein ‘Abd al-‘Azīz defines Ribāth as a sturdy building where Muslim fighters camp in order to hope for Allah's pleasure (Shafī‘ī, 1995): “And prepare to face them with whatever force you can and from *ribāṭ al-khayl* (horses tethered for war), so that you may frighten the enemies of Allah and your enemies” (al-Anfāl: 60).

Historically, *Ribāth* in a military sense has existed since the early establishment of the Islamic state. Initially, Ribāth was very simple, consisting only of tents as temporary residences. This is evident in the expeditions of conquering armies, such as when the forces of Khālīd ibn al-Walīd, under the orders of Abū Bakr, went to Syria and camped at a fortress near ‘Ayn al-Tamr (Sarhān, 1985). As Islamic territories expanded to the east and west, the need to build permanent fortresses and defensive posts increased, leading to the construction of *ribāth* at borders, in the mountains, and along the coastline, until every border point became a *ribāth* post (Sarhān, 1985).

Entering the 4th century Hijri, when the Islamic state became increasingly stable and advanced politically, socially, and economically, the function of Ribāth underwent a transformation, especially in the eastern regions. Ribāth changed into a place of residence and refuge for Sufis, the poor, and the weak. Whereas previously it was built in border areas, Ribāth was now constructed within cities with a social function as housing and lodging (Syāfi‘ī, 1995).

The seeds of *ribāth* existed during the time of Prophet Muhammad, although it was not yet called *ribāth*. Prophet Muhammad once allocated a part of his mosque as a residence for poor companions who had no family or wealth. They were known as *ahl aṣ-ṣhuffāh* (Sufi expert) (al-Maqrīzī, 1997). In addition, in Mecca, there were also endowed houses (*waqf*) during the time of the Prophet and his companions, which served a function similar to *ribāth* (al-Syāfi‘ī, 1995). One of the earliest *ribāth* built on this basis was *Ribāth al-Sidrah* in Mecca, endowed by a woman named Hājar, the aunt of Caliph al-Muqtadir Billāh, in the year 312 AH. According to Hussein ‘Abd al-‘Azīz, it was located to the east of Masjid al-Haram, between Bāb al-Salām and Bāb al-Nabī (al-Syāfi‘ī, 1995).

After that, other *ribāths* were established as the need and spirit of social solidarity increased. Such *ribāths* are also known by various names, depending on the context and function. Along with socio-political changes, the meaning of *Ribāth* evolved into a place of refuge for the poor and those in need, as well as a center for the study of knowledge and religious education. Thus, the meaning of Ribāth developed and transformed from a military function into a socio-religious function, and recently, Ribāths have also increasingly flourished within Sufi traditions. In Sufi tradition, a *ribāth* can be referred to as a *zāwiyah*, *tākiyyah*, or *khānqāh* (Syaqrun, 2012). However, each has its distinct function. A *zāwiyah* is usually oriented toward a particular Sufi order, a *khānqāh* is more associated with funeral rituals, while a *ribāth* stands out more as a place of lodging and service for the poor and travelers or a sort of spiritual hospice that provides services without compensation (Rapoport, 2015).

D. WOMEN'S RIBĀTH ENDOWMENT

The attention of Muslims to the establishment and financing of *ribāth* was not limited to poor men, weak individuals, and Sufi adherents, but also included women. They built *ribāths* specifically for women. The driving factor was the large number of single women in Islamic society during the medieval period, caused by high mortality and divorce rates. Joseph Rapoport explains that many women at that time lived alone for long periods, sometimes until the end of their lives. Often, these women were expelled by their families, forcing them to live independently. Most of them found shelter in women-only *ribāths*. The main function of women's *ribāth* was to provide a safe place for widows, divorced women, and women abandoned by their husbands (Rapoport, 2015).

There is evidence that many Muslim men and women endowed *ribāths* and hostels to accommodate unmarried women. For example, Muhammad bin ‘Abdullāh bin al-Qāsim al-Kamāl Abū al-Faḍl asy-Syahrazūrī, a qādī (d. 572 H), is mentioned by al-Sakhāwī as having built *Ribāth al-Sabīl* and *Ribāth al-Nisā’* (al-Sakhāwī, 1993). Shafadī also mentions that Ibn al-Wazīr Fakhr al-

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Dawlah al-Ḥasan bin Hibatullāh bin Muḥammad bin ‘Alī (d. 578 H) built a ribāth specifically for women and endowed his wealth and land to build schools, ribāths, mosques, and houses for the poor (al-Shafadi, 2000). The scholars praised him as a great philanthropist (al-Jauzi, 2013).

Abū Bakr bin Aḥmad bin Muḥammad bin Abī Bakr bin al-‘Āqil al-Salāmī al-Makkī (d. 1326 AH) also had a ribāth for men and women. According to Taqī al-Dīn al-Fāsī, he was a wealthy merchant who abandoned his business to devote himself to worship day and night (al-Fasi, 1998). ‘Aṭīyyah bin Khalīfah bin ‘Aṭīyyah al-Zayn al-Makkī, a major merchant of Mecca (d. 1427 AH), endowed a women's ribāth in the al-Layl market. Al-Sakhāwī described him as a successful entrepreneur in the spice trade and the owner of many properties (al-Al-Sakhāwī, 2010). Qāḍī al-Quḍāt al-Ḥanafī ‘Izz al-Dīn al-‘Asqalānī (d. 1472 AH) even permitted a group of widows and unmarried women to live in his old house, which was later converted into a *takiyah* (al-Sakhāwī, 2010).

Women also played a role in endowing ribāths. Ibn ‘Asākir recorded that his cousin, Āminah binti Muḥammad bin al-Ḥasan bin Tāhir al-Qurashīyah (d. 595 AH), endowed a ribāth for poor women (‘Asākir, 2010). Fāṭimah binti Sūdīn al-Dāyah, the mother of Abū Bakr bin al-Dāyah Majd al-Dīn, one of the nobles of the Nūrī dynasty, endowed a women's ribāth in Aleppo, under the city fortress (al-Shafadi, 2000). Tadhkarbāy Khātūn, daughter of Sultan azh-Zāhir Baybars (d. 796 AH), built a women's ribāth called Ribāṭ al-Baghdādiyyah. Zainab Fawwaz praised her as a pious woman, a lover of goodness, and close to the poor (al-‘Amili, 1894). She endowed the ribāth for a female Sufī named Zaynab binti Abī al-Barakāt, who was known by the nickname Bint al-Baghdādiyyah. The ribāth, established in Cairo in 684 AH, was the most famous among women's ribāths of its time. It served as a residence for women who were divorced or abandoned by their husbands until they remarried, in an environment full of supervision, discipline, and religious guidance (al-‘Amili, 1894).

Siṭīṭah binti al-Amīr Sayf al-Dīn Kūkāy al-Manṣūrī (d. 730 AH), the wife of the deputy of Syria, Tankiz, built a women's ribāth next to the mosque and tomb that she established. She also founded an orphan madrasa and was known as a philanthropist (Ibn Katsir, 2000). Al-Sakhāwī narrated that her grandmother, Hājar binti al-Jamāl bin ‘Abd al-Wāhid al-Wīshī al-Qāhirī (d. 867 AH), opened her house for widows and women in need, praising her as a kind-hearted, righteous, and humble woman. Her father's cousin, Umm al-Qāsim, also made her home a gathering place for estranged women and widows, and was skilled in teaching girls (al-Sakhāwī, 2010).

Zaynab binti al-‘Alā’ bin al-‘Ālim al-Badr Muḥammad al-Ḥanafī al-Māḍī, also known as Bint Ibn Khāṣ Bāk (d. 9th century AH), married Ināl al-Ajrūd and had abundant wealth. She established a ribāth for widows near Zāwīyah Banī Wafā in Ḥarah ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ. When she passed away, al-Sakhāwī noted that her funeral prayer was attended by many people, a sign of her numerous good deeds (al-Sakhāwī, 2010).

Fāṭimah binti al-Jamāl Yūsuf Sanqar, the wife of at-Tāj al-Balqīnī (d. 855 H), provided a zāwīyah and ribāth for widows, divorced women, and women whose husbands had left them. She was renowned as *the Shaykhah* (leader of that ribāth). Al-Sakhāwī described her as a woman of good faith, a helper of widows, and benevolent towards them (al-Sakhāwī, 2010).

Some women even participated together, such as at *Ribāth al-Siyāḥah in Mecca, which was endowed by a group of women, including Umm al-Quṭb al-Qasṭallānī* (al-Sakhāwī, 2010), the wife of a prominent scholar and well-known saint, Abū ‘Abdullāh al-Qurashī al-Hāshimī (al-Talmasani, 1968). Two sisters, Khadījah and Maryam, daughters of the commander Abī Thāmir al-Mubārak al-Qāsimī, also jointly endowed the ribāth on the condition that it be occupied only by women of the Shafī‘ī school of thought (Syāfi’ 1, 1995).

From the description above, it is clear that attention to the development and endowment of ribāth is not the monopoly of a single group. There are ribāths built by sultans, amirs, qāḍīs, and wealthy individuals; even women compete to earn great rewards from Allah. Many women from the elite class lived in these ribāths, whether they built them themselves or they were built by others. Some of them even became leaders (*shaykhah*) of the ribāth and provided teaching there. For example, Fāṭimah binti Aḥmad bin Qāḍī al-‘Askar became a shaykhah at the ribāth in the al-Mizzah area near Damascus. Zayn al-‘Arab binti al-Jawbarānī, the daughter of a scholar who divorced in 658 AH, lived at the Ribāth Darb al-Naqqāshah until her death in 704 AH. A daughter of the Ayyubid royal palace also led a women's ribāth in Damascus until her death in 697 AH (Rapoport, 2015). Joseph Rapoport mentioned that the common factor among all the residents of this ribāth is that they are not bound by marriage. A woman who wants to reside in a ribāth does not have to be poor, but it is almost certain that she is unmarried (Rapoport, 2015).

E. THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN RIBĀTH LEADERSHIP

Ribāth built to accommodate women usually hosts various religious and social activities. The female residents are required to perform prayers, attend *dhiḥr* gatherings, and participate in religious lessons. They are under the spiritual guidance of a leader who resides with them. Each women's ribāth has a leader responsible for managing religious and scholarly affairs, as well as providing teachings and advice to its residents (Rapoport, 2015). In biographical books, the names of female leaders who lived in Ribāth are recorded. For example, Ḥijāb binti ‘Abdullāh, a female leader at *Ribāth al-Baghdādiyyah*. Al-Maqrīzī acknowledged her as a pious woman who consistently stayed in the ribāth to give advice to women until her death in 725 AH (al-Maqrīzī, 1997).

The role of women leaders of ribāth is not limited to giving advice, but they also act as narrators of hadith (*muḥaddithah*), who are involved in listening to and granting ijazah of hadith. Ibn Ḥajar mentions Zayn al-‘Arab binti ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān bin ‘Umar

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bin al-Ḥusayn bin ‘Abdullāh, known as *Bint al-Kharizani*, *Syaykhah Ribāth Bint al-Saqlātūnī*, who once heard the Saba’iyyāt al-Farawī from at-Taj Abu Ja’far Ibn al-Qurtubī (al-‘Asqalanī, 1972). Al-Dzahabī notes that she also heard hadith from ‘Abd al-‘Azīz bin Abi Ṭāhir al-Irbilī (al-Dzahabī, 1988). She received ijazah from al-Sakhāwī, Abu Ṭhālib bin Ṣabir, Ibrāhīm bin al-Khusyū’i, Karimah, as well as several students of Ibn ‘Asākir (al-Barzālī, 2006). Al-Dzahabī praised her as a pious woman leader of ribāth who was diligent in memorizing lessons, while al-Barzālī described her as a blessed and righteous woman (al-Barzālī, 2006). She is the daughter of a scholar, married al-Kamāl Ibn al-‘Imād al-Asyqar, and lived in *Ribāth Darb al-Naqqāsyah* until she passed away in 704 H at an age over 70 years old (al-‘Asqalanī, 1972).

‘Ā’isyah binti al-Syaikh Abi al-Muẓaffar Muḥammad bin ‘Alī bin al-Ball al-Baghdādiyyah al-Ḥanbaliyyah is also known as a *muḥadditsah* (female transmitter of hadith). She heard hadith from her father and received permission (ijazah) from Abu Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jilī, Abu al-Faṭḥ Muḥammad bin ‘Abd al-Baqi Ibn al-Baṭṭi, Abu al-‘Ala’ Wajih bin al-Mubārak al-Saqāṭi, ‘Abdullāh bin Sa’d Ibn al-Ḥaṭira, Abu al-Ḥasan Muḥammad bin Muḥammad bin Ghubrah, and Aḥmad bin Yaḥyā bin Naqah al-Kufiyyan (al-Husainī, 2007). Ibn al-Najjār acknowledged that he had read hadith in her presence (al-Najjār, 2010). She resided in a ribāth (a type of religious retreat) belonging to her father along with a group of pious women (al-Husainī, 2007). Ibn al-‘Imād al-Ḥanbālī and ‘Izz al-Dīn al-Ḥusainī both praised her as a pious woman who diligently advised other women (al-Hanbalī, 1986).

Among the women leaders of ribat (*shaykhah*) as narrators of hadith is Umm ‘Abd al-Qadir, Amah al-Karim binti Imam Naṣiḥ al-Dīn ‘Abd ar-Raḥman bin Najm bin ‘Abd al-Wahhab al-Ḥanbali, wife of Shams al-Dīn Ibn ‘Abd al-Kafi, as the leader of *Ribāth Baldaq*. She narrated from her father the second part of the hadith of Ḥamdan bin Naṣr, which was recited to her by ‘Alam al-Dīn al-Barzālī (al-Barzālī, 2006), and also heard *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* in Irbil. Al-Dhahabi and al-Shafadi described her as an honorable, knowledgeable woman who was skilled in writing (al-Dhahabi, 2003), who passed away in 679 AH and was buried near her father at the foot of Mount Qasyun, near *Ribāth al-Nāṣirī* (al-Barzālī, 2006).

Umm Ahmad Taj al-‘Arab bint al-Shaykh Shams al-Dīn al-Muslim bin Muhammad bin al-Muslim bin ‘Allan al-Qaysi, who passed away in 707 AH, was a female leader (Shaykhah) at Ribāth Baldaq, who narrated hadiths from her paternal uncle, As’ad, and held ijazahs from several scholars of Damascus.

Amah ar-Raḥmān Sitt al-Fuqahā’ binti asy-Syaikh al-‘Allamah ‘Izz al-Dīn Abi Muḥammad ‘Abd ar-Rāzīq bin Abī Bakr ar-Rus’āni al-Ḥanbālī, a female leader (Syaykhah) at *Ribāth Baldaq* in Damascus, narrated hadiths to al-Barzālī and others. She passed away in the year 695 AH (al-Barzālī, 2006).

In addition, there is also the name Khatun Agung al-Kubra, Nasab Khatun, daughter of Malik al-Jawad Muẓaffar al-Dīn Yunus bin Syams al-Dīn Mudud bin al-Sultān al-Malik al-‘Adil Saif al-Dīn Abu Bakr Ayyub, she was the Sheikha of *Ribāth Baldaq*. Al-Barzālī mentioned that she recited to him a copy of Abi Mashar’s work from Ibrāhīm bin Khalīl. She also once heard hadiths from Khāṭib Marda and Ibn ‘Abd al-Da’im, and then narrated them. Al-Barzālī described her as a long-lived woman who often resided among the Hanabilah, where she also listened to hadiths. Al-Dzahabī described her as a noble female leader of a ribāth (al-Dzahabi, 2003), while Badr al-Dīn al-‘Ayni praised her as a pious and charitable woman (al-Aini, 2010). Her father once ruled as Sultan of Damascus. She was a noblewoman from the Ayyubid palace who managed the ribāth until her death in 697 H (Ropoport, 2015).

The female leader of Ribāth was also a scholar of Islamic jurisprudence, such as Zaynab binti Faṭimah binti ‘Abbas al-Baghdādiyyah (died in 714 AH), who was the head of Ribāth al-Baghdādiyyah, named after her. Zaynab Fawwāz praised her as a model woman of her time, pious, zuhud (ascetic), knowledgeable, *qana’ah* (accepting things as they are), diligent in worship, *ikhlas* (sincere), *taqwa* (God-fearing), and concerned with promoting good deeds (*amar ma’ruf*). She was known as a jurist (al-‘Āmilī, 1894).

Women leaders of the ribāth diligently engaged in worship and encouraged women to worship and perform nighttime *dhikr* (Barzālī, 2006). Some had special litanies, such as Sitt al-‘Ulamā’ nicknamed al-Bulbul, the leader of Ribāth Darb al-Muhrānī in Damascus. She was famous for her ability to give sermons, her eloquence, the beauty of her words, and she had nighttime litanies. Al-Shafadī added that she loved prayer, night worship, was disciplined, and always attended gatherings promptly. She remained like this until she lost her ability to speak. She passed away in 712 AH, was buried in the mountains, and her funeral was attended by many women (al-Barzālī, 2006).

Many women leaders of ribāth also come from the background of *Sufi sheikhs’* daughters, for example Ḥasnā’ binti Sayyidī ‘Alī bin Muḥammad bin Wafā asy-Syādzilī. Joseph Rapoport explains that she expanded her Sufi order’s activities by establishing a ribāth for women (Ropoport, 2015). She became the leader of the ribāth she established near their zawiyah in Ḥārat ‘Abd al-Basīṭ. She passed away in 888 H, and according to as-Sakhāwī, her funeral was attended by many people, and she was then buried among her ancestors in al-Qarāfah (al-Sakhāwī, 2010).

Among the daughters of other sheikhs is Faṭimah binti Aḥmad bin Muḥammad bin Yusuf bin al-Khaḍr Ibn Qāḍī al-‘Askar al-Ḥalabiyyah, who became the leader of the ribāth in al-Mizzah, and passed away in the year 685 AH. Her father and her uncle, ‘Abdullāh, were among the teachers (*sheikhs*) of al-Dimyaṭī. Al-Dzahabī mentioned that she attended hadith gatherings of Thabit bin Musyarraf, and the students narrated traditions from her (al-Dzahabī, 2003).

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There was also a female ribāth leader who came from a royal family, such as the wife of al-Malik al-Ḥafīẓ known as *Dār Jawhar*, the daughter of Malik al-Ṣāliḥ Ismā'īl, and the aunt of al-Malik al-Kāmil. She was the leader of *Ribāṭ Baldaq* in Damascus and passed away in 700 Hijri (al-Barzālī, 2006).

There were also some leaders of the ribāth who came from families of judges (*qāḍī*), such as Hājar binti al-Imām al-‘Ālim Qāḍī al-Fayyūm, Muḥibb al-Dīn bin Karīm al-Dīn al-Qurāsyī al-‘Aqilī al-Suqrāṭashinī, who was nicknamed Umm Mufīd. She was the leader of Ribāṭh az-Zāhiriyyah in the southern region of Mecca. Al-Sakhāwī described her as a woman well-known among other women for her virtue, memorization, and advice. Ibn Fahd praised her for her religious devotion, goodness, love for the poor, and generosity. She passed away in 872 AH and was buried in al-Ma'la, Mecca (al-Sakhāwī, 2010).

In addition, there was a female leader of the ribāth who came from a merchant family, such as Shaykhah Qurrat al-‘Ayn, the daughter of Ismā'īl bin Musa, a merchant from Yemen, known as *al-Ḥabashiyyah*. She led the ribāth in *Darb al-Naqqāsyah* and passed away in 707 Hijri. Al-Barzālī praised her as a blessed woman, intelligent, knowledgeable, and diligent in worship.

All the female leaders of the ribāth (Shaykhah), coming from various backgrounds, were known for their piety, kindness, knowledge, and skill in teaching religion and spirituality to women. Their quality in carrying out the duty of leading the ribāth was beyond doubt, whether they were daughters of scholars, daughters of merchants, or daughters of nobles; all turned out to be knowledgeable women, devoted in worship, and competent advisors.

CONCLUSION

Islam honors women and grants them the same rights as men. Islam has never oppressed women; rather, it liberates them from the shackles of the ignorant era of *jahili*. Therefore, the accusation that Muslim women are always oppressed, wronged, and deprived of their rights cannot be justified.

Through tracing the social history and biographies of scholars, it has been found that the existence of ribāth managed by women demonstrates the presence of Muslim women as equals in the history of Islamic civilization. Muslim women play an important role in education, religion, and social affairs. They are involved in education, whether by endowing ribāth, schools, leading ribāth, or guiding the community. All of this serves as authentic evidence that they are not oppressed, isolated, or backward beings, as alleged by some Western orientalists. Therefore, any notion that women need to be 'liberated' from darkness, ignorance, and confinement is inaccurate, because many women are educated, intelligent, cultured, and possess wealth which they spend in the way of Allah.

The phenomenon of the development of ribāth in the history of Islamic civilization is an authentic fact demonstrating the involvement and significant role of women in three ways: *First*, there were groups of women who devoted themselves to ribāth institutions and were very attentive to the development of knowledge, religion, and spirituality, whether as religious teachers, hadith transmitters, mentors, or advisors, and this certainly serves as evidence that they had influence in society and possessed piety; *Second*, there were women who endowed ribāth, schools, or social assemblies, which indicates their high status both economically and socially; *Third*, many women became managers and leaders of ribāth (*shaykha ribāth*), who genetically came from the descendants of royal rulers, merchants, wealthy traders, judges (*qāḍhi*), jurists, Sufis, and so on, and this proves that their managerial, political, and social competence was very high.

Thus, it can be concluded that women have a significant role in Islamic history, and they are not an oppressed or shackled group, as alleged by some parties and Western Orientalists.[]

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