

## The Cult of Saints in Central Asia

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**Abstract:** Scholars specializing in classical Oriental studies as well as contemporary writers pay great attention to the origins, development, and status of the saint veneration. By analyzing the characteristics of retained remnants of the pre-Islamic substrate and their influence on the contemporary palette of religious groups in Uzbekistan, this article addresses the issue, which is pertinent to modern Islamic studies.

**Keywords:** Rituals of worship, pilgrimage, shamanism, Central Asia, and the Cult of Saints.

Religion has always played an important role in the life of Central Asian society. Even in pre-Islamic times, various beliefs and cults were spread among the population of this region, as well as already established religious systems, such as Zoroastrianism, Buddhism and Christianity. With the advent of Islam in the VII–VIII centuries, the displacement of old religious systems and the active conversion of the local population to Islam began. On the territory of Central Asia, believers were already familiar with Christian monasticism and Buddhist hermitage; therefore, they actively accepted Sufi Islam and joined fraternities. The new faith became an example of morality and changed the whole way of life of the people, but it could not completely destroy the previous traditional beliefs, moreover, it absorbed much of the cults and religious rituals of previous eras. Therefore, now, the specificity of the religious life of Muslims in Uzbekistan lies in the synthesis of pagan cults with Islam, which is practiced by the vast majority of the country's inhabitants.

In terms of the number of objects of worship, Uzbekistan can be considered a kind of Mecca of Central Asia, since the country has preserved many mosques and shrines in the famous cities of the former Great Silk Road. Bukhara, Samarkand and Khiva are among the oldest cities in the region and attach great importance to the history of Islam. Since Uzbekistan became an independent State, citizens have been given freedom and the opportunity to worship saints. The most important religious and memorial complexes, such as Shahi Zinda, the graves of Abu Mansur al-Maturidi and Imam Muhammad ibn Ismail al-Bukhari, the burial of the Prophet Daniel and others, were restored on the initiative of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan I.A. Karimov. The Government of the country is currently striving to develop the sacred geography of the country, attracting foreign pilgrims and tourists. This brings great success, as according to Abdulaziz Ak-kulov, deputy head of the Tourism Committee of Uzbekistan, in 2023 more than 10 million residents of the country made pilgrimages. However, the main shrine of the country, which attracts the largest number of believers, remains the burial of the Sufi leader of the XIV century Bahaiddin Naqshbana in Bukhara.

The shrines of Uzbekistan are most often the graves of saints or places where they performed miracles. In relation to the objects of worship, the words mazar or ziyoratgoh are more often used, which translates as "place of visit". The saints themselves are called awliya or pir, the latter word originally meant a Sufi sheikh, but after that it became applicable to all saints, regardless of the nature of their origin. Avliya are considered standards of morality and moral ideals in Bukhara, which make it possible to see all the shortcomings of modern religious figures in

Uzbekistan.

The cult of saints originated in the country back in the tenth century, when the first cemeteries with the graves of Islamic theologians appeared, which over time turned into shrines. For example, it happened to the cemetery of Djakardiz in Sa-Markand, where Abu Mansur al-Maturidi is buried. Famous and great scientists of the Muslim world are buried in this cemetery, on the site of which there was previously a military fortress that gave the cemetery its name.

Since Sufism played an important role in the spiritual life of the population of Central Asia in the pre-Soviet period, the inhabitants of almost every village had their own Sufi spiritual teacher, whose grave after death became an object of pilgrimage. Here, as well as in other countries of the region, the main motive for visiting is faith in the healing abilities of the saint. And since most of the country's population cannot afford to perform Hajj, pilgrimage to their native holy places is considered an almost complete substitute for it, or even a holy duty of Muslims. The believers themselves note that "the tradition of visiting shrines is part of the culture".

The ritual of pilgrimage to the graves of saints has been unified over the many years of the cult's existence and includes a single set of actions. These are primarily circular detours around the cemetery, similar to the ritual circumambulation of the Kaaba. Then a prayer with a statement of the request to the saint, touching with hands various parts of the burial, up to the trees growing nearby, as according to the pilgrims, all objects near the saint are filled with divine goodness.

Pilgrimage to Bahauddin Naqshband for many women believers also includes a visit to the cemetery of his mother, as she is considered to be the intercessor for children and pregnant women. In the well of the temple complex, empty bottles are filled with water, which will then be given to the person for whose health and well-being prayer was performed.

The khans and emirs who ruled in Bukhara visited the leaders of the Tariqa, sheikhs, and saints before ascending the throne. This tradition has even been made an important statewide political and religious ceremony. After this ceremony, their throne was recognized as legitimate. The emirs also paid special attention to Khan in choosing their last place where their bodies would be buried after their death. Many of them are buried in front of the great saints of Bukhara.

There were the following reasons for this. The emirs knew perfectly well that millions of pilgrims have been visiting the Holy of holies for centuries, reading the Koran and praying for them. The blessing of these prayers is to touch them, to bequeath them to be buried in these places so that they can enjoy the prayers they have made. Having reached the truth on the Day of Judgment, the governors intended to rise up with Piru Kamil. Pursuing such blessed goals, they sought to have their graves near the saints

Although some places of worship are similar to others in the surrounding areas or other countries of the Islamic world, there are also some shrines with characteristic local features.

During their reign, the emirs performed many kinds, noble deeds, easily coped with the difficulties of the population, with pain, the people never forgot it, kept it in their hearts and memories. He even believed that after his death he was elevated to the Dignity of a saint. For example, after his death, Ismail Samani was revered by the inhabitants as "Poccho Samani", "Saint Ismail Samani". Amir Shohmurad, buried in the grave of Eshon Orfo in the Joybar mahalla of Bukhara, was ordained a saint by the people under the name "Amir Jannatmakan", who was worshipped among other saints. In the royal dahmas "Dahmai Shah", formed over seven centuries in the sanctuary of Bahauddin Naqshband, the names of Subhonkulikhan's wife from the Ashtarkhanids Pasha-Bibi (Sitorai Mohi Hossa), imamkulikhan, are mentioned.

These include the Shahi Zinda cult and monument complex in Samarkand, which takes its name from the Persian for "The Living King" and honors Kusami ibn Abbas, the Prophet Muhammad's cousin. According to legend, Kusam arrived in Samarkand in 676 to spread Islam and died in battle, and his body was buried in the southeastern part of Afrosiab hill. The mausoleum, according to legend, was built in the XI century, as evidenced by the remains of a carved frieze, as well as the lower part of a brick minaret. However, the current memorial complex, consisting

of more than 20 buildings, was built only in the first half of the XIV century. The main part of them was built between 1370 and 1405, mainly for Timurid women.

The entrance portal to the Shahi-Zinda complex was built by Ulugbek in 1435 and got its name from the name of his son, Abd al-Aziz, according to the remains of an inscription located inside the arched niche of the portal. The mausoleums are built according to the same pattern typical of Central Asian tombs - a cube covered with a double dome, to which a peshtak leads. The interiors are decorated with carved bricks and slabs, and many Arabic calligraphic inscriptions have been preserved, most of which are of religious origin. Currently, the mausoleum complex is included in the UNESCO World Heritage List.

There is an incessant flow of pilgrims to the mausoleum, not only from Uzbekistan, but also from neighboring countries. The mausoleum of Qusam ibn Abbas himself is considered the main shrine of the Shahi Zinda ensemble. Believers respectfully touch the carved wooden screen in front of the sarcophagus and read prayers in front of it. The legend associated with him refers to the traditions of Central Asian shamans. Although, in fact, Kusam had never been to Samarkand, according to beliefs, during the confrontation with the pagans of the city he was beheaded, the spirit of Khizr descended to him and helped him leave the battlefield. Khizr placed Ku-sama in the Shaaban well, where he descended with his head under his arm, which is usually associated with legends about shamans. Inside the well, after drinking the living water, he recovers and receives immortality. People believe that the souls of righteous people gather at night to worship and serve the "Living King", and in the morning, they fly back around the world.

Another important shrine for the Uzbek population is the burial of the prophet Daniel or Khoja Daniyar. His grave is recognized as sacred not only for Muslims, but also for Christians and Jews. The legend says that Tamerlane brought some earth to Samarkand from the grave of the prophet Daniel in Iran.

The grave is located on the outskirts of Afrosiab hill and is a 5-domed building over 20 meters long, built of sand-colored bricks. Inside the mausoleum there is an 18-meter sarcophagus covered with a dark green velvet cloth embroidered with gold with verses from the Holy Koran. There are beliefs among the local population related to the length of the sarcophagus - some people believe that St. Daniel was a very tall man, while others believe that his grave is increasing in size every year.

There is a water spring next to the Mausoleum, from which believers draw drinking water and wash open areas of the body. In addition, one of the rituals of pilgrimage to the grave of Khoja Daniyar is touching a pistachio tree growing nearby, which is part of the ritual of worshipping trees, whose cult was very popular in Central Asia before the advent of Islam. One of the most widespread pre-Muslim cults preserved among the population of Uzbekistan is shamanism. It actively continues to influence the life of the Turks of Central Asia, and Shamanistic communities remain popular today, numbering about 650,000 participants. Modern Uzbek shamans communicate with the Almighty through spirits, and instead of the traditional instrument of the tambourine, they use rosaries. Reading the Koran and other religious literature is also an important part of the shamanic ritual. Many guardian spirits have transformed into Sufi saints, and now appear to the shaman in the form of Khizr and Bahauddin Naqshband. It is believed that the power of a shaman depends on the number of spirits belonging to him. The innate abilities and characteristics of a shaman continue to play a big role, it is believed that if a child is born with small physical abnormalities, such as six fingers or a harelip, then in the future he will become a shaman.

In Uzbek homes, you can find many amulets to protect against evil forces. Methods of protection from the evil eye include the simultaneous use of quotations from the Koran, amulets and burning wild rye, kindling fire. The cult of plants still has a great influence on Uzbek society. Thus, one of the most common rituals that purify the house from evil spirits is fumigation of rooms with herbal "hazor isband" (means remedy for 1000 decease), a popular medicinal plant growing in the steppes of Central Asia. According to beliefs, it protects against the evil eye, so it

is actively used to make amulets designed to protect the house.

It is worth noting that amulets of Islamic origin, such as prayers written by mullahs and juzas of the Koran, are found in everyday life as often as pagan talismans in the form of dried herbs and horns of sacrificial animals.

Thus, it can be concluded that pagan beliefs and the closely related cult of saints are deeply rooted in the Islam of Uzbekistan. Nevertheless, if in some cases they have adopted a Sufi Muslimized form, then in others, pagan beliefs exist in the life of the people in their original form. As can be seen, in the modern world, the concepts of the cult of saints in Islam and Sufism are intertwined, and sometimes act as one phenomenon. Of course, Sufism contributed to the widespread spread of the cult and helped pagan beliefs and rituals to take an "Islamized form". However, modern examples of pilgrimage and the use of various magical rituals in the countries of Central Asia show us that the cult of saints in its linguistic manifestations is very difficult to remove from the age-old consciousness of the people.

The modern authorities of Uzbekistan are gradually resuming the rituals of pilgrimage to graves and the sacred geography of the country, as they believe that this form of Islam is most understandable to ordinary believers and is close to their ideas about the world order. In addition, adherents of the cult of saints do not carry a political threat. All these phenomena together are indicators that the cult of saints is an integral part of modern Central Asian society.

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