



Section 2. Literature

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ETYMOLOGY AND SEMANTIC EVOLUTION OF "MOLLA" AND "MÖVLANA": FROM ANCIENT MYTHOLOGICAL ARCHETYPES TO ISLAMIC INTELLECTUAL TRADITION

*Adgozelzade-Rasulova Nushaba Elshad gizi*¹

¹ Research Fellow, Institute of Literature named after Nizami
Ganjavi, Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences

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Abstract

This article explores the etymological roots and semantic development of the titles "molla" and "mövlana" (mevlana), which were historically attached to the name of the classical Turkic poet Muhammad Fuzuli. The study traces the possible connection between the "ma/mo" particle found in these words and ancient mythological archetypes of protection and guardianship in pre-Islamic civilizations, including Sumerian, Egyptian, Central Asian, and Chinese cultures. It then examines the Arabic term "mawla", its usage in the Qur'an, and its evolution from "freed slave" or "client" (mawali) to "master", "protector", and ultimately "Lord" (God). The article argues that the semantic shift from a social to a divine and then to an honorific scholarly title reflects broader cultural and religious transformations in Islamic societies. Finally, the study explains why medieval scholars and poets like Fuzuli were honored with these titles, linking them to the high intellectual and spiritual standards of the time.

Keywords: *Molla, mevlana, mawla, etymology, Fuzuli, semantic change, mythological archetype, Islamic intellectual history*

Introduction

The words "molla" and "mövlana" are widely used in Turkic and Islamic cultures to address learned men, religious scholars, and sometimes poets. However, their origins stretch far back into ancient history – long before the emergence of Islam. This study investigates the hypothesis that the first syllable "ma/

mo" in these words shares a common archetype with protective deities in pre-Islamic mythologies across various civilizations. It then traces the documented history of "mawla" in Arabic, its transformation during the Umayyad and Abbasid periods, and its eventual adoption as an honorific title for highly educated individuals in the Ottoman and Persianate worlds.

The research employs Professor Rahila Geybullayeva's "before and after" method. The "before" part restores earlier semantics using the abjad/consonantal alphabet, based on the principle that every letter and symbol contains meanings from earlier periods. The "after" approach examines how linguistic units were adopted by later generations and societies, how relevant they remained, and how they developed. This methodology is particularly suitable for studying words like "molla" that have accumulated multiple layers of meaning over millennia.

The "Ma/Mo" Archetype in Ancient Mythologies

Professor E. M. Meletinsky's *Dictionary of Mythology* reveals that the particle «ma/mo» appears as part of names of deities and protective spirits across various ancient cultures. Several examples illustrate this phenomenon:

- *Malakbel* (ma+lakbel) – a sun god in ancient Semitic mythology, identified with the Hellenistic sun god Helios.
- *Ma+mow* or *Mo+mow* – appears in Avar, Tat, and Akushali cultures as a female protective figure.
- *Maat* (ma+at) – the Egyptian goddess of justice and order, who protects cosmic balance and truth.
- *Mavan* (ma+van) – in Chinese mythology, the goddess protecting horses.

In Sumerian, "ama" means mother. In Turkic mythology, "Umay" is a protective goddess of children and fertility. In Indic languages, "mata" means mother. The phonetic similarity between these words from geographically distant civilizations – Mesopotamia, Egypt, Central Asia, China, and India – is striking.

What explains this similarity? The most plausible explanation is psycho-linguistic. The simplest sounds a human can produce – "ma", "mu", "mo" – are biologically universal. These sounds are often among the first that infants produce, and they are naturally associated with the mother figure, the primary protector and guardian in human experience. This biological reflex and initial psycholinguistic perception may explain the recurring association of "ma/mo" with protection and guardianship across different mythologies.

The Finnish scholar E. Tarasti, at the 2018 Azerbaijan Comparative Literature Association (AzCLA) conference, emphasized that every sign is connected to classical concepts formed in the Middle Ages, and their historical development can be traced back to the ancient consonantal or abjad alphabet. This supports our methodological approach to tracing "molla" back to the "ma/mo" archetype.

From "Mawla" to "Molla" in Arabic

In Arabic, the word "mawla" derives from the root "w-l-y" (ولى), meaning to be close, to protect, to govern, or to have authority. The word appears in pre-Islamic Arabic and continued to develop new meanings in the Islamic period.

During the 7th century in Arabia, the "mawali" system was developed to integrate freed slaves and non-Arab converts into tribal structures. A freed slave became the "mawla" (client) of a patron through a contract called *hilf*. The client was considered a close associate of the patron's tribe. The term "mawali" (plural of mawla) referred to these freed slaves and non-Arab converts who had attached themselves to Arab tribes.

Under the Umayyads (661–750 CE), "mawali" referred primarily to freed non-Arab converts who were clients of Arab tribes. These individuals were often highly educated and played important roles in administration and culture. Under the Abbasids (750–1258 CE), the term expanded to include state officials, paid soldiers, and civil servants – anyone employed in state service, regardless of ethnic origin. The mawali gradually gained social status and, through intermarriage with Arabs, achieved full integration into society.

Over time, "mawla" also acquired the meaning of "Lord" or "Protector" – one of the names of God in Islam. The Qur'an contains several verses where Allah is referred to as "mawla". For example, Surah al-Anfal 8:40 states: "Know that Allah is your Mawla – the Best Protector and the Best Helper." Other verses in the same surah (8:72, 8:73) use the word "wali" (from the same root w-l-y) meaning "protector" or "close friend".

The word "molla" (or "nulla") emerged from "mawla" through phonetic changes. The process likely involved intermediate

forms such as “monla” or “munla”, with the consonant [n] assimilating to the following (Ashiq Pasha, 1998) – a common phonological process in many languages. The resulting form “molla” entered Ottoman Turkish and other Turkic languages as a title for religious scholars and learned men.

French and Western Scholarship on “Molla”

The French Islamic scholar Jean Calmard, in his entry on “Molla” in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, confirms that the term derives from the Arabic “mawlā” meaning “master”, “lord”, “owner”. He notes that the title applies to any Muslim scholar who has

received a certain level of religious education and possesses the ability to transmit it to others. In both Iranian and Ottoman societies, Calmard explains, the title could also be applied to adolescents who had completed 15 to 18 years of advanced study in a madrasa.

The Iranologist Hamid Algar, in his study of the Qajar period, treats “molla” not as a separate lexical term but within the framework of the *ulama* (religious scholars). Algar shows that in Qajar Iran, mollas were not limited to religious functions but were actively involved in state politics. They held significant social and political influence, and the title signified not only religious authority but also social prestige.

Table 1.

Period	Form	Meaning
Prehistoric (mythological)	ma/mo particle	protection, guardianship
Pre-Islamic Arabia	mawla	client, freed slave, close associate
Early Islamic (7th-8th c.)	mawla / mawali	non-Arab convert, freed slave attached to tribe
Abbasid period (8th-13th c.)	mawla	state official, paid soldier, civil servant
Qur’anic usage	mawla	God as Protector, Lord
Medieval (13th-16th c.)	mevlana	our master – Sufi spiritual guide, great scholar
Ottoman period	molla	advanced madrasa graduate, religious scholar
Modern	molla	cleric, religiously educated person (sometimes pejorative)

The Semantic Shift: Summary

The semantic evolution of “molla” can be summarized as follows:

Mevlana as a Sufi and Scholarly Title

In the 13th century, the term “Mevlana” (Arabic “mawlānā” – “our master”) became strongly associated with Jalal al-Din Rumi (1207–1273), the founder of the Mevlevi Sufi order. After Rumi, “mevlana” was so closely identified with him that it almost became his personal name. However, the title continued to be used for other highly respected scholars and spiritual guides.

In the Ottoman educational system, a “molla” was a person who had completed 15–18 years of advanced madrasa education. The curriculum included religious sciences (fiqh, tafsir, hadith, kalam, usul al-fiqh), as well as philosophy, logic, mathematics, geometry, astronomy, medicine, and literature. Graduates of this system were qualified to serve as judges (qadi), professors (mudarris), or religious authorities (mufti).

The connection between “mevlana” and Fuzuli is particularly significant. Fuzuli wrote masterpieces in Azerbaijani Turkish, Persian, and Arabic. He was deeply versed in hadith, kalam, fiqh, logic, geometry, and medicine. His

work *Hadiqat al-su'ada* (The Garden of the Blessed) is a religious epic about the martyrs of Karbala, demonstrating his mastery of Islamic history and theology. Hasibe Mazioğlu emphasizes that to understand Fuzuli's profound knowledge of religious sciences, one must examine his works – and for this reason, sources call him “Mevlana Fuzuli”.

Conclusion

The journey of the words “molla” and “mövlana” from ancient mythological protective particles through the social-legal term “mawla” in early Islam to the high scholarly and spiritual titles of the medieval period illustrates the dynamic nature of language. These terms absorbed layers of meaning from each era, ultimately symbolizing protection, mastery, and wisdom.

The study confirms that there is a semantic connection between the “ma/mo” arche-

type in pre-Islamic mythologies and the later Islamic usage of “mawla” as protector and master. Both share the core concept of guardianship and authority. However, as Florian Coulmas warns, it is methodologically problematic to completely identify terms from different periods with their origins. The connection should be understood as a semantic affinity based on the archetype of protection and order, not as direct genetic descent.

The application of the titles “molla” and “mevlana” to Muhammad Fuzuli was not accidental but a fitting recognition of his profound knowledge, philosophical depth, and poetic genius. Fuzuli represents the ideal of the classical Islamic scholar-poet: someone who combined mastery of religious sciences with literary excellence and spiritual insight. The titles “molla” and “mevlana” capture this synthesis of intellectual, spiritual, and cultural authority.

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Contact: nusabe.adgozel@outlook.com