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## Text and Performance in the Hikmät of Khoja Ahmad Yasawi

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### Abstract

In this chapter I discuss an aspect of Uyghur religious practice, which is at the time of writing under severe threat in the Uyghur homeland. I trace the patterns of circulation of sung hikmät, considering the ways that these Turkic language prayers link the Uyghur communities of Xinjiang to other parts of the Turkic speaking world through the circulation of written and published texts. I draw on recent debates on the relationship between orality and literacy, and consider how they help us to think about hikmät as they were performed in ritual contexts in Uyghur communities until very recently. I argue that oral and textual traditions of hikmät interact constantly and closely, creating "feedback loops" of transmission and performance. This perception impels a reassessment of our assumptions around projects of canonization of Central Asian performance traditions.

### Keywords

*hikmät, yasawi, text, performance, sufism, uyghur*

The sung performance of hikmät is firmly embedded in community life amongst the Turkic speaking Muslim Uyghurs of Central Asia. They play a part in rituals of mourning and healing, and as part of regular spiritual practice in both men's and women's gatherings. They are an integral part of what practitioners term *tärikät yol* (the way of the *tariqah* or Sufi orders). Hikmät are maintained and transmitted through performance traditions which are widespread across Uyghur communities, transmitted from master to apprentice (*ustaz-shagit*) in continuous chains of transmission through families or ritual specialists. The Uyghur tradition of reciting

hikmät is linked across space to traditions maintained in Uzbek communities in the Ferghana valley. All of these traditions are believed to derive from a collection of texts which are attributed to the medieval Central Asian Sufi sheikh, Khoja Ahmad Yasawi, whose shrine lies in the town of Turkistan in southern Kazakhstan. These texts, gathered together in collections named the *Diwan-i Hikmät*, circulated in manuscript form across Central Asia well into the twentieth century, and they have more recently circulated more widely in printed book form, released by publishers from Istanbul and Ankara to Kazan, Tashkent, Almaty and Ürümchi.

In this chapter I trace the patterns of circulation of hikmät, considering the ways that these Turkic language prayers link the Uyghur communities of Xinjiang to other parts of the Turkic speaking world. I draw on recent debates on the relationship between orality and literacy, and consider how they help us to think about hikmät as they are performed in ritual contexts in Uyghur communities today. I ask: to what extent, and in what ways do oral traditions of hikmät transmission and performance interact with the textual circulation of hikmät? It has traditionally been assumed that these oral practices were passed down through linear chains of transmission, taught directly by teacher to pupil. If written texts were involved, these were assumed to be equally localized, written by individual learners to serve as personal aide-memories (Light 2008). I challenge the common assumption that the hikmät performed in ritual contexts in Uyghur communities are isolated, locally maintained, discrete traditions. Instead, I argue that these Uyghur traditions of ritual performance encompass more diverse and complex forms of circulation which bridge the oral and textual spheres, and traverse international borders. Contemporary Uyghur reciters of hikmät are rooted in the oral tradition but they also engage actively with circulating texts, and they have re-appropriated the transnationally circulating print tradition and re-vivified it within the performative context of their rituals.

### Hikmät in a healing ritual

One afternoon in the late summer of 2012, twelve women including two büwi ritual specialists paid a visit a household in the Uyghur village of Yantaq in southern Xinjiang. Their purpose was to perform a khätmä ritual for Hurriyät Hajim, who was recovering from a back operation. This was her second operation, which had involved a long journey to the regional capital Ürümqi, several weeks in hospital, and

several months immobile in bed. Now she was slowly moving around the home on crutches and beginning to take back some of the burden of household chores. She was a devout woman who had completed the hajj a few years previously, but she did not regularly participate in khätmä rituals. On this occasion though, her sister-in-law who was a keen participant in khätmä had arranged a visit from the büwi ritual specialists. It was quite normal for villagers to combine recourse to institutional medical support with religious rituals to promote healing.

The bulk of the khätmä ritual was devoted to the repeated recitation of short Arabic prayers and supplications and short ayat from the Qur'an. After the completion of each cycle of prayers, the women blew noisily into a bowl of water, "Ffsheeuw!" This transferred the spiritual benefits and healing properties of the recitation into the water (ayat su), which would be carefully preserved by the sick woman and sipped regularly over the coming weeks. As the women recited the Arabic prayers, several "came to the boil" emotionally; they wept noisily and one began to hyperventilate. After around an hour the women moved into spoken Uyghur language prayers for Hurriyät Hajim's recovery. This section of the ritual concluded with a surah from the Qur'an, and finally a melodious and rhythmic hikmät, sung in unison by all the women present.

Aghzingning nimi qashqay, amin  
 Közum nuri öchkäy, amin  
 Tupraq ichigä köchkäy, amin  
 Wäyran qilur bu ölüm, amin

It will dry the saliva in your mouth  
 You will enter into the dust  
 Extinguish the light in your eyes  
 Be fearful of death

Qul Khoj' Ahmäd sän oyghan, amin  
 Yoqtur bu sözlär yalghan, amin

Tupraq ichidä qalghan, amin  
Wäyran qilur bu ölüm, amin

Awake Khoja Ahmad, slave of God  
These words are no lies  
You will be left in the dust  
Be fearful of death

Saraylirini buzup, amin  
Bostanlirini köchurup, amin  
Hämimizgä barawär, amin  
Kälgän ölüm ämäsmu, amin

Palaces will be destroyed  
Orchards moved away  
It is the same for us all  
Death will come, will it not?¹

The performance of this hikmät formed a great contrast to the overlapping wash of sound and the emotionally charged style of

the celebrated Central Asian saint who most likely lived in the late twelfth century.<sup>2</sup> Yasawi is popularly known throughout Central Asia as a Sufi sheikh and a mystic poet, author of the *Diwan-i Hikmät*. His shrine lies in the town now known as Turkistan in southern Kazakhstan. In the twelfth century this was the town of Yasi, the place where Yasawi is said to have studied under the probably mythical figure of Sheikh Arslan Baba. Yasawi's shrine has been an important religious center and pilgrimage site at least since the monumental mausoleum that still stands today was built on the orders of Amir Timur, founder of the Timurid dynasty, at the end of the fourteenth century. A smaller shrine to Arslan Baba lies outside the town.

Yasawi's biographical details are obscure and contested in the historical record, and



Fig. 1. Transcription of a hikmät, led by Nisakhan, Yantäq Village, 2012.

the preceding Arabic language recitation. The women's voices sounded out confident and strong, easily keeping together to a strong pulse. Although the lyrics reflected on the inevitability of death, and its power to erase all earthly things, the mood was not one of fear and apprehension, but was confident and calm. Singing the hikmät seemed to serve the purpose of bringing the women back down from the excitement of the khätmä, and providing resolution after the emotional upheavals they had experienced.

### Khoja Ahmad Yasawi

The reference in this sung text to Qul Khoj'Ahmad denotes Khoja Ahmad Yasawi,

even his relationship to the Yasawi Sufi order and what we know of its silsila or spiritual genealogy is not straightforward. The Yasawi as an organized Sufi order did not survive competition from the rival Central Asian Naqshbandi, which restricted Yasawi activities and later appropriated its legacy and subordinated it to Naqshbandi interests. But the Yasawi tradition has had lasting and far-reaching influence in the realm of popular religious practice and the shaping of communal identities across Central Asia, including contemporary Xinjiang. Its broader legacy includes many aspects of religious practice maintained today, including styles of zikr, aspects of shrine veneration, and narratives of the

spread of Islam in the region. It also had lasting influence on notions of communal identity. The Yasawi tradition's political and social role was not expressed through a Sufi order as such, but through intimate bonds with local communities. In this tradition of social organization, whole villages or nomadic communities were formally recognized as disciples of hereditary sheikhs linked with the Yasawi tradition, and they regarded their affiliation to such lineages as a central feature of their communal solidarity and identity (DeWeese 1996a, 1996b, 1999, 2006). Yasawi's shrine has historically and today served as a major pilgrimage destination for Central Asian Muslims. Hereditary sheikhs served as guardians of Yasawi's shrine and officiated over large-scale zikr rituals there, which continued until Stalin's purges of the 1930s (Privratsky 2001). Pilgrimage revived in the 1990s, and Muslims from across Central Asia began to visit the shrine in order to access the saint's miraculous powers. Popular versions of the *Diwan-i Hikmät* in Kazakh, Uzbek and Turkish languages were sold at the shrine, and oral stories about the life and miracles of Yasawi circulated and were retold at the shrine.

The *Diwan-i Hikmät* refers to manuscript collections of Turkic language Sufi mystic poetry attributed to Yasawi, which have circulated, historically and today, in multiple forms from Turkey to Xinjiang. The oldest manuscript collection is believed to date to the seventeenth century (Azmun 1994). There are significant divergences between different extant versions of the *Diwan-i Hikmät*, in terms of content, number of poems, as well as aspects of wording and style. Larger collections contain over a hundred hikmät, shorter collections include around thirty poems. They are identified with Yasawi through the inclusion of his name within the poem in the manner of Central Asian poetry. The name appears in different forms, primarily *Qul Khoj' Ahmad* (Ahmad, Servant of God),

or *Miskin Ahmad* (Poor Ahmad).

The opening series of hikmät in the written collections recount in highly formulaic fashion the life of Yasawi, listing his spiritual achievements in every year of his life verse by verse up to the age of 63 (the age of the Prophet at his death) after which he retires to an underground existence in a cave. A nineteenth manuscript collection of hikmät from Kashgar and one recorded performance from Turpan, as well as various versions published in Xinjiang, all adhere closely to this narrative structure. According to legend, Yasawi lived on for a total of 125 years. In popular belief, and in much of the relevant scholarship up to the late twentieth century, it was uncritically assumed that the *Diwan* was actually the work of Yasawi (de Weese 2006; 2011). But some hikmät are panegyrics, obviously written by Yasawi's followers; there are anachronistic references to Yasawi's tomb, and scholars have now generally accepted that the *Diwan* dates from after Yasawi's lifetime, and was likely composed by his disciples and later followers of the Yasawi tradition. Variations in the signature, the style of poetic meter, the type of Turkic Chagatay language used with its extensive inclusion of Persian vocabulary, and the late date of surviving manuscripts, all suggest that the *Diwan-i Hikmät* is a compilation of poetry post-dating Yasawi, and probably composed by multiple authors over a substantial period of time (Light 2008: 75).

### **Hikmät in circulation**

Traditions of hikmät as a living performance practice have been maintained in Xinjiang to the present day and they occur in diverse contexts. Ethnographers in the 1990s and early 2000s documented numerous groups performing hikmät in both women's and men's *hällqä-sohbät* gatherings in rural Uyghur communities right across the region (Liu 2010; Mijit 2012).<sup>3</sup> Some of these performances of hikmät, associated with rituals of Sufi groups based around

Kashgar, were absorbed into sections of the canonical musical repertoire of the Uyghurs, the Twelve Muqam, and recorded in twentieth century anthologies of Muqam poetry (Light 2008). Hikmät texts are also found embedded within the performances of dastan: sung tales of lovers, religious figures and warriors from the Central Asian narrative tradition, performed in bazaars and at shrines by acknowledged bards (dastanchi) who accompany their sung narratives on stringed instruments (Kadir 2010: 96). In terms of their lyric structure and content hikmät are also diverse. The repertoire overlaps with other sung forms such as monajat or mäshräp but there is an identifiable core style, with a step-wise melody descending to a sustained note corresponding to a single line of the text, syllabic delivery and strong pulse. As the translated texts show, they typically feature themes of death and judgment, and are often identified within the text by reference to the putative author, Khoja Ahmad Yasawi. Crucially, their performance should be affectively powerful, able to provoke weeping, and this affective force is especially centered on the long, sustained notes at phrase ends, and the thrilling timbre in which reciters deliver them.

The oral circulation of hikmät is not confined to Uyghur communities in Xinjiang. We know that hikmät are also sung as part of contemporary Sufi meetings for Uzbek men across the border in Uzbekistan's Ferghana valley. Pasilov and Ashirov describe a ritual they observed in 2004, noting that:

... at the end of every zikr they say in the manner of a sing-song or only sing the moral-ethical verses of Yassavi (d. 1162), Mashrab (d. 1711), Khazini, or Mazdub Namangoni, with the purpose to give moral forces to participants of the zikr (2007: 172).

Hikmät also form part of the contemporary practice of Uzbek women ritual specialists (otin) in Uzbekistan's Ferghana valley. We can trace these performance traditions back to the early twentieth century through the accounts of travelers and

early ethnographers. The Russian scholar Troitskaya described regular women's rituals taking place in Tashkent in the 1920s:

The Ishan-bu, wife of an ishan, recited in a loud voice the zikr qadiri (jahariyya) accompanied by her assistants Haifa and Otin, dressed in white. Every zikr ritual followed a precise structure, beginning with the first surah of the Quran and the salavat for Ghavsuli Agzam (praise for a Muslim scholar), followed by zikr based on the chorzarb (« four beat »), rhythmic repetition of the profession of faith, «La ilaha illa 'llah». Then the women dance in a circle to the poems of Mashrab and Ahmad Yasavi, before reciting from surah 112 to end the ritual (Troitskaya 1928, cited in Sultanova 2005).

The brief notes on style and meaning contained in these quotes highlight the similarities between practices in different parts of Central Asia across a period of over a century. The "moral force" noted by Pasilov and Ashirov parallels my description of the affective work done by reciting hikmät. The metric formula for zikr (chorzarb or four beats) noted by Troitskaya is also found among Uyghur groups. Charzarb describes the regular four beats of the recited declaration of faith which begins the zikr: LA - i - LA - ha - ILL - a'll - AH. This is followed by the duzarb (two beats): ILL - a'll - AH, and the gathering culminates with the yekzarb (one beat): the repeated exhalation of the syllable HU (Zhou 1999). We have even earlier explorer's accounts of listening to hikmät in the Uyghur region. The German explorer and archaeologist Albert von le Coq recorded a hikmät in Qarakhoja town near Turpan in 1904. He wrote that it probably derived from the region of West Turkestan, now the territory of contemporary Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, perhaps making the link to the shrine of Yasawi (Bellér-Hann 2000: 34). In fact, the patterns of circulation are more complex than he imagined.

Manuscript and more recently print versions of the Diwan-i Hikmät circulate still more widely, part of a rich tradition

of hagiographical Central Asian literature relating to Yasawi (De Weese 2006). In the Uyghur branch of this tradition, manuscript copies of the Diwan-i Hikmät were common. At least seventeen copies of the Diwan are held in the Ürumchi archive, and a nineteenth century manuscript from Kashgar resides in the archive in Lund<sup>4</sup>, suggesting that the Diwan was one of the most widely circulated texts in the region, after the Qur'an. Unofficially published collections of hikmät still circulated in Uyghur bazaars in the 2000s, and many men and women who participated in khätmä or hämqä-sohbät rituals kept their own notebooks in which they transcribed or copied versions of the hikmät that they wished to learn or remember.

The nineteenth century manuscript collected in Kashgar and preserved in the Lund archive provides a vivid example of pre-modern manuscript versions of the Diwan. This version adheres to the core narrative structure of the Diwan-i Hikmät, with its verse by verse description of the spiritual advances made by Yasawi in each year of his life. This manuscript version is steeped in concepts and terminology drawn from philosophical traditions of Sufism, and it represents the life story of Yasawi as a Sufi journey towards unity with the Divine. Ishq (love or passion for the divine) is a central concept in these verses, where

it is represented as key to the journey of the Sufi follower.

Bir subhdäm nida kälidi qulaghim  
Zikr et dedi zikri näytib yürdüim muna  
Ishqsizlarni kördüm ersä yolda qaldi  
Ol säbäbdin ishq dukkanin qurdum muna

One morning at dawn the Call came to my ears  
Remember God [recite zikr], it said, and I began to remember Him  
I saw those lacking in love left behind on the road [the Sufi path]  
For this reason I built the shop of love

On birimdä rähmät därya tolub tashti  
Allah dedim shäyitan mändin yiraq qashti  
Hay u häwäs ma'u mänlik turmay köchti  
On ikimdä bu sirlarni kördüm muna

At the age of eleven, my mercy brimmed over like the ocean  
I spoke the name of Allah and Satan fled far from me  
Ah worldly desires, together as one we pass them by without pausing  
At the age of twelve I saw these secrets ...

The emphasis on spiritual love and secret knowledge displayed in this text is notably lacking in the modern print tradition of Yasawi. In fact, there is a yawning gulf between the meanings ascribed to Yasawi and his poetry in the world of print and their meanings in the oral, performative tradition. Turkish scholars have shown great interest in Yasawi and the Diwan-i Hikmät since the early twentieth century, seeing in him a literary forefather of the Turks: the first known poet to have written in a Turkic language. Several versions of the Diwan derived from diverse sources from Central Asia have been published in Turkey, often with translations into modern Turkish (Azmun 1994). Much of this work fell into the Turkic nationalist framework established by the early twentieth century work of the influential scholar Mehmet Fuad Köprülü. Köprülü's life project was to establish a grand narrative of the shared

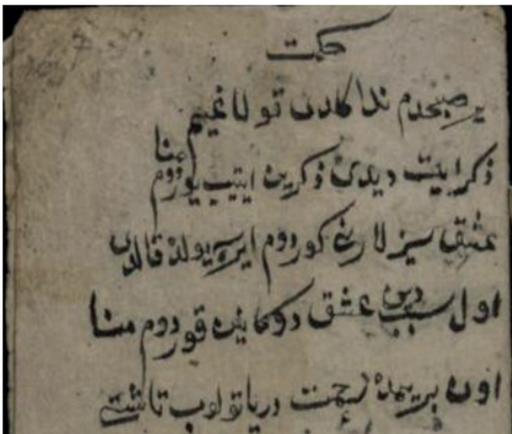


Fig.2. Opening lines of a nineteenth century manuscript copy of a hikmät.<sup>5</sup>

cultural heritage of the Turkic peoples, and he situated the roots of Anatolian literature in these early Central Asian traditions. In Köprülü's understanding, the *Diwan-i Hikmät* was a piece of Islamic missionary literature, which promoted a simplified form of Sufism to suit the simple needs of the Central Asian Turks. In this Turkic literary genealogy, Yasawi served as a precursor for the more sophisticated work of later Sufi poets such as Yunus Emre (Köprülü 2006).

The twentieth century brought a series of unlikely twists in this literary history. The figure of Yasawi also acquired symbolic power in the writings of the Jadidists, the Central Asian Muslim modernizers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, who depicted him as a nationalist and a proletarian, and even as a socialist poet. During the early Soviet period, Yasawi's name became linked politically and ideologically to the Jadidists, and when Stalin's persecution of the Jadidists began, Yasawi also fell out of favor and was officially labeled a feudal bourgeois and an apostle of reactionary dogma. Yasawi's reputation was subsequently revived in post-Soviet Central Asian scholarship, but in these re-readings the religious mysticism of the tradition was downplayed in favor of a strongly nationalist and religiously diluted interpretation better fitted to the political ideologies of the new Central Asian nations (Zarcone 2000).

Modern Uyghur scholars were also interested in Yasawi's hikmät. In 1984, not long after the end of the Cultural Revolution, an important and influential version of the *Diwan-i Hikmät*, edited by Nijat Mukhlis, appeared in the pioneering literary magazine *Bulaq*. It is remarkable that this edition, and all the subsequent published versions available in modern Uyghur translation, are not based on the living traditions of hikmät practiced in Uyghur communities, but on nineteenth

and twentieth century collections of hikmät texts previously published in Turkey. The 1985 *Bulaq* version is based on an 1879 Ottoman publication (Muxlis 1985; Kadir 2010: 96), while the most recent Uyghur published collection (Yessewi 2012) contains translations into modern Uyghur by Abdureshid Jelil Qorluq of 101 hikmät from various published versions of the *Diwan-i Hikmät* from Turkey and Uzbekistan. The Uyghur intellectuals who promoted Yasawi were much more interested in the Turkic nationalist, Jadidist vision of Yasawi forged in circulation between Ankara and Tashkent which portrayed Yasawi as literary forefather of the Turks, than they were in the oral traditions of the *tärikät yol* with its performative enactment of *huzn* being practiced right under their noses. However, this divergence of interpretation did not stop the followers of the *tärikät yol* from subsequently re-appropriating and re-vivifying the print tradition of the *Diwan-i Hikmät* within their performative ritual practice.

### **Text and performance**

If we want to understand the relationship between these textual and performance traditions of hikmät, it is instructive to consider the wider scholarship on literacy and orality. Ruth Finnegan cautions against the binary division of the world into "oral" and "literate" societies with fundamentally differing social and mental characteristics. For Finnegan (2014), this approach is underpinned by technological determinism, and it fails to grasp the diversity of ways in which different communications technologies (speech, writing systems, print or digital) develop in different historical circumstances. More recent studies generally accept that most literary performance traditions develop out of patterns of interaction between written texts and oral performance, effectively collapsing the opposition between these two modes of creativity (Novetzke 2015; Widdess 2015). As the early twentieth

century Uyghur scholar Mohammad Ali Damollah explains:

When reading, the greatest thing is the fact that one has to put one's heart and soul into it and read with all one's heart. If one does it only with one's eyes, little comes out of it. Many times, when someone's mind is somewhere else but his eyes are with the script, other words emerge from his mouth (Scharlipp 1998: 110-112).

Literacy in nineteenth century Xinjiang - or Altishahr as it is more appropriately termed in that period - was more common than the views of contemporary European travelers, and the prevalent narratives of the liberation of the region by the CCP might suggest (Bellér-Hann 2008). Community schools (*maktab*) supported by charity, shrines and mosques were widespread across the region, and they taught their pupils to read Qur'anic Arabic as well as Persian and East Turki (the precursor of modern Uyghur) texts. Madrasahs provided higher learning in the form of Arabic-based Islamic education. Mohammad Ali Damollah's comments immediately suggest two important things about reading (*oqumaq*) in the Uyghur tradition: a deep-rooted respect for literacy, and an assumption that reading generally meant reading aloud. Both of these understandings are linked broadly to Islamic norms, and they are confirmed in the Uyghur tradition of *hikmät*. Similarly, when discussing their rituals, the village women I worked with always spoke of "reading" *hikmät* (*hikmät oquymiz*) in the same way that they always read the Qur'an (*Qur'an oquymiz*) regardless of whether an actual text is present or whether the reading is sounded or silent; there is no separation in Uyghur, as there is in English, between "reading" and "reciting."

Rian Thum (2014) describes numerous contexts for the performance of the written word in early twentieth century Altishahr. Professional *dastanchi* storytellers recited poetry from written texts,

there were regular public reading of Turki romances and epics at barber shops, in the bazaar, or at *mäshräp* gatherings, and religious Arab and Persian texts were read daily at mosques. At the shrines of the Sufi saints, pilgrims listened to readings and purchased copies of *tazkirah* manuscripts that recounted the life of the saint. In many cases, the oral performance of these texts was highly musical.<sup>6</sup> Thum's account builds up a picture of texts whose primary purpose was to be activated in performative contexts and which were thoroughly embedded in social relations.

#### **"For this reason I entered the cave"**

In summer 2009, another group of women gathered in a family home in a small town near Turpan in eastern Xinjiang. They were led a woman named *Hädichäm*, who was given the title *Khälpät* (from the Arabic honorific title *Khalifa*). She sat on a spacious raised brick bed in the courtyard of the house, flanked by a small group of her followers. They were dressed formally in white headscarves and waistcoats over their dresses in the manner of older village women across the region. A small table was placed on the bed before them, covered with a tablecloth and laden with bowls of fresh and dried fruit, nuts, and tea, and *sangza*: crisp, fried strands of dough arranged in spirals and piled high on a platter. As always, these ritual practices intersect with forms of hospitality. *Hädichäm Khälpät* recited in a low-pitched, nasal style with a forceful, ringing delivery. She established an insistent rhythm, rocking slightly forwards and backwards, and slapping her knee to underline the regular duple beat. The other women began to rock in time with her. She sang a repeated five-line melody with a regular six measures per line, which descended consistently to the same sustained repeated note. Stylistically her performance was clearly related to the *hikmät* recited by the women in *Yantaq Village*. After the first verse, the women seated beside her began to recite the *zikr*.

As the song unfolded, their chant became gradually louder, a deep, noisy inhaling and exhaling: “ah - HUM - ah - - ah - HUM - ah - .” They continued to rock back and forth, but maintained a relatively restrained decorum, conscious of the camera.

Hädichäm Khälpät’s performance has a surprisingly close relationship with the textual tradition of the Diwan-i Hikmät. She began her hikmät, singing:

Äya dostlar häsbi halim bayan äyläy  
Shu säwäbtin häqtin qorqup ghargha kirdim<sup>7</sup>  
Chin därtlikte bu sözlärni bayan äyläy  
Shu säwäbtin häqtin qorqup ghargha kirdim

Oh friends I will tell you about my situation  
Thus I withdrew into the cave  
With painfilled words I tell my story  
Thus I withdrew into the cave

The core, repeated line of this verse, “For this reason I hid myself from others and entered the cave” (Shu säwäbtin häqtin

are quite different. The Sufi mysticism of the nineteenth century text has been replaced by an emphasis on daily prayer and the everyday duties of a pious Muslim. Hädichäm Khälpät’s performance is closely related to recent published collections of hikmät. She recites:

Ghar ichidä keche-kunduz taät qildim  
Neqli namaz oqup uni adät qildim  
Härnä japa chäksä anga taqät qildim  
Shu säwäbtin häqtin qorqup ghargha kirdim

In the cave I worshipped night and day  
I recited my daily prayers regularly  
If I felt weary I persevered  
Thus I withdrew into the cave

This oral rendition is a very close match with a 2012 collection which contains translations into modern Uyghur of hikmät from versions of the Diwan-i Hikmät previously published in Turkey and Uzbekistan (Yessewi 2012):

Fig. 3. Transcription of a hikmät recited by Hädichäm near Turpan 2009.

qorqup ghargha kirdim) is, as we have seen, an important recurring motif in the Diwan-i Hikmät denoting a key trope in the story of Yasawi’s life: his retreat from the world at the age of 63. This broad structuring theme is shared with the early manuscript version discussed above, but the religious sensibilities of this text

Ghar ichidä keche-kunduz taät qildim  
Tätäwwu namaz oqup uni adät qildim  
Härnä japa chäksä anga taqät qildim  
Ol säwäbtin häqtin qorqup ghargha kirdim

Hädichäm’s language is virtually identical with the print version, varying in some sections only where substitutes everyday

vocabulary for the more literary language of the published version, and adds refrains (hu-Allah) to fit the rhythm of the zikr. It seems evident that she has based her performance on the 2012 published text. As I noted above, this published text deviates considerably from the nineteenth century manuscript version from Kashgar which is so strongly imbued with Sufi ideals. In contrast, the 2012 print version is almost completely cleansed of esoteric themes, and portrays Yasawi's spiritual journey principally in terms of adopting the regular practice of a pious lifestyle. This shift in emphasis suggests its debt to the twentieth century literary history of Yasawi. It is fascinating that Hädichäm Khälpät has directly adapted the cleansed print version - co-opting the authority of the printed word - and re-inserted it back into a Sufi-inflected zikr ritual. It demonstrates that there is no simple opposition between tradition and modernity; these supposedly opposing poles are always in close conversation with each other, enabled by complex circuits of transmission involving manuscripts, print and performance.

### **Hikmät in the Uyghur diaspora**

The road from Almaty stretches out eastwards in a straight line all the way to the border town of Zharkent. In the Soviet period it was known by the Russian name of Panfilov, and Uyghurs name it Yärkänd using the Uyghur pronunciation. Long mountain ranges, branches of the Heaven Mountains, shadow the road on both sides. When we took this road in summer 2015 there were frequent police speed checks close to Almaty, but regulation faded as we headed further east towards the Xinjiang border and our driver accelerated to 130km/hour over the cracked and pitted road surface. As the gravel flew it became clear why so many cars on the road had cracked windscreens. At regular intervals I spotted small gravestones bearing the image of a young man. It took me a while to link the driving practices to the gravestones.

Closer to the border a gleaming new road was under construction, a project financed and implemented by the Chinese government. We pass by a newly built railway station, again constructed with Chinese expertise and money, anticipating greater cross-border economic activity impelled by China's Belt and Road Initiative. This economic stimulus was not overtly visible in Zharkent, which was still an old-style Central Asian town. The streets were laid out in a grid pattern; most of the houses were single story with sloping corrugated iron roofs and thick whitewashed walls, privately built and surrounded by small plots of land where people kept hens, sheep and noisy guard dogs. Cows and donkeys wandered untended down the town streets. The majority of the cars on the road were the tiny, rickety Soviet-era Lada, some of them carrying astonishing loads of everything from cut hay and melons to furniture.

Just outside Zharkent town lay Pänjim, a former Soviet kolkhoz collective farm (like the communes across the border in Xinjiang), now a "pure" (sap, mono-ethnic) Uyghur village. It boasted a small mosque that broadcast the azan five times daily, and two large wedding halls - one for summer weddings, one for winter - which seated up to 250 people. In this village lived a remarkable group of some twenty elderly Uyghur haji women. Most of them had arrived in Kazakhstan as children in the late 1950s during China's communization drive, fleeing persecution under the "four olds" campaign.

Since the opening of the border in the 1990s and the increase in trade between China and Kazakhstan many Uyghur families in this area had profited from the opportunities for trade and haulage. The area had seen a corresponding rise in religious piety. These elderly women living in a remote village accessed by a single-lane road deeply pitted by potholes, many

of them walking with some difficulty, were not one-off hajj; they had all been on the hajj at least three times. As I sat with them and asked about their pilgrimage experiences they shouted competitively across the room, “I’ve been four times!” “Me too!” “I’ve been six times!” They met weekly, taking turns to host the gathering, to perform a kind of neo-khätmä. Like the women’s groups in Xinjiang they wore white clothing and gathered around a tablecloth heavily laden with food, but theirs was a re-invention of the ritual. The familiar sequence of orally transmitted repeated short Arabic prayers had been replaced with reading from a published text: the Uyghur translation of the Qur’an. Gone was the musicality and emotional force of the khätmä as I had experienced it in Yantaq Village, replaced by a dutiful engagement with the textual content of the Qur’an. It was a striking change.

After reading the translated Qur’an, and some personal prayers offered to the host of that week’s gathering, Adiläm Hajim led the group singing a hikmät. This text was rather childlike - indeed one could imagine it being taught to young children - and its content and lyric structure was remote

from the verses of the Diwan-i Hikmät, although it included the signature Qul Khoj’Ahmad. Musically, with the low pitch, strong pulse, and descending melody, with extended melisma at end of the third line of each verse, it was clearly related to the group sung style of hikmät led by Nisakhan in Yantaq Village, which I described above.

Beshingdiki nimä digändä  
Taji döwläät digäymän  
Qolungdiki nimä digändä  
Äziz Muhämmät digäymän (häq Allah)

What is in your head, they say  
The kingdom of glory, I say  
What is in your hand, they say  
Beloved Muhammad, I say

Aghzingdä nimä digändä  
Kelimä shahadet digäymän  
Qolungdiki nimä digändä  
Heyri sahawät digäymän (äy Allah)

What is in your mouth, they say  
Surah Fatiha and the Shahadah, I say  
What is in your hand, they say  
Charity I say.<sup>8</sup>

The group’s leader Adiläm Hajim unusually for Uyghurs in Kazakhstan had retained the ability to read and write Uyghur in



Fig. 4. Uyghur women in Pänjim village, Kazakhstan, pause for refreshments in the middle of their neo-khätmä ritual, photo by the author.

the Arabic script as well as the Russian Cyrillic. When we asked her how she came to participate in khätmä rituals and recite hikmät she gave a familiar litany of loss and grief: the persecution of her family in the 1950s, the disruption and hardships of migration, the deaths of loved ones, and personal illness. Since the 1990s she had gone back to visit Ghulja several times, and while there she sought out women’s ritual gatherings. However, the zikr that Adiläm had adopted was a modified version, one that had been cleansed of excessive emotion: neither *ishq* nor *huzn* were manifest in their gatherings. Adiläm explained:

We used to recite Allah-hu. We would crawl on the floor and embrace and comfort each other and wish that the other’s wishes would come true, but now we’ve stopped doing these things. We said to each other if people see us it might be embarrassing. We were afraid. When you fully engage in zikr you can’t control yourself.

Adiläm’s words suggest the influence of reformist Islam on popular attitudes to religious practice in this area. They had led this group of women to reject the embodied, emotionally saturated styles of religious practice that Adiläm remembered from her youth, and to replace them with practices that emphasized textual meanings and emotional restraint. Even in the lyrics of the hikmät they recited, the emphasis was fully on the centrality of reading the Qur’an in religious practice:

Qur’an tängrim hädisi  
 Uchmaq bolur rolchisi  
 Israät otäp kuchisi  
 Chiraq bolur bu Qur’an

The Qur’an is God’s story  
 It is a role model for all  
 Its followers offer prayers  
 The Qur’an is a light

Qul Khoj’ Ahmad ghapilmän  
 Ghapil kishini tonurmän  
 Mundin artuq bähtim yoq

Oqur bolsa bu Qur’an

Poor foolish Khoja Ahmed  
 know that foolishperson  
 have no other pleasure  
 Beside reading the Qur’an

Here again, the name of Qul Khoja Ahmad makes a slightly incongruous appearance - a passing nod to forgotten Sufi traditions in this otherwise fully revivalist performance. This kind of close engagement with the recited Qur’an within the Uyghur Islamic revival, is something I will explore more fully in the next chapter.

During her visits to Ghulja, Adiläm also collected hikmät texts. She brought to the gathering a lined schoolchild’s notebook, with a series of prayers and hikmät neatly copied in the Uyghur Arabic script. “We read hikmät; we copy them from other people’s books, and we learn and recite them,” she said. Just as we found in Hädichäm Khälpät’s performance in Turpan, one hikmät copied in Adiläm’s book was an almost identical match to the print version of the Diwan recently published in Xinjiang (Yessewi 2012: no.63). Just a few subtle changes suggested that Adiläm had not copied it directly from the published text, and that this was a text which had been adapted for oral performance: the addition of the name of Allah at line endings, a few letters altered.

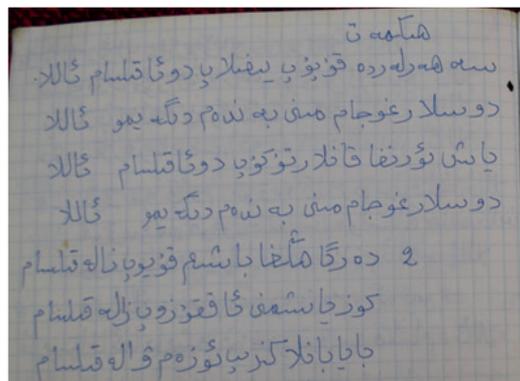


Fig. 5. Page from Adiläm’s notebook, containing the lyrics of a hikmät.

Sähärlärdä qopup yighlap du'a qilsam Allah  
Dostlar khojam meni bändäm digäymu Allah  
Yash ornigha qanlar tukup du'a qilsam Allah  
Dostlar khojam meni bändäm digäymu Allah

I rise at dawn and pray in tears  
The Khoja is my companion  
Weeping tears of blood I pray  
The Khoja is my companion

This correspondence between Adiläm's version and the published version offers more evidence of the close relationship between local traditions of copying and performance, and the textual tradition that has travelled from Central Asia to Turkey and back. It seems evident that Adiläm has copied this hikmät from the notebook of another reciter in Ghulja who has taken a published text and adapted it for performance. Here again we find circulation and cross-fertilization between the textual and oral traditions, and we find the influence of revivalist approaches to religious practice: the emphasis on everyday pious practices of daily prayer and fasting blending seamlessly with references to the companionship of the saint.

### **Circuits of transmission**

It is interesting to consider this kind of movement from published texts back into locally maintained traditions of ritual performance in the light of existing literature on the twentieth century canonization of Uyghur literary and musical traditions (Harris 2008; Light 2008). Nathan Light writes extensively of the work of twentieth century Uyghur scholars who edited and revised the lyrics used by folk performers of the Twelve Muqam, both for publication and for use in stage performances by the new professional troupes. These lyrics were drawn from the Central Asian poetic tradition of writers including Ali Shir Nawa'i and Baba Rahim Mashrab: a tradition soaked in Sufi imagery and ideals, and one that frequently intersects with ritual performance practices

(Kadir 2010; Harris 2017). However, the process of oral transmission and adapting these lyrics to performance meant that there was sometimes a considerable gap between published and sung versions of these texts. Light highlights the anxieties of those twentieth century Uyghur scholars as they considered the international scholarly reception of the Muqam texts they intended to publish. How could they reveal to the world that the poetic texts as sung in their classical Uyghur tradition deviated from published versions based on other strands of the Central Asian literary tradition?

The dominant perspective among institutionally trained 'experts' was that illiterate 'folk' performers had preserved the muqam tradition, but it was time to take it off their hands and return it to the entire Uyghur people, to whom it rightfully belonged. In the process the distortions introduced by the folk performers should be set right. The muqam tradition was thus being treated much like a manuscript tradition: scholars thought of it as fragile and easily lost through poor copying and limited distribution. Thus it was in need of editing to correct flaws and then publication of an authoritative edition to prevent further losses. (Light 2008: 225)

As I discussed at the beginning of this chapter, this notion of a "correct" or "authentic" version of an early historical text is widely acknowledged to be deeply problematic. Much of the poetry associated with the Twelve Muqam tradition is attributed to poets for whom we have no single authoritative source for their writing. In the texts attributed to Yasawi, as we have seen, multiple versions circulate transnationally and they respond to the social and political climate in which they were adapted and performed. The historical evidence suggests that it is highly unlikely that their putative author had anything to do with them other than serve as inspiration for their creation, and indeed for their ongoing performance and re-creation.

What can the kind of ethnographic

research I have described contribute to our understanding of the ways in which the oral circulation of hikmät interacts with the textual circulation of the *Diwan-i Hikmät*? Nathan Light argues that the oral tradition of hikmät differs profoundly from the written tradition ascribed to Yasawi. For him, the hikmät now found in the verses of the *Muqam* were more likely part of a discrete oral tradition maintained by Sufi groups in Kashgar, and quite unrelated to the published textual tradition of the *Diwan-i Hikmät* (Light 2008: 80). Other researchers diverge from Light's assessment of a gulf between oral and text traditions. Drawing on her extensive field research around the region, Uyghur ethnographer Aynur Kadir proposes a much more flexible Yasawi-based tradition. Hikmät occupy such a large percentage of the Uyghur tradition of recited poetry, she argues, obviously they cannot all be attributed to one author. The early tradition established by followers of Yasawi formed the basis of a poetic style that continues to be extended and enriched by numerous anonymous poets whose creative practice has been subsumed under the name of Yasawi (Kadir 2010: 97).

This view of a more diverse and flexible tradition is consistent with Thum's (2014) discussion of "community authorship" and "textual drift" in the Uyghur *tazkirah* manuscript tradition. Thum suggests that through processes of copying - as copyists over a period of centuries edited, abbreviated, corrected names, misread, and added new praise sections into their texts - a great diversity of versions of the *tazkirah* manuscripts accumulated. This process rendered these texts flexible, and able to change over time to reflect the changing needs of a community of readers. I argue that in order to fully understand these historical processes of "textual drift" it is crucial to take into account the complex interactions between text and performance. As the examples of Adiläm

in Kazakhstan and Hädichäm in Turpan suggest, modern print versions of the texts are also fully integrated into these processes. Aynur Kadir provides evidence of the ways that another print publication has provided an important interface between the printed and oral circulation of hikmät in the Uyghur tradition. She describes a fieldwork encounter with an elderly man in Turpan who claimed to have followed the *tärikät yol* for fifty years. He told her that his strongest desire was to meet Nijat Mukhlis, the man who had published the *Diwan-i Hikmät* in *Bulaq* magazine in 1984, a publication which had provided him with a rich resource for his own ritual practice (Kadir 2010: 98).

Many hikmätchi (reciters of hikmät) crave "correct" versions of practice to strengthen their performance. They regard the versions enshrined in the medium of print as possessing greater authority, and therefore as having greater potential to release spiritual power in performance. Their appropriation of the published versions is enabled and facilitated by the living tradition of musical performance, which provides a framework into which performers can slot new texts, as long as these texts lie within the stylistic boundaries of the tradition in terms of their poetic form and structure. Instead of thinking of separate oral and written traditions then, we should recognize the existence of more diverse, complex forms of circulation, crisscrossing the oral and textual spheres, and crossing international borders. Hikmät performers refer to published versions as well as the handwritten notebooks of hikmät they directly inherit, and they adapt the published texts to the musical framework that they have learned orally.

The possibility of this kind of movement from published texts back into locally maintained traditions of ritual performance suggests that we need to

revise our assessments of the process of canonization in Uyghur literary and musical traditions. It is pleasing to think that this work of canonization - far from being a final, authoritative sealing of tradition, may in fact be merely one more link in the chain of oral transmission. We may more productively conceive of “feedback loops” (Novak 2013), in which traditions of manuscript copying and oral performance intersect and feed into each other in circuits of transmission. The advent of print versions fits seamlessly into these circuits, not in any way disrupting the cycles of movement between text and performance, but instead enabling faster moving and more far flung loops of feedback, as Turkish scholars in Ankara rework manuscripts sourced in Turkistan, Uyghur scholars in Ürümchi translate these texts from the eighteenth century Turki into modern Uyghur, and ritual specialists in Turpan and Ghulja adapt these translations into a form that fits the musical structure of their performance tradition. Texts that are meant by nationalist scholars to “fix and ossify” can in fact be revived in the hands of performers who retain the framework of the performance tradition, and re-animated with the affective power of ritual performance. Thus revised and enriched, and enshrined in a reciter’s notebook, the hikmät is then set in motion in a new cycle of transmission.

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### Endnotes

1. From a hikmät sung as part of a khätmä, Yantaq village, August 2012. Singing led by Nisakhan. Recorded by Rachel Harris. Translated by Rachel Harris and Aziz Isa.
2. There is no historical evidence to support the popularly cited date of his death (1166-7). Devin deWeese suggests that the historical Yasawi most likely lived a half century later.
3. We have a comprehensive picture of performance style through the work of the musicologist Zhou Ji who recorded and transcribed performances of hikmät from dozens of locations around Xinjiang (Zhou 1999).
4. Gunnar Jarring Collection of Manuscripts from Eastern Turkestan in the Lund Library, <https://www.alvin-portal.org/> (accessed 20 February 2019).
5. Manuscript collected by Gunnar Jarring, c. 1930, believed to be of nineteenth century origin, source unknown. Lund Library (folio 7r), <https://www.alvin-portal.org> (accessed 20/02/2019). I am grateful to Iskandar Ding for his generous help with transliterating and translating these verses.
6. See recordings made by Rahile Dawut and her team at shrine festivals in southern Xinjiang, <http://www.soundislamchina.org/?p=1521>.
7. Verse 1, Recited by Hädichäm. Recorded near Turpan 2009. A section of the recording can be accessed here: <http://www.soundislamchina.org/?p=1411>. For comparison with a printed text, see Yessewi 2012: 53.

8. Hikmät led by Adiläm Hajim, recorded by Rachel Harris, Pänjim village, Kazakhstan, August 2015.

## **Uygur müzikal ve edebi yapılarında Hoca Ahmed Yesevi hikmeti**

Bu bölümde kendi vatanlarında ağır tehdit altında gerçekleşen Uygur dini pratiğinin bir yönü tartışılmaktadır. Sincan Uygur topluluklarını, Türk dilinde yazılmış ve yayınlanmış dualar vasıtasıyla dünyanın Türkçe konuşan diğer bölgelerine bağlayan ilahilerde ki hikmet dolaşım desenleri incelenmektedir. Şifahi iletişim ve okuryazarlık arasındaki ilişkiye dair son tartışmalar ele alınmakta, Uygur topluluklarındaki dini tören şeklinde gerçekleştirilen uygulamaların hikmet hakkında düşünmemize nasıl yardımcı oldukları ortaya konulmaktadır. Şifahi ve metinsel hikmet geleneklerinin aktarım ve icra geri bildirim döngüleri oluşturmak suretiyle sürekli ve yakından nasıl etkileşime girdiği tartışılmaktadır. Bu algı, Orta Asya performans geleneklerini kutsallaştırma yaklaşımları hakkındaki varsayımlarımızı yeniden değerlendirmemize neden olacaktır.

### **Anahtar kelimeler**

*hikmet, ahmet yesevi, metin, performans, tasavvuf, uygur*