

# 6

## PERFECTING THE SELF

### Female Sufi saints in Islamic history

Some have argued that the globalization of Sufism, which has been discussed in the previous chapters, has meant greater opportunities for women's involvement in the tradition. Contemporary Mevlevi Sufi master Sulayman Loras (d. 1985), for example, began teaching women to whirl in North America, breaking with centuries of tradition limiting this ritual to men. However, this idea that Sufism offers more opportunities for women in the West has also been exaggerated, overlooking the historical precedents of feminine involvement and leadership in Sufism, and the ways in which women are taking leadership roles in non-Western contexts. To make sense of these historical precedents, this chapter first explores the classical Sufi concepts of *insan al-kamil* (perfected human) and *awliya'* (friends of God) and their relationship to gender. Thereafter, the chapter offers representative examples of the ways in which these ideal principles were actualized by Sufi women. This chapter is not meant to be comprehensive but rather offers brief examples of female Sufi personalities in each distinct period of Muslim history as a means of contextualizing the contemporary.

The contemporary era has offered women opportunities to take on public roles within Sufism that were previously the preserve of men, and yet contemporary women's activities in many ways perpetuate the rich history of women saints, teachers, and practitioners of Sufism. Sufi female personalities were influential in the development of the various aspects of the Sufi tradition, from developing its principles and practices to transmitting knowledge, and being recognized as saints, spiritual teachers, and authorities. The ways in which "women" are discussed in the history of Sufism rest on two theoretical approaches: (1) a metaphysical one; and (2) an historical and anthropological one. In comparing the conclusions drawn from these theoretical frameworks to the study of Sufi women, historically there is a consistent trend that the feminine, as an ideal principle, does not necessarily equate with the feminine as a social subject in the societies women occupied.

Where the ideal feminine, especially as a saintly and perfected manifestation of the divine, is elevated in Sufi metaphysical and philosophical thought by male Sufi writers, this positionality did not necessarily equate to gender egalitarian access to spaces (public or private) and rituals in the day to day life of Muslim women.

That being said, women, as many recent studies have unearthed, negotiated this complex positionality that relegated them on a biological level to the margins but elevated them on a spiritual level. Sufi women's social and familial gender expectations were negotiated in their performance of leadership roles. Thus, where Sufi men's stories did not necessitate that their spiritual identity be gendered as masculine, Sufi women's stories did. Despite these complexities and the intersections at which Sufi women engaged in spiritual and pious work, they maintained roles as leaders and were seminal in the development of Sufi institutions, teachings, and devotion. They were a part of the story of Sufism much as their male counterparts. Yet, it is precisely their ability to occupy saintly and leadership positions that challenged the social and gender norms of the day, that further attracted criticism of Sufism as an Islamic spiritual tradition. Sufi women's roles historically and in contemporary contexts attracted further vitriol from anti-Sufi camps. At the same time, it was one of the qualities that appealed to non-Muslims, including Orientalists, as a tradition that was contrary to the stereotyped vision of women as lacking agency or a voice in Islam.

### ***Insan al-Kamil: The perfected human being***

Like the Bible and the Torah, the Qur'an states that humans are created in the image (*surah* or form) of God. Relating this idea of manifesting the divine form to Quranic teachings about God's Ninety-Nine Names (*asma al-husna*), Sufis have long understood the core of their practice to involve each person's conscious cultivation of their capacity to fully reflect all of the divine qualities present within the Names. For every spiritual virtue and existential principle there is a corresponding divine name, because all of creation reflects its Creator. Unique among the created beings, however, humans have the capacity to *comprehensively* reflect God's nature in all its fullness, encompassing qualities as diverse as majesty, beauty, patience, strength, wisdom, firmness, gentleness, love, subtlety, and peace, among many others. Although God alone possesses these qualities in their fullness, human beings have the potential to manifest them in an integrated manner through assiduous spiritual practice and divine grace.

While direct knowledge of God (*'ilm al-ladunî*) is ultimately a divine gift that cannot be attained through devout practice alone, full spiritual realization requires constant awareness of God's presence and can be reached by any practitioner, whether male or female, through the cultivation of sensitivity to God's immanent (*tashbih*) and transcendent (*tanzih*) presence. Significantly, the Sufi goal of becoming a complete or whole and perfected human being (*insan al-kamil*) is not understood to be a gender-specific state of being, and indeed requires

integration of divine qualities that might be considered “feminine” as well as “masculine.”

Sufi personalities like Ibn al-‘Arabi described the process of aspiring toward divine perfection by taking on God’s qualities as *takhalluq bi akhlaq Allah*, which translates literally as “characterizing oneself with the characteristics of God” or “becoming perfect in God’s perfections.”<sup>1</sup> This is certainly one way to understand the entirety of the Sufi path: a gradual process of embodying more and more of God’s qualities, like generosity, justice, forgiveness, patience, wisdom, love, etc. As one invokes and more importantly lives and embodies these qualities, the aspirant fulfills more of the original human disposition (*fitra*) of innate goodness, which is a function of being created in the image or form of God. The fully realized human being or *insan al-kamil* (perfected human), manifests all of God’s qualities, reflecting God’s wisdom, compassion, and guidance into the world. To reach this station of perfection, however, the human has to be emptied of all created qualities, annihilated (*fana’*) with respect to egoic characteristics, to clear the ground for God’s qualities to manifest and subsist (*baqa’*) and thereby permit a contingent sense of identification with the Divine. Gender is notably absent within the Sufi understanding of the perfected human. In other words, being male or female is no more relevant to being described as the perfected human than is identity linked to culture, nationality, ethnicity, economic status, or any other social qualifier.

An interesting example of this genderless aspect of *insan al-kamil* is found in the writings of Ja‘far al-Sadiq (d. 765), one of the most important early commentators on the Qur’an, as well as a renowned mystic, a scholar of religious sciences, a descendant of the Prophet, and, for Shi‘a Muslims, the sixth Imam. According to al-Sadiq, *insan al-kamil* is connected to the idea of the *al-haqiqa al-muhammadiyya* (“the Muhammadan Reality”) or *nur muhammadiyya* (“the light of Muhammad”) as inspired by a Quranic passage known as “the Light verse” (24:35):

Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth; the likeness of His Light is as a niche wherein is a lamp – the lamp in a glass, the glass as if it were a glittering star – kindled from a Blessed Tree, an olive tree that is neither of the East nor of the West, whose oil well nigh would shine, even if no fire touched it: Light upon Light; Allah guides to His Light whom He will. And Allah strikes similitudes for man, and Allah has knowledge of everything.

Early Muslim scholars such as al-Sadiq suggest that the lamp (*misbah* in Arabic) in this verse is actually a symbol for Muhammad. Schimmel describes this reading of the text in the following terms:

Through him the Divine Light could shine in the world, and through him humankind was guided to the origin of this Light. The formula “neither of the East nor of the West” was then taken as a reference to Muhammad’s comprehensive nature, which is not restricted to one specific people or race and which surpasses the boundaries of time and space.<sup>2</sup>

It is with this more universal meaning of Muhammad that we find al-Sadiq explaining why other prophets like Mary, Moses, Joseph, and Abraham are also “*muhammad*.” In this case, they are described as such based on the *meaning* of the name, as “one who is praised” and not by gender. Thus *Nur Muhammad* can be conceived as the light of prophetic guidance manifest not just in the historical Prophet Muhammad but also among the other prophets, who, like Muhammad and indeed Mary, are praised (*muhammad*) for their state of total submission to God and transmission of the divine word.<sup>3</sup>

From a Sufi perspective, Islamic conceptions of divine as well as human perfection transcend the qualities and conceptions of masculinity and femininity that can be ascribed to the universe of created things. Reality in its many-ness is replete with differences and distinctions, and many of God’s Ninety-Nine Names can themselves be categorized as taking on a masculine or feminine character. God as such, however, surpasses such characterizations in his all-inclusive nature, despite the use of a masculine pronoun to refer to his transcendent reality. Similarly, individuals who, whether male or female, come to realize God’s oneness through recognition of his presence within the many-ness of his manifestation, arrive at a state of completion that is beyond a gender binary.

### ***Gendered qualities encompassed by the perfected human***

While God’s perfection (*kamil*) integrates all of the diverse qualities manifest within God’s many names, the Names themselves have traditionally been divided into two specific categories associated with gender: transcendent or *jalal* (majestic and incomparable) names and qualities, on the one hand, and immanent or *jamal* (beautiful and loving) qualities, on the other. By characterizing names of God as being *jamaliyya* and *jalaliyya* and associating these qualities with creation and with God’s relational presence in lived reality, commentators developed a cosmology in which *jalal* names and qualities were connected to the masculine principle and *jamal* names and qualities were linked to the feminine. *Jalal* names included characteristics of strength, firmness, inaccessibility, bringer of humility, abasement, and death. In contrast, *jamal* names encompassed love, peace, forgiveness, subtlety, gratitude, and life. Placing contemplation of God’s beautiful names at the center of Islamic spirituality underscored the link between worship of a transcendent God and discovery of his immanent presence in a world where the names of God are quite literally scattered throughout creation, so these principles are found everywhere. Significantly, Sufi personalities emphasized contemplating *both jalal and jamal* qualities of God, and thereby encouraged cultivation of “masculine” as well as “feminine” ways of relating to the all-inclusive divine reality. Influential Sufi writers such as Ibn al-‘Arabi criticized the “*jalal* only” perceptions of divinity found in theological frameworks that excluded feminine and beautiful principles present within the Qur’an, and went so far as to state that “the *Kalam* [exoteric theology] stresses God’s incomparability so much that it negates the possibility of love between human beings and God.”<sup>4</sup>

To counterbalance the “*jalal* only” tendency that sometimes took root within outwardly focused forms of religiosity (forms that were often the most male-oriented), many Sufi personalities sought to develop the feminine or *jamal* aspect of spirituality, both as a creative and theophanic principle through which a spiritual aspirant becomes receptive to the divine, and ultimately as a necessary aspect of cosmological creation.<sup>5</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabi, for example, suggested that all souls are feminine, and that all of creation in fact is female in relation to God, in a state of total receptivity.<sup>6</sup> Other Sufis characterized saints as “brides of God,” and referred to death as their soul’s wedding night. Traditions stating that “my soul is a woman”<sup>7</sup> similarly embellished on this theme in ways that idealized the receptive quality as present within idealized figures such as the Virgin Mary. Such positive valuations of the feminine principle were further developed by Ibn al-‘Arabi in his commentary on a prophetic Hadith concerning love for women, and explained that loving women is itself a highly refined way of contemplating God. His poetic works such as *Tarjuman al-Ashwaq* (“Interpreter of Ardent Desires”) made extensive use of the feminine principle when describing moments of spiritual realization. The next chapter (Chapter 7) will explore similar invocations of the feminine, as seen in the thought of many contemporary Sufi female leaders.

### ***Gendered “Friends of God”***

Even while describing a spiritual path for which both masculine and feminine principles are indispensable, Sufi characterizations of the complete or perfected human being imply a state within which *jalal* and *jamal* qualities become integrated. As the individual comes to manifest all of God’s Names, they become marked by comprehensiveness and perfection and are thereby able to act as a representative of God on earth. This means carrying out tasks of guardianship and protection of life, as envoys of God or as what the Qur’an qualifies as “*Awliya’ Allah*” or “Friends of God.”<sup>8</sup>

The intensive spirituality required to reach such an elevated state has been understood as nothing less than the perfection of the Islamic faith and its very core, hence later Sufis could lay claim to being the true “Heirs of the Prophet,” or inheritors of the fullness of prophetic knowledge. Sufi traditions ascribe to the “Friends of God” responsibility not just for preserving the purity of Islam but indeed the spiritual integrity of the world itself.

In Arabic, the singular term “*wali*” suggests qualities not just of friendship but also of guardianship, and the integration of these qualities is at the core of Islamic conceptions of sainthood. Even as they act as “friends” of God, the *awliya’* (plural form) are also differentiated from other people in their capacity for “guardianship” (*walaya/wilaya*) in relation to the created world. Al-Junayd described this role in the following manner:

God has select ones among His worshippers and pure ones among His creatures. He has chosen them for friendship, selected them [for] His graciousness

and [thus] set them aside for Himself. He has made their bodies to be of this world, their spirits of light, their ideas of spirit, their understanding of the throne of God, and their intellects of the veil.<sup>9</sup>

According to al-Junayd, the *awliya'* "are the instruments of God through whom God guides humanity to Himself and the springs with which He showers His mercy on His creatures."<sup>10</sup> Later Sufis would insist that their entire path was premised on the existence of this select group of guides brought close to God, who in turn share their knowledge, light, and blessing with their close disciples, with Muslims, and with all people and creation in general. Those who respond to God's guidance and draw closer to Him are given commensurate responsibilities to carry out on His behalf, in a manner similar to that suggested by the Quranic concept of *khilafah*, or vicegerency (2:30), according to which the purpose of human life is to act as a custodian of the created world on behalf of God.

Early Sufi writers reflected extensively on the concept of *walaya*. Generally articulated as a dual trajectory – one toward God, whereby the *walī* is brought close to God and experiences nearness and intimacy, and one toward creation, through which the *walī* helps in carrying out God's tasks on earth, as a caretaker, protector, and transmitter of grace and wisdom. Significantly, Sufis did not see sainthood as an exclusively masculine spiritual station and maintained that the quality of *wilaya* could be bestowed by God upon anyone. In particular, anyone who undertakes moral purification and spiritual discipline of the Sufi path can experience an unveiling of esoteric knowledge, including access to the hidden meanings of the Qur'an, transmission of blessing (*baraka*), and even experience of miraculous gifts. At least in principle then, anyone can be a *walī*, even if only a select few find within themselves the spiritual discipline and dedication required to make the journey. It is these qualities of the *walī*, their ability to access the inner meanings of the Qur'an, miraculous gifts, and *baraka* that anti-Sufi interpreters have questioned or denied (as discussed in [Chapter 2](#)).

In light of this last point, classical Sufi writers described a hierarchy of differently ranked saints watching over the world, and it was Ibn al-'Arabi who further specified that this saintly hierarchy consisted of both men and women. With respect to the different ranks within this hierarchy, he stipulated that "each category that we speak of contains both men and women," such that any of the saints, from the highest *qutb* (spiritual or axial pole) to the lowest of the thirty-five levels of sainthood, could be occupied by women as well as men. As Ibn al-'Arabi affirmed in multiple instances, "There is no spiritual quality belonging to men to which women do not have equal access."<sup>11</sup>

## A brief historical overview of Sufi women

Paradoxically, the elevation of femininity as an ideal in Islamic cosmology and the widespread affirmation of female "Friends of God" did not erase conventional understandings of gender in Islamic societies. Women's contributions often took

place behind the scenes, and women infrequently assumed public roles. The public sphere, with its religious and political institutions, tended to be male dominated. Why? One theory to explain this concerns the institutionalization of Sufism and its increasing ties to government and the *'ulama*. As Sufism transitioned from informal social and spiritual networks to more institutionalized forms, we see a general pattern of male domination of these institutions. Organized Sufism thereby tended to follow patterns that were also present in *fiqh* and *kalam*, and largely fell into line with premodern gender norms whereby men were associated with the public sphere and women with the private.

Scholars such as Laury Silvers and Amila Buturovic attribute the lack of formative and classical literature on Sufi women to sociopolitical norms that restricted women's leadership within the public sphere. Rather than take on formal leadership of Sufi orders, women asserted themselves within prescribed female roles as mothers, wives, and daughters connected to Sufi males. This does not mean, however, that women were passive or completely marginalized from Sufi practice. As Silvers notes:

Pious, mystic, and Sufi women were engaged socially with one another. They visited each other at home, met at gatherings, travelled to spend time with each other, passed along accounts of each other's knowledge and practices, worshipped with one another, and caught up with each other's news.<sup>12</sup>

Though not nearly so well documented as men's activities, Sufi women's engagement with one another was a vital part of Sufi culture and practice. As Buturovic states, "Sufi women's participation in the mystical path has never been simple: rather, it has been predicated on their ability to navigate through social constructions – Sufi and non-Sufi alike – of gender and public/private space."<sup>13</sup>

Despite the institutionalized tendency to amplify men's voices, women had a continuous presence in Sufi orders and in the living and teaching of Sufism. As stated by Schimmel:

Women played a positive role in Sufism. Even though the early ascetics were rather negative in their statements about women, it was a woman who introduced the concept of pure love into Islamic mysticism, and has been venerated for this reason throughout the centuries. One meets women in almost every avenue of Sufism. They act as patrons of Sufi *khanqahs* and as *shaykhas* of certain convents. They have been venerated as saints and accepted as spiritual guides. This symbol of the woman-soul who embodies the highest ambition of the God-seeking human being, has been popular in the Sufi tradition of Indo-Pakistan. As mothers, many mystically inclined women have deeply influenced their sons who in turn became leading masters of the Path thanks to their early education. The role of women for the expansion of mystically tinged Islamic thought in the countryside and down to the lowest levels of population cannot be overrated; they were the most important

depositories of mystical lore and the simple, unassuming faith in God and the Prophet.<sup>14</sup>

In what follows, we point to specific examples from the formative, medieval, and colonial periods of Muslim history that help illustrate Schimmel's observations.

### ***Formative period: Female ascetics and male biographers***

The first four centuries after the Prophet Muhammad's death in 632 are commonly described as the formative period of Sufism. During this period, Islam transitioned from its status as a seemingly minor new Arabian religious movement to a major force in world history – the basis for the polycultural and wide-ranging empires of the Umayyads (661–750) of Damascus and the Abbasids of Baghdad (750–1258). Although Sufi thought and practice were not absent from major urban centers of these empires, many early developments are understood to have transpired along the margins of empire among ascetics and mystics who sometimes preferred the isolation of the desert to the luxuries and temptations of cities. Over time, however, a widespread and diffuse culture of Islamic spirituality and esoteric thought developed coherence, in no small part through work of great Sufi biographers who traveled extensively to gather, compile, and record stories and teachings of exemplary Sufi masters. The manuals produced by these Sufi biographers, often in the form of encyclopedic guidebooks, preserved records of the early Sufi way of life as well as accounts of essential practices, and became catalysts for molding the future of classical Sufi traditions. From these works the authors were able to convey a variety of themes as well as genres, including descriptions of Sufi rules of conduct and norms of pious behavior, accounts of Sufi rituals and terminology, and hagiographic stories of leading Sufi personalities, both men and women.

Scholarship exploring the presence as well as absence of Sufi female figures in Sufi biographies and compendiums has helped us to understand how women were included and at times neglected in these early, defining works. For instance, Silvers points out the stark difference between biographical collections wherein one or two notable Sufi female figures are depicted (e.g., al-Qushayri's *al-Risala* or al-Hujwiri's *Kashf al-mahjub*) versus that of other collections which offer a diversity of figures, male and female, who represent different Sufi inclinations and regions of the Muslim world (e.g., Abu 'Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami's [d. 1021] *Dhikr al-niswal al-muta'abbidat as-sufiyyat* and Abu al-Faraj Ibn al-Jawzi's [d. 1201] *Sifat al-safwa*, as well as Muhammad Ibn Sa'd's [d. 845] *Tabaqat al-kubra*).<sup>15</sup>

One female Sufi saint who is mentioned in most Sufi biographical collections is Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya. Due to the advanced nature of her spiritual states many Sufis held that there were none who were equal to Rabi'a. Biographers like Attar considered her to be far above her contemporaries and later Sufis and hence she was given the title the "Crown of Men" (*Taj al-Rajal*). This "reverse genderization" is found in many of the biographers' works in which women were said to have reached a state of perfection that transcended their "woman-ness" through rigor in

mystical devotion.<sup>16</sup> Sufi authors articulated the courage necessary to go through the trials of the spiritual path and the rigors of self-denial as a form of manliness – to be a true man, or a manly and masculine man, was to be one who faced these challenges. By this logic, a woman who undertook the spiritual path successfully could be considered more masculine than the vast majority of men.

Attar's praise for Rabi'a exemplifies this tendency to celebrate distinguished Sufi women as "more manly than men." In his famous work *Mantiq at-tayr* (*Conference of the Birds*), Attar offers the following ecstatic praise for Rabi'a's status: "No, she wasn't a single woman. But a hundred men over ... From foot to face, immersed in the Truth, effaced in the radiance of God, and liberated from all superfluous excess."<sup>17</sup> Attar expands on the rationale for this praise of Rabi'a in his *Memoirs of the Saints*:

That noble recluse who dwelled behind the cloisters of God's elect, a matron of sanctity beneath sincerity's veil, on fire with love, totally consumed with yearning, arduously enraptured by God's proximity, that apostle of Mary's purity, acknowledged by all men was Rabi'a al-'Adawiyyah, God's mercy rest upon her.<sup>18</sup>

Associating Rabi'a with the Virgin Mary, Attar portrays her as having achieved a spiritually active or "masculine" state of ascetic world-renunciation – of complete and loving dedication to the realization of God. He affirms her spiritual station by attesting that, "Both in terms of her spiritual transactions and gnosis of God, Rabi'a was unexcelled in her time and was accredited by all great men of her age."<sup>19</sup> Offering similar praise, 'Abd al-Rahman Jami (d. 1492), a famous Persian Sufi poet and commentator on Ibn al-'Arabi, said the following about Rabi'a: "If all women were like the one we have mentioned, then women would be preferred to men."<sup>20</sup>

Such statements are very telling. In conferring upon Rabi'a titles such as "The Crown of Men," Sufi authorities who celebrated her spiritual excellence as an exponent of divine love alluded to another tradition that states, "When a woman walks in the way of God, she cannot be called a 'woman.'"<sup>21</sup> Though society may have favored men over women in conventional understandings of status and presumed capacity for leadership, Sufi Muslims granted exemplary spiritual women an "honorary male" or "more masculine than men" status. In the relevant Arabic and Persian literature, such women were often referred to respectfully as "men" – as *rajul* and *mard*. Such designations underscore the complex role of women in the theory and practice of mysticism, particularly considering the manner in which the noun "man" was often used normatively to designate any individual who earnestly strove toward God, without making any direct reference to the gender identity of the person in question. Nevertheless, this "reverse genderization" can be critiqued from a contemporary standpoint as perpetuating the valorization of the masculine as representing the pinnacle of spirituality, while the feminine is something that is in a sense shed on the spiritual path, despite the fact that male Sufi authorities aspired to the "feminine ideal" or the spiritual state of the bride in their approach to seeking God's love. In contrast, Rabi'a's status as a spiritually realized woman was affirmed in terms

of the feminine as she was described as a “second spotless Mary.”<sup>22</sup> This links Rabi’a to the notion of the *insan al-kamil*, which, as we discussed above, is a genderless notion of human perfection. This linkage to Mary is made as Mary was considered both the *insan al-kamil* and the *Nur Muhammad*, highlighting one of the ways in which medieval Islamic metaphysics transcended the dualities of gender categorizations. As we will see in [Chapter 7](#), contemporary female Sufi leaders invoke Mary and continue to be inspired by her as a feminine archetype of spiritual perfection.

Though Rabi’a took on archetypal status and appears to have set a pattern for spiritually realized women, she was not the only Sufi woman to receive praise as an exemplar whom wise men ought to emulate. One of these early Sufi women was Fatima of Nishapur (d. 849), of Khurasan. Her famous student Abu Yazid al-Bistami (d. 874) once said of her:

In all of my life, I have only seen one true man and one true woman. The woman was Fatima of Nishapur. There was no station (on the way) about which I spoke with her, but that she had already experienced it herself.<sup>23</sup>

Like few other exceptional women, she received elevation to the ranks of honorary men by being called *ustadh* (meaning “teacher” or “master” in the masculine form, as opposed to the *ustadha*). As related by the prominent Sufi scholar Dhu’l-Nun al-Mesri, “I have never seen anyone more excellent than a woman I saw in Mecca who is called Fatima of Nishapur ... She is a saint from among the friends of God, the Glorious and Mighty.”<sup>24</sup> She also is known for stressing upon Dhu’l-Nun that the life of a Sufi is not to be found in supernatural states but in living spirituality through pious practice and thought.

Rabi’a al-‘Adawiyya and Fatima of Nishapur are among the eighty-four women recognized in one of the most interesting Sufi biographical collections, Abu ‘Abd ar-Rahman al-Sulami’s *Tabaqat as-Sufiyya* (*Categories of the Sufis*). Intriguingly, these Sufi women are detailed in the book’s appendix, *Dhikr an-niswa al-muta’abbidat as-sufiyyat* (*The Book of Sufi Women*), which offers an account of Sufi women famous for their sanctity, miracles, and wisdom. Rkia E. Cornell, translator of al-Sulami’s statements concerning these Sufi women, points out that the appendix was separated from the original work soon after al-Sulami’s death and was thought lost until rediscovered in 1991. As one of the earliest manuscripts on Sufi women, the book contains descriptions of women from Iraq, Iran, and Syria, and begins with an introduction attesting that these women were spiritual exemplars:

Masters of the realities of the divine oneness, recipients of divine discourses, possessors of true visions and exemplary conduct, and followers of the ways of the prophets.<sup>25</sup>

Other women mentioned in al-Sulami’s work are Mu’adha al-‘Adawiyya, Hafsa bint Sirin, and Hukayma or Halima of Damascus. Mu’adha founded the first school of female asceticism in Basra and was credited with initiating the way of disciplined

servitude to God.<sup>26</sup> She was praised by Hasan al-Basri (d. 728), who reportedly deemed her an authority on the spiritual path.<sup>27</sup> Her method stressed the principle of servitude through “prayer, fasting, and the performance of night-vigils.”<sup>28</sup> *Tawakkul* (trust in/reliance on God) “was also a central part of her doctrine.”<sup>29</sup> She further “used to pray six hundred prostrations (*rak‘at*) every day and night and would read her nightly portion of the Qur’an in the standing position.”<sup>30</sup> Desirous of meeting death while in prayer, she refrained from sleeping during the night and wore “only thin garments” to enable the cold to keep her awake.<sup>31</sup>

When overcome by the need for sleep, she would get up and wander around the house, saying, ‘Oh Self! Eternal sleep is ahead of you. If I were to die, your repose in the grave would be a long one, whether it be sorrowful or happy!’<sup>32</sup>

She once said to a woman whom she had nursed as a child:

Oh daughter, be cautious and hopeful of your encounter with God, the Glorious and Mighty, for I have seen that when the hopeful person meets God, he is made worthy by his devoted servitude, and I have seen the God-fearing person hoping for safety on the day when humanity stands before the Lord of the Worlds!”<sup>33</sup>

Hafsa bint Sirin (8th century) had memorized the Qur’an by the age of twelve<sup>34</sup> and was known for “her unique ability to interpret” its teachings.<sup>35</sup> She would say to her young students: “Give of yourselves while you are still youths. For I see true spiritual practice only among the youths!”<sup>36</sup> Her spiritual practice included an emphasis on prayer, fasting, and Quranic recitation, and she spent most of the hours of her day in her private place of worship leaving only upon the “full light of day”<sup>37</sup> (in the morning) and returning in time for the noon prayer. “She would recite half of the Qur’an every night and would fast every day,”<sup>38</sup> except for certain holidays (e.g., the Eid).<sup>39</sup> It is related that although the oil of her lamp would sometimes go out while she was praying in the night, it “would continue to illuminate her house until daylight.”<sup>40</sup>

Hukayma or Halima of Damascus (9th century) was a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad and an important Sufi figure in Syria. As with Rabi’a, some biographers conferred the masculine title for a teacher, “*ustadh*,” upon her, as she was considered as having transcended the social limitations of her femininity with her renowned expertise in the formal Islamic sciences and matters of doctrine.<sup>41</sup> Attesting to the wisdom implied in her name, which means “Dear Sage” or “Dear Philosopher,” Rabi’a bint Isma’il related the following story about a visit with her:

I entered Hukayma’s room while she was reading the Qur’an and she said to me, “Oh, Rabi’a! I have heard that your husband is taking another wife.” “Yes,” I said. “How could he?” she replied. “Given what I have been told about his good judgment, how could his heart be distracted from God by

two women? Have you not learned the interpretation of this verse: ‘Except one who comes to God with a sound heart.’”<sup>42</sup> “No” I said. Hukayma said, “It means that when one encounters God, there should be nothing in his heart other than Him.”<sup>43</sup> As I left Halima, I was so deeply moved by her words that I rocked back and forth as I walked in a kind of trance, but felt embarrassed at my condition – that a passerby might think me drunk.<sup>44</sup>

Taken together, these early Sufi female personalities were recognized as individuals who were steeped in the ways of gnosis (*maʿrifa*), and in Sufi principles and practices of renunciation, moral conduct, spiritual motivation, love, and strict ascetic practices, which garnered notoriety that their male counterparts preserved their narratives in compendiums of Sufi lives.

Some narratives of Sufi women interestingly worked within given gender constraints, but subverted them by challenging the purported masculinity of men, suggesting that there were few, none, or even only “half” a real man among them.

Husayn Ibn Mansur has a sister who laid claim to manliness on his path. She was also beautiful. She would come into Baghdad with half of her face covered by a veil and the other half exposed. A great one came to her and said, “Why do you not cover your face entirely?”

She replied, “You show me a man, and I will cover my face. In the whole of Baghdad there is only half a man, and that is [my brother] Husayn. Were it not for him, I would leave this half uncovered also.”<sup>45</sup>

In contrast to some of the perspectives articulated above, Sachiko Murata invokes the metaphysics of submission and femininity, in observing that “when people recognize themselves for what they truly are,” they “will have no choice but to surrender to God willingly” and that, “male or female,” those who submit will become “a woman of light.”<sup>46</sup> Hence the various metaphysical orientations offered by the Islamic tradition include a play of gendered possibilities, not only the genderless perfected human, the masculine woman, or emasculated man but also the man as woman, in a state of surrender.

### ***Medieval period: Female teachers and Sufi orders***

The female Sufi personalities of the formative period inspired generations of classical Sufi women and the development of Sufi piety in the medieval period from the 12th to 16th centuries. This period witnessed the crystallization of the various *ʿulum*, or sciences, of Islam. By this time, diverse aspects of Islamic learning were formalized within coherent schools of thought, and institutionalized within private and publicly funded centers of learning. For Sunnis, Islamic law was now accessed through the four established schools of legal methodology (Hanafi, Maliki, Shafiʿi, and Hanbali), while Islamic theology was taught according to the Ashʿari and Maturidi creeds. These established schools of law and theology were increasingly disseminated

through networks of *madrasas* (endowed colleges of Islamic higher learning), which trained the *‘ulama* (the religious scholars who now staffed administrative hierarchies).

By the medieval period, Sufism too had become accepted as one of the sciences of Islam, the science of the inward, of spirituality and psychology (*‘ilm al-batin*), as we discussed in [Chapter 2](#). In this age of increasingly institutionalized Sufi orders, there was a tendency for Sufi spirituality to permeate mainstream Islamic practice. While the vast majority of women influenced by Sufism will remain unknown to history, the lives of a variety of Sufi female personalities have nonetheless been recorded. Some followed ascetic ways isolated from society, while others became recognized as teachers while also fulfilling their roles as mothers, daughters, and sisters.

During the formative period of Sufism, many leading male Sufi personalities had female teachers; this phenomenon did not cease in the medieval period. Like al-Basri and Dhu'l-Nun before him, the great metaphysician Ibn al-‘Arabi also claimed to have benefitted from female spiritual mentors. As described in his *Ruh al-Quds* (“The Spirit of Holiness”) and *al-Durrat al-Fakhirah* (“The Precious Pearl”), Ibn al-‘Arabi was influenced by two of his most venerated teachers in al-Andalus (medieval Muslim Spain): Shams, “Mother of the Poor,” and Nunah Fatima Bint Ibn Al-Muthanna. While studying with numerous Sufi teachers, Ibn al-‘Arabi specifically mentions that some of the most realized of souls were his female teachers. With respect to Shams, he is known for stating that “among people of our kind I have never met one like her with respect to the control she had over her soul.” The following is also an account by Ibn al-‘Arabi about his female teacher, Shams:

In her spiritual activities and communications she was among the greatest. She had a strong and pure heart, noble spiritual power and a fine discrimination ... She was endowed with many graces. I had considerable experience of her intuition and found her to be a master in this sphere. Her spiritual state was characterized chiefly by her fear of God and His good pleasure in her, the combination of the two at the same time in one person being extremely rare among us.<sup>47</sup>

Ibn al-‘Arabi ends the biographical section of his *Ruh al-Quds* with another female teacher, Nunah Fatima Bint Ibn al-Muthana, whom he met in her nineties. She was said to have had a particular relationship with the opening chapter of the Qur’an, the *Fatiha*, whereby she related to the chapter as a living being that could quite literally be sent to follow and guide those who were in danger of wandering astray.<sup>48</sup> Upholding her as a spiritual exemplar, Ibn al-‘Arabi described Nunah Fatima in the following terms:

Although God offered to her His Kingdom, she refused, saying, “You are all, all else is inauspicious for me.” Her devotion to God was profound. Looking at her in a purely superficial way one might have thought she was a simpleton, to which she would have replied that he who knows not his Lord is the real simpleton. She was indeed a mercy to the world.<sup>49</sup>

In Ibn al-ʿArabi's account, self-control and awareness of God were among Nunah Fatima's foremost qualities. He relayed a story in which she prayed for an individual who had struck her with a whip and left her in a state of anger. Recognizing the spiritual danger of this state, she sought refuge from her anger in prayer and asked for God to "not censure him because of [her] feeling against him."<sup>50</sup> Ibn al-ʿArabi went on to describe how the Sultan had intended to punish this same individual for other wrongdoings but Fatima's prayer interceded with this wish and he was spared execution.<sup>51</sup>

These early experiences with profound women must have influenced Ibn al-ʿArabi not only to proclaim that the experience of *walaya* is fully available to both women and men without gender restrictions but also to encourage women in their pursuit of spiritual reality. As reflected in Ibn al-ʿArabi's magnum opus, *Futuhat al-Makkiyya* (*The Meccan Openings*), he is known for stating that women could attain any spiritual station, including the hierarchy of the saints. It is also reported that fourteen out of the fifteen students to whom Ibn al-ʿArabi conferred the *khirqa* (or the patched frock of dervishes on the spiritual path) were women. In *Teachings of Sufism*, Ernst shares how Jami' wrote an appendix entitled, "On the Remembrance of the Women Knowers of God Who Attained the Levels of the Men of God," in which he recollected a passage from Ibn al-ʿArabi's *Futuhat al-Makkiyya* concerning the number of "Substitutes," one of the highest levels in the world's spiritual hierarchy of divinely realized persons.<sup>52</sup> Upon reporting that "Forty souls" have attained this rank, Ibn al-ʿArabi was asked to clarify his answer in terms of gender. He then answered that he had not used a masculine pronoun "Because there are women among them."<sup>53</sup>

Another prominent medieval example of a female Sufi ascetic teacher was Lala ʿAziza of Seksawa, whose tomb is still a place of pilgrimage in the High Atlas Mountains of Morocco. As recorded in *Uns al-faqir wa ʿizz al-haqir* (*The Convivial Company of the Wandering Poor and the Honorable Strength of the Contemptible*) by Ibn Qunfudh (d. 1407), ʿAziza, who was his teacher, was known for her saintly presence and power:

ʿAziza blessed me with her goodness. I studied with her awhile ... She was a teacher and had a number of followers, both men and women; they were involved in worship and in search for the divine ... ʿAziza was eloquent in her speech, in her knowledge of the Qur'an and Arabic ... People were always crowded around her. I never saw her but that she was doing good. She is filled with God's generosity.<sup>54</sup>

Ibn Qunfudh also described an encounter between ʿAziza and al-Hintati, the governor of Marrakesh and a commanding general who was attempting to conquer south Morocco with his 6,000 men:

ʿAziza walked out of the safety of the foothills and onto the harsh Marrakesh plains and stood—alone—before the great general and his army. She confronted al-Hintati with her words and her own faith. She spoke of God's demands for justice, the pull of the good, the wrong of harming God's

creation. The general was overwhelmed by her. He later described the event to Ibn Qunfundh: "O religious teacher! This one—she is a wonder. She answered me before I could ask anything of her. She knew what was going on inside of me ... my internal thinking, my ideas. I was not able to counter her argument, to reject her requests."<sup>55</sup>

Elaine Combs-Schilling affirms how this story of 'Aziza is still retold after six hundred years and how 'Aziza's tomb is a sanctuary and it is still used as a space for mediating conflicts. Even during the colonial age and the independence war with France, her tomb was a safe haven where many people would seek peace and calm in the midst of the conflict.

'Aziza talked the general out of his conquest. She convinced him to leave the people of Seksawa unharmed. He marched his army back to Marrakesh, and she returned to the mountains. The story of a woman who dared to stand up to a general and his army, armed only with her faith. Down through the centuries people have sought refuge there, people fleeing the excesses of central power or local conflicts, people falsely accused of crimes, people who have done great harm.<sup>56</sup>

In addition to great female ascetic Sufi personalities who preferred the deserts to imperial cities, there also were scholarly personalities who left their legacy not through stories and aphorisms but through metaphysical poetry and writings. Perhaps the most well-known Sufi female mystic and scholar as well as prolific poet and writer in the medieval era was 'Aishah al-Ba'uniyah (d. 1517) who "composed more works in Arabic than any other woman prior to the 20th century."<sup>57</sup> Having been born into a family of religious scholars and poets, many of whom were devout Sufi members of the Qadiri Sufi order in southern Syria, al-Ba'uniyah also studied with Sufi male leaders and some of the well-known scholars of her time. In particular she was known as a copyist, and in the process of her work she was influenced by the famous Sufi treatises by Yahya Ibn Sharaf al-Nawawi (d. 1277), *Kitab al-Adhkar* (*The Book of Recollections*), and 'Ali Ibn Muhammad al-Jurjani's (d. 1414) *Kitab al-Ta'rifat* (*The Book of Definitions*).

Similar to the biographical works of al-Kalabadhi, al-Qushayri, and al-Sulami – all of whom she quotes from their collections – al-Ba'uniyah's own book of reflections was composed, entitled *al-Muntakhab fi Usul al-Rutab fi 'ilm al-Tasawwuf* (*Selections on the Fundamentals of Stations in the Science of Sufism*). In this work, al-Ba'uniyah "compares Sufism to a tree with many branches, yet having four essential roots or principles: repentance (*tawba*), sincerity (*ikhlas*), recollection (*dhikr*), and love (*mahabba*)" (Homerin 2014, xvii). The following is an excerpt which ends her book of Sufi principles:

God looked with favor on a folk,  
So they stayed away from worldly fortunes.

In love and devotion, they worshipped Him;  
 They surrendered themselves with the best intention.  
 They gave themselves up to Him in love  
 And passed away from existence with nothing left behind.  
 Then with kindness and compassion, he turned to them  
 And revealed to them His essence,  
 And they lived again gazing at that living face  
 As His eternal life appeared.<sup>58</sup>

Al-Ba'uniyah's scholarship and mastery of Sufi lexicography can also be experienced through her works of mystical poetry which have been collected in her writings: *Diwan 'Aishah al-Ba'uniyah* and *Fayd al-Fadl wa-Jam' al-Shaml* (*The Emanation of Grace and the Gathering Union*). A variety of key Sufi concepts, such as *dhikr* (remembrance of God), *fana'* (annihilation of lower self) and *baqa'* (subsistence in God), are explored in the 370 poems in *Emanation of Grace* to penetrate different mystical states and stations as well as highlight significant Quranic themes.

As is witnessed in the works of al-Ba'uniyah, the predominant tendency during the medieval period was for a Sufi aspirant to adhere to the teaching of particular male Sufi personalities within a specific Sufi order, and to reverentially follow the traditions of that teacher and order. While most hagiographic literature concerns narratives about male Sufi masters like 'Abd al-Qadir Jilani and Nizam al-Din 'Auliya (d. 1325), one also finds stories about the great women in their lives, particularly mothers, daughters, and sisters. Some of these stories involve women stepping beyond their expected social roles.

Most Sufi orders, for example, are organized around spiritual lineages that pass from fathers to sons or male devotees. The Rifa'i Sufi order, however, diverges from this tendency by tracing its spiritual chain of transmission to Zaynab bint al-Rifa'i and Fatima bint al-Rifa'i – the daughters of its founder, Ahmad al-Rifa'i (d. 1178). Zaynab and her mother, Rabi'a bint Abi Bakr, are both mentioned in the biographical collection, *The Garden of the Guardians and the Extract of the Deeds of the Upright*, by Abu Muhammad al-Witri (d. 1512). Rabi'a bint Abi Bakr was described as "the perfect knower of God" and was given the title by Ahmad Rifa'i of "mother of the *faqirs* [the humble servants]."<sup>59</sup> As for Zaynab bint al-Rifa'i, al-Witri offers the following description:

[A]mong the saints was the patient, humble lady, the one who recollected God, the perfect woman saint, the pure knower of God, the pious God-fearing one, the hopeful luminous one, the one who took precedence over saintly men, through her lofty qualities and her illustrious spiritual states, the mistress of sublime degrees, the mother of men, my lady Zaynab.<sup>60</sup>

As previously discussed about earlier female Sufi mystics like Rabi'a and Fatima of Nishapur, Zaynab too was described as "though she had been created a man" by her own father, Ahmad Rifa'i.<sup>61</sup>

Another very well-known example of an influential Sufi female medieval figure can be found beyond the Middle East, in Mughal India. A member of the royal family, Lady Jahanara (d. 1681), was the daughter of the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan (d. 1666) and of Empress Mumtaz Mahal (d. 1631) (for whom the Taj Mahal was built). The brothers of this “Sufi princess” were Dara Shikoh (d. 1659), himself a significant Sufi personality, and Aurangzeb Alamgir (d. 1707), who would eventually rise to the Mughal throne. A devout and pious disciple of the Chishti Sufi order, Jahanara’s writings attest to her devotion as an imperial princess to the Sufi path and way of life.<sup>62</sup> In contrast to followers of mendicant orders who took a vow of poverty to pursue their spiritual practice, Jahanara maintained her elite status while engaging in the dervish practice of using *dhikr* to connect with the divine.

In her collection entitled *The Confidant of Spirits*, Jahanara conveys her personal commitment to Sufi living. Utilizing the term *faqira* (spiritual poverty and humility), Jahanara acknowledges her spiritual calling as a Sufi. This term was eventually invoked in the inscription at her tomb, which reads: “The annihilated *faqir* Lady Jahanara ...”<sup>63</sup> In this work, she acknowledges that it was “with the aid of fortune and ascendant victory”<sup>64</sup> that she was able to make her pilgrimage “from the capital Agra in the company of my great father toward the pure region of incomparable Ajmer”<sup>65</sup> – where the tomb of Mu’in al-Din Chishti (d. 1236) was located – during Ramadan in 1643. She evocatively describes her mystical experience of visiting the tomb as follows:

Having entered the dome, I went around the light-filled tomb of my master seven times, sweeping it with my eyelashes, and making the sweet-smelling dust of that place the mascara of my eyes.

At that moment, a marvelous spiritual state and mystical experience befell this annihilated one, which cannot rightly be written. From extreme longing I became astonished, and I do not know what I said or did ...

If the sincerity, love and spiritual concentration of this annihilated one demanded that I should not go back home after having gone all the way to that blessed and gracious place, the corner of security – what can be done?

The Beloved has placed a noose on my neck,  
And he pulls me wherever he wishes ...<sup>66</sup>

Significantly, medieval India produced female spiritual masters (known as “Bibis”) and men (referred to as “Babas”). The gender-inclusive aspects of this spiritual culture have not necessarily unfolded progressively over time. It is ironic that in this day and age no women are allowed to enter the inner sanctum of Nizam al-Din ‘Auliya’s shrine in New Delhi, given that Nizam al-Din himself was known for frequently visiting the Sufi female shrine of Bibi Fatima Sam. To him, she was “a man sent in the form of woman.”<sup>67</sup>

Lives of women in medieval periods, such as above, convey how women subverted public and private realms and cultivated metaphysical principles of masculinity and

femininity in their interactions and disciplines. For instance, Lalla, a 14th-century yogini and poetess of Kashmir “used to walk around naked because there were no men before whom she could feel embarrassed.”<sup>68</sup> Lalla, then, came upon Sayyid ‘Ali Hamadani (d. 1385), a Kashmiri Muslim saint, and “then she put on clothes. She had never before met a man, only people in masculine form who were in fact women.”<sup>69</sup> Although many scholars have focused on the piety of antinomian women, their pious dress and behavior can be understood as forms of social deviance. Many dervishes, particularly those known as *qalandars*, expressed pious protest not only through the self-denial of renouncing property and material wealth but also through a rejection of institutions, employment, marriage, and family. Such non-conformism included seemingly “deviant” forms of behavior and appearance, associated with a peripatetic homeless life of “voluntary poverty and mendicancy.”<sup>70</sup> Just as Lala ‘Aziza of Seksawa practiced civil disobedience by confronting a military force, so too did Lalla and al-Hallaj’s sister challenge gender norms by subverting expected feminine attire. Thus, the “anti-establishment” conduct of many dervishes earned both praise and blame, and in some cases dervishes were regarded as the “mouthpiece of social criticism.”<sup>71</sup> These forms of civil disobedience and social critique of Islamic law and society garnered critique from anti-Sufis, as discussed in Chapter 2. Simultaneously, as these negotiations were unfolding within Muslim societies between orthodoxy and heresy – at the helm of which were often women – Orientalist encounters with dervish culture<sup>72</sup> created a culture of fascination and exoticization which further propelled Sufism toward a non-Islamic context.

In his examination of saints’ bodies and legacies of piety, Scott Kugle also explores the life of the North African saint Sayyida Amina bint Ahmad Ibn al-Qadi in 16th-century Fes.<sup>73</sup> In particular, Kugle reflects on the legacy of this *majdhub* (“attraction to god”) as her devotion unfolds in what has been labeled “popular” and “official” Sufism (or “good” and “bad” Sufism).<sup>74</sup> Sayyida Amina, for instance, negotiated her practice of Sufism within her relationships with her family (private) and also among jurists and scholars (public). Kugle writes:

This symbiosis might mean that all saints, women and men, break patriarchal norms, since the goal of sainthood itself is to cultivate an integrated personality that transcends gender divisions. We should pay as much attention to the “effeminacy” of male saints as we do the “empowerment” of female saints, for it may well be that in each male saint is an inner woman, such that the man is a *walī*, not a man like other men.<sup>75</sup>

### ***Age of colonization: Sufi females and the call of resistance***

Whereas in Europe the coming of the modern age is primarily associated with the intellectual discoveries and social dynamism of the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods, the same period brings different associations to mind in traditionally Muslim lands. For Muslims, the advent of modernity meant the beginning of colonization rather than emancipation, as virtually all traditionally Muslim territories

fell under European occupation and imperial administration by the end of the First World War. Political subjugation to countries such as Britain and France marked a great historical as well as existential rupture, and created a fundamental change in the basic terms of reference for Muslim culture and politics. Muslims found themselves entering a new era with an historically unfamiliar, subordinate status; they were now forced to “catch up,” reform, and undertake adjustments in all areas of life – political, legal, economic, intellectual, and social.

In the colonial period from the 17th to 20th centuries, as traditions of Sufism were being reshaped by anti-Sufism and Orientalism, women continued to be present in all walks of Sufi life and practice. In some cases, Sufi women even served as leaders of anti-colonial resistance. Two prominent Sufi women were Nana Asma’u (d. 1864) and Lalla Zaynab bint Shaykh Muhammad Ibn Abi al-Qasim (d. 1904).

Asma’u was one of West Africa’s most important religious teachers and community leaders. She was the daughter of Usman dan Fodio (d. 1817), a Sufi *shaykh* of the Qadiri order and the founder of the Sokoto Caliphate – the capital of which was located in what is today northern Nigeria. Dan Fodio, known as a reviver of Islam, preached an integral Islam based on the Qur’an, the *Sunnah* of Muhammad, Islamic law, and the practices and doctrines of the Sufi path. He was heavily influenced by the works of the medieval synthesizers of the Sufi tradition, such as al-Ghazali and Ibn al-‘Arabi.<sup>76</sup>

Though also a political and indeed military leader, dan Fodio came from a family of religious scholars in the Fulani clan, and his scholarly and saintly reputation were such that he became known simply as the *Shehu* or *Shaykh*. Although the local Hausa kings were Muslim, dan Fodio openly preached against their corruption, abuse of the poor, and deviance from *Sunnah*. In 1804, he was exiled with his family for this political stance. The *Shehu* came to envisage his task like that of the Prophet Muhammad: first to escape the oppression of those resisting the establishment of Islam, and then to fight to secure a realm safe for the religion’s practice. To this end dan Fodio launched what would become known as the Sokoto Jihad, a struggle against local colonial and Muslim rulers to eradicate corruption and idolatry, and to establish the teaching and practice of Islam in a large region that is now divided among several modern African states.

Like her father, Asma’u was well-versed in the breadth of the Islamic tradition, including the Qur’an (which she had memorized as a child), the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (Hadith), and the doctrines and practices of the Sufi path. She was fluent in the local Hausa, Fulfulde, and Tamashek languages, as well as Arabic.<sup>77</sup> Although traditions of Islamic scholarship were frequently the preserve of men, the dan Fodio family made sure that male and female members alike were thoroughly educated. Her father set an important precedent for African Muslim women, in critiquing the cultural resistance to female education in the region.<sup>78</sup>

Counting her father and grandmother among her teachers, Asma’u was tutored in the many handwritten books that the dan Fodio family carried with them in goat-skin satchels. She would eventually become a well-known religious scholar, holding popular classes for both men and women. Increasingly, Asma’u would draw students

from all over the region, particularly women, who knew they had a welcoming but rigorous teacher they could approach. Although women did not customarily travel alone, Asma'u argued that they be allowed to do so for the sake of religious study.<sup>79</sup>

Educating women would become one of Asma'u's lifelong causes. For those women who could not travel due to the demands of marriage and young children, Asma'u pioneered a distance education model, whereby she personally trained older women and younger girls (those without family duties) in a series of religious lessons including Qadiri Sufi values and the basics of Islamic doctrine and practice. These women, known as the *Yan Taru* ("The Associates") would then travel in small groups to remote rural areas, bringing education to women who would otherwise be totally isolated from such opportunities:

The *Yan Taru* organization was comprised of women who were past their child-bearing years, and thus freed from domestic responsibilities, as well as socially free to travel on their own. It was customary in the region for girls to move to their husbands' homes at the start of puberty, settle in, and finish maturing in their new homes, even before consummation of the marriage. This meant that they were focused on their new domestic roles and unavailable to attend education classes outside their homes. For the majority, who lived in rural areas, there were no schools to attend in any event. To address this need, which was made more severe in the aftermath of jihad battles as society was beginning to mend, Asma'u began to prepare mature women to act as extension teachers for rural women. The lesson plans through which she taught them were her poems.<sup>80</sup>

Asma'u's reputation for learning grew, and she comfortably engaged with other, usually male, scholars of renown across Africa. Asma'u's *Yan Taru* model of distance education outlived not only herself but even the Sokoto Caliphate. This model of traveling religious educators remains active in contemporary West Africa, and is still used by Qadiri women.<sup>81</sup>

Asma'u was also famous for her poetry and prayers, written in Hausa, Fulfulde, and Arabic, which elegantly expressed religious teachings, the history of her family and the Sokoto movement, her grief over lost loved ones, and her longing for God. In the following excerpt of her prayer *Tawassuli Ga Mata Masu Albarka*, she eulogizes famous Sufis, and particularly Sufi women, for the inspiration they provide in her own life:

My aim in this poem is to tell you about Sufis  
To the great ones I bow in reverence.  
I am mindful of them while I am still alive  
So that they will remember me on the Day of Resurrection.  
The ascetic women are all sanctified  
For their piety they have been exalted ...  
I remind you how they yearn for God.  
I swear by God that I love them all

In the name of the Prophet, the Messenger of God.  
The scent of their yearning engulfs me.<sup>82</sup>

In the prayer, Asma'u continues to describe the virtues of the Prophet's mother, wives, and daughters, as well as female Sufi figures from early and later periods of Islamic history. In her book, *Sufi Women*, she includes the names of Sufi women who are cited in a 10th-century biographical work by al-Sulami. Asma'u would translate the lives and sayings of these historical Sufi women into all three languages (Arabic, Fulfulde, Hausa), to make them accessible to all groups.<sup>83</sup>

Asma'u herself would become an exemplar of female piety, learning, mystical acumen, and communal leadership in the age of colonization and in contemporary times, especially as Africans were moved by transatlantic crossing for use as slaves in the Americas; their religious practices, such as Sufism, were transmitted during their forced migration. Jean Boyd and Beverly Mack, in their 2011 study, highlight how the same model of education that "inspired" Asma'u was transmitted among Muslim American women via the transatlantic slave trade route.<sup>84</sup> For instance, by the late 20th century, an African-American community in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, reclaimed their ties to the Sokoto Fodio family by studying works of Shehu dan Fodio and following the rituals of the Qadiri order.<sup>85</sup>

Another prominent daughter of a Sufi *shaykha* in the era of colonization was Lalla Zaynab bint Shaykh Muhammad Ibn Abi al-Qasim (d. 1904) of the Rahmaniyya Sufi Order in Arab-Berber Algeria. Rahmaniyya Sufi Order was established by M. Ibn M. Ibn Mas'ud b. 'Abd ar-Rahman al-Fasi (d. 1878), who traveled to Mecca in 1850 and built a Sufi shrine (*zawiya*) there. In 1897, Lalla Zaynab would succeed her father, Shaykh Sidi Muhammad b. Abi al-Qasim, as the order's leader. Similar to Asma'u, Lalla Zaynab was supported by her father to also receive advanced religious education that transferred Sufi teachings, doctrines, and traditions to her.

Politically, Julia A. Clancy-Smith describes Lalla Zaynab's position – along with that of her father – as follows:

In a war of cultures, cultural weapons – and not militant opposition – proved the most formidable defense. And one of the most intrepid warriors in this bloodless battle was a woman, precisely because the colonial edifice was conceived of as an imperial man's world ... Contrary to what is frequently asserted – that colonized women lost power and status – it can be argued that the contradictions of the French regime offered opportunities, under certain conditions, for women to offer nonviolent resistance. Thus, Zaynab's confrontation with French authorities indicates that women could be political agents as well as social actors even in a system of dual patriarchy. "But it is principally her audacity that renders this woman remarkable," observed Zaynab's main opponent within French officialdom.<sup>86</sup>

Led by Captain Crochard, the French colonial administration attempted to displace her from her leadership position. Increased Bureau Arabe interference

occurred because of her gender, which resulted in the installation of her male cousin, Muhammad bin al-Hajj Muhammad, as her father's successor. Just as Zaynab's father was being prepared for his funeral, her cousin, Muhammad b. al-Hajj Muhammad, along with a group of supporters, went to the *zawiya* of the *shaykh*, where they were "confronted by a resolute and hostile Zaynab, who refused to acknowledge his moral and spiritual authority."<sup>87</sup> Zaynab "forbade" the students and caretakers of the *zawiya* "from obeying her cousin's orders, denied him entry to the center's library, books, and buildings, and imposed a sort of lockout by taking possession of the keys."<sup>88</sup> Clancy-Smith suggests that Zaynab's "objections" to her cousin was likely a result of his impiety – which made him an unsuitable inheritor of her father's authority – and the suspicious nature of the "apocryphal" letter that was presented by Captain Crochard to support her cousin's succession.<sup>89</sup> Despite this conflict over succession, Zaynab still received her father's *baraka*, which was "fused [with] grace, blessings, supernatural powers, and charisma."<sup>90</sup>

Nile Green points out that Sidi Muhammad, Lalla Zaynab's father, significantly challenged "the old Sufi patterns of patriarchy" by having Lalla Zaynab succeed him as the head of the Rahmaniyya Sufi Order *zawiya*.<sup>91</sup> She also then was known for transmitting Sufi teachings to the Swiss woman Isabelle Eberhardt (1877–1904), whose short stories in French formed the European counterpart to *Qut al-Qulub* (*Nourishment of the Hearts*) by Abu Talib al-Makki (d. 996).<sup>92</sup> Eberhardt, known as a "passionate nomad," similar to the Traditionalist scholar Guénon, was studying Arabic and Islam in Algeria. She eventually married an Algerian Muslim soldier, converted to Islam, and was initiated into the Qadiri Sufi order by Lalla Zaynab.<sup>93</sup> Eberhardt's propensity to cross-dress and transgress sociocultural norms likely found resonance with Lalla Zaynab, who too was fighting patriarchal authority and colonial structures. These two women, one a female Sufi saint and the other a Western convert, and their relationship with Sufism in Algeria during the colonial era, capture the complex intersection of Sufi tradition, colonial milieus, and gender dynamics.<sup>94</sup> The common understanding of spiritual transmission of a Sufi lineage is usually from a male teacher to a male student. However, Lalla Zaynab's reception of her father's *baraka* challenges this traditional model of transmission, and is further problematized with her own decision to transmit this *baraka* to another woman despite her European descent and convert status.

Last, it is important to note that, unlike Asma'u, Lalla Zaynab was celibate. As an unmarried woman, she was regarded as an ascetic, and from this acquired a status which ultimately provided spiritual authority, the ability to move freely, and social autonomy:

The choice to remain unmarried can increase a woman's power over herself, making her equal in status to a man. This issue in part explains the celibacy of women such as Rabi'a and others, who are shown interacting as equals with men in early Sufi narratives. A case for this comes also from the story of a Sufi woman named Lalla Zainab ... Women's celibacy is indexed also to the

preservation of virginity as a marker of purity, which does not have a similarly valorized male equivalent.<sup>95</sup>

Devoted to caring for those in need, Lalla Zaynab led her order's social and educational services. Venerated for religious devotion and humility as well as sophisticated knowledge, she became an icon of female spirituality and leadership within her Arab–Berber context. Some even attributed to her the capacity to work miracles, and even in postcolonial Algeria, Clancy-Smith reports, “Zaynab endures as the stuff of pious legends and lore.”<sup>96</sup>

## Conclusion

As we will see in [Chapter 7](#), modern social formations, which have largely dissolved the gendered division of the public and private social spheres, have opened up public teaching roles to women, to an extent not possible in premodern contexts, where male control of public life was assumed as normative, and public roles, especially leadership ones, were largely perceived to be socially inappropriate for women. However, as this chapter has illustrated, male dominance of public life did not translate into male dominance of Sufi spiritual hierarchies: women have long been thought of as having exactly the same spiritual potential as men, or even more, with the same capacity for human perfection, and for occupying the various positions of spiritual guardianship and authority in the hierarchy of saints. This theoretical spiritual egalitarianism translated into the actual presence of women in the biographies of Sufi luminaries. Women have been recorded as being among the foundational figures of the Sufi tradition as a whole, and as acting spiritual guides to some of Sufism's most renowned male masters. Their spiritual accomplishments earned them “honorary male” status, or even superlative maleness, speaking both to a (at least theoretical) gender fluidity and at times superiority, and to the ways in which Muslim women navigated the conventional valorization of maleness.

Despite the widespread assumption of female privacy in premodern Muslim contexts, notable Sufi women emerged as public leaders, transcending gender divisions. Even for those women who functioned within socially sanctioned roles of mother or daughter, their spiritual authority and accomplishment were recognized as forming an integral part of the historical transmission of Sufism.

Additionally, Sufi women's hagiographies, some of which have been conveyed above, indicate the transgressive nature of their piety and spiritual disciplines. Historically, these figures and their narratives have been presented in terms of their gender and spirituality. However, their lives can also be conceptualized in terms of social critique. A Sufi woman not only aspired for a spiritual transformation of the inner self, but also ultimately of the outer world, as espoused in the ideal of *insan al-kamil*, which defined the path of Sufism for men and women.

After outlining the metaphysical understanding of the feminine ideal within Sufism, this chapter has considered how this ideal manifested among various

historical Sufi female personalities in several premodern periods. However, in the end the *insan al-kamil* is a genderless category, being expressed in different forms of Sufi authority, including sainthood, which both women and men manifested. This examination showcases the complex relationships and spheres that Sufi women negotiated, be it in ascetic self-renunciation, in familial and court cultures, or through metaphysical and biological forms. The stories of these Sufi women illustrate the contradictory and complementary nature of Sufism which continues to be lived among female *shaykhas* in the contemporary world.

## Notes

- 1 William C. Chittick, "Worship," in *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, ed. Tim Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 235.
- 2 Annemarie Schimmel, *And Muhammad is His Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety* (Lahore, Pakistan: Vanguard Books, 1987), 124–125.
- 3 Farhana Mayer, *Spiritual Gems: The Mystical Qur'an Commentary Ascribed to Ja'far al-Sadiq as Contained in Sulami's Haqa'iq al-Tafsir from the text of Paul Nwyia* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2011), liii.
- 4 Sachiko Murata, *The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), 78.
- 5 Jamal Elias, "Female and the Feminine in Islamic Mysticism," *The Muslim World* 78, nos. 3–4 (1988): 209–224; Murata, *The Tao of Islam*; Annemarie Schimmel, *My Soul Is a Woman: The Feminine in Islam* (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1997); Sa'diyya Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn 'Arabi, Gender and Sexuality* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).
- 6 Murata, *The Tao of Islam*.
- 7 Schimmel, *My Soul Is a Woman*.
- 8 "The friends of God – for them there is no fear, neither do they grieve" (Qur'an 10:62).
- 9 Ahmet T. Karamustafa, "Walayah According to al-Junayd." In *Reason and Inspiration in Islam: Theology, Philosophy, and Mysticism in Muslim Thought*, ed. Todd Lawson (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005), 65.
- 10 Karamustafa, "Walayah According to al-Junayd," 69.
- 11 Michel Chodkiewicz, *Seal of the Saints: Prophethood and Sainthood in the Doctrine of Ibn 'Arabi* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1993), 98. The concept of *qutb* (literally meaning "pole" or "axis") symbolizes the idea of a spiritual center and higher state of reality, which in Sufism is associated with a specific human being.
- 12 Laury Silvers, "Early Pious, Mystic Sufi Women," in *The Cambridge Companion to Sufism*, ed. Lloyd Ridgeon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 48.
- 13 Amila Buturovic, "Between the *Tariqa* and the *Shari'a*: The Making of the Female Self," in *Feminist Poetics of the Sacred: Creative Suspicions*, eds. F. Devlin-Glass and L. McCredden (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 135.
- 14 Annemarie Schimmel, "My Soul is a Woman," in *Women of Sufism: A Hidden Treasure*, ed. Camille Adams Helminski (Boston, MA: Shambhala Publishers, 2003), 99.
- 15 For more about the absence of Sufi women from early biographical writings, refer to Silvers, "Early Pious, Mystic Sufi Women."
- 16 Elias, "Female and the Feminine in Islamic Mysticism"; Buturovic, "Between the *Tariqa* and the *Shari'a*," 144; Arezou Azad, "Female Mystics in Mediaeval Islam: The Quiet Legacy," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 56, no. 1 (2013): 81.
- 17 Javad Nurbakhsh, *Sufi Women* (New York: Khaniqahi-Nimatullahi Publications, 1990), 15.
- 18 Margaret Smith, *Muslim Women Mystics* (Oxford: Oneworld Publishers, 2001), 21.
- 19 Nurbakhsh, *Sufi Women*, 16.

- 20 Schimmel, *My Soul Is a Woman*, 78.
- 21 A. J. Arberry, *The Seven Odes* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1957), 40.
- 22 Smith, *Muslim Women Mystics*, 21.
- 23 Camille Adams Helminski, ed., *Women of Sufism: A Hidden Treasure* (Boston, MA: Shambhala Publishers, 2003), 47.
- 24 Rkia E. Cornell, trans., *Early Sufi Women: Dhikr an-Niswa al-Muta'abbidat as-Sufiyyat* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1999), 144.
- 25 Ibid., 48.
- 26 Ibid., 61.
- 27 Ibid., 268.
- 28 Ibid., 61.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 Ibid., 264.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Ibid., 266.
- 34 Ibid., 270.
- 35 Ibid., 62.
- 36 Ibid., 270.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Ibid., 274.
- 39 Ibid.
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 Ibid., 59.
- 42 Qur'an 26 [*ash-Shu'ara'*], 89.
- 43 Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*, 126.
- 44 Adams Helminski, *Women of Sufism*, 35.
- 45 Murata, *The Tao of Islam*, 326.
- 46 Sachiko Murata, "Women of Light in Sufism" (paper presentation, Congreso Internacional sobre Mistica Femenina "Mujeres de Luz," Avila, Spain, November 1999).
- 47 Ibn al-'Arabi, *Sufis of Andalusia (The Ruh al-Quds and al-Durrat al-Fakhirah)*, trans. R. W. J. Austin (Sherborne: George Allen & Unwin, 1971), 142.
- 48 Ibid., 143.
- 49 Ibid., 143–144.
- 50 Ibid.
- 51 Ibid.
- 52 For an overview of conceptions of the spiritual hierarchy within Sufism, refer to Carl W. Ernst, *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 1997). For a detailed account of Ibn al-'Arabi's cosmological hierarchy, refer to Chodkiewicz, *Seal of the Saints*.
- 53 Carl W. Ernst, *Teachings of Sufism* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 1999), 180.
- 54 M. Elaine Combs-Schilling, "Lalla Aziza," October 20, 2008, <http://lallaazizasante.unblog.fr/>.
- 55 Ibid.
- 56 M. Elaine Combs-Schilling, "Sacred Refuge: The Power of a Muslim Female Saint," *Fellowship: Islam, Peace, and Nonviolence* 60, nos. 5–6 (1994): 17.
- 57 Th. Emil Homerin, trans. *Emanations of Grace: Mystical Poems by 'A'ishah al-Ba'uniyah (d. 923/1517)* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2011), 7.
- 58 'A'ishah Al-Ba'uniyah, *The Principles of Sufism*, ed. and trans. Th. Emil Homerin (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 159.
- 59 Abu Muhammad Al-Witri, "The Garden of the Guardians and the Extract of the Deeds of the Upright," in *Teachings of Sufism*, ed. and trans. Carl W. Ernst (Boston, MA: Shambhala Publishers, 1999), 190.
- 60 Ibid., 191.
- 61 Ibid.

- 62 Ibid., 194.
- 63 Ibid.
- 64 Ibid., 197.
- 65 Ibid.
- 66 Ibid., 198.
- 67 Ibid., 187.
- 68 Murata, *The Tao of Islam*, 326.
- 69 Ibid.
- 70 Ahmet T. Karamustafa, *God's Unruly Friends: Dervish Groups in the Islamic Middle Period 1200–1550* (Oxford: Oneworld Publishers, 1994), 14–16.
- 71 Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 111.
- 72 As discussed in [Chapter 3](#), in the works of Edward W. Lane and John P. Brown.
- 73 Scott A. Kugle, *Sufis and Saints' Bodies: Mysticism, Corporeality, and Sacred Power in Islam* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 81.
- 74 Dervishes who were believed to be particularly inspired, through an all-consuming absorption in divine contemplation and loss of conventional awareness, frequently earned the title *majdhub* (“utterly attracted to God”) or *majnun* (roughly, “possessed by divine madness”). Such terms were applied to a dervish who lived in union with God, experiencing the “ecstatic rapture by losing himself in God” (see Shems Friedlander, *The Whirling Dervishes* [Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1992], 156). Sufi poets such as Nizami (d. 1209) used symbolic narratives in which losing one’s own identity through intense preoccupation with a beloved figure led to the ultimate state of union with the divine Beloved. Others spoke of *hayra*, an experience of bewilderment or mystical perplexity, and similarly affirmed the loss of ordinary “sanity” as a basis for deeper spiritual realization.
- 75 Kugle, *Sufis and Saints' Bodies*, 120.
- 76 Beverly Mack, “Nana Asma’u: Nineteenth Century West African Sufi,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Sufism*, ed. Lloyd Ridgeon (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 190.
- 77 Adams Helminski, *Women of Sufism*, 137.
- 78 Mack, “Nana Asma’u: Nineteenth Century West African Sufi,” 192. As also mentioned in Jean Boyd and Beverly Blow Mack, *One Woman's Jihad: Nana Asma’u: Scholar and Scribe* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000), 185: “Asma’u’s father is known for having admonished men for preventing their wives and daughters from leaving their homes to pursue their studies, stating explicitly that a man who did not educate the women in his family was not a good Muslim.”
- 79 Adams Helminski, *Women of Sufism*, 139.
- 80 O. N. Ukpokodu and P. Ukpokodu, eds., *Contemporary Voices from the Margin: African Educators on African and American Education* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2012), 101.
- 81 Mack, “Nana Asma’u: Nineteenth Century West African Sufi,” 194.
- 82 Adams Helminski, *Women of Sufism*, 140–141.
- 83 Ukpokodu and Ukpokodu, *Contemporary Voices from the Margin*, 100–101.
- 84 Jean Boyd and Beverly Mack, “‘Be Sure of God’s Truth’: Nan Asma’u,” in *Feminist Writings from Ancient Times to the Modern World: A Global Sourcebook and History*, ed. T. K. Wayne (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2011), 158–159.
- 85 Ibid.
- 86 Julia A. Clancy-Smith, *Rebel and Saint: Muslim Notables, Populist Protest, Colonial Encounters (Algeria and Tunisia, 1800–1904)* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), 216.
- 87 Clancy-Smith, *Rebel and Saint*, 235–236.
- 88 Ibid.
- 89 Ibid.

- 90 Ibid., 243.
- 91 Nile Green, *Sufism: A Global History* (Chichester; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 201.
- 92 A foundational collection of Sufi practices that would inspire such early medieval Sufi figures as al-Ghazali (see Green, *Sufism*, 201).
- 93 Clancy-Smith, *Rebel and Saint*, 244.
- 94 Ibid.
- 95 Shahzad Bashir, "Islamic Tradition and Celibacy," in *Celibacy and Religious Traditions*, ed. Carl Olson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 135–147.
- 96 Julia A. Clancy-Smith, "The 'Passionate Nomad' Reconsidered: A European Woman in l'Algerie Francaise (Isabelle Eberhardt, 1877–1904)," in *Genealogies of Orientalism: History, Theory, Politics*, eds. Edmund Burke and David Prochaska (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska, 2008), 203, 265.

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# CONTEMPORARY SUFISM

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*Meena Sharify-Funk, William Rory Dickson  
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