



Sufi Motives in Ancient Turkic Nomadic Culture

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<https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.106.2030>

Abstract

The cultural and anthropological concept of Turkic Sufism is rooted in ideals of spiritual perfection, the absolute, and the archetype of the "perfect human". This concept, though widely influential, remains insufficiently explored from sociological perspectives. This article expands on Sufi motives in ancient Turkic nomadic culture by incorporating sociological theories of collective rituals, authority, and cultural capital. Drawing on Émile Durkheim's notion of collective effervescence, we examine how communal Sufi practices fostered social cohesion and a shared sacred experience among nomadic communities. Using Max Weber's concept of charismatic authority, we analyze the role of Sufi saints and leaders whose personal spiritual charisma legitimized new religious ideas and guided cultural transformation. Through Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, we explore how Sufi knowledge, rituals, and symbols functioned as valued social assets that facilitated identity formation and integration into the broader Islamic civilization. The study addresses the synthesis of pre-Islamic Tengriism with Sufism in the Great Steppe, illustrating how spiritual practices shaped collective identity and ethical norms. This sociological reframing clarifies the profound influence of Sufism on cultural values, social structures, and identities, offering a more rigorous understanding of its role in the historical evolution of Central Asian cultures.

Keywords: Sufism, Nomadic culture, Turkic society, Tengriism, Collective



Introduction

The introduction of Sufism into the Turkic nomadic world was a catalyst for profound cultural and social transformation (Trimingham, 1998) Sufism entered Central Asia as a comprehensive spiritual doctrine accompanied by distinctive practices and ways of life, giving a powerful impetus to the development of Turkic philosophical thought. In the medieval Great Steppe, Sufi teachings resonated with existing shamanistic and Tengriist traditions, allowing the nomads to embrace Islam in a form that enriched rather than erased their indigenous worldview (Suadi Sa'ad, 2025). The Turks were drawn to this mystical dimension of Islam because it enabled them to connect with the achievements of world civilization (through the Arabic language and Islamic culture) while preserving their own cultural identity. Through Sufism's emphasis on inner perfection and direct spiritual experience, the formerly animist or shamanist Turkic peoples found a way to integrate the new faith with their ancestral beliefs (Chittick, 2007).

From a sociological perspective, the spread of Sufism among nomadic Turks can be understood through the frameworks of collective rituals, leadership authority, and cultural value systems. Émile Durkheim's concept of *collective effervescence* – the heightened energy and unity that a community experiences during communal rituals – is especially relevant. Nomadic Turkic society, like many others, held collective ceremonies (such as feasts, dances, and zikr circles) that created powerful shared emotions and reinforced social bonds (Pizarro et al., 2022). The Sufi practice of dhikr (remembrance of God, often performed with music and movement) and the whirling dance (Sema) exemplify how spiritual rituals doubled as social glue, producing moments of ecstatic unity that solidified group identity (Nurlan Orynbekov, 2024). These rites turned abstract beliefs into lived, *felt* experiences, thereby strengthening the community's commitment to the emerging Islamic-Sufi worldview. Durkheim noted that such intense communal experiences can transform cultural symbols and reinforce the moral order of society. In the context of Turkic nomads, the sacred gatherings around Sufi saints or at the tombs of holy figures (mazars) became focal points of collective effervescence, through which Islam gained a deeply rooted, emotional acceptance (Schimmel, 1975).

Max Weber's theory of *charismatic authority* provides another lens to interpret this cultural shift. Weber defined charismatic authority as legitimacy derived from the perceived extraordinary qualities of an individual leader. In the Turkic Sufi context, charismatic leaders such as Khoja Ahmed Yasawi and other Sufi sheikhs exemplified this form of authority (Trimingham, 1998). They were revered not because of formal office or lineage alone, but due to their spiritual insight, miraculous deeds, and moral exemplarity – qualities considered "of divine origin" by their followers (Schimmel, 1975). These Sufi masters (often called *auliya*, i.e., saints) earned devotion through their personal holiness and ability to bridge the human and divine. Their influence often transcended tribal structures, allowing them to unify disparate clans under a spiritual banner. The acceptance of Islam in the Steppe was thus frequently mediated by Sufi saints whose charisma made the new religion approachable and resonant with Turkic values. Rather than forceful conversion, it was the persuasive spiritual authority of these figures that facilitated a relatively peaceful Islamization. They embodied an authority structure parallel to traditional tribal leadership, one grounded in sanctity and wisdom. Over time, some of this charismatic authority became routinized (in Weber's terms) into respected Sufi lineages or shrine custodianships, blending with traditional authority and contributing to new social institutions centered on khanqahs (Sufi lodges) and pilgrimage sites (Haselby, 2024).

Pierre Bourdieu's notion of *cultural capital* further enriches our understanding of how Sufism impacted Turkic nomadic society (Bourdieu, 1986). Cultural capital refers to non-economic assets – knowledge, skills, education, symbolic goods – that can be used to gain status and power in society. Adopting Islam through Sufism provided Turkic nomads with access to a vast repository of cultural capital from the broader Islamic world (Shahi, 2019). Mastery of the Arabic script and Quranic literacy, familiarity with Sufi poetry and philosophy, and participation in cosmopolitan Sufi networks all became markers



of distinction and gateways to new forms of prestige. For example, a nomadic chieftain who patronized Sufi scholars or claimed affinity with a revered Sufi order could enhance his legitimacy and connect his community to the urbane culture of the Islamic caliphates. Sufi values also reoriented notions of honor and virtue: the Turkic ideal of the “perfect human” (*insan-i kamil*) propagated by Sufi teachings elevated traits like humility, piety, and love for the divine as esteemed virtues, thus reshaping the social honor code (Chittick, 2007). In Bourdieu’s terms, embracing Sufism endowed individuals and groups with embodied cultural capital (e.g., spiritual discipline, esoteric knowledge) and objectified cultural capital (e.g., books, musical instruments like the *kobyz* associated with Yasawi’s hymns) that had currency in the new socio-religious context. Such cultural capital facilitated social mobility in a stratifying society – for instance, formerly pagan shamans could become respected Sufi healers, and clan leaders could become Islamic scholars or patrons, thereby maintaining influence in the changing cultural landscape (Watson-Jones & Legare, 2018).

This article proceeds by examining the dialogue between pre-Islamic beliefs and Sufi Islam in the medieval Turkic context, analyzing how Sufi rituals and symbols (such as the circle, dance, and sacred music) aligned with or transformed indigenous practices. We then discuss the role of Sufi institutions and saints in identity formation and community organization, applying Durkheim’s, Weber’s, and Bourdieu’s theories to illuminate these processes. Finally, we incorporate comparative insights from other regions – notably South Asia and the broader Islamic world – to highlight that the interplay of Sufism with local culture is a widespread phenomenon. By integrating these sociological perspectives, we aim to clarify the mechanisms by which Sufi motives influenced cultural values, social structures, and collective identity among ancient Turkic nomads (Trimingham, 1998).

Materials and Methods

This article applies the methods of hermeneutics and comparativism to analyze key ethical concepts that are central to Turkic languages and cultures. These concepts play a significant role in shaping moral frameworks within the Turkic world. The study focuses on the ancient Turkic concepts of “virtue” and “dignity,” expressed through the word *erdem*. Additionally, the concepts of “justice” (*kunilik*) and “truth” (*çin* and *bıyık*) are analyzed.

Religious traditions, particularly Tengriism and Sufism, played a significant role in shaping the spiritual life of the Turks. Tengriism viewed humans as an inseparable part of nature, where their relationship with the world was governed by principles of harmony and unity with the surrounding space. In this cosmological framework, the natural worlds – Upper, Middle, and Lower—held sacred significance. The Upper world, embodying Tengri (the Sky), was especially revered.

The circle serves as a key symbol in Turkic culture, representing unity and infinity. This archetype is particularly expressed in the idiom *aynalayın*, which translates to “you are my light, and I revolve around you.” The phrase underscores the idea that life and the world revolve around a central, unifying object or principle. This worldview is closely tied to Tengriism, where humans seek their connection to the Sky and nature, embodying a holistic approach to existence.

Results and Discussion

Sufism and indigenous beliefs: cultural transformation on the steppe

One of the remarkable features of Central Asian history is the relatively peaceful integration of Islam into the nomadic lifestyle. By the 6th–11th centuries CE, the Turkic peoples of the Altai and Turan had established a vibrant civilization with a rich tapestry of beliefs. Their indigenous religion, often referred

to as Tengriism, was a shamanistic and nature-centric belief system venerating Tengri (the sky god) and a host of spirits. When Islam began spreading into the steppe, it could have clashed with these deeply rooted traditions. Instead, Sufi missionaries and mystics played a conciliatory role in bridging the two worldviews. Sufism, with its cosmological focus and personal spirituality, turned out to be highly compatible with the Tengriist emphasis on harmony between humans and the cosmos (Daniel Satybaldiev, 2024).

Turkic conversion to Islam was often a gradual layering of Islamic practices atop Tengriist foundations, rather than an abrupt replacement. Scholars note that early conversions had a “conditional formal character,” where Islamic faith was adopted outwardly but many pre-Islamic customs persisted in daily life. The key to deeper Islamization was the synthesis achieved by Sufi teachers, who showed that the worship of one God and the reverence of ancestral spirits and nature need not be mutually exclusive. For example, Sufi veneration of saints (*wali*) paralleled the nomads’ reverence for ancestor-spirits and heroes; many Islamic saints in Turkic lands were identified with local spirit-protectors or legendary shamans. The Sufi concept of *Ziyarat* (pilgrimage to saints’ tombs) aligned with pilgrimages to sacred springs or mountains in Tengriism. Through such correspondences, Sufism effectively indigenized Islam, embedding it into the fabric of Turkic cosmology (Hill, 2009) (**Fig.1**).



Fig. 1. (Author’s own) Mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi in Kazakhstan. Constructed in the late 14th century, this magnificent mausoleum is a cornerstone of Central Asian Islamic architecture. It remains a vital pilgrimage site where visitors seek blessings and spiritual solace, often venerating its sacred stone and relics attributed to the revered Sufi saint. Although traditional Islamic doctrine generally discourages the veneration of images or relics, Sufi traditions embrace these symbols as expressions of divine grace and cultural heritage.

An illustrative figure is Khoja Ahmed Yasawi (1093–1166), a Central Asian Sufi poet and teacher whose influence was monumental in the Turkic world. Yasawi, revered as a sage of the steppe, composed poetry in the Turkic language (instead of Arabic or Persian), making Islamic mysticism accessible to nomads in their mother tongue. His work *Divan-i Hikmet* (“Book of Wisdom”) taught Sufi concepts using metaphors familiar to the steppe dwellers – yurt (tent) as the world, journeying as a metaphor for spiritual progress, etc (Yesevi, 2018). The Yasawi Sufi order blended shamanic elements (such as using the *kobyz* fiddle in rituals) with Islamic teachings. This syncretic approach meant that a Turkic shaman could convert to Islam and yet continue practicing as a Sufi dervish, channeling spiritual power in ways the community recognized. Over generations, this led to a transformation of the Turkic cultural code: Islamic concepts of one God (Allah) and prophecy merged with Tengriist notions of the eternal blue sky and sacred ancestors, forming a unique Turko-Islamic identity.

Importantly, this transformation was not one-sided. While Islam gained Turkic characteristics, the Turkic nomadic culture also evolved, adopting new ethical and philosophical dimensions. The Turkic ideal of *erdem* (virtue) and *kunilik* (justice) were reinterpreted in light of Islamic ethics. Hospitality, bravery, and honor – prized traits on the steppe – found new expressions through Islamic charity (*zakat*), *jihād* (striving for justice), and *futuwwa* (spiritual chivalry). The result was a layered cultural identity: on the surface, the society was Islamic, but underneath it retained a worldview attuned to the rhythms of nature and the memory of ancestors. Sufi practices acted as a mediating force, ensuring continuity amid change. As one scholar puts it, Islam in Turkic lands became “*Islamo-Sufi*”, a blend that allowed the Turkic peoples to enter the Islamic civilization “without destroying their spiritual landscape” (H.T.Gabitov).

Ritual and collective effervescence: the circle, the dance, and the sacred

Ritual performances in ancient Turkic culture were imbued with symbolic significance, and Sufi practices intensified this symbolic repertoire. Central to the nomadic spiritual expression was the circle – a shape that embodied the cycle of life, the cosmos, and the unity of the community. The ancient Turks, like many other peoples, perceived existence as fundamentally cyclical: day and night, seasons, life and death, all followed a repeating pattern. In their pre-Islamic rituals, Turkic shamans would often lead community dances in a circle, moving in harmony with drumbeats that signified the heartbeat of nature (Andrey Khazbulato, 2024; Martin van Bruinessen, 2007).

Circular dances thus acquired a renewed sacred status in the Islamic era. The most famous of these is the *Sema*, the whirling dance of the Mevlevi dervishes (inspired by the teachings of Jalaluddin Rumi, though Rumi’s influence in the Turkic Steppe came slightly later via the Perso-Turkic world). In the *Sema*, dervishes spin on their axis, one hand raised to the sky and the other turned toward the earth, symbolizing the connection between the heavens and the material world. For the Turkic Sufis, such circular movement was a physical embodiment of *dhikr* (remembrance of God). As they spun, they recited or internalized sacred formulas, entering a trance-like state of ecstasy. The whirling dervish in this state represents the soul orbiting the Divine Truth, much like planets orbit the sun. Each revolution is both an invocation and a surrender (**Fig.2**) (Fremantle, 1976).



Fig.2. The Sufi whirling dervishes in Pamukkale. Sufi whirling dervishes perform the *Sema* ritual, a form of active meditation that originated among Sufis. Such communal dances, rooted in ancient shamanistic ceremonies, foster intense shared emotions and unity among participants. In Durkheim’s terms, they generate “collective effervescence,” binding the community together in a sacred experience (Egloff, 2011). This file directly was taken from Wikimedia Commons without any changes (Wikimedia), (CC BY-SA 4.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>>).



Anthropologically, the act of dancing in unison under guidance of a spiritual leader can be seen as an expression of collective effervescence, as described by Durkheim. When the Turkic community gathered in a Yurt (tent) circle or an open steppe clearing to participate in a ritual dance or *zikr*, individuals reported feeling a powerful sense of oneness with the group and the cosmos. Their personal identities momentarily dissolved into the collective identity of the tribe under God. This aligns with Durkheim's observation that during communal religious rites, people "communicate the same thought and participate in the same action," resulting in an energy that "serves to unify the group." In those moments of heightened emotion – chanting of Sufi poetry, the repetitive rhythm of the drum (echoing the shaman's tambourine), the whirling motion – the boundary between the sacred and the profane blurred (A.Khakimov, 2005).

Beyond dance, music and chanting in Sufi practice also had a collectivizing effect. The Turkic nomads had a tradition of epic singing and throat chanting, which readily blended with Sufi *qasida* (hymns) and *zikr*. The repetition of God's names or the singing of poetry to the point of ecstasy functioned as rhythmic social synchronization, aligning the group's emotional states (Egeland, 2023). Recent studies in social psychology affirm that synchronized group activities (like chanting or dancing together) increase feelings of unity and prosocial behavior (Pizarro et al., 2022). This scientific insight echoes what Turkic communities experienced centuries ago: the path to social solidarity ran through shared sacred experiences. In sum, by appropriating the archetype of the circle and the medium of dance and song, Sufi orders in Turkic society preserved an ancient mode of collective worship and amplified it, ensuring that as the culture changed its religious substance, it retained a familiar form of communal expression and social cohesion (Aldeen, 2024).

Sufi saints and social authority: charisma and leadership

The spread of Sufism in the Turkic nomadic milieu cannot be explained without understanding the influence of individual Sufi saints and masters. These figures were the agents of change who guided tribes and communities toward new spiritual horizons. They often emerged as charismatic authorities in the Weberian sense – leaders whose legitimacy stemmed from perceived extraordinary qualities and a divine mandate (Fadlil Yani Ainusyamsi, 2024). A Sufi master arriving in a camp might demonstrate healing abilities, profound wisdom, or miraculous survival in the harsh steppe, leading people to view him as touched by Tengri or Allah. Stories spread of Sufi saints communing with nature: making water spring from barren ground, taming wild animals, or foretelling the weather – all resonant signs for a nomadic culture deeply dependent on nature's whims (Rahman, 2009; Seesemann, 2008).

One example is the legend of Ahmed Yasawi after his death: local lore claimed that wolves guarded his tomb and that earth from near his grave could cure illnesses. Such tales elevated Yasawi's status to that of a supernatural protector of the land. Similarly, Suleyman Bakırgani (Hakim Ata), a disciple of Yasawi, was credited with bringing rain during droughts through his prayers. The belief in these saints' intercessory power made them focal points of devotion. People would swear oaths by them, seek their guidance in disputes, and attribute clan successes to their blessings.

Weber notes that charismatic authority is inherently unstable and needs continuous reaffirmation. In the Turkic Sufi context, this was managed by the formation of Sufi lineages and brotherhoods that passed on the saint's *baraka* (spiritual grace) to successors, thereby institutionalizing charisma to some extent. The Yasawi order, for example, continued for centuries, with successive leaders (sheikhs) tracing spiritual lineage back to Yasawi and ultimately to the Prophet Muhammad. These lineages provided a new kind of authority structure parallel to tribal chieftains. In some cases, Sufi sheikhs held greater sway over the populace than local khans. They could mobilize people across tribal lines, for instance, calling for a joint pilgrimage or a jihad against injustice, relying on their spiritual prestige.

The authority of Sufi saints also played a crucial role in mediating conflicts and fostering alliances. Shared reverence for a holy person could unite different tribes that otherwise had feuds. Pilgrimage sites (mazars) associated with saints became neutral ground where diverse groups met in peace. The gatherings at these sacred sites often doubled as tribal assemblies or fairs, blending social, economic, and spiritual life. In this way, Sufi institutions paralleled the role of traditional tribal councils, but under a spiritual ethos of unity and love rather than mere political expediency (**Fig.3**).

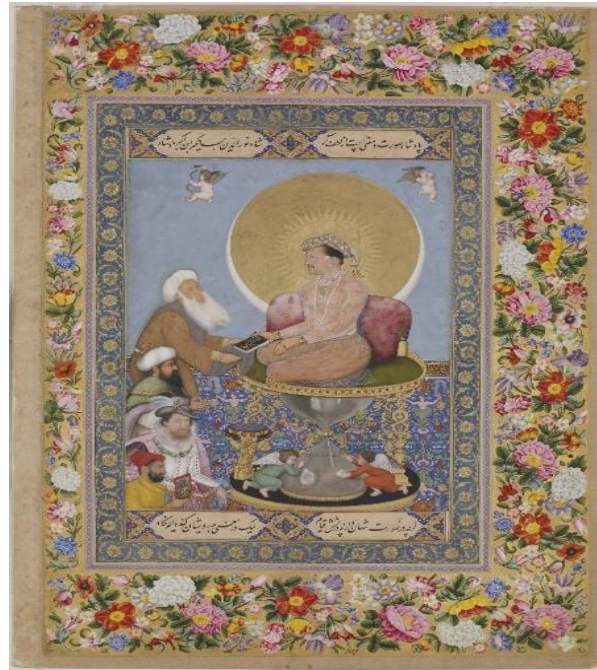


Fig.3. Jahangir Preferring a Sufi Shaikh to Kings, from the St. Petersburg album. Mughal Emperor Jahangir (seated right) offers a book to the Sufi Shaikh Husain of Ajmer (left), symbolically showing reverence to spiritual authority over worldly kings. This 17th-century painting, “Jahangir Preferring a Sufi Shaikh to Kings” by Bichitr, illustrates a ruler’s deference to a Sufi saint. Across cultures, Sufi saints commanded profound respect and wielded charismatic authority that could eclipse temporal power (DcoetzeeBot, 2011). This file directly was taken from Wikimedia Commons without any changes (Wikimedia), (CC BY-SA 4.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>>).

This painting from Mughal India (though outside the Central Asian steppe) epitomizes a broader pattern: political leaders often sought validation from Sufi luminaries. In the Turkic context, rulers of Khanates and later even the Mughal emperors (who had Turkic-Mongol roots) would visit Sufi dargahs (shrines) to legitimize their rule. The Kazakh khans, for example, patronized the shrine of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi in Turkestan (present-day Kazakhstan) as a royal mausoleum and spiritual center, signaling that their authority was under the blessing of the saint’s spirit. By doing so, they effectively merged traditional authority (hereditary rule) with charismatic authority (spiritual sanction), thus strengthening their overall legitimacy in the eyes of the people (Nizami, 1998).

However, charismatic religious authority also had its tensions with established power. There were instances of conflict when a saint’s following was seen as a threat. For instance, historical accounts note that some Sufi-led movements, if they turned overtly millenarian or political, were suppressed by wary rulers (Badarussyamsi, 2023). Yet, more often, a symbiotic relationship prevailed: Sufi leaders



advised khans and mediated between the masses and the elite, while rulers endowed khanqahs and protected Sufi communities. This balance ensured that Sufi motives became deeply ingrained in governance and social norms without leading to major ruptures. It also meant that moral and ethical leadership in society was frequently provided by Sufis – they were the conscience-keepers who could admonish even rulers (albeit delicately) by invoking spiritual principles (Bruinessen, 2007; Bruinessen & Howell, 2007).

The impact of Sufi saints on Turkic nomadic societies can be seen in the emergence of a dual leadership paradigm: temporal leaders (khans, beys) who managed worldly affairs, and spiritual leaders (sheikhs, babas) who guided hearts and morals. Weber's charismatic authority concept helps explain the rise of the latter – their legitimacy came not from tradition or law but from the community's belief in their exceptional connection to the divine. Over time, this contributed to the formation of a more stratified yet integrated society: nobility and clergy, warriors and sages, each with their role. Yet unlike the European context where church and state were often at odds, in the nomadic Turkic context, the "church" (Sufi orders) often roamed with the "state" (tribes), cohabiting the steppe and together navigating the challenges of survival and faith (Siddiqa, 2018).

Identity formation and cultural capital

The Islamization of the Turkic nomads via Sufism was not only a religious conversion but also an identity transformation. The concept of the Ummah (the global Muslim community) introduced a new supra-tribal identity that complemented and sometimes superseded tribal affiliations. For a people whose lives were traditionally ordered by clan lineage and alliances, adopting Islam meant integrating into a narrative that connected them to distant lands and peoples – from Arabia to Persia to Anatolia. Sufism eased this transition by providing culturally resonant pathways into the Ummah. Through Sufi teachings, Turkic nomads could see themselves as part of a universal quest for divine truth, while still honoring the particularities of their steppe lifestyle (Temirbayev & Temirbayeva, 2021).

One way to analyze this new identity is through the distribution of cultural capital in Bourdieu's sense. The embrace of Sufism came with acquisition of new cultural capital: knowledge of Islamic theology and law (to varying degrees), ability to speak or at least recite in new languages (Arabic prayers, Persian hymns), and familiarity with the norms of the settled Islamic world. Those individuals or groups who acquired this capital often became cultural brokers. For example, members of a nomadic clan who studied in a madrassa or traveled on Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca) returned with enhanced status – they could teach others, arbitrate religious questions, and connect their community to trade and scholarly networks across Muslim Asia. In the stratified society that was emerging, these were valuable assets. Families began to pride themselves on producing ulama (Islamic scholars) or hafiz (memorizers of the Quran) alongside traditional warriors and herders (Huang, 2019).

At the same time, the embodied cultural capital of the steppe – prowess in horsemanship, knowledge of grazing routes, the art of oration through epic tales – did not disappear. Instead, we see a fusion of old and new capital in social life. The ideal leader (biy or khan) in later Turkic society was expected to be both a fierce protector (exhibiting the ancient virtue of batyr – heroism) and a just, pious ruler (upholding Islamic justice and patronizing religious institutions). Poetry gatherings (aitys) now included Islamic themes; the traditional shaman-bards (bakshis) who once sang of Tengri and spirits now also sang of Muhammad, Ali, and Sufi saints. Knowing genealogies of saints became as important as knowing tribal genealogies (Cook, 2024a).

Education became an avenue for accumulating cultural capital that could elevate one's position. The establishment of Sufi lodges and schools in places like Yasi (Turkestan), Bukhara, and Samarkand meant that even nomadic youth sometimes spent a season learning under a Sufi master. The concept of adab (proper conduct/culture) was taught – encompassing manners, ethics, and refined tastes of



the Islamic civilization. This allowed a fresh avenue for social mobility not tied to birth or wealth, thus altering the social fabric in a significant way (Cook, 2024b).

One can look at how Sufism similarly affected identity in other regions. In South Asia, for example, the arrival of Turkic-Afghan Sufis was instrumental in shaping a new Indo-Muslim identity. Sufi saints in India (like Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti of Ajmer) won over local populations by accommodating cultural practices and speaking the local vernacular, much as Yasawi did in Turkic lands. Over time, Sufi teachings of divine love and human equality resonated with the masses, cutting across caste and ethnic lines (Jafri, 2006).

In regions like Punjab and Bengal, being part of the local culture began to include venerating Sufi saints and attending their *urs* (death anniversary festivals) regardless of one's original religion, thus forging a composite culture. Similarly, in North and West Africa, Sufi brotherhoods like the Qadiriyya and Tijaniyya played a huge role in the Islamization of diverse ethnic groups, creating new identities (e.g., the Fulani or Wolof self-conception became tightly linked to Sufi affiliations). These comparative cases underscore a pattern: Sufism acts as a cultural catalyst, enabling the formation of syncretic identities that ease the transition into Islam by valuing pre-existing traditions and channeling them into the service of a broader Islamic identity.

In modern times, although the context is vastly changed, Sufism continues to influence identity. The 20th-century saw reforms and even suppression (Atatürk's Turkey banned Sufi orders in 1925, for example), aiming to create a secular national identity. Yet, Sufi practices went underground or adapted, and have resurged in many places as people seek spiritual meaning. The fact that Turkic Central Asians today, after decades of Soviet secularism, are reviving Sufi pilgrimages and oral epics with Sufi themes, speaks to the enduring identity imprint left by the centuries of Sufi tradition. It remains a wellspring of cultural capital – evident in music, poetry (e.g., Rumi is globally celebrated, including in Turkic countries), and a general ethos of tolerance and mysticism that many central Asians claim as their heritage.

Comparative insights: Sufism's broader impact

The Turkic nomadic engagement with Sufism was part of a larger historical tapestry of Islamic mysticism's role in societies. Comparatively examining other regions highlights both unique features and common dynamics. As mentioned, in South Asia, Sufism was pivotal in spreading Islam in a predominantly Hindu-Buddhist environment. The methods were strikingly similar: Sufi saints used music (*qawwali*), local languages, and miracles to attract devotees, becoming beloved figures across communities. Just as the Turkic nomads blended Tengriism with Sufism, Indian communities blended Sufi veneration with Hindu devotionism – for instance, songs of poet-saints like Kabir and Guru Nanak (influenced by Sufi and Bhakti ideas) appealed to mixed audiences. The concept of charismatic authority is exemplified by figures like Sheikh Nizamuddin Auliya of Delhi, whose *khanqah* fed thousands and whose mere presence was said to calm civil strife. His charisma was such that Sultans sought his counsel, paralleling how Turkic khans revered their Sufi mentors.

In the Middle East and North Africa, Sufi orders often became mass movements. The Sanusi order in the Maghreb and Libya, for example, not only led spiritual life but also anti-colonial resistance. Their leaders wielded both spiritual capital and political influence, reminiscent of how Sufi sainthood in Central Asia could mobilize tribes for or against political causes. The notion of collective effervescence was seen in the huge *dhikr* gatherings of the Naqshbandi or Shadhili orders, where entire towns would participate in chanting, much like a nomadic encampment would gather for a grand *zikr* in the steppe. Those events reinforced communal solidarity especially in times of foreign threat or social upheaval (Chalcraft, 2017).



From a modern sociological standpoint, Sufism's adaptability to different cultures can be seen as its strength – it provided a framework of meaning that could absorb local customs and give them new purpose. It often functioned as a form of social capital as well – membership in a Sufi order created networks of trust and mutual aid (analogous to guilds or fraternities). In nomadic society, this might mean safe passage and hospitality when traveling among far-flung tribes of the same order; in urban settings, it could mean business partnerships and alliances fostered at the lodge (tekke). Bourdieu's concept of social capital dovetails here: Sufi affiliations often connected people across regions, enabling trade, scholarship, and even diplomacy. For nomads who frequently migrated, belonging to a trans-local Sufi network (e.g., the Yasawi or Naqshbandi network) extended their support system beyond kinship, which was a novel form of social organization introduced by Sufism.

It's also instructive to note how collective effervescence in Sufi practice has been re-interpreted in contemporary times. In modern gatherings – whether the Urs of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar in Pakistan where thousands dance in trance, or the annual Konya festival in Turkey celebrating Rumi with whirling performances – the same principle applies: communal emotion, forged in rhythmic devotion, creates a temporary but powerful solidarity that can transcend social divides. Sociologists today cite concerts, mass protests, even sports events as secular analogs of this phenomenon, but Sufi rituals have been doing it for centuries in a religious key (Pizarro et al., 2022).

The comparative perspective underscores that Sufism's role in cultural transformation and identity formation is a recurring theme across the Muslim world. Whether among settled peasants, urbanites, or nomads, Sufi motives provided tools for societies to internalize the message of Islam in culturally meaningful ways. The Turkic nomadic case is unique in its context – wide grasslands, tribal politics, shamanic legacy – yet it resonates with these broader patterns. By viewing it alongside other examples, we affirm that Sufism's blend of esoteric philosophy and popular practice often made it the heart of Islam's encounter with diverse cultures. It was usually at the frontiers (geographical or social) that Sufism shone brightest – bringing the faith to new peoples not by sword, but by love, art, and example.

Conclusion

The infusion of Sufi ideals into Turkic nomadic culture was a transformative force that reshaped both spiritual practice and everyday life. Far from being a mere religious conversion, the integration of Sufism catalyzed a broad cultural metamorphosis, influencing social structures, authority, and collective values. Sufi rituals—ranging from communal dances to meditative chants—served as pivotal mechanisms for forging a shared sense of identity and reinforcing group cohesion. These communal practices allowed abstract sacred concepts to be experienced in tangible, meaningful ways, embedding Islamic symbols and ideals deeply within the social fabric. Charismatic Sufi leaders, revered for their spiritual magnetism and perceived closeness to the Divine, played a crucial role in this transformation. Their influence transcended traditional tribal boundaries, guiding nomadic societies through periods of profound change. Their moral authority and leadership realigned social norms towards Sufi ethics and provided a unifying vision that helped communities navigate external pressures and internal uncertainties. Furthermore, the adoption of Sufi cultural elements enriched the indigenous traditions of the Turkic peoples. The integration of Sufi poetry, music, architectural styles, and culinary practices with local customs created a dynamic blend of heritage that was both innovative and deeply rooted in tradition. This synthesis produced a resilient cultural identity that enabled Turkic societies to thrive despite challenges such as invasions, colonization, and repression. These interrelated processes reinforced one another, fostering an environment where spiritual innovation and traditional values coexisted harmoniously. The legacy of this synthesis is evident today in the continued emphasis on tolerance, unity, and resilience within Turkic societies. In sum, the infusion of Sufi ideals was not merely a religious shift but a multidimensional transformation that reshaped ritual, leadership, and cultural expression, leaving an enduring mark on the cultural DNA of Central Asia.



Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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