The Persianate Ulama in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Central Asia

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Introduction

Sometime in the late eighteenth century, probably in the 1780s, Īrnaẓar[1] Namangānī set out from a madrasa in Kitāb (a town not far from Shahrisabz in modern Uzbekistan) for India with the intention of spending his last days in Mecca. Instead of finding passage across the Indian Ocean to Islam's holiest city, however, he met a Sufi shaykh of the Naqshbandiyya-Mujaddidiyya order in Kabul who urged him back to his homeland in the Ferghana Valley to spread the brotherhood's teachings – which he did.[2] Throughout his journey Namangani passed through territories controlled by Uzbek and Pashtun dynasts while traversing mountains and deserts, and yet he never really passed into truly foreign territory. His trajectory was integrated by a Persianate sphere characterized by shared language, high culture, religion, and social structures. Namangani's colleagues would have shared similar Islamic higher educations, communicated through the same lexicon of Iranian literary references, and participated in comparable structures both within and outside of the state.

In 2010 I traveled by plane from Dushanbe to Kabul, a journey geographically not so dissimilar from that of Namangani, yet our experiences shared very little. Twenty years after the fall of the Soviet

[1] For ease of reading, I have foregone diacritical marks after the first instance of transliterating a given word from Arabic or Persian.

[2] Qāẓī Jumʿa-Qulī al-Mulaqqab bil-Khamūlī bin Sūfī Tughaī Turk al-Samarqandī, *Tarjuma-i Ḥāl-i Qāẓī Jumʿa-Qulī Khamūlī* , 1252 / 1836f, ms., Institute of Language, Written Heritage, and Oriental Studies of the Tajikistan Academy of Sciences inv. no. 294.

Union one is still struck by the persistence of its institutional, cultural, and social continuity across the vast imperial space as well as the break with the pre-Russian past. True, one can find continuity between the pre-modern and modern periods anywhere if one looks closely enough; scholarly families hid Persianate texts from Soviet authorities and perpetuated the region's pre-Soviet legacies beneath the radar.[3] And yet where in the Islamic world was the break with the pre-modern past cleaner than in post-Soviet Central Asia? After years of traveling and working in this region, I was struck by how little my experience there transferred across the Amu Darya. As we move deeper into the twenty-first century the region is more in flux than ever and we would do well to recall a millennium-old regional equilibrium that was displaced almost overnight.

So what, precisely, is implied by the notion of a "Persianate sphere" and what is its analytic value? For many time periods and research questions states (or administrative units within them) offer convenient, practical delimitations for historical inquiry. In some cases this is viable in Central Asia[4] as well[5] and indeed has been frequently employed for the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, this approach comes with profound drawbacks. Historians have often taken the "three khanates" for granted based on lofty claims made by the amirs and their court without adequately investigating the degree of control actually exercised outside the khanate's titular capital of Bukhara, Khiva, or Khoqand. Even more problematically, these three khanates which – not at all coincidentally – happened to later fall within the geographic boundaries of the Soviet Union are routinely grouped together, thus imparting anachronistic importance on the Amu Darya river, a border that meant little before 1920.[6]

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[3] Stephane A. Dudoignon, "From revival to mutation: the religious personnel of Islam in Tajikistan, from de-Stalinization to independence (1955-91)," *Central Asian Survey* 30, no. 1 (2011): 53 - 80.

[4] Here I am leaving "Central Asia" intentionally vaguely and broadly defined to refer to the post-Soviet states, Afghanistan, and their neighbors.

[5] For instance, during periods of imperial expansion – such as the early Arab caliphates, the Mongols, and the Russian / Soviet empires – all or most of Central Asia was briefly contained in a single state.

[6] See, for instance, Yuri Bregel, "The New Uzbek States: Bukhara, Khiva and Khoqand c. 1750-1886," in *The Cambridge History of Inner Asia: The Chinggisid Age* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 392-410.

Eighteenth and nineteenth century Central Asia consisted of an assortment of independent or quasi-independent city-states, but this political disunity belied a regional coherence reducible neither to the Russian / Soviet space nor Islam. To varying degrees, empires leave in their wake cultural rubrics and networks of exchange that long outlive the political life of the political formation in question, which offers an attractive way to organize territory that does not fit neatly into any particular state.[7] This study attempts to follow this model and characterize the Persianate sphere as a network of cultural, intellectual, and material exchange serving as the pivot of the eastern, Sunni Islamic world.[8]

Yet despite its longevity, and despite increased interest in recent years, the concept of "Persianate" is trickier to pin down than parallel regional networks and cultural systems. One can hardly speak of an "Achaemenid Commonwealth"[9] and the last pre-Islamic Persian empire – that of the Sasanians – never truly extended its reach beyond Marv.[10] The confusion stems from the fact that the Persianate sphere is not separable from Islam. Throughout the eighth, ninth, and tenth centuries the Islamic conquests carried a fusion of Arabian Abrahamic religion with Iranian high culture into northern Afghanistan and Transoxiana. The Sasanians had never successfully imposed their particular flavor of Iranian culture onto other Indo-European peoples beyond the Iranian heartland, but their descendants

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[7] Stephen Kotkin, "Mongol Commonwealth?: Exchange and Governance across the Post-Mongol Space," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 8, no. 3 (2007): 487-531.

[8] In this respect, it follows the example of recent works such Ghislaine Lydon, *On Trans-Saharan Trails: Islamic Law, Trade Networks, and Cross-Cultural Exchange in Nineteenth-Century Western Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Brinkley Morris Messick, *The Calligraphic State: Textual Domination and History in a Muslim Society*, Comparative studies on Muslim societies 16 (Berkeley: University of California, 1993).

[9] Although the Sasanian monarchs bent over backward to emphasize the continuity between their civilization and that of the Achaemenids, direct continuities spanning the Hellenic period between these two dynasties were few, especially in terms of the vectors emphasized here, such as language, high culture, and religion.

[10] Richard N. Frye, "The Political History of Iran Under the Sasanians," in *The Cambridge History of Iran: The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian Periods*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater, vol. 3 (1) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 124.

prevailed under the banner of Islam.[11] In the eastern lands of Islamdom a unique synthesis of Islamic learning, Sasanian courtly culture, and Persian poetry emerged.

This paper focuses in particular on Islamic scholars, the ūlamāʾ, as agents articulating this space. The ulama were not the only constituents of this cultural milieu,[12] nor is the Persianate sphere the only useful non-state rubric for this time period.[13] Yet the Persianate ulama constituted a particularly influential and enduring social group embodying the eastern reaches of Islam and lending it cultural and social cohesion. Relying in particular on a handful of unique nineteenth-century autobiographies, this essay traces the careers of several members of the ulama and attempts to recapture their world on the eve of its displacement.

Bukhara Center: Eddies and Flows of the Persianate Space

Already from the ninth century the lands of Islam were fragmented into competing kingdoms, but the ulama traversed these political boundaries as they gravitated toward regional educational centers. Names of classical Islamic madrasa cities such as Baghdad, Damascus, Nishapur, Cairo, and Madina come to mind as regional hubs. By the time European travelers began showing up in Turkestan in the nineteenth century, they took it for granted that the ancient city of Bukhara was and had always

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[11] Under the Sasanians, Middle Persian language and their patrons from Fars was one of many varieties of Iranian culture, competing, for instance, with Parthian, Khwarazmian, Sogdian, and Bactrian. With the rise of Islam, these variants disappeared almost as rapidly as the Persianate sphere outside of Iran with the rise of Turikic and Indian nationalisms. See, for instance, Richard N. Frye, “Ethnic Identity in Iran,” *JSAI* 26 (2002).

[12] Other scholars have studied merchant activity in Central Asia, a group for whom the Sunni-Shia schism was less of a barrier than the ulama. Scott Levi, *The Indian Diaspora in Central Asia and Its Trade, 1550-1900*, Brill’s Inner Asian library v. 3 (Leiden: Brill, 2002); Audrey Burton, *Bukharan Trade, 1558-1718* (Bloomington: Indiana University, Research Institute for Inner Asian Studies, 1993).

[13] A much larger Islamic network framed the Persianate space, most significantly through the hajj pilgrimage. As the nineteenth century progressed, Russian-Tatar networks and British-Indian ones would grow increasingly tangible until they ultimately displaced the Persianate one.

been the religious epicenter of the Persianate space, at least on the northern end. (Delhi probably enjoyed that distinction in the south.)

Yet Bukhara had only just consolidated its preeminence as the regional educational hub around the turn of the nineteenth century. In his famous fourteenth century *Riḥla*, Ibn Battuta skipped over Bukhara entirely, writing that the city had been wasted by Chingis Khan and that it had become a bastion of fanaticism (*taʿaṣṣub*). The city fell into some neglect under the Timurids, when the capitals were Samarqand and Balkh, only to begin its ascent back into the limelight under the Shibanid dynasty.[14]

In the late nineteenth century Bukhara's rise had still yet to reach its apex, having suffered numerous disturbances in recent decades such as Nadir Shah's conquests (1740s). While other cities in the region perhaps could not boast such an illustrious history as Bukhara, they were serious competitors as regional hubs. Shahrisabz and Khoqand, for instance, were making an active play to attract the regional ulama. Jumʿa-Qulī al-Mulaqqab bil-Khamūlī bin Sūfī Tughaī Turk al-Samarqandī (henceforth simply "Khamuli")[15] wrote that the ruler (imārat panāh) of Shahrisabz built a substantial (ḥujrat ka̱sira) madrasa complex in Kitab especially for his teacher (ākhūnd), the aforementioned Namangani.[16] His largesse paid off and the esteemed Namangani remained in his province – at least until he left for the hajj.

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[14] Robert McChesney, "Economic and Social Aspects of the Public Architecture of Bukhara in the 1560's and 1570's," *Islamic Art* 2 (1987): 217-242.
[15] A history written by Khamuli has been described by Anke von Kügelgen in Anke von Kügelgen, *Legitimatsiia sredneaziatskoi dinastii mangitov v proizvedeniiakh ikh istorikov, XVIII-XIX vv.* (Almaty: Daik-Press, 2004); Anke von Kügelgen, "Bukhara viii. Historiography of the Khanate, 1500-1920," *Encyclopedia Iranica*, 2009. She refers to the author as Khumuli rather than Khamuli according to Semenov's transliteration (*Sobranie Vostochnykh Rukopisei Akademii Nauk Uzbekskoi SSR*, vol. 3S. S. Semenov, ed., *Sobranie vostochnykh rukopisei Akademii Nauk Uzbekskoi SSR*, 11 vols. (Tashkent: Izd-vo Akademii nauk UzSSR, 1952).), but since this manuscript is from Tajikistan I have opted for Mirzoev's "Khamuli" (Katalog vostochnykh rukopisei Akademii Nauk Tadzhikskoi SSR, vol. 1).
[16] Khamūlī, *Tarjuma-i Ḥāl-i Qāẓī Jumʿa-Qulī Khamūlī*, 17.

In the late eighteenth century the rulers of Shahrisabz did not style themselves mere governors and could afford to actively compete with competitor city-states in the manner described above. It is worth noting that the honorific imārat panāh simply means "refuge of the emirate" and referred to governors and amirs and governors (ḥākim) alike – blurry though the distinction often was.[17] In other texts the rulers of Shahrisabz, who routinely defeated Bukhara in open combat, referred to the city-state as an emirate on equal footing with Bukhara.[18] While the ulama enjoyed much greater independence from the state than in other societies (as will be discussed subsequently), material wealth endowed into awqāf by temporal rulers was a powerful influence on the contours and focuses of this space. The point here is that in the late eighteenth century it was still not clear that Bukhara would come out on top and other cities – such as Shahrisabz and Samarqand, for instance – had the power to draw in and retain scholars of renown.

As the eighteenth century progressed the amirs of Bukhara waged an active and conscious campaign to cast Bukhara-i Sharif as a center of Islam.[19] As this regional struggle played out one can observe its reverberations amongst the ulama. After Namangani's death Khamuli continued his studies under his teacher's protégé, Muhammad Luṭfallah Khwaja, who taught in Shahrisabz proper. Right in the midst of a war between the amir of Bukhara, Shah Murad, and the amir of Shahrisabz, Lutfallah got word of a shakeup in Samarqand and dispatched Khamuli with a message to one of his contacts there requesting appointment in an esteemed madrasa there and sanction to write fatwas.[20] For Lutfallah, it mattered not at all that Bukhara was attempting (unsuccessfully) to annex his city-state of residence and

[17] In fact, even the term "amir" does not necessarily refer to a head of state; in the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates it referred to a military leader or governor subordinate to the Caliph.
[18] Muḥammad Ḥakīm Khān, *Muntakhab al-Tavārīkh*, 2 vols. (Tokyo: Muʾassasah-ʾi Muṭālaʿāt-i Farhang'hā va Zabān'hā-yi Āsiyā va Āfrīqā, 2009), 402.
[19] Beginning under the reign of Shah Murad the Bukharan amirs engaged in a massive process of establishing and restoring Islamic endowments. See Philipp Reichmuth, "Semantic Modeling of Islamic Legal Documents: A Study on Central Asian Endowment Deeds" (Martin-Luther-Universität Halle (Saale), 2010), 13.
[20] Khamūlī, *Tarjuma-i Ḥāl-i Qāẓī Jumʿa-Qulī Khamūlī*, 32b-33. Lutfallah's contact in Samarqand was none other than his mother-in-law, who also happened to be the wife of the city's Qāẓī al-Quẓāt. It was not just a shared cultural rubric that united this space, but also family ties.

vassalize his patron. What mattered was the prestige of the position and the resources available. For elite such as Lutfallah the traditions, responsibilities, and community were nearly identical on either side of the political divide.

In addition to the material side of the establishment of Bukhara as a cultural hub girded by waqf endowments, there was a rhetorical, mythological side to this process as well. While Bukhara's preeminence in Central Asia was sporadic in the long run of history, memory of its status as a Sogdian economic center,[21] early bastion of Islamic learning, and Samanid capital offered the necessary raw materials to portray the city's recovered religious prestige immortal, an advantage that its competitors – such as Khoqand and Shahrisabz – could not boast. Ahmad bin Muhammad "Muʿīn al-Fuqarāʾ"'s nineteenth century work *Risālah-ʾi Mullā Zādah* articulates just such a vision of Bukhara's status as an eternal and sacred city of Islam.[22] Mu'in al-Fuqara describes the foundation of Bukhara and devotes particular attention to its early, sacred geography. For instance, he draws significance to the fact that a mosque built in 94 hijri / 712f C.E. by Qutaiba (one of the most famous Arab generals who conquered Central Asia) was constructed within ten years of the Umayyad mosque of Damascus.[23] Mu'in al-Fuqura continues to describe the various tombs in the city that contain strands of hair of the Prophet Muhammad, one of which serves to unite Bukhara's Islamic and pre-Islamic grandeur as the relic rests in

[21] While Bukhara was indeed a major urban site in Transoxiana prior to the Islamic conquests, it was neither the oldest nor the most celebrated of the Sogdian city-states, not rising to prominence until the fifth century C.E. and overshadowed by Samarqand. Étienne de la Vaissière, *Sogdian Traders: A History*, trans. James Ward (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 17.
[22] Ahmad bin Muhammad Muʿīn al-Fuqurāʾ, *Risālah-ʾi Mulā Zādah*, 1219/1804f, ms., The al-Biruni Institute of Oriental Studies of the Uzbekistan Academy of Sciences inv. no. 3396/I.
[23] Muʿīn al-Fuqurāʾ, *Risālah-ʾi Mulā Zādah*, 2.

the grave of a Sogdian dihqan.[24] The myth-making process described here is part of the conscious effort to elevate Bukhara's regional prestige while simultaneously locally rooting the Islamic tradition.[25]

Just as we see Lutfallah gravitating into the Bukharan orbit around the turn of the century, by the time of Mīrzā Bābā bin Dāmālā Ṣafar Muhammad Ḥisarī in the 1850s there was little question that Bukhara was the obvious destination for an aspiring scholar. Despite the greater proximity of Samarqand and Shahrisabz, Hisari made straight for Bukhara without so much as a passing reference to other potential educational establishments, despite reserving plenty of space to mention various local mosques and shrines he frequented on his journey.[26] Even in this late decade it is important to note that Hisari was ignoring political boundaries. Bukhara did not conquer Hisar until 1282 hijri / 1865f C.E., before which time it was essentially independent.[27]

The Russian conquest introduced a new regional coherence that would gradually displace the Persianate one, but in the short term this was not so obvious. Russian subsidies and the proceeds of increased trade activity led to a dramatic surge in waqf endowments and the construction of mosques and madrasas.[28] For some scholars, therefore, the city held greater allure than ever. Muḥī al-Dīn al-Kāshghariyy studied a wide range of Islamic sciences at a madrasa in his native Kashgar until 1328 hijri /

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[24] Muʿīn al-Fuqurāʾ*, Risālah-ʾi Mulā Zādah*, 2. The Persian term dihqān has come to mean "farmer" or "peasant," but its classical meaning referred to a Sasanian or Sogdian feudal landlord.
[25] This process of "nativizing" the Islamic tradition has been studies by scholars of Central Asian history in other contexts, most notably with regard to Islamic conversion amongst the Turks by Devin DeWeese, *Islamization and Native Religion in the Golden Horde: Baba Tukles and Conversion to Islam in Historical and Epic Tradition* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994).
[26] Mīrzā Bābā bin Dāmālā Ṣafar Muhammad Ḥisarī, *Yāddāshthā*, 19th century, ms.., Institute of Language, Written Heritage, and Oriental Studies of the Tajikistan Academy of Sciences inv. no. 1428/1.
[27] Muhammad Ṣādiq Qarāvul Bīgiyy (mutakhalliṣ) Gulshaniyy Bukhāriyy, *Tārīkh-i Humāyūn*, 1328 / 1911f, ms.., Institute of Language, Written Heritage, and Oriental Studies of the Tajikistan Academy of Sciences inv. no. 2968, 84b-85.
[28] Abdullodzhon Mirbabaev, *Istoriia Madrasa Tadzhikistana* (Dushanbe: Meros, Akademiia nauk Respubliki Tadzhikistan, 1994), 31.

1910f C.E. when he traveled to Bukhara to study logic and philosophy (al-manṭiq wa al-falsafa).[29] It seems, therefore, that the idea of Bukhara as a timeless center of Islam itself had a history and one that endured right up to the eve of the Bolshevik Revolution and in the face of new competition from imperial networks of exchange.[30]

Between Sharia and the Beloved: The Many Hats of a Persianate ʿĀlim

The Arabic plural "ulama" is a convenient way of amalgamating an astonishingly diverse social milieu, though it runs the risk of obscuring the multitude of roles and skillsets encompassed within single individuals, let alone the sum of the parts. This is not to say that its usage is a Western convention; as Richard Bulliet notes, the singular "alim" is used far less frequently in the sources than "ulama" because once disaggregated the alim became a jurist (fāqiḥ), Quran memorizer (ḥāfiẓ), or a grammarian (naḥwiyy).[31] In early modern Central Asia "alim" was still infrequently used as a term, though perhaps it would have been more appropriate, as most intellectuals made some claim on the entire repertoire of Islamic sciences as well as Persian poetry and status in a Sufi order. By the nineteenth century one can discern the outlines of a uniquely Persianate stratum of intellectuals which, while hardly homogenous, often shared a common educational background, practical competencies, and even intellectual worldview.

[29] ʿAbdallah bin ʿAbd al-Raḥman bin ʿAbd al-Rahīm al-Muʿallimī, *Aʿlām al-Makayyain min al-Qarn al-Tāsiʿa ʾilā al-Qarn al-Rābiʿa ʿAshar al-Hijrī* (Muʾassasat al-Farqān lil-Turāth al-Islamī Farʿ Muʾassasat Makka al-Mukarrama wa al-Madīna al-Munawwara, n.d.), 786.
[30] The Tatar space of the Russian Empire was one such community that distanced itself from Bukhara in the latter part of the nineteenth century and – boasting new technologies such as the lithograph – even became an exporter of religious materials and ideas. Russian observers wrote that Bukhara's colonial subjugation dulled its appeal somewhat amongst potential students (Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Istoricheskii Archiv F. 821 O.6. D.612, 265). See also Mustafa Tuna, "Imperial Russia's Muslims: Inroads of Modernity" (Princeton University, 2009), 59–61.
[31] Richard W. Bulliet, *Islam: The View from the Edge* (Columbia University Press, 1995), 105.

In 1268 hijri / 1851f C.E. Mirza Baba Hisari exchanged the comfort of his native Hisar[32] for the hardships of the road with the ultimate goal of obtaining an education in Bukhara. To justify his ambition, he composed the following poem: "The pen became my standard in the dominion of the spoken word, the inkwell a comrade to the Chalice of Jamshid; A single written page became my empire, the written word loftier than any earthly domain." [33] There were members of the ulama whose reputations rested primarily on poetic composition, but Hisari was not one of them. Yet Persian poetry permeated the writing of Hisari and his contemporaries. Jamshid was a legendary pre-Islamic king immortalized in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* composed over eight hundred years prior and his chalice referred to a cup which miraculously allowed its bearer to look into the seven heavens. Hisari and his colleagues' shared reverence for the epic was shared in Qajar Iran, but the *Shahnameh* and other Persian-language literary classics were not held to be imported or Iranian in any modern sense. Rather, they constituted the fabric that rendered this space legible across such vast distances.

Hisari's memoir offers many such moments that shed light on how this world was acted out and articulated. In 1296 hijri / 1879f C.E. the courtly secretary came down with an illness after working in the chancellery of the province of Żiyāʾ al-Dīn and spent several weeks recovering after consulting doctors (dānishmandān).[34] Hisari's chosen activity of leisure during this down time was to exchange lengthy verses of poetry with his friend Mīrzā Muhammad Yūsuf in Samarqand.[35] Yusuf was, according to Hisari, a celebrated poet in his own time renowned for his verse and riddle (naẓm va muʿammā gūī). Yusuf was a also an alim and a master of the Islamic science, but in Hisari's eyes his most refined claim to prestige lay in his mastery of the higher arts of Persian poetry. Specifically, Hisari refers to the

[32] While not a city-state on the scale of Bukhara, Khoqand, or Shahrisabz, Hisar nevertheless served as a local hub for villages like Dushanbe (now the capital of Tajikistan). Gulshaniyy Bukhāriyy, *Tārīkh-i Humāyūn*, 73.

[33] قلم در مُلک گفتارم عَلَم شد، دوادم هم عنان جام جم شد
مرا شد مملکت یکصفحهٔ مکتوب، چه مکتوبیکه از هر مُلک مرغوب
Ḥisarī, *Yāddāshthā*, 13.

[34] Ḥisarī, *Yāddāshthā*, 58b.

[35] Hisari exchanged the text by way of Yusuf's brother, Mīrzā Maḥmūd. Ḥisarī, *Yāddāshthā*, 59.

poetical composition they exchanged as a “sāqī nāmah,” which might be translated as “book of the wine-bearer,” a Persian poetical genre in which the narrator seeks relief from his hardships by repeatedly summoning the serving boy to bring him wine. Both friends were madrasa-trained and Hisari at least’s actual duties[36] amounted to clerical and management duties in Bukhara’s modest bureaucracy, but through this correspondence they set aside daily practicalities and the prohibitions of Islamic law to enact high Persianate cultural space. Ironically, actual wine lubricated Hisari’s correspondence, for the aforementioned doctors had prescribed a kind of wine (muthallath sharʿī) to ease his affliction.[37]

In a narrow sense, then, the Persianate sphere can be compared to the “Republic of Letters” of early modern Europe – a community of intellectuals communicating through a cultural rubric shared across political and geographic boundaries.[38] Just as in Europe this community had little to do with ethnicity. Irrespective of the claims of Soviet nation-building projects, participation in this community was not the exclusive prerogative of Tajiks. Modern historians have rightly emphasized the modernity of nationalism and artificiality of ethnic terms such as Tajik, Uzbek, Afghan, etc. But that does not mean that these terms were absent or irrelevant in the pre-colonial period, even if they were imbued with rather different (and protean) significance. Hisari, for instance, was a Tajik and a native Persian-speaker, as was the narrow majority of Hisar’s population in the nineteenth century.[39] Even assuming literacy, the native Persian dialect of his home city would not have helped him converse in the flowery variety of high literary Farsi common to the elite of his domain. After setting out from Hisar for Bukhara, Hisari was forced to spend six months in a mosque near Ghujduvān (a village northeast of Bukhara) gaining the necessary minimum proficiency in writing and high Persian (zabān-i faṣāḥat) just to get his foot in the

[36] Judging by the title mīrzā, which in Central Asia generally referred to a scribe or secretary of some variety, Yusuf may well have held a similar position to earn a livelihood.
[37] “Muthallath” is a kind of wine cooked until two thirds of it has evaporated. While Hanafis are divided on the lawfulness of this particular beverage, al-Marghīnānī , whose legal work was easily the most influential in Central Asia, ruled that it was acceptable.
[38] See https://republicofletters.stanford.edu/.
[39] Gulshaniyy Bukhāriyy, *Tārīkh-i Humāyūn*, 87.

door.[40] It seems, therefore, that admittance to the domain of Persianate high culture was an active process for even for those coming from an ethnically Tajik background.

This point is made even more explicitly by Hisari's predecessor Khamuli, a judge (qāẓī) active in Samarqand in the late eighteenth century. Unlike Hisari, Khamuli originated from a Turkic tribe in the mountains near Shahrisabz and was intended by his father for the modest life of a shepherd.[41] On the very first page of his memoir, Khamuli praises God for saving him from the tribes of Turks whose commitment to Islam was superficial at best, at least in Khamuli's estimation.[42] Later Khamuli relays a parable about an exchange between Ali and Umar, two of the Rightly Guided Caliphs, in which Umar claims to be stronger in Islam than Ali because, unlike Ali, he was once an infidel who stood in opposition to Muhammad's community. "He who has tasted the poison of infidelity," argued Umar, "better understands the antidote (taryāk) of Islam."[43] Likewise, Khamuli implies, having come from a Turkic background loose in the tenets of Islam he is even more qualified to appreciate the fruits of Persianate Islam. The lines here between religion and ethnicity are blurry and one should not take for granted Khamuli's assertions that Islam sat lightly with his Turkic kindred.[44] But it is interesting to note that for Hisari, and even more so for Khamuli, finding a place amongst the Persianate ulama was a journey, not an ethnic birthright. Even while penning Persian verse, Khamuli never became a "Tajik," though he perhaps shed his Turkic past to some degree, at least within his narrow characterization of it as the last holdout of infidelity (kufr).

There was something special, therefore, about Persian literary high culture as a glue for this space. But the literary aspect had a much broader range, extending into Iran and even the Ottoman

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[40] Ḥisarī, *Yāddāshthā*, 12b–13.
[41] Khamūlī, *Tarjuma-i Ḥāl-i Qāẓī Jumʿa-Qulī Khamūlī*, 9.
[42] Khamūlī, *Tarjuma-i Ḥāl-i Qāẓī Jumʿa-Qulī Khamūlī*, 1b.
[43] Khamūlī, *Tarjuma-i Ḥāl-i Qāẓī Jumʿa-Qulī Khamūlī*, 2.
[44] Devin DeWeese has investigated in depth Islam amongst Turkic pastoralists and the unsatisfactory manner in which scholars have generally treated their religiosity. These stereotypes were not unique to Western scholars; they were shared by the ulama. DeWeese, *Islamization and Native Religion in the Golden Horde*.

Empire, and was only one aspect of a broader range of this society's characteristics. The Persianate sphere of Ferdowsi's era extended from Iraq to northern India, but the rise of Safavid Shiism in Iran in the sixteenth century complicated this picture. Quotations from the Quran and Hadith were every bit as ubiquitous as literary tropes, the former of which differed appreciably in the lands of Sunni Islam. For both sects of Islam the Hadith are nearly as important as the Quran in terms of scriptural importance, but the reliability of transmitters of the traditions are weighted differently. Virtually all Hadith referenced by Khamuli and Hisari were from the *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, the most respected Hadith work in the Sunni world and their juridical framework was exclusively Hanafi.

The Persianate sphere of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was delimited even more starkly by the presence of specific sufi orders (ṭarīqa) exclusive to the Sunni world. There is sometimes a tendency in the literature to treat sufis as a class of religious elite distinct from the ulama and indeed a dichotomy between the two concepts as ideal types survives in the sources as well. In the verses opening his autobiography, for instance, Hisari includes separate poems praising the ulama and the sufis (mashāyīkh). While these were indeed conceptualized as separate kinds of knowledge and authority, one struggles to find an example of an alim who was not also a member of a sufi order.

Even if distinct, Sufism and the Islamic sciences were very much considered to be complementary. Both Khamuli and Hisari, for instance, lace mystical references throughout their works despite the fact that neither made their living as primarily the leader of such an order. Khamuli served a as a qazi in the town of Urgut not far from Samarqand. As such, his days would have been filled primarily dealing with land disputes, marriages, and minor criminal matters – all of which are entirely absent from his autobiography. Khamuli's madrasa teacher, the Namangani mentioned in the introduction, inducted him into the Naqshbandiyya-Mujaddidiyya order[45] and Namangani was explicitly

[45] Khamūlī, *Tarjuma-i Ḥāl-i Qāẓī Jumʿa-Qulī Khamūlī*, 24.

instructed by the sheikh in Kabul to expand the order's membership, and yet Sufism is conceptualized throughout the work as something much more subtle and fluid than organizational membership. In some passages Khamuli describes the ulama as bearers of secret internal knowledge of Islam using esoteric sufi terminology.[46] Likewise, Hisari served primarily as a mid-level bureaucrat to various regional governors and hardly fit the image of a destitute dervish, yet his membership in a Sufi order lent him the metal fortitude to dedicate ten years of his life to study in a Bukharan madrasa.[47] Hisari is even less cognizant than his predecessor of organizational hierarchy or divisions between the various orders common in Central Asia, instead – like Khamuli – simply layering the sufi forms of knowledge onto his professional and literary competencies. From the late eighteenth to the late nineteenth century, therefore, one can discern the amalgamation of various sufi traditions into the common basket of competencies mastered by the Persianate Islamic scholar.[48]

Transforming Knowledge into Power

Pleasurable as savoring the prose of Rumi or debating the intricacies of Islamic law may be, there were stakes to the proficiencies cultivated by the ulama. Francis Robinson has argued that a resurgence of interest in the rational sciences in the seventeenth century directly led to the establishment of an Indian Islamic education system that prepared cadres of competent administrators for the Mughal government and regional princes.[49] To some degree we can observe a similarly

[46] Khamūlī, *Tarjuma-i Ḥāl-i Qāẓī Jumʿa-Qulī Khamūlī*, 3.
[47] Ḥisarī, *Yāddāshthā*, 9b.
[48] According to Devin Deveese, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries there was a fierce competition between the Yasavi and Naqshbandi orders. By the end of the seventeenth century, however, Central Asia witnessed a "…growing tendency of Sufi aadepts and shaykhs to collect multiple silsila affiliations, a process known from other parts of the lsamic world." Devin DeWeese, "The Masha'ikh-i Turk and the Khojagan: Rethinking the Links between the Yasavi and Naqshbandi Sufi Traditions," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 7, no. 2 (1996): 204.
[49] Francis Robinson, *The `Ulama of Farangi Mahall and Islamic Culture in South Asia* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001).

utilitarian function of the Central Asian madrasa system. In addition to the more refined arts of philosophy and literature, the Islamic educational system emphasized literacy, math, and law, a background with practical application. Hisari in particular served in a variety of capacities in posts across the territory of the Bukharan emirate. Immediately after his lengthy madrasa education he traveled independently to the province of Khuẕār seeking gainful employment and immediately obtained a respected and lucrative position in the governor's court, despite lacking any prior personal connections to the province. He simply showed up, found a room at the local hostel (sarāī), and after eight nights he managed to befriend a young Turkic notable, who patronized him and gained Hisari access to the local court.[50]

This is not to say, however, that the Persianate ulama of Central Asia were entirely reconciled to service in the princely court. Patricia Crone has argued that one of the factors that sets Islamic civilization apart was the presence of a powerful religious class that developed independently from and, at least rhetorically and morally, stood in opposition to the temporal authorities.[51] This tendency was complicated to the east by the Persian tradition of kingship, which emphasized the near divinity of the shah, and this register could be tapped into when necessary.[52] Nevertheless, even eight hundred years later government service was an activity engaged in with some reluctance. Hisari, for instance, was not thrilled to be leaving the confines of the Bukharan madrasas for his professional career, even after ten years of study. Rather, he found himself "cast from the madrasa into the noxious (muhlik) corners [of the outside world" by the necessity of supporting a livelihood.[53] Hisari served many masters across the Bukharan emirate, in Khuẕār, Jizmand, Jizzakh, and Ẓīāʾ ul-Din, but his loyalty to his various employers never extended beyond their ability to pay him, for they were a means to an end. Unlike, for instance,

[50] Ḥisarī, *Yāddāshthā*, 15-16b.
[51] Patricia Crone, *Slaves on Horses: The Evolution of the Islamic Polity* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1980).
[52] Hisari's autobiography was not unique in opening with hyperbolic poetry extolling the reigning amir and his predecessor, whom he compares both to Muhammad and Rustam, a famous hero of the *Shahnameh*. Ḥisarī, *Yāddāshthā*, 4b.
[53] Ḥisarī, *Yāddāshthā*, 14b.

the Russian or Sasanian nobility, there was no intrinsic honor in royal service. Recall too that Lutfallah Khwaja, Khamuli's teacher, leapt at the opportunity to exchange his tenure in a madrasa in Shahrisabz for a better position in Samarqand, despite having enjoyed extensive patronage in the former.

In some ways this oppositional tendency between the ulama and temporal powers ingrained in Islam from its very inception was even more pronounced in early modern Central Asia because of the addition of an ethnic dimension. Again, this was not an ethnic tension between primordial nationalities, but between those who had embraced Persianate high culture – the ulama – and those who held the reigns of military authority resting on the authority of tribal lineage – the ʾumarā ʾ. This tension was usually not consciously conceived as an ethnic one, but rather as a schism between the religiously enlightened and those found wanting.[54] Khamuli's aforementioned remarks on the deplorable state of Islam amongst the Turkic tribe from whence he came, for instance, fault not them for their origins, but for their state of enlightenment.

Throughout his autobiography Khamuli relays numerous anecdotes about contemporary scholars whom he admires. Nearly all of his mentors distinguished themselves in at least one instance by refusing temporal power or even outright defying a Turkic khan or governor. Khamuli relays that his mentor Namangani came to be known as such because after being educated in a Bukharan madrasa he returned to the town of Namangan (in modern-day Uzbekistan) in the Ferghana Valley where he taught the Islamic exoteric sciences (ʿilm-i ẓāhir). His students there doubled as his sufi disciples (murīd) and Khamuli is keen to emphasize that such was their devotion to God that they eschewed employment by the governors (always Turkic) of the province.[55] Namangani ran into trouble with this attitude when the governor called upon him to serve as a qazi (judge), a request he refused, humbly insisting that he had

[54] Of course, nearly all of our sources were written by the ulama, not the umara; here the bias of the former group is entirely the point. See Robert McChesney, "The Amirs of Muslim Central Asia in the XVIIth Century," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 26, no. 1 (1983): 33-70.
[55] Khamūlī, *Tarjuma-i Ḥāl-i Qāẓī Jumʿa-Qulī Khamūlī*, 15b.

not the knowledge and wisdom (vuqūf) necessary for such a position. Khamuli lauds his late master's strength to abstain from the material temptations of the world (nafs-i ammārah) inherent in the position. This, of course, angered the hakim (governor) and resulted in Namangani's exile to Shahrisabz – where his path ultimately crossed with that of Khamuli.[56] This sort of story has a long history in the Islamic world. Most notably, Abu Hanifa's famous contest of wills with the Abbasid caliph al-Mansur comes to mind and may serve as the antecedent of this possibly legendary tale. Apocryphal or not, the moral importance Khamuli places on the story's transmission illustrates the inherent tension in translating the madrasa educational tradition into temporal power persisted through the centuries even as Islamic society evolved and differentiated regionally.

Even for ulama who *were* reconciled to service in the princely court using the intellectual tools they acquired in the madrasa, it is difficult to see the practical utility in much of their training. True, literacy translated easily into chancellery work and Islamic jurisprudence was essential background for serving as a judge. But what about the Persian poetry? The discussion of walāʾ - a form of servitude to an Arab tribe out of practice for a thousand years – in fiqh (jurisprudence) manuals?[57] The reality is that much of what the ulama learned in the madrasas did not have any strictly practical application; rather, the competencies of the ulama had a logic particular to the society in question. In other words, memorizing Persian poetry or mastering the finer points of arcane and entirely academic legal disputes was not a leisure activity – there were internal stakes to these contests.

The value of such seemingly superfluous erudition is illustrated by a curious tangent Khamuli indulges in during the course of his autobiography. After describing some miracles performed by a prominent sufi master who had trained one of his teachers, Khamuli transitions to a discussion of the possibility of female prophethood, noting that while certain earthly individuals are indeed capable of

[56] Khamūlī, *Tarjuma-i Ḥāl-i Qāẓī Jumʿa-Qulī Khamūlī*, 16.
[57] On the legal endurance of this institution, see Patricia Crone, *Roman, Provincial, and Islamic Law: The Origins of the Islamic Patronate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

performing miracles, that doing so does not make them prophets.[58] Khamuli's axe to grind here is that women cannot be considered prophets even when they performed miracles in the presence of other prophets (such as Maryam or Bilqīs, the Queen of Sheba). To substantiate his point, he quotes hadith of al-Bukhari (*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*) and the opinions of his various teachers, including the Afghan shaykh who instructed Namangani.[59] Because Islam asserts that Muhammad was the "seal of the prophets" it is difficult to conceive of a debate more purely academic twelve hundred years after his death than female prophethood (although the dispute did have relevance for the canonization of sufi miracles).

Only after this lengthy and technical discussion does the issue's true relevance emerge when Khamuli describes a majlis (assembly) held in Samarqand by Qāżī Mulā Raḥmatullah Maghiyūn. Here Khamuli offers us a rare view of the majlis, a social and intellectual event where the ulama (sometimes along with other elite) met to casually discuss anything from idle gossip to poetry to matters of Islamic law. During this particular majlis Maghiyun expressed the opinion that there were in fact women prophets in Islam. To the horror of his admirers – a faction of ulama apparently so substantial that Khamuli refers to them collectively as the "māghiyānī," playing off of Maghiyun's name – Khamuli was so bold as to publicly contradict him. Those present sided against Khamuli, an outrage the author expressed – naturally – through the composition of poetry.[60] The point here is that once one peels back the layers it becomes evident that much hinged on the outcome of these social encounters. Khamuli does not elaborate on the consequences (if any) of his challenge to the qazi, but in other examples the

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[58] The thousand-year pedigree of this particular theological pedigree apparently did little to sap its heatedness by Khamuli's time. Maribel Fierro has analyzed the dispute in eleventh-century Andalusia. Then, as in Khamuli's time, the stakes of the debate related to miracles performed by sufi saints: Given that Mary's miracles were beyond dispute, if one held miracles to be the exclusive provenance of the prophets, one was in a better position to refute sufi miracles after the time of Muhammad (the final prophet). On the other hand, if Mary could perform miracles without being a prophet, then so too might particularly pious individuals after Muhammad's death. Maribel Fierro, "Women as Prophets in Islam," in *Writing the Feminine: Women in Arab Sources*, ed. Manuela Marín and Randi Deguilhem (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 183-198.

[59] Khamūlī, *Tarjuma-i Ḥāl-i Qāẓī Jumʿa-Qulī Khamūlī*, 29-30b.

[60] "There where truth was hidden falsities were circulated." آنجا که حق نهان شد باطل رواج یافت. Khamūlī, *Tarjuma-i Ḥāl-i Qāẓī Jumʿa-Qulī Khamūlī*, 31b.

results of these sorts of power struggles are more evident. It was mentioned previously that Khamuli's teacher Lutfallah maneuvered himself from Shahrisabz into a more desirable madrasa in Samarqand. His tenure there was not long, however, as he was ultimately driven back to Shahrisabz as the result of an entanglement with his brother-in-law, who also happened to be the Qāżī Kalān.[61] It seems, therefore, that the finer points of Persianate learning were not so academic as they may seem on the surface.

Conclusion and Policy Relevancy

The Persianate sphere was composed of individuals who acted out a high culture common at least throughout modern Central and South Asia and with influence much further still. The Islamic scholars at the heart of this study are long dead and their Persianate world is an inconvenient memory to nationalists from India to Uzbekistan. Yet fissures in the Soviet imperial zone are all too apparent twenty years after its dissolution and too often we forget that the current geopolitical configuration is a recent artifact of twentieth-century history. To be certain, it is a mistake to consider the Russian and Soviet periods as a colonial interregnum that can now be conveniently forgotten. The Soviet imprint on Central Asia remains profound and nowhere else was the break with the pre-modern Islamic tradition radical. Nevertheless, the millennia-old Persianate sphere that is the focus of this historical study underpins emerging systems of exchange gradually reconnecting post-Soviet Central Asia with South Asia and the Middle East. If Central Asian history began in 1991 or even 1917, these trends will be difficult to understand or even perceive, but a deeper appreciation of the region's past reveals a resilient and enduring system of cultural and social exchange that will only increase in relevance as the twenty-first century progresses.

[61] Khamūlī, *Tarjuma-i Ḥāl-i Qāẓī Jumʿa-Qulī Khamūlī*, 33b-34.

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