The apparent proliferation of quasi-messianic movements in the Muslim world beginning in the 14th and 15th centuries has been attributed to a variety of factors, including the political, social, religious, and economic dislocations accompanying the Mongol conquest and its aftermath, the age-old appeal of hopes for social justice and retribution against oppressors, the supposed taste for ‘non-normative’ programs of doctrine, ritual, and leadership among ‘lightly Islamized’ Turkic nomads newly powerful in particular regions (or among an Iranian population deemed receptive to such non-normative programs because of historical experience or cultural inclination), and an upwelling and ‘actualization’ of longstanding and barely submerged messianic tendencies rooted in pre-Islamic religions. Aspects of several of these factors may indeed have some value for our understanding of the developments of this era, but the specific connections between many such messianic movements and the social and religious milieu of Şūfism, broadly speaking, are of obvious importance; yet explanations for the increase in messianic movements during this period that have taken note of the Şūfī environment in which they often emerged have tended to stress the contribution of doctrinal developments linked to Şūfī esoteric thought, or of ritual patterns reflective of Şūfī practices, each typically interpreted on the basis of the supposition that Şūfism was inherently syncretic and was ‘permeable’ to influences extrinsic to ‘normative’ Islam.

I would argue that another factor characteristic of Şūfī communities in the eastern Islamic world during this era should be recognized as a contributor to the emergence of social and religious movements that proposed a unique individual status for their leaders, and a unique communal status for their affiliates. What I have in mind is the intense competition among Şūfī communities of this period, fostered by widening circles of public participation and involvement, and by emerging patterns of patronage; the claims often yielded by such competition developed in the context of still-diverse modes of asserting not only the legitimacy or authority,
but the superiority, of their respective communal programs that prevailed before the widespread (if never quite complete) recognition of the silsila, or chain of initiatic transmission traced back to the Prophet, as the key guarantor of legitimacy for Ṣūfī traditions.

I have outlined elsewhere\(^1\) some of these modes of asserting legitimacy and superiority, which include hereditary ties with a famous shaykh of the past, the possession of certain insignia of authority, a visionary encounter affirming direct sanction by God or the Prophet, spiritual initiation by Khiḍr, the speed or efficacy of a particular disciplinary method,\(^2\) a distinctive social stance or juridical profile, and, finally, the mode that became normative by the 16th century, the silsila. The present study is focused on just one among the diverse modes of legitimation proposed, implicitly and explicitly, by Ṣūfī communities of the eastern Islamic world during the 14th and 15th centuries: claims of special intercessory power accessible to devotees of a particular saint and, by extension, to members of the Ṣūfī community linked with him, as well as claims of direct sanction by the Prophet, who thereby in effect extends his own intercessory power to the sanctioned saint.\(^3\) We often find, that is, particular Ṣūfī groups asserting that to join a particular saint’s community, or merely to invoke his name, would lead one automatically to salvation or realization, because of some special favor granted to the saint by God or the Prophet; explicit claims of intercessory ability are common, and implicit claims of the same—through emphasis upon direct approval, sanction, and blessing by the Prophet himself, the definitive intercessor for the Muslim community—are even more widespread.

Such assertions stop short of the universal reach of outright messianic claims (as in the case, for example, of the Nürbakhshshīyya), though in principle they elevate the ‘founding’ saint to the level of the Prophet himself, and do so in a way that is significantly more grandiose than is evidenced in the familiar equation of the saint in his community with the Prophet in his umma; these assertions likewise fall short of the grand political claims made within some groups of this era, including the erstwhile hereditary Ṣūfī community of the Ṣafawīyya. But they clearly belong on a spectrum of assertions of the special status of the ‘founder’ or eponym of a particular Ṣūfī community, and as such they help illuminate the diverse range of

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\(^1\) See DeWeese, The Legitimation of Bahā’ ad-Dīn Naqshband 262–263.
\(^2\) DeWeese, Spiritual Practice and Corporate Identity 251–300.