

THE SYNCRETISM OF THE ISLAMIC EDUCATION SYSTEM AND LOCAL SCIENTIFIC-CULTURAL TRADITIONS: A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS BASED ON MADRASA ACTIVITIES

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Abstract: This article presents a historical analysis of the **syncretism** of the Islamic education system and local scientific-cultural traditions in Uzbekistan, based on the activities of madrasas. Using historical sources and modern scholarly literature, the study examines how Islamic education in madrasas integrated with local traditions of knowledge and culture. The findings indicate that in Central Asia – particularly during the **Timurid era** – madrasas combined religious and secular learning. This fusion rooted Islamic education deeply in the local cultural context and led to the formation of a rich intellectual heritage in the region.

Keywords: Islamic education; madrasa; syncretism; Timurid era; local traditions; Uzbekistan; Central Asia; Sufism; scientific heritage; cultural heritage.

Annotatsiya: Ushbu maqolada O‘zbekiston misolida islomiy ta’lim tizimi va mahalliy ilmiy-madaniy an’analar **sinkretlashuvi** tarixiy nuqtai nazardan tahlil qilingan. Tadqiqot davomida madrasalar faoliyati asosida islomiy ta’lim va mahalliy urf-odatlar hamda ilmiy an’analar qanday uyg‘unlashgani tarixiy manbalar va zamonaviy ilmiy adabiyotlar asosida yoritib berildi. Olingan natijalar shuni ko‘rsatadiki, Markaziy Osiyoda, xususan, **Temuriylar davrida** madrasa ta’limi diniy va dunyoviy bilimlarni birlashtirgan holda rivojlangan. Natijada islomiy ta’lim mahalliy madaniy muhitga chuqur singib, mintaqada boy ilmiy-ma’rifiy meros shakllangan.

Kalit so‘zlar: Islomiy ta’lim; madrasa; sinkretizm; Temuriylar davri; mahalliy an’analar; O‘zbekiston; Markaziy Osiyo; tasavvuf; ilmiy meros; madaniy meros.

Аннотация: В данной статье представлен исторический анализ **синкретизма** исламской системы образования и местных научно-культурных традиций на примере деятельности медресе в Узбекистане. Исследование, основанное на исторических источниках и современной научной литературе, показывает, как исламское образование в медресе интегрировалось с местными традициями знаний и культуры. Установлено, что в Средней Азии, особенно в эпоху **Тимуридов**, медресе объединяли религиозные и светские знания. Это способствовало глубокому укоренению исламского образования в местной культурной среде и формированию богатого интеллектуального наследия региона.

Ключевые слова: исламское образование; медресе; синкретизм; эпоха Тимуридов; местные традиции; Узбекистан; Центральная Азия; суфизм; научное наследие; культурное наследие.

INTRODUCTION. In the history of Central Asia, the development of Islamic education has been characterized by a dynamic interaction between the universal traditions of Islam and local scientific and cultural practices. This syncretic evolution is especially evident in the example of madrasas (Islamic colleges) in the territory of modern Uzbekistan. As centers of learning, madrasas not only imparted religious knowledge but also absorbed and nurtured pre-Islamic and local scholarly traditions, leading to a unique blend of educational culture. By the tenth century, Transoxiana (Mawarannahr) – the region between the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers – had already become an integral part of the broader Islamic world, with its cities connected to networks of Muslim scholarship and

culture[1]. Cities like Bukhara and Samarkand emerged as major hubs of Islamic learning, producing some of the most important figures of the Islamic Golden Age, such as the hadith scholars Imam al-Bukhari and al-Tirmidhi, the philosopher-scientist al-Farabi, and the polymath Ibn Sina (Avicenna)[1]. These scholars were part of broader networks of travel and knowledge exchange that made Transoxiana a “heartland” of the Muslim world in that era[1].

At the same time, the educational activities in the region did not develop in isolation from the local context. The adoption of the Hanafi school of Islamic law – known for its relatively inclusive approach – and the patronage of the Persian language as an Islamic literary tongue under the Samanid dynasty helped accommodate local customs and languages within the Islamic framework[2][3]. As a result, by the 10th century, Bukhara witnessed a remarkable intellectual synthesis, with the Samanid court sponsoring works of literature in **New Persian** (the fully Islamized Persian language) as well as translations and scholarly compilations that combined knowledge from various traditions[4][5]. This created a firm foundation for a syncretic educational tradition in which religious and secular sciences could thrive side by side. Despite later disruptions such as the Mongol invasion in the 13th century – which devastated many institutions of learning – the Islamic educational tradition in Central Asia proved resilient. It adapted to changing circumstances, partly through the influence of Sufi mystical movements that spread in the aftermath of the invasion. By the Timurid era (late 14th–15th centuries), there was a powerful revival of Islamic education in the region[6][7]. The Timurids – especially during the reign of Mirzo Ulugh Beg – heavily patronized madrasas and scholarly work, ushering in what has often been called a “Timurid Renaissance”[6, p. 480]. Under their rule, madrasas became truly universal centers of learning that integrated religious studies with the rational sciences and local cultural knowledge.

This paper investigates how the activities of madrasas in historical Central Asia (with a focus on Timurid-era Uzbekistan) exemplified the syncretism of Islamic education with local scientific-cultural traditions. We draw on historical chronicles, archival documents, and contemporary scholarly analyses to explore the curriculum, pedagogical methods, and social roles of these madrasas. The analysis is structured according to the IMRAD format: after this introduction, we describe the **Materials and Methods**, then present the key findings on madrasa activities (**Results**), followed by a **Discussion** interpreting these findings in terms of syncretism, and finally a concise **Conclusion**.

MATERIALS AND METHODS. This study employs a historical-analytical methodology to examine the syncretic development of Islamic education in Central Asia. We reviewed primary sources such as medieval chronicles and *waqf* (endowment) documents, alongside research literature from academic journals and monographs. For instance, the 10th-century chronicle *Tarikh-i Bukhara* by Abu Bakr Narshakhi provides early evidence of madrasa existence in the region – it records that a madrasa in Bukhara was damaged by fire in the year 937 [2, b. 84; 11, p. 265]. Such primary accounts allow us to trace the establishment and local embedding of Islamic schools in Central Asia. Additionally, we analyzed published studies on cultural history and patronage in the Timurid period [7], on educational endowments and curricula [4, p. 1872], and on the interplay between formal religious scholarship and Sufi tradition in Central Asia [1; 5, p. 22]. By combining qualitative content analysis of texts with contextual historical interpretation, we aimed to reconstruct how madrasas functioned as a point of convergence between Islamic educational ideals and the local milieu. Adhering to the IMRAD structure, we first introduce the historical background, then discuss specific characteristics of madrasa education (e.g. languages of instruction, subjects taught, institutional support, etc.) in the Results section. This is followed by a Discussion that interprets these characteristics in terms of syncretism, and finally a concluding section.

RESULTS. Early Emergence of Madrasas and Integration of Local Traditions. Historical evidence suggests that madrasas (formal Islamic colleges) had appeared in Transoxiana by the early Islamic era, contemporaneous with or even earlier than their emergence in other parts of the Muslim world. Notably, Narshakhi's *History of Bukhara* indicates that a madrasa was present in Bukhara in the year 937 [2, b. 84; 11, p. 265]. This predates the well-known madrasas of Khurasan (for example, the madrasa established in Nishapur in the late 10th century) and underscores that Central Asia was at the forefront of developing dedicated institutions for higher learning. The rise of these early madrasas took place in a context where local scientific and cultural traditions were already rich. By the Samanid period (9th–10th centuries), Bukhara had become a vibrant center of learning where Persian and Arabic scholarly activities coexisted. The Samanid rulers patronized the use of Persian (the local court and cultural language) for literature and scholarship, commissioning works like Firdawsi's *Shahnama* and encyclopedic compilations of science [8]. At the same time, they supported studies in the Islamic religious sciences and the translation of knowledge from Arabic and other languages into Persian, thereby effectively localizing Islamic education and making it accessible to the native population[1]. This patronage ensured that the spread of Islamic learning built upon existing cultural foundations rather than alienating the populace. Key scholars of Central Asian origin, such as al-Khwarizmi (mathematician-astronomer), al-Farghani (astronomer), and others who in the 9th century had been drawn west to centers like Baghdad, found under the Samanids that they could pursue their work in their home region[1]. Tenth-century Bukhara thus became the scene of a remarkable intellectual synthesis where religious scholarship (in fields like hadith, jurisprudence, and theology) was conducted alongside advances in philosophy, medicine, astronomy, and literature, all within an Islamic framework[8]. This early fusion set the stage for the later flourishing of a syncretic educational tradition in Central Asia.

Another important aspect of this formative period was the incorporation of local customs and social norms into the Islamic way of life, which had implications for education as well. Central Asia's predominantly Hanafi orientation in law encouraged pragmatism and the recognition of *'urf* (local customary practice) as long as it did not contradict fundamental Islamic principles. As a result, many pre-Islamic cultural practices were gradually Islamized – for example, aspects of communal life and traditional etiquette were validated as part of Islamic *adab* (proper conduct)[1]. This ensured that the expansion of Islamic education did not appear “foreign” to the local population; instead, it built upon and elevated existing cultural norms. By the early centuries of Islam in the region, being a learned person (*olim*) often meant not only mastery of religious texts but also familiarity with the pre-Islamic scholarly heritage of the area (such as elements of Iranian literature or Greek-influenced sciences). We see evidence of this breadth in figures like Abu Rayhan al-Biruni (11th century), who exemplified the broad knowledge characteristic of Central Asian scholarship—writing on astronomy, medicine, geography, and history, and thereby bridging Islamic and pre-Islamic knowledge. In sum, the foundations of Islamic education in what is now Uzbekistan were marked by a bilingual scholarly culture (Arabic and Persian) and a curriculum that went beyond theology to include the natural sciences and humanities. This laid an enduring basis for syncretic educational practices in the region.

The Timurid Renaissance: Madrasa as a Nexus of Religion and Science. The pinnacle of the syncretic development of Islamic education in Central Asia was reached during the Timurid era (late 14th to 15th centuries). After the turbulence of the Mongol conquest, the Timurids – especially under Amir Timur (Tamerlane) and his successors – invested heavily in rebuilding cities and establishing institutions of learning[7][13]. Dozens of madrasas were founded or restored in major cultural centers like Samarkand, Bukhara, and Herat. These madrasas became the loci where Islamic scholastic traditions and local (as well as imported) scientific and cultural knowledge converged. Timur's own campaigns famously brought scholars, artists, and craftsmen from across his empire and beyond into his realm, transplanting diverse expertise into Transoxiana[6]. For example, Amir Timur invited renowned intellectuals such as the eminent

theologian Sa'd al-Din al-Taftazani and the astronomer Qazizoda al-Rumi to his capital in Samarkand, reflecting a deliberate policy of patronage that created a cosmopolitan intellectual atmosphere[6].

Under Timur's grandson Mirzo Ulugh Beg – who ruled Samarkand from 1409 to 1449 – this trend reached its zenith. Ulugh Beg is renowned not only as a ruler but also as a scientist and educator. He established one of the most prestigious madrasas of the age: the Ulugh Beg Madrasa in Samarkand, completed in 1420, where he himself famously lectured on subjects like mathematics and astronomy[9]. Ulugh Beg's madrasa exemplified the Timurid model of a syncretic curriculum: religious sciences (Islamic law, theology) were taught alongside rational sciences such as astronomy, geometry, logic, and history[9]. In fact, Central Asian madrasas of this period were often ahead of their time in emphasizing “secular” fields of knowledge. A UNESCO study notes that 15th-century madrasas in Samarkand and Herat were esteemed as cultural centers for astronomy, mathematics, and medicine[9]. Prominent scholars at Ulugh Beg's academy included Ghiyath al-Din Jamshid al-Kashi, a mathematician who calculated pi with remarkable accuracy, and Qadi-zada al-Rumi, an astronomer – both of whom taught and conducted research under Ulugh Beg's patronage[6]. The presence of such figures indicates how deeply the scientific tradition was integrated into the Islamic educational milieu by the Timurid period.

The language of instruction and scholarship in Timurid madrasas further demonstrates this integrative approach. Classes were often conducted in three languages – Arabic, Persian, and Turkic (early Uzbek) – reflecting the linguistic diversity of Central Asian Islam. For example, a 16th-century *waqf*-nama (endowment deed) records that Arabic was the primary medium for instruction in religious subjects [3, c. 66], even as Persian remained the language of literature and local scholarship. Contemporary *waqf* documents show that each madrasa's endowment would specify the number of staff and the subjects to be taught, which could include everything from Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsir*) to mathematics, medicine, or astronomy[12]. The inclusion of subjects beyond purely religious studies was the norm, not the exception. For instance, some madrasas founded by Timurid nobles were specialized: the Muhammad Sultan Madrasa in Samarkand was reportedly designed for 20–25 select students focused on advanced sciences, while others like the madrasa of Sarai Mulk Khanum (Timur's wife) and the madrasa of Maulana Qutb al-Din were larger institutions with capacity for about 100 students and offered a broader education [4, p. 1871]. In all cases, the synthesis of religious and rational disciplines within the madrasa curriculum was considered not only acceptable but praiseworthy. Surviving epigraphic evidence also echoes the educational philosophy of the time: the Ulugh Beg Madrasa in Bukhara (built in 1417) famously features the hadith “*All Muslims are obliged to seek knowledge*” inscribed in elegant script above its entrance, underscoring that the pursuit of learning in all fields was sanctified in this culture [4, p. 1872]. Such messages reinforced the idea that faith and reason were complementary, and that acquiring knowledge – whether religious or worldly – was a duty for believers.

Timurid madrasas benefited from strong financial support through pious endowments (*awqaf*). Rulers and elites endowed madrasas with revenue from land or commerce to pay stipends to students and salaries to teachers, ensuring these institutions could sustain scholarly activities in the long term [12]. By providing lodging and meals, madrasas attracted talented students from all over Central Asia and even beyond. (There are records of students coming from as far as Anatolia, Persia, and India to study in Samarkand or Bukhara during the 15th century.)[6] This patronage resulted in a diverse student body and a fertile cross-pollination of ideas, further enriching the local intellectual scene.

The Synthesis of Orthodox Scholarship and Mystical Tradition. A significant dimension of syncretism in Central Asian Islamic education was the intertwining of orthodox scholarship with Sufi mystical traditions. Rather than a strict separation between the

scholarly *‘ulama* and the Sufi masters (*shaykhs*), Central Asia historically witnessed a synthesis of these roles and perspectives[1]. Many leading Sufi figures, such as the Naqshbandi sheikhs of the 15th–16th centuries, were themselves learned in the madrasa sciences; conversely, many madrasa-trained *ulama* were inclined towards Sufi spirituality. Historical surveys indicate that by the 19th century, for example, a number of Sufi masters in regions like Tashkent were graduates of the Bukhara madrasas[1]. But this fusion began much earlier – during and after the Timurid era, there was an increasing acceptance among scholars that the mystical path (*tarīqat*) and the legal-religious path (*sharī‘at*) were complementary rather than conflicting avenues to truth[1]. One of the great Sufi leaders of the Timurid period, Khwāja Ahrar (d. 1490), for instance, wielded significant influence in Transoxiana and was respected by the *ulama*; he himself advocated for adherence to the *sharī‘at* while practicing Sufi devotions, personally embodying this balance in his life and teachings.

The integration of Sufi thought into the educational sphere meant that the moral and ethical training of students in madrasas often included teachings beyond dry jurisprudence – it encompassed spiritual discipline and personal virtue as emphasized by Sufism. Texts on ethics and Sufi *adab* (proper conduct) were sometimes informally part of the curriculum. Furthermore, local customs that had spiritual or symbolic significance – such as the veneration of saints’ tombs (*ziyarat*) and the celebration of certain traditional festivals – were generally **not** shunned by the scholarly class in Central Asia; rather, they were often incorporated into the religious life of madrasa communities. The *ulama* of the region generally regarded many of these practices as permissible local expressions of Islam[1]. As Adeeb Khalid observes, Central Asian scholars “accepted many local customs and traditions (*urf-odatlar*) as compatible with the norms of Islam,” thereby forging a broad consensus that endured well into the modern period[1]. This consensus helped ensure that Islamic education was not seen as antagonistic to local ways; instead, it validated and elevated those local traditions under an Islamic idiom. In effect, Islam in Central Asia was **indigenized** through educational practice – so much so that for most people there was little perceived contradiction between being a devout Muslim and following local cultural customs. Local customs were sacralized, and Islam was made indigenous in this process [14]. Far from being a barrier to orthodoxy, the syncretism between formal scholarship and popular spirituality provided social cohesion: *ulama* and Sufi sheikhs often reinforced each other’s authority, and religion permeated everyday culture in a harmonious way.

Continuity and Legacy in Early Modern Times. The syncretic model of Islamic education established during the Timurid period did not disappear with the fall of the Timurids. In the 16th century, the region saw new Uzbek dynasties (such as the Shaybanids in Bukhara) come to power, and they continued to patronize Islamic learning. Bukhara in particular remained a major center of Islamic scholarship under the Shaybanid and subsequent Janid (Astarkhanid) rulers, who maintained madrasas and libraries as part of their statecraft[13]. Throughout the early modern era (16th–18th centuries), the madrasa system in Central Asia preserved the curriculum and intellectual traditions developed earlier. Indeed, by the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the curriculum had largely crystallized around medieval paradigms: it relied heavily on commentaries and textbooks dating back to the 15th century, implying that the intellectual frameworks set during the Timurid “golden age” had become the established norm for later generations[15]. This continuity ensured that a core scholarly tradition survived even as the political landscape changed with new khanates (Bukhara, Khiva, Kokand) rising and falling. However, the very success and completeness of this classical synthesis eventually made the traditional system less adaptable to radically new ideas introduced in the modern era.

By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Central Asia's educational establishment was seen by some as stagnant. Reformist intellectuals known as the **Jadids** critiqued the old madrasa curriculum – which had remained largely unchanged since Timurid times – as outdated. They argued that the madrasas needed to teach modern sciences and languages in addition to classical Islamic subjects. In essence, this was a call for a **new syncretism**: a fusion of the old religious curriculum with contemporary European knowledge. Such ideas met resistance from traditionalists who viewed the existing curriculum as optimal, but they set in motion important changes. Scholars have studied how the transition from traditional madrasa education to modern schooling occurred in Central Asia during the Russian colonial and Soviet periods[15]. These studies show that elements of the old syncretic model—such as the inclusion of secular subjects—were selectively reintroduced in new forms (e.g., *Jadid new method* schools) to modernize education while retaining an Islamic spirit[10]. Understanding the history of Islamic education in Central Asia thus provides valuable context for current discussions on religious education reform. It reveals that what might appear as **innovation** today (combining religious and secular studies) actually has deep historical roots in the region's experience.

DISCUSSION. Legacy and Modern Implications: The syncretic tradition of Islamic education in Uzbekistan left an enduring legacy. It provided a rich intellectual lineage from which later generations could draw inspiration. For example, even in the 19th century, Central Asian scholars could take pride in figures like al-Bukhari, Ibn Sina, or Ulugh Beg as part of their heritage – all products of a culture that saw no contradiction in fusing the spiritual with the rational. This legacy of combining religious and worldly knowledge became a point of cultural pride, often evoked in narratives of a “**Timurid Renaissance.**” However, the flip side of this successful synthesis was that the traditional system became resistant to change; by the turn of the 20th century, conservative educators clung to the old curriculum, viewing it as complete and sufficient. The Jadid reformers' critique – that the madrasas needed to embrace modern subjects – can be seen as an attempt to rekindle the innovative spirit of the past by broadening the definition of useful knowledge once again[10]. Indeed, recent scholarship has highlighted how educational reforms in Central Asia in the early Soviet period were negotiated, with some reformers arguing that the classical heritage of integrating useful sciences could be aligned with modern requirements[15].

In conclusion, the case of madrasas in Uzbekistan demonstrates that the syncretism of Islamic educational institutions with local scientific and cultural traditions was a key factor in the region's vibrant intellectual history. Rather than being rigid or insular, the Islamic education system here showed a high degree of adaptability – absorbing languages, ideas, and customs from its environment and elevating them within an Islamic worldview. This created a distinctive civilizational blend: an Islamic scholarship that was deeply rooted in local culture yet made seminal contributions to the broader Muslim world. The heritage of institutions like Ulugh Beg's madrasa – where astronomy was taught alongside theology – remains a powerful reminder that faith and reason, as well as global and local knowledge, can be mutually reinforcing. As Uzbekistan and its Central Asian neighbors continue to reform and develop their educational systems today, there is much to be learned from this rich legacy of syncretism, which once placed the region at the forefront of the Islamic world's intellectual achievements.

CONCLUSION. The historical analysis of madrasas in Central Asia, particularly in the territory of modern Uzbekistan, reveals that Islamic education thrived through a continual process of **syncretism** with the local cultural and intellectual environment. From the early introduction of Islam, through the Samanid and Timurid golden ages, and into the early modern era, Islamic institutions of learning assimilated pre-Islamic traditions, indigenous languages, and secular disciplines into their curriculum and ethos. This blending was instrumental in producing a vibrant, world-renowned scholarly tradition that advanced both religious and scientific knowledge. The **Timurid era** especially stands out as a time when patronage of education led to remarkable achievements in theology, astronomy, mathematics, and other fields under one

educational roof. The enduring legacy of this syncretic model is evident in the way Central Asian Islamic education remained robust and culturally relevant for centuries. Even as modern reforms emerged, they often sought to recapture the spirit of integration that had characterized the madrasa system at its height. Ultimately, the story of Islamic education in Uzbekistan underscores that the strength of a scholarly tradition lies not in isolating itself, but in engaging creatively with the broader cultural and intellectual currents of its society.

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