

3. Hindiyya and her Family

Shukrallah 'Ujaymi and his wife, Helen Hawa, had ten children. In keeping with the typical demographic pattern of the *Ancien Regime*, they were not spared by the terrible infant mortality rampant in Aleppo and other cities. Indeed, the two eldest, Anthony (Antun) and John (Hanna), as well as the fifth, Elijah (Ilyas), sixth, Qudsiyya, and eighth child, Anthony junior, all died in infancy, less than a year and a half old. Suzanne, the tenth child, reached the age of nine. Consequently only four children arrived at adulthood: Maryam, Hindiyya (two years her junior), Nicholas (the seventh) and Margaret (the ninth). The parents were particularly affected by the death of the sons. The intercession of St Nicholas of Bari, to whom Helen had promised her fourth male child, seems to have been salutary, since he was the only one to reach adulthood before joining the Society of Jesus.

The edifying biography by Fr Venturi which provides this information says that the mother suffered greatly during her pregnancies and deliveries, except in the case of Hindiyya. She was born 31 July 1720, the day of St Ignatius, which the Jesuit construed as a good omen. She was baptised on 6 August and, as it was the Feast of the Transfiguration in the Maronite Church, this was considered yet again to be evidence of a positive conjuncture. The liturgical practice of the Maronites from Aleppo complied with the rules of the Council of Trent: contrary to the tradition of Eastern Churches there was no forty-day delay before her baptism and she was not confirmed at the same time.

Her godfather was Elijah Knaydar and her godmother Giuliana, his sister-in-law. It is not hard to imagine that the Knaydars belonged to the same affluent devout milieu as the 'Ujaymis and the Hawas. In the late eighteenth century a member of this family had become bishop of Aleppo, and his brother (who died in 1801) was well known as a school-teacher and a pillar of the congregation of celibate Maronites founded by the Jesuits.¹

The choice of Hindiyya's name, meaning "Indian", is somewhat surprising. The surname 'Ujaymi, moreover, is a diminutive of "Persian". Hindiyya 'Ujaymi therefore bears the strange name of "the Indian Persian". Her aunt insisted that she be given the name "Anne" (a popular name at that time in the

Catholic West) as a baptismal name, but this did not prevent her mother from calling her Hindiyya, and it was the pagan name that triumphed. Nicholas, her brother, the future Jesuit, was somewhat ashamed of her name and always called her Anne, although he eventually adopted the common usage.²

Some said that the evocation of India was the result of her dark complexion.³ There were probably other reasons too. A younger sister, who did not survive, was named Qudsiyya, the “Jerusalemite”, perhaps in memory of a pilgrimage or a business trip to the holy city.⁴ The name of Hindiyya could therefore be the commemoration of another similar expedition in this family of merchants. She was not the only one to have this name: Muslim courts recorded the case of a Christian peddler, Mikha’il Walad ‘Atallah Jirdi, who died in 1728 on the way to Istanbul, leaving behind three daughters whose names evoked the father’s itinerant profession: Hindiyya (the Indian), ‘Ajamiyya (the Persian), and Basra (a port city in Iraq).⁵

In any case, the question of Hindiyya’s name is hardly irrelevant to her fate. Fr Venturi interpreted it as an auspicious sign that God, who always addressed her in this way in her visions, wanted to include this new name among the saints to be venerated. Although her companions often changed their names when they entered into religion, Hindiyya kept hers as an expression of faith in the singularity of her vocation and in her local roots. Later, in a dark legend spread by her adversaries, the name would be infused with satanic connotations⁶.

Although the candidate for sanctity whose conversion occurs in a sudden illumination usually changes names, Hindiyya’s attachment to her own confirms the continuity of her vocation. Lives of women with mystical and ascetic callings have been shown to have less interruptions, dichotomies, and symbolic inversions than those of men. Generally speaking, the feminine aspiration to sanctity is already manifest in childhood and develops continually, while men go through crises and conversions. Women often knew before the age of eight that they would choose celibacy and renounce marriage. A strong will at an early age was necessary for a family to accept a status that diverged from custom.⁷

Like Catherine of Siena and many other mystics, Hindiyya showed an implacable resolve to forge her own identity while still quite young by refusing certain social conventions. She adopted others which had been introduced into Aleppo over a century earlier by missionaries and Eastern clerics. These she was capable of following with excessive zeal. All this, together with her refusal to conform to the behaviour expected of a “normal” young girl in the community of Christian merchants in Aleppo, were necessary conditions for a reputation of sanctity. It was this relative marginalisation that would reveal the virtual saint in the eyes of others as a potential mediator, capable of a prophetic mission and a direct and informal relationship with Heaven.⁸

Many elements from Hindiyya’s childhood and adolescence confirm the archetype of female sanctity that has been well-documented in Italian girls

since the fourteenth century. These were generally from a middle-class urban milieu of merchants and artisans, socially comparable to that of the 'Ujaymis and Hawas, where family structures and dominant values probably differed very little from those of Aleppine Christians.⁹ If Hindiyya and her brother Nicholas did sometimes express family solidarity and an attachment to their extended family, thus conforming to the general image of Eastern families, witnesses emphasise above all the strong emotional ties, whether positive or negative, between members of the 'Ujaymi nuclear family. This is one of the features of the "modern" family according to the now controversial model of Philippe Ariès.¹⁰ To what extent is the history of Hindiyya and the 'Ujaymis indicative of "modernity" in family relationships, or rather, to what extent is it a paradigm of typical psychological situations in a traditional Aleppine family? It has to be admitted that we do not have the means to unravel these alternatives. Ultimately the 'Ujaymi family history may suggest an ambiguity, or a conflict, between two cultural models which began to overlap within the community of Aleppine Christian merchants.

Largely because of Jibra'îl, the Roman uncle, the Hawa family seemed to have particularly close ties with the "Franks". Hindiyya's parents had chosen priests from the Holy Land rather than Maronites as confessors. According to Hindiyya's testimony in response to questions from the apostolic delegate in 1753 it was her mother, Helen, who was the central figure in the girl's childhood. Her grandmother also took part in her upbringing. We do not know whether or not this was her maternal grandmother, but it makes sense to imagine that Helen's mother had encouraged her grand-daughter to follow the path of piety and mysticism. She rocked Hindiyya in her cradle when she was little and took her to church and to school¹¹. Eight years after her death she appeared to Hindiyya and squeezed her hand so tightly that she was in pain for several days.¹² Yet it was Hindiyya's mother who had the leading role as confidante and educator. She provided the little girl with understanding and affection while remaining the symbol of law and authority. Helen was no different in this respect from other mothers of "saints": she was an attentive and loving woman who raised her daughter from an early age according to the precepts of piety. It may be that this too perfect mother inspired a sense of omnipotence in the child which lay at the origin of her search for the absolute and, later, of her megalomania.¹³

While Western observers generally deplored the laxity of Eastern parents towards their offspring,¹⁴ Helen appears to have been the ideal tutor for her daughter, conforming to the principles of post-humanist Catholic education. She instilled in her the notion of bodily control according to standards of "decency" common in Europe: "immodest behaviour, inquisitiveness, and gossip are sins".¹⁵ A woman must not laugh out loud, she must sleep only on her side, must not extend her legs as Eastern women do when they are seated, or yawn without covering her mouth, etc.¹⁶

Hindiyya relates that her mother summoned her during the day to recite

the Our Father and the Hail Mary and that she had to repeat them again at night before going to bed. By the time she was three and a half she knew them by heart and could make the sign of the cross. At the age of five or six, Helen explained to her that Jesus was God and man, incarnate in the womb of the Virgin Mary for the redemption of humanity. The little girl had already learned that her behaviour was under the permanent scrutiny of God and she had begun to grasp the concept of sin.¹⁷

However, when faced with these principles of education encouraged by the “Frank” priests, Helen’s attitude was occasionally ambivalent. She was torn between her desire to see her daughter achieve what she probably considered to be the ideal of a woman’s existence and the need to adapt the child to society. When Hindiyya differed too much from the usual standard of conduct for girls, by isolating herself and refusing to play like other children of her age, her mother rebuked her. Indeed, Hindiyya declared that although her mother had instilled in her a hatred of sin, she did not want her to behave abnormally in society and attract attention. She wanted Hindiyya to conform with the normal behaviour of children of her age, since some people said: “This behaviour will lead to your downfall. We have never seen anyone behave like this”. Helen’s equivocal attitude to the roles she wanted to impose on her daughter may have influenced Hindiyya’s psychological development.¹⁸

Knowing the part he would later play beside his sister it is unfortunate that accounts of Hindiyya’s childhood give us so little information about her little brother, Nicholas, who was six years younger. She seems to have been very close to him.¹⁹ Antonio Venturi, who was her confessor, thought he detected in the boy the beginnings of a holy vocation, according to Jesuit standards, from an early age. He compared him to St Aloysius (Louis of Gonzaga) and St Stanislas Kotska (canonised in 1727). In 1741 Venturi decided on his own initiative to send him to Fr Franz Retz, the general of the Society, to have him admitted as a student.²⁰ There is no doubt that Nicholas shared a propensity towards asceticism and mysticism with Hindiyya. Much later (1775 and 1776) his own admissions reveal his attachment to his sister and his faith in her vocation, belatedly shaken when he became aware of the pernicious deviations in the convent where she was mother superior.²¹

“Saints” are mainly younger children.²² Hindiyya does not mention her older sister Maryam in her responses to the interrogation by the apostolic delegate or in her autobiographical work, the *Mystery of Union*. Her confessor, on the other hand, stresses the jealousy between the two girls. From the time when she was four or five Hindiyya was persecuted by Maryam who mistreated her, beat her with a stick or wooden sandal, and chased her out of the house when the adults had their backs turned.²³ Maryam was obviously convinced that her parents preferred her sister. Her jealousy was accentuated when, from the age of five, the younger girl began declaring that she wanted to become a nun, the bride of Christ, and her parents were even more loving

to her.²⁴ This rivalry manifested itself in the typical domain of beauty and seduction. At the age of thirteen, Hindiyya tried to appear more beautiful than her sisters. One day she wore a necklace of gold cubes “linked together, in the local style”. Her necklace was larger than Maryam’s. When Maryam asked her why, Hindiyya replied: “Because I am the prettiest”. She was wrong to choose coquetry, however. The necklace broke on three occasions. And, while she was descending from the terrace where she had had this conversation with her sister, her Guardian Angel pushed her downstairs as a punishment. In fact it was only a fleeting temptation, perhaps indicative of unconscious desire, because Hindiyya already knew that her superiority over other girls would not be owing to her beauty. Her aspiration to sanctity conferred a far greater advantage. Once, hiding in a corner of the kitchen after being chased by her big sister, she predicted that Maryam would have a rich marriage, followed by misfortune. And indeed, after a lavish wedding with a handsome dowry, Maryam would become poverty stricken just a few days later.²⁵ Beyond sibling rivalry this episode illustrates the superiority of the “modern” female path of celibacy over a “normal” and traditional career of marriage and children.

The father figure plays a less explicit and more problematic role in Hindiyya’s memories of childhood. When asked by the ecclesiastical investigator if “she had ever failed to obey”, she gave this intriguing answer:

Yes, Father. I remember that I failed to obey twice. Once when my mother told me to sleep in my father’s bed, as is the custom in this region for little girls. Although I was only seven at the time, I refused, and despite my mother’s pleas, I would never go. The other time I disobeyed my mother was when she wanted a male servant to accompany me to school and I refused. My grand-mother agreed to accompany me, in order to please me, and then I went willingly. I do not remember ever having disobeyed my father.²⁶

“The custom of the region” mentioned in this statement is not found in any other source.²⁷ We know that, ever since the sixteenth century, the Catholic clergy denounced the practice, common at that time, of having children sleep in their parents’ bed: if Hindiyya’s opposition to the custom was genuine, she was supported by post-Tridentine standards. She also refused to sleep next to both her mother and sister, and got up when they tried to force her.²⁸

Yet to report an act of disobedience which consisted of refusing to sleep in her father’s bed while saying that she had never disobeyed him is a strange confession to make, and draws our attention to the enigmatic father figure. Its prominence, associated with feelings of guilt, is a common feature in the lives of many female mystics. We might suggest, basing ourselves on Lacan, that a distorted image of the real father had led Hindiyya, like many founders of all-encompassing religious currents, to idealise her father - an overinvestment of the imaginary father figure. Her desire for a mystical

union and the absolute may have originated here, especially since the symbolic father, who establishes the Law and allows assimilation in society, would later remain strangely silent.²⁹

Being the second daughter in a family that was hoping desperately for a son must have placed Hindiyya in an uncomfortable situation. Shukrallah, her father, could either completely reject her, or, on the contrary, lavish on her an affection that would make her into a “tomboy”. This intention might have been brutally interrupted and transferred to the little brother when he was born, and survived, six years after her. The date of the act of “disobedience” could make this second hypothesis plausible, although we have no evidence to support it.

We would have to be able to return to the obscure episodes that preceded this act of “disobedience”. In her *Mystery of Union* Hindiyya says that, before even being able to speak, she had gazed at the sky and seen a *figure* whom she loved “for his grandeur, stature, beauty and splendour”. She had been surprised that he was not wearing any clothes and did not walk “like other men, like my father”. The figure asked her if she loved him, and she replied: “I love you very much”. However, this “recollection”, which is not very coherent, does not appear in her responses to the apostolic delegate during the investigation of 1753. She had then been more cautious, saying that the figure who had appeared to her was clearly the Infant Jesus, and that she had not begun to have these visions until the age of eight.³⁰ It was around that time (probably following her act of “disobedience”), that, according to Antonio Venturi, she began to fear hell more for the idea of being there together with men than for its fire and brimstone. At eight or nine she had managed, with the miraculous help of her Guardian Angel, to resist a man who had tried to enter a small room with her. She would hide at the mere sight of a man, even her father; she did not even want to go into a room where her father and mother or other close relatives were consorting with other men and women. Much later, in a dialogue with the figure who appeared to her regularly, she would declare:

I loathe, detest and refuse to have anything to do with men, their company and their conversation.³¹

Venturi also reports that she sought every opportunity to hear the name “Jesus” in sermons and liturgical readings. Seeing people take communion, and having had her grandmother explain what it was, she asked that these words be repeated several times: “*Il corpo di Nostro Signore Gesù-Christo*”. When she was older, at a time when “*incantata era dal amorosetto singore la fanciulla Hindiè?*”, she addressed the bishop, the priest, the director and even her mother and sister inadvertently as “Jesus”. Her heart pounded with divine love on the feast of the Circumcision when, during a sermon lasting nearly two hours, the Maronite bishop uttered the beloved name repeatedly.³²

The *Mystery of Union*, written after the investigation of 1753 and the subsequent Roman sanction, is permeated from beginning to end by the theme

of inner conflict. She wonders about submitting to sensation and feeling physically the love which the “figure”, whom she believes to be Christ and who appears to her, has for her. She also mentions a mysterious experience, “which I detested and found abhorrent”, an “event” which she could not overcome and which forced her to confide her secret visions to her confessor. She felt shame and fear, a guilt that made her responsive to the mystical healing powers of the Sacred Heart. We may detect the distortion of the imago of the father in these visionary texts produced after Hindiyya had entered the convent, through the contradictory attributes of Jesus and Satan (although all mystics experienced these disturbing shifts between God and the Devil).³³

These observations might suggest that Hindiyya suffered from hysterical neurosis, a diagnosis which later physiological disorders would confirm. Indeed, Antonio Venturi says that at the age of six, her whole body suffered when reference was made to the passion of Christ, and she felt pain in her side at the mention of the wound to his Sacred Heart. Later, when she had already reached adulthood (at the age of about 25), she showed every sign of the pains of love: she spoke less and less, her eyes were constantly downcast and she never smiled. She was so absent-minded that she bumped into walls and put tobacco on her bread, confusing it with *zā‘tar* (a condiment made from thyme which is usually eaten with bread). In moments of impassioned prayer, her hands resting on her chest could not endure the burning sensation which sprung from it. The burning flame could be seen to rise from her heart to her face, while a puddle of sweat spread around her. In the midst of the cold Aleppine winter, which can be harsh indeed, the violent love she felt made her clothing unbearable. She walked barefoot on the frozen ground and climbed up to the terrace to free her chest and breathe the icy wind. She placed wet cloths and snow on her bare breast, and had her sister spray her with water, to no effect.³⁴

Like other women aspiring to sanctity, Hindiyya chose, when still quite young, to use food to test her self-control and the resistance of her entourage, although her anorexia never reached the self-destructive proportions that it did for other women. This is, once again, the “hysterical challenge”, a form of resistance expressed through body language,³⁵ the symptom of a conflict dating back to childhood. Refusing food is commonly associated with the refusal of sex through a shift to orality.

Thirty years later Hindiyya would remember that she had begun to refuse to eat when she was three and until she was three and a half. At seven she fasted secretly on bread and water on Fridays. Her mother sometimes noticed and would then make her eat soup. This she would do, but grudgingly, taking one, two or at the most three spoonfuls, claiming she could not swallow more. Helen, who was sometimes reduced to tears, turned to the confessor who ordered the young girl to eat, which she did reluctantly. When she was older, however, she still found means to mortify herself through food and drink in secret. She chose to forego foods considered delicacies and which

also served as social markers. She only accepted twice, at the behest of her mother, to drink wine, a “manly” drink traditionally rejected by Eastern ascetics.³⁶ After receiving the Eucharist she could neither eat nor drink for the entire day. She went for three days without swallowing anything after her first communion, and when her mother anxiously tried to place food in her mouth she immediately spat it out.³⁷ (This resistance to her mother’s efforts inevitably reminds one of her previous “disobedience”). Hindiyya never took her anorexia as far as some of her holy and heroic predecessors. At thirty, as founder of a congregation, mother superior of the Convent of Lebanon, and the “author” of spiritual texts, she seemed to have been “cured” of her anorexia – something that corresponds to a common and well-documented evolution.³⁸ But her relationship with food would later resurface as a problem since she was then accused of gluttony.

Hindiyya also wanted to affirm her difference and to distinguish herself from her sisters and other girls of her age through the arrogant humility of her dress. She only wanted to wear modest and rough clothing, refusing the traditional finery that went with her social position. She thus refused to conform to the rules of her social milieu in a city where dress codes were very important, rejecting in particular the custom that four daughters be dressed identically. This attitude distressed her mother, who even wept because of it. Hindiyya accepted a compromise to avoid causing her undue chagrin, but she later admitted to the apostolic delegate: “I suffered greatly because of this, unable to act according to my own wishes”.³⁹

She would find further opportunities to exercise her will. Towards the age of ten (probably the age when she began puberty), she started to sleep secretly on stones and thorns. She would pick a bitter herb, covered with nearly finger-length thorns, and place it on her chest, causing profuse bleeding. At fifteen, for two or three days a week, she would attach an iron belt to her hips studded with spikes on the inside. She later experimented further with a board studded with nails which she bandaged to her chest, spiked iron wrist-cuffs, knotted cords tied to her legs, a discipline (a whip used for penitence) equipped with iron spikes, and a hairshirt.⁴⁰

It is not surprising that Hindiyya should have renounced marriage, taking a vow of chastity and proclaiming herself to be the bride of Christ. Her grandmother’s encouragement, her mother’s repeated painful pregnancies with the loss of many children, the desire to surpass her elder sister without imitating her, the fear of men, even of her own father, would certainly not encourage her to follow the path of marriage and motherhood. Yet her mother, who seems to have instilled into her a fear of the male sex⁴¹ and inspired her quest for a new feminine ideal, only envisaged a married future for her daughter. We know nothing of the family’s matrimonial aspirations for Hindiyya. Perhaps it was difficult to refuse suitors who considered her a good catch. At ten years old she had already received several marriage proposals, with the promise of a noble and rich betrothal. According to her Jesuit

biographer everyone encouraged her, even her mother and the priests. Only her grandmother understood her reluctance and took her under her wing. Marriage was then the only future possible for an eligible girl. As we have seen, there was no convent for women in Aleppo that could have received girls from good families, and it seemed out of the question to send her to the Lebanese mountain. Besides, she claimed that she did not want to be a nun. She knew she ran the risk of finding herself destitute if she did not marry before the death of her parents. Towards the age of eleven she had to undergo “a new attack”. A wealthy young man from a noble family, the only son of a widow, wanted to marry her. This episode seems to have been managed by women. The young man’s mother visited the ‘Ujaymi home and covered Hindiyya in fine clothing and gold necklaces. Helen and the other women urged the girl to accept. They accompanied her to the young man’s house where she could admire the furniture, silver vases and the rest of the family heritage. Hindiyya refused the prospect, however, declaring herself to be the bride of Christ. At fourteen she firmly committed herself to remaining chaste. At twenty Christ appeared to her “either in all his glory, or as he was in the world at the age of about 30”, and repeatedly asked her to become his wife. The age gap of ten years with her divine suitor corresponds exactly to the ideal difference in age between man and wife according to the Catholic clergy.⁴²

This behaviour clearly shows that Hindiyya chose not to conform to the traditional model of the “Aleppine woman”. Her experience at home had convinced her from an early age that she had a special calling, already mapped out by Western female saints and initiated in Aleppo first by the devout followers of the Capuchins, and then by those of the Jesuits. She admits having experienced feelings of sadness and solitude when she refrained from behaving like other girls of her age. When she was six it was Jesus himself who began to guide her through an inner voice. By establishing a direct connection with God she could gain complete freedom from the constraints of her surroundings, from her family as well as her confessors. She could even claim to exercise a certain power over them, liberating herself from normal morality.⁴³ It is certain that her childhood experience, her personality forged within her family, and the defence system built into the relationship with her parents would stand her in good stead in her adult life.

Nevertheless this strength was only acquired gradually, through all kinds of trials. Self-mortification was not a renunciation of femininity or the internalization of the negative image of the female body portrayed by men. It was, rather, a way of affirming the specificity of female experience. The renunciation of food was a means of challenging traditional gender roles in society. The renunciation of sexuality was a way to escape male power. Torturing her flesh questioned its physiological functions, its ability to procreate.⁴⁴ Helen, her grandmother, and the “Frank” clerics had helped Hindiyya discover the only possible way for a woman to obtain independence and power: the difficult path of sanctity.