

## Introduction

Would it be true to say that I began my investigation of Hindiyya 'Ujaymi impartially, without feeling the slightest fascination for her? Certainly not. She remains even today shrouded in an aura of diabolical mystery that could only appeal to a narrator. I had already read Volney, who visited Lebanon when the ramifications of the scandal in 1777 had not yet subsided. The author relates factual elements of Hindiyya's tale that fuel rather than satisfy the readers' curiosity, like the pages of a good novel:

About the year 1735 there was, in the neighbourhood of the Jesuit Missionaries, a Maronite girl, named Hendia, whose extraordinary way of life began to attract the attention of the people. She fasted, wore a hair-cloth, possessed the gift of tears; and, in a word, had all the outward appearance of the ancient hermits, and soon acquired a similar reputation. Everybody considered her a model of piety and many thought her a saint. The transition from such a reputation to talk of miracles is very easy, and indeed, it was soon reported that she was able to work miracles. To have a proper conception of the effects of these reports we must not forget that the state of men's minds in Lebanon was nearly the same as in the earliest ages. There were neither infidels nor wits, nor even doubters. Hendia availed herself of this single-minded enthusiasm for the completion of her designs; and, imitating the conduct of her predecessors in the same career, she wished to become the foundress of a new order . . . . To build the convent, money was necessary. The foundress solicited the pious charity of her followers, whose contributions were so abundant as to enable her, in a few years, to erect two vast stone houses which could not have cost less than 120,000 livres (5,000 pounds). . . . Everything succeeded as well as could have been wished; it is true that many of the nuns died, but this was imputed to the air, and the real cause was not easy to be discovered. Hendia had reigned over her little kingdom nearly twenty years, when an unforeseen accident threw everything into confusion. A broker, travelling from Damascus to Bairout (sic) in the summer, found himself at nightfall near this convent: the gates

were shut, the hour unseasonable; and, as he did not wish to give any trouble, he contented himself with a bed of straw and lay down in the outer court, awaiting the return of day. He had only slept a few hours when a sudden noise of doors and bolts awoke him. Three women came out of one of the doors, with spades and shovels in their hands. They were followed by two men bearing a long white bundle which appeared very heavy. They proceeded towards an adjoining piece of ground full of stones and rubbish where the men deposited their load, dug a hole into which they put it, and, covering it with earth, trod it down with their feet, after which they all returned to the house. The sight of men with nuns and this bundle thus mysteriously buried by night could not but furnish the traveller with matter for thought. At first he remained silent out of astonishment, but this was soon from anxiety and fear; he therefore hastily set off for Barout (sic) at break of day. . . .<sup>1</sup>

The reputation of a saint and the founder of a religious order brutally destroyed by an accusation of murder provides great potential literary material, as Maurice Barrès would recognise much later.<sup>2</sup> Reading Volney, however, it is difficult to understand clearly the full details of an affair that had lasted over twenty-five years.

Hindiyya was also fascinating for reasons beyond this tale. She left autobiographical texts in which she evokes memories of her childhood and adolescence and attempts to describe her remarkable mystical experiences. She was probably the first woman in the Arab world to have asserted herself as “I”. I was not the first person to be captivated by her story; Fr Michel Hayek had already published her writings in Arabic,<sup>3</sup> and Fr Youakim Moubarac later made a French version of her two main testimonies available to a larger audience in a monumental work that was intended to be an anthology of Maronite heritage.<sup>4</sup>

I had some doubts about the truth of the murders that took place in the convent under Hindiyya’s supervision: my knowledge of the history of Lebanon and Syria made me sceptical about this kind of accusation, since on many other occasions the death of a patriarch or bishop had unjustly been rumoured to be criminal, or an upstanding figure had unjustly been accused of the most heinous acts. The idea of untangling the mystery seemed exciting. I was even more interested by the novelty of Hindiyya’s writings. It seemed to me that I had an example of “the modern individual”, shaped by the methods and themes of the post-Tridentine Catholicism I had previously analysed in *Les Chrétiens du Proche-Orient au temps de la Réforme catholique*.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the story involved a woman. As I had already noted in my earlier research, Western influence had led to a feminisation of Christianity in the Middle East.

Hindiyya struck me as modern insofar as she clearly demonstrated the effects of a devout education, the catechism, pious images, inspirational

readings, regular sacraments, and intensive spiritual guidance on the development of her personality. All this seemed to have led to an awareness of the “self” that could be expressed with the psychological tools that the Catholic literature of the eighteenth century placed at her disposal, and resulted in the internalization of religion and a break with traditional practices which tended to be exterior and collective. Besides, the spirituality of the Sacred Heart, which she claimed as her inspiration, conveyed a specific political message, involving reparation, atonement, and combat against the enemy. Within the context of Christian minorities in Islamic countries this could be particularly effective.<sup>6</sup> The methodical study of Hindiyya was consequently the natural continuation of my search for interactions between the Catholic West and the small Christian societies of the Middle East, and allowed me to develop the analysis of the changes taking place.

Yet another reason encouraged me to take on this task: the abundance of sources, some of which were rather original, for example the testimonies of Hindiyya’s confessors concerning her spiritual direction. The “De Propaganda Fide” congregation, with whose archives I was already familiar, was the repository of a voluminous correspondence from a wide variety of protagonists and witnesses of events that occurred around Hindiyya during her long life. “Special congregations” of cardinals had sought to unravel the circumstances that were brought to the attention of the Roman authorities, and had tried to settle the protracted conflicts that had arisen. Apostolic delegates had been sent to Lebanon several times to investigate, and their detailed reports provided valuable material.

The sources may have been too abundant. I must admit that on several occasions I felt completely overwhelmed by the weight of contradictory evidence, doubting I would ever be able to clear up any particular episode, and weighed down by the amount of paper it had generated. My time was also limited. If the writing was not to be postponed indefinitely, I had to remind myself at certain moments that there was enough material to provide a degree of certainty and on which to base an honest version of the story. Nevertheless I continued to complement my discoveries in the archives of the Propaganda with documents kept in the patriarchate in Bkirki and the headquarters of the Society of Jesus in Rome, as well as with accounts in the French consular correspondence. Chronicles occasionally shed interesting light on a particular episode.<sup>7</sup> I also examined what had already been published. At the beginning of the twentieth century Fr Bulus ‘Abbud Al-Ghustawi was the first scholar to study the “Hindiyya affair” systematically, and to publish a large quantity of documents kept in the archives of the Propaganda, supplemented by documents from the Maronite Patriarchate and other Lebanese collections.<sup>8</sup> Fr Butrus Fahd subsequently published collections of documents, the most useful of which came from the convent of Aleppine Monks in Rome.<sup>9</sup> The object

of both of these clerics was clearly apologetic. Furthermore, their editorial work is somewhat sketchy, with numerous errors or inaccuracies. Yet I was still determined to use them for lack of anything better. Fr Michel Hayek had assembled the corpus of Hindiyyan writings and published them in the journal *Al-Mashriq*. He too was motivated by the idea of rehabilitating the Maronite heroine. Nevertheless, his introduction provides some interesting interpretations of what he calls an intellectual crisis at the confluence of several social, mental, and moral crises. He particularly emphasised the fact that Hindiyya raised the problem of the synthesis between a religiosity of Western origin, for which he provides a large number of sources, and an Eastern mentality.<sup>10</sup> Tempted to write the history of the Maronite mystic, he stressed the difficulty of such an undertaking which, he believed, was impossible for a single individual in view of the complexity of events, the large number of protagonists, and the “sea of documents”.

This warning inhibited me. But I did not undertake the project with the intention of writing a “life of Hindiyya”. I am not particularly fond of biographies, and my background leads me to focus on structures and patterns rather than on the individual’s action in the evolution of history. Furthermore, I approached the subject with a hypothesis inspired by a simplistic feminism: I considered Hindiyya to have been a helpless girl who was manipulated by male authorities, a pawn in the struggles and ambitions of her masculine entourage.

In one of our conversations, on the other hand, Fr Hayek drew my attention to the importance of Hindiyya’s iron will in the course of events. I was able to verify the accuracy of his assessment as I progressed in my research. Besides, the material I had read made me realise that female mystics had not been so easily manipulated by men in a position of power. They had actually managed to usurp authority and impose some of their ideas, albeit within an extremely limited framework. The renunciation of sexuality, in particular, was not the result of any oppression exerted by their family, but was a deliberate choice that could allow them to escape the often unappealing fate of marriage and motherhood and aspire to a more enviable place in society.<sup>11</sup>

Hindiyya therefore gradually occupied more space in my project, becoming the central figure of the book I was writing. There was a consistency in her behaviour which, once grasped, provided a unity to the whole story. I did not intend to limit myself to an artificial opposition between society and the individual as individuals only exist within a diversified network of social relationships which enable them to develop.<sup>12</sup> It is not the individual as such, immutably structured since childhood and programmed, as it were, for a future which the historian will reconstruct retrospectively, and who can provide the key to the events in which he or she was involved. On the contrary -- Hindiyya’s identity developed within the context of her time, while leaving an indelible mark on her society.

Besides, living saints, more than other figures in history, are created in the gaze of those who behold them.<sup>13</sup> In this respect, they belong to the category of charismatic leaders whose power comes from the recognition they produce in others.<sup>14</sup>

The Lebanese society in which Hindiyya began her career did not function according to a coherent, transparent and stable system of norms. It was riddled with contradictions which led to conflict between the protagonists and the values to which they adhered. I had sought to write the history of this changing society, caught up in a whirlwind of confusing political events at so many different levels that it looks confused and difficult for the historian to decipher. This complexity, however, allowed the individual, in this case Hindiyya, a relatively large “interstitial” freedom to act upon the group.<sup>15</sup> The system of power surrounding a cloistered woman who aspires to charismatic authority clearly has specific traits. Within the Lebanese context, however, the system did not function as it did in comparable European cases.

In its relations with the Christian Churches of the East, Rome is usually presented as an immutable monolithic block. But I believe that we cannot understand Hindiyya’s story unless we adopt a different perspective. Lebanese temporality was not that of the popes and cardinals. When Hindiyya committed herself to the path of modern and Western mysticism under the guidance of a Jesuit, Rome, which distrusted personal inspirations and emotional outbursts, considered this with suspicion. Her story occurred in the wake of the Quietist crisis, and at the time of the “*regolata devozione*”. Nor was the cult of the Sacred Heart which Hindiyya claimed to follow particularly popular with the head of the Church just then. But the Roman normative system was itself in a state of flux during the turbulent period of the second half of the eighteenth century, and the attitude towards this kind of spirituality subsequently became more positive, or at least ambivalent, and Catholicism continued to be crossed by conflicting currents.

My desire to study Hindiyya’s fate in relation to her entourage resulted in a chronological history that was more of a narrative than I had originally intended. A method had to be followed resembling the Italian *microstoria* insofar as it seeks to rebuild social networks and strategies of power and domination within a restricted space but on a very large scale.<sup>16</sup> I was therefore often confronted with the basic procedure of a positivist historian (for which I was not especially trained) in order to establish the detailed chronology of the events. This is not a prerequisite for interpretation but rather an initial interpretative approach, linking events and seeking meaning bit by bit. In a history that aims to focus on the strategy, the indecision and the intentions of the protagonists, this procedure, which often resembles a police investigation and a judicial reconstruction, is at the basis of all research. It would have been even harder for me to dispense with it since it had not been previously conducted in an honest and systematic way, and I did not possess the tools that would have allowed me to avoid it.

Hindiyya's many autobiographical writings, along with the descriptions of her personality made by her successive spiritual directors, are naturally conducive to a psychoanalytical interpretation. It would probably be possible to diagnose a childhood hysteria which subsequently led to paranoia, although these pathological conditions were not defined by European medicine until well after her death. Without going that far we have enough details of Hindiyya's childhood to discern, as in other women aspiring to sanctity, the sources of her quest for a mystical union, and later, her megalomaniacal hatred. While suggesting various possibilities, I finally decided to abandon this approach. Firstly, because it would have distorted the historical method I just mentioned, which focuses less on the individual than on the individual's interaction with society, and reactions to events and situations. It would also have confined the entire history within an excessively univocal interpretation. Secondly, because I am not qualified for this kind of interpretation. If Freud himself practised retrospective analysis with some caution in the case of President Schreber, in *A Neurosis of Demoniacal Possession in the Seventeenth Century*, or in *Leonardo Da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood*,<sup>17</sup> in which he relied on written documentation, he did so by referring to his clinical experience in order to advance his hypothesis. This is obviously something that I lack altogether. Finally, for a psychoanalytical approach to be possible, the socio-historical groundwork must be established in order to avoid anachronisms and errors of interpretation. This has hardly been the case for Hindiyya up until now. I hope that my research will contribute to this end.<sup>18</sup> Although the dialogue between historians and psychoanalysts has begun, it often concludes that the respective hermeneutics are incompatible. Abandoning the "psychoanalysis of Hindiyya" was frustrating, but I am convinced that a more qualified author will rise to the challenge using the sources that I shall indicate, for, rich though they are, the two texts published by Youakim Moubarac remain inadequate.<sup>19</sup>

Hindiyya's mystical adventure is quite unusual in the Maronite context. It is, however, fairly commonplace when compared to the lives of a long litany of young women in the West who pursued sanctity from the thirteenth century onwards. While respecting the undeniably unique nature of her experience, I was able to show the way in which Hindiyya shared the characteristic traits of female mystics in general. To do this I had at my disposal an almost endless bibliography on the subject.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, the acculturation of the model of feminine sanctity in Aleppo and Lebanon followed specific evolutions which I am not sure I have fully grasped.

The second – dark – half of Hindiyya's life poses more difficult problems of interpretation. The literature on female hatred and cruelty in convents is much less abundant than that which deals with the mysticism and sanctity of women. Contemporary sociological research on "new religiosities" and cult phenomena provided me with the relevant theoretical framework

of understanding to apply to the events that took place in Bkirki from 1755 on.<sup>21</sup> This interpretation has the additional merit of preserving the consistency of Hindiyya's personality between the first and second phases of her life.

The writer has the privilege of being able to intervene at any time during the narrative and, if he needs to do so, to express his personal feelings.<sup>22</sup> The historian, on the other hand, must try to be as unobtrusive as possible. In this account of Hindiyya it was not always easy to adopt a suitably neutral style. If I began this work with a feeling of empathy for Hindiyya, the discovery of Warda Badran's shocking deposition in the archives of the Propaganda forced me to confront the subject of murders and disturbed me deeply. Reading the poignant testimonies of those who had been victims of the despotic charisma of Bkirki's mother superior inspired feelings of horror and revulsion that I struggled to control. Is it possible to write the biography of someone you abhor?<sup>23</sup> This question forced me to retain a distance that would avoid imposing my opinion on the reader. I am not sure if I have completely succeeded.

The question also arises of whether or not I should reveal everything I have discovered. Yes, undoubtedly. Not with a view to creating a scandal or a literary success, but simply in order to exercise my profession honestly, without obliterating any aspect of the truth. Unless I choose to forego a coherent narrative of events, I have to present once and for all the stark reality of the facts to the public, regardless of the consequences. This revelation could also facilitate the process of memory after a repression which lasted well over a century.