
Aisha: A Life and Legacy

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Early Islam produced many prominent and leading women figures that would inspire and influence their contemporaries. The most influential of any of the early Muslim women were Muhammad's wives, for their closeness to the holy prophet. Aisha, the third of the twelve wives, was the most influential for her "holy" role as wife, and her political influence following Muhammad's death. Many modern Muslim women look to Aisha for influence and guidance. Through this role as wife and public political figure, Aisha has circumscribed her prominence in Islamic history.

Role as Wife

Aisha bint Abu Bakr was an important influence to early Islam from a young age.⁸² The daughter of the prophet's favorite and closest companion. Abu Bakr, Aisha rose to prominence at the age of six, when she was betrothed and married to Muhammad. Her family lineage made Aisha an extremely important figure to not only Muhammad, but to the Islamic community, and acts as an important catalyst to establishing her role as wife.

Abu Bakr and his daughters made the *hijra*, or pilgrimage, to Medina with Muhammad in 622, confirming their conversion to Islam.⁸³ Aisha took the *hijra* as well and thus converted to Islam at an early age.⁸⁴ Furthermore, Abu Bakr and Muhammad's relationship grew closer after the *hijra*, solidifying the trust and closeness between the family and the prophet. In the Islamic tradition, the closeness of Abu Bakr and Muhammad suggested "a new basis for communal relationships forged in faith, rather than blood."⁸⁵

Indeed, prior to the engagement of Muhammad and Aisha, Abu Bakr wondered how he could marry his daughter to his brother. Muhammad, in reply, answered "you are my brother in faith."⁸⁶ Since Muhammad revered Abu Bakr, it is no surprise Aisha was revered by the prophet as well. Furthermore, Sunni Muslims venerate Abu Bakr, and thus Aisha is highly thought of as an influential individual in Islam.⁸⁷ The strength of the relationship between Abu Bakr and Muhammad strengthened the relationship between Aisha and Muhammad. Abu Bakr, considered to be the "truthful man," means that Aisha has been titled "daughter of the truthful man."⁸⁸ Family lineage

⁸² Sources used in this paper have used various spellings for Aisha's name. This paper will solely spell her name as Aisha bint Abu Bakr.

⁸³ None of Abu Bakr's wives went.

⁸⁴ D.A. Spellberg, *Politics, Gender, and the Islamic Past: The Legacy of A'isha bint Abi Bakr* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 32.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 32.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 32.

⁸⁷ D.A. Spellberg constitutes the marriage of Aisha and Muhammad as a solidification of Abu Bakr and Muhammad's "religious commitment." She continues to describe the difference in the importance of genealogy between Shi'i and Sunni Muslims: Abu Bakr's precedence in faith mattered more over lineage to Sunnis; Shi'i do not buy into the "brother in religion," and constitute a true, familial bloodline. See page 33 in her book.

⁸⁸ Spellberg, 33.

alone, however, does not mark Aisha as a legacy throughout the history of Islam; while Abu Bakr is a central figure to Aisha's legacy, her own agency as wife is important as well.

Aisha's agency in her role as wife is crucial to her influence in Islam. Prior to her engagement to Muhammad, Aisha was engaged to a boy around her own age.⁸⁹ Yet, after the *hijra*, the boy's family grew fearful of his conversion to Islam, and the engagement was subsequently broken. Aisha was then betrothed to the Prophet alongside a widow named Sawda; both women were picked because Aisha was a virgin, and Sawda was not.⁹⁰

It is important to note that Aisha's virginity seems to be a crucial aspect in her importance in her role as wife. In a collection of lists dedicated to the reasons why Aisha was the favorite wife, Aisha specifically notes that she is the only virgin of the twelve wives.⁹¹ Yet, the importance of Aisha's virginity is more of an attribution to her legacy rather than something to be honored; she relentlessly reminded Muhammad that she was the only virgin until their marriage consummation when she was approximately nine-years-old.⁹² Aisha's most important role as wife, however, transcends the physical world; her spiritual role as wife, therefore, makes Aisha crucial in the influence in Islam.

Aisha's involvement with the spiritual world not only makes her unlike the other wives, but solidifies her role as wife and as an important figure in Islamic history. After the death of Muhammad's first wife, Khadija, Muhammad dreamt about Aisha. The angel Gabriel came to Muhammad bearing a silk cloth with Aisha's likeness, instructing Muhammad to marry her. Though the stories in the hadith vary on who exactly the angel was and when the angel visited Muhammad, it signifies the importance of Aisha. D.A. Spellberg continues this, stating: "Aisha is not just defined as the Prophet's wife, but his wife 'in this world and the next,' a phrase that effectively links her divinely ordained marital arrangement with her posthumous place in heaven."⁹³ This ethereal encounter with Gabriel had given rise to the favoritism of Aisha, thus allowing her to become an influential figure in Islam.

The encounter with Gabriel sets Aisha apart from the other wives of Muhammad, making Aisha an important figure in Islam. In her list of why she's the Prophet's favorite wife, Aisha notes several important and intimate actions Muhammad performed in front of her, unlike any other wife. She states that she was the only wife to wash with Muhammad—both ceremoniously and for cleanliness.⁹⁴ *Ghusl*, the ritual washing of the body, was to be done alone in preparation for prayer.⁹⁵ Aisha also states that Muhammad would pray and receive revelations in front of her, unlike any of the other wives. She would even chew a stick before Muhammad used it as a toothbrush, doing so daily up until his death.⁹⁶ D.A. Spellberg states:

Her special knowledge of significant acts of prayer, ablution, and cleanliness performed by the Prophet Muhammad made her an especially valued source of ritually significant information for the Sunni Muslim community, who in all matters looked to the Prophet's human example in the performance of their daily life.⁹⁷

⁸⁹ Aisha was probably around 6 or 7 when she married Muhammad.

⁹⁰ Leila Ahmed, "Women and the Advent of Islam," *Signs* 11, no. 4 (1986): 674.

⁹¹ Spellberg, 30.

⁹² Spellberg, 40.

⁹³ Spellberg, 43.

⁹⁴ Spellberg, 30.

⁹⁵ Ruth Roded, ed. *Women in Islam and the Middle East: A Reader* (London: I.B. Publishers, 1999), 96.

⁹⁶ Spellberg, 37.

⁹⁷ Spellberg, 37.

Aisha's glimpse into the intimate life of the Prophet Muhammad, unlike the other wives, is important in the continuation of Islamic tradition and makes her an influential source in Islam. While other wives did, in fact, contribute a lot to Islam and are revered in the contemporary era, Aisha's own lineage, spiritual connection, and intimate practices set her aside from the other wives. Aisha was truly a "favorite" wife of Muhammad, and truly dedicated to the religion. Her role as a political and public figure further solidified her influential status.

Role as Public and Political Figure

Aisha's role in the public and political sphere further cemented her influential and legacy in Islam. Some pre-Islamic tribes were matrilineal and matrilocal, meaning that many of the practices were done by women and the ancestral lines were traced through the mother's line. Furthermore, it emphasized a great role women played in the political, economic, and social aspect of their tribes. During the rise of Islam, individuality began to trump tribal focuses, and many scholars pinpoint the diminishing tribes to the rise of the patriarchy.⁹⁸

Aisha was probably not involved with politics immediately following her marriage to Muhammad; after all, she was a young girl, and her political awareness only grew around Muhammad's death in 632, when Aisha was eighteen.⁹⁹ Muhammad built apartment-styled homes on the eastern wall of the mosque for each of his wives, and would allocate several nights to each of them. This caused a lot of tension between the wives, each believing the Prophet was spending the least amount of time with the individual wife. Shortly after, Muhammad received Quranic verse 33:33, and Nikki R. Keddie describes the implications:

[The Quranic verse stated:] 'And stay in your houses...and do not strut about in the manner of the former Jahiliyyah, and perform prayer and give the alms, and obey God and His Prophet. God wishes to put all filthiness away from you, People of the House.' The direction to Muhammad's wives to stay in their houses was later applied to all women, though only women who did not have to go out to do work and errands could observe it. This verse was also used [by later Islamic jurists] to legitimate Muslim women's exclusion from participating in public affairs.¹⁰⁰

Aisha backed Muhammad's revelation to seclude herself within the houses; she feared anti-Muslim individuals would find out who she and the other wives were, molest them, and take them as slaves.¹⁰¹

This seclusion solidified the growing patriarchy, and Aisha would soon challenge it with her political and public sphere. "By institution seclusion," writes Leila Ahmed, "[Muhammad] created a distance between the wives and this thronging community on their doorstep—the distance appropriate to the wives of a now powerful and successful patriarchal leader in a newly ambiguously patriarchal society."¹⁰²

Following the death of the Prophet, and the urge to find a successor to the caliphate, Aisha's political and public influence challenged the patriarchy—and ultimately failed. Following the death of Uthman, a successor caliph, and the rise of Ali, Aisha took to a public speech—veiled due to the

⁹⁸ Nikki R. Keddie, *Women in the Middle East: Past and Present* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2007), 18.

⁹⁹ Hoda Elsadda, "Discourses on Women's Biographies and Cultural Identity: Twentieth-Century Representations of the Life of 'A'isha Bint Abi Bakr," *Feminist Studies* 27, no. 1 (2001): 46.

¹⁰⁰ Keddie, 23.

¹⁰¹ Ahmed, 682. Following Muhammad's death, all of the wives received pensions. Interestingly, Aisha received the largest pension, and all of the women were allowed to continue to live in the apartment houses.

¹⁰² Ahmed, 683.

seclusion revelation—and took to the Battle of the Camel in 656. Though she and her soldiers ultimately failed in the Battle, the aftermath in the legacy of Aisha was significant and revolutionary.

Defeated, Aisha returned to her home and refrained from political activity; yet, her role in the Battle of the Camel was significant to the further development and influence in the role of women in Islam. She felt defeated not only because she had lost the battle, but because she deliberately broke the seclusion rule Muhammad had laid out.¹⁰³ Following her loss, adversaries criticized her for stepping outside of her place in the home; the patriarchy was in full effect, and Aisha directly challenged it.¹⁰⁴

By challenging the patriarchy, Muslim women's roles were directly challenged in the generations following the first Muslims. Early hadiths pinpoint Aisha's loss at the Battle of the Camel as an example as to why women should *not* be in politics or seek political advice. According to the hadith, women are considered *fitna*, a source of temptation.¹⁰⁵ Women's inferiority was in full swing. Of course, not all of this can be completely traced back to Aisha and her involvement with the Battle of the Camel, but Aisha is a prominent figure that scholars have traced back. Nikki R. Keddie attributes Aisha's downfall to that of the Judeo-Christian Eve, as a "causer of major trouble," and that God had made women foolish.¹⁰⁶ Following her fall from political and public ways of life, Aisha turned to translating over 1200 hadiths. She carried out the remainder of her life quiet, using the hadith translations as a way to not only further preach the words of the Prophet, but to spread her influence.¹⁰⁷ While the role of Aisha in Islamic History ultimately lead to negative implications on all Muslim women, Aisha still played an important part in shaping early Islamic women's history in general. Through both her roles as wife and public/political leader, Aisha demonstrates not only Muhammad's favoritism, but the influence she would have throughout Islam.

Aisha's role as wife and as a political and public figure makes her a prominent figure in the early developments in Islam. Aisha witnessed the rise of the patriarchy and made severe attempts to push past it; though these attempts to push past it ultimately ended in failure and place restrictions on Muslim women, many Sunni Muslims revere Aisha for her faith to Islam and Muhammad. Aisha's strong influence continues throughout Islamic communities today, and because of her loyalty and dedication, should be labeled as the Prophet's favorite wife.

¹⁰³ Ahmed, 689.

¹⁰⁴ Elsadda, 46.

¹⁰⁵ Keddie, 34.

¹⁰⁶ Keddie, 35.

¹⁰⁷ Roded, 49.