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Sufi Feminism

Women Leaders in African Sufi Movements

Hamdy A. Hassan | ORCID: 0000-0003-1930-9561

Professor of Political Science, Department of International Studies,

Zayed University, Dubai, UAE

hhamdy21@yahoo.com

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Abstract

Men founded and have ruled over Sufi orders since their inception, and thus the position of Khalifa or shaykh has been traditionally held by men. However, this study argues that in some Islamic mystical traditions women have assumed a senior leadership role with all the power that such a prominent position entails. More research is needed to understand the challenges Sufi women have faced in legitimizing their power, their experiences in a patriarchal society, and the various methods they have used to establish and protect their religious authority. By adopting a qualitative approach, this study seeks to explain the shift in Sufi women's leadership role in society, specifically within the African context, focusing on two women who were influential spiritual leaders, Nana Asma'u and Sharifa 'Alawiyya al-Mirghani. The study concludes that African Sufi feminist traditions overcame the challenges posed by their complex societal contexts.

Keywords

Sufism – Sufi feminism – female saints – Khatmiyya – Tijaniyya – Mouridiyya – Qadiriyya

1 Introduction

Despite the plurality and diversity of the Islamic Ummah, many scholars have viewed women's role as limited and inescapable (Ahmed 1992; Ghazanfari et al. 2022; Mernissi 1991). Patriarchal systems have attempted to subjugate women to men and to defend the concept of sex segregation over the centuries by preventing most men from entering the fortified space occupied by women, and on the other hand prohibiting women's incursion into the open world of men.¹ The Maliki school's legal position on female prayer leadership was agreed on in the late ninth and early tenth centuries: women were not allowed to lead prayers under any circumstance. Accordingly, Al-Hafiz Ibn Abd al-Barr stated, 'It is not permissible for a woman to lead men in obligatory Prayers'.² However, in regard to religious duties and roles, these gender-based lines have been crossed, while common believers, both men and women, are expected to be faithful in word, deed, and performance of duties in roughly the same ways. Aside from imams, Muslim women, particularly Sufis, have changed the way they perform Islamic rituals (Calderini 2021). This study seeks to clarify the shift in Sufi women's practice of rituals in the African context, particularly vis-à-vis their societal practices within Islam.

The Sufi orders have historically been credited with spreading Islam across the African continent. Shaykhs and their followers would descend on a tribe and establish dhikr circles, singing religious songs and hymns. The shaykhs would subsequently assume a position of reverence according to which their disciples would show them the highest signs of obedience and loyalty, seeking blessings from them and making supplications. Thereafter crowds of people wishing to adopt Islam flocked to the shaykhs, causing great changes in African societies, particularly in women's dress, work, and travel (Hassan 2015). Although these societies established prominent spiritual roles for Muslim women, research on them is limited (Helminski 2003). However, there is evidence of all-women mystical retreats (*khalwas*) in the twelfth century. Further, when famous Sufi leaders had no surviving sons to inherit their role, women became community leaders (Coulon 1988). Nonetheless, most precolonial Sufi women achieved influence and status through their relationships with powerful men.

Reviewing the literature on women and gender in West Africa, Frede and Hill (2014) highlight certain crucial aspects of female Muslim authority. They illustrate how women were portrayed favorably in leadership positions in light of otherwise gendered piety standards. Frede and Hill further suggest reexamining the forms and practices of Islamic knowledge, which have remained hidden from academic studies despite being a crucial component in the performance of Islamic authority. In this context Rosander (2003, 2004) identifies

Mam Diarra as a unique case, who was the mother of Shaykh Amadou Bamba, the founder of Mouridism in Senegal. To honor Shaykh Amadou Bamba, Mourids travel to Touba each year. Many travelers have included the trip to Diarra's tomb at Porokhane in their sacred plans. Female Mourid cult members usually describe Mam Diarra and her son as having equal status and being one. Hanretta (2008) emphasizes the reforms of Yacouba Silla, a Sufi teacher (shaykh) in Southern Mauritania. Many of Yacouba's opponents regarded his opening of Sufi dhikr ceremonies to women in the Hamawiyya-Tijaniyya Sufi order as his most radical reform.

Since the late 1970s various studies have centered on powerful Muslim women from North and West Africa who served as influential religious leaders. According to Dwyer (1978), women became the main decision-makers in relation to the Moroccan mystical complex. The lives of various female Tijani Sufi spiritual leaders and teaching scholars in Nouakchott can be seen as an example of how women exert Islamic authority. Frede (2014) addresses two critical aspects of women's religious authority. The first is the relevance of the concept of understanding Islam, which necessitates familiarity with the Qur'an and many other Islamic teachings. Second, historical figures, particularly the Prophet's wife Aisha, provide grounds for women's participation in Islamic knowledge teaching and production.

In *The Walking Qur'an* (2014) Ware suggests a revisionist reading of West Africa's sociohistorical and educational developments. Investigating how knowledge was transmitted, he studies the philosophy of knowledge underpinning the Qur'an schools in the Senegambia region. According to Ware, several racial and cultural biases tainted past historiographies of West African Islam and its Islamic pedagogies. He claims that men were not the only brilliant intellectuals in West Africa. Clerical families in particular have a history of producing exceptional female scholars. Khadja bint Muammad al-qil taught the manifest and hidden sciences to her brothers, Mukhtr wuld Bnah, the Almaami, and many of the late eighteenth century's most prominent academicians (Ware 2014).

Northern Nigeria has seen a significant increase in Muslim women's leadership practices, and studies on the nature of these roles have also been conducted. For example, in the nineteenth century Jean Boyd maintained her commitment to highlighting the works of the great Sufi poet Nana Asma'u. She presents the life of the daughter of jihadi leader Othman Dan Fodio and sister of Caliph Muhammad Bello in a scholarly way, which contributed to reviving the history of the jihad movement and the early Sokoto Caliphate in West Africa (Boyd 1989). Her subsequent collaboration with Beverly Mac resulted in the publication of Nana Asma'u's entire body of work, thereby making Hausa texts, carefully translated into English, available to scholars

and readers (Boyd and Mack 1997). *One Woman's Jihad* is the culmination of Boyd and Mack's long-running effort to make Nana Asma'u's work accessible and understandable to students of African and women's studies in particular (Mack and Boyd 2000). This two-volume book and an appendix containing thirteen of Nana Asma'u's major poems situate her within the larger Islamic scholarly tradition, charting the central dimensions of Qadiriyya Sufism and demonstrating how her works contributed to the caliphate's sense of history and community.

Through the case study of Magat Diop, the first woman of the Mouridiyya order to bear the title of caliph, Christian Coulon and Odile Reveyard-Coulon (1990) are also credited with being the first to take an interest in feminist Islam. Magat Diop's Mouridiyya leadership was regarded as entirely legitimate and natural. This may have surprised the solitary observers more than the Mouridiyya followers (Coulon 1988). However, Senegalese scholar Codou Bop (2005) opposes the researchers' current attempts to assess the presence, emergence, and dynamism of Muslim women within the structure of Sufi orders. She claims that while Senegalese women may have occasionally creatively manipulated the structure of the Sufi establishment they never fundamentally changed it, remaining merely disciples rather than spiritual leaders. However, not all women avoid the public sphere or accept a minor role within the Sufi community structure (Buggenhagen 2009). In fact, some women have received international acclaim and have tens of thousands of male and female followers.

Sufi women's studies within the African context focus on classical and modern works from the Maghreb and West Africa (Gemmeke 2009; Hill 2018; Masquelier 2009). Thus it is not surprising that there is a significant gap in the academic literature regarding the Horn of Africa and East Africa in general since only limited and partial studies have examined women's participation and leadership roles within the Sufi movements in general. Some research has focused on Somalia and addresses issues such as women's oral literature and daily religious practices (Declich 2000). However, the difficulties that Sufi women have faced in legitimizing their power, their experiences in a patriarchal society, and the various mechanisms that they have used to establish and protect their religious authority require more research. Furthermore, by demonstrating the various coping mechanisms used by pioneering spiritual leaders such as Sharifa 'Alawiyya al-Mirghani, the leader of the Mirghaniyya (Khatmiyya) *tariqa* (i.e., order) in Eritrea, I aim to transcend the dominant academic discourse that has overlooked the effectiveness of Muslim women's roles and instead focused on the negative aspects of women's leadership in the African sociopolitical landscape.

This study primarily reviews the existing literature and analyzes accounts of Sufi female leadership in Africa. Reviewing secondary sources such as books, journal articles, reports, and online data provided an overview of the changing relationship between men and women in the context of religious text flexibility vis-à-vis reality's constraints, particularly to affirm gender equality. This allowed the study to obtain an understanding of Sufi feminism's attempt to develop an 'Islamic theory of gender equality' (Mirza 2008, 30).

While this study restores Sufi female saints to the dominant discourse in African Sufi thought, it also raises important questions such as: What does the presence of female Sufi leaders tell us about the African Sufi discourse? How does this fit in with the dominant narrative, which portrays men as saints and sources of blessing? and How did the study's models function within the patriarchal societal context in which female Sufi leaders lived? As such, this study is divided into four major sections. The first examines the theoretical framework as well as the place of Sufi feminism within the Islamic feminism literature in general. The second section provides a broad overview of women's leadership styles in African Sufi practices. The third and fourth sections present two prominent case studies that highlight women's pivotal role in leading the Sufi movements in Africa.

2 The Concept of Sufi Feminism

This study aims to analyze a body of literature and practices that can be linked to the concept of Sufi feminism. This new subcategory falls under the broad umbrella of Islamic feminism, which seeks to transform the relationship between men and women via the study of sacred texts (the Qur'an and Sunnah) in order to further gender equality. Despite the fact that Islamic feminist discourses differ and vary, they have been well documented since the 1990s (Badran 2001; Mernissi 1991; Moghadam 2002). Yet to be thoroughly investigated, Sufi feminism has idiosyncrasies relating to the way Sufism is viewed, particularly the emphasis on the principle of gender equality as a component of Sufi thought.

Despite the intertwining and overlapping of Islamic feminism and Sufi feminism, it is helpful in the context of the present study to distinguish between the two. In Islamic feminism the feminism aspect stems from the intellectual movement that arose to defend the rights of subjugated women and to respond to injustices committed in the name of Islam; it envisions a society in which women participate effectively and directly (Saleh 2000). Because the movement is based on the Qur'an and Sunnah, it can also be considered Islamic.

Islamic feminists see Islam as a source of rather than a threat to personal freedom. They agree that Islam does not pose a problem for women but grants them rights and privileges.

The Islamic feminist movement claims that actual patriarchal structures have distorted many sacred texts that support women's rights. This dissonance between Islamic feminists' ideals of Islam, which they believe are based on a radical human egalitarian anthology, and the various social contexts in which Muslim women are oppressed in the name of religion has been the focus of research and analysis. For example, scholars have examined how Islamic teachings are influenced by social contexts and have argued that patriarchal interpretations result from much of institutional Islam's exclusively male composition. However, they contend that equality is one of Islam's supreme spiritual and moral values that Muslims must constantly strive for. In addition, a new feminist trend led by Muslim women living in the West has attempted to distinguish between the Qur'an and Hadith. They believe that the Qur'an is more gender equitable, whereas most Islamic rulings that are unjust to women are based on Hadith. Amina Wadud's book *The Qur'an and Women* (1992) exemplifies this trend.

Turning to the concept of Sufi feminism, Dailmy (1991) sees a third way to reconcile feminism and Islam in the Sufi principle of gender equality. Sufi feminism is based on the panentheistic principle of effacement of the self in mystical union with God. The concept of the body and sexual difference, for example, implies that both men and women will fight the same battle against the body to release the self from the body to ascend to God. Further, in his book *Fuṣuṣ Al-ḥikam* the Andalusian writer Ibn al-'Arabī (2004) states that the reality of God or the self is feminine; accordingly, he uses the pronoun 'she' when referring to the self and even discusses why it is more likely feminine than masculine. Ibn Arabi has groundbreaking ideas regarding gender: he claims that women could lead mixed congregational prayers not only because they are equal to men but also because men and women share the same human origin. Thus everything that follows from being a complete human in terms of rights and responsibilities applies equally to men and women. Further, Ibn Arabi challenges the dominant gender paradigm of creation by imagining a different creation story involving Jesus's birth from the Virgin Mary. This position may appear radical to many modern Muslims, but it stems from a profound understanding of Islam's essence and message (Shaikh 2014).

This Sufi path thus reconciles Muslim women with modernity, feminism with Islam, and, most importantly, men with women to essentially create an Islamic theory of gender equality. Although Sufi feminism overlaps with

Islamic feminism in some characteristics, the comprehensive vision of submission and spiritual practice so elaborately articulated by Sufism enables Sufi feminists to ensure that their search for Islamic morals is part of their religious practice. As expressed by Shaikh:

Within this vision, the law is about more than simple gender equality. It is about facilitating societies that foster the spiritual refinement of human character – a refinement to which gender equality is absolutely intrinsic. These rich resources within Sufism, combined with feminist insights, allow for a radical and organic critique of patriarchal societies. Such a contemporary engagement with Sufism also opens up spaces for prioritizing alternative modes of relationships – based on equality – between all human beings. (2009, 817)

As a result, Sufi feminists believe that the principle of divine unity is a feminine formulation of existence and confirms their place in the system of *waliya* (sainthood) and righteousness.³ This Sufi path enables them to communicate directly with God through self-experience rather than through the institution of traditional jurisprudence (Christ 1987). However, the Sufi feminist path is no longer limited to the spiritual domain; *shaikhas* and mouride women have formed effective feminist movements within local social and cultural contexts, as evidenced by the cases highlighted in this study. Perhaps this is what encouraged Sara Haq (2018) to examine the possibilities of future research on the modern resurgence of feminism and Sufism, using an interdisciplinary approach she named Sufiminism in her study of popular culture in South Asia.

This paper seeks to link the lives of some Sufi saints in the African context and literary structures, some of which have given rise to major subsects now found in Sufism, such as asceticism and mysticism. The following section aims to demonstrate the most important styles of Sufi leadership in the African tradition.

3 Sufi Women's Leadership Styles

Each Sufi order has its own internal hierarchy and distinct tier of ranks and affiliations. A *muqaddam* (guide) is the spiritual leader of a local *zawiya* in the Tijani order. There are numerous examples of female Sufis who rose to become spiritual masters in charge of their male and female disciples' education and well-being (Hill 2018). In addition, as shown in this study, some women

rose to positions of senior leadership within Sufi orders, such as Khatmiyya and Mouridiyya. We can distinguish four distinct female Sufi leadership styles in Africa.

The first of these refers to transformational leadership in which the female leader played a role in *da'wah* and Muslim community transformation. The second style involves leading the process of community awareness by emphasizing the importance of women's participation in public spaces; this role clashes with both the discourse of tradition and that of colonialism. The third style represents the resistance's national leadership role, particularly during the colonial period, as it presents an attempt to preserve Muslim societies' Islamic identity and cultural independence. The fourth style is associated with new Sufi women leaders from various socioeconomic classes. Even though these leadership styles overlap, distinguishing between them helps us understand the societal circumstances of the Sufi women leaders addressed in this study.

3.1 *Women and Transformational Leadership*

Through their clear vision and strong personalities, transformational leaders inspire their followers to change their expectations and perceptions in order to work toward the common goals of their communities. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries this leadership model for Muslim women was associated with the Islamic renewal movement. The exceptional case of poet and writer Nana Asma'u (1793–1864), daughter of the Sokoto Caliphate's founder Shaykh Othman Dan Fodio, exemplifies the most prominent features of this jihadi leadership style (Azuonye 2006). In African history this princess is a pivotal figure in the continent's re-Islamization. She played a significant role in the politics, education, and social and religious reforms of her time as a recognized scholar and educator. In addition to educating students in her community she established a network of itinerant teachers, known as Yan Taro, who spread her teachings to women in rural and remote areas.

Nana Asma'u's efforts to promote reconciliation, education, and justice contributed to the transformation of the dominant Islamic culture of her time. Her jihad had three basic components. First, she aimed to preserve and disseminate her father's teachings, following the Sunnah and achieving justice for all. Second, she established educating women as the primary guides for future generations. Third, she dedicated her life to reconciliation and peaceful coexistence, employing her intelligence, imagination, and ability to solve practical problems. Asma'u valued dialogue and intellectual debate as much as she valued humanitarian efforts at the local level since she understood that both were equally important. Her everyday life was infused with devotion to Islamic values (Helminski 2003).

Another example of transformational leadership is found in the first generation of Kano Tijani *muqaddamat* from 1937 to 1963 (Hutson 1999). The experiences of these women in Kano in obtaining and maintaining their roles as Sufi order precursors in the twentieth century demonstrate that Muslim women can contribute to community building and influence each other's spiritual lives, an issue that historians often overlook. Although their communal practice of Islam was and still remains constrained by social norms and legal interpretations, the history of Tijaniyya women in Kano demonstrates that freedom of movement and charisma were part of the lives of Sufi women in many African countries in the twentieth century. Their individual and collective efforts have provided Kano women with new options for practicing the Sufi path of Tijaniyya.

3.2 *Women and the Achievement of Cultural Independence*

Amadou Bamba, the founder of the Mouridiyya order, often referenced the importance of the Muslim community's cultural independence from French cultural hegemony (Hassan 2020). He did not oppose colonialism by adopting the Islamic duality of the outside world as the realm of unbelief on the one hand and the realm of Islam on the other. In many ways, he attempted to resist through subterfuge or present an image of a pacifist Sufi seeking its ideal within the framework of what we might call the disciple's world. As a result, the resistance model was associated with Africa's colonial era. It could be argued that the introduction of colonialism did not provide opportunities for Muslim women to be empowered, nor did it bring any special improvements to their conditions in Africa. On the contrary, some studies have found that colonial rule contributed to the marginalization of women and their exclusion from positions of power that were eventually offered to men (Touati 2018). It was thus unsurprising that colonial authorities ignored women's political participation in the precolonial period.

Algerian Shaykha Lalla Zeinab's (1850–1904) history is noteworthy in this context because it parallels that of Sharifa 'Alawiyya in East Africa. Lalla Zainab was a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad – may God bless and keep him – and a devout Muslim who studied Islamic sciences. After her father died she took command of the al-Zawiya al-Qasimiyah, even though the colonial powers ignored her authority and appointed her cousin to succeed her father as the local religious leader. She devoted her life to the poor, students, travelers, and her father's Sharia sciences students. She eventually gained great popularity among European travelers and her students, who admired her and believed she was blessed and capable of performing miracles. The *muqaddamas* were also noted within Sufi communities in Mauritania as early as the 1820s, a situation that persisted throughout the twentieth century.⁴

During the colonial period, many women joined the Tijaniyya order, often against the wishes of their husbands and the colonial authorities. This helped the order to rapidly spread in the region. At the Mouridiyya level we find Sokhna Magat Diop, who succeeded her father as caliph and was actively involved in the order's religious and political affairs. When her father died in 1940 with no male heirs, she rose to prominence and built shrines to her father, which became regional pilgrimage destinations (Coulon and Reveyard 1990). Her ranking was comparable to that of women in precolonial Wolof kingdoms, who had the right to the throne if there were no male heirs. Diop lived in Tuba, the home of the order's founding father Amadou Bamba, where she held religious ceremonies alongside other dignitaries.

Although Sokhna Magat Diop did not lead prayers or attend wedding ceremonies, she taught, wrote, and guided her followers. She was recognized as a religious leader since she recited Mouridiyya verses and appointed imams and leaders. Her followers also pledged their allegiance to her and gave her mystical gifts, just as they did with male shaykhs (Coulon 1990). Her supporters assisted her with her farmland, which was supported by several Sufi circles. Further, she inherited *baraka* from her father and her mother's noble ancestors, and her ascetic and mystical lifestyle played a significant role in her sainthood. She devoted most of her time to prayer, reading the writings of Shaikh Bamba and her father, and leading mystical retreats (*khalwah*). Most of her public duties and meetings were delegated to her representatives and children. She spoke quietly during her few public appearances, her mouth covered by a scarf. On 18 July 2003 Sokhna Magat Diop died in Thiès, leaving the Khalifa position to her younger sister, Sokhna Seybatou Adara (Gemmeke 2011).

3.3 *Women's Leadership in the National Resistance*

On this topic we can highlight the heroic role of Lalla Fatma N'Soumer (1830–1863) in the Algerian resistance against French colonial powers in the Kabyle region. Legends and mysteries surrounded her life and character. However, her name appears in colonial records documenting the conquest of Algeria, indicating her role in leading the Algerian army's national resistance movement. Lalla Fatima was able to organize popular uprisings and prepare military teams of men and women to resist the French incursion into the Kabyle region. She launched a call to jihad from the Zawiya al-Rahmâniyya, which she co-led with her brother, and won a number of battles against the French armies led by General Randon (Salhi and Bouguereau 2021).

Studies have attempted to shed light on this exceptional Berber woman by analyzing French colonial sources that describe these military campaigns, despite their apparent bias, as well as subsequent secondary sources (Touati 2018). In the same year that the French colonized Algeria, she was born in a

village near Ain El Hammam in the Kabyle region. Her father was the head of the village's Qur'anic school, associated with the Zawīya Raḥmāniyya in relation to Sidi Abd al-Rahman. As a result, her level of education in spiritual and religious matters may have been higher than previously assumed. Her religious and spiritual background may explain her enormous popularity among her people in the Kabyle region.

Al-Sayyida al-Hurra's life in northern Morocco demonstrates the pattern of Sufi women taking the lead in resisting colonial encroachment. Born in Chefchaouen about 1493 AD, Al-Sayyida al-Hurra was raised in the lap of her father, Mulay 'Ali Ibn Rashid, and educated by the city's most renowned scholars and theologians (Raissouni, Sharif Ali. Personal interview, 1 November 2022). During her reign in Tetouan she was concerned with the military aspects for countering the constant dangers of the Iberian powers. Historians thus refer to her as the princess of naval jihad. Al-Sayyida al-Hurra holds a unique place in Moroccan history. During her thirty-year reign, she managed to repel Portuguese colonialists and become a heroine of resistance in northern Morocco. All of this makes her a strong model for women's leadership in Africa against colonialism (Lebbady 2011).

3.4 *Women as a Modernizing Force*

In this leadership style female Sufi leaders who transcended gender, tribal, and ethnic identities were particularly able to unify and reform contentious societies. Many African Sufi women attained high spiritual status, including *khalifa* and *wali*.⁵ The followers of the *tariqa* (brotherhood) not only recognized their spiritual achievements, but they also accepted them as saints and guides. According to Joseph Hill (2010), although Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse (1900–1975) appointed many Senegalese women as *muqaddamas* during his lifetime, few of his students were aware of these appointments. However, since the 1990s a growing number of Niasse disciples have led more openly active groups of followers. Several factors have aided these women in assuming recognized and unquestioned leadership positions, including Ibrahim Niasse's jurisprudence on the issue of Sufism and authority, which he made available to a large number of students; the Niasse movement in Senegal, particularly after colonialism; and the globalization of the gender equality discourse, in which Muslim women appear as one of the discourse's objectives as influential religious and economic actors (Hill 2010). While these women occasionally draw on global discourses of gender equality, they largely base their religious authority on the epistemological structure and historical legacy traditionally associated with the African mystic movement's pioneering women. Since 2000 many women in Dakar, Senegal, have openly served as spiritual leaders for both men and women. These women offer guidance in practicing Islam and cultivating

mystical knowledge of God among urban youth seeking direction and community through Tijaniyya rituals. Female Islamic leaders may appear radical in a context where women have rarely exercised Islamic authority, but their presence has sparked little debate.

Based on his fieldwork in Senegal, Hill (2018) proposes a new type of female Sufi leadership that includes two key characteristics that distinguish certain women leaders in West Africa and in Islam more broadly. First, unlike the vast majority of African female Sufi authorities, none of these women derive religious authority, knowledge, and/or divine blessing (*baraka*) from male kin. Hence many *muqaddamas* are not the daughters or wives of Islamic teachers or Sufi leaders. The second unusual feature is that these women are openly acknowledged as spiritual guides for both men and women. Furthermore, drawing on ancient Sufi thinkers such as Ibn Arabi, male and female leaders frequently described masculine and feminine as complementary principles inherent in any dynamic process, from God's gendered creation of the universe to the transmission of spiritual knowledge (Hill 2018). They simultaneously viewed gender distinctions as illusory, dissolving in the awareness of divine unity.

The following section presents an embodiment of the jihadi leadership model and the movement for societal change on the one hand, and the preservation of the cultural identity of the caliphate state society in Sokoto on the other through the analysis and discussion of Nana Asma'u's biography. These two cases are studied in more depth because they have attracted significant scholarly attention, particularly Nana Asma'u of Sokoto, and they also exemplify some of the four leadership styles presented in this study.

4 Nana Asma'u as a Sufi Transformational Leader

To understand Nana Asma'u's contributions and leadership role in Sufi movements it is helpful to situate her within the larger context of the nineteenth-century religious reform movement in West Africa. Her father, Shaykh Othman Dan Fodio, was an advocate for women's education, demanding that women defend their right to education and refuse to obey husbands who failed to guide them in their religious duties. It is no secret that many of his contemporaries saw this agitation as very revolutionary. According to Shaykh Othman:

Oh Muslim women, do not listen to the words of the misguided ones who seek to lead you astray by ordering you to obey your husbands instead of telling you to obey Allah and His Messenger. They tell you that a

women's happiness lies on obeying her husband. This is no more than a camouflage to make you satisfy their needs. They impose on you duties which neither Allah nor His Messenger imposed on you. They make you cook, wash clothes and do other things which they desire while they fail to teach you that which Allah and His apostle have prescribed for you. Neither Allah nor his apostle charges you with such duties. (DANGANA 1999, 285)

However, Shaykh Othman's advice to women did not prevent them from completely obeying their husbands. He claimed that regardless of whether her husband is poor or a slave, the wife must obey him in private and in public. She may not refuse to obey him unless he orders her to disobey Allah, because disobeying the Creator is not the same as obeying a creature. Shaykh Othman assigned husbands the responsibility of women's education. He stressed that failure to carry out this duty was the root cause of social problems (Dangana 1999). Conservative Muslim scholars were outraged by Shaykh Othman's attempts to encourage women's education. Although Shaykh Othman defended his position on women's education and participation in social events, he did not allow free mixing of the sexes in his educational sessions.⁶

As a result, there is an important area that needs to be explored in terms of women and their leadership roles within Sufi orders, namely defining educational roles within *tariqa* Islam. It is widely assumed that women, both within and outside religious orders, lack a high level of education and training in Islamic sciences and knowledge. Knowledge and propagation of Islam have been patriarchal efforts undertaken by merchants, scholars, preachers, and conquerors during the period of Islamic jihad since the beginnings of the spread of Islam in West Africa. The majority of girls in Sufi orders receive a very limited education. However, there have been a few highly knowledgeable women, such as Nana Asma'u bint Othman Dan Fodio. She was a princess, poet, and teacher and dedicated her life to educating the women of her time. She lived during the caliphate's founding generation, so she became an important guiding resource for succeeding governments.

As Othman Dan Fodio's daughter, Nana Asma'u was raised in a family of scholars and jurists. Many of her relatives, both men and women, were scholars or were educated in the classical Islamic scientific tradition. Jean Boyd and Beverly Mac's book *One Woman's Jihad* (2008) includes a genealogical chart depicting Asma'u's ancestors, a long line of distinguished scholars dating back ten generations. Asma'u was educated by other women in her clan as well as by her father. Those formative years included more than just memorizing the Holy Qur'an. Her education was unusual for a woman of her time, but

her father was extremely supportive. Nana Asma'u was one of many women in the Fodio family who benefited from such an education. These women, including mothers-in-law and older sisters, provided guidance and mentoring. Their goal was to educate young men and women with distinct characteristics who were well versed in Islamic sciences, including grammar, literature, poetry, logic, and mathematics. Arabic was used as the medium of instruction (Boyd 1989).

Nana Asma'u was fluent in four languages: Arabic, Fulfulde, Hausa, and Tamashek. She became an advisor to her brother, the second Sokoto Caliph Ahmadu Bello, and excelled in her role. There are records of her writing instructions to rulers and fearlessly debating other scholars and princes. Ahmadu Bello and his father built on existing traditional female authority by naming female leaders. Accordingly, Shaykh Dan Fodio and his son relied on Asma'u to help women transition from their original beliefs to Islamic teachings, enhancing their understanding of the importance of women's roles in Islam. In her book *Sister of the Caliph*, Boyd states that Asma'u's position was determined by her lineage related to the House of the Caliphate. As a result, Nana Asma'u's appointment was not only appropriate but also highly relevant to the caliphate's tasks at hand.

4.1 *The Yan Taro Movement*

Perhaps Asma'u's most significant accomplishment was to educate and train women so that they could pass on Sufi beliefs to future generations. She had a method and a vision, and was selective in teaching women to educate others. She chose women who exemplified maturity and intelligence; they were sometimes tasked with providing religious education to women who lived in remote areas. The process of appointing these teachers took place during the Asma'u Teachers Club ceremony in which her authority was transferred to female leaders (Boyd 1989). This role for female leaders was dubbed *jaji* (leader). A traditional hat was used to designate a *jaji* for each village; the *jaji* also received a red ribbon to tie around the brim of the hat. The ceremony's formalities emphasized its significance. Titles of power were bestowed on women in the same way that men were granted ceremonial power. All of this raised the profile of the *jaji*, who were granted the right to travel alone. This freedom enabled them to reach out to and organize women seeking religious education. The *jaji* also brought young girls and older women to Asma'u for consultations (Boyd 1989).

The *jaji*'s primary responsibility was to disseminate Asma'u's work to women in rural communities. These women relied on regional oral traditions to educate their students in schools and at home. The curriculum covered two

aspects of life: essential life skills for adjusting to the new Islamic leadership, and spiritual teachings for living a godly life. Their work earned them an exceptional position in the caliphate, as well as the opportunity to organize a network of women across its regions. This new network of women arose from the efforts of the Teachers Club members and all other women who had gained a sense of belonging to the community and the Islamic faith (Boyd 1989).

Nana Asma'u founded the Yan Taro movement in 1840 to promote women's education. She was the movement's pioneer and organizer. Her students came from various villages and towns and belonged to various ethnic groups, including the Fulani and Hausa. Some lived in more culturally diverse areas where different ethnic groups mixed. Their clothing, customs, and lifestyles reflected the diversity of their origins (Boyd and Last 1985).

The Yan Taro education system aimed to allow women aged fourteen to 44 to stay at home and care for their families while attending classes. Students could participate in the educational program if they obtained permission from their spouse or father. The jaji also urged every student to set out with determination and commitment to learn everything in their power, renew their faith, and work with God-fearing people. In exchange for her services Nana Asma'u accepted gifts of cereals, butter, cloth, and honey, which she later used to provide social services to the disabled and sick.

Nana taught women the fundamental religious duties of prayer, ablution, alms, pilgrimage, and fasting. She also taught them what was permissible and was not permissible in Islam so that they would know how to behave and interact with others. She forewarned them about deception, greed, hatred, envy, theft, and low self-esteem. Because of Nana Asma'u's seriousness and trustworthiness, men allowed their daughters and wives to attend her lectures.

4.2 *Nana Asma'u's Poetic Works*

Nana Asma'u wrote approximately 60 works that were later published; there were probably more in the family library in Sokoto, northern Nigeria. The majority of her works were long rhyming poems, with a few in prose. Her poetic style reveals great literary talent, particularly in demonstrating the style of *takhmis*, a process in which a poet appends three verses to two from another poet with the same rhyme as the first verse, for a total of five verses. This form celebrates other poets' poems in stanzas, resulting in a poem with new features while faithfully preserving the original rhyme and rhythm. These poems were written in tribute to the original author, whose work could be easily identified in the new poem. She also wrote her poems in the language best suited to her audience: Arabic was the lingua franca for scholars, while poetry

dedicated to members of her extended family was written in Fulfulde. She also authored poems in the Hausa language for the masses, particularly for the Yan Taro education system.

Asma'u's devotional poems are compiled in her first treatise 'The Way of the Pious', which she wrote in Arabic prose when she was in her twenties (Boyd and Mack 1997). Perhaps reflecting the impact of her long years in school, the treatise addresses an educated audience while its subject matter covers the core spiritual concerns that pervade all of her works. 'The Way of the Pious' is one of Asma'u's few works in long prose form. It may have been read and heard by Arabic-speaking scholars who would have appreciated the content without having to memorize it. The poems encourage people to demonstrate their devotion to the Prophet's Sunnah by performing charitable works and cultivating virtues such as humility and modesty. It is a succinct guide to proper spirituality for ethical behavior.

Asma'u wrote a similar work, 'Reasons for Seeking God', near the end of her life. She wrote it in Hausa so that Yan Taro teachers could use it in rural areas. To facilitate memorization, 'Reasons for Seeking God' is written in 35 short, rhymed verses rather than prose. She writes:

16. Repent and obey God's commandments
For to desist from evil is to show repentance.
17. The Shahiida:ll and prayer are true
And the fast, alms and the pilgrimage for those with the means.
18. What God has forbidden has been made clear.
Everyone who obeys will be rewarded after death.
19. Lying, whispering slander, spreading rumours, jealousy
Self-esteem and boasting are all forbidden.

BOYD AND MACK 1997, 266

'Fear of the Hereafter' is an example of Islamic manners that Asma'u felt conveyed an urgent message to both her Hausa and Fulfulde audiences, so she wrote it in both languages in the same year. The poem has 54 verses that are simple to remember. This work combines Qur'anic descriptions of the after-life, discusses how the world will end, and describes the fates of the wicked and the pious:

8. The sun and the moon will merge
And darkness will descend over everything.
9. The heavens will split asunder, and angels will descend
To find the populace huddled together.

10. A circle of fire will surround the multitude
Which will be in utter confusion.
11. The fire will emit heat, smoke, and flames,
As is stated in the Qur'an.

BOYD AND MACK 1997, 256

Nana Asma'u's educational curriculum was a collection of educational poems written in the people's native language. These poems were written with the intention of teaching beginners basic religious knowledge and intermediate learners more advanced knowledge, while advanced learners could progress to higher-level education by using the poem as a foundation. Nana Asma'u wrote these poems with the oral culture of her people in mind. They could be memorized before reading and read before writing. Women could use these poems to fight patriarchal oppression by reciting them to their husbands as needed. Her poem 'The Quran' is an example of her poetry curriculum. Here she writes a 30-verse poem to teach the names of 114 chapters of the Qur'an:

1. I pray to God the Glorious
Through the honor, Alhamdu and the sura Bakara
2. And Ali Imrana and Nisa'u and Ma'idatu,
Lan'ami, La'arafi and Lanfali and Bara.

BOYD AND MACK 1997, 41

Two long works written in Hausa are 'Yearning for the Prophet' (316 verses) and 'Signs of the Day of Judgment' (75 verses). The first is a detailed biographical account of the Prophet Muhammad's life, with a focus on events that parallel Shaykh Othman's life. It is possible that the poem was too long for a rural woman to memorize; they could instead listen to it and learn about the parallels between the Prophet's biography and Shaykh Othman's jihad. The poem reads as follows:

5. I bless and praise Ahmada
And also, his followers, and the relatives of Muhammada.
6. Oh God, You of Power and Knowledge
Guide and help me in my praise of Ahmada.
7. Place me in that garden of light and praise
Where I will find pleasure in the beloved, Muhammada.
8. Oh God receive my song, may it please
You, and be acceptable to Muhammada.

BOYD AND MACK 1997, 309

'Signs of the Day of Judgment' is a terrifying depiction of the afterlife when the hour arrives, and it is directly inspired by the Holy Qur'an. If anyone had any measure of repentance and piety this poem would undoubtedly push them to uphold moral standards. According to the poem:

12. Some of the signs of the Day of Judgment have been seen:
And I will tell you about those which have already happened,
 13. They are deceit, oppression, and misappropriation,
Misrepresentation, and drunkenness.
 14. The construction of high buildings and disregard for the law.
Lack of interest in family and kinship.
 15. Warfare that leaves too many women single.
The seeking of knowledge for worldly status.
 16. And shunning wives in favor of prostitutes.
- In short, the Days are fast approaching.

BOYD AND MACK 1997, 298

4.3 *A Sufi Transformational Leader*

In her visions, writings, and community activities, Nana Asma'u was a transformational leader. Her innovative educational system served as an impermeable wall in the fight against misogyny and the empowerment of women in every village and town. Her legacy for generations of strong African women who continue to follow in her footsteps demonstrates the true transformative effect she had on her society (Gray 2017). Using Nana Asma'u as a case study, one can trace not only the aesthetic norms of Arabic writing in West Africa, but also features of Islamic discourse as they relate to women's status. Nana Asma'u was a tireless social activist who spent the majority of her life as a teacher, community leader, role model, and active worker. She mobilized the people of the Sokoto Caliphate toward the practical realization in daily life of the various ideals implied in her poems and her general intellectual output (Azuonye 2006). As demonstrated in the following analysis, she thus exemplifies the transformational leadership style.

It can be concluded that Asma'u completed her first mission of raising awareness among women with the help of her family. This scholarly leader established a vast network of pioneering teachers of religious education. The second goal was achieved by closely adhering to the Othman Dan Fodio family tradition of writing and composing. Finally, Nana Asma'u's legacy builds on the achievements of previous Sufi women in her family and other ascetic women. Asma'u also accomplished both goals by fostering connections among women in order to deepen their spiritual values. Asma'u's writings are intended to

convey teachings that promoted, encouraged, supported, and advised men and women on a variety of topics.

Asma'u also fostered the idea of developing social bonds in nomadic pastoral communities by creating a network of women through the Yan Taro movement. The Jaji Asma'u group carried out this work and facilitated men and women's education. While her writings focused on religious education and imparting knowledge that could help women gain a stable spiritual life, Asma'u's impressive mastery of Islamic sciences and knowledge helped her deal with virtually all of her society's complex problems. However, it was her personal approach that gave women a sense of direction in their religious lives. Many women who never met her had a much richer and more meaningful religious life as a result of her efforts.⁷

Among her many blessings was the fact that she was born to a man who not only founded the Sokoto Caliphate but also strongly believed in women's education as a fundamental principle of social progress. Othman Dan Fodio particularly emphasized learning and teaching as complementary components of the educational framework. Consequently, Asma'u's success as a poet, teacher, scholar, and feminist reformer was founded on her firm belief in the importance of education.

The following section presents another case of a woman's jihad in the Sufi tradition, that of Sharifa 'Alawiyya al-Mirghani. Her case underscores the legitimacy of women's spiritual leadership in a society dominated by patriarchal traditions and highlights the gender variable in dealing with Italian colonial authorities.

5 Sharifa 'Alawiyya al-Mirghani

Eritrea gained prominent religious and social status during Italian colonial rule. The Eritrean-Sudanese region faced a period of intense conflict in the early twentieth century, characterized by increasing internal fragmentation between political and religious leadership as well as the stampede of European colonial powers. The Al-Mahdi uprising (1882–1885) in Sudan contributed to the destabilization of the Turco-Egyptian institution that ruled a large part of Sudan and Eritrea (1820/21–1885), providing sufficient justification for the Anglo-Egyptian and Italian armies' gradual incursion from the Red Sea coast to remote areas to face the threat of the Mahdiyya. Finally, the end of Turco-Egyptian rule and subsequent Mahdist defeats resulted in the Anglo-Egyptian occupation of Sudan (1899–1956) and the Italian occupation of Eritrea (1885–1941). During this time, the Khatmiyya group led the fight

against the Mahdiyya, but it was eventually forced to surrender to the British and Italian powers in Sudan and Eritrea, respectively (Bruzzi 2018; Bruzzi and Zeleke 2015).

During Ottoman rule, Sayyid Muhammad al-Hasan established the main hub of the order in the township of al-Khatmiyya, which belonged to Kassala in Sudanese territory. The Khatmiyya order subsequently gained significant social and religious status. The Khatmiyya order was founded in the Hijaz around 1840 by Sayyid Muhammad Othman al-Mirghani (Mecca, 1793–Al-Ta'if, 1853), a descendant of a Meccan noble family. His grandfather had laid the groundwork for the teachings of the most prominent Sufi orders of his time, namely the Naqshbandi, Qadiriyya, Shadhiliyah, Junaidiyah, and Mirghaniyya. Ahmed Ibn Idris El Fassi (1749/50–1837), a famous Moroccan scholar who studied Sufism in Mecca, Upper Egypt, and Yemen, appears to have had a strong influence on him. Ahmed Ibn Idris advised his students to follow practical methods and systems based on Sufi spiritual traditions, particularly the classical writings of Ibn Arabi and Ibn al-Farid. El Fassi also encouraged his students to travel to African countries and preach Islam, but he did not create any method or institution to support them. Perhaps this is what his disciples, such as Muhammad Ibn Ali al-Senussi (1787–1859), Ibrahim al-Rashid (1817–1874), and Muhammad al-Mirghani (1793–1852), accomplished after his death.

The traditions and teachings of Ahmad Ibn Idris were especially influential in the many Sufi zawiyas established in northeast Africa in the nineteenth century, particularly the Ahmadiyya, Dandaraweyah, Salihiyya, and Khatmiyya. Sayyid Muhammad Othman al-Mirghani preached among the Bani 'Amir in Eritrea in the name of his master Ibn Idris. After the latter's death he became the independent shaykh of his own order, the Mirghaniyya or Khatmiyya.⁸

Sayyid Hashem al-Mirghani (Masawwa, 1849/50–1902), the father of Sharifa 'Alawiyya, was the Khatmiyya's representative in Eritrea. Around 1860 he traveled from the Hejaz to Masawwa, where he eventually assumed spiritual leadership of Eritrea. Following his stay, he married an Eritrean woman from the Khatmiyya order's sons of Bani Amer.⁹ Sharifa, who would later become the leader of Muslims in Eritrea, was then born. At this time the people of these border areas suffered from rising unrest and internal conflicts. The Khatmiyya defeated the Mahdiyya with the help of the British and Italians during this period. Following the defeat of the Mahdiyya, the Italian authorities attempted but failed to contact Sayyid Hashem al-Mirghani, who as a spiritual and religious leader wielded considerable power over the local population. After his death in 1902 the Italian government assisted in the construction of his tomb near Masawwa. Hashem had no male heirs, but he did leave two orphaned daughters, Maryam and 'Alawiyya.

In the aftermath of Hashem's death in Kassala, Eritrean colonial ruler Fernando Martini encouraged his nephew, Jaafar bin Bakri bin Jaafar al-Sadiq bin Muhammad Othman al-Mirghani, to establish his seat in Keren in 1903 (Bruzzi 2018; Bruzzi and Zeleke 2015). As a result, the Khatmiyya's alliance with colonial authorities grew stronger in the early twentieth century. The regime, in exchange for generous financial and institutional support, has focused on serving as a source of stability by facilitating colonial economic and military policies across the region. Thus, members of the al-Mirghani family held prominent positions throughout the colonial period as judges, translators, and religious leaders. The Khatmiyya's ability to accommodate Italian authorities by creating a relatively safe space for their own Islamic religious and civic institutions mirrored similar processes that Sufi leaders undertook throughout Islamic Africa during the colonial era, most notably the Tijaniyya, Qadiriyya, and Mouridiyya in West Africa under French rule (Hassan 2020). This was true even among Khatmiyya leaders who had crossed into British-ruled Sudan. Finally, this collaboration enabled Jaafar al-Mirghani and other family members to solidify their position as the main Islamic authorities in most of western and northern Eritrea, effectively weakening other rival groups (Venosa 2013).

The growing influence of Sayyid Jaafar in Keren, which was supported by the Italian colonial authorities, sparked a rivalry within the Khatmiyya, specifically between Sayyid Jaafar and his cousin, the Sharif Alawites, and the daughter of Sayyid Hashim al-Mirghani, who was living in Massawa at the time. When the Khatmiyya order decided to relocate to Keren several disputes erupted. As a result, the colonial authorities warned that the situation could lead to a split within the Eritrean branch of the Khatmiyya. Indeed, Sharifa 'Alawiyya quickly emerged as a prominent political and religious guide in the region, defying colonial expectations. The local population increasingly recognized her, forcing colonial authorities to reluctantly accept the *fait accompli* (Miran 2005). Sharifa 'Alawiyya was a servant of Sidi Hashem al-Mirghani's tomb in Masawwa.

Sharifa 'Alawiyya inherited not only the *baraka* but also her father's social and religious position (Bruzzi 2012). Although rare, the transmission of a significant religious role from father to daughter was documented in the Sufi Islamic world, particularly in Sudan and the Horn of Africa. Because her father, Sidi Hashem, was regarded as a saint, his remnants in the tomb of Otumlo near Massawa became the site of annual pilgrimages. Thus 'Alawiyya became not only the keeper of the relics but also a person of exceptional moral, intellectual, and religious qualities to whom people could turn for advice, protection, and assistance.

‘Alawiyya established the Charity Council of the Islamic Community and, thanks to the voluntary offerings she received, was able to provide material assistance to the needy. To this were added the thaumaturgical abilities and foresight gifts that her family members recognized. The ability of some shaykhs to heal through *zar* rituals and the removal of evil spirits or jinns is accepted in the Islamic world, similar beliefs can be found in Catholicism (Isacchini 2018). Her father possessed these abilities, which ‘Alawiyya inherited, but she also added an appreciation for European medicine as a result of Italian colonialism (Bruzzi 2012).

According to colonial sources, her intervention as a mediator in resolving disputes between indigenous peoples and the government was effective. During the Italian war in Libya (1911–1912) fundraising campaigns were organized for the families of Eritreans who died or were injured in the war. According to the al-Mirghani family’s account, she negotiated an end to the conflict between the Italian government and Sultan Muham-mad Anfari in Afar in the 1930s. During the Italian war in Ethiopia (1935–1941) she requested the support of Ethiopian Muslims by directing many letters to them.

In this case the appointment of caliphs is an interesting point because there was a conflict between the colonial powers’ intentions and Sharifa’s defiance toward them. According to colonial data, Sharifa ‘Alawiyya personally began appointing her successors in Eritrea in violation of this prohibition. Syed Jaafar al-Mirghani condemned this contradiction, and the Italian authorities also expressed strong disapproval. It is worth noting that the establishment of a patriarchal system within the Muslim community was deemed necessary by the Italian colonial rule to ensure colonial peace. The Italians believed that female leadership would cause problems, and as such, their colonial rhetoric was in line with a negative attitude towards ‘Alawiyya’s leadership.

A colonial report on a clash in Keren sheds light on the critics of Sharifa ‘Alawiyya’s religious leadership. Caliph Syed Jaafar stood during Friday prayers at the main Karan mosque, reading a text laden with accusations against Sharifa ‘Alawiyya for deviating from the Sunnah regarding the duties of a Muslim woman (Bruzzi and Zeleke 2015). The document’s significance stems from the fact that it sheds light on patriarchal religious discourse, whether Salafi or Sufi, in its challenge to the concept of female leadership according to a unique understanding of Islamic law principles. The sermon included a list of Qur’anic advice and obligations for Muslim women’s behavior. Sharifa ‘Alawiyya was implicitly accused of misconduct in order to undermine her leadership (Bruzzi 2018). Although her name is not mentioned in the text, it is clear that she was the target of the criticism. The text was aimed at the large crowds of men attending Friday prayers at the main mosque. It was an attempt to use religion to claim that her authority was illegitimate. The

general criticism centered on the issue of heresy and violating the Prophet's honorable Sunnah.

5.1 *The Debate over a Woman's Role in Prayer*

One of the most visible challenges Sharifa 'Alawiyya faced as caliph of the Khatmiyya order was the controversy surrounding women leading group prayers. The Prophet said in a hadith on the authority of 'Abdullah Ibn Mas'ud, 'A woman's prayer in her room is better than her prayer in her courtyard, and her prayer in her cabinet is better than her prayer in her room' (Abu Dawood and Al-Tirmidhi provide narration). Sharifa 'Alawiyya appeared to be unable to fulfill this religious obligation. The issue of Muslim women praying in a mosque sparked an ongoing debate. According to Ibn al-Jawzi, if a woman is afraid of causing strife in the hearts of men she should pray at home (Calderini 2021). Thus, the legal basis for a woman becoming an imam can be understood in this discussion. It was forbidden for a woman to lead a congregation in the mosque, but this was not the case with Sharifa 'Alawiyya since the gathering and prayer took place in her home rather than the mosque. Her prayers were also voluntary and not obligatory.

The Keren Mosque where Muslims gathered and prayed was built by the Italian authorities to support the legitimacy of Sayyid Jaafar al-Mirghani as the official representative of the Eritrean branch of the Khatmiyya. The authorities were attempting to identify with the Muslim elite who were trying to limit Sharifa 'Alawiyya's influence. 'Alawiyya and Jaafar's rivalry persisted, but both remained important frames of reference for colonial authorities. Both continued to appear in colonial reports and the Italian media as representatives of the Eritrean Muslim community at colonial celebrations.

Sharifa 'Alawiyya responded to the criticism directed at her by emphasizing the terms of the imam. According to colonial sources, she claimed to be more qualified for the position of leader than her relative Jaafar al-Mirghani because she was "closer to the Prophet than he was" (Bruzzi 2018:52). When she was labeled as a victim of gender discrimination, she responded by emphasizing her place among the righteous awliya' of Allah, implying that her gender was irrelevant. Unlike Jaafar al-Mirghani, Sharifa 'Alawiyya's status was recognized (Bruzzi and Zeleke 2015). Her response used the rule of logic and intellect in Islam because her leadership was called into question on the basis of gender discrimination in 'Islamic discourse'. In response to this attempt to undermine her leadership, she gradually asserted her authority by adopting fundamentalist Islamic practices. She wore special pants under her traditional dress, as well as a veil that covered her hair, ears, and chin. This practice of covering herself was critical to her religious empowerment and to her ability to assume a public and political role in the country as an Islamic authority.

5.2 *The Unity of the Tariqa and the Sharia*

The way Sufi shaykhs dress is extremely important. In some cases the simplicity and breadth of the dress can be interpreted as an expression of the unity of believers, reflecting the monotheistic principle. The use of both Christian and Islamic symbols has been recognized as expressing the religious dimension of the Sufi practices that have spread throughout the Horn of Africa and East Africa in general. Since ancient times, clergymen and priests have worn special clothes of a certain priestly style, while religious ceremonies have played an important role in the spread of these clothes. In one of her few photos in the record, her most popular image in Ethiopia and Eritrea, Sharifa 'Alawiyya appears wearing highly symbolic dress. She is wearing a headscarf in this photo for official events organized by the Italian colonial authorities in the country. It is a special veil, similar to what Catholic nuns wear, which evokes both Christian and Islamic symbols and values. According to Imam Ahmad al-Farūqī al-Sirhindī, a prominent member of the Naqshbandi Sufi order, Sharia and Sufism are indistinguishable. On the one hand, Sharia and *tariqa* are two expressions of the same reality; on the other hand, the *tariqa* serves the Sharia (Bisati 2001). Sharifa 'Alawiyya emphasized this concept by wearing this veil, implying full and strict adherence to her competitors' Islamic obligations regarding Muslim women's dress. She defended her public role, highlighting her duties as a political mediator between the local population and colonial authorities. Further, by wearing the veil Sharifa 'Alawiyya was addressing and appealing to Christian believers, including the Italian colonial authorities, to fulfill the mission of seeking the truth, which resonates with the message evoked by Catholic nuns (Bruzzi and Zeleke 2015). According to some accounts narrated by the al-Mirghani family, when the Italian authorities invited Sharifa 'Alawiyya to visit the Christian cathedral in Asmara they asked her to sit on the throne and dubbed her *Santa* (i.e., saint) 'Alawiyya. Thus her influence on the social and political lives of both Muslims and Christians grew stronger throughout colonial rule.

6 Conclusion

Sufi orders and organizations not only provided social outlets for women's participation as followers but also promoted them to positions of spiritual leadership, and assigned them the function of advocating for societal change. Although a woman's rise to the rank of *wali* was based mainly on kinship with the order's shaykh, following the principle of the succession line, many

muqaddamas in the Tijaniyya order relied on educational and spiritual abilities to build their religious authority. According to our literature review, Sufism treats gender issues differently compared to the more traditional understandings of Islam. This significantly impacts women's status. The Sufi gender paradigm's conception of women's equality and dignity may be its most significant aspect. Another inherently genderless assumption within Sufism is the insistence on one's inner state, prioritizing the same spiritual duty for all humans regardless of the gender of their inhabited body.

The biographies of the pioneering women in the African Sufi movements show that the Sufi feminist trend and the challenge to the dominant traditional discourse were linked to several factors that aided their emergence and development. These include:

- the emergence of major reform movements in West Africa in the nineteenth century and their calls for women's liberation and empowerment in the public sphere, exemplified by the case of Nana Asma'u;
- the European colonial resistance movement, the emergence of Islamic identity issues, and the call for cultural and intellectual independence, as reflected in the Sufi movements in North Africa;
- the reliance on Sufi women's cognitive and spiritual formation to establish their spiritual legitimacy within the *tariqa*; and
- cultural interaction with Sufi female leaders in other Islamic societies, particularly during Hajj-related travel.

This study also focused on the Khatmiyya order's influence in the Eritrean cultural, religious, social, and political landscape, specifically how the order faced and adapted to Italian occupation. This provides valuable insights that contribute to our understanding of the broader gender dynamics that shaped colonial occupation in Eritrea. The model of social awareness reflected in Sharifa 'Alawiyya's experiences enhances our understanding of power relations, forms of power, and hierarchies in African Islamic society. Within these dynamics, women are viewed as embodying various religious and familial ideals, but also as key agents in the transmission of cultural and religious values and thus of civil society control by challenging some forms of male dominance.

As this study has shown, the issue of women taking on leadership positions has sparked a heated debate within the *tariqa* regarding gender and the relationship between men and women. The major issues, which Islamic feminism may have overcome at present, are women's leading prayer and adherence to the Islamic dress code. This has led to the reluctance of Sufi women, despite having the title of shaykha or saint, to enter the mosque and lead men and women in prayer. In the case of East Africa this controversy has prompted a

challenge to the female authority of the order and the creation of another sub-order of the Mirghaniyya under male leadership. This reflects Sufism's contradictory attitude toward gender equality.

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Notes

- Many texts on general women's issues such as rights, dress, and adornment show that their concepts were not formulated according to Sharia but rather according to patriarchal societies' authority and jurists' utterances. See Al-Qarala (2018) and Saleh (2013).
- Scriptural evidence from hadiths, such as the hadith that states that the best row for women is the last, are among the justifications provided to prevent women from leading. Furthermore, women's ritual capacity is limited because they are not permitted to call the *adhan* and *iqama*, nor to perform *imama*. Another reason that Maliki jurists give, related to the concept of '*awra*' (i.e., something to be concealed/private parts), is that women should not expose their bodies, including their voice, because the female voice is also '*awra*' for them (Calderini 2021).

- ³ *Wali* (plural *awliyā*) Allah: 'friends of God', equivalent to Christian saints. 'In Sufi theory, the wali receives his elevated status as a gift from God: his piety and religious exercises are only preparation to receive this gift. His visions and karamat (wonders and miracles) are not of his own making but occur through or around him by divine agency. In social practice, however, the wali is a source not only of baraka (blessings), but also of power: the power to bless, to heal, to judge, to foresee, to transform, and also to curse and bring down the punishment of God' (Mack and Boyd 2000, 28).
- ⁴ A *muqaddam* (feminine: *muqaddama*) is a spiritual guide within the *tariqa* in the Tijaniyya and other Sufi orders. He plays two significant roles. As a granter of authority, he authorizes people to recite Tijani prayers and appoints other *muqaddamun*. His second function is that of a spiritual guide: the *muqaddam* directs his disciples' development (Brenner 1984).
- ⁵ According to the hierarchical ranks within Senegalese Sufi brotherhoods, a *khalifa* is the designated successor of a specific shaykh to lead the *tariqa*. The marabout is regarded as an intercessor between the disciples and God, guiding and protecting his or her followers. In turn, the disciples obey the marabout. Furthermore, *tariqa* followers are referred to as Mouride, which is derived from an Arabic word (*mourid*, literally 'one who desires'). A disciple in Sufism is someone who follows a spiritual guide (*murshid*) (Gemmeke 2011).
- ⁶ Shaykh Othman wrote a treatise urging women's education, the 'Kitab Tanbih Al-Ikhwan Ala Jawaz Ittikhaz Al-Majlis li Taalim Al-Niswan' [A Treatise Alerting the Brethren to the Permissibility of Holding Sessions to Educate Women on Religion] (printed in Sokoto, n.d.), in which he defended women's right to educate themselves about religious matters (Hassan 2020).
- ⁷ Nana Asma'u's sociocultural environment was heavily patriarchal, which should have hampered her intellectual pursuits. Women lived on the outskirts of society before the Dan Fodio era, at the command and pleasure of men. Such a patriarchal society could not have predicted the emergence of a female intellectual, a feminist precursor who answered to the urgent issue of rethinking the role of women in the prevalent discourse, particularly regarding the education of girls and their potential participation in and contribution to Nigeria's national project (Olaopa 2013).
- ⁸ However, his son, al-Hasan (d. 1869), was chiefly responsible for the order's influence among the Sudan tribes, the Bani 'Amir, and other Eritrean tribes. He founded the township of al-Khatmiyya, part of Kasala, as the seat of the order in East Africa (Trimingham 1976).
- ⁹ The Khatmiyya's ability to integrate preexisting religious structures that maintained the class of notable and noble lineages into a cross-cultural network with far-reaching social consequences is primarily responsible for the order's success in gaining the loyalty of local community followers. As a result, the Khatmiyya's influence extended beyond the traditional domain of Sufi religious institutions and into the social and economic fabric of many Muslim communities throughout Eritrea. These developments fueled the majority of the population's conversion to Islam and its mystical practices. Consequently, by the nineteenth century all Tigrayan-speaking groups had converted to Islam (Venosa 2013).