

Section 6. Pedagogy

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SUFISM IN XVI–XVII CENTURIES CENTRAL ASIA: DOCTRINAL FOUNDATIONS AND PEDAGOGICAL INTERPRETATION

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Abstract

This article examines Sufism in Central Asia during the XVI–XVII centuries as a historically grounded system of moral and pedagogical formation. Moving beyond purely theological interpretations, the study analyzes Sufi traditions as non-formal educational models that played a significant role in ethical education and social regulation. Using a qualitative historical–pedagogical methodology, the research draws on classical Sufi texts, historical sources, and contemporary scholarly studies, including works by Central Asian and Uzbek researchers.

The findings indicate that Sufi pedagogy was primarily oriented toward character formation, moral self-discipline, and experiential learning. Central to this educational system was the mentorship-based *murshid–murid* relationship, which functioned as an individualized pedagogical model emphasizing continuous moral guidance and self-reflection. Unlike madrasa-based education, Sufi instruction integrated ethical training into everyday social and professional life, extending its educational influence to diverse social groups.

The study argues that Sufi pedagogy represents an indigenous and holistic model of moral education that anticipated key principles of modern learner-centered and character-based educational approaches. Recognizing the pedagogical dimensions of Sufism contributes to a deeper understanding of the history of education in Central Asia and offers insights for contemporary discussions on moral and holistic education.

Keywords: Sufism; Central Asia; XVI–XVII centuries; Naqshbandiyya; Spiritual Education; Moral Pedagogy; Murshid–Murid Relationship; Informal Education

Introduction

During the XVI–XVII centuries, Central Asia was a major center of Islamic intellectual and cultural life where religious thought,

social practice, and educational traditions closely interacted. In this context, Sufism functioned not only as a mystical doctrine but also as a comprehensive system of moral

and educational formation. Sufi orders, particularly the Naqshbandiyya, played an important role in shaping ethical norms and informal pedagogical practices within Central Asian societies (De Weese, 2016).

Unlike madrasa-based education, which emphasized jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and theology (*kalam*), Sufi education focused on inner transformation, character formation, and mentorship-based learning. Central to this system was the *murshid–murid* relationship, which functioned as a structured pedagogical model grounded in moral supervision and gradual personal development (Knysh, 2017). During periods of political instability and social change, Sufi pedagogy provided moral continuity and stability. Ethical values such as humility, self-restraint, and social responsibility were transmitted through lived practice rather than formal instruction, allowing Sufism to function as a complementary educational system accessible to broader social groups (Bertels, 1965).

This article aims to analyze the doctrinal foundations of Sufism in XVI–XVII century Central Asia and to interpret its pedagogical significance within the broader history of non-formal education.

Literature Review

Research on Central Asian Sufism has primarily focused on historical, philosophical, and socio-cultural dimensions, while its pedagogical aspects have often remained implicit. Existing literature can be grouped into historical studies of Sufi orders, analyses of Sufi ethical concepts, and pedagogical interpretations of Sufi practices.

Historical scholarship emphasizes the social and educational roles of Sufi orders, noting that Sufi lodges functioned as centers of moral education where knowledge was transmitted through personal example and communal practice rather than formal curricula (DeWeese, 2016). Philosophical studies examine concepts such as *tazkiya al-nafs*, *riyāda*, and *ṣuḥba*, which form the epistemological basis of Sufi pedagogy and emphasize experiential and lifelong ethical development under spiritual guidance (Knysh, 2017).

More recent scholarship interprets the *murshid–murid* relationship as an early

mentorship-based pedagogical model characterized by individualized guidance and moral accountability (Bertels, 1965). Despite these contributions, focused analysis of Sufism as a pedagogical system in the specific context of XVI–XVII century Central Asia remains limited. This study addresses this gap by integrating historical and pedagogical perspectives.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative historical–pedagogical research design to examine the educational dimensions of Sufism in Central Asia during the XVI–XVII centuries. The research is grounded in an interpretive historical approach that enables contextual analysis of Sufi teachings within their socio-cultural, religious, and intellectual environments. This approach is particularly suitable for the study of non-formal educational systems such as Sufi pedagogy, which operated outside institutional schooling while exerting significant influence on ethical education and social conduct (DeWeese, 2016; Bertels, 1965).

From a pedagogical perspective, classical Sufi concepts—including *tazkiya al-nafs* (self-purification), *riyāda* (spiritual discipline), and *ṣuḥba* (companionship)—are interpreted as educational mechanisms aimed at character formation and moral development. Uzbek scholars emphasize that these concepts reflect a coherent educational philosophy centered on cultivating the “perfect human being” (*insān al-kāmil*), corresponding to contemporary theories of holistic and character-based education (Komilov, 2009; Niyozmetov, 2018).

The study is based on systematic analysis of both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include classical Sufi texts, doctrinal treatises, and hagiographical works circulated in Central Asia during the XVI–XVII centuries, providing insight into Sufi educational ideals and ethical norms (Bertels, 1965; Knysh, 2017). Secondary sources comprise contemporary studies in Islamic studies, history, philosophy, and pedagogy, with particular attention to Uzbek scholarship examining Sufism as a cultural and educational phenomenon (Komilov, 2009; Abduqodirov, 2020).

Qualitative content analysis identifies recurring pedagogical themes such as moral self-regulation, mentorship-based learning, experiential education, and ethical accountability, which are interpreted through pedagogical theory (Niyozmetov, 2018; DeWeese, 2016). Comparative analysis contrasts Sufi educational practices with madrasa-based education, highlighting Sufism as an alternative and complementary educational model within Central Asian society (Komilov, 2009; Bertels, 1965).

Reliability is ensured through data triangulation, while validity is strengthened by the consistent application of pedagogical concepts to historical material (Knysh, 2017; Abduqodirov, 2020). As a historical and textual study, ethical considerations are limited to accurate citation, faithful representation of sources, and avoidance of anachronistic interpretations, ensuring respect for the conceptual integrity of Sufi teachings (DeWeese, 2016; Komilov, 2009).

Naqshbandiyya Order and Pedagogical Practice in XVI–XVII Centuries Central Asia

During the XVI–XVII centuries, the Naqshbandiyya order emerged as one of the most influential Sufi traditions in Central Asia, significantly shaping spiritual life, social organization, and moral education. Unlike Sufi orders that emphasized ascetic withdrawal, the Naqshbandiyya promoted active social engagement combined with spiritual discipline. This balance between inner purification and outward responsibility formed the pedagogical foundation of Naqshbandi education (Komilov, 2009; DeWeese, 2016).

A key pedagogical principle of the Naqshbandiyya was “*dil ba yār, dast ba kār*” (the heart with God, the hand at work), which expressed a holistic educational philosophy integrating spiritual awareness with practical and social activity. This principle encouraged learners to develop ethical consciousness while fulfilling professional and communal responsibilities and has been interpreted by Uzbek scholars as an early model of integrative education combining moral formation with social competence (Komilov, 2009; Abduqodirov, 2020).

The core instructional mechanism of Naqshbandi pedagogy was the *murshid–murid* relationship, functioning as a men-

torship-based educational model. Education was individualized and grounded in continuous moral guidance and personal example rather than formal curricula. The *murshid* served as teacher and moral exemplar, while the *murid* engaged in sustained self-discipline and ethical self-reflection (Knysh, 2017; Bertels, 1965). This structure closely corresponds to modern learner-centered pedagogical approaches emphasizing formative learning outcomes (Niyozmetov, 2018).

Naqshbandi education relied primarily on experiential learning through daily activities, communal interaction, and spiritual practices such as silent *dhikr*, ethical self-monitoring (*muhāsaba*), and companionship (*ṣuḥba*). These practices functioned as pedagogical tools for cultivating moral awareness and ethical responsibility and align with contemporary models of reflective and experiential learning (Knysh, 2017; DeWeese, 2016).

Naqshbandi communities often operated as informal educational spaces accessible to diverse social groups, facilitating the diffusion of ethical norms beyond elite circles. Ethical formation remained the primary goal of Naqshbandi pedagogy, with virtues such as humility, patience, self-restraint, honesty, and social responsibility cultivated through sustained practice. This character-oriented approach represents an indigenous model of moral education integrating spirituality, social engagement, and personal accountability (Komilov, 2009; Abduqodirov, 2020).

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Sufism in Central Asia during the XVI–XVII centuries functioned as a coherent system of moral and pedagogical formation. Sufi traditions, particularly within the Naqshbandiyya order, provided mentorship-based, experiential, and character-oriented education that complemented formal religious institutions. Sufi pedagogy emphasized internal transformation, ethical discipline, and the integration of education with everyday life. Uzbek scholars highlight that such approaches align with contemporary models of moral and value-oriented education, in which ethical competence is developed through sustained

practice and social engagement (Ismailov, 2016; Qodirov, 2019).

The inclusive and community-based nature of Sufi education contributed to social

cohesion during periods of political instability and offers valuable historical insights for modern discussions on character education, mentorship, and holistic learning.

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