INTRODUCTION

In 1891 Khadija bint Yusuf died in Damascus at the age of 110. Although she is unknown today, Khadija was one of the most powerful women in Syria and the wider Ottoman Empire. She not only formed close bonds with leading politicians, but she also headed a branch of the Naqshbandiya-Khalidiyya—the Sufi order founded by her husband, Shaykh Khalid. He was a charismatic Kurdish religious leader and wali (saint) from northern Iraq, who won a wide range of followers in the 1820s in the Ottoman Empire and then the rest of the Muslim world. Shortly before his death in 1827, Khalid entrusted Khadija with administrative and financial responsibilities, and her role in Ottoman politics and in the Sufi order grew afterwards. Seven decades later, Khadija’s power was so great that the Ottoman Sultan at the time, Sultan Abdulhamid II, made certain that her dying request to rebuild Khalid’s grave in Damascus was fulfilled.

By analyzing the writings of Shaykh Khalid and his followers, court records and the firman decree, my paper today will illustrate the role of women in the Naqshbandiya-Khalidiyya throughout the nineteenth century. While women are absent from the scholarship on the Naqshbandiya-Khalidiyya, they nonetheless played a role in Khalid’s career and in the growth of the order. They served as teachers, administrators, financiers, and even political leaders. I will argue that the prominence of these women should come as no surprise, since there is nothing intrinsic to Shaykh Khalid’s teachings or devotional practices that preclude women from participating in the order or in political life generally. I will also focus on how Khadija and other women assumed control over Khalid’s properties after his death, won exemptions from military services and financial privileges for Khalid’s family, and forged ties with Ottoman elites, including female members of the Ottoman royal family.

Significantly, my approach to women in the Naqshbandiya-Khalidiyya is consistent with the ideas of Itzhak Weismann, a leading scholar of Sufism. He observes in the preface to Naqshbandiya: Activism and Orthodoxy in a worldwide Sufi tradition that “Naqshbandi authors tend to focus on the ‘great men’ of their brotherhood and to depict them as they ought to have been rather than they
actually were". To address these biases, he argues that scholars must read Naqshbandi writings critically and crosscheck them "where possible against independent sources". My paper reflects my research in Syrian and Turkish archives over the last eight years—archives that contain a wealth of "independent sources" about the Naqshbandiyah. From these archives we will see that a tradition of "great women" emerges from the Naqshbandiyah along with the tradition of "great men".

I hope this paper will begin a process of re-framing how scholars look at Sufi orders during the nineteenth century. Although there is growing scholarship on the role of women in Sufism generally, there remains little work on Sufi and women in the nineteenth century and how leading Sufi figures viewed women and their place in society. Ultimately, this type of work will help us better understand the development of Muslim societies during a critical period in the modern history of the Middle East.

Women and the Rise of the Naqshbandiyah-Khalidiyyah in Kurdistan

Born in 1776 in a small village in the Ottoman-Iranian frontier district of Shahrazur in what is today northeast Iraq, Shaykh Khalid began his career in 1810, when he journeyed to India and joined the Naqshbandiyah-Mujaddidiyah tarīqa. A year later, Khalid returned to Kurdistan. There he founded a suborder of the Naqshbandiyah-Mujaddidiyya that bore his name: the Naqshbandiyah-Khalidiyya. But differences with local religious and political leaders as well as international tensions prevented him from settling anywhere permanently until he came to Damascus in 1823. He died there four years later, reportedly a victim of plague. After his death, the Naqshbandiyah-Khalidiyyah grew into a vast socio-religious network, which would go on to play a key role in Muslim societies from Algeria to Southeast Asia.

Women were integral to Shaykh Khalid’s success, beginning with the socio-cultural milieu in which the Naqshbandiyah-Khalidiyyah first arose: the Jaf tribal regions in Northern Iraq, Turkey and Iran. In particular, the Jaf tribes differed from Arabs and even Turks in their attitudes toward women, particularly during Shaykh Khalid’s lifetime. The British traveler, James Rich noted in the 1810s that women in the Jaf tribe lacked “the slightest pretension to a veil, nor had they even a handkerchief round the lower part of the face like Arab women.” They did not even attempt to “hide themselves” from foreigners, and there “were as many women as men present” in Jaf camps. In Rich’s mind, the behavior of Jaf women epitomized the wide freedoms enjoyed by women in a Kurdish society in which women “mixed freely” with men in public and were “treated as equals by their husbands.” The freedom of Kurdish women was so striking that Rich also states that the condition of Kurdish women was “far better” than that of their Turkish, Arab or Iranian counterparts and that Kurdish women in particular derided and despised “the slavish subjection of the Turkish women.” Equally striking is Rich’s discussion of the central role of women in regional diplomacy, in the life of elite Kurdish families in the 1810s and 1820s, and in the important role of Keighan, believed to be an English female knight, in the foundational story of the Baban family, the ruling family of Khalid’s hometown, Sulamaniyya.

How accurate were Rich’s observations of Jaf behavior and the roles of Kurdish women in the Baban and other families? While research on Kurdish women in the nineteenth century remains limited, Martin Van Bruinessen’s work on matriarchy in Kurdish societies suggests that Kurdish populations in the Ottoman lands—both Muslims and non-Muslims—accepted female political and military figures in the nineteenth century. He cites the female Kurdish chieftain who fought for the Ottomans in the Crimean War and the tale of Zambilikifros in which a queen falls in love with a prince who had foresworn luxury for the life of a wandering dervish. Even more importantly, Van Bruinessen discusses Adela Khanum, the wife of the ruler of Shahrazur, Shaykh Khalid’s and the Jaf’s home region, Adela Khanum was a descendant of the ruling Ardalani family, who frequently intermarried with Jaf rulers. She was Shahrazur’s ruler in all but name from the turn of the twentieth century until 1924—even presiding over the province’s court. Although Adela Khanum governed several decades after Rich visited Kurdistan, her success lends some credibility to Rich’s portrayal of Kurdish women, particularly that of elite women.

Within this context, women were critical to forming community bridges among various tribes for Shaykh Khalid and penetrating the local political elite. Though there is scant biographical information on these
women in the hagiographies and official histories, Khalid’s correspondence, Rich’s observations and official Ottoman government records give us a wider view. From Khalid’s correspondence and Ottoman records, we know that at least one of Khalid’s wives had brothers and other relatives in Aramayn (Hawraman), a mountainous region on the Ottoman-Iranian frontier northeast of Shahrazur. In another one of his letters, Shaykh Khalid mentions that he had recently visited his mother (presumably his mother’s grave) in this region. Finally, there are several letters written by Khalid during his time in Kurdistan addressed to a certain “Walidat al-Majida”, a term that could have applied to his mother or an older woman whom Khalid especially respected. Whoever Walidat al-Majida turns out to have been, there is little question that older, mother-like women and their relatives were an important factor in Shaykh Khalid’s life in Kurdistan.

Baghdad and Damascus

After the Naqshbandiya-Khalidiyya spread from Kurdistan southward to Baghdad between 1810 and 1820, Khalid found a new group of male and female supporters. The enormous crowds that gathered at the Baghdadi mosque that became known as Khalid’s zawiya (the “Tekke Khalidiyya”) represented all ages, classes, and ethnicities. Men and women affiliated themselves with the tarīqa and visited the zawiya regularly. Numerous wealthy Baghdadis endowed orchards and properties to support Khalid’s work. The Ottoman governor of Baghdad, Dawud Pasha, gave Khalid a cash grant of 30,000 gold pieces, an enormous sum at the time, and provided funds to expand Khalid’s zawiya. Nonetheless, the largest contributor to the Naqshbandiya-Khalidiyya was a woman, Khatija Katun; this fact suggests the great influence that women carried in Baghdad’s elite at the time. As Dina Le Gall notes in *A Culture of Sufism: Naqshbandis in the Ottoman World*, Katun’s generosity was consistent with what other Muslim women in the Ottoman Empire had done for centuries, where they often served as “benefactors for Naqshbandiya institutions”.

The role of women in the Naqshbandiya-Khalidiyya continued to grow following Khalid’s exile from Iraq and decision to settle in Damascus in 1823. Among the prominent Damascene women to join the order was Halima al-Kayalî al-Khalidî. She was the wife of one of Shaykh Khalid’s closest Syrian followers, ‘Abd Allāh bin Mustafa al-Khāni, and the daughter of a prominent shaykh in Damascus’ Salihîyya neighborhood. In a letter penned in Syria announcing the death of his son in Urfa, Turkey Khalid requested that his disciple in Baghdad, ‘Abd al-Qahfûr, inform his male and female followers that he had been able to come to terms with the sudden loss. When Husan Efendi died while Shaykh Khalid was in Sulaymaniyya, Khalid told ‘Abd al-Qahfûr that he had sent Um ‘Abd al-Hakim to express the condolences of his family and to console Husan’s wife and daughter. He also asked Um ‘Abd al-Hakim, whom he referred to reverentially as “shaqiq al-shaqiqa” (sister of the sister), to tell Husan’s family that he no longer saw them “as he did before” — a potential indication that Shaykh Khalid would be closer to them in the future and look after their interests. As you can see, women were integral to the growth of the Naqshbandiya-Khalidiyya.

A Flexible Approach to Women

By the time of Shaykh Khalid’s untimely death in 1827, he had enough trust in Khatija that he designated her alone in his wasiyya (or will) to oversee his properties in Syria and to distribute charitable resources to the poor. The fact that Shaykh Khalid trusted a woman with such an important assignment along with the fact of the prominence of his female followers in Damascus suggests the strength of women in the order. Moreover, there is nothing intrinsic in Shaykh Khalid’s core teachings, in the beliefs of his followers, or the Naqshbandiya-Khalidiyya’s devotional practices that precludes women from participating in the social movement or in political life generally. Equally importantly, there were other women who played important roles in the dissemination of Sufi orders and Muslim social movements generally in the nineteenth century: teachers, leaders, and even soldiers.

That said, Khalid was not a modern feminist, and there are instances in which he appears to have explicitly limited women’s access to
the tarīqa, its followers, and places of worship. In this sense, women may not have been “equal” to men in the order’s hierarchy. Shaykh Khalid had female disciples throughout the Ottoman Empire and married the daughter of a prominent Syrian family, but he forbade his disciples in Istanbul after 1823 to marry Turkish women or to allow young women to enter the official Naqshbandiyya-Khalidiyya lodge in Istanbul; the point of this was to prevent them from forming independent alliances with Turkish elites.  

Equally important, Naqshbandiyya-Khalidiyya sources also record that Khalid, while on his deathbed in 1827, barred women outside of his family from entering his family’s house in Damascus. The only exception to this was the young women who had been required to remain in the house until they gave birth and who were now nursing children. In addition, he warned his followers not to start relationships with women under the pretext of teaching as well as to cease seeking guidance from his wives in the teachings of the Naqshbandiyya-Khalidiyya.  

How does one explain Shaykh Khalid’s approach to women? Khalid often displayed flexibility in both his personal behavior and his approach to his followers. He could suspend basic teachings if changing circumstances dictated that he needed to do so. For instance, Khalid’s instructions to his followers in Istanbul in 1823 reflected his fear that one of them would build alliances with the Ottoman elite and usurp Khalid’s position as the leader of the order—just as his old disciple in the city, ‘Abd al-Wahhab al-Susi, had done before he was expelled from the order. Similarly, Khalid’s instructions to his followers in Damascus in 1827 regarding women generally and his Kurdish wives in particular may have been meant to prepare them for a new conservative social and political order in the city after his death. It is worth remembering Rich’s observation that the position and freedoms afforded Kurdish women in the nineteenth century was substantially better than those enjoyed by their Arab and Turkish sisters.

Women and the Naqshbandiyya-Khalidiyya After 1827

As flexible as Shaykh Khalid’s teachings may have been, it is worthy of note that his followers either ignored or chose to forget these

final instructions regarding women. After a brief exile in Kurdistan in the late 1820s, Khalid’s followers returned to the city and resumed administering his Damascene house, land, and network of pious endowments. Rather than limiting their public role, Khadija and other women played an even larger role, closely linking themselves to Shaykh Khalid’s legacy. Through Egyptian diplomatic documents, we know that Khadija forged close ties with the Egyptian government during the Egyptian occupation of Syria in the 1830s and won a state pension.  

In the years after the restoration of Ottoman sovereignty in Syria in 1840, Khadija forged even closer ties with Ottoman officials, including senior female members of the Ottoman royal family’s properties. She also won generous state funds for the upkeep of Shaykh Khalid’s tomb—appealing directly to highest levels in the Ottoman government. When Khadija died in 1891, Sultan Abdulhamid II requested that a poem be composed eulogizing his decision to uphold her request to rebuild Khalid’s tomb.  

Other women also played key roles in the Naqshbandiyya-Khalidiyya in Damascus and beyond in the nineteenth century. One of Khalid’s daughters, Fatima, became a leading teacher of the Naqshbandiyya-Khalidiyya in Damascus. She was very well schooled in Islamic sciences, had her own followers, and married the scion of a leading Damascene religious family, Muhammad bin Muhammad al-Khani. She spoke four languages fluently: Arabic, Farsi, Kurdish, and Turkish. By comparison, her father, Shaykh Khalid, only knew Arabic, Farsi, and Kurdish. He never learned Turkish.

Another woman who played a role in the Naqshbandiyya-Khalidiyya was ‘Aftab bint ‘Abdullah, the daughter of one of Khalid’s followers from Baghdad. In 1854 she publicly challenged Khadija’s decision to sell the contents of Shaykh Khalid’s personal library, bringing suit against her in Damascus’s shari’a court. According to court records Khadija argued through her representative that the books had been the property of her recently deceased son and she therefore had the right to sell them. ‘Aftab countered through her representative that Khalid had written a family wagf (or pious endowment) on the flyleaf of a dictionary that mandated that the library remain intact. The chief judge, ‘Ali Rida, sided with ‘Aftab and prohibited Khadija and any other of Khalid’s relatives from obstructing her access to the library. In a subsequent ruling,
Rida certified the family waqf as official and mandated Khadija to look after the administration of the pious endowment. Khalid's personal library remained intact and served the people of Damascus well into the mid twentieth century. If one reviews the 1854 court case, Khadija's motives are pretty clear: she wanted the money that she would get from selling the books in Khalid's library. But 'Aftab's motives are not nearly as clear. Bringing suit in court would have meant expending considerable time and resources fighting over the fate of a collection of books she did not own and could never expect to control. She must have had a very good reason to want the library to remain as it was. While personal animosities may have played a role in motivating 'Aftab to sue Khadija, there is another (and more likely) explanation: education. Khalid's library contained nearly 900 book manuscripts in Arabic and Persian on subjects as diverse as Quranic exegesis, law, Islamic mysticism, history, philology, Arabic syntax, grammar, logic, philosophy, and arithmetic. The library also contained multiple copies of key Islamic texts. In the period before the establishment of the Zahiriyiya Library, such a vast collection of books, which multiple individuals could access at one time, was a valuable resource to students of the Islamic sciences. In short, 'Aftab sued Khadija to make certain that she-like previous generations of men and women in the tariqa-could benefit from Khalid's library.

Conclusion

Nearly a hundred and fifty years after 'Aftab went to court to save Khalid's library, men and women continue to be drawn to his followers in Syria and in many other parts of the world. Just as there is a silsilah, or formal chain of spiritual descent, from Shaykh Khalid to his leading contemporary male disciples, there is also a silsilah of female shaykhs that dates back to the nineteenth century. Hundreds of girls and young women are trained annually in the Naqshbandiya-Khalidiyya tariqa in Damascus and develop their own followings. Other women have joined the tariqa and been initiated in communities administered by female followers in Cyprus. Today women are an inescapable part of any of the tariqa anywhere in the world.

Though they are often forgotten by scholars and laymen alike today, women made critical contributions to the Naqshbandiya-Khalidiyya and provide us important insights into the role of women in the Middle East and in Damascus during the nineteenth century. Through a critical reading of Naqshbandi writing and by referencing independent sources, I have sought to restore these women to their rightful place in the history of the Naqshbandiya-Khalidiyya and give a new insight into the rise of modern Islamic movements. My conclusion (and source materials) reminds us of the wisdom of the leading Syrian historian of the Ottoman period, Abdul Karim Rafeq. He argues that "no study of pre-industrial Arab society and the changes it underwent may be adequate, or in fact possible, without consulting [Syria's] rich law-court registers." Indeed, we would never know about Khadija and other women in the Naqshbandiya-Khalidiyya without the registers. Given the spiritual and intellectual limitations of the time—and the way in which biography was conceived—it would not have been possible for Khalid's hagiographers to have included material dealing with the powerful women present in the shaykh's retinue. But spirit and intellect know no gender boundaries, and you may be sure that the women of Khalid's time made their presence felt. Khadija is a particularly telling example of how much genuine power a woman of that time could attain.

Endnotes


Ibid.


Ibid., 284.

Ibid., 283-285.

Ibid., 285

Ibid., 291-301. Rich notes that the Bâbian family believed that Keighan was an English warrior and had boasted the finest Turkish knights until she lost to the male founder of the Bâbian dynasty, Fakih Ahmad. The Ottoman Sultan then rewarded Fakih with territories in Kurdistan and sanctioned his marriage to the female English knight.

"For more on this issue, see Martin van Bruinessen, "Matriarchy in Kurdistan?: Women rulers in Kurdish History", The International Journal of Kurdish Studies 6(1) (Fall, 1993): 25-39.

Shaykh Khalid built a substantial following in this region and there are still important families connected to the Naqshbandiya Khalidiyah there today. For more on Shaykh Khalid’s influence on the Hâwraman, see Ferhad Shakerly, "The Naqshbandi Sheikhs of Hâwraman and the Heritage of Khalidîyya-Mujaddidiyya in Kurdistan", in Naqshbandis in Western and Central Asia, ed. Elisabeth Özdağ (Istanbul: Svenska forskningsinsitutet, Istanbul, 1999), 92-100.

For more on Wiladat al-Majida, see Shaykh Khalid, Maktubât Khalid Baghdatî (Istanbul: University Library Rectory, AY 728, folios 1-192, N.D.), folios 107a, 111e-112b, 148a-b, 150b, 156b, 166a, and 181b.

Yusuf 'Isyâz al-Din, Dowad Bashâ wa-nihayat al-mannâkit fi al-'Iraq (Baghdad: Matbât al-Shâhâb, 1976), 49.


"Dina Le Gall, A Culture of Sufism: Naqshbandis in the Ottoman World, 1450-1700 (Binghamton: State University of New York Press, 2005), 60.


Urafa is a town in south-central Turkey near the Turkish-Syrian border. It was an important stopping point on the land-route between Iraq and Syria.


Ibid., 206-207.

Sâhib, Bughyat al-wajid, 259-265. A good example is Nana Asma' u. For more on her life, see Beverly B. MacK and Jean Boyd, One Women's Jihad (Blomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000).

Sâhib, Bughyat al-wajid, 121.

Khalid, Maktubât Khalid Baghdatî, folios 44b-45a and Sâhib, Bughyat al-wajid, 259-264.

Ibrâhîm Ru'âf, al-'Iraq fi wa'ahiq Muhammad Allî (Baghdad: Bayt al-Hikma, 1999), 68 (486 and 921).

Baskaranilk Osmanli Arsivi, Sadaret Mektûbî Kalemi, Nezâret ve Devâr, 66/70, dokumentt date 12 Safer 1269 (November 25, 1852); Baskaranilk Osmanli Arsivi, Sadaret Mektûbî Kalemi, Nezâret ve Devâr, 128/37, dokumentt date 28 Rebi 'ulâhî 1271; (January 18, 1851); Baskaranilk Osmanli Arsivi, Sadaret Mektûbî Kalemi, Nezâret ve Devâr, 348/30, document date 29 Ramazan 1277 (April 10, 1861):
EZIGBO MMADU: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION INTO THE CONCEPT OF A GOOD PERSON IN IGBO WORLDVIEW

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Abstract

This paper examines the concept of ‘ezigbo mmadu’ (good person) in Igbo worldview. The paper argues that ‘ezigbo mmadu’ is constructed in human relationships. It argues that the Igbo people’s understanding of ‘mmadu’ as the climax of the Supreme Being’s creativity and beauty situates the human person as a moral agent. Deviating from that ideal is an aberration that reduces the human person from the pinnacle that humankind has been placed. And so, for the Igbo ‘ezigbo mmadu’ captures and reflects those ideals necessary for group and inter-group relations.