

HOME PAGE | MY TIMES | TODAY'S PAPER | VIDEO | MOST POPULAR | TIMES TOPICS

The New York Times **Magazine**

TimesSelect Free 14-Day Trial | Log In | Register Now

Magazine | All NYT

WORLD | U.S. | N.Y. / REGION | BUSINESS | TECHNOLOGY | SCIENCE | HEALTH | SPORTS | OPINION | ARTS | STYLE | TRAVEL | JOBS | REAL ESTATE

AUTOS | THE TIMES MAGAZINE | T: STYLE | KEY | PLAY

Where to stay | What to do | When to go | Where to eat

Before you go there, go here. **NYTimes.com/Travel**

RECONSIDERATION
A Secret History

Next Article in Magazine (12 of 17) »



Lynsey Addario, Corbis



MOST POPULAR

E-MAILED | BLOGGED | SEARCHED

1. Honeybees Vanish, Leaving Keepers in Peril
2. It Seems the Fertility Clock Ticks for Men, Too
3. Restaurants : Where Only the Salad Is Properly Dressed
4. Is Whole Foods Straying From Its Roots?
5. As Ethics Panels Expand Grip, No Field Is Off Limits
6. In Medieval Architecture, Signs of Advanced Math
7. From Phobia to Fame: A Southern Cook's Memoir
8. Demand for English Lessons Outstrips Supply
9. Crypt Held Bodies of Jesus and Family, Film Says
10. The Consumer: Bargaining Down That CT Scan Is Suddenly Possible

Go to Complete List »



Video
nytimes.com/video

Watch the video report "Return to Haifa Street"

- Also in Video:
- [Ashura in Baghdad](#)
 - [A Bombing in Baghdad](#)
 - [A Baghdad Neighborhood in Transition](#)

By CARLA POWER
Published: February 25, 2007

For Muslims and non-Muslims alike, the stock image of an Islamic scholar is a gray-bearded man. Women tend to be seen as the subjects of Islamic law rather than its shapers. And while some opportunities for religious education do exist for women — the prestigious Al-Azhar University in Cairo has a women's college, for example, and there are girls' madrasas and female study groups in mosques and private homes — cultural barriers prevent most women in the Islamic world from pursuing such studies. Recent findings by a scholar at the Oxford Center for Islamic Studies in Britain, however, may help lower those barriers and challenge prevalent notions of women's roles within Islamic society. Mohammad Akram Nadwi, a 43-year-old Sunni alim, or religious scholar, has rediscovered a long-lost tradition of Muslim women teaching the Koran, transmitting hadith (deeds and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad) and even making Islamic law as jurists.

Akram embarked eight years ago on a single-volume biographical dictionary of female hadith scholars, a project that took him trawling through biographical dictionaries, classical texts, madrasa chronicles and letters for relevant citations. "I thought I'd find maybe 20 or 30 women," he says. To date, he has found 8,000 of them, dating back 1,400 years, and his dictionary now fills 40 volumes. It's so long that his usual publishers, in Damascus and Beirut, have balked at the project, though an English translation of his preface — itself almost 400 pages long — will come out in England this summer. (Akram has talked with Prince Turki al-Faisal, Saudi Arabia's former ambassador to the United States, about the possibility of publishing the entire work through his Riyadh-based foundation.)

The dictionary's diverse entries include a 10th-century Baghdad-born jurist who traveled through Syria and Egypt, teaching other women; a female scholar — or muhaddithat — in

12th-century Egypt whose male students marveled at her mastery of a “camel load” of texts; and a 15th-century woman who taught hadith at the Prophet’s grave in Medina, one of the most important spots in Islam. One seventh-century Medina woman who reached the academic rank of jurist issued key fatwas on hajj rituals and commerce; another female jurist living in medieval Aleppo not only issued fatwas but also advised her far more famous husband on how to issue his.

Not all of these women scholars were previously unknown. Many Muslims acknowledge that Islam has its learned women, particularly in the field of hadith, starting with the Prophet’s wife Aisha. And several Western academics have written on women’s religious education. About a century ago, the Hungarian Orientalist Ignaz Goldziher estimated that about 15 percent of medieval hadith scholars were women. But Akram’s dictionary is groundbreaking in its scope.

Indeed, read today, when many Muslim women still don’t dare pray in mosques, let alone lecture leaders in them, Akram’s entry for someone like Umm al-Darda, a prominent jurist in seventh-century Damascus, is startling. As a young woman, Umm al-Darda used to sit with male scholars in the mosque, talking shop. “I’ve tried to worship Allah in every way,” she wrote, “but I’ve never found a better one than sitting around, debating other scholars.” She went on to teach hadith and fiqh, or law, at the mosque, and even lectured in the men’s section; her students included the caliph of Damascus. She shocked her contemporaries by praying shoulder to shoulder with men — a nearly unknown practice, even now — and issuing a fatwa, still cited by modern scholars, that allowed women to pray in the same position as men.

It’s after the 16th century that citations of women scholars dwindle. Some historians venture that this is because Islamic education grew more formal, excluding women as it became increasingly oriented toward establishing careers in the courts and mosques. (Strangely enough, Akram found that this kind of exclusion also helped women become better scholars. Because they didn’t hold official posts, they had little reason to invent or embellish prophetic traditions.)

Akram’s work has led to accusations that he is championing free mixing between men and women, but he says that is not so. He maintains that women students should sit at a discreet distance from their male classmates or co-worshippers, or be separated by a curtain. (The practice has parallels in Orthodox Judaism.) The Muslim women who taught men “are part of our history,” he says. “It doesn’t mean you have to follow them. It’s up to people to decide.”

Nevertheless, Akram says he hopes that uncovering past hadith scholars could help reform present-day Islamic culture. Many Muslims see historical precedents — particularly when they date back to the golden age of Muhammad — as blueprints for sound modern societies and look to scholars to evaluate and interpret those precedents. Muslim feminists like the Moroccan writer Fatima Mernissi and Kecia Ali, a professor at [Boston University](#), have cast fresh light on women’s roles in Islamic law and history, but their worldview — and their audiences — are largely Western or Westernized. Akram is a working alim, lecturing in mosques and universities and dispensing fatwas on issues like inheritance and divorce. “Here you’ve got a guy who’s coming from the tradition, who knows the stuff and who’s able to give us that level of detail which is missing in the self-proclaimed progressive Muslim writers,” says James Piscatori, a professor of Islamic Studies at [Oxford University](#).

The erosion of women’s religious education in recent times, Akram says, reflects “decline in every aspect of Islam.” Flabby leadership and a focus on politics rather than scholarship has left Muslims ignorant of their own history. Islam’s current cultural insecurity has been bad for both its scholarship and its women, Akram says. “Our traditions have grown weak, and when people are weak, they grow cautious. When they’re cautious, they don’t give their women freedoms.”

When Akram lectures, he dryly notes, women are more excited by this history than men.

ADVERTISEMENTS

Turbo charge your network with the fast, flexible HP DL380 server.

Back up your business with HP’s ProLiant ML150 Server—just \$1,299.

Empower your business with the HP BladeSystem c-Class.

American Airlines:
American offers 4,000 flights to 250 cities worldwide.

The New York Times STORE



Pinus Insignis, at Osborne
Buy Now

To persuade reluctant Muslims to educate their girls, Akram employs a potent debating strategy: he compares the status quo to the age of al jahiliya, the Arabic term for the barbaric state of pre-Islamic Arabia. ([Osama Bin Laden](#) and Sayyid Qutb, the godfather of modern Islamic extremism, have employed the comparison to very different effect.) Barring Muslim women from education and religious authority, Akram argues, is akin to the pre-Islamic custom of burying girls alive. "I tell people, 'God has given girls qualities and potential,'" he says. "If they aren't allowed to develop them, if they aren't provided with opportunities to study and learn, it's basically a live burial."

When I spoke with him, Akram invoked a favorite poem, "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," Thomas Gray's 18th-century lament for dead English farmers. "Gray said that villagers could have been like Milton," if only they'd had the chance, Akram observes. "Muslim women are in the same situation. There could have been so many Miltons."

Carla Power is a London-based journalist who writes about Islamic issues.

[Next Article in Magazine \(12 of 17\) »](#)

[Need to know more? 50% off home delivery of The Times.](#)

Tips

To find reference information about the words used in this article, double-click on any word, phrase or name. A new window will open with a dictionary definition or encyclopedia entry.

Past Coverage

-  [BOOKS OF THE TIMES; No Rest for a Feminist Fighting Radical Islam \(February 14, 2007\)](#)
-  [THE WORLD; In Egypt, A New Battle Begins Over the Veil \(January 28, 2007\)](#)
- [National Briefing | Midwest: Michigan: Veil Allowed In Court \(January 25, 2007\)](#)
-  [From Head Scarf to Army Cap, Making a New Life \(December 15, 2006\)](#)

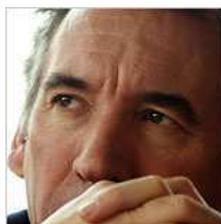
Related Searches

- [Women](#)
- [Islam](#)
- [Mosques](#)
- [Faisal, Turki al-](#)

INSIDE NYTIMES.COM



TimesSelect



Cohen: France Must Move On

MOVIES »

Black Stars Pushing International Barriers

Can "Dreamgirls" be a success abroad?

DINING & WINE »



At Robert's, It's About the Steak. Really.

FASHION & STYLE »



John Galliano Kicks Up His Heels

TimesSelect

Applebome: An Institute Where New Age and Conventional Wisdom Meet

SPORTS »



Horse Racing Officials Move Toward Steroid Ban