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Hearing the Great Ancestors and "Women Living Under Muslim Laws"

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I would like to welcome you all to this session on feminism and the women's movement. As we all know, the women's movement started a couple of centuries ago with women's struggles in Europe and the West . . .

begins one speaker, only to be interrupted by a second speaker who protests:

Excuse me, I don't think that's true. I think women have been active in many parts of the world. How can you say that it's only in the West and Europe? We know women from different parts of the world were active . . .

The first speaker resumes: *Well yes, maybe women were active in different places, but I think we all know that in our parts of the world, and in our countries the ideas of the women's movement came to us from women in Europe and North America . . .*

Suddenly the lights go down, an image of a woman appears on a screen and a voice from elsewhere in the room calls out,

How can you have forgotten me . . .?

* * *

So begins a presentation of the *Great Ancestors.* The staged altercation above could occur at a round-table workshop, at the front of a lecture hall, or on a stage of a theater. The disembodied voice continues, "I am Umm-Salama" and launches into a narrativized account of her life in Baghdad in the eighth century. Recounting the story of her third marriage to Abbas, who would later become Caliph, she explains how she was the one who made the proposal, paid the amount for his dower, and then made him officially promise to be monogamous. As Umm-Salama completes her short narrative, a new image appears of an extremely self-satisfied looking woman wearing bright red shoes, from a Persian miniature. A new voice reads out the story of Aisha bint Talha who, in Mecca in the early 700s, not only married multiple times and was regarded as highly learned, but also refused to veil. To give a synopsis of these

women's stories, each segment provides a narrativized account or a quotation from the woman herself, as drawn from the pages of history. Each minute-long "act" is accompanied by a suitable image or, as is especially the case from the twentieth century, a photograph of the woman in question. Each segment is read in under sixty seconds, drawing from people who lived and events occurring from the eighth century to the 1940s. Most of the women profiled were Muslim, though some were minorities in Muslim-majority regions and others may have identified as secular. Each one, however, operated in Muslim contexts, asserting rights for themselves and for others, establishing the foundations of female education, and engaging in solidarity actions with other women.

Feminism in the Muslim World Training Institutes

For years, Farida Shaheed, of the international feminist solidarity network Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML) had been collecting fragments of histories relating to women operating in Muslim contexts who asserted their own rights and/or championed the rights of others. These seemingly disparate slivers of history came together for her during the planning of the second Feminism in the Muslim World Leadership Institute, jointly conducted by WLUML and the Center for Women's Global Leadership (CWGL) of Rutgers University. CWGL had been conducting feminist leadership workshops since 1991, to which WLUML had encouraged their networkers to apply. Their joint institutes were held in Istanbul in September 1998 and again in Lagos in the autumn of 1999.

These intensive residential institutes, lasting two weeks each, were designed to strengthen the capacities and skills of younger women active in WLUML. Bringing together over twenty young women leaders from twenty Muslim countries and/or Muslim communities, the institutes aimed to help the participants strengthen their local projects, enhance their work within WLUML, and generally help groom a new generation of women's rights activists. Of the participants, some lived in a self-proclaimed "Islamic" state, others in a secular context. Some were part of the Muslim majority in their country (e.g., Malaysia), others belonged to a Muslim minority (e.g., India), and some were non-Muslims from places increasingly affected by religious-political forces.

Though the participants came from diverse backgrounds and had differing relationships with Islam as a spiritual and political force, a space was created for the sharing of experiences at a transnational level. It was widely acknowledged that the discourses of conservative Islamists have been intensifying in the past few decades and women have become caught between a narrow version of history and the ambiguities of a globalized world. Firstly, Muslim women are all too often represented by others and have limited access to positions providing control over accessing and distributing information. In addition, women in Muslim communities are generally depicted as static and

oppressed and when their efforts are celebrated they often gloss over women's gender-based alliances which contributes to their activism. WLUML recognized the need to build upon the work of earlier historians and writers who had brought Muslim women's contributions to light in order to counter the dominant representations of women, emanating from conservative Muslim quarters as well as from the Western media. The desire to introduce contemporary activists to vibrant women from the past coincided with the broader objectives of the feminist leadership institutes.

The institutes had three underlying themes: connecting the local to the global; making the link between women's struggles and human rights; and connecting the past and present. One of many components of the second institute was the presentation of the *Great Ancestors*, which during its preparation became informally referred to as "the light-and-sound show." Conceived of as a training module, the *Great Ancestors* addresses each of the three underlying themes of the institutes. The international flavor of the presentation is perhaps its most striking aspect, and the inclusion of "Ancestors" from not only the Middle East and South Asia, but also sub-Saharan Africa, Central Asia, and the Far East, clearly demonstrates that women across the globe were actively participating in Muslim contexts. Though the specific religious and cultural traditions have varied widely in each region over time, the training module shows that women fighting for women's rights were not tied to a specific locale. Of particular interest were the transnational solidarity efforts women undertook in the past. Though there was not enough time in the script to allow for more than a passing mention, the companion volume of research discusses examples of these international links, such as a delegation of Egyptian feminists who attended a large conference in Rome in 1923, or R.A. Kartini of Indonesia who, at the turn of the twentieth century, shared intellectual correspondence with Dutch women.

The connections between women's rights and human rights was also a key theme of the institutes, but were expanded upon more in sessions other than in the *Great Ancestors*. In large part this is due to the fact that all the women discussed in the *Ancestors* were active before 1950 at which time the discourse of modern human rights was in its infancy insofar as it pertained to women's rights. Nonetheless, some of the women discussed in the module adamantly asserted their rights, often using the language of Islam, and many others had an implicitly rights-based approach to their activism. Many of the women we read about were actively engaged in social justice struggles, whether this was defined as fighting against colonial rule, working at a national political level, or fighting for the rights of religious minorities.

The theme of linking past and present struggles was key to the general discussion of a contemporary feminist leadership in Muslim communities, and many participants were surprised at the rich collection of activist predecessors they encountered. The historical nature of the *Great Ancestors* lends

itself well to the issue of recognizing past achievments and learning lessons to apply to today's women's movements. Still, the presentation of the *Ancestors* makes it explicit that some issues which today may be seen as strategic priorities by both feminists and their critics, such as regulating sex outside of marriage, were not always points of contention. For example, in the eleventh and twelfth centuries in Spain, many well-known women writers of the elite classes were very frank about their lovers, through both their literature and their actions. Conversely, other issues were as contentious in the past as today, such as debates over veiling and a mother's right to custody of her children. Almost 100 years ago, Begum Sharifa Hamid Ali was encouraging marriage contracts (*nikahnama*) that included the many unactivated rights provided to women under Islam. Today, in the early twenty-first century, the marriage contract is still a site of contestation; activists in Afghanistan are currently trying to reform the national marriage contract (*nikahkhat*) to protect women's interests within the institution of marriage. In addition to showing the participants that women of the past contended with many of the issues we still address today, the module presented the listeners with versions of the past they may not otherwise have been familiar with. Standard historiographies, in all cultural traditions, have marginalized women and their contributions. Where some researchers, such as Fatima Mernissi and Leila Ahmed, have blazed the trails of Muslim women's history by uncovering and sharing stories of empowered women, the organizers of the feminist leadership institutes continued the tradition by sharing these stories with the participants. The intention was that this revisiting of women's histories could subsequently be reproduced by participants in their own communities thereby educating and inspiring others. It is not enough to say that the *Great Ancestors* sought to make history entertaining for the audience through narrativization and colorful images; by personalizing the women of the past, the presentation encouraged participants to draw connections with their own lives and use these considerations to shape their own futures.

Farida Shaheed and the other members of WLUML wanted to circulate the *Great Ancestors* widely so that these stories could be shared with many, inspiring others to research their own histories. Before the module could be distributed, however, it not only had to be finalized for print, but also needed a comprehensive list of the historical and contemporary references used. This was not only exercising a good publishing ethos: it ensured that those using the module could not be accused by their detractors of "making up" history. With citations in hand, the *Great Ancestors* can now be performed in any setting one may see fit, be it a workshop, a classroom, a theater, or beyond.

To facilitate reproduction of the presentation, the *Great Ancestors* was published as a set of two books. The first includes the script and all accompanying images in an easy-to-handle, spiral-bound format. The script can be photocopied for the readers and the images can either be photocopied

onto overhead transparencies or scanned into a computer for use as a PowerPoint presentation, depending on the equipment available to the organizers. The companion volume is presented as a historical reference, providing context and more in-depth information on every person and issue discussed in the script as well as numerous additional Ancestors not mentioned in the script, in addition to a complete bibliography of sources used. This publication of the *Great Ancestors* now allows these stories of courage and activism to be even more widely distributed and elaborated upon by all who use it.

As the process of historical research can never be fully exhausted, the *Great Ancestors* is inevitably a work-in-progress. WLUML is constantly learning more about the Ancestors already included along with new information about other women activists of the past. Tentative ideas for expanding the project include a second volume of the publication, providing more examples of women and their actions. Other methods of dissemination are being explored such as film, where the voices of these women and their narratives can be given a new vitality with the use of moving images and music. On the other hand, the current structure of the module gives suggestions on how to read the script and what images to use, but in practice there is a wide scope for creativity in the performance. We have encountered many interesting discussions arising from men reading the first-person narratives as "a Muslim woman."

Reclaiming History, Disseminating Information, Storytelling

There are three main objectives to the *Great Ancestors* project. The first is historical, namely the desire to recover marginalized life-stories of women from the past. As Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi has argued, this historical project is one of urgency and responsibility, especially for those conducting feminist and/or post-colonial research: "*Muslim women in general . . . cannot count on anyone, scholar or not, 'involved' or 'neutral,' to read their history for them. Rereading it for themselves is entirely their responsibility and their duty. Our demand for the full and complete enjoyment of our universal human rights, here and now, requires us to take over our history, to reread it, and to reconstruct a wide-open Muslim past. This duty, moreover, can turn out to be no drab, disagreeable task, but rather a journey filled with delight.*"[1] The recovery of these women's lives was not as straightforward as seeking out small references in existing historical accounts. In the case of the extraordinary story of Bibi Zainab, who, in the nineteenth century launched a tightly organized and widespread armed women's militia in Iran first against the British monopoly over tobacco and then against injustice in general, the references to her life and work come to us through court records, complaining about her actions and those of her troops. We also know of her exploits through the folklore sung and told by women of Tabriz, who have kept Bibi Zainab's story alive. Consequently it is impossible to know the exact number of grain storehouses broken open to feed the poor nor can we relate how many women fighters

were killed in action. Nonetheless, we do know that the collective actions of these women not only posed a challenge to the British and Iranian governments, but also left enough of an impression of justice and courage upon the citizenry for them to be kept alive in popular memory.

Having excavated information on women of the past, the second objective of the *Great Ancestors* project was to disseminate this information. Collating the material in a typically academic way, including the use of scholarly language and extensive referencing, would have resulted in just another textbook. While historical textbooks have their place, it is probably safe to assume that the majority of people do not read them, either due to lack of availability in English or the vernacular, or time constraints (especially amongst professional women), and limited literacy. To disseminate the words and actions of these inspirational Ancestors to the widest possible audience, we decided to narrativize their stories and contexts into entertaining nuggets. Whenever the actual words—written or spoken—by the women in question were available, we used them. Where the historical figures were merely mentioned in passing in broader chronicles, we personalized their tales through narrative, in order to restore flesh-and-blood vibrancy to their segments, underscoring that these were vibrant women, not characters.

The use of numerous voices to read the monologues, dialogue, and quotations captivates the listeners' attention. Not required to focus on a single voice, reminiscent of a didactic lecture, listeners instead hear five voices, ideally with different accents and intonations. Rather than having the information presented by a "voice-of-God" style of narration, as is common in a traditional documentary (both film and radio), having a small cast of readers ensures the audience process the information being read aloud through a series of characters with whom to identify. Many instances in the script use the first-person singular to heighten the intimacy between the speaker and the listener, as with the opening line when the voice representing Umm-Salama provocatively inquires of the audience, "How can you have forgotten me . . .?" Later in the series of narratives, with the account of Zuleikha Buransheva of a Soviet-controlled region of Central Asia, the listener is directly drawn into a confidential huddle through the words of her daughter who recounts:

> *After my mother, Zuleikha Buransheva, married in 1924, she found herself in a patriarchal Uzbek family, where she had all the responsibilities of a daughter-in-law . . . To end her slave-like existence, she left her husband, joined the Communist Party, and started working as a women's organizer in a silk-weaving cooperative, called an artel . . .*[2]

Finally, it was not enough to simply collect and narrativize the historical information on the lives of these women. It was necessary that contemporary women and men *hear* these stories; they arm the listener with the knowledge

that women from Muslim backgrounds have a rich feminist history to be proud of and therefore serve as a potential source of self-empowerment. Especially in a global political climate that supports the portrayal of Muslim women as static, oppressed, and silent, it is nobody's responsibility but our own to correct these misconceptions. While it has become especially fashionable, particularly post-9/11, to write "about Muslim women" (and even though this may be done with the best of intentions) such projects are all too often sensationalistic accounts of the hardships suffered by women, such as polygamy and the veil. Furthermore, such hardships are seen to stem from Islam itself as a religious doctrine, without concomitant attention paid to the exploitation of religion for political goals. The *Great Ancestors* not only relates stories of independent and socially active Muslim women, but shows how many of these women were aware of such manipulations over a century ago. As stated by Bengali writer and educator Rokeya Hossain (1880–1932):

> *Whenever a woman has tried to raise her head, she has been brought down to her knees on the ground of either religious impiety or scriptural taboo . . . Men have always propagated such* [measures] *as edicts of God to keep us women in the dark . . .*[3]

Some women, such as the Javanese R.A. Kartini (1879–1904), were overtly critical of certain religiously sanctioned traditions, such as polygyny:

> *The Moslem law allows a man to have four wives at the same time. And though it be a thousand times over no sin according to the Moslem law and doctrine, I shall forever call it a sin . . .*[4]

Others, like Begum Sharifa Hamid Ali, of pre-Independence India, argued that some Islamic traditions were worth keeping. She drew up and circulated a model marriage contract which included the delegated right of divorce, a right she stated all women should have.

In the initial presentations of this material into the Feminism in the Muslim World Leadership Institute, the reactions of the participants testify to their astonishment at coming face to face with heroines from their own past who had hitherto been invisible to them:

> *The group as a whole felt empowered to be able to relate to powerful female figures and to identify potential role models who have emerged from their own cultures . . . Louisa Ait-Hamou from Algeria . . . initially felt she "did not believe in such an exercise," later told the group that, "I have just been re-connected with my history."*[5]

After the presentation, the participants in the institute related their own

stories to each other of how they became interested in feminism, whether rooted in a negative experience in their childhood or in an inspiring woman in their own family. As studies with school children show, the telling of stories has the potential to foster a connection between the content of the tale and the individual lives of the listeners. The listeners identify with the voices and the stories they hear (and will identify with some segments more than others), and relate the content to their own personal or collective circumstances. Hearing the *Great Ancestors* in a collective setting is a more dynamic experience than the less interactive engagement of individual reading. Listeners are encouraged to ask questions about the material they have just heard and seen, to share other stories with the group, and ultimately to link these struggles of the past to their own current context. Not claiming to be definitive or all-inclusive, the script invites audiences to research other women of history, perhaps in their own regions or drawn from one's own area of expertise (medicine, law, literature, etc.).

The positive reaction to the *Great Ancestors* has been encouraging. The sheer volume and variety of people mentioned in the presentation ensures that through the narratives almost everyone learns about somebody new. Many are pleasantly surprised to learn that women were active so many centuries ago or that Muslim women were politically organized in areas such as sub-Saharan Africa. Listeners from non-Muslim communities have drawn parallels with their own histories. The Intercultural Grandmothers women's group of Saskatchewan, Canada told me that they were struck by the similarities between the *Great Ancestors* and the storytelling-as-therapy sessions they had organized in the local Métis and First Nations community. She described how the women attending these story-sharing circles told of their arduous experiences within the residential school system, a reality which is sanitized in traditional historical accounts. Being sidelined by the annals of recorded history was as acutely apparent in this community as in the cases of the women included in the *Great Ancestors*.

While the overall reception of the presentation has been largely positive, some criticisms arose when the script was performed in Farsi by a women's group in Iran. Participants noted the marked discrepancy between the age of the performers, many of whom were in their late teens and early twenties, and the content of certain first-person narratives which described much older women. Others voiced ideological criticisms from a secularist perspective, arguing that by representing these women within a framework of Muslim history the presentation privileged a religiously defined version of the past. The intent of the *Ancestors* is to show the diversity of these women's relationship to Islam. Some considerations had to be made in relation to religion; so as not to inflame orthodox sensibilities, the publication did not include any information considered too contentious in scriptural debates.

Political concerns such as these informed the selection process and shaped

the vocabulary used to present these historical anecdotes. In recent years, oral tradition and storytelling have gained more acceptance as legitimate forms of presenting and preserving histories. Rather than "storytelling as history," however, the *Great Ancestors* offers "history as storytelling." Partly to bypass the stigma of written history as dull and laborious and partly to engage women—especially those operating in Muslim contexts—with their own histories, this project brings to life the voices, words, and images of women who have been relegated to the margins of traditional scholarship. No one else will recover these histories for us and without telling the stories of our foremothers to others we condemn them to be once again forgotten by history.[6]

Aisha Lee Fox Shaheed is a writer-researcher with a background in history, emphasizing gender, (post)colonialism, and historiography. She is an active networker for the transnational feminist solidarity network, Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML). Her forthcoming publications include a chapter on the history of veiling in Muslim contexts and an analytical overview of the status of women and women's activism in Saudi Arabia.

Notes

1 Fatima Mernissi, *Hidden from History: The Forgotten Queens of Islam* (Lahore: ASR Publications, 1994), 116.
2 Farida Shaheed, *Great Ancestors: Women Asserting Rights in Muslim Contexts [Training Manual]* (Lahore: Shirkat gah, 2005), 114.
3 Rokeya Hossain, cited in Bharati Ray, *Early Feminists of Colonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 63–4.
4 Raden Adjeng Kartini, cited in Kumari Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*, 2nd ed. (Lahore: ASR, 1993), 61.
5 Anissa Hélie, *Feminism in the Muslim World Leadership Institutes: 1998 & 1999 Reports* (London: Center for Women's Global Leadership & Women Living Under Muslim Laws, 2000), 36.
6 The most recent Institute was held in Malaysia in 2007.