

## Medieval Kazakhstan as the model of tolerance

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### ARTICLE INFO

**Keywords:**  
*medieval  
Kazakhstan,  
Eurasia, ethno-  
cultural values,  
middle age,  
tolerance, culture  
of coexistence,  
reigns, authority,  
Islam, traditional  
religions.*

IRSTI 10.09.91

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32523/2664-5157-2026-3-65-82>

### ABSTRACT

This article explores the question of coexistence in medieval Kazakhstan on the basis of selected written sources and scholarly works by local and international researchers. The historical and cultural heritage of the region, including centuries-old traditions of statehood, is examined as an important factor in the formation and development of a culture of tolerance and ethno-religious coexistence in medieval steppe civilization. Particular attention is paid to traditions of governance and to interactions between seemingly disparate cultures in terms of both ethnicity and religion. Different peoples, despite differences in religion and ethnicity, successfully maintained a culture of coexistence based on mutual respect within the social order. This legacy remains an important feature of modern society and reflects the continuity of centuries-old traditions of tolerance. Focusing on the reigns of prominent rulers, the article analyzes how successive configurations of authority emerged at the intersection of Islamic legal norms and khanate governance. Based on a comparative historical reading of key narrative corpora and modern historiography, the study contrasts a symbolic model of religious authority associated with courtly patronage, a mediated integration model in which Sufi networks translated Islamic ethics into local social contexts while accommodating legal pluralism, and a later reconfiguration toward more formalized Sharia-centered governance. The model of religious authority is defined here along three dimensions. The first is normative reference: which norms are invoked as binding (Sharia, customary law, and political norms). The second is institutional carriers: which actors and institutions are empowered to articulate and transmit these norms. The third is modes of compliance: whether normativity is pursued primarily through coercive enforcement, distributive patronage, reputational mechanisms, or ethical cultivation. Mapping these dimensions helps clarify why two periods that were both “Islamic” at the level of elite identification could differ sharply in their social reach. The article argues that Islam’s integrative capacity in

steppe polities depended less on formal adoption than on institutions capable of mediating between law, spirituality, and existing normative orders. It therefore proposes a transferable typology of Islamization as a process of negotiation

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### **Ортағасырлық Қазақстан толеранттылықтың үлгісі ретінде**

**Аннотация.** Мақалада жекелеген жазба деректер мен отандық және шетелдік ғалымдардың ғылыми еңбектерін зерделеу негізінде ортағасырлық Қазақстан аумағындағы әртүрлі этникалық және діни қауымдардың өзара қатар өмір сүру мәселесі қарастырылады. Тарихи-мәдени мұра, соның ішінде көпғасырлық мемлекеттілік дәстүрлері ортағасырлық дала өркениетінің этнодіни кеңістігінде толеранттылық мәдениеттің қалыптасуы мен дамуының маңызды көрсеткіштері ретінде талданады. Зерттеуде этникалық және діни тұрғыдан ерекшеленетін мәдениеттердің өзара ықпалдастығы жағдайындағы мемлекеттік басқару дәстүрлеріне ерекше назар аударылады. Діни наным-сенімдері мен этникалық ерекшеліктері әртүрлі халықтар қоғамдық құрылым аясында өзара құрмет қағидатына негізделі бейбіт өмір сүру мәдениетін қалыптастырып, оны едәуір дәрежеде сақтай алды. Бұл құндылық қазіргі қоғам үшін ғана маңызды емес, ғасырлар бойы қалыптасқан толеранттылық дәстүрлерінің сабақтастығын көрсетеді. Зерттеу кезеңіндегі көрнекті билеушілердің қызметіне негізделі отырып, сол дәуірдегі билік құрылымдарының қалыптасу ерекшеліктері де талданады. Атап айтқанда, олардың исламдық құқықтық нормалармен, сопылық дәстүрлерінің ықпалымен қалыптасқан институттармен және хандық басқару жүйесімен өзара байланысы қарастырылады. Негізгі нарративтік деректер кешендері мен қазіргі тарихнаманы салыстырмалы-тарихи тұрғыдан ғылыми талдаудың негізінде зерттеу жүргізгенде, діни биліктің символдық моделі және сопылық желілер теологиялық этиканы жергілікті көпғасырлық әлеуметтік ортаға бейімдеп жеткізетін жанама интеграциялық модельмен өзара салыстырылады. Сонымен қатар құқықтық реттеудің ерекшеліктері, соның ішінде кейінгі кезеңде неғұрлым формалданған шарифаттық басқару жүйесіне қарай жасалған қайта құрылымдау үдерісі ескеріледі. Бұл зерттеуде діни билік моделі бірнеше негізгі өлшем арқылы айқындалады. Біріншісі – нормативтік негіз, яғни қандай нормалар міндетті деп танылады: шарифат, әдет-ғұрып құқығы немесе саяси нормалар. Екіншісі

Received 10 June 2026. Revised 15 July 2026. Accepted 23 August 2026. Available online 30 September 2026.



**For citation:** E.L. Hasanov Medieval Kazakhstan as a model of tolerance // Turkic Studies Journal. 2026. V. 8. № 3. P. 65-82. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.32523/2664-5157-2026-3-65-82>

– институционалдық субъектілер, яғни нормаларды қалыптастыруға және таратуға қандай субъектілер мен институттар өкілетті. Үшіншісі – нормалардың сақталуын қамтамасыз ету тәсілдері, яғни нормативтік талаптардың негізінен мәжбүрлеу, ресурстарды бөлуге негізделген қамқорлық, беделдік тетіктер немесе этикалық тәрбие арқылы жүзеге асырылуы. Осы өлшемдерді салыстыру элиталық бірегейлік деңгейінде екі кезең де исламдық сипатта болғанына қарамастан, олардың қоғамға тигізген әлеуметтік ықпалының не себепті айтарлықтай ерекшеленетінін түсіндіруге мүмкіндік береді. Мақалада дала мемлекеттеріндегі исламның интеграциялық әлеуеті оның формалды түрде қабылдануынан гөрі, құқық, руханият және қолданыстағы нормативтік тәртіптер арасында дәнекер бола алатын институттардың қызметіне тәуелді болғаны тұжырымдалады. Сонымен қатар исламдану үдерісінің құқықтық билік, этикалық-рухани дәнекерлік және саяси ұйымдасу арасындағы өзара ықпалдастық үдерісі ретінде қарастырылатын әмбебап типологиясы ұсынылады.

**Кілт сөздер:** ортағасырлық Қазақстан, Еуразия, этномәдени құндылықтар, ортағасыр, толеранттылық, қатар өмір сүру мәдениеті, билеушілер, басқару, ислам, дәстүрлі діндер.

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### **Средневековый Казахстан как пример толерантности**

**Аннотация.** В данной статье на основе изучения отдельных письменных источников, а также научных трудов отечественных и зарубежных ученых исследуется вопрос взаимного сосуществования в средневековом Казахстане. Историко-культурное наследие, в том числе многовековые традиции государственности были анализированы как важные показатели формирования и развития культуры толерантности в сфере этно-религиозности степной цивилизации средневековья. В научном труде уделяется внимание традиции правления государства на основе изучения соприкосновения на первый взгляд разных культур как с этнической, так и религиозной точки зрения. Отдельные народы, также разные по вероисповеданию, довольно успешно сохранили культуру взаимного сосуществования, опираясь на взаимное уважение в составе общественного строя, что и по сей день стало одним из самых важных достоинств современного общества и сохранившихся многовековых толерантных традиций. Сосредоточившись на правлении видных правителей анализируется, как последовательные конфигурации власти исследуемого периода возникали на пересечении исламской правовой нормативности, институтов, опосредованных суфизмом и ханского управления. Опираясь на сравнительно-исторический научный анализ ключевых нарративных корпусов и современной историографии, исследование противопоставляет символическую модель религиозной власти, а также опосредованную интеграционную модель, в которой суфийские сети переводили теологическую этику в местный многовековой социальный

контекст, одновременно учитывая правовую демократию, в том числе более позднюю реконфигурацию в сторону более формализованного шариатского управления.

Модель религиозной власти здесь определяется важными измерениями. Одна из них нормативная отсылка – какие нормы принимаются как обязательные (шариат, обычное право, политические нормы). Институциональные носители – какие субъекты и институты уполномочены формулировать и передавать нормы. Способы соблюдения – осуществляется ли нормативность преимущественно посредством принудительного исполнения, распределительного покровительства, репутационных механизмов или этического воспитания. Сопоставление этих измерений помогает прояснить, почему два периода, оба являющиеся исламскими на уровне элитарной идентификации, могут резко различаться по своему социальному влиянию. В статье утверждается, что интеграционная способность ислама в степных государствах зависела не столько от формального принятия, сколько от институтов, способных выступать посредниками между правом, духовностью и существующими нормативными порядками. Также концептуально предлагается переносимая типология исламизации как процесса взаимодействия между юридической властью, этико-духовным посредничеством и политической организацией.

**Ключевые слова:** Средневековый Казахстан, Евразия, этнокультурные ценности, средневековые, толерантность, культура сосуществования, правители, управление, ислам, традиционные религии.

## Introduction

Islamization in the medieval Golden Horde is often narrated as a top-down event: a ruler converts, the polity becomes Islamic, and Islamic institutions follow. While this political chronology is indispensable, it can obscure the social and institutional pathways through which Islamic normativity became meaningful and enforceable in a multiethnic, largely mobile empire. As part of this empire, medieval Kazakhstan combined nomadic governance, urban nodes, and a layered legal environment in which the political culture, Turkic customary norms, and Islamic jurisprudence could coexist. In such settings, conversion alone is an insufficient proxy for the consolidation of Islam. The Golden Horde's historical geography amplified this complexity. The khanate controlled steppe corridors and riverine routes linking the Black Sea and the Volga-Ural zone to Central Asia and the Near East. These routes facilitated the movement of merchants, scholars, emissaries, and ritual specialists. They also sustained religious plurality: Islam circulated alongside inherited Mongol religious practices and the established presence of Christian communities and other traditions in frontier and urban contexts. Islamization therefore cannot be reduced to doctrinal substitution; it is better approached as an evolving settlement within a pluralistic imperial ecology.

From a religious-studies perspective, Islamization is treated here as the gradual social embedding of Islamic normativity – ritual, ethical, legal, and institutional – within a political community. “Religious authority” denotes the socially recognized capacity to define, transmit, and (where possible) enforce that normativity. Authority is therefore relational: it is produced through interaction between rulers, jurists (*ulama*), Sufi shaykhs, and local communities, and

it is shaped by the available infrastructures of mediation (courts, waqf patronage, educational networks, lodges, ritual lineages, and moral exemplars) (Zhandarbek, 2010: 67).

This article asks a focused question: how did Islamic law and Sufi networks operate individually and in combination as instruments for constructing and contesting religious authority in the Golden Horde? Rather than asking when the Horde “became Islamic,” the analysis compares three reigns often treated as turning points – Berke Khan (in Mongolian: Бэрх хан *ᠪᠡᠷᠬᠡ ᠬᠠᠨ*), died in 1266/1267, Özbeg or Uzbek Khan also known as Giyas ad-Din Muhammad Uzbek Khan (1282-1341), and Janibek Khan (in Persian: جانی بیگ, died in 1357) – to identify shifts in the locus of authority and their likely consequences for social integration.

The article advances three contributions. First, it integrates political, legal, and Sufi perspectives into a single authority-centered framework. Second, it clarifies the state-supporting functions and limits of Kubrawiyya-linked patronage, Yassawiyya mediation, and Sharia-centered legal institutionalization in a steppe environment characterized by legal pluralism. Third, it proposes a typology of Islamization as authority negotiation between law, spirituality, and political organization an approach that can travel beyond the Golden Horde case.

### Historiographical and Conceptual Context

Scholarship on Golden Horde Islamization has tended to privilege one explanatory register at a time. Classical political historiography foregrounds elite conversion and state policy, reading Islamization through court alliances, diplomatic alignments, and confessional declarations (Сафаргалиев, 1960: 85; Тизенгаузен, 1884: 87)<sup>1</sup>. This work established crucial chronologies, but its emphasis on rulers and diplomacy often leaves the mechanisms of social penetration under-specified: it is not always clear how Islamic norms moved from court rhetoric into everyday moral and legal expectations (Измайлов, 2007: 40). The key insight here is legal pluralism: Sharia became one authoritative vocabulary among several, and its reach varied by region, social milieu (urban vs. steppe), and political priorities (Тишков, 2003: 69).

Sufism-centered approaches shift attention to mediation and lived religion. In steppe and frontier contexts, Sufi institutions could translate Islamic ethics and ritual into vernacular, culturally resonant forms, operating through moral authority, communal affiliation, ritual discipline, and symbolic continuity (Trimingham, 1989: 45). Within Turkic religious history, the Yassawiyya is frequently treated as a paradigmatic vehicle for such translation because of its vernacular orientation and adaptability to nomadic social organization (Köprülü, 2006: 119; Kutlu, 2012: 129).

Recent scholarship has increasingly attempted to bring institutions and material culture into the picture, using the spread of mosques, madrasas, khanakas, cemeteries, and architectural patronage as indicators of Islam’s growing public presence (Федоров-Давыдов, 2003: 71; Kançal-Ferrari, 2018: 196). Work in Golden Horde-focused venues has also refined discussions of chronology and institutional incorporation (Mirgaleev, 2016: 91; Почекаев, 2016: 122), while broader syntheses situate the Horde more explicitly within Islamic imperial connectivities (Favereau, 2021: 69). This work is valuable insofar as it resists equating elite

<sup>1</sup> Арсланов, А. М. Торгово-экономические связи Улуса Джучи (Золотой Орды) со странами Запада (вторая половина XIII–XIV вв.). Автореф. дис. ... канд. ист. наук. Казань 2015, с. 11;

conversion with social transformation. However, built evidence still needs to be interpreted through the lens of authority: the presence of institutions tells us that Islamic infrastructures existed, but not automatically how they mediated between state policies, jurists, and local communities (Mirgaleev, 2016: 96).

Despite these advances, fewer accounts systematically compare how different configurations of authority operated across successive reigns within the Horde. The present study therefore treats Islamization as a sequence of authority settlements - always partial, negotiated, and reversible in which rulers could shift their reliance among jurists, Sufi networks, and inherited normative orders. This comparative focus helps explain why certain arrangements supported cohesion while others generated frictions between formal norms and local practice.

Analytically, a “model of religious authority” is defined here by three dimensions. Normative reference: which norms are invoked as binding (Sharia, customary law, Chinggisid political norms, or hybrid forms). Institutional carriers: which actors and institutions are empowered to articulate and transmit the norms (jurists and courts; Sufi shaykhs and lodges; rulers and administrative agents; or combinations). Modes of compliance: whether normativity is pursued primarily through coercive enforcement, distributive patronage, reputational mechanisms, or ethical cultivation. Mapping these dimensions helps clarify why two periods that are both “Islamic” at the level of elite identification can differ sharply in their social reach.

Framed in this way, Islamization becomes an institutional problem as much as a theological one: it concerns how Islamic normativity is carried into social life and how it competes with, accommodates, or reorders existing norms. This framing also reduces the temptation to read later legal-institutional forms back into earlier periods. A ruler’s piety or legal rhetoric matters, but its social effects depend on the authority infrastructures available to translate rhetoric into practice.

A recurring theme across these literatures is legal pluralism. Even when khans endorsed Islamic norms, Sharia rarely operated as an exclusive system. It interacted with steppe customary regulation and with Chinggisid political norms that continued to structure coercion, taxation, and adjudication. This matters analytically because the “degree” of Islamization cannot be inferred from legal rhetoric alone: the same khanate may display Hanafi legal discourse at court while relying on customary procedures in peripheral uluses, especially where mobility and lineage politics constrain bureaucratic reach (Измайлов, 2012: 104; Sadibekov, 2007: 31). Treating Islamization as authority formation therefore requires tracking not only the presence of jurists, but also the institutional channels through which legal normativity could be made practically binding.

Sufi orders appear here not as a mere “mystical add-on” to Islamic law, but as mobile institutional frameworks that could travel with populations. In steppe and semi-steppe environments, wandering shaykhs, interconnected lodge systems, shrine-centered devotional practices, and moral instruction in local idioms provided replicable ways to build shared recognition and allegiance without deep or intrusive state administration. In some works of the specialists, this intermediary role is crucial for understanding how Islam becomes socially operative beyond the conversion of elites, while Trimingham’s typology helps explain how tariqas could persist as durable communities that tied courtly patronage to local moral economies (Trimingham, 1989: 48).

Finally, the present article uses Berke, Uzbek, and Janibek as analytically convenient “moments” in which different balances between law, mediation, and political organization

become visible. This is not meant to imply that each reign is uniform across space or that other rulers were unimportant. Rather, the periodization is a heuristic device for comparing configurations of authority: Berke highlights the possibilities and limits of courtly conversion; Uzbek illustrates mediated integration as a state-building strategy; and Janibek foregrounds the promises and risks of stronger juridical institutionalization (Сафарғалиев, 1960: 49; Favereau, 2021: 67).

## **Materials and Methods**

This study uses a qualitative historical comparative design based on textual and historiographical analysis. It draws on narrative compilations and chronicles commonly used in Golden Horde studies alongside modern research on Jochid governance, legal pluralism, and Sufi institutions (Сафарғалиев, 1960: 84).

The analysis proceeds in three steps. First, it reconstructs for each reign the dominant “authority package”: the mix of political-administrative mechanisms, juridical actors and claims, and Sufi-mediated institutions through which religious legitimacy was produced. Second, it evaluates the likely social reach of that package by asking how it could travel beyond the court through patronage, education, ritual affiliation, and dispute settlement. Third, it compares the three reigns to identify shifts in the locus of authority and their implications for the social embedding of Islam.

A hermeneutical approach is used to interpret how sources frame legitimacy, law, and religious practice, recognizing that narrative materials encode ideological claims rather than transparent reportage. The method therefore focuses less on extracting “facts” in isolation and more on identifying patterned representations of authority (e.g., the invocation of Sharia, the moral portrayal of rulers, the prominence of shaykhs and scholars, and the language of piety and reform).

Two limitations should be noted. The article does not attempt a comprehensive regional survey across the ulus, and it does not treat material culture as a direct proxy for belief. Instead, it uses institutional presence and reported patronage patterns as indicators of shifting authority relations, while acknowledging unevenness and local variation across urban centers and mobile populations.

To operationalize the comparison, the analysis treats reported instances of patronage, appointment, and institutional sponsorship as “authority signals.” These include: references to qadis and courts; the presence of endowed learning and ritual spaces; narratives of shaykh–ruler interaction; and claims about the enforcement of Sharia norms. The goal is not to produce a quantitative index, but to identify recurring patterns through which sources describe the production of legitimacy and norm compliance.

In operational terms, the study distinguishes between claims to normative authority (how sources describe Islamic rule, Sharia, or saintly charisma) and authority infrastructures (the institutions that make such claims actionable). This distinction helps prevent the common slippage between the existence of Islamic vocabulary and the social embedding of Islamic practice. The analysis therefore reads narrative and historiographical sources “against the grain,” asking what kinds of actors and institutions are presupposed when a text portrays a khan as a Muslim ruler or as an enforcer of Sharia.

For coding purposes, the article treats the following as recurring authority signals that can be compared across reigns and regions:

- patronage of jurists and educational institutions (appointments, court scholars, madrasas, juridical language);
- Sufi mediation (tariqa affiliations, lodges/khanakas, shrine patronage, saintly genealogies, vernacular ethical instruction);
- public markers of Islamic presence (mosques, cemeteries, architectural patronage and urban religious space);
- explicit negotiations with non-Islamic or extra-juridical norms (customary law, steppe political practice, and pragmatic accommodations).

## Analysis

### 1. Berke Khan: elite conversion and courtly patronage

Berke Khan is often presented as the first major Jochid ruler to align the Horde decisively with the Islamic world. This alignment had geopolitical consequences (especially in the context of relations with neighbouring powers) and it also created new possibilities for legitimating Jochid rule through Islamic idioms. Yet the social meaning of this shift depends on whether Islam was embedded beyond the court. The evidence most strongly supports an early configuration in which Islam functioned primarily as elite affiliation and diplomatic resource.

At this stage, the khan's patronage could attract Muslim scholars and Sufi figures connected to Central Asian urban centres. Such figures could provide an "Islamic language" of rulership moral exemplarity, justice, and pious sponsorship without necessarily generating durable institutions capable of regulating everyday life in mobile constituencies. This matters because in steppe polities authority does not flow only through centralized administration; it is negotiated through dispersed leadership structures and the practical management of conflicts and alliances.

Historiographical reconstructions emphasise continuity in political structures: Chinggisid governance and Turkic customary norms retained significant regulatory weight during this period (Сафаралиев, 1960: 55). In such a setting, Islamic normativity could circulate as a legitimating vocabulary, but it would compete with other normative orders that already organized taxation, arbitration, and military obligations. Islamization here is therefore best described as "symbolic patronage" rather than "institutional consolidation."

The Kubrawiyya is frequently associated with early courtly Islamization in the Jochid realm. As an urban-linked Sufi tradition, it could provide recognized spiritual genealogy and learned prestige, particularly valuable at court. However, the structural limitation of such a model is social reach: authority anchored in courtly and urban milieus is less capable of mediating Islamic norms into dispersed steppe constituencies. Where mediation is thin, Islamic symbols can remain detached from the everyday governance of disputes, ritual life, and ethical discipline.

Accordingly, Berke's reign illustrates a first authority configuration: the khan's adoption of Islamic identity is significant, but it does not yet imply a thick institutional ecology of Sharia courts, endowed religious infrastructures, and wide Sufi-mediated communal networks. This configuration establishes key precedents – especially the possibility of Islamic legitimacy for

Jochid rule – while leaving open the question of how Islam could become socially embedded across the ulus.

A key feature of the Berke configuration is that the primary arena of Islamization is the court. The khan's Islamic identity could be amplified by foreign-policy positioning and by engagement with Muslim polities and mercantile networks. In such contexts, Islam operates as a language of alliance and moral distinction. Yet, because mobile constituencies were not governed through dense bureaucratic penetration, court Islamization did not automatically reorganize the everyday normative order of the steppe. The authority problem remains: who mediates Islamic norms into local arbitration and communal practice, and with what institutional resources?

From this angle, Berke's Islamization can be read as a court-centered legitimacy project that operates through diplomatic alignment and selective patronage rather than through systemic juridical change. Sources that emphasize Berke's Muslim identity tend to foreground his position within wider Islamic geopolitics, but they provide thinner evidence for the routine regulation of steppe social life through Sharia. The likely outcome is an authority pattern in which Islamic norms function as a prestige language at the centre, while customary adjudication and Chinggisid political practice continue to organize conflict management in the peripheries (Сафарғалиев, 1960: 85; Тизенгаузен, 1884: 99).

## **2. Uzbek Khan: mediated integration through Sufi networks and managed pluralism**

Uzbek Khan's reign is widely regarded as a decisive stage in Horde Islamization because Islam gained a more systematic role in governance and public legitimation. The distinctive feature of this stage, however, is not simple "legalization" of rule. Rather, it is the emergence of a mediated settlement in which Islamic norms were promoted while legal pluralism and steppe social structures were managed rather than abolished.

On the political plane, Uzbek Khan's sponsorship of Islamic identity strengthened imperial connectivity to wider Muslim circuits of learning and legitimacy. In practice, such connectivity could be expressed through the patronage of mosques, learning, and ritual specialists, and by presenting the khanate as operating within the broader Sunni ecumene. Yet the success of this policy depended on translation mechanisms. In the ulus, authority was not produced exclusively through centralized courts; it relied on informal leadership, tribal structures, and moral economies. Sufi institutions could operate as mediators precisely because they combined portable practices with charismatic authority and communal discipline (Kutlu, 2012: 130).

The Yassawiyya, in particular, is often described as culturally resonant within Turkic contexts because its ethical instruction and vernacular orientation allowed Islamic concepts to be integrated without dismantling existing social idioms (Köprülü, 2006: 121; Kutlu, 2012: 131). In authority terms, the Yassawiyya provided a bridge between state-level Islamic legitimacy and local moral life: it offered a repertoire of practices, lineages, and ethical expectations through which Islam could be internalized as a lived norm rather than only a courtly symbol. Such mediation is especially consequential where populations are mobile and where political authority cannot rely solely on fixed bureaucratic infrastructures.

Importantly, mediated integration does not mean the absence of law. Uzbek Khan's policies can be read as attempting to expand Islamic normativity while avoiding overreach. Juridical authority (within the Hanafi-Maturidi tradition) could be patronized and used selectively, especially in urban centres and administrative settings, while customary law and

local arbitration continued to structure many disputes. Legal pluralism thus persisted, but its balance could shift: Sharia became more visible in public legitimation and in certain institutional settings without necessarily becoming the exclusive normative order.

This constellation of factors helps account for why the Uzbek period is frequently characterized as comparatively stable. In contexts where Sufi forms of mediation retained their institutional strength, religious authority could be reproduced and transmitted through trust-based ties, vernacular moral instruction, and practices of communal affiliation, thereby mitigating the likelihood that formal legal norms would be experienced as external, unfamiliar, or merely coercive. On this reading, Uzbek Khan's Islamization is most accurately conceptualized as a form of "mediated institutionalization": a synthesis of political endorsement with culturally flexible networks capable of translating normative commitments into locally intelligible social practice and of sustaining ethical discipline over time.

In the Uzbek configuration, this authority problem is addressed more directly. Sufi mediation expands the channels through which Islamic identity becomes locally meaningful: initiation lineages, ethical teaching, ritual repertoires, and reputational authority create forms of belonging that travel with mobile communities. At the same time, state patronage can stabilize these channels by supporting endowed infrastructures in urban nodes – settings in which juridical and educational institutions are more viable. The resulting system is not fully centralized, but it is more densely mediated: Islamization gains depth because multiple carriers (political, juridical, and Sufi) reinforce one another rather than operating in isolation.

This configuration reflects a form of mediated Islamization in which Sufi networks, juridical institutions, and political authority reinforce one another rather than functioning independently (Khalid, 2007: 354).

Material and spatial indicators are consistent with this mediated integration. Urban growth and architectural patronage under Uzbek Khan increased the visibility of Islam in public space, particularly in major centres associated with khanate authority. Archaeological work on Golden Horde cities underscores that mosques, cemeteries, and related institutions can be read as evidence of expanding Islamic infrastructures, while studies of mosque decorum and regional variation caution against assuming uniformity across the ulus (Федоров–Давыдов, 2003: 68; Kançal-Ferrari, 2018: 202). Read together with institutional analyses of administrative incorporation, these findings suggest a pragmatic state-building package: strengthen Islamic public presence, connect the court to Hanafi learning, and rely on culturally resonant Sufi mediation to translate norms into steppe social idioms (Еропов, 1985: 112; Mirgaleev, 2016: 91; Hasanov, 2025: 126; Почекаев, 2016: 119).

### **3. Janibek Khan: reconfiguration toward Sharia-centered institutional authority**

Janibek Khan's reign is frequently described as a period of stronger commitment to Sharia and the authority of jurists. In principle, legal institutionalization can deepen Islamization by establishing predictable norms, courts, and scholarly infrastructures. In practice, in a pluralistic steppe polity, legal expansion creates a coordination problem: law becomes socially effective only when it is mediated, internalized, and seen as legitimate across diverse constituencies.

Legal-centered scholarship highlights that even where rulers promoted Sharia, implementation remained uneven and selective (Измайлов, 2012: 106; Мажорина, 2014: 164). This unevenness reflects the layered normative environment of the ulus, in which customary law and inherited administrative practices remained functional. Attempts to

privilege Sharia as the dominant language of governance could therefore generate friction if they outpaced the capacity of institutions to translate legal norms into everyday practice.

From the perspective of religious authority, Janibek's reconfiguration can be framed as a shift in the locus of legitimacy from a settlement in which Sufi mediation and managed pluralism buffered legal authority, toward greater reliance on jurists and formal norms. This shift does not imply that Sufi networks disappeared, but it suggests that their mediating role could be reduced in the state's legitimation strategy. In turn, jurists and courts could become more prominent as symbols of "proper" Islamic governance.

The potential consequence is a weakening of informal channels that previously linked imperial authority with local communities. Where mediation is diminished, Sharia-centered governance risks becoming administratively visible yet socially thin: its norms may be invoked in elite and urban contexts while remaining contested, ignored, or selectively adapted elsewhere (Sadibekov, 2007: 29). In such conditions, legal formalization can produce clarity for the state but ambivalence for local actors whose normative expectations are shaped by customary orders, kinship-based structures, and mobile social organization.

Janibek's reign therefore illustrates a third configuration: "institutional legal consolidation" pursued in a context where the integrative capacity of mediation may have been less robust than in the Uzbek period. This configuration is analytically important because it shows that increasing formal Islamic governance does not automatically increase social cohesion; the outcome depends on whether juridical authority is accompanied by credible, culturally resonant mediating institutions.

The Janibek configuration illustrates the tension that can arise when the balance shifts toward juridical authority. Legal consolidation promises uniformity, but uniformity is difficult to achieve across a polity that spans cities, frontier zones, and steppe corridors. If juridical authority is perceived as closely aligned with the centre and insufficiently mediated into local moral economies, it can provoke strategic compliance (invoked when advantageous) rather than deep internalization. The analysis therefore treats Janibek's period not as "more Islamic" in a simple sense, but as differently Islamic: it privileges a distinct technology of authority with distinct risks.

The authority trade-off becomes clearer if Janibek's legalism is placed against the baseline of managed pluralism. Where customary law remained socially authoritative, stronger juridical expectations could be experienced as external or "courtly," especially if enforcement depended on urban institutions and sedentary specialists. Legal pluralism therefore does not disappear; it becomes more politicized, because competing normative registers are now linked to competing claims about who may legitimately speak for Islam. In such contexts, Sharia-centered institutionalization may deepen Islamic governance in some locales while simultaneously eroding the integrative capacity of informal religious networks elsewhere (Еропов, 1985: 115; Sadibekov, 2007: 27).

#### **4. Comparative synthesis: three authority configurations**

Comparing these reigns suggests that the key variable in Golden Horde Islamization is not simply the ruler's confessional stance, but the institutional distribution of religious authority. Berke's period is marked by elite-symbolic Islamization with limited institutional depth; Uzbek's by mediated integration combining Sufi networks and selective legal patronage; and Janibek's by a tilt toward Sharia-centered consolidation that risked outpacing mediation. The

comparative implication is that Islamization in pluralistic steppe polities is best understood as a sequence of negotiated authority settlements rather than a uniform transition.

Seen in this way, conversion functions as an enabling condition rather than a sufficient cause. It opens a space for Islamic idioms of legitimacy, but whether those idioms become socially durable depends on the institutions that carry them. Sufi networks and juridical infrastructures represent different modes of carrying: the first emphasizes ethical translation and affiliation; the second emphasizes normative standardization and adjudication. Political authority can combine these modes, but it must also manage the continued operation of customary norms and administrative practices that remain effective in steppe contexts.

### **5. Authority infrastructures across space: court, city, and steppe**

The three configurations also imply different spatial logics. In the court and major urban centres, juridical and educational institutions can be more visible: scholars can gather, courts can operate with more regularity, and endowed spaces can anchor teaching and ritual. In the steppe, where populations are more dispersed and mobility is a structural condition, authority tends to rely more heavily on portable and relational mechanisms – personal leadership, reputational bonds, and institutions that can travel (including Sufi lineages and itinerant teaching).

Berke's symbolic patronage Islamization is concentrated at court and in elite circles, with limited evidence of dense mediation into steppe society. Uzbek's mediated integration strengthens the bridge between spaces: Islamic identity is supported at the centre while Sufi networks provide an interface with local communities. Janibek's legal consolidation tends to emphasize the urban-administrative end of the spectrum. Where this emphasis is not matched by strong mediating institutions, the centre – periphery interface can become fragile.

This spatial framing helps avoid an all-or-nothing measurement of Islamization. The same polity can display different degrees and modes of Islamization in different spaces, and rulers may calibrate authority strategies accordingly. The analytical question is therefore how authority carriers connect (or fail to connect) these spaces into a coherent normative order.

The spatial contrast between court, city, and steppe also illuminates how different authority models could coexist without direct contradiction. Jurists, courts, and educational institutions were typically node-bound: they concentrated in urban centres such as Sarai and regional towns, where literate administration, stable patronage, and settled audiences enabled routine adjudication and teaching. By contrast, Sufi mediation was both node-bound and networked. Lodges, shrines, and burial sites provided local anchors, yet authority could also travel through itinerant preaching, disciple chains, and portable ritual repertoires. In practice, this meant that a legalist turn could deepen Islamization in cities while leaving the steppe governed through negotiated pluralism. Conversely, a Sufi-mediated strategy could widen the social reach of Islamic ethics in the countryside even when formal courts remained thin. Seen this way, Islamization is not a single scalar process, but a patterned distribution of infrastructures across space. Any assessment must therefore specify which spaces are being measured (court, urban nodes, or pastoral peripheries) and which mechanisms connect them (taxation and patronage, pilgrimage and shrine veneration, or the movement of specialists) (Федоров–Давыдов, 2003: 45; Kançal-Ferrari, 2018: 192).

## Results

Islamization as negotiation between law, mediation, and political organization. The Golden Horde case clarifies why “Islamization” is a misleadingly singular term. What changes historically is the configuration of authority through which Islamic normativity becomes actionable. Three analytical claims follow. Juridical authority and political authority do not map neatly onto one another. Sharia can be endorsed by rulers without being uniformly enforceable, and the presence of jurists or courts does not guarantee social embedding. Legal pluralism is therefore not a residual anomaly but a structural condition in steppe empires, where multiple normative vocabularies remain operational. The key question is not whether pluralism exists, but how rulers and religious actors manage it through selective patronage, negotiated adjudication, or the tolerance of parallel normative domains (Измайлов, 2012: 101). Second, Sufi mediation should be treated as an institutional technology of translation. In societies where formal administrative penetration is limited and social order relies on personal bonds, Sufi networks can provide portable institutions lodges, lineages, ritual repertoires, and moral exemplars that render Islamic normativity socially meaningful. Such networks also create reputational economies: affiliation can signal moral standing, while shaykhs can function as brokers between rulers and communities.

The Yassawiyya’s historical significance lies less in doctrinal novelty than in its capacity to align Islamic ethics with Turkic social idioms, thereby expanding the social reach of Islam without demanding immediate juridical uniformity (Köprülü, 2006: 120; Kutlu, 2012: 129; Гасанов, 2026: 139). Where such mediation is strong, Islam can appear as a shared moral language that supports cohesion; where it is weak, legal norms can remain abstract or contested.

Third, the relationship between religion and political stability is contingent. Religion supports cohesion when it supplies widely recognized legitimacy and reduces transaction costs between centre and periphery. In the Uzbek configuration, mediated authority helped Islam function as a shared moral and symbolic framework across diverse communities. Where authority shifts toward formalization without sufficient mediation, legal claims can become sites of contestation rather than integration, especially under conditions of succession tension, regional diversity, and economic stress. Religious authority can therefore be stabilizing or destabilizing depending on its institutional ecology (Сафаргалиев, 1960: 49; Самбалгундев и др., 2013: 80).

These claims can be summarized as a transferable typology of Islamization as authority negotiation:

- Symbolic – patronage Islamization (elite conversion, limited institutional reach);
- Mediated integration (Sufi networks translating Islamic norms while legal pluralism is managed);
- Institutional – legal consolidation (expansion of juridical authority with risks if mediation weakens).

Applied comparatively, this typology suggests that the depth of Islamization depends less on confessional declarations than on the balance among jurists, Sufi mediators, and political-administrative structures.

A practical implication for Golden Horde historiography is that debates over “how Islamic” the khanate was should be reformulated into questions about which authority infrastructures

were operative in which spaces (court, city, steppe), and how these infrastructures interacted. This directs attention to patronage patterns, the social reach of educational and Sufi networks, and the negotiated coexistence of Sharia and customary norms, rather than to conversion as a single causal switch.

One advantage of an authority-centered approach is that it clarifies what is at stake in debates about the relative influence of jurists and Sufi shaykhs. These actors are not simply “competing religious groups”; they often represent different mechanisms of norm production and social control. Jurists provide standardized categories for adjudication and governance, which can be crucial for administrative coherence. Sufi shaykhs can provide moral discipline and community-making mechanisms that socialize norms in contexts where formal legal reach is limited. In many pre-modern settings, durable Islamization involves some settlement between these mechanisms rather than the outright triumph of one.

The Golden Horde case also suggests why later phases of legal institutionalization may not always translate into stronger cohesion. If legal authority becomes a primary marker of legitimacy, disputes over who controls legal interpretation (which jurists, which courts, which patronage networks) can become politically charged. Conversely, where mediation is robust, Islam can operate as a shared moral economy that reduces the salience of legal contestation by embedding norms in ethical practice and communal affiliation.

A further implication concerns the “transport” of authority. In mobile polities, authority is persuasive when it can circulate through interpersonal ties, ritual repertoires, and recognizable lineages, not only through fixed institutions. This helps explain why tariqa-based mediation could outperform purely legalist strategies in steppe settings: it offers portable forms of recognition (shaykh–disciple relations, shrine networks, vernacular didactic genres) that do not require dense bureaucracy. In this respect, Sufi mediation is less a rival to law than a mechanism that can render legal and ethical norms socially intelligible, thereby widening the audience for juridical claims (Köprülü, 2006: 119; Trimingham, 1989: 46; Федоров–Давыдов, 2001: 112; Гасанов, 2025: 59).

The analysis is necessarily constrained by the unevenness of the source record. Courtly narratives and later compilations tend to overrepresent elite viewpoints, while archaeological indicators of Islamic presence can show institutional expansion without directly revealing how norms were practiced or contested in everyday life. Future work can sharpen the typology by pairing regional case studies with material-culture datasets (urban religious space, funerary practices, architectural patronage) and with closer attention to how legal pluralism was administered on the ground. Such a programme would complement existing institutional reconstructions and help specify where, and for whom, the balance among jurists, Sufi mediators, and khanate governance was most consequential (Федоров–Давыдов, 2003: 67; Kançal-Ferrari, 2018: 200).

A complementary way to read the three models is through the policy instruments that make religious authority operational. In a Chinggisid polity, endorsing Sharia or sponsoring jurists was not only a confessional gesture; it could also standardize transactions in urban nodes (marriage, inheritance, commercial disputes) and provide a recognizable grammar of legitimacy for diplomacy and taxation. Yet juridical authority is costly to extend: it requires literate personnel, institutions, and a degree of social trust in adjudicators. Sufi networks, by contrast, can supply trust and recognition through personal ties and ritual repertoires that

travel, lowering the social friction of norm adoption, but they can also become alternative centres of loyalty if not integrated into state strategies. The Uzbek configuration can therefore be interpreted as a relatively successful equilibrium: legal discourse and public institutions expand, while mediation provides cultural translation and stabilizes compliance. The later turn toward heavier legal institutionalization may deepen normative clarity in some spaces but risks brittleness where mediation weakens and plural norms remain authoritative (Измайлов, 2012: 104; Favereau, 2021: 68).

### Conclusions

This article has argued that Islamization in the Golden Horde is best understood as a process of religious-authority formation. Across the reigns of Berke Khan, Uzbek Khan, and Janibek Khan, the locus of authority moved among elite patronage, Sufi-mediated translation, and Sharia-centered institutionalization. The comparative record suggests that Islam became socially durable when Islamic normativity was embedded through institutions capable of mediation between law, spirituality, and existing normative orders. Beyond the Golden Horde, the typology proposed here offers a comparative lens for other pluralistic and post-imperial settings in which rulers sought Islamic legitimacy while governing populations with strong customary repertoires. It redirects attention from conversion narratives to the infrastructures that make religious authority durable: courts and educational institutions, Sufi networks and ritual spaces, and the fiscal and patronage mechanisms that connect specialists to communities. Applied comparatively, the approach suggests two testable expectations. First, legal consolidation is most likely to widen everyday practice where administrative penetration and trusted local intermediaries exist; where they do not, it risks remaining a courtly project. Second, mediated integration can generate cohesion by translating norms into local idioms, but its political utility depends on how rulers manage the relationship between mediators and jurists. Future research could refine these expectations by combining textual work with regional archaeological datasets and by tracing how particular networks (jurists, lodge affiliates, shrine patrons) intersected with trade routes and urbanization.

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#### ***Conflict of Interest.***

There is no conflict of interest related to this article.

#### ***Мүдделер қақтығысы.***

Мақалаға байланысты мүдде қақтығысы жоқ.

#### ***Конфликт интересов.***

Нет конфликта интересов, связанного со статьей.