

Article

Sufism in Modern Kazakhstan: Continuation of the Yassawi Tradition?

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Abstract

Sufism is one of the cultural, religious, and social bases of the Turkic culture that has existed for centuries until the modern day. The religious renaissance after forced secularization that followed the independence of Central Asian states was accompanied by the revival of cultural and religious practices. The Sufi leaders of Kazakhstan are also active actors of religious life in the country. This article examines modern Sufi groups of Kazakhstan and social portraits of their leaders through the prism of the continuation of the Yassawi's tradition, teachings and practices. Materials of article are based on field research in Kazakhstan and Turkey (in-depth interviews with leaders and followers of Sufi groups) and participant observation in the Sufi communities of Kazakhstan. This study's results showed that modern Sufi communities continue Yassawi's teachings, employing his rhetoric and the dhikr practices of this school in different ways. However, there are not always legitimate grounds for this. For the first time, it is reported that verified field data results point to a current legitimate sheikh of the Kh.A. Yassawi tradition. Previously, scholars believed that the Yassawi Sufi school had fulfilled its historical mission in the region.

Keywords: Sufism; transformation; Yassawi tradition; neo-Sufism; modern Sufi leaders



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1. Introduction

Religious practices represent a fundamental value system that structures the daily lives of believers and is crucial to individual and group identity. Sufism is one of the components of the religious identity of the Turkic peoples. The Yassawi, Kubravi, and Naqshbandi tariqas emerged in Central Asia, and later the Qadiri and Suhrawardi tariqas also had influence and followers in the region. The Yassawi tariqa was one of the most influential in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, the Volga region, Anatolia, and Khorezm. Sufism has centuries-old roots in Kazakhstan due to the founder of the Turkic branch of Sufism, Khoja Ahmed Yassawi (d. 1166). He received education, spiritual knowledge and wisdom from his father Ibrahim, Baha ad-din Ispijabi, Arystan Bab, and Khoja Yusuf Hamadani (TDV *İslâm Ansiklopedisi'* 1989, pp. 159–61).

The teachings of Yassawi were based on the Qur'an and Hadith. As he himself noted, "Qur'an is the essence of my Hikmets" (Yassawi 2017). He is the author of Risaleh der

Adab-e Tariqat and Risaleh der Maqamat-e Erba'in (Khoja Ahmed Yassawi International Kazakh-Turkish University n.d.). The Sufi teachings of Yassawi provide a glimpse into the Turkic version of Islam. His activity as a spiritual teacher contributed to the conversion of nomadic peoples of the region into Islam. A distinctive feature of Yassawi's preachings was sensitivity to the local socio-cultural context of the Turkic peoples. The path he offered to the conversion of local peoples into Islam has led to a unique expression of national culture of the Turkic-speaking people. In Kazakh culture, ethnic confessional customs have played an important place in this process. Among Turkic-speaking peoples, the Divan-i Hikmet was called the "Quran of the Turks" as the Turks received the Quran through the Hikmets of Khoja Ahmed Yassawi. Therefore, he became known as the "Hazret Sultan" or "Holy Sultan" (Kurtumerov 2014, p. 384). Hikmets were based on verses of the Quran and hadiths. They functioned as a vernacular transmission of Islam in a form accessible to Turkic-speaking audiences. The work influenced the formation of the religious and cultural consciousness of the Turks. His authority turned Turkestan into an important enlightenment center during the Middle Ages in the region.

In the 11th–12th centuries, Sufism spread in Mawarannahr (corresponding to the territories of southern Kazakhstan). Sufi teachings also gained support of the political elite (Papas 2020, p. 260), particularly the rulers of the Golden Horde. Tamerlane, a ruler who conquered the territories of 27 modern states, believed that adhering to the Islamic norms leads to a creation of a just state and consolidation of his power. He was a religious man and read Yassawi's Hikmets during decisive battles. The conqueror was convinced that the Hikmets led him to victories. After another one of his victories, Tamerlane decided to visit Yassawi's grave. Unfortunately, the grave was in a dilapidated condition. In 1385 he ordered to build the Yassawi Mausoleum (Schimmel 2026). The mausoleum was built as a complex that included a mosque, madrasah, library, two palace halls, tomb, living quarters, canteen, the central hall (Kazandyk), and a well. The main southern entrance was adorned with a majestic arc that had minarets at two ends (Mausoleum 2003).

Sufi followers became the victims of repression in Soviet Union times. Sufi unions (tariqahs) were outlawed. The golden chain of succession (sil-sila) of Yassawi had almost been discontinued. However, the pilgrimage to the main holy site of the country, the Yassawi Mausoleum, and the practice of reading zikr by individual followers did not cease despite the persecution. As part of this study, one of the respondents noted that followers could not always provide documented proof of their adherence to the Yassawi tariqah (field materials, interview R3-17, 2023). At the same time, they systematically practiced the loud Yassawi zikr, pronouncing the Sufi formulas of the understanding of Allah, regardless of the state policy on religion. They did not always pass on their knowledge to their offspring. Some local scholars and modern Sufis state that the Yassawi tariqah served its historical mission (field materials, interview R1-1, 2020).

In this regard, we observe that a wide range of Sufi communities exist in Kazakhstan today, each with its own structure, leadership models, and areas of activity. The purpose of this article is to examine the activities of Sufi communities through the lens of Yassawi's teachings (legitimate connections, discourses, practices, etc.).

2. Materials and Methods

The theoretical and methodological framework of this study is based on interdisciplinary, anthropological, phenomenological, and historical approaches. Qualitative methods were used as a methodological tool. This study covers the period from gaining independence by Kazakhstan to the present. Materials of article are based on field research in Kazakhstan and Turkey (in-depth interviews with leaders and followers of Sufi groups) and participant observation in the Sufi communities of Kazakhstan from 2016 to the 2025.

In Turkey, this study was conducted in Kayseri, where the leaders of a Kazakh Sufi group resided for several years. In Kazakhstan, this study was conducted in Astana, Akmola Region, Almaty, and Turkestan and its surrounding region. Data were also obtained from all regions of the country (18 at that time) from experts in the field of religion in government agencies.

This article used a “snowball sampling” method, which is used to access hard-to-reach and closed communities. This strategy helped reveal that Sufi groups are aware of each other. This study surveyed followers of Sufi groups of various professions and social statuses. Many combine work and spiritual pursuits.

All approaches to the research are based on adherence to the principles of scientific knowledge, are based on historicism, objectivity, systematic and logical presentation of material, the establishment of a cause-and-effect relationship, and a comprehensive and innovative approach to research. To comply with international ethical standards, the personal data of study participants are not disclosed.

This study was conducted in accordance with the international and Kazakh standards. All participants involved in this study were informed about the purpose of the research, as well as the anonymity of their personal data. All participants consented to participate and to the use of the obtained materials for scientific goals.

The data obtained during this study are not publicly available to ensure confidentiality, protection of the participants’ personal data and ethical restrictions. All data are anonymized and encrypted by the author Aigerim Temirbayeva. The data consist of interviews with leaders and followers of Sufi groups and participant observation field notes collected during the research from 2016 to the 2025.

3. Results

3.1. The Yassawi Tradition in Modern Time

Yassawi is famous for being a Muslim preacher, Sufi poet and philosopher. He is the author of such works as *Mirat-ul Kulub* (*The Mirror of the Soul*), *Pakir-name* (*Tales of the Poor*), among others. One of his most prominent works is *Diwani Hikmet* (Book of Wisdom). Turkic people called this work “Qurani Turki”, since they accepted Islam with both the Qur’an and *Diwani Hikmet*. Yassawi himself was called Hazret Sultan by the Turkic people, while Turkestan was known as the second Mecca. Hikmets include the main provisions of the Yassawi tariqah. According to scholar Kh. Alimov, Yassawi’s Hikmets include the following forms of zikr: “zikr ilahi” (divine zikr), “zikr kalb” (zikr of the heart), and “zikr sirr” (mystery zikr) (Alimov 2024, p. 362). Along with religious instructions Yassawi called for a spiritual unification of the Turkic people in his work. To achieve spiritual and moral improvement and understand God it was important to take the path (Bulan 2023, p. 17). The path included several stages, such as sharia, tariqah, ma’ rifah and haqiqah. Each stage requires passage of a threshold, the makamah of the spiritual state. Yassawi himself noted that if one does not learn seventy sciences and pass seventy thresholds, one will not be worth much more than an idol. In addressing his students (murids), he asserted that they should only follow a teacher who is proficient in sharia, competent in tariqah, impeccable in haqiqah and generous in ma’ rifah. During the different historical periods, Sufi teaching was either flourishing or in decline. However, the key values persisted (DeWeese 2012, p. 18).

After independence, Kazakhstan witnessed the resurgence of Sufi teachings and the practice of zikr. This took the form of activity by local and foreign missionaries. The new surge in development also occurred in the revival of historical and cultural heritage of the country, development of the pilgrimage practice and tourist routes, restoration of old

mosques, and construction of new Islamic cultural centers that bear the names of Sufi leaders (Temirbayeva et al. 2021, pp. 91–92).

Some of the current Sufi groups in Kazakhstan expand their tariqahs by adding the traditional teachings of Yassawi. The use of this rhetoric was particularly prominent in the early history of independent Kazakhstan. Various local and foreign missionaries state that they continue the Yassawi tradition and uphold his spiritual values to attract new followers. Such appeals continue with current Sufi tariqahs as well.

In scholarly discourse, it was long assumed that the traditional genealogical lineage associated with Kh.A. Yassawi in Kazakhstan had not been preserved. Those who speculated have no legitimate grounds. There were rare cases when the practice of loud dhikr of the Kh.A. Yassawi tariqah was carried out, but there was no confirmed power. It is important to note that there are no comprehensive studies of the sil-sila of the Yassawi tariqah in the academic community. However, recent field data refute the disappearance of sil-sila in the 19th century. It is known that during this period some legitimate followers of the Yassawi school maintained their spiritual lineage, but their descendants converted to the Naqshbandi tariqah. Zaki Validi Togan and Sabit Mukanov wrote in their materials that, in the first half of the 20th century, they encountered representatives of the Yassawi tradition, including the practice of loud dhikr, in the Kashgar region (Xinjiang Province in Western China). Moreover, additional information in the works of Saduakas Gylmani (Ramazan and Tyshkhan 2026, pp. 70–71) and the poetic works of Balmagambet Balkybayuly also indicate the preservation of the Yassawi tradition and continuity. These data allow us to conclude that the Yassawi sil-sila continued to exist into the 20th century (Issakhan 2025).

In 2022, due to information from Turkish colleague Nejdett Tosun, it became known that a sheikh living in Afghanistan continues the tradition of Kh.A. Yassawi (Issakhan 2026, p. 12). In 2023, Kazakhstani scientist M. Issakhan visited Afghanistan and personally met with the Yassawi sheikh—Ihsanullah Ahrar al-Afghani al-Turkmani al Yassawi (born in 1981). The scholar established the authenticity of the supporting documents and spent several days in the sheikh's abode, personally talking with him and observing the activities of the community. It is important to note that Sheikh Ihsanullah Ahrar al-Afghani al-Turkmani al Yassawi studied with the sheikhs of the Naqshbandi tradition of his region for more than 20 years, but they never gave him ijaza (the right to instruct, to spread the teaching). As M. Issakhan found out, in the 20th century, due to the political and social situation, several pirs of the Yassawi tradition moved from Bukhara to Afghanistan: Muhammad Sharif ata, Damla Gok, and Oraz Muhammad. Despite the difficulties, they managed to preserve the teaching. One of them, pir Oraz Muhammad, gave ijaza of the Yassawi tariqa. Currently, Ihsanullah Ahrar al-Afghani al-Turkmani al Yassawi is known in his region; people come to his monastery with various questions, and he also helps in the treatment of mental illnesses. Sheikh Ihsanullah Ahrar al-Afghani al-Turkmani al Yassawi is assisted by his mother, who is well versed in herbal medicine. She prepares medicinal tinctures for various diseases for those in need. The family has its own long-standing traditional recipes (Issakhan 2024, p. 7). In April 2024, Sheikh Ihsanullah Ahrar al-Afghani al-Turkmani al Yassawi visited Kazakhstan and met with the scientific community. This fact makes a huge contribution to the further study and development of the tradition of Kh.A. Yassawi.

3.2. Continuation of Tradition in Modern Kazakhstan

Currently there are various Sufi communities in Kazakhstan, mostly of the Nakshband tradition. Recent years saw the emergence of Sufi groups not affiliated with Islam. These communities are based on the syncretism of meditation, yoga and various psycholog-

ical methods of spiritual self-improvement. They are appended with certain Sufi elements, such as meditation, trance, whirling, etc.

Some Sufi groups have their own central offices and regional leaders like caliphs and vakils. Moreover, as was the case previously, followers of Sufi orders are highly disciplined and are loyal adherents of their teachers.

Information about the leaders of modern Sufi groups of Kazakhstan is gathered from interviews with sheikhs and their followers, as well as open sources and scientifically tested data. A notable fact is that as part of this study it was not possible to identify a current religious leader among Chechens and the Ingush. Turkish jamaats are widespread in Kazakhstan and expand their social activities through public associations and waqfs (Saetov 2013, p. 165).

The leader of the Sufi group Naqshbandiya Mujaddidiya-Husayniyah is Akhmedov Kurbanali Bakbullaevich, born in 1955. He received his education in the Miri Bab Madrasah in Bukhara, Uzbekistan. He is the 36th link in the chain of succession (sil-sila) of the tariqah, from Abd al-Vahid-ishan Mamatshukurov (Meier 2001, p. 135). This Sufi group is the only group in Kazakhstan to retain a legitimate chain of succession. His followers call him “Pir” which means the saint and the leader of the Sufi tariqah. He practices the quiet zikr (every night) and the weekly collective zikr.

He is the author of the following works in Kazakh: *The meaning of madhhab (Madhhab manisi)*, *The Book of Prayer (Namaznama)*, *Following Knowledge (Ilimge ilesy)*, *The Book of Soul (Rukhnama)*, *The Book of Tariqah (Tarikhhatnama)*, *He Who Has the Pir, Has No Reason to Worry (Piri bardyn ne kamy bar)*, *Aruaq is the Life-giving Source of Allah (Aruak—Allanin abykhayaty)*. He publishes the Haq Joly newspaper (The Path of Truth) in Kazakh and Russian. In addition, a YouTube channel “Hazireti Kurbanali Akhmed ishan” was created for the followers, where he publishes videos recorded in his own studio or recordings from meetings with murids. Videos cover the subject of Islam, Sufism and daily questions of the believers. This channel has now been removed because of inspections by the competent authorities. The main training currently takes place in Istanbul, the Republic of Turkey.

He uses Kazakh, Russian and Uzbek in his sermons. Akhmedov has a quiet monotonous speech and mostly speaks using a microphone.

During the interview he noted that the passage of knowledge in the tariqah occurs orally. There are women’s groups. The discussion takes place in closed groups in messaging apps.

In addition, hereditary leaders of this tariqah are the sons of Abd al-Vahid-ishan Mamatshukurov, Sultankul (born in 1943) and Nasriddin-ishan (died August 2025). Currently, the tariqa is run the by eldest son of Nasriddin-ishan. They live in the village of Kush-Ata in the Turkestan region. Followers periodically visit them in the village. In July 2022 an interview with sheikh Sultankul took place in the village of Kush-Ata. His brother, a sheikh, was away for Hajj. During the interview Sultankul ata noted that it is important to learn Arabic. He also noted that the knowledge of tariqah is passed on orally. He expressed concern over the fact that currently there are various destructive religious movements, while the younger generation is cut off from spirituality due to history. Sultankul ata uses Kazakh and Uzbek in his speech. During the interview he spoke Kazakh with references to Arabic. Each brother has his own set of followers. Despite that they unite during the religious celebrations (field materials, participant observation, interviews with relatives, 2022). According to Kazakh researcher M. Issakhan, this tariqah is traditional. However, as one respondent who attended this group noted, strict rules of adab are observed within. They communicate among themselves in Uzbek.

It is important to note that he had the right (ijazah) to spread the teachings, but not the right to create a separate group or manage a tariqah. As field research (interviews with researchers and subsequent participant observation as confirmation) showed, in this

community, some attending a meeting may not know where they have come or what will happen. Such newcomers are invited to the meeting, but they may be unaware of the essence. However, during the meeting, an initiation ceremony into the tariqah (bay'ah) is held, and they do not always understand the consequences of what is happening. This contradicts the Yassawi teaching, in which a student undergoes extensive training and spiritual training but may still not be accepted into the tariqah. Moreover, one of the key initial stages in the Yassawi tariqah is adherence to Sharia law.

The leader of the Jahriya Sufi group (they consider themselves to be followers of the Yassawi tradition) is Abdugappar Ismatulla, born in 1948 in Afghanistan. He is a citizen of Kazakhstan since 2002. He studies in the Peshawar madrasah in Pakistan. His legitimacy (sil-sila) as the leader of the tariqah has not been completely verified. He and his followers assert that their succession stems from their ancestor Maymak Ishan, who was persecuted during the Soviet period and had to move to Afghanistan ([Counterterrorism Committee of Kazakhstan n.d.](#)). His position in the tariqah is that of the God-guarded sovereign (Maghzum Taqsir). This Sufi group practices the loud zikr collectively or individually every Thursday.

He is author of the following works: republican newspaper *Three Hurricanes* (*Ush kiyan*); books: *The Proof of the Jahr Zikr* (*Zhariya zikirdin daleli*) and *The ABC of the Secrets of Qur'an* (*Kuran syrlarynin alippesi*). In addition, videos with Ismatulla on various subjects are published on YouTube and social media.

It is notable that, since its inception, this Sufi group established its activity through the republican public union "Senim. Bilim. Omir", which functioned in 17 cities and 18 settlements. Approximately 200 branches exist in Kazakhstan ([List 2012](#)).

The group leader also founded the Yassawi vocal band ([Yassawi Toby 2024](#)). The entire spectrum of organizations functioned until the imprisonment of the leader in 2011. The leader of the tariqah continues his activity in Almaty Mosque after having served his sentence. There he started his work as a missionary during the early years of independent Kazakhstan. His sermons are mostly in Kazakh with references to Arabic. He has a loud voice and is noted for his charisma. He is a former military ideologist. He uses gestures in communication and the rhetoric of the coming of the Mahdi.

The activity of this Sufi community became splintered during the imprisonment of Ismatulla. In late 2019 he was freed from prison. He addressed several world leaders in writing, including Kasym-Jomart Tokaev, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin. The main idea of his addresses was that all humans have shared ancestors and that nationalities are irrelevant. Moreover, he states that the world awaits the coming of the prophet Mahdi and reads zikr, which is the only cure for the COVID-19 pandemic ([Aldabergenov n.d.](#)). Overall, past and current speeches of Ismatulla contain various calls for action to the public. In 2022 he participated in a series of scientific events in Bashkortostan together with Talgat Tadzhuddin. The Russian government's support is not welcomed by residents, especially those who advocate for the preservation of Kazakh identity.

S. Kerimbay, who is one of his main followers and, according to certain sources, was the main ideologist of the Sufi group, created his own community. He transformed and syncretized the archaic postulates of Sufism and adapted Sufi teachings to the needs of the modern public. Kerimbay is an orientalist, currently receiving a PhD from the University of Erciyes, Turkey. He does not possess the traditional Sufi sil-sila (field materials, interviews with several source persons, 2016, 2022); however, according to the information from his Facebook page, he spoke to Yassawi in his dreams, as such appealing to the concept of ayan. He had the leading position in his own community and is noted for his charisma. The community practices collective and individual loud zikr jahr, arra ([Nugman 2025](#)).

Kerimbay is the author of the following works: *From the Cradle to the Epic* (Aldiden eposka deyin), *The Traditions Speak* (Salt dastur soyleydi), *Siyar Sharip*, *Logotherapy or the Passion for Life* (Logoterapia nemese Omirge kushtarlyk), *The Yassawi Phenomenon* (Yassawi fenomeny), *Loving Life* (Omirge gashyk boly), *The Civilized Man* (Orkeniitti adam), *The Meaning of Love* (Mahabattin many), *The Ecosophy and the Sacred Nature* (Ekosofia nemese kiely tabigat), *One Thousand Questions* (Myn syrak), *The Tale of Sul-anbiya* (Kissa sul-nabiya), etc. He contributes to the translation of classical children's literature into Kazakh. Presentations featuring the staff of various scientific organizations are organized as part of publishing new books in various cities around the country ([Family Anthology n.d.](#)). In addition, he publishes videos on a hosting platform, where he talks about these books, along with the Yassawi zikr called Hai. It is probable that it is the synthesis of Yassawi's teachings with the needs of modern humans that brings him relevance among his followers.

The location of the tariqah is reportedly the city of Turkestan (south Kazakhstan). Followers come from various cities and regions of the country (field materials, interview R3-5, 2023). The leader himself visits Turkey on a systematic basis. Kerimbay speaks literary Kazakh, Turkish, English, and Russian. In addition, he is a former television host who possesses speaking skills, as he makes inflections on the necessary messages using his voice and gestures.

Since its inception, this Sufi group has used the rhetoric linked to the name and teachings of Yassawi. The group works towards reviving the spiritual values of this tariqah. Overall, this branch of Sufi can be viewed as Neo-Sufi. However, S. Kerimbay himself is currently increasingly engaged in educational activities, and in his interviews, he notes that he performs dhikr as a personal home practice. This is likely due to the tightening of religious legislation in Kazakhstan and systematic monitoring by law enforcement agencies. His social media appearances on culture, traditions, books, and translations are enjoyed by many in Kazakhstan, and his educational activities find support across various segments of the population. As this study showed, some Kazakhstani citizens do not support his Sufi interpretations but listen to his podcasts and read his books.

The leader of the Naqshbandiya Rabbaniya, the Suhba Intellectual-Spiritual School, including the Khaqqani tariqah of the Mujadidiya-Khalidiya branch, is Smagulov Marat Amanzholuly, born in 1968. He received his education from the International University of Al-Azhar in Cairo, Egypt, with a master's degree in theology. He received initiation from Sheikh Muhammad Nazim Adil al-Kubrusi al-Haqqani of Northern Cyprus. He was in a 40-day halvet with the sheikh during the latter's lifetime. He accompanied Sheikh Mehmed Adil in his travels to Kazakhstan. After that he became the main representative (vakil) of the Kazakhstan tariqah. However, in 2018 he was demoted to the position of a student (murid) of the Kazakhstan tariqah due to internal strife. As became known during this field study, in 2022 he once again became the main representative of the Khaqqani tariqah of the Mujadidiya-Khalidiya branch in Kazakhstan. Despite his demotion Smagulov received education from several sheikhs abroad. He received the ijaza (the license allowing the owner to transfer certain text and knowledge) from Sheikh Ali ibn Hussein and Sheikh Yusuf Khattar, who holds a doctorate in five disciplines. He is the de-facto representative of several tariqahs (field materials, interview R1-1, 2020, 2022).

In one of his interviews, he says the following: "...studying the legacy of Ahmed Yassawi is not an easy path. As a practitioner of tasawwuf, studying this third pillar of Islam and having permission to practice both the Naqshbandi and Yassawi tariqas, I would say that tasawwuf is, first and foremost, the cleansing of the heart and soul from all negative qualities" ([Zhualykyzy 2025](#)).

His position is Hakim (the holder of wisdom) in this tariqah. This Sufi group practices the loud zikr (arra, Huwa). B. Babajanov (2003, p. 240) notes that this dhikr is considered the most widespread type of loud dhikr in Central Asia, especially in the Yassawi brotherhood. The group gathers for dhikr at a convenient time online, mostly at the weekends evenings, and individual quiet zikr by personal necessity. For the first time in Kazakhstan's history, there was an attempt to change the form of zikr recitation to an online format. As noted by the followers, people from many countries join online. Smagulov periodically travels to various cities in Kazakhstan to meet the followers and gain new adepts.

An analysis of his interviews reveals that he advocates anti-Salafi rhetoric and opposes radical manifestations in Islam. He also openly positions himself as a practicing Sufi and promotes Sufism, including the Yassawi tariqah.

Smagulov is the author of several books, including *Tasawwuf* and *Own Path* (field materials). The leader lives in Astana (the capital of Kazakhstan); he also periodically travels to other cities to meet with the followers. He speaks Kazakh, Russian and Arabic. He is articulate, literate and has a calm voice. He delivers the information confidently and uses simple language. He uses gestures in speech. He uses various methods due to his previous experience in law enforcement. He uses references to Yassawi in his sermons and the practice of online loud dhikr. Overall, this tariqah's activity can be viewed as a form of Neo-Sufism.

The Mujadidiya-Khalidiya branch is led by a woman, Nakshbandiya Khakkaniya, born in 1961. She received initiation personally from Sheikh Muhammad Nazim Adil al-Kubrusi al-Haqqani. She is possibly the only prominent Sufi woman in Kazakhstan. She believes that she continues the tradition of Kazakhstani Sufis, including Yassawi, since her family were followers of Sufism. In addition, she mentioned in the interview that the Yassawi tariqah fulfilled its historical function. She is actively involved in lineage studies; she is also the head of the center for lineage studies in Kazakhstan and a coordinator of the international school of the lineage culture of family. She is a former follower of M. Norbekov's health system and follower of Valery Dokuchaev. She is involved in professional training in psychology and psychotherapy. She holds the position of the murid in the tariqah. At the same time, she has been a part of the tariqah for 10 years and is one of the key female representatives from Kazakhstan. During his lifetime Sheikh Nazim offered her to open a branch of this tariqah in Kazakhstan. However, she declined, citing problems with legislation in the country (field materials, interview R1-4, 2021, 2025).

The tariqah practices collective loud zikr and individual quiet zikr. She lives in Astana (the capital of Kazakhstan). She speaks Kazakh, Russian and Turkish. Her style of speech is formal, and she has her own charisma. In speeches she appeals to historical facts and works of famous Sufi authors and foreign psychologists.

She visits various cities in Kazakhstan with seminars, trainings, and club meetings on lineage studies thanks to her work. The themes of these events include those relevant for modern humans, such as parents and teachers, relationship improvement, man and woman, as well as spiritual and scientific laws. Interactions and sharing of knowledge take place offline and online through closed chat groups in messaging apps (field materials, interview R1-4/3, 2021, 2025).

As noted by the Kazakhstani followers during interviews, Sheikh Muhammad Nazim Adil al-Kubrusi al-Haqqani had favorable views of the Yassawi Sufi school and had a special attitude towards Kazakhstani followers. In addition, one of his followers noted that, during the initiation ceremony (bayat) to Sheikh Nazim in Turkey, he summoned the spirit of Yassawi. She also notes that Muhammad Nazim Adil al-Kubrusi al-Haqqani recommended visiting the Yassawi Mausoleum in Turkestan. An analysis of social media activity shows that the group's activities over the past two years have expanded to include topics

related to hadith and its psychotherapeutic potential. Field research during meetings revealed that the group's leader quotes various verses, suras, and hadiths from the Quran. This branch of Sufism can be viewed as contemporary Neo-Sufism.

The leaders of the Naqshbandiya Haqqaniyya of the Mujadidiya-Khalidiya branch are Nurgazin Daniyar, born in 1980, and his wife Akanova Assem (died in 2024). Multiple attempts to establish contact with these leaders have been unsuccessful.

Nurgazin received his education from the London University of Arts in the UK. He and his wife are business people who own a chain of real estate companies in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, UAE and Northern Cyprus. They are the followers of the Canadian Sheikh Farhat Joini and his wife Barbara Dingwall. The pair have spent most of their life in the service of Sheikh Muhammad Nazim Adil al-Kubrusi al-Haqqani of Northern Cyprus. They occasionally visit Kazakhstan, where they meet with followers of this branch of Sufism.

It is unknown what position Nurgazin and Akanova hold in the Sufi hierarchy. However, they are the main representatives in Kazakhstan. They live in Astana, the state capital. It was not possible to identify their type of zikr practice. They speak Russian and English. They spread their religious views by job hunting for real estate, as well as using the Sparta organization, which organizes courses, trainings, and other activities. Akanova cited Sufi teachers of various traditions in her speeches. Overall, the leaders of this Sufi group appeal to the fact that, apart from traditional treatments, Akanova was able to cure her cancer due to her mystical knowledge of Sheikh Farhat. There is no rhetoric related to Yassawi. This group can be viewed as contemporary Neo-Sufi.

The School of Harmonious Development ALIF is a branch of the International Mystical School ALGIZ or "European Sufism"; its leader is Arman Khamitov, born in 1990. He studied at a Kazakh Turkish high school. He started praying in school. He lived for a certain time in the Nakshband tariqah in the village of Kush-Ata, Turkestan region. He is the founder of the @alif_sufi_school, a professional ICU, ICF and ICTA business training coach, and founder of the Dostyk Educational Center and CEO Ulytau Enterprise. As the head of the Kazakhstan branch, he gained recognition from the founders of these Sufi schools, including Ruslan Zhukovets and Konstantin Usov (Russia). According to information from one of his followers, Zhukovets counts his chain of succession (sil-sila) from G. Gurdzhiev (field materials, interview R1-6, 2023, 2025).

A clairvoyant follower saw in one of her esoteric visions that the spirit sheikhs, including Muhammad Nazim Adil al-Kubrusi al-Haqqani of Northern Cyprus, opened a scroll that contained Khamitov's name. The Sufi group interpreted this as a sign of legitimacy of their leader. His position in the community is that of a Sufi master. The group practices individual zikr, both loud and quiet variations. Quiet zikr is preferred because it requires less energy. The zikr includes the recitation of 99 names of Allah, focusing on one of the points in the body (heart, head, etc.). It is important to note, during participant observation, the names of Allah used during collective dhikrs do not always correspond to the generally accepted Asma'ul-Husna and may contain, for example, the word "purifying" or "absolute". There are also stages of condition/degree nafs, six in total, where the highest one is the sixth nafs (field materials, participant observation, 2023, 2025).

Russian and English versions of *A Book for Princesses and Sufis* by Usov is popular in the group (Usov 2018, p. 5). The book is a memoir of the author and his path of becoming a Sufi master. Other popular books include *Great Mystics as They Are* and *Behind the Veil of Light* by Zhukovets in English. The books describe the mystical experience, means of transfer of knowledge, and mystical practices. These books are intended for those interested in the esoteric and seekers of the path.

The group headquarters is in Astana (north Kazakhstan), regular seminars are also organized in Almaty (south Kazakhstan). Seminars are paid. The group language is Russian.

Khamitov himself speaks Kazakh, Russian, Turkish and English. As a professional coach his speech is literate, his voice is clear, and he displays oratory skills. He has experience working with different age groups ([Mentors Academy 2019](#)).

The group has approximately 10–15 active followers and attracts newcomers. The leader asks each member about their individual needs, such as health, family relationships, and so on. The leader knows each follower personally by name, their marital status, place of work, religious experience, spiritual experiences, and so on. The members identify themselves as Muslims but not in a fundamental sense. Field research in 2025 shows that among the followers are mediums (women called akku—swan; men called sunkar—hawk), members of the Ata Zhol community, banned in Kazakhstan ([Malgarayeva et al. 2025](#), p. 167). An analysis of the group's social media showed that, since about 2024, the group has been practicing the transformational game Lila (an ancient Indian game for self-knowledge). One of the main followers edited it and named it after the Sufi community—the Alif transformation game.

This Sufi group synthesizes practices from different branches of Sufism: esoteric, coaching, clairvoyance, and psychology ([Temirbayev and Temirbayeva 2023](#), p. 23). At the same time, as identified during research, “praying and other fundamentals of Islam are not obligatory, the important part is to perform the practices of the teacher”. The knowledge is shared via closed groups in messaging apps, online via Zoom during group meetings, and during individual sessions with the Sufi master. The community leader assigns tasks, which are practices called “Work”, and transfers energy to his students. All lessons and training are paid. This group articulates to Islam, they know about Yassawi tradition, and visited the Yassawi Mausoleum in Turkestan (field materials, interview R1-6, R1-6/1, 2023, 2025). This Sufi group can be classified as New Age.

The aforementioned information about the leaders correlates with responses of the followers. In answering the question “Why did you turn to Sufism? What events or factors led you to it?”, the Sufi respondents responded by saying that they were in search of spirituality and met the teacher (sheikh). During the in-depth interviews the followers of different Sufi groups answered the question “Who is an authority in Sufism for you?” The unanimous answer was “my sheikh”. This statement correlates with the Yassawi hikmets: “Without a spiritual teacher the student will not reach maturity, in any times”. Moreover, during the interview respondents of various tariqahs reported that they periodically go on pilgrimage to the holy site of the Yassawi Mausoleum in Turkestan. Religious tourism has become one of the key clusters. As noted by one of the respondents, “While living my whole life and working as a cab driver in Turkestan, I saw people of almost all nationalities, even Native Americans. All of them come to visit the Yassawi Mausoleum”.

As the study results showed, modern Sufi groups primarily focus on the spiritual component. However, the khanakas of the Yassawi tradition focused primarily on religious and ethical disciplines. The elements of broader intellectual knowledge could be taught indirectly within the framework of the Islamic educational tradition. The Mausoleum of Kh.A. Yassawi and the khanakas were not only places of worship but also educational centers.

4. Discussion

American researcher Devin DeWeese notes in his works that the Yassawi tradition was an important part of the region's religious fabric and spread its Sufi teachings among the Turkic population. He also writes that both the Yassawi and other organized tariqas, such as the Kubrawi and Naqshbandi communities, had complex relationships and competed with one another ([DeWeese 2018](#)). This rivalry persisted throughout the Middle Ages and

continued later. He also writes that the sources about Yassawi are not so early and direct, and perhaps his role is overestimated (DeWeese 2025, p. 571).

Kazakhstani researchers of Sufism also believe that Sufism has deep roots in Kazakhstan and is an integral part of the region's spiritual heritage and the entire Turkic world. The work of religious preachers—sheikhs and ishans—laid the foundations for tolerance, peace, and harmony under the Islamic dome in many countries (Smanov et al. 2024, p. 71). However, scholars disagree on the activities of modern Sufi groups. For example, the Western scholar Lawrence (2010, p. 362) criticizes modern Western Sufi groups, such as Idries Shah, Inayat Khan, J. Nurbakhsh, G.I. Gurdjieff, and others, calling them “non-classical Sufism” and “pseudo-Sufism”. Kazakhstani researcher A.K. Izbaïrov believes that some Sufi groups in modern Kazakhstan can be classified as pseudo-Sufi (Izbaïrov 2013, p. 204). He attributes this to the unlawful actions and prosecution of leaders, as well as the unconfirmed legitimacy of the Sufi tradition. In general, the academic literature also uses the terms “universalist Sufism”, “unified Sufism”, “modified Sufism”, “partially Islamic Sufism”, “quasi-Islamic communities”, “pro-Sufi structures” and others in various contexts. Despite this, as this study has shown, traditional Sufi schools based on hereditary succession have survived in Kazakhstan, but they are not always included in the media space and are little known to modern believers. Meanwhile, new Sufi groups have the resources to create an extensive network and popularize their teachings through a wide range of modern tools. This study revealed the validity of the assertions of A.D. Knysh, A.A. Yarlykapov, and M. Sedgwick, and O.A. Yarosh notes that modern Sufism represents a wide range of associations, where consumers of religious services choose the desired “product/teaching/practice/group/mentor” (Knysh 2022, p. 14; Yarlykapov 2024, p. 343; Sedgwick 2016, p. 172; Yarosh 2017, p. 74). Moreover, the research is consistent with Neil Green's approach, which views Sufism as a social and intellectual formation and conceptualizes it as a historically fluid transregional network of people, practices, and infrastructures. In this sense, this approach fits within the framework of the historical anthropology of Islam, which emphasizes mobility, material conditions, and local contexts of religious life (Green 2012, p. 280). In today's reality, it is important to study current narratives, identify common trends, and identify regional contexts. It is important to note that Sufism, like traditional religions, is undergoing transformations, which are perceived positively by Sufis themselves. Syncretism is not inherent in all Sufi associations but rather is characteristic of newly formed communities and correlates with contemporary global trends (Zarrabi-Zadeh 2024, p. 6). Overall, in recent years, alongside historical factors, there has been a shift in the focus of state-confessional policy toward a fundamental study of the country's spiritual heritage through the organization of scientific projects, conferences, and seminars related to Sufism, as well as the cultivation of a tolerant attitude in society.

The result of this study shows that active Sufi groups in Kazakhstan draw on the spiritual legacy of Kh.A. Yassawi to varying degrees. In the early years of Kazakhstan's independence (1991), a revival of spiritual traditions, including Sufism, was initiated by citizens to address the religious vacuum. However, this revival sometimes had negative consequences. Consequently, the country's population was wary not only of Sufism but of religion in general. The popularization of Sufism (approximately since 2022) was initiated by the country's leadership and supported by the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan through speeches by imams and the publication of books on Sufism. The focus has shifted, including the organization of scientific and practical conferences and research projects.

In modern Kazakhstan, after seventy years of atheism, the name of Yassawi and the shrines of Turkestan become symbols of spirituality and patriotism. Nowadays, in several

Islamic states, Sufi groups continue to be a part of political and religious life. Sufism's flexibility and "openness" to outside influences make it extremely heterogeneous.

In Kazakhstan, the issue of religion is regulated by law and any attempt to infringe on religious rights is punishable by law. However, even though there are roots of Sufism in Kazakhstan, the attitude towards Sufism is ambiguous both on the part of "official Islam" and on the part of citizens. This is due to the violation of the law by Kazakh Sufis, which has created a negative reputation in society. At the same time, they periodically talk about the revival and development of spiritual traditions and values, but what is meant by this is not clear. There is also no consensus in the academic environment regarding Sufi groups.

5. Conclusions

The Sufi tradition had a profound influence on the ideology, way of thinking, and way of life of the Turkic peoples, and, of course, influenced the development of spiritual culture in Kazakhstan. Although the Yassawi Sufi communities gradually transformed from the original image of Yassawi, they nonetheless became an integral part of the spiritual life of the Kazakhs. The ideas of Yassawi Sufism became firmly ingrained in the way of life, religion, poetry, philosophy, and even everyday life of the Kazakh people. In Central Asia, Sufism underpinned the development of spiritual and moral philosophical issues, which were reflected in both oral folk poetry and the written works of thinkers.

Modern Sufism is a complex historical phenomenon encompassing various traditions, practices, and interpretations. Sufism in Central Asia has undergone various periods. Yassawi's teachings were preserved during the Soviet period and the first years of independent Kazakhstan with contributions from several individuals. However, due to the social norms of the time it was not always passed on to future generations. Certain respondents have a fragmented memory of the zikr practice in the family, yet the documented evidence of that was not preserved. The findings of this study indicate that contemporary sheikhs reference Kh.A. Yassawi during their sermons, sharing his teachings and practices. Followers of Sufi groups are also interested in Kh.A. Yassawi's legacy and make pilgrimages to his mausoleum.

These practices of engaging the tradition of Kh.A. Yassawi can be interpreted as a form of "living tradition" and a symbolic legitimization of the spiritual authority as the bearer and transmitter of a centuries-old tradition. All this points to the Islamic subjectivity of the region and the plurality of Islamic experience. The mass visitation of the mausoleum in Turkestan fits into broader theoretical discussions about sacred geography, sites of memory, the cult of saints, and the politics of religious memory in the country.

In the present, most of the current Sufi tariqahs of Kazakhstan preserve the tradition of passing on the spiritual knowledge from the teacher (sheikh) to the follower (murid). As part of religious practice, students not only receive knowledge but also spiritual experience, advancing through ranks of spiritual condition (makams). Means of transferring spiritual knowledge continue expanding. During the interviews the respondents noted that their teachers have the following attractive traits: education of their sheikh, opportunity to get religious knowledge, the ability to answer important questions, high level of spirituality, contribution to the well-being of the country, and business partnership.

The above data and characteristics of Kazakhstani Sufi leaders are important factors in attracting followers. Pilgrimages and visits to the mausoleum of Kh.A. Yassawi have continued, and today Turkestan is the spiritual capital of the Turkic world, though those who wish to visit come from all over the world.

The followers noted that sheikhs maintain global connections with other Sufi tariqahs, and the geography of spread is not limited to Kazakhstan. The attraction of followers occurs by various cultural, scientific, educational and tourist events. These have become

more active in the post-pandemic period. Some Sufi leaders note that they do not chase an increase in the number of followers, they prioritize quality over quantity of the group. Field research demonstrates that the followers practice switching from one Sufi group to another or visiting several Sufi groups.

Overall, Sufi sheikhs in Kazakhstan preach spiritual and moral values among their followers, appealing to traditional constants of Islam and the teachings of Kh.A.Yassawi, Sufi writing and practices, as well as to modern knowledge of pedagogy, psychology, psychotherapy, management, economics, etc. Such a synthesis of Sufism transforms the teaching, allowing to adapt to modern circumstances.

As this study's results demonstrate, Kazakhstani Sufism developed not only through a combination of regional characteristics but also integrated into more global Sufi networks. In North and West Africa, Sufism also combined with local Berber and Arabic traditions, as well as saint cults, and was a key factor in Islamization (Seesemann 2010, p. 614). In Kazakhstan, Sufism was historically institutionalized. As noted above, scholars note that, with the loss of these institutions, the teachings were integrated into folk traditions and continued to exist even during the years of repression.

Contemporary narratives of Sufi practice demonstrate that the ongoing revival of Sufism in the Islamic world is partly linked to broader transformations in religious practice in Muslim societies around the world.

In conclusion, it is important to note that the name of Khoja Ahmed Yassawi and the Turkic branch of Sufi is alive in the 21st century and consolidates in the memory of modern generations. This tradition has a powerful cultural and historical potential in consolidating the Turkic world.

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