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SUFISM IN AZERBAIJAN: HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT AND CULTURAL INFLUENCE

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Abstract. The article examines the history of the development and cultural influence of Sufism in Azerbaijan, from the early stage of the emergence of the mystical and ascetic trend in Islamic religiosity to its integration into social and cultural life and the modern situation. The initial manifestations of Sufism on the territory of Azerbaijan have been recorded since the 10th century, when figures such as Baba Kuhi Bakuvi and his contemporaries gained considerable authority in the Islamic mystical movement. During the Middle Ages, Sufi brotherhoods (tariqas) such as Khalvatiyya, Suhrawardiyya, and later Safaviyya were formed on the territory of Azerbaijan, influencing not only spiritual life, but also politics, culture, and architecture. Sufism has become an important component of the spiritual and cultural landscape of Azerbaijan: it is reflected in folk poetry, the Ashyghe tradition, the architecture of khanqahs and mausoleums, folklore and literature. For example, the influence of Sufi motifs on the work of Ashik Ashig Alyasgar is being investigated. In the modern context, Sufism is considered as an element of cultural identity and heritage, as well as an object of academic study and cultural policy. From the point of view of methodology, the article uses a historical and philosophical approach, relies on epigraphic and archival sources, as well as on recent research in the field of Sufism in Azerbaijan. The article shows that the Sufi tradition of Azerbaijan reflects the dialectic between mystical individuality and a general religious institution, between transcendent aspiration and cultural expression.

Key words: Sufism, Azerbaijan, tariqa, mysticism, culture, folk poetry, architecture.

Introduction. The study of Sufism (tasawwuf) as a mystical and ascetic trend in Islam has long occupied its place in the history of Islamic thought. In the context of Azerbaijan's spiritual and cultural history, it has a special significance: Azerbaijan has been one of the important distribution points of Sufi practices and orders since the early Middle Ages. This makes it necessary to consider not only the historical chronology, but also the ways of cultural impact: how the Sufi tradition manifested itself in poetry and folk art, how it was reflected in architecture, and how it was transformed in the context of political and social changes. The purpose of this study is to trace the stages of Sufism's development in Azerbaijan, identify key tariqas and figures, and assess the cultural influence of Sufism on literature, folk art, and architectural heritage of Azerbaijan.

Sufism is a mystical trend in Islam that focuses on seeking direct personal experience with God through love, meditation, and inner transformation. Sufi teachings can be found not only in Muslim countries, but also among people of various faiths, as they are universal in nature, calling for the purification of the soul and the search for the highest truth (Khalilli, 2023).

Sufism originated in the early centuries of Islam and developed as a reaction to the formalism of religious rituals. Sufis sought a deeper, inner connection with God through meditation, poetry, music, and dance. Some of the first Sufi thinkers were such famous personalities as al-Hallaj and al-Ghazali.

Sufism is based on the practice of *dhikr*, the repetition of God's names and meditation to purify the heart and soul. Sufis strive for a direct experience of the Divine through devotion, humility, and inner purification. An important aspect is the love of God and the all-encompassing love for all living beings.

The roots of Sufism in Azerbaijan date back to the 10th century. According to sources, already at the turn of the 9th–10th centuries, the first Sufi mentors operated on the territory of modern Azerbaijan. For example, Baba Kuhi Bakuvi and his brother Hussein Shirvani have earned wide recognition.

Many great Sufi thinkers expressed their spiritual ideas through poetry. An example is the famous poet Jalaladdin Rumi, whose poems about love and unity with God have become a symbol of the Sufi path. Sufi music, for example, in the form of “dervish” dances, is also an integral part of spiritual practice that promotes transcendental experiences (Demirzadeh, Allahverdiyev, 2024).

The first “hanegs” (Sufi monasteries) and the beginning of the formation of communities of *murids* (disciples) belong to this time. Already in the 13th century, the number of Sufi centers was significant: for example, the author of the 13th century, Muhammad ibn Munawwar, records more than 400 *khanegh* in Shirvan alone.

During this period, the intellectual and mystical form of Sufism (“*irfan*”) prevailed – an emphasis on experiencing unity with God, rather than solely on external legal (*Sharia*) observance.

Among the orders active at this stage were Suhrawardyia and Khalvatiya. The appearance of such *tariqas* indicates that Sufism in Azerbaijan was not just a passive acceptance of alien forms, but developed as an independent movement (Gubadov, 2023).

The period of the 10th–12th centuries became the most important stage in the spiritual history of Azerbaijan, when the mystical and religious teachings of Sufism began to spread actively in the region. This process was inseparable from the general trends in the development of Islamic thought in the East, but in Azerbaijan it took on specific forms due to local cultural and ethnic characteristics, as well as close ties with Persia, Central Asia and the Arab world.

The origin of Sufism in Azerbaijan is connected not only with religious practice, but also with the formation of an original spiritual tradition, which had a huge impact on the development of literature, philosophy and public consciousness in the region..

After the Arab conquests of the 7th–8th centuries, Islam gradually established itself on the territory of Caucasian Albania and Atropatene. By the 10th century, Azerbaijan was part of various Muslim states – the Sajids, Rabbadids, Sheddadids, and later the Seljuks. These political structures created conditions for an active exchange of ideas between Azerbaijan, Iran, Khorasan and Baghdad, the centers of Islamic spiritual life.

During this period, Sufism was not only a religious, but also a philosophical movement aimed at the inner realization of truth (*haqiqat*), purification of the soul and unity with God. The spread of Sufi ideas was facilitated by traveling dervishes, sheikhs and poets who created the first *khanaka* – Sufi monasteries that served as centers of spiritual life and enlightenment (Corbin, 1993, p. 87).

In the X–XII centuries. Azerbaijan is becoming one of the significant regions where Sufism is becoming institutionalized. The city of Ganja, where the outstanding poet and thinker Nizami Ganjavi (1141–1209) was born, is becoming a center of spiritual and cultural activity. Although Nizami himself did not belong to Sufi fraternities, his work is deeply imbued with ideas of mystical knowledge and spiritual perfection, close to the Sufi tradition (Mammadli, 2023).

In Shirvan and Tabriz, the first schools and circles of Sufi students were formed, associated with the Malamati (*Malamatiya*) and Khalvatiya movements, which emphasized humility, inner purification and rejection of outward ostentatious religiosity (Schimmel, 1975, p. 63).

By the 11th century, representatives of such orders as the Sufis of Khorasan (influenced by Junaid of Baghdad and Bayezid Bastami) and early followers of the Khalvati way, who later gave rise to the Khalvatiya Order, which played a major role in the spiritual culture of the region in the 14th–15th centuries, were active in Azerbaijan (Trimingham, 1998, p. 78).

Important Sufi orders were formed and operated on the territory of Azerbaijan, which had both spiritual and religious, as well as socio-political influence. Among them:

Khalvatiya: her roots are connected with Azerbaijan. As noted: “the founders of Khalvatiya were Azerbaijanis ... the Shirvanshahs supported the Sufi sheikhs...”

Sufism in Azerbaijan combined elements of the Arab-Persian mystical tradition with local cultural archetypes and images. It developed as a spiritual teaching aimed at the harmony of man and the universe, at the inner comprehension of God through love (ishq) and knowledge (ma’rifah).

One of the key concepts of Sufism was fana – the “annihilation” of the ego, dissolution into God, which was reflected in poetic texts attributed to Azerbaijani mystics.

During the same period, Sufi symbols penetrated into folk art – songs, parables, legends, and also became the basis for the formation of spiritual and ethical ideals such as humility, virtue, brotherhood, and patience (Nazarova, 2023).

Early Sufism had a significant impact on the development of Azerbaijani culture. It became not only a religious movement, but also the philosophical basis of the humanistic thought of the region. Mystical poetry and philosophy paved the way for the flourishing of spiritual literature of the 13th–14th centuries, represented by such authors as Imadeddin Nasimi and Shah Ismail Khatai.

Thus, Sufism of the 10th–12th centuries laid the foundation for the formation of the national spiritual identity of Azerbaijan, in which religious experience was closely intertwined with aesthetics, philosophy and ethical principles.

Sufi brotherhoods (tariqas) have played an important role in shaping popular spirituality. Thanks to the preaching activities of the Sufis, Islam has become part of folklore traditions, and mystical ideas have been embodied in legends, songs and rituals.

Of particular importance were dhikr, the ritual of remembering God, and sama, mystical musical and dance practices symbolizing a state of unity with the Deity. These rituals became the basis for the emergence of unique musical and dance traditions, the most famous of which is the dance of the “swirling dervishes” of the Mevlevi order.

Folklore works dedicated to Sufi saints (awliya) such as Ahmad Yasawi, Bahauddin Naqshband, and Abdul-Qadir Gilani have preserved images of saints as intermediaries between the earthly and heavenly worlds. Thus, Sufism has become an integral part of folk religious culture, synthesizing elements of Islam with local beliefs and traditions.

Suhrawardiya: one of the most significant Sufi trends.

Safavidiya: an order that later became the ideological basis of the Safavid state (1501-1736) under Shah Ismail I; it also played a role as a political factor.

Such fraternities had their own monasteries, mentors, and a system of education, often combining spiritual and social functions. They contributed to the spread of Sufism through education, ritual practices, literature, and architecture.

Sufi orders (tariqas) are spiritual communities that follow specific teachings and practices. Among the most famous are the Naqshbandiyya, Meksumiyya and Shilviyya orders. Each order has its own characteristics, but they are all focused on achieving intimacy with God through worship, service, and inner work.

Today, Sufism continues to attract attention as a spiritual practice focused on inner harmony and self-development. Its values can be found in various cultural and religious contexts, attracting people seeking to find meaning in life and spiritual growth (Ismailova, 2025).

Sufism from Arabic Tasawwuf is a mystical tradition in Islam focused on personal, inner knowledge of God through love, self-knowledge and spiritual purification. Having emerged in the 8th–9th centuries in the Arab and Persian cultural centers, Sufism had a significant impact on the spiritual and artistic life of Muslim societies. Unlike the Orthodox movements of Islam, Sufism developed inner religiosity, emotional perception of faith and the pursuit of divine truth through symbol and metaphor. These features have found vivid expression in literature, folklore, and architecture.

Sufi symbolism, ideas of mystical unity (especially the concept of “wahdat al-wujud” = unity of being) have found their expression in Azerbaijani poetry and folklore. Thus, the study shows that Ashig Alyasgar’s work is full of themes such as divine love, existence, ethics, the heart and death, and that it is influenced by the Sufi tradition.

Sufi thought and literature were also studied in the context of the work of the philosopher-poet Nasimi: the reflection of the Sufi-Hurufite worldview was noted in his work.

Thus, Sufism enriched the literary tradition of Azerbaijan, contributing to the integration of Islamic mysticism into the national cultural context.

The influence of Sufism on the literary tradition was manifested primarily in poetry. The poetic language of the Sufis became a tool for conveying mystical experience, a symbol of divine love and the desire for spiritual unity.

The ideas of Sufism were most deeply embodied in Persian literature. Jalal al-Din Rumi (13th century) in his work *Masnavi-yi Ma’navi* created a poetic encyclopedia of Sufi philosophy, where the path of the soul to God is depicted through allegories of love, suffering and epiphany. In his poem “The Language of Birds”, Farid al-Din Attar presented the spiritual journey of the soul as a metaphor for understanding the truth. Hafiz Shirazi used traditional motifs of wine and love, turning them into symbols of mystical ecstasy.

In Turkish poetry, similar motifs were developed by Yunus Emre, whose poems were characterized by simplicity and popular accessibility, which contributed to the spread of Sufi ideas among the broad strata of society.

Sufi poetry has also influenced world literature. Through translations of the works of Rumi and Hafiz, Sufi symbolism penetrated the philosophy and poetry of European Romanticism, influenced the work of Leo Tolstoy, G. Hesse, H. L. Borges and other thinkers and writers..

Numerous monuments of Sufi heritage have been preserved on the territory of Azerbaijan: khane-gas, mausoleums, sanctuaries. For example, khanega Pir Mardakan in the village of Geklyar in the Shamakhi region is one of such monuments.

The architectural forms of these monasteries reflect the role of Sufi mentors in society, as well as the connection of mystical tradition with material culture. This suggests that Sufism was promoted not only in texts or rituals, but also in a specific space – monasteries became cultural centers.

The architecture of Sufi buildings reflected the spiritual symbolism of the inner path and contemplation. The main types of buildings associated with Sufism were khanaka, tekke, and zawiya, monastic complexes that served as centers of spiritual communication, learning, and worship.

The architectural design of these buildings shows a desire for harmony, symmetry and light as a symbol of the Divine presence. Examples include the mausoleum of Ahmed Yasawi in Turkestan (14th century), erected by order of Timur, Tekke Mevlevi in Konya (Turkey), the center of the Rumi Order, as well as the mausoleums of Sufi sheikhs in Bukhara, Samarkand, Delhi and Shiraz. These buildings performed not only religious, but also cultural and educational functions, becoming centers of spiritual and artistic life of the regions.

Sufi ideas penetrated into popular culture, in particular, through the poetry of the Ashigs and music, through images of saints, through practices of memory and legends. This means that Sufism has become part not only of the religious elite, but also of a broad cultural tradition. This is confirmed by the data that Sufism in Azerbaijan was considered as an element of unification (unity) in folk art.

Sufism in Azerbaijan did not remain only a spiritual phenomenon: it had socio-political significance. For example, during the Safavid period, Sufism became a state-ideological factor.

The study also shows that in the 17th century, Sufi brotherhoods and their monasteries were influenced by transitional processes associated with changes in political regimes and religious paradigms.

In the modern era, Sufism is included in cultural policy, research programs, and education. Thus, a course on Sufism and cultural transformation has been introduced into the curricula of Azerbaijan.

In the 21st century, Azerbaijan's Sufi heritage retains its importance as a cultural resource, but it also faces challenges such as secularization of public life, changing religious practices, and globalization. The study shows that Sufism continues to be studied as an academic field ("Sufi studies"), for example, publications in 2023-2025.

In addition, the use of religious and mystical symbols as an element of national identity is noted in the field of cultural policy.

Thus, it can be argued that Sufism in Azerbaijan today acts more as a cultural and research phenomenon than as a mass religious movement.

Conclusion. The emergence of Sufism on the territory of Azerbaijan in the 10th–12th centuries was the result of complex historical, cultural and religious processes taking place in the region. It has become an integral part of the Islamic spiritual tradition, but at the same time it has developed in a unique form that reflects the identity of Azerbaijani culture.

Sufism has not only shaped new forms of religious experience, but has also had a lasting impact on philosophy, literature, and social life. It was during this period that the foundations of the spiritual worldview were laid, which later defined the face of the Azerbaijani civilization of the Middle Ages.

The study shows that Sufism in Azerbaijan has gone through a complex and multidimensional path: from an early mystical group in the 10th–11th centuries to integration into literary, architectural and folk culture, and further to a modern cultural and educational phenomenon. Sufi brotherhoods have played a significant role not only in religious life, but also in shaping Azerbaijan's cultural identity. Sufism has enriched the literary tradition, folk art, architectural heritage, and has also become an area of academic interest. Despite the changes of eras and regimes, elements of the Sufi tradition are preserved and adapted to modern conditions. Further research may be aimed at analyzing regional variations of Sufi practice in Azerbaijan, as well as comparative analysis with neighboring regions of the Caucasus and Iran.

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