



# Female Sufi guides and the Murshida *fatwa* in Indonesian Sufism: Murshidas in a Sufi order in Lombok

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## Abstract

This article contributes to the wider historicity of female Sufi spiritual guides by engaging Indonesian examples about which very little have been written. While women can and do hold different levels of rank and leadership in Indonesian Sufi orders (*tariqah*), usually among all-female congregations, this article examines a very rare example of a woman in a public leadership position overseeing an entire *tariqah* network inclusive of male and female disciples. Across the Sufi world, it is not common publicly to find women in official positions of leadership as spiritual guides based on a predominant and normative, but fractious, understanding that males are authentic guides with authority to initiate disciples. Keeping with this understanding, the Indonesian national body that governs the correctness of Sufi orders has since 1959 maintained a *fatwa* that bans women from holding head leadership positions as spiritual guides of the highest rank known by the title *Murshida*, which is the female counterpart to the male *Murshid*. We explore the conflation of *Murshid* with leader and subsequently problematize it in terms of gender when the *Murshida* rank is not separated analytically from the male *Murshid*. Arguments suggest that in practice the rank and roles of a *Murshida* in Indonesia are diverse and culturally situated and thus take on different understandings across socio-political contexts. Further to this, the article has two major aims: one is to historicize the place of the *Murshida* in the broader Indonesian context through an anthropological examination of contextual meanings this rank and title carries in practice as opposed to the strict *fiqh* understanding (which is masculinized in the male *Murshid* as a Sufi order's legitimate guide); and the other aim is to document ethnographically the contestation within a Sufi order, *Hizib Nahdlatul Wathan*, on the island of Lombok in eastern Indonesia which had a *Murshida* as its formal leader and spiritual guide from 2005 to 2019 and who continues to hold the *Murshida* rank together with claims to inherited sainthood.

**Keywords** Sufi women guides · Female Sufi guides · Female saints · Sufi leadership · *Murshida* · Sufism · Sufi orders · Lombok · Indonesia

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## Introduction

Female Sufis of high/est rank are both hidden and publicly visible in the world's largest Muslim-majority nation of Indonesia. Knowing this renders it challenging to produce a comprehensive anthropological account of their extensive, plural, and complex roles in daily life and in the diverse worlds of Indonesia's Sufi orders (tariqah). Historically and contemporarily, we know from limited scholarly studies (mostly on Java but with an expanding literature on Madura, Aceh, Lombok, and elsewhere) that Indonesian Sufi women have occupied positions of spiritual authority both informally and formally as spiritual guides of varying ranks, including sainthood.

This article, however, offers new insights into the rare occurrence of public female leadership in Indonesian Sufi orders in cases where a woman occupies the head position as a spiritual guide of a tariqah in her rank as Murshida and saint (note: a Murshida may also be known as Syaikhoh, Khalifah, Muqaddama, or Nyai among other titles depending on her tariqah)<sup>1</sup> in contrast to lower-rank leadership positions, of which we find several examples in the literature and which we discuss later.

Sufi teachings historically integrated into cultural practice across the ethnic groups found throughout the Indonesian archipelago beginning in the thirteenth century. Sufism as cultural practice contrasts to the national, state-based formalization and organization of Sufi orders, which began in 1957 with the formation of a national body, *Jam'iyyah Ahlith Thariqah al-Mu'tabarah an-Nahdliyyah*, consisting of male religious scholars responsible for maintaining legitimacy and correctness of tariqah. In this network of (at present) forty-three authorized tariqah, male spiritual guides with the highest rank act as formal head leaders and are typically referred to as Murshid (and may also be referred to as Syekh, Khalifah, or other titles depending on rank and tariqah).

The rank of Murshida and its associated authority are sources of contention in Indonesia because Murshida as head leader of a tariqah is a forbidden rank and role first declared in a fatwa in 1959 and again in 2018 by Maulana Habib Luthfi Bin Yahya, the current leader of *Jam'iyyah Ahlith Thariqah al-Mu'tabarah an-Nahdliyyah* (Khamim, 2019; Muzayyin, 2020; Smith, 2021). *Jam'iyyah Ahlith Thariqah al-Mu'tabarah an-Nahdliyyah* is attached to Indonesia's largest Islamic organization, Nahdlatul Ulama, and is located in the Shafi'i mazhab (school of jurisprudence) together with orthodox Al-Ghazalian Sufism, both of which are predominant in Indonesia. Despite this fatwa, we know from the limited available literature that in Indonesian Sufism there have been, and still are, notable female Sufi teachers in Sufi orders who possess a high or the highest rank in leadership and sainthood (Birchok, 2016; Fathurahman, 2018; Husin, 2014; Khamim, 2019; Millie, 2012; Mochtar 2002; Mulyadi, 2015; Muzayyin, 2020; Smith, 2011, 2014; 2021).

<sup>1</sup> There is diversity in how rank and titles are acquired and used across Sufi orders among both women and men. Note that although we use the term Murshida, our reference to female leaders may also include the aforementioned titles.

The subject of female leadership in the Shafi'i mazhab is debatable in the Indonesia context because many scholars argue for the restriction of women from leading men in mixed-gender prayer and court contexts while allowing for leadership in organizations, political spheres, and other non-religious arenas. There are also many scholars who do not problematize female leadership in religious contexts by taking as examples a Hadith that instructs to take half of the religion from A'isha (the youngest of Prophet Muhammad's wives) and scholarly references to women guides throughout Islamic history (for example, in the work of Ibn Al'Arabi and al-Sulami). It must be noted here that Al-Ghazali did not hold women in high regard and considered them inferior to men especially in regard to the need for religious education, which he placed in the hands of men (Dahl, 1997). Our ethnographic data demonstrate the porosity of fatwa in practice by showing how local scholars negotiate interpretations of Shafi'i law with indigenous bilateral kinship practices in determining religious leadership together with the inheritance of sainthood and indigenous understandings about gender and female power.

The *Jam'iyah Ahlith Thariqah al-Mu'tabarah an-Nahdliyyah* fatwa currently defines the (male) Murshid as the highest rank in a Sufi order and therefore its leader and head guide<sup>2</sup> and bans women from holding leadership positions, which includes teaching and initiating disciples in-line with an Al-Ghazalian interpretation. A Murshida rank is not always synonymous with the position of head tariqah leader, and therefore, in effect, the fatwa delegitimizes a Murshida's status and authority in cases where her responsibilities are solely concerned with guiding, teaching, or healing and clearly sit outside of the role of leader. Furthermore, because the fatwa conflates Murshid with the role of a leader in a tariqah, it does not account for situations where there may be more than one Murshid in a Sufi order; one of whom is the leader and the others who are high-ranking teachers or guides and may include women.

Therefore, this article also requires separate analytical categories for how we use the term Murshida. The first is how Murshida is used by scholars and the majority of tariqah leaders in *Jam'iyah Ahlith Thariqah al-Mu'tabarah an-Nahdliyyah* to refer to a female leader of the highest rank in a mixed-gender tariqah; and the second refers to how the term may be used in Indonesia's diverse Sufi cultures to refer to a high/est ranking female Sufi teacher or guide (not as head leader) with various roles and responsibilities in her tariqah, usually, but not always, among women only.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> In many Sufi orders, the Murshid is equivalent to the leader or head guide and occupies the highest rank. In some Sufi orders, though, there may be multiple Murshids functioning as teachers, with one of them occupying the role of leader or guide (for example in Naqsyabandiyah and Samaniyah). Furthermore, in the majority of Sufi orders, there are different levels of rank within the Murshid level: the highest is that of the Syekh and subsequent higher ranks move into sainthood. As noted earlier, a Murshid may also be referred to as a Muqaddam, Khalifah, or Badal or in the highest ranks, Maulana Syekh, and saint.

<sup>3</sup> Elsewhere in the Muslim world, the Arabic term Murshid and its female counterpart, Murshida, simply mean "a guide" without necessarily indicating a special rank. In Morocco for example, Murshida refers to a female religious teacher (not necessarily Sufi). Female spiritual guides of the highest rank in Sufi orders around the world, including in Indonesia, may, like their male counterparts, carry different titles across the diversity of Sufi tariqah including that of Murshida, Khalifah, Syaikhoh, and Muqaddama, among others moving into sainthood.

Murshids are predominantly in positions as public leaders in the majority of Sufi orders in the Muslim world, including in Indonesian Sufi orders. There is thus a limited body of research on Indonesia that deals explicitly with the role of female spiritual guides in high/est rank in a tariqah. Representative examples include a few historical studies in Madura that mention only in passing the existence of four Murshidas (of various ranks) during the mid-1900s (Bruinessen, 1992; Khamim, 2019; Mulyadi, 2015); a Murshida (as a tariqah leader) in East Java during the mid-1920s for thirty years (Smith, 2011, 2014) and a Muqaddama regional leader from West Java from 1988 to the early 2000s (Mochtar 2002). It should also be noted that Sufism is also practiced outside of the formal tariqah in the controversial new religious movements, where women hold high rank and spiritual authority in leadership positions (see Millie, 2012; Smith, 2014; Widiyanto, 2014).

In this article, we argue that a Murshida as a spiritual guide and/or leader in Indonesia may possess heterogeneous roles that are both culturally relevant and contextual and that the fatwa fails to capture this complexity. Importantly, the fatwa bans women from initiating other women into a Sufi order but does not specify whether a Murshida rank may be allowed in the case of an all-female congregation. We therefore propose a more diverse and fluid understanding of the Murshida rank that is inclusive of mixed-gender and/or all-female congregations and includes teaching, initiating, healing, and guiding males and females either with or without holding a leadership position. A broad-spectrum approach allows for different kinds of Murshidas in practice across cultural contexts that may complicate a Murshida's role politically, in Islamic and local law, and in kinship, as we demonstrate in this article.

The fatwa ruling by Islamic law theoretically poses a challenge for women Sufis whose communities perceive them to be Murshidas. While it is possible for a woman to become a Murshida without doubling as the tariqah's leader, this fatwa speaks particularly to the understanding of equating a Murshida with a leader, which is typically how it is understood for males. So we put forward here that a Murshida must be understood contextually and not taken to be a direct counterpart to the notion and role of Murshid in his authority as leader, except where her leadership rank is clearly made known. In practice, however, a fatwa may be disregarded because it is not legally bound to the state and is subject to scholarly debate.

The Sufi order we examine here, Hizib Nahdlatul Wathan, sits outside the *Jam'iyah Ahlith Thariqah al-Mu'tabarah an-Nahdliyyah* scope for two reasons: first, it is not a part of the broader Nahdlatul Ulama network, despite also belonging to the Shafi'i mazhab and being deeply Al-Ghazalian, as well as sharing an organizational history<sup>4</sup> and; second, Hizib Nahdlatul Wathan leaders have chosen not to register the tariqah with *Jam'iyah Ahlith Thariqah al-Mu'tabarah an-Nahdliyyah* because they are a Lombok-born tariqah and a distinct stand-alone organization, separate from Nahdlatul Ulama.

The second part of this article examines the fractious ways in which interpretations of Shafi'i law about female leadership led to the contestation of a Murshida in

<sup>4</sup> The founding father of Hizib Nahdlatul Wathan was formerly the head of Nahdlatul Ulama in Lombok prior to founding the Nahdlatul Wathan organization.

the Hizib Nahdlatul Wathan Sufi order attached to the largest local Islamic organization, Nahdlatul Wathan, on the island of Lombok. The Murshida we examine here, Ummi Siti Raehanun (b. 1953) is one of very few publicly acknowledged Murshida in contemporary Indonesia who in theory transgresses the *Jam'iyyah Ahlith Thariqah al-Mu'tabarah an-Nahdliyyah* fatwa. In practice, however, Ummi Raehanun is supported by indigenous bilateral political kinship practices and local religious leaders who endorse her rank and authority as inherited from her late father and Sufi saint, Maulana Syeikh Tuan Guru Hajji Zainuddin Abdul Madjid (b. 1898 / d. 1997) who founded the Nahdlatul Wathan organization (in 1953) and its Sufi order (in 1964). Ummi Raehanun is also understood to have inherited her late father's sainthood and divine blessings.

It must be stated that in the dearth of literature on Sufi women in Indonesia, it is not always made explicit whether or not highly ranked female teachers are considered to be Murshidas in their communities. It is therefore possible that there are Murshidas who are instead referred to with different titles, such as the Javanese honorific Nyai for wives of Kyai (male Muslim leaders, scholars, and/or preachers) and therefore make it difficult to adequately assess the extent to which Sufi women informally possess the Murshida rank, especially when they function in partnership with their husbands or male kin and including in those Sufi orders that do not conform to *Jam'iyyah Ahlith Thariqah al-Mu'tabarah an-Nahdliyyah*.

Ethnographic scholarship on gender and Sufi women's authority from the wider Muslim world including India, Pakistan, Africa, Morocco, Turkey, and Egypt (Abbas, 2002; Hill, 2010, 2018; Ouguir, 2020; Pemberton, 2004, 2006; Raudvere, 2002; Schielke, 2008) collectively demonstrates two major ways in which women exercise leadership: one is in their kinship with male leaders and the other is outside of the formal male-dominated tariqah in informal groups, in ritual spaces including musical ones, at shrines, and through female saints' lineages at sanctuaries. Scholars have therefore called for a re-conceptualization of how we approach understandings about Sufi leadership and gender that is inclusive of the informal sphere as a legitimate authoritative space.

The Indonesia context presents a more complex picture with the ongoing maintenance of male-based authority through *Jam'iyyah Ahlith Thariqah al-Mu'tabarah an-Nahdliyyah* and its monitoring of gender transgressions in tariqah. Under surveillance, Sufi women in leadership across ranks tend to function in partnership with male kin. Cross-culturally, Sufi women with high rank or in leadership positions tended to be dependent on their male kin for their derived status, usually in their roles as either mothers, wives, sisters, or daughters of religious leaders (Coulon, 1988; Hutson, 1999; Pemberton, 2004; Smith, 2021). To this we add another dimension concerning inherited Sufi leadership and high rank of women who support Shafi'i rulings against female leadership, despite functioning informally as a tariqah leader.

We further explore this latter point in relation to another leading female figure in the tariqah in question, Ummi Siti Rauhun (b. 1947), who is the older half-sister of the official Murshida we present, and who possesses the same authority and rank as her younger sister, but is not classed as a Murshida, reasons for which will become clear as the article develops. These sisters in their respective roles in the various spheres of the tariqah reflect wider sensitivities in Sufi orders more globally

concerning gender hierarchy and leadership succession practices associated with patrilineal kinship and patriarchal Sufi gender discourses on authority. We propose that the two sisters in their respective leadership positions as sacred daughters of a Sufi saint need to be analyzed from different angles in order to capture the complexity, fluidity, and flexibility of Shafi'i law as it is engaged by Islamic scholars in Nahdlatul Wathan in an indigenous Sasak<sup>5</sup> and Sufi field of practice.

We begin with an overview of the role of women in Sufism and Sufi orders in Indonesia by looking at the contested historicity of the Murshida as an underrepresented figure in Sufism. Following that we provide a background of Sufism in Lombok and then shift to focus on a detailed ethnographic examination of the role of prophecy in shaping Ummi Raehanun's spiritual authority as a Murshida and saint. Our arguments are based on individual and combined anthropological fieldwork conducted from 2010 to 2022 in the Hizib Nahdlatul Wathan tariqah and wider Nahdlatul Wathan communities in Lombok and East Lombok in particular.<sup>6</sup>

## Historicizing the Murshida rank in Indonesia: an overview

Issues concerning the role and status of Sufi women in history and in the contemporary context in tasawuf and Sufi orders throughout the Islamic world have been well documented across disciplines resulting in a thick and substantial corpus of knowledge (Abbas, 2002; Bop, 2005; Bruzzi & Zeleke, 2015; Cornell, 1999; Coulon, 1988; Fathurahman, 2018; Hill, 2010, 2018; Hutson, 1999; Kuehn & Pokorny, 2019; Milani et al. 2021; Muzayyin, 2020; Ouguir, 2020; Pemberton, 2004, 2006; Raudvere, 2002; Schielke, 2008; Schimmel 2003; Shaikh, 2012; Sharify-Funk, 2020; Smith, 2014, 2021; Widiyanto, 2014). The literature presents the heterogeneity of Sufism and Sufi orders as well as the plural ways in which women as gendered function within and acquire rank in these diverse Sufi worlds including through inherited sainthood/divine blessings, associative statuses as mothers, wives, sisters, or daughters, or through personal spiritual practice and piety.

A contestation surrounding the Murshida rank in Indonesia is that of initiation into a Sufi order's authorized *silsilah*<sup>7</sup> through the sacred promise (Ar. Bay'a), which ties a disciple to his/her guide with a commitment to walk the Sufi path accordingly. The issue of who has authority to administer Bay'a contains a gender contestation in relation to the broader theme of female leadership. In the contemporary Muslim world (non-Western), there is a predominant normative, orthodox interpretation

<sup>5</sup> The Sasak are indigenous to the island of Lombok. They are mostly Muslim (95%) with a Buddhist minority. Sasak heterogeneity is reflected by differences in Sasak language and custom across the major cultural groupings on the island.

<sup>6</sup> Hamdi and Muzayyin are Nahdlatul Wathan scholars. Both were born into Nahdlatul Wathan communities; specifically, into what are now known as "Raehanun's" and "Rauhun's" communities respectively. Smith has conducted ongoing, long-term ethnographic work on Sufi women in both Raehanun's and Rauhun's communities in Nahdlatul Wathan since 2008 until the present (2023).

<sup>7</sup> The sacred chain of transmission that links Murshids and Murshidas to the Prophet Muhammad.

dominated by an Al-Ghazalian perspective that authorizes only Murshids to initiate disciples into a particular Sufi order.

Indonesian Sufi orders regulated by *Jam'iyah Ahlith Thariqah al-Mu'tabarah an-Nahdliyyah* ideally conform to the above understanding that the chain of transmission legitimizing a Murshid's authority is a male-only one rooted in outdated notions about male superiority as documented by the fifteenth century Egyptian *fiqh* scholar, Abdul Wahhab al-Sya'rānī. In his book, *Mizān al-Kubrā*, Sya'rānī reproduces a fatwa and normative Al-Ghazalian gender discourse that bans women from leadership positions in Sufi orders based on ideas about female inferiority to males, claiming that the great Ulama unanimously agreed that there has never been a woman leader of the disciples (Sya'rani, 1989: 189). While there is no question about Sufi women's prominence and achievements throughout history, the issue of female authority in Indonesian Sufi orders thus remains contested by the fatwa that bans women from holding formal and public leadership of a tariqah and therefore restricts them from administering Bay'a.

However, interpretations and practices regarding Bay'a and *silsilah* are, like shariah law, fractious and subject to interpretation in their plurality. There are different kinds of Bay'a for ranks and roles in a tariqah. Historical and contemporary accounts indicate that Murshidas and Sufi women in high rank have indeed held authority in male-dominated *silsilah* in both public and informal leadership. Historical examples include the first known female Sufi saint, Rabiah Al-Adawiyah who instructed males in Sufi practice, great Sufi scholar Ibn Al-Arabi's narration of the feminine and female guides (Shaikh, 2012), and al-Sulami's text on Sufi women of exemplary conduct (Cornell, 1999). In the contemporary context, and occurring more publicly than the various cross-cultural examples from the wider Muslim world mentioned earlier, European and American Sufism boast a number of Murshidas including, but not limited to, the various orders of Hazrat Inayat Khan (Kuehn & Pokorny, 2019) and his Universal Sufism, the Mevlevi Order, the Indian-inspired order known as Sufism Reoriented, and the Shadhiliyya tariqah. To this, we add Indonesian examples of Murshidas with authority to administer Bay'a to men and women in the following Sufi orders: Hizib Nahdlatul Wathan, Naqsyabandiyah Mazhariah, Naqsyabandiyah, and Tijaniyah, as discussed below.

## Female Sufis of high rank

Early historical and anthropological accounts of Sufism in Indonesia were clearly influenced by Dutch-Anglo orientalist views of Islam and thus overlooked the importance of women in Sufi orders which led to a lack of feminist interest in the topic (Smith, 2014). Despite this, scholarship shows us that Indonesia indeed has a history of high-ranking female teachers and Murshidas in several tariqah (Bruinesen, 1992; Khamim, 2019; Mochtar 2002; Mulyadi, 2015; Muzayyin, 2020; Smith, 2011, 2014, 2021; Widiyanto, 2014). More often than not, such women were/are embedded in their familial statuses in Sultanates and in Sufi orders attached to traditional Islamic schools (*pesantren*), while others reach/ed high stations as healers

or through dreams which gift/ed them divine knowledge from saints, angels, and deceased sacred Muslim female figures.<sup>8</sup>

In order to understand the power dynamics and gender relations in Indonesia's Sufi orders, we need to have insight into the workings of *pesantren* to which the majority of Sufi orders are attached or at least share an affiliation through the head of the *pesantren* known as a Kyai (who may also double as a Sheikh or Murshid). In *pesantren* culture, leadership and power are typically inherited within families and may be inclusive of women through bilateral and political kinship systems common in Indonesia (see Smith & Woodward, 2014). We return to probe into this dynamic later in the article.

The literature regarding women Sufis in high/est rank in Indonesia is still growing. Widiyanto (2014: 105) identifies four possibilities for women and Sufi women teachers in Sufi orders in Indonesia: (1) women are disciples and not leaders; (2) women may be leaders with authority to teach but not to initiate new members through the Bay'a; (3) women may be leaders with authority to initiate other women only; and (4) women may be leaders with full authority to initiate both males and females in the order.

To this, we add clarification concerning that women may teach all-female students with or without the authority to initiate and that women may teach males and females in mixed-gender gatherings with or without the authority to initiate. Our example of Ummi Raehanun demonstrates the possibility of a Murshida with full authority to initiate males and females in addition to teaching them. The issue of initiation with the sacred promise remains contested even if a Murshida does so in an all-female congregation because the fatwa explicitly bans women from doing so in any situation. Below, we survey the minimal literature on Murshidas in Indonesian Sufi orders and show the variety of Murshidas as well as women with high rank who are not referred to as Murshidas but who exercise limited spiritual authority and leadership.

The examples show diverse meanings the Murshida title carries in practice and indicate that of all the cases, Murshida Ummi Raehanun appears to stand alone as the head figure of an entire tariqah, which is in-line with the *Jam'iyah Ahlith Thariqah al-Mu'tabarah an-Nahdliyyah* definition (that being a head leader of a tariqah with authority to initiate both males and females and to teach them). Again, we point out that there is a difference between a Murshida acting as the head of a tariqah as opposed to holding a lower-level leadership role beneath the head Murshid (which we see mostly in the examples below).

Like in other Islamic organizations in Indonesia, *Jam'iyah Ahlith Thariqah al-Mu'tabarah an-Nahdliyyah* also has a women's wing, *Wanita Thariqah Nahdliyyah*, which is active in spreading Sufi teachings and practices among Nahdlatul Ulama women (predominantly in East Java and Madura). Women leaders of the regional wings are usually referred to as Nyai and are learned women in their communities, *pesantren*, and Sufi orders. These women leaders tend to women-only

<sup>8</sup> Examples include Prophet Muhammad's first wife Khadija and their daughter Fatimah, the Prophet's other wives, and the first known female Sufi saint, Rabia Al-Adawiyah, among others.



congregations under the supervision of the head Murshid (or Khalifah) in accordance with *Jam'iyah Ahlith Thariqah al-Mu'tabarah an-Nahdliyyah* gender discourses and roles.

The Naqsyabandiyah Mazhariah tariqah in Madura is one such tariqah with a history of Murshidas. The data on these Murshidas in the literature are incomplete and inconsistent, so here we can only reproduce those minor findings. Bruinessen (1992) relates stories he heard that place three Murshidas in the mid-1900s. Other data suggests that there were four Murshidas, the first of whom acquired her rank in the late 1800s (Mulyadi, 2015). The available data suggests that these Murshidas mostly tended to women-only Sufi circles and were not formal leaders of the tariqah. This female line includes Nyai Aisyah, her granddaughter Nyai Tobibah (d. 1995), Nyai Syarifah Fatimah, and Syarifah Nor<sup>9</sup> (Bruinessen, 1992; Mulyadi, 2015: 11).

These women were appointed the rank of Murshida by Murshids/Sheikhs between the late 1800s and the mid-1900s. Most of these Murshidas were relatives of Murshids in this tariqah (Nyai Aisyah was appointed a Murshida rank in the late 1800s as the mother of the 43rd Murshid; Nyai Syarifah Nor<sup>10</sup> was the wife of the 45th Murshid, and Syarifah Fatimah was a descendant of the Prophet who was given the Murshida rank by a Kyai who was not a relative) (Bruinessen, 1992; Khamim, 2019: 103). Indonesian scholars (Khamim, 2019; Mulyadi, 2015) have demonstrated how Sufism and Sufi orders are a part of Madurese cultural practice and therefore incorporate and integrate both women and men into the tariqah tradition. It is clear here that these Murshidas for the most part were operating within all-female congregations and not explicitly as tariqah figure heads, with the exception of Nyai Tobibah who initiated both males and females (Widiyanto, 2014).

In East Java, Smith (2011, 2014) conducted ethnographic fieldwork in a Sufi order embedded in a *pesantren* with female descendants of a Murshida who derived her Murshida rank from her husband (who appointed her as his replacement prior to his death) in 1925 (or so) for almost 30 years in a branch of what is now officially the Naqsyabandiyah Kholidiyah. She was formally acknowledged as both Murshida and leader of the tariqah, yet her students referred to her with the Javanese honorific title Nyai, for wives of Kyai. During her leadership, the wider community of Nahdlatul Ulama tariqah leaders rejected this particular tariqah branch as deviant. Upon her death in 1954, her son was sworn in as the formal Murshid and leader, and the tariqah was authorized as legitimate. Note that this tariqah branch was part of the broader Naqsyabandiyah network with multiple Murshids, so this particular Murshida was not in possession of leadership in the way Ummi Raehanun was in her role overseeing an entire tariqah network inclusive of lower-ranking male leaders.

Nyai Hamnah (also spelled Chamnah) (b. 1943) from a Tijaniyah tariqah in Cirebon, West Java, was appointed by a male Khalifah leader, a regional-level leadership role as Muqaddama from 1988 to 2004 in which she served both women

<sup>9</sup> Mulyadi does not refer to Syarifah Nor but instead to Syafah.

<sup>10</sup> Nyai Syarifah Nor's rank as Murshida continues to be a contested issue among tariqah members despite the continuous celebration of her spiritual authority through annual Haul events (Khamim, 2019: 104).

and men in her congregations (Millie, 2012; Mochtar 2002). Widiyanto (2014) has documented women Sufis with high rank in the Qadiriyah-Naqsyabandiyah tariqah in North Java but demonstrates the restrictions these women face, suggesting they do not fit the category of Murshida and are therefore unable to attain leadership positions. There are many more examples of Sufi women teachers in Aceh who have acquired leadership and high rank among women-only circles (Husin, 2014; Srimulyani, 2014).

Smith (2014) has further shown how women Sufis with informal high rank in Hizib Nahdlatul Wathan, the Sufi order we examine in this article, possess important social functions as intercessors with saints, healers, and spiritual brokers for those seeking advice within their local communities. Such women, she argues, are embedded in family kin groups dependent on male-derived power and status, but they themselves do not hold official ranks within the Sufi order. Again, these examples confirm that women Sufis with informal authority do not necessarily exercise power separately from their male kin or their head Sheikh, and as Smith (2014) demonstrates, their power must be qualified and usually also managed, by those males in the *pesantren* and Sufi environments of which they are a part.

Such female Sufis contrast to aspiring female disciples in Hizib Nahdlatul Wathan who participate in the women's section called Hizib Nahdlatul Wathan Banat. Together with the men's tariqah, they form a "twin tariqah" that emphasizes gender complementarity under a male teacher or scholar's authority and counsel. In this "twin tariqah," focus is on gender-segregated communal recitation and *dhikr* chanting and remembrance practices in communities (for detailed accounts, see Smith, 2021; 2023).

These examples contrast with the data we present here, mainly because the focus of this article concerns a different category of female Sufi, being the sacred daughters of Maulana Sheikh in their respective leadership of the tariqah. Gender/sex systems and hierarchies (in Lombok) must be analyzed in terms of socio-cultural context and not simply religious-based gender ideology. A more thorough investigation shows how the complex and intersecting roles of culture, religion, and law shape the ways in which women experience Sufism and its associated ranks.

Our arguments build on Smith's (2012, 2014; 2021) previous ethnography on Sufi women in Nahdlatul Wathan to demonstrate how Ummi Raehanun's and Ummi Rauhun's inherited and sacred leadership is complex. It shows that when there is no son or male kin available to replace the Murshid post-death, a female kin member may do so until her own son or another male kin is ready to take over the role as a way to ensure that power and authority are contained in the Sheikh's lineage. Ummi Raehanun's inheritance of formal leadership was supported by two understandings: Nahdlatul Wathan scholars of Shafi'i law argued that women may lead men in religious matters; and a fatwa her father issued before his death that she was to inherit the leadership of Nahdlatul Wathan. In addition to inheriting the leadership, locals also understand that Ummi Raehanun inherited her father's sainthood and divine blessings. We return to this point shortly in the latter part of the article.

Of the above noted cases, we see four examples of women in formal leadership positions with authority to initiate males and females: Murshida Bu Nyai from

East Java, Madurese Murshida Nyai Tobibah, Muqaddama Nyai Hamnah from West Java, and Murshida Ummi Raehanun from Lombok. Again, the difference between Ummi Raehanun and the other female spiritual guides is that Ummi Raehanun held the head leadership of her tariqah together with inherited sainthood, whereas the other female guides were in a subordinate rank and gender hierarchy with Murshids (or Khalifahs). There does not appear to be any other reports of subsequent female spiritual guides in public leadership positions with authority to not only teach to mixed-gender congregations, but to also initiate male and female disciples. As stated earlier, and as we suspect, it is entirely possible that such Murshidas exist/ed elsewhere in Indonesia but are not described as such and remain unknown publicly.

In 2005, the Sufi order Hizib Nahdlatul Wathan officially pronounced Ummi Siti Raehanun as its head Murshida. Below the Murshid/a is the rank of Badal, which in this context means “replacement” (of the Murshid) with authority to initiate new members in the name of Maulana Syeikh. Ummi Raehanun in her capacity as a Murshida directly initiates males and females as the head of the tariqah and also has the authority to appoint Badal positions (Muzayyin, 2020). We note here that at present there are no women active in Badal positions in this tariqah and neither is there a history of Sasak women in this position. Upon further examination, we see that Ummi Raehanun’s Murshida role is contextually bound by political kinship and is supported by indigenous notions of female power that Smith has discussed at length elsewhere (see Smith, 2012, 2021).

In 2010, Ummi Raehanun was formally acknowledged by her community as a saint (see Smith, 2021). Later, we map out the process of Ummi Raehanun’s rise to the ranks of Murshida and saint to show how it is embedded in wider cultural and political kinship complexes that support the leadership prophecy concerning Ummi Raehanun’s son, proposed by her late father. By contrast, we elucidate how her older half-sister and opponent, Ummi Rahun, also informally functions as a Murshida without using this title, in a separate branch of the same tariqah which experienced violent conflict and polarization in the aftermath of Maulana Syeikh’s death in 1997 (see Hadi, 2010; Hamdi & Smith, 2012; Smith & Hamdi, 2014). Her role as a leader and adviser can be located in our argument that the Murshida rank is wide-ranging and expansive. Ummi Rahun does not actively initiate disciples into the Sufi order, but she does serve as the highest ranking leader in her community; her counsel is sought by male religious leaders (referred to as Tuan Guru in Lombok), Sufi sheikhs, scholars, and tariqah teachers, and her blessings are sought by her students and ordinary community members.

Ummi Rahun holds the highest rank in her faction and has the authority to activate or deactivate the tariqah, and in this case, she has deactivated it despite leading Sufi figures requesting her to reactivate it, as we discuss later. She also holds sole authority to give Sufi prayers and *dhikr* formulae particular to this tariqah to those who request them from her. In this way, she serves in the same ways as does her younger sister, Ummi Raehanun, but without the title of Murshida and in her capacity as head, she has formally deactivated the tariqah. Ummi Rahun occupies the highest rank in her organization, but her son, Zainul Majdi (former Governor of Nusa Tenggara Barat 2010/2018), is placed in front of her as the official leader and

head of the organization (which now has separated legally from Ummi Raehanun's Nahdlatul Wathan and is called NWDI).

Indonesian Muslim scholars in the field of Islamic Studies have produced a minor body of literature on this conflict in Nahdlatul Wathan and its Sufi order (Hadi, 2010). The majority of these are mostly theological, normative, and historical and do not interrogate sociologically or anthropologically the issue of gender or female Sufi authority, with the exception being the dissertation of Muzayyin (2020) whose work we draw on here in this present article. By contrast, ethnographic representations of gender and Sufism in Nahdlatul Wathan are also minimal in the anthropological literature on Lombok with the majority being Smith's feminist ethnographic work (2012, 2014, 2021, 2023). We build on existing literature on Sufism in Nahdlatul Wathan by further exploring the ways in which sainthood and female spiritual authority are couched in the notion of prophecy.

Later, we demonstrate how Ummi Raehanun's rise to the leadership of Nahdlatul Wathan and its Sufi order, together with her subsequent sainthood and ascribed rank of Murshida, are supported by a prophecy her father declared in the form of a discourse about the "true" leader of the organization, who is Ummi Raehanun's sixth child, son, and saint, Zainuddin Atsani (b. 1982) (and who since 2019 has held formal leadership of Nahdlatul Wathan and its Sufi order). We show how the organization uses discourses on prophecy and sainthood to reproduce and maintain authority and power within Maulana Syeikh's kin line both bilaterally and patrilineally across shifting contexts.

## Sufism, Wetu Telu, and Nahdlatul Wathan

Sufi teachings are estimated to have entered Lombok significantly later than elsewhere in the Indonesian archipelago in approximately the fifteenth century when they adjusted to indigenous Sasak culture, which at that time blended with Hindu-Buddhism (Budiwanti, 2000; Cederroth, 1999). After Sufi Islam was indigenized, it became known as *Wetu Telu*, which we discuss shortly. It is difficult to estimate how many Sasak Muslims actively participate in *tariqah* in contemporary Lombok. It is, however, understood anthropologically that Sufism is an embedded cultural practice in community life worlds. At present, we find multiple Sufi orders in Lombok attached to Indonesia's largest national Islamic organization, Nahdlatul Ulama<sup>11</sup> together with stand-alone orders. These include Naqsyabandiyah, Qadiriyyah, Qadiriyyah wa Naqsyabandiyah, Alawiyyin, Sammaniyah, Tijaniyyah, Naqsyabandiyah Qadirun Yahya, Al Chistiyah, and Dakwah wat Tabligh. Nahdlatul Wathan is the largest local Islamic organization in Lombok and was founded by Sufi saint and scholar Tuan Guru Hajji Zainuddin Abdul Madjid (Maulana Syeikh) in 1953. The saint's Sufi order, Hizib Nahdlatul Wathan (established in 1964), was formed much

<sup>11</sup> Leading religious figures in Nahdlatul Ulama connected to several *tariqah* include TGH Turmuzi (leader of Pondok Pesantren Qomarul Huda), Sahfari Hazim (in East Lombok), and TGH Saleh Hambali (in Bengkulu).

later than many of the other Sufi orders which were already strongly embedded in Sasak society and which were formalized over time through association with Nahdlatul Ulama (established in 1926) (for history on Sufi orders in Indonesia, see Bruinessen, 1992).

The historical record estimates the arrival of formal Sufi orders in Lombok in the late 1800s and early 1900s under Dutch colonial rule, as is the case for Indonesia more broadly due to the large number of Muslim scholars studying abroad in Mecca at that time. The Sufi orders served as sites of opposition to Dutch colonial rule and were instrumental in its overthrow (Bruinessen, 1992; Nasuhi, 2000). Murshid Tuan Guru Haji Ali Batu from the Naqsyabandiyah tariqah led the resistance movement against both Dutch and Balinese invaders at that time (Zakaria, 1998).<sup>12</sup>

Prior to the revolts against the Dutch and Balinese, Sufism was already firmly enmeshed in indigenous Sasak culture, which in the literature is described as Wetu Telu (see Budiwanti, 2000; Cederroth, 1999). During the late 1800s and early 1900s, several Sufi orders were associated with Wetu Telu indigenous and Hindu-Buddhist practices and experienced backlash from puritans, including the marginalized Pengadangan tariqah community and the highly popular Naqsyabandiyah tariqah in Padamara in East Lombok (the only Murshid of which passed away in 2021).

After lengthy study in Mecca where he demonstrated an outstanding scholarly ability, Maulana Sheikh founded the Hizib Nahdlatul Wathan Sufi order in response to these Sufi Wetu Telu and Naqsyabandiyah tariqah communities whom he referred to as practitioners of satanic tariqah because they had abandoned shariah. In his influential *wasiat* poetry (2008), he writes.

Banyak sekali membisikkan haqiqat (Many whisper of the hakekat)  
 padahal mereka buta syariat (But they are blind to the shariah)  
 sehingga orang awam banyak terpikat (the ordinary folk are captivated by it)  
 menjadi zindik menjadi sesat (and so they become heretic and deviant)

Adapula berkata begini (There are those who say this)  
 Thariqatku ini adalah isi (My tariqah is complete)  
 Syariat itu tidak perlu lagi (Shariah is no longer necessary)  
 Karena isilah yang memang dicari (because completeness is what is sought  
 indeed)

Maulana Syekh frequently pointed out that his Hizib Nahdlatul Wathan Sufi order was a bridge for the Wetu Telu and Naqsyabandiyah Sufis referred to in the

<sup>12</sup> Notable Sufi Murshids in Lombok include Tuan Guru Haji (TGH) Umar Kelayu (b. 1837–d. 1930) of the Qadiriyyah wa Naqsyabandiyah tariqah, TGH Muhammad Shaleh Hambali Bengkel (b. 1893/6–d. 1968) of the Khalwatiyyah-Qadiriyyah tariqah, TGH L. Muhammad Shaleh Lopan (b. 1819–d. 1942) and TGH Muhammad Ali Batu Sakra (d. 1891) of the Naqsyabandiyah tariqah, TGH Yahya al-Kalimi Jerowaru (b. 1921–d. 1984), TGH Umar Syafi'i Gerantung, and TGH. Zainuddin Tanjung Teros from Qadiriyyah wa Naqsyabandiyah tariqah (Alfarisi et al., 2016). There is also reference to a document estimated to have been written in the 1800s relating to the Sammaniyah tariqah which was found in the village that is assumed to have been the location of the former Selaparang kingdom.

above poetry in order to balance hakekat with shariah, but in order for this to happen, he had to adjust traditional tariqah practices by easing the level of commitment to suit the modernizing lifestyles of Sasak society (Hadi, 2010). Maulana Syeikh claims that he received a message from the Prophet Muhammad instructing him to form this new tariqah by compiling prayers and *wirid* (special chants or prayers) from major Sufi orders. Because of this, his tariqah is popularly known as “the last of all the tariqah” (see Habib, 2010; Noor et al., 2014).

Maulana Syeikh successfully socialized the Nahdlatul Wathan organization and its tariqah into communities around Lombok, with the greatest concentration in East Lombok. The majority of the Nahdlatul Wathan community has been initiated into the tariqah through their schooling in the organization’s *pesantren* network. Smith and Hamdi (2014) and Smith (2021) have described Nahdlatul Wathan communities as sites of “communal Sufism” because Sufism is embedded culturally in all aspects of life and religious praxis. Almost all community members have taken the Sufi promise (Bay’a) and gather for recitation of the tariqah’s core text, the *Hizib*, every Thursday night in religious leaders’ homes.

As stated, when the saint passed away in 1997, his second daughter, Ummi Raehanun, inherited the leadership of the organization and then later of its tariqah. Her rise to leadership was supported by a fatwa her late father issued prior to his death instructing his loyal Tuan Guru followers to instate Ummi Raehanun as his replacement (for more on Ummi Raehanun’s controversial rise to leadership, see Hamdi, 2011; Smith, 2012; Hamdi & Smith, 2012; Smith & Hamdi, 2014). Ummi Raehanun’s rise to leadership of the organization in 1998 was opposed by her half-sister and only sibling, Ummi Rahun. The organization split into two factions under the leadership of each daughter and suffered from ongoing violence until 2002<sup>13</sup> (see Hamdi & Smith, 2012 for more detail). The organization remains divided, and in 2021, Ummi Rahun’s faction created a new organization called NWDI under the leadership of her son (Zainul Majdi). Ummi Rahun and her son publicly denounced Ummi Raehanun’s leadership because she is female.

Maulana Syeikh’s death divided not only the wider Nahdlatul Wathan organization but also its Sufi order, Hizib Nahdlatul Wathan. His daughter’s rise to leadership eventually saw her replace former senior leaders of the Sufi order. Maulana Syeikh held the position of Murshid from 1964 when he formally established the tariqah and until his death in 1997. Parallel to this position, he also acquired the status of a saint and Qutb (a perfected saint of saints). His role as a waliyullah or saint in the afterlife remains an important one in the Sufi order for his kin and those who hold high rank because they continue to seek his advice and guidance, as we explore later in the section on prophecy, kinship, and sainthood. Throughout the life of the tariqah, Maulana Syeikh had only a few “Coordinators” or “Badal” (also referred to

<sup>13</sup> The original Nahdlatul Wathan organization and its *pesantren* schools were located in the town of Pancor in East Lombok. After the organization split into two factions due to conflict over Raehanun’s leadership, Raehanun and her supporters were forced to flee. They relocated to the village of Anjani. The two factions thus became known as Nahdlatul Wathan Pancor (Rahun) and Nahdlatul Wathan Anjani (Raehanun) (see Hamdi and Smith 2012 for a detailed account).

as Khalifah or Muqaddam in other tariqah) whom he appointed to teach and initiate new disciples into the order.<sup>14</sup>

In 2019, Ummi Raehanun's son Atsani replaced her as leader and head Murshid of Nahdlatul Wathan and its Sufi order after he was "democratically" elected. It is important to state here that Atsani has now ascended to a higher degree in rank with the supreme title, Maulana Syeikh. His mother still holds her Murshida rank and title, but as we will see, it remains contested. We now turn to a discussion of this in the context of how the organization and its Sufi order engage ideas about prophecy and sainthood in the reproduction of power and authority in the post-conflict environment. We also look at the role of male kin in containing a Murshida's authority in the Sufi context by identifying the role of a dominant culture of male Sufis and saints in Lombok.

### Prophecy, kinship, and sainthood

Here, we aim to further complicate understandings about Murshidas by considering Sasak cultural complexity surrounding Ummi Raehanun's rank and the subsequent conflict that ensued in this community in response to the late Maulana Syeikh's prophecy about the future of the Sufi order's leadership. We argue that while women can, and do, assume ranks as Murshidas in Indonesian Sufi orders, in the case of Lombok, there is a wider political kinship context intertwined with indigenous notions of female power and sainthood at play that must be considered as central and pivotal in the making of a Murshida.

Like elsewhere in Indonesia, the majority of Sufi orders in Lombok are under male leadership by Murshids and/or Syeikhs (or a Kyai). Indonesian Sufi orders demonstrate the role of kinship systems in maintaining authority and leadership generationally and show how women Sufis with high ranks are more often than not dependent on, or to varying degrees associated with, their father's, husband's, son's, or other male kin's power and status through either inherited or derived authority.

As we demonstrate for the Lombok case, this points to a gendered contestation inherent in women Sufis whose authority is embedded in cultural and political kinship and patriarchal complexes. We examine Sufi women's embeddedness in male kin to broaden the scope by bringing the issue of female sainthood and the power attached to such a rank into this understanding, particularly as they relate to indigenous Sasak matrifocal understandings. A major point is that, in the Indonesian context, understandings about indigenous kinship practices are not necessarily

<sup>14</sup> In 1994, Hizib Nadhlatul Wathan changed its use of Badal to Coordinator for disciples to represent Maulana Syeikh in initiating new disciples into the order. After Ummi Raehanun assumed the leadership of the tariqah, she reinstated the use of "Badal" instead of "Coordinator" and appointed only a few Tuan Guru with these positions with herself as the sole authority to conduct Bay'a. Now with Atsani as head Murshid, Badal has been replaced again with Coordinator.

problematized for bilateral descent of political and “divine” (saintly) power into both male and female heirs (Smith, 2014, 2021). This, combined with the fluidity in Sasak understandings of shariah and rulings about female leadership in Shafi’i law, means that Muslim women can become leaders in the highest rank of sainthood as Ummi Raehanun’s case exemplifies.

Sainthood in Indonesia is inextricably tied to Sufism and is predominantly masculinized. Indonesian female Sufi saints are less well known in comparison to a rich tradition associated with famous male saints, but they do exist. Quinn (2012) has listed twelve such deceased female Muslim saints in Java. Outside of Java, Woodward (2018) has published on a deceased female Muslim saint in Bali; Smith (2021) has published on Lombok’s living saint Ummi Raehanun and her sacred kinship with the Sasak goddess Dewi Anjani who is also understood to be a saint; and Birchok (2016) has published on deceased female Sufi saints in Aceh.

Sufism in Lombok is masculinized in the tradition of sainthood and pilgrimage to saints’ graves or maqam spread around the island, one of which belongs to Maulana Syeikh. Saints’ sacred sites are associated with the history of the spread of Islam in Lombok, as they also are in Java with the legends of the semi-historical figures known as Wali Songo or Nine Saints. Lombok boasts a network with approximately eight major maqam<sup>15</sup> and several minor ones each associated with a male saint who spread Islam in the area where the maqam is located (see Budiwanti, 2021). Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Sundays are particularly busy days at these sacred sites with trucks filled with male, female, and child pilgrims seeking to interact with the saint’s spirit for personal reasons including for healing illness or personal problems or seeking wealth, pregnancy, or a marital partner, to pay nazar or to acquire spiritual knowledge. These interactions are part of *tawassul*—a belief that a deceased saint’s spirit can intercede with Allah on behalf of the pilgrim—and are common ones across the wider Sufi world.

The historical production of Sufi sainthood in Lombok is thus a male-dominated one, as it is elsewhere in Indonesia, and continues to produce male Sufi saints. Maulana Syeikh’s sainthood was acknowledged far and wide throughout Indonesia. In Lombok, in addition to Maulana Syeikh is the famous Sasak saint and Murshid of Qadiriyah wa Naqsyabandiyah, Tuan Guru Ali Batu from Sakra, who led the revolts against Dutch colonialists in the 1800s. Ummi Raehanun’s claimed ascension to sainthood in 2010 is that of the only female saint we are aware of in the oral history of Lombok. It is also common to hear Ummi Raehanun’s followers refer to her as a saint, but this is a sensitive issue that remains out of the public sphere. As mentioned, it is also understood locally that Maulana Syeikh’s sainthood descended to his grandson and current leader, Murshid Atsani. Subsequently, there is a fatwa in the organization that each and every leader of the organization must be a saint (see Smith, 2021).

<sup>15</sup> We can find major graves or maqam sites in most areas around Lombok, including Makam Batu Layar, Makam Bintaro, Makam Loang Balok, Makam Kuranji, Makam Wali Nyatok, Makam Selaparang, Makam Maulana Syeikh, and Makam Ali Batu, among many other minor ones around the island.



Maintenance of power within prestigious Kyai families in *pesantren* networks is a political practice common across the archipelago, including in Lombok. Because Sasak indigenous kinship systems are for the most part fluid and negotiated exchanges between bilateral and patrilineal descent practices, the descent of power and leadership to a female kin member in a *pesantren* setting is acceptable despite being situated within a wider patriarchal and shariah-derived patrilineal domain. Kinship systems co-exist and co-mingle across political situations and in their flexibility can be manipulated to support the continuity of power and authority within a particular family when leadership inheritance descends bilaterally to a female kin.

Ideas presented here expand on Smith's (2021) anthropological work on how politico-cultural kinship practices supported Ummi Raehanun's leadership succession and reproduce ideas about her sacredness. Smith (2012) argues that in Ummi Raehanun's case, Sasak bilateral kinship practices rather than normative patrilineality in shariah were core to her assuming the leadership. Yet, at the same time, there was also a fluid exchange between normative interpretations of shariah and Sasak notions of female power (Smith, 2012, 2021). To this, we add the Sasak practice of nurturing matrifocality as core to understanding the mother-son dynamic in this Sufi order, which positions the mother above a son in a hierarchy of kin.

Smith (2021) has further presented an ethnographic narrative that demonstrates how Ummi Raehanun's inherited leadership is also valid in her shared kinship with the indigenous "mythical" goddess and Muslim saint, Dewi Anjani, whom is understood by indigenous Sasak to dwell above Lombok's magnificent Mount Rinjani. Smith (2021) locates historical wider Indonesian patterns of goddesses in partnership with kings and leaders as a core discourse that contributed to the legitimacy of Maulana Syeikh's leadership to demonstrate ethnographically how this sacred kinship transferred to Ummi Raehanun after Maulana Syeikh passed away. Atsani, however, does not share this understanding or sacred kinship with the goddess. Such understandings demonstrate the fluidity and fractious assemblage of the ways in which Nahdlatul Wathan Muslims and Sufis engage in Islamic discourses about leadership and authority.

Combined with indigenous nurturance for matrifocality, where the figure of the mother is central to not only the hearth and household, but to the wider community in her role as sustainer, educator, and caregiver, we find a complex cultural web of kinship practices that intermingle in the politics of descent and leadership in Nahdlatul Wathan's Sufi order. In *pesantren*, wives of Kyai are referred to as Nyai or Ummi (Arabic for Mother), and in Nahdlatul Wathan, both Raehanun and Rahun are referred to as Ummi in their roles as mothers and leaders of the Sasak people. More recently, Raehanun has acquired an even higher title among her most loyal disciples correlating her to a status very near to that of her late father, that of Masyaikhoh (great female Syeikh). The wider Nahdlatul Wathan congregation places Ummi as their mother at the sacred center of their community; she is revered accordingly as a saint who has inherited her father's divine blessings.

At her religious sermons, Tuan Guru religious leaders sit together in the congregation cross-legged at her feet beneath her special chair. One by one, they wait in line to kiss her hands and feet before and after a public event. This is a common

practice of reverence for elders or those with high status in Indonesia and its Muslim communities. Having said this, it is also the case that Ummi Raehanun's Murshida rank is a contested one. Many in the organization oppose her use of the Murshida rank in their understanding that a female cannot lead a tariqah. Others, while greatly honoring her for being the daughter of their great saint and Syeikh, instead hold to the prophecy her father foretold when Atsani was a young boy that, out of the four of Ummi Raehanun's sons, Atsani was destined to lead the organization and its Sufi order (Fig. 1).

At first glance, there is nothing unusual about the familial descent of authority within a Sufi order or succession of sainthood based on prophecy. We find many examples across the Muslim world, and especially in Indonesia, for example in Sufi orders including Qadiriyyah wa Naqsyabandiyah Suryalaya (Java) and Naqsyabandiyah Kholidiyyah (Java and North Sumatra) and wider *pesantren* traditions (Dhofier, 1999; Zulkifli, 2002). When placed in this model of leadership, combined with the prophecy that Atsani has always been the intended leader, Ummi Raehanun's role as leader, for many, was seen as a necessary and temporal one in order to keep the kin line intact while waiting for her son to assume power over the organization. In an interview with Atsani in 2020, he told us,

**Fig. 1** Left: Murshida Ummi Raehanun, upper center: Maulana Sheikh Tuan Guru Zainuddin Abdul Madjid, right: Maulana Syeikh Atsani, lower center: Atsani's son Atsalis, the Sufi order's future Murshid. Photo taken by Bianca J. Smith in a branch of Hizib Nahdlatul Wathan in Anjani, East Lombok in October 2022



My mother held the responsibility of spreading this Sufi order before I took over. I was entrusted with this task from my grandfather Maulana, but because I was so young when he appointed me with this role, he transferred the responsibility to my mother until I was ready to take over, and because of this I am now the head Murshid.

In 2015, Atsani claims he heard “whisperings” from his grandfather Maulana in the Sasak language. Maulana told him, “*ka wah wayanae englanjutan*” (the time has come for you to take over). After this, he proclaimed himself as the head Murshid but did not take an active role because his mother was still performing the chief tasks of swearing in new initiates and teaching. He said that his mother had more right to do so than he did because she is Maulana’s daughter. More recently, after he formally assumed the leadership in 2019, and his mother’s health had started to decline, Atsani replaced her and openly started initiations and teaching both within Lombok and in other parts of Indonesia.

Atsani’s ranks and titles have also been sites of contestation over the years. When he was only a young child aged 4 years old, Maulana Syeikh graced him with the title he himself was given as a young scholar recently returned from long-term study in Mecca in the 1930s: “Tuan Guru Bajang,” which means young Tuan Guru. This was Maulana’s prophecy for the future leader who would resemble him in his youth as a young Tuan Guru. Atsani was too young at the time to formally use his title and did not fulfill any of the requirements needed to be a Tuan Guru.<sup>16</sup> Maulana Syeikh at that time spread the word throughout his congregations that his grandson Atsani was the future young Tuan Guru and began carving a process of creating a future identity and status for Atsani. Atsani often accompanied his grandfather during his sermons, and community members sought blessings from the young boy.

After Maulana Syeikh died in 1997 and conflict ensued as Ummi Raehanun took power, her nephew Zainul Majdi (son of Rauhun) also acquired the title Tuan Guru Bajang. His speeches reminded the community of those of his late grandfather’s, and thus, they started to refer to him as another young Tuan Guru in the image of Maulana Syeikh. Maulana Syeikh gave Zainul Majdi his name as a shortened version of his own name. Many in the community also interpreted this as a sign that his grandfather envisioned him as the future leader of the organization. As he rose to political prominence in his role as governor, he became popularly known as Tuan Guru Bajang. Indeed, Majdi displayed/s high intelligence through the acquisition of his doctorate degree at Al-Azhar University in Egypt and is known for his superior knowledge of Islam. He more recently has assumed the Syeikh title and is also considered to be a Ulama. The changing of titles of both Atsani and Majdi from Tuan Guru Bajang to Syeikh is a Sasak and Muslim tradition based on age and transition into a higher rank.

<sup>16</sup> A Tuan Guru must fulfill several requirements before being acknowledged by the community, including: he must have made the hajj; he must have studied Islam at length either overseas or in one of Nahdlatul Wathan’s higher education institutes; and must be recognized as a leader by the community.

The misappropriation of titles has been an ongoing source of contention within the organization's factions as they each compete for legitimacy. Ummi Raehanun's and Atsani's sainthood is also contested by loyalists of Majdi who claim that Majdi is the prophesized saint, not Atsani or Raehanun. The prestigious Tuan Guru Bajang title together with claims to sainthood is found only in Nahdlatul Wathan in the persons of Maulana Syeikh, Atsani, and Zainul Majdi and has been an ongoing source of conflict used in pursuit of legitimacy and power. The two sides of the organization, divided and ruled by each daughter, compare Atsani's and Zainul Majdi's piety and knowledge in their quest to prove one at the expense of the other. Stories abound about the gifts both Atsani and Zainul Majdi possess and again work to confirm Maulana's prophecy. In sum, Atansi is known for his mystical abilities and Sufism, and Zainul Majdi is known for his intellectual abilities in Islamic studies.

In August 2021, in accordance with further instruction or "whisperings" from Maulana Syeikh in the afterlife, Atsani acquired the new title, Maulana Syeikh, and passed on the Tuan Guru Bajang title to his young son and future leader, Atsalis, as the third Tuan Guru Bajang through Ummi Raehanun's kin line. Atsani said that "it was really difficult for me to change to the new title, but I did so because Maulana Syeikh asked me to. And because of that, I obeyed": "sami na wa-ala'na" ("we have heard and obeyed" as stated in the Qur'an). The use of the Tuan Guru Bajang title and its reproduction works much like royalty and associated titles in the maintenance of authority and legitimacy. At the time Atsani changed his title from Tuan Guru Bajang to Maulana Syeikh, Zainul Majdi was still using his famous Tuan Guru Bajang title and still does up until now. However, many of his loyalists started referring to him as Maulana Syeikh shortly after Atsani acquired the title.

This section has demonstrated how the two half-sisters in their respective leadership positions were and still are contained within a wider male-dominated and patriarchal dependency, which is supported by the wider Islamic culture of normative patrilineality and transmission of authority through the male-line. It can also be argued that this relationship is a partnership between kin as a strategy to ensure the survival of the organization and its Sufi order and keep it in the family lineage with a matrifocal emphasis on mother-son relations which places a mother in a higher status than her son.

The use of prophecy as a way to legitimize Ummi Raehanun's Murshida and saint ranks has been a powerful one because although it was supported by indigenous Sasak bilateralism and notions of female power associated with the goddess Dewi Anjani, it was at the same time contained by patrilineality in normative shariah law as demonstrated by the prophecy that the intended leader has always been Atsani. It is therefore clear that Ummi Raehanun's Murshida and saint ranks are supported by interchangeable bilateral and patrilineal kinship systems that are situated in a masculinized Sufi culture. A similar argument can be posed for Ummi Rauhun's informal leadership in partnership with her son, Zainul Majdi, despite her public rejection of female leadership.

## Murshidas through the eyes of their disciples

Here, we show how the wider Nahdlatul Wathan community considers both Umami Raehanun and Umami Rahun to be the sacred daughters of Maulana Syekh and how the power each of these women carries spiritually and socially suggests that in their sacredness they each possess the authority to appoint themselves as Murshidas or not in accordance with their respective claims to receiving guidance from their deceased father. Therefore, the Murshida rank is not simply something they have “inherited” but it is a sacred role and divine blessing which they agentively perform and negotiate on their own terms directly from Maulana Syekh (for Umami Raehanun) and in response to wider Islamic gender discourses. The roles the sisters have performed publicly and informally over the years demonstrate the diversity of a Murshida’s roles in practice, including as public leader, informal leader, guide, teacher, and healer. Ethnographically, we show how in the wider Hizib Nahdlatul Wathan Sufi order (as a currently split tariqah) Umami Raehanun, Umami Rahun, and Maulana Syekh Atsani perform as Murshid and Murshidas (formal and informal) in their respective responsibilities and roles. It must be noted that this tariqah at present is a rare example of a Sufi leadership structure with a formal Murshida (Umami Raehanun) in possession of a higher rank than a legitimate Murshid as head tariqah leader.

In her role as former leader of the Nahdlatul Wathan organization and its Sufi order (from 2005 to 2019), Umami Raehanun’s Murshida responsibilities and duties indeed did match that of the male Murshid equivalent; she oversaw the Sufi order, she initiated all new disciples both male and female, and she taught to mixed-gender congregations; she advised male Tuan Guru scholars and teachers and appointed their ranks accordingly, and male and female disciples sought her blessings, wisdom, and healing and consulted with her on personal, official, and public matters. She still carries out these duties as Murshida but she is no longer the official leader of the tariqah. Many in the Nahdlatul Wathan community and Sufi order do not simply identify Umami Raehanun as the organization’s leader who has inherited her father’s legacy, but she is also a spiritual leader who has inherited her father’s spiritual abilities and sainthood.

Umami Raehanun’s half-sister, Umami Rahun, however, does not neatly fit this same definition despite also possessing a similar capacity in leadership and authority. Umami Rahun has never supported her younger half-sister’s leadership based on claims that females are not allowed to hold leadership positions in Islam and partly because of the prophecy regarding Tuan Guru Bajang as discussed above. This decision led to the (now legal) separation of the Nahdlatul Wathan organization, its schools, Sufi order, and community for 20 years until the recent formation of a new organization NWDI in 2021.

Interestingly, although Umami Rahun’s son Tuan Guru Bajang Zainul Majdi has been the formal leader of Umami Rahun’s faction since its split during the conflicts from 1998 to 2002, Umami Rahun has maintained the highest rank without declaring herself as the leader. In the aftermath of the conflict and the separation of the organization, Umami Rahun chose to deactivate the Hizib Nahdlatul Wathan Sufi order. Despite this choice, she still receives guests at her home who seek her blessings and prayers for special occasions and a particular kind of Sufi knowledge that her late

father Maulana Syeikh distributed throughout the Sufi order. Because she is the informal leader, and acts at the level of a Murshida, major Sufi teachers do not have any authority to distribute this particular Sufi knowledge without her permission. Therefore, those seeking it still require a consultation with her in order to receive it. (Some former Badal have become active in Ummi Rauhun's faction of the Sufi order in recent years in their own local areas without challenging her authority and decision to keep the tariqah formally deactivated.)

Several high-ranking Sufi teachers have requested Ummi Rauhun to reactivate the Sufi order by appointing new Badal positions because they perceive a need for it in the community but she rejects such requests for several reasons, including the economic burden it will place on the community. In Nahdlatul Wathan communities there is a tradition of paying in cash for initiation into the Sufi order and different kinds of *wirid* and prayers they prescribe. Ummi Rauhun does not want to either burden the community or be the one responsible for changing this traditional practice. From this narrative, we can see that Ummi Rauhun is acting in the capacity of a semi-active, informal Murshida, and the authority that she holds is a clear indication that she is indeed the head of the non-active Sufi order. During an interview with a Tuan Guru close to Ummi Rauhun, he explained that if Ummi Rauhun ever chose to reactivate the Sufi order, she would appoint one of the existing male Sufis of a high rank as its Murshid. Ummi Rauhun's orientation toward a practice of Islam that does not support Sufism also reflects the wider changes that occurred in her faction post-conflict that scholars have described as more in-line with "modernist" and even "Salafi" Islam (Hamdi, 2019; Smith & Hamdi, 2014).

Ummi Rauhun does not present a mystical aura or claims to sainthood like her younger sister does (but many quietly perceive her as a saint). Her loyal community perceives her to be a highly intelligent woman and respects her greatly in her former role as a school teacher. As we discussed earlier, Ummi Rauhun does, however, exert the highest level of power and authority over her faction of the organization. Not a single decision will be made without first seeking her prayers and blessings in her capacity as a sacred daughter of Nahdlatul Wathan's beloved Sufi saint.

Hizib Nahdlatul Wathan in Ummi Raehanun's stronghold in Anjani is popular among community members who have direct access to Ummi Raehanun and her religious sermons despite the ongoing contestation of her Murshida rank among senior Tuan Guru figures. These male leaders express concern because in their understanding the role of a Murshid/a is extremely heavy and only certain disciples can make it to that level and rank. According to these Tuan Guru leaders, Ummi Raehanun ceased major tariqah practices her father once taught including *muraqabah*, *khatam*, and *suluk*<sup>17</sup> (Muzayyin, 2020). During her role as the tariqah's leader and Murshida, Ummi Raehanun instead focused on spreading the Sufi order through initiations without leading any Sufi practices. New disciples practiced the required

<sup>17</sup> Muraqabah is a meditation-like practice of constant self-awareness with Allah watching.

Khatam has various meanings in reference to Quranic recitation practices performed by a Murshid and his/her disciples.

Suluk is a spiritual retreat held in a quiet place where disciples fast, do not talk, and do *dhikr* and other practices to be close to Allah for 10, 20, or 40 days or more.

prayers and *wirid* through photocopies of certain books without direct advice or instruction from her as Murshida (Muzayyin, 2020).

Some of her critics have expressed concern that she does not fulfill the spiritual role of guiding disciples in depth, which is core to the role of a Murshid/a. While many of her followers do not question this change, scholars such as Muzayyin (2020) argue that after in-depth interviews with leading male figures in the tariqah, it became clear that she was lacking in the required training and so was not able to maintain those practices. Interestingly, her son and current Murshid, Atsani, has reinstated all of those formerly suspended practices. There is also another understanding that, despite her lacking in training, she instead has acquired her father's divine blessings in her sainthood and is able to offer her followers a very deep spiritual encounter with his blessings through her person.

In practice, however, her new initiates are comfortable with her distant role and instead they limit their practice to *wirid* only without seeking to increase their self-knowledge through in-depth instruction with her as Murshida. Many of her disciples express their love for her because when they see her they see Maulana Syeikh. Some disciples break down in tears of joy upon sighting her person at sermons or during initiation ceremonies, the latter one being a mystical experience with new initiates claiming it was actually Maulana Syeikh who initiated them spiritually through Ummi Raehanun's body. Such understandings are typical within Sufi orders more broadly and demonstrate the ongoing role of an order's guide or founder within his/her *silsilah* and Sufi saints in the afterlife.

Because Ummi Raehanun's sainthood is understood to be something she inherited from her father, the community wraps her in her father's identity. Tuan Guru who work closely with Ummi Raehanun tell stories about her sainthood and her mystical abilities on their travels, including her predictions and ability to foresee and know information before a situation occurs, such as that of the severe earthquakes that hit Lombok in 2018. These loyal teachers believe that any demeaning words spoken about the saint will result in punishment from Allah.

These claims to sainthood have been further endorsed by Sayyid Abbas bin Alawi al Maliki (a relative of Professor Dr. Sayyid Muhammad Alawi Maliki al Hasani, a teacher at the famous Madrasah Shaulatiah in Mecca where Maulana Syeikh and other leading Indonesian scholars studied during the early 1900s). The Sayyid gave Ummi Raehanun the title of Mujahidah Islam (a female warrior for Islam) in acknowledgement of her never-ending dedication to strengthening Islam.

Disciples describe her dedication to developing the Nahdlatul Wathan organization by building new schools across Indonesia in the words of Maulana Syeikh who often used to say that one should embrace life "like the sun that always shines." Professors in Islamic universities in Lombok also attribute their successes to saint Ummi Raehanun's prayers for them.

Having said this, there are just as many ordinary community members who do not perceive Ummi Raehanun as either a saint or Murshida but instead demonstrate deep respect for her as Maulana Syeikh's daughter. Others interpret that stories about sainthood and mystical abilities are simply ways for Ummi Raehanun and her family to maintain authority and power over the Nahdlatul Wathan organization, its assets, and communities. Whether one agrees with women holding the rank of Murshida

or not, it is clear that in Hizib Nahdlatul Wathan, both Ummi Raehanun and Ummi Rauhun are honored as sacred leaders because they are the daughters of a Sufi saint.

Ummi Raehanun's and Ummi Rauhun's social-religious roles as Murshidas in Nahdlatul Wathan communities eventuated after the death of their father. The title Ummi (mother) for both of these female leaders is used as a replacement for the grand title Maulana Syeikh, which is reserved for males of the highest rank. Ummi Raehanun's and Ummi Rauhun's words and orders are understood to be directly from Maulana Syeikh and thus hold absolute power that is uncontestable within the ranks. The two sisters are embedded in a male-kin line that connects from their father to their sons and grandsons and continues to play a crucial role in the organization and its Sufi order even in cases where their sons have formally assumed leadership. The matrifocal core in Sasak kinship and the reference to Ummi Raehanun and Ummi Rauhun as sacred mothers reinforces the need to look at kinship practices and the cultural complexity inherent in Sufi orders where Islamic law is practiced fluidly within the wider local cultural context.

## Conclusion

This article has argued that female Murshids, or Murshidas, not only have an historical place in Indonesian Sufism, but also a contemporary one. In order to understand the diversity of the Murshida figure in Indonesia's Sufi orders, we have argued more generally that the roles of a Murshida are various and culturally contextual and thus need to be interpreted outside of the *Jam'iyah Ahlith Thariqah al-Mu'tabarah an-Nahdliyyah* fatwa scope which defines and restricts a Murshida to that of the forbidden role of the head guide or tariqah leader.

Such normative understandings about gender in Indonesian Sufi orders place women in a lesser rank than men in-line with an Al-Ghazalian-derived discourse. Yet the Lombok case demonstrates the fractious ways in which such ideas interact culturally with plural interpretations of female leadership in Shafi'i law as Sufi practice. Our ethnographic data and associated arguments about the different ways to interpret Murshidas in Lombok are also relevant to other cultural contexts in Indonesia such as in Madura, Aceh, and Java.

We put forward the understanding that in Indonesia, Murshidas have mostly operated in all-female congregations either as guides of a high rank or as leaders within a gender hierarchy with male Murshids. We further identified four documented cases where female guides possessed full authority to initiate male and female disciples in mixed-gender congregations; all of which occurred under male Murshids' leadership, except for Ummi Raehanun. In her public leadership and possession of sainthood, Ummi Raehanun oversaw an entire tariqah network as the highest ranking living leader with lower-ranking male subordinates. To add complexity, we illustrated how her older half-sister, Ummi Rauhun, in her public rejection of female leadership, in fact acted informally at the level of a Murshida. Her choice to deactivate the Sufi order post-conflict is at odds with her possession of full authority over male tariqah leaders who consider her as their sacred leader. The sisters' divergent leadership practices as public (Ummi Raehanun) and informal (Ummi



Rauhun) demonstrate the different ways Murshidas agentively negotiate with various Muslim and Sufi gender discourses in practice.

Beyond this, we demonstrated the ways in which indigenous Sasak understandings about mothers and female power underlie authority and kinship in Nahdlatul Wathan's Sufi order. We showed how Ummi Raehanun's authority in the ranks of Murshida and saint, although being contained by male-kin, at the same time, is supported by indigenous notions about female power and matrifocality, and thus indicates that Ummi Raehanun in her own right earned her Murshida rank. Ummi Raehanun and Ummi Rauhun exercise authority and power in their own right respectively as heiresses, yet the installment of their sons as the public and official leaders of the respective organizations suggests that descent of leadership ideally belongs in the male realm in Nahdlatul Wathan and its Sufi order.

The contested cases we have detailed for Hizib Nahdlatul Wathan demonstrate how male kin support Murshidas in a Sufi patriarchal container that is culturally defined by fluid relations between indigenous bilateral kinship practices, ideas about inherited sainthood, Shafi'i law, and orthodox Al-Ghazalian Sufism. In such a context, a Murshida, as both a daughter and a mother figure at the same time, replaces a Murshid to ensure continuity in familial power and authority, and therefore, she acts as a leader for both males and females until she is replaced by a suitable male kin. This fluid practice of descent also allows for female leaders or Murshidas in the future should there be a political or cultural need.

At present, Murshida Ummi Raehanun appears to be the only known female Sufi guide and saint in contemporary Indonesia who has publicly possessed full leadership at the highest level of sainthood in a mixed-gender tariqah.

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