

THE IMPACT OF AHMAD YASAVI'S TEACHING ON THE CULTURAL AND POLITICAL LIFE OF THE TURKS OF CENTRAL ASIA.

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The legend about Arslan Baba and the date, often mentioned in the *Dīvān-i Hikmat*, makes it clear that Aḥmad Yasavī considered himself a spiritual heir to Muhammad, his representative among the Turks of Central Asia. His devotion to the Prophet was so deep that he embarked on a way of life centered on his own version of emulation of the Prophet, a spiritual direction that was to pervade the religious life of the Central Asian Muslims. He firmly believed that he had a mission among the Turks similar to the mission of the Prophet among the Arabs : To spread the true Faith through words and through personal examples. His words are collected in the *Dīvān-i Hikmat*, a book of words of wisdom, to which later followers of his also contributed. His exemplary acts survive in legends or are crystallized in the practices of religious orders that claim origin from him.

The view often expressed in literature, namely, that Aḥmad Yasavī was a mystic and what he taught was Sufi mysticism, is simplistic and misleading. His teaching embraced broad segments of Islam, from the basic tenets of the Faith, through moral issues applied or abstract, to instruction for those in quest for the Truth the ultimate goal of which was *dīdār*, the vision of God. These segments, patterned on the stages of progression from *sharī'a*, through *sharī'a* and *ṭarīqa*, to *ḥaqīqa*, reflected the different phases of Yasavī's understanding of the *imitatio Muhammadi*, from which a special kind of Central Asian Turkic Islamic mysticism was to develop.

Aḥmad Yasavī carried his *imitatio Muhammadi* to the extreme that at the age of sixty - three he set up his abode in the ground to emulate the Prophet who died and was laid to rest at the age of sixty-three. He even called his own work, the *Dīvān-i Hikmat*, the Second Book (*daftar-i sānī*) because it reflected the views and practices of Muḥammad whose teaching Yasavī conceived as the original or the first book. His *ḥikmats*, the genre of which reminds us of the words of wisdom inserted in the text of the *Qutadghu Bilig*, were succinct statements on matters of religion, elaboration on moral principles, or presentations of legends in full accord with the Qur'ān and the Apostolic Traditions.

As teacher of Islam, Aḥmad Yasavī's objective was to reach a broad audience including the mostly illiterate nomads of the steppe, open the Path of Islam for the Turks, and bring about a strong, cohesive and well-disciplined Muslim community among them. For this purpose he chose to use a simple language, an idiom on the level of a colloquial dialect and composed his *ḥikmats* in an unsophisticated style. Instead of subtle allusions, intricate imagery, and complex metaphors to be seen in high-style poetry, he achieves the desired effect in communicates through direct expression, plain wording and forceful delivery, using elements of traditional Turkish prosody the audio-effect of which is reminiscent of incantatory shamanistic formulas. The *ḥikmats* proved to be a very effective didactic means. The genre became extremely popular in Central Asia. Many teachers of Islam, sheykhs, mullahs, and adībs composed *ḥikmats* in the style of Yasavī some of which found their way into later manuscripts of the *Dīvān-i Hikmat*, their authors never to be identified.

Yasavī's teaching of Islam among the Turkic tribes in Central Asia had far-reaching cultural-political consequences. The *ḥikmats* brought the technical terminology of Islam into the everyday vocabulary of simple people with little or no education enriching their minds with concepts of a new religious lore. This opened up a cultural development in two directions. On the one hand, people now acquainted with the basic nations of Islam were more receptive to further education in matters of this religion. On the other, elements of traditional folk culture became blended with the newly acquired Muslim lore yielding a cultural reference peculiar to the Central Asian Turks but common to most of the Turkic nomadic tribes.

By opening the path of Islam for them Aḥmad Yasavī brought the Central Asian Turks into a cultural sphere with higher, historically more progressive values in all segments of life, moral, cultural, social, and economical. His *ḥikmats* planted the Faith among the popular masses at the very base of the nomadic society where it took roots and developed along with traditional popular ways and beliefs. By the time Islam got strong in the new environment, it was perceived by the Turks as an organic part of their cultural life with deep social and economical roots, rather than an alien superstructure imposed upon them: Sunni Islam, with all the local colors in their ritual practices, and folkloric motifs in their devotional literature, was *their* religion that permeated all walks of their lives. Religion and nationality underwent a fusion, tribal differences were reduced, just as in the case of the Arabs in the early days of Islam. The difference between Turks and Arabs and Turks and Persians, however, became more and more emphasized.

This takes us to the third item in the cultural political consequences of Aḥmad Yasavī's teaching: the creation of a strong and cohesive community (*umma*) disciplined by the *sharī'a* and motivated by the cause of the Faith.

An inner structure of authority —parental, professional, or social— kept the members together and moved them to joint actions. This community, however, was the community of the Turks and was soon to become a source of central Asian Turkic identity. The Turkic *umma* carried in itself from its early stage the potentials of confrontation with the Arabs, the foreign invaders, and with the Persians, the people of the Shi'a. It fueled Turkic patriotism and prepared the minds for higher ambitions within the world of Islam.

The cultural political tendencies latently present in Aḥmad Yasavī's teaching from the very beginning became more and more noticeable with the lapse of time and with the increase of the Yasavī school's influence on the nomadic Turks. They surfaced at different points in history, most markedly, perhaps, in the early sixteenth century when the Shaybanids established their rule in Transoxiana.

In the following I propose to highlight a few pieces of evidence to show how deeply the Mongolian prince, Muḥammad Shaybānī Khān, the founder of the Shaybanid dynasty in Central Asia, was affected by the teaching of the Yasavī school and what consequences this influence had on the Uzbek Khān's personality and political ambitions.

Muhammad Shaybānī, a born Muslim and a man educated in religion and literature, held Aḥmad Yasavī in high esteem. He regarded him as the preeminent one among the saints and was proud of the fact that the cradle of his empire was the city of Turkistan, the home and resting place of Aḥmad Yasavī. In one of his ghazals he writes :

'The preeminent of the saints was that King of Turkistan./The one whose light spreads over the face of the earth was the moon of Turkistan.

'O young people, I will tell you this secret (of mine), listen well :/The proper place (for me) to become an emperor was the place called Turkistan.'

When Muḥammad Shaybānī established himself as Khān of Transoxiana and began to lay down the ideological and political foundations of the second Uzbek empire, he wanted to make sure that the tragedy that had brought down his grandfather's kingdom was not going to happen to him. He was looking for a cohesive force to unite his people and for a purpose to line them up behind him. He found both in the teachings of Aḥmad Yasavī.

Yasavī's emulation of the Prophet called for strict observance of the Shari'a and utmost dedication to the Prophet and his cause. For Shaybānī Khān the Shari'a was a new political means with greater potentials in the

Islamic milieu to keep his subjects together and in line than the *yasa* of Janghiz Khan. He, therefore, embraced the Islamic Law and put his sword in the service of Islam. Addressing God in one of his ghazals he says :

“Shabānī, from the house of Janghiz Khān, has bought and taken possession of your Shari’a./(Now) I am the sword of Islam, ready to sacrifice my life on your Path.’

He devotes an entire ghazal to the description of the importance of the Shari’a as he understood it :

‘What I call the Law, is the path of the Prophet./He who does not like the Law is weak in mind.’

‘The Law (, on one side,) and Self and Satan (, on the other,) are enemies./The latter are contemptible in the eyes of the people who keep the Law.

‘The Law is a vast ocean without shores./((Our) deeds carried out in accordance with the Law are pearls (in that sea).’

‘The meaning of the Law is in the Qur’ān, know full well./The Law is the essence of the secrets of Qur’ānic meanings.

‘He who does not like the Law should end up in Hell./The Law guides one to Paradise.

‘The Law is (a sign of) affection from your father./Lovers of the Law are the Houris and the Fairies.’

‘Shabānī has submerged into the sea of the Law./His words, therefore, are the words of the Law.’

Following Yasavī’s example he regarded it his mission to assert the sunna and to enforce the Shari’a. He was convinced that with strong and united popular masses behind him he could not fail in achieving his goals. He speaks about his mission with confidence and determination :

‘Marching at the head of his people, Alexander takes empires and thrones./((No wonder, since) it is through good efforts that you inherit crown and leadership.

‘(Remember,) Shaybānī, the victory of the Truth has been assigned to you since eternity :/(Your task is) to assert the Sunna and to enforce the Shari’a, your inheritance from the Prophet.’

Shaybānī Khān knew that popular support was vital for the success of his Uzbek empire and for the realization of his imperialistic dreams. Like Aḥmad Yasavī, he wanted to reach the broadest layers of his subjects. In his works, therefore, he used a simple language and a clear, didactic style. Most of his ghazals and ruba’is have direct messages to his people. His book of devotions, the *Risāla-i ma‘ārif* was dedicated to all segments of his society. More importantly, he wanted to teach his people through his personal example :

‘I communicate the word of God to (my) people through my way of life and through (words that come from) my heart.’

He acquired the habit of rising at night to perform the *tahajjud* prayer, an act of devotion that impressed even his adversaries. He abstained from wine and took strict measures against wine drinking. He read the Qur’ān, studied the traditions and lead an exemplary life. As Muḥammad Ṣaliḥ says about him :

‘Unlike other Khāns he does not arrange parties./He does not boast of feasting and revelry.

‘He is not inclined to drinking wine/and is never forgetful of his duties.’

Shaybānī Khān succeeded in building up a strong army of dedicated warriors ready to fight ‘on the path of God’. Also, he was able to obtain a broad popular support for his military expeditions. Encouraged by these results he declared with confidence his political program, a program of territorial expansion and Turkic domination. His famous ghazal composed after he obtained the throne of Transoxiana describes this program in dramatic terms :

‘He who granted the destitute the wealth of this world,/will also grant them —and that should not seem strange at all— the wealth of the Hereafter.’

‘I have dispersed the forces of heresy in Transoxiana,/and soon the same will be my task in the land of Khorasan.’

‘When I bring the forces of Islam down upon the red caps,/the Friend from the city of Madina will be my helper.’

‘I have drawn my sword in the defense of the Law, the Lord knows it./Only the judge, the sheykh, and the preacher do not realize it.’

‘O Shabānī, the ailment called love is in your heart. / Know that except for the Beloved, there is no other doctor to treat that ailment.’

It followed from the ever strengthening sense of Turkic identity nursed by the teaching of the Yasavī school, that Shaybānī Khān and his Uzbeks found it hard to be second in rank to the Arabs in the *millet* of Islam. Shaybānī Khān succinctly declared that in the community of the Prophet the Arabs cannot claim superiority on the account that Muhammad was an Arab by origin :

‘Know that if a person drinks (as I do) from the cup of the Shari’a of this city (of Madina),/God makes his people equal in rank to the Arabs.’

As a Muslim leader fighting for the cause of Islam against infidels and heretics, Shaybānī Khān regarded himself superior to Arab and Persian kings :

‘I am Islam, I am Islam, what choice is there for the infidelity of the kafirs?/I will cut the roots of the infidels so that no trace of them remains.

‘(I) from the line of Janghiz Khān have become a Royal Falcon. Where are now the Phoenix and the Eagle?/I am the jewel of this age, (although) men and fairies do not know the value of this jewel.’

In a ghazal addressed to the people of Iraq he summons Persians and Arabs alike to follow him on the Path of the Law :

‘People of Iraq, I have stated my intention to set out to circumambulate the Ka‘ba./Although the Ka‘ba is beyond that (land of yours), it is not too far (for me to get there).’

‘Do not abandon the Path of the Law, people of Arabia and Iraq./All those who wish good fortune for themselves should better listen to my advice.

‘I have dedicated my life to (pressing forward on) the road of the Law of the Faith./I will bring disaster upon people that do not set out on this road.’

‘If you want good fortune, come to the threshold of (the house of) good fortune./Do this before this same good fortune says to you, “The time is here for separation”.

‘To me, the highest officer of God (, the Truth), obedience is due./He who does not bend in obedience, will remain far from God.

‘I have an ardent desire for the throne of the Khān of the Qur’ān./Because of (my) love for that throne, I do not rest my weapons, not even for a moment.

‘O Shabān, make the ignorant nations of the world so/that people find no trace of them, no matter how much they look.’

Shaybānī Khān’s ascending career was cut short on December 2, 1510 in the battle at Merv : The Royal Falcon succumbed to the Persian Phoenix. Some of his ideas were picked up and carried on by members of his family. But the Uzbek greatness he had dreamed of, his countries’ leadership in the Islamic world, was never attained.

More lasting than the poems about ambitious dreams are Shaybānī Khān’s ghazals to his favorite places of the Uzbek empire, especially to the city of Samarkand. We find in them the first signs of Central Asian Turkic patriotism generated and kindled by the ideology of the Yasavī school. I wish to quote, in conclusion, one of the ghazals of the group that could be called the “Samarkand Cycle” :

Tāza bolur cānımız sōy-i Samarqand ilä
Bil ki ölüg tirilür böy-i Samarqand ilä.

Čašma-i hayvān suyu hēč kiši tapmadı :
İzdägän anı tapar cōy-i Samarqand ilä.

Silsila mō hūblar köp turur, ay ahl-i dil
Bāghğ erür könğlümüz mōy-i Samarqand ilä.

Vā'ız agar necä kim vaşf-i bihišt äyläsä
Hür va quşūr köp turur köy-i Samarqand ilä.

Körgäli qardaşların boldi Sabānī ferağ,
Yağı turur könğlümüz rōy-i Samarqand ilä.

'Our soul is renewed when we turn toward Samarqand./Know that the dead comes to life again with a waft of fragrance from Samarqand.'

'Nobody has ever found the source of the water of life./He who is still in search of it, can find it in the streams of Samarqand.'

'There are many beauties with ringlets in their hair, O People of Heart!/My heart, (however), is tied with the hair of the beauties of Samarqand.'

'No matter how vividly the preacher describes (the beauty of) Paradise, (I do not care because)/Huris and palaces are many in the streets of Samarqand.'

'(The thought of) seeing his brothers again made Shabānī joyful./Our heart is healed by the (vision of the) face of Samarqand.'