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THE ROLE OF THE SURKHAN OASIS IN THE SPIRITUAL LIFE OF THE EMIRATE OF BUKHARA

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Abstract: This article analyzes the role of the Surkhan Oasis—part of the Emirate of Bukhara—in spiritual life from the late 18th century to the first quarter of the 20th century. The study examines the oasis's religious and educational environment, the activities of “maktab” (traditional primary schools) and “madrasas” (higher religious schools), the status of religious scholars (“ulama”) and teachers (“mudarris”) in society, the spiritual functions of mosques and pilgrimage sites, and the formation and development of oral folklore and traditional values. Particular attention is given to the connection between the educational institutions and the scholarly-educational environment of the Boysun, Denov, and Sherobod “bekliks” (districts) and the broader spiritual landscape of the Emirate of Bukhara. The research findings demonstrate that, despite its relative distance from the central regions of the Emirate, the Surkhan Oasis served as a significant regional hub for preserving and transmitting religious knowledge, education, folk traditions, and spiritual values across generations.

Keywords: Emirate of Bukhara, Surkhan Oasis, spirituality, religious and educational life, Boysun, Denov, Sherobod, “madrasa”, “maktab”, “ulama”, “mudarris”, mosque, pilgrimage site, oral folklore.

Introduction

In the history of Central Asia, the Emirate of Bukhara emerged as a major center not only of political and economic activity but also of scholarly, religious, and spiritual life. Throughout the late 18th and the 19th centuries, the development of Islamic sciences—such as Quranic studies, Hadith, jurisprudence (fiqh), exegesis (tafsir), and Sufism—alongside the activities of madrasas and schools and the status of religious scholars (ulama) in society, constituted vital components of spiritual life in Bukhara. These spiritual and intellectual processes were not confined solely to the city of Bukhara. A religious and educational environment also took shape across the territories of the Emirate, developing through the activities of local schools, madrasas, mosques, and religious scholars. One such region was the Surkhan Oasis; in the 19th century, “bekliks” (administrative districts) such as Boysun, Denov, and Sherobod served as its key administrative centers.

Examining the role of the Surkhan Oasis in the spiritual life of the Bukhara Emirate is significant for several reasons. First, it allows for an understanding of how education and religious knowledge spread throughout the region. Second, it highlights the connections between the scholarly and educational environment of Bukhara and these southern



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territories. Third, it enables an analysis of the interplay between Islamic values, local customs, and oral folklore.

Research Sources and Methodology

The article employs historical, objective, comparative-historical, and problem-chronological methods. It analyzes scholarly articles, historical data, architectural monuments, and studies regarding the history of education in the Surkhan Oasis. In particular, research focused on the primary education systems in the Boysun, Denov, and Sherobod “bekliks” provides valuable material for studying the school system and educational environment of the Surkhan Oasis. It sheds light on the region's old schools, madrasas, and “mudarris” (instructors), as well as the distinctive features of the educational process. Research into the architectural heritage of the Surkhan oasis dating from the 16th to the 19th centuries also highlights the role played by madrasas, mosques, mausoleums, and other religious structures in the region's social and religious-educational life. The Role of the Surkhan Oasis in the Spiritual Landscape of the Emirate of Bukhara. As one of the southern territories of the Emirate of Bukhara, the Surkhan Oasis held a distinctive geographical and historical position. In the 19th century, the oasis's *bekliks* (administrative districts)—such as Boysun, Denov, and Sherobod—were integrated into the Emirate’s administrative system, while certain eastern areas were governed as part of other *bekliks*. Its southern geographical location imparted a unique character to the oasis's spiritual life; in this region, the Islamic educational and spiritual traditions of Bukhara harmoniously blended with local customs, oral folklore, and ethno-cultural values. Consequently, it is incorrect to view the spiritual life of the Surkhan Oasis merely as a peripheral replication of processes occurring in the center (Bukhara). On the contrary, a distinctive spiritual environment emerged in the oasis, formed by the synthesis of shared Islamic educational traditions with local historical experience and folk culture.

Schools and Madrasas: Centers of Spiritual Life. During the era of the Emirate of Bukhara, schools and *madrasas* served as key institutions of spiritual life. While schools provided basic literacy and religious instruction, *madrasas* offered advanced religious and scholarly education. In the Surkhan Oasis, too, these institutions catered to the religious and educational needs of the local population. Modern research indicates that a primary education system existed in the Boysun, Denov, and Sherobod “bekliks” (districts) of the Emirate of Bukhara, and that the schools and “madrasas” in the region operated based on a long historical tradition. A key aspect of this educational system was that schools served not only to teach basic literacy but also to provide moral and religious upbringing; consequently, academic instruction and spiritual education were inextricably linked. The curriculum—covering Quranic recitation, religious tenets, ethics, and basic literacy—played a vital role in shaping the worldview of the younger generation.

“Madrasas” held particular significance in the spiritual life of the Surkhan Oasis. Beyond imparting religious knowledge, they played a crucial role in fostering the local scholarly environment. The Said Otaliq Madrasa in Denov stands as one of the oasis's most important historical, architectural, and educational landmarks. Research identifies this institution, along with other “madrasas” in Denov, as pivotal centers for scholarly and



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educational activity in the region. Evidence also points to the development of “madrasa” education in the Boysun area. The connection between the educational environments in Boysun and Denov and the “madrasas” of Bukhara played a significant role in the development of the local scholarly community. The gathering of religious scholars (“ulama”), instructors (“mudarris”), and students around these “madrasas” fostered a vibrant scholarly and educational atmosphere. This environment fostered not only the spread of religious knowledge but also the development of reading habits, a culture of writing, and scholarly traditions.

During the era of the Emirate of Bukhara, religious scholars (“ulama”) held significant influence over the spiritual life of society. In addition to their work in mosques and “madrasas”, they played a vital role in addressing the religious, ethical, and social issues of daily life. In the Surkhan Oasis, too, “mudarris” (teachers) and religious scholars actively shaped the spiritual lives of the local population. Their duties extended far beyond mere instruction; these scholars:

- conducted religious ceremonies;
- provided counsel on marriage and family matters;
- explained religious and legal issues;
- instilled moral values in the youth;
- worked to enhance the religious knowledge of the populace.

Thus, religious scholars and teachers served as a crucial link between religious knowledge and social life during that period.

It is difficult to envision the spiritual life of the Surkhan Oasis without considering its scholarly and educational ties to Bukhara. As a major religious and intellectual hub of Central Asia, Bukhara was a vital center of learning for students and scholars arriving from various regions, and the educational system of the Surkhan Oasis was closely linked to the broader “madrasa” traditions of Bukhara. The travel of local youth to Bukhara for advanced education, and the return of those educated in Bukhara’s scholarly environment to their home regions to teach, ensured the continuity of intellectual and spiritual ties. This process was significant in two respects: on the one hand, the scholarly traditions of Bukhara extended into the Surkhan Oasis; on the other, scholars hailing from the Surkhan Oasis contributed to the shaping of Bukhara’s intellectual milieu.

Mosques were among the most important social institutions in the spiritual life of the Surkhan Oasis. Beyond serving as places of worship, they acted as hubs that united the population, disseminated religious knowledge, and strengthened communal bonds. Research into the architecture of the Surkhan Oasis during the era of the khanates notes that the presence of mosques, madrasas, mausoleums, and other religious structures reflects the material foundations of the region's religious and educational life. Meanwhile, pilgrimage sites held a special place in the religious and spiritual consciousness of the people; the pilgrimages, prayers, rituals, and legends associated with them served to strengthen the spiritual connection between generations. From this perspective, these sites can be viewed not merely as religious facilities, but as repositories of the people's historical memory and spiritual heritage.



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Sufism played a significant role in the spiritual life of the Emirate of Bukhara. During the 18th and 19th centuries, alongside other Islamic disciplines, Sufi teachings influenced both social and spiritual life. Studies indicate that the study of the Quran, Hadith, “fiqh” (Islamic jurisprudence), and Sufism was prioritized during the era of the Emirate of Bukhara. Sufi traditions also played a notable role in shaping religious views and the spiritual culture of the people in the Surkhan Oasis. Sufism’s promotion of ethical values—such as patience, honesty, humility, generosity, and humanism—has influenced the people's daily spiritual life. In this process, religious teachings harmonized with traditional folk views, creating a distinctive local spiritual atmosphere. The spiritual life of the Surkhan oasis cannot be imagined without its oral folklore. Epic poems (“dostans”), “termalar” (traditional recitations), songs, proverbs, tales, and legends have served as vital vehicles for transmitting the people's historical memory and moral values from generation to generation. The art of the “bakhshi” (traditional epic singer), in particular, stands out as a unique cultural and spiritual phenomenon of the Surkhan region.

The epics performed by “bakhshis” promoted values such as courage, patriotism, loyalty, friendship, justice, respect for parents, and humanity. Consequently, oral folklore can be regarded as one of the informal yet powerful instruments of spiritual upbringing. Family and communal rituals also played a significant role in the spiritual life of the Surkhan oasis. Wedding ceremonies, circumcision rites, rituals associated with newborns, funeral and memorial services, and seasonal customs served to unite members of the community. These rituals showcased local customs alongside religious values. For instance, values such as respect for the older generation, neighborliness, hospitality, “hashar” (community-based collective work), and mutual assistance have strengthened the spiritual foundations of society.

In this regard, the spiritual life of the Surkhan oasis was not limited to religious education; it also encompassed a system of moral values manifested in the people's daily lives.

The madrasas, mosques, and mausoleums of the Surkhan oasis hold great significance as tangible expressions of the spiritual life of that era. These architectural monuments offer insight into the religious worldview, aesthetic sensibilities, and construction culture of the society of that time. Research indicates that the madrasas, mosques, mausoleums, and other structures built in the Surkhan oasis between the 16th and 19th centuries reflect a blend of Bukharan architectural traditions and local characteristics. Thus, these architectural monuments are not merely historical buildings but serve as vital historical sources reflecting the spiritual worldview of the people of that period.

New developments emerged in the socio-cultural life of the Surkhan oasis during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As the Russian Empire’s political and economic influence in the region grew, the oasis’s connections with the outside world expanded. Although traditional “maktab” and madrasa education persisted during this period, new social and educational ideas also began to gradually take hold. Recent studies on the ethno-political history of the Surkhan Oasis note that while Uzbeks and Tajiks constituted the primary ethnic groups in the region during the late 19th and early 20th centuries,

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Russian, Tatar, and other groups were also present. This diversity influenced the oasis's cultural ties and social environment.

At the same time, traditional religious and educational values retained their significance. This situation demonstrates the coexistence of tradition and processes of renewal within the spiritual life of the Surkhan Oasis.

Summarizing the research findings, the role of the Surkhan Oasis in the spiritual life of the Emirate of Bukhara can be characterized by the following aspects:

First, the dissemination of education and religious knowledge was a central element of the oasis's spiritual life.

Second, the “maktabas” (primary schools) and “madrasas” in Boysun, Denov, and Sherobod met the intellectual and religious needs of the local population.

Third, scholarly and educational ties with Bukhara linked the religious and educational environment of the oasis to the broader scholarly traditions of Bukhara.

Fourth, mosques and pilgrimage sites served as centers for social and spiritual cohesion alongside their role in religious life. Fifth, the art of “bakhshi” storytelling and oral folklore have served as important means of preserving the historical memory and moral values of the local population.

Sixth, traditional customs and family rituals have ensured the continuity of spiritual values in daily life. Conclusion

From the late 18th century through the first quarter of the 20th century, the Surkhan Oasis was a region that played a significant role in the spiritual life of the Emirate of Bukhara. The educational and religious-enlightenment environment that developed in centers such as Boysun, Denov, and Sherobod not only met the spiritual needs of the local population but also facilitated the establishment of the Emirate’s broader scholarly and religious traditions in these southern territories. *Maktabas* (primary religious schools) and *madrasas* served as the primary institutions of spiritual life, through which religious knowledge, literacy, and moral education were passed down from generation to generation. Religious scholars (*ulama*) and teachers (*mudarris*) acted not merely as educators but also as spiritual guides for the community. The spiritual life of the Surkhan Oasis was not limited to religious education alone; mosques and pilgrimage sites, oral folklore, the art of *bakhshi* (traditional epic storytelling), family rituals, customs, and traditional values also constituted vital components of the oasis's spiritual culture.

Furthermore, it would be a one-sided approach to view the spiritual environment that emerged in the oasis merely as a result of influence from the center in Bukhara. In the Surkhan Oasis, pan-Islamic and Bukharan scholarly and educational traditions harmoniously blended with local historical experience, oral folklore, and ethno-cultural values. Thus, the Surkhan Oasis held a significant place within the spiritual landscape of the Bukhara Emirate as a regional center that disseminated education and religious knowledge, shaped the local scholarly environment, and preserved the people's historical memory and traditional values.

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