

## UNDERGROUND MOSQUES OF MANGISTAU: CONTINUITY OF SUFI PATH OF ISLAM\*

MANGISTAV'IN YERALTI MESCİTLERİ: İSLAM'IN SUFİ  
YOLUNUN DEVAMLILIĞI

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### Abstract

Mosques, as places of worship in Islam, are places where Muslims fulfill their religious duties and unite. Muslims coming together in a place of worship ensures that the theoretical principles of religion combine with folk culture and are reflected concretely in life. Dervish lodges, where the Sufi interpretation of Islam is kept alive, also integrate folklore and Islam. Throughout the historical process, Muslims have had to build underground mosques for various reasons. These mosques have functions similar to dergahs, inns and caravanserais, other elements of Islamic architecture. Mangistau, one of the regions where Sufi Islam is most vital in Kazakhstan, is rich in underground mosques and khanakas, which are the reflection of Sufi culture in architecture. This region is considered a unique cultural landscape, where the most significant part of the country's monuments and holy places is concentrated. The underground mosques in Mangistau and Ustirt are unique in terms of historical and spiritual value. Excavation of shelters, places of worship, or "mortal abodes" by digging caves out of the common ground or mountain gorges has been a practice since very early times. Some of their samples are kept in Spain, Turkey, Jordan, and Crimea. The article analyzes the similarities and peculiarities of underground mosques with Sufi khanakas in the Middle Ages and their history and current use.

**Key Words:** History of Sufism, Mangistau, underground mosques, khanaka, tekke.

### Öz

Mescitler İslam'ın ibadethaneleri olarak Müslümanların dinî görevlerini yerine getirdikleri ve bir araya geldikleri yerlerdir. Müslümanların ibadethanelerde toplanması, dinin teorik ilkelerinin halk kültürüyle birleşerek somut olarak hayata yansımaları sağlar. İslam'ın tasavvufi yorumunun yaşatıldığı dergahların da folklor ve İslam'ı bütünleştirme gibi bir işlevi vardır. Tarihi süreç boyunca Müslümanlar çeşitli sebeplerle yeraltı mescitleri yapmak durumunda

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kalmıştır. Bu mescitler, işlev bakımından İslami mimarinin diğer unsurları olan dergahlar, hanlar ve kervansaraylarla benzer işlevler üstlenir. Kazakistan'da sufi İslam'ın en güçlü olduğu bölgelerden biri olan Mangıstav, tasavvufi kültürün mimarideki yansıması olan yeraltı mescitleri ve hanakalar açısından zengindir. Ülkedeki anıtların ve kutsal mekanların yoğunlaştığı bu bölge, eşsiz bir kültürel mirasa sahiptir. Mangıstav ve Ustyrt'teki yeraltı camileri hem tarihî açıdan hem de taşıdığı manevi değer açısından önemlidir. Ortak kullanılan alanlardan veya dağ geçitlerinden mağaralar kazarak barınakların, ibadet yerlerinin kazılması çok eski zamanlardan beri yapılagen bir uygulama olmuştur. Bu tarz yapı örnekleri İspanya, Türkiye, Ürdün ve Kırım'da vardır. Bu çalışmada, yeraltı camilerinin Sufi hanakaları ile benzerlikleri ve taşıdıkları özellikler, bu yapıların tarihçesi ve günümüzdeki kullanımları ele alınacaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Tasavvuf tarihi, Mangıstav, yeraltı mescitleri, hankah, tekke.

## Introduction

Mosque - (Arabic: مسجد [ˈmæsdʒɪd] - masjid “place of prostration”) is a Muslim house of worship (Қазақ мәдениеті, 2005). The mosque's structure includes a mihrab, a hollow place facing Mecca for prayer, a pulpit for reading the Koran or verses, one or more minarets for making the call to prayer, and a place for ablution. The architectural form and content of mosques, whose primary function is to be places of worship, in various Muslim countries have developed and been formed most comprehensively. They differ from tiny rural houses to steep mausoleum mosques (Әжіғали, 2014, 142). Some of their samples are kept in Spain, Jordan, Crimea and Türkiye.<sup>1</sup>

Particular types of mosques are underground in Mangıstau and Ustirt, carved out of steep rocks or dug out of the ground in hard-to-reach places. Probably, the mosque is their conventional name. A mosque is a place of worship. Moreover, the underground mosques in Mangıstau were not only for worshiping or teaching children; their initial function was closely related to the spiritual mission of Mashayiks and Darvish, who spread the teachings of Sufism. If so, is there a reason to connect the underground mosques in Mangıstau, which performed their spiritual, sacred function until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (before the Soviet persecution), with the places of worship of Sufis in the Middle Ages?

In theological studies, khanaka (ханака), tekiye<sup>2</sup> (тәкие, текке), and zabiya (зәбия) are mentioned as places of worship of Sufis in the Middle Ages. Although there are synonyms as terms (places for Sufis (сопыларға арналған жайлар), places of worship (құлшылық орындары)), each is a chronologically connected Sufi concept.

In his article on studying medieval architecture related to Sufism, T. Kh. Starodub says: “In written documents, there is information that Sufi khanakas began to be

1 Some historical structures that have survived to the present day in Türkiye, which hosted different beliefs and civilizations in the past, were later turned into mosques by Muslim Turks. Among these, there are also underground mosques. Located in Karaköy in Istanbul, the Underground Mosque is remarkable as it is an ancient building. The building, whose construction date is not precisely known, is the cellar of the large bastion located on the Golden Horn side of the Galata walls during the Byzantine period. One end of the large chain stretched to the Golden Horn by the Byzantine Empire to protect Istanbul from the attacks of other states was connected here. The tower to which the cellar, which is used as a masjid today, is connected is mentioned in historical sources with names such as Kastellion ton Galatou, Phourion, Tor de Galathas, Castrum Galathe, Castrum Sanctae Crucis. <https://islamansiklopedisi.org.tr/galata#2-galatada-turk-eserleri> (17.05.2024)

2 According to the information provided by the *TDV İslam Encyclopedia*, although the use of the word in Ottoman Turkish was «tekye», it changed to «tekke» in later periods. According to the information given by Mustafa Kara, there is no definitive information about the origin of the word. The word «tekâyâ», which is found in the plural form in Arabic, was not used in Persian and was used instead as «dergâh» and «hankâh». «Dervish lodges», which focus on the principles of spiritual and moral education of the people, have been widely used as «zawîya», «hankah» and «ribât» in different times and geographies. Mustafa Kara. “Tekke”, *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi*, <https://islamansiklopedisi.org.tr/tekke#1> (17.05.2024).

built at the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> century and the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century” (Стародуб, 1989, 268-279). Abd Rahman Jami (15<sup>th</sup> century) in his writings says that a person named al-Ghazali built khanakas for Sufis in the city of Tus, while the medieval Arab historians al-Tabbah (first half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century and the second half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century) and Ibn Shaddad (1217-1285) reports that Shams al-Hawas Lulu built the first khanakas in Aleppo. Moreover, Ibn Jubayr writes that during the rule of Nur ad-din Mahmud, two khanakas for men and one for women were built in Aleppo, and later Nur ad-din Mahmud’s subordinates built six more rabats (*рабат*). At the same time, he mentions the constructions similar to the rabats of the Maghreb: “In Syria, they are called khanqahs, they consist of grand palaces for Sufis, because Sufis are the kings of this country” (Стародуб, 1989, 268-279). During the rule of the Ayyubids (in Syria, 1183-1260), the terms khanaka and rabat were used simultaneously. According to Ibn Shaddad and other medieval authors, about 20 rabats and khanakas were built in Aleppo during this period, 4 of which were for women.

Sufi khanakas in Arabia, Egypt, Palestine, South Africa, and Central Asia have large halls, corridors, bedrooms, and dining rooms measuring 23.5x30.5 square meters, a small square-shaped stage with a small pool in the central courtyard and a window on the roof (for zikr- *зікр салуга арналган*) was in the form of a stately building. After the death of the owners or head teachers of the khanaka, their bodies were buried in one room of the khanaka (Стародуб, 1989, 268-279).

Researcher Starodub used the term “khanaka” in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. He says that it is gradually out of use. “Buildings of the 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries, in which the main architectural and planning principles of the Khanaka were formulated, must have undergone a long formation period since the 8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> centuries. In the XV-XVI centuries, khanaka architecture developed according to regional schools. For example, instead of a central hall, a khanaka in Anatolia had a covered courtyard opposite the entrance, with a courtyard in the middle. Since the 15<sup>th</sup> century, kanakas without housing appeared in Egypt – “homeless tasawwuf.” As can be seen from Central Asian monuments in the following centuries, the builders of the khanaka basically repeated the previous versions”. This process was also associated with a change in the function of khanakas. For example, the khanaka of Najmaddin Kurban in Old Urgenish became a mausoleum after the death of the owner, and the khanaka of Shams ad-din al-Nakhhas in Damascus later became a mosque (Стародуб, 1989, 268-279). The last stage in the history of khanaka was marked by the fact that they became uninhabited places, only gathering places for worship during the day.

Thus, due to the development and formation of the religious traditions of Sufism in different territories and periods, the architectural structure, content, and function of places of worship have been expanded, and their names have also changed. For example, during the time of the Mamluks, the place of khanakas was replaced by zabias, which were smaller in size and function than them. According to the researchers, lectures were held during the day, and Sufis and monks gathered for dhikr at night. Especially in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, zabias became famous as a place where teachers and their students could pray in solitude. Compared to khanaka, the architectural type of zabia dates back several centuries, and local features and localization are visible.

Later, the places of worship of the Sufis in the period of the Ottoman Empire were transformed into solemn complexes called tekiye. According to Syrian researchers, *tekke* appeared during the Ottoman Empire. The famous *tekke* belonging to earlier periods is the famous *tekke* of Maulana Jalelledin Rumi in the Old City. It forms an architectural complex consisting of several closed buildings. According to Al-

Maqrizi, an Egyptian geographer of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, tekkes were intended for Sufis to pray in solitude. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, 18 tekkes served as hotels for travelers from all over Cairo. In the structure of large tekkes was a residence of sheikhs, a unique prayer house, a dormitory for Sufis, a well, and a garden in the inner courtyard. In the Middle Ages, small zabias began to appear along with tekkes in Egypt, and their number increased in the 80s of the XIX century (Стародуб, 1989, 268).

Western researchers say about the places of worship of Sufis: “Religious centers of Sufis, mainly, served as a place where “professional Sufis (кәсіби сопылар)” stopped from worldly life and stayed for private worship. In tekkes and zabias, they did spiritual exercises, some of them starved (refusing to eat-ac ішуден бас тартып) for months in solitude in khilayats (қылуат), and learned to fight against their lust (нәпсімен күресу)” (Кириллина, 1989, 84), he explains. Regarding Sufi khanakas’s advantages over Christian monasteries, Polish researcher Anna Neumann says: “Darvishis (дәрүіштер) do not adopt a monastic lifestyle. This is because the Prophet (пайғамбар) denies that Christians invented monasteries and celibacy. They gather at khanakas at certain times to recite dhikr, and in the rest of the time they plant crops, trade, and do their own lives” (Кириллина, 1989, 84), he says.

English orientalist J. S. Trimmingham, in his work entitled “Formation of Sufi Orders in Islam” (translated from English to Russian by O.K. Akimushkin), tells about the role played by the khanaka institution in the formation of the Sufism order. Starting from the 11<sup>th</sup> century, zabiya and khanakas, which were temporary shelters for darvish sufis, became centers for spreading the new rules of piety and played an essential role in the Islamization of the bordering countries and non-Arab regions of Central Asia and North Africa. By the 12<sup>th</sup> century, during the Salahadin Ayyubid period in the Middle East, many khanakahs had become prosperous settlements. Ibn Jubair (Ибн Джубайр), who traveled from 1183 to 1185, wrote about Damascus: “There are many rabats for Sufis here; they are called khanaka. These are beautifully decorated mansions with pools. They offer a spectacular view that can only be dreamed of. The members of the Sufi group are the real kings of these lands. God has given them immeasurable blessings and freed them from the need to earn a living, so they devote their lives to serving God. They were placed in palaces that gave a taste of paradise. That is why these lucky people, selected from among the Sufis, will bless the present and the future world, thanks to the grace of God. They respectfully adhere to their vows and successfully establish their joint life. Their worship is extraordinary and miraculous, and their tradition is to gather together for passionate chanting (ән айту) (sama-sama). Sometimes, some of these wonderful people fall into such ecstasy that they no longer seem to belong to this world at all” (Тримингэм, 1989, 22). It can be seen from the scriptures that Sufism’s khanakas also became more luxurious as Sufism gained prestige. But the original meaning of khanaka was to get rid of the luxury of life, “to die without dying, (өлмей тұырып өлу)” “(to become soil (топырақ болу).”

According to Trimmingham, the rabats in the border areas became Islamic hotbeds among non-Muslims. Also, they played the role of observation and defense posts, and the garrison members were active promoters of Islam. Al-Id’qubi (Әл-Иәқуби) wrote in “Kitab al-buldan (Китаб әл-булдан)” in 891: “From Sfax to Bizerte is an eight-day journey. In each section, he writes that there are fortified points guarded by pious people and murabituns at a short distance.” (Тримингэм, 1989, 238).

The name rabat (fortress, garrisons for the propagation of Sufism) mentioned in J. S. Trimmingham’s work is preserved in the holy toponyms of Mangystau. There is also the following legend about the arrival of Sufi-shaikhs in Mangystau. The Arab

soldiers who wanted to establish the religion of Islam with the power of the white spear (*ақ найзаның күшімен*) (war) were defeated by the Turks. Turks do not let foreigners go to their ancestors. At that time, the Sufis came peacefully, placed their rabats on the borders of Mangystau, and began to perform their religious rituals. Turk's heroes came and asked, "Who will you be?", "What are you doing?" - says. The head of Darvish (shaikh-*шайх*): "We are spreading the religion of God. God is one; the Koran is true," he answers. "Our God is one, so your religion was not foreign to our knowledge. Furthermore, what can you do?" he asks. "If we fight, we will fall," says the Darvish. "Then, let us see your strength", said two people from both sides, and when they fought, they could not defeat each other. "Yes, your powers are equal; it is possible to talk with you", said the Turkish heroes, who dismounted from their horses, had a conversation with the Sufis, and soon confessed their religion. There is an assumption that these places, Kalyn Arbat (*Қалың арбат*) (Kalyn Rabat-*Қалың Рабат*), Kubrabat (*Кубрабат*), etc. in the modern Mangistau region must have been the residence of shaykhs who once propagated Sufi teachings.

The conclusion is that the original khanakahs were where the Sufis (tasawwuf-*тассаввуф*) conducted their main practical trials. They are, in particular, secluded from worldly life, face-to-face with God in solitude (*хилует*), remembrance of God and dhikr, fasting and struggle against lust (*jihad-джихад*), shelter for lost travelers, and a gathering of Sufis from all over the world. , holding a spiritual meeting (*хадарат*), the relationship between murshid and murids (interview, swearing, *ijaza*, *adab-сұхбат*, *ант беру*, *иджаза*, *адаб*), visiting the grave of the head teacher, etc.<sup>3</sup>

Later, the spread of Sufism expanded the mission of the Khanakas. Sufism has become a profession; fake Sufi organizations have proliferated. Under the Seljuks, Persian-style Sufi lodges became especially popular, and under the Ayyubids, their fame grew even more. Salahadin invited Sufis from Asia to Egypt. He and his followers founded and financed many khankas, rabats, and zabias (Тримингэм, 1989, 27).

The transformation of Sufis is reflected in their relationship. The Sufi groups in the early times were united by the desire to destroy their ego, purify their souls, and thus get closer to God, worship together, and acquire spiritual knowledge. They are a spiritual union with a familiar spirit and purpose rather than a formal organization. Over time, the Sufis turned from such a «pious community» into a «community of vowers (*ант берушілердің жасағатына*)» who obeyed one teacher, followed his path, and continued the baton to the next ones. They named their path after their teacher, and later, this path became a certain silsala (*силсала*) or religious order, sect or cult (*тарихат*) (Тримингэм, 1989).

Jürgen Paul, in his work *Sufism in Central Asia*, says that khanakas are an essential stage in the development of Muslim mysticism; however, building a khanaka, financing it, managing the vast amount of money coming from it, and even bequeathing a khanaka after the death of the owner of the khanaka required meddling in the affairs of the material world rather than spiritual service. Jürgen Paul, at the same time, the leader of the Sufi order, Abd al-Khalik ('Абд ал-Халық), did not support Sufis living together in khanakas. In his writings, which became a «spiritual commandment

3 According to the information provided by the *TDV Islam Encyclopedia*, in addition to Sufism education, courses such as tafsir, hadith, fiqh, akaid and Arabic were given in Khankahs. In addition, writing books and reproducing written books were among the duties of the dervishes residing in the khankahs. On the other hand, in addition to reading poetry and hymns, religious music was also given the necessary attention. Sema performance was one of the indispensable rituals. See: Süleyman Uludağ. "Hankah" (خانقاه), *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi*. <https://islamansiklopedisi.org.tr/hankah#1> (17.05.2024).

(рухани өсиет),» he pointed out that building khanakas and living in them is not necessary. Another Sufi leader, Ali 'Azizan Ramitani ('Али 'Азизан Рамитани), said: «For us, khanaka is not important; the most important thing is worship and faith.» Devin Deewis, an American researcher who studied the history of Sufism in Central Asia, explains: «'Ali 'Azizan Ramitani not only objected to the Sufis living together in khanakas, but also to the fact that some political figures were engaged in building khanakas not to serve God or man, but to make themselves famous.» (Хисматуллин, 2001, 176). In our opinion, the leaders of the later Sufi order must not have liked the traditional way of swearing between murid and murshid (мүрид пен мүршид), the murid following the teacher's path, being faithful to his oath, always talking to his teacher and traveling together.

However, the further development of the Sufi organization was based on the teachers' experiences, who avoided the luxurious life of the kanakas, lived in seclusion in their private bias in big cities, and often went on wanderings with their students.

Researcher V. N. Nastich in his article «Shah Fazil: mausoleum or Sufi khanaka? (Шах-Фазил: мавзолей или суфийская ханака?)», he mentions the mausoleum of Khoja Ahmet Yasawi (Қожа Ахмет Ясауи), the founder of Sufism in Central Asia and Kazakhstan, in the city of Turkestan (Kazakhstan) as a vivid example of Central Asian khanakas. «The grave of the holy master, a mosque, a spacious hall for dhikr, a boiler room (*қазандық*) and other overflowing service rooms, a huge building consisting of many shrines, niches in the walls (*құжырлар*), in a word, one can imagine a hundred percent khanaka» (Настич, 1989, 280), he says. Of course, it is understandable that the Sufi khanaka, based on the concept of «dying before dying» of the great teacher of Sufism - Khoja Ahmet Yasawi, later became the mausoleum of the great teacher.

One feature common to all the places mentioned above of worship is seclusion from everyday life and dedication to worship. They are rejecting the pleasures of the world, choosing a medical path. Moreover, the original idea is to be alone with God, to fight against the ego through solitude and renunciation of earthly life. Its core is one of the main concepts of Sufi knowledge founded by Khoja Ahmet Yasawi - an example of perfect humanity (*kamil al-insan-кәмил әл-инсан*) - «to die before dying». The places of worship of the Sufis, which began as simple caves far from the eyes of the country, must have later turned into beautiful buildings built on the ground. In our opinion, the position of Sufism's concept of a perfect person «to die before dying» is more recognized in the underground mosques of Mangistau, the homeland of saints, than in solemn khanakas and tekkes.

Suppose the medieval, kanakas, takiye, and zabia in Egypt, Syria, and Central Asia are places of worship typical of the urban architecture of that era. In that case, the underground mosques of Mangystau are undoubtedly places of worship that have adapted to the field lifestyle.

The researchers point out that the reason why mosques were built «underground» or dug out of rocks is, firstly, for piety, seclusion from everyday life, worshipping in solitude, and secondly, for protection from hot and cold weather.

### **1. Views on The Emergence and Genesis of Mangistau Underground Mosques**

The famous researcher S. E. Azhigali (С.Е. Әжіғали) divides the mosques in Mangistau and Ustirt into three types: rocky-underground (*жартасты-жерасты*), on the ground (*үстінде*) or «field (*далалық*)» (*simple-қарапайым*), with underground walls (*architectural-архитектуралық*). Rock-underground mosques exist only



in Mangystau and Ustirt in Central Asia and continue to perform their content and structural functions even after centuries have passed (Әжіғали, 2014, 148).

Religious scholar B. Abdirakhmanov connects the period of construction of underground buildings (temples or mosques-ғибадатхана немесе мешіттер) in Mangistau and Ustirt with the period of worship of the God of the Turkic peoples at the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century and the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century of our era. According to the researcher's opinion, the Turkic tribes that reached Mangystau from Altai during the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries, first built Beitini (Бәйтiнi) and later the underground mosques of Shopan Ata (Шопан Ата) and Shakpak Ata (Шақпақ Ата). A common feature of these places of worship is the presence of a cross symbol in the construction of the building. As some researchers have assumed, this is not a sign of Christianity but a sign of the worship of God by the ancient Turks. With the arrival of Islam, the shape of the cross in Shakpak Ata was changed; four pillars were built, decorated with beautiful patterns, verses were written on them, and the four pillars supporting the dome in the image of the universe were sent from God through angels to the four prophets (Moses, Jesus, David, Muhammad) refers to the four books (Әбдiрахманов, 2004, 89).

S. E. Azhigali identifies the emergence of underground mosques in Mangistau with the arrival of Islam to the Caspian coast in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries (Әжіғали, 2014). Some opinions attribute the construction time of Mangistau underground mosques to the 16<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries (Көшбай, 2009, 13). M. Mendikulov (М.Мендікүлов) attributes the Shopan Ata underground mosque, considered the oldest, to the 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries and the Shakpak Ata underground mosque to the Kipchak-Nogay period of the 14<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries. It is said that the underground mosque, like Shakpak Ata, which has a very complex structure, was built with the direct support of Tuglik-Timur (Тұғлық-Тимур), the ruler of Khorezm (Хорезм), who supported Sufism (Мендикулов, 1987, 24).

Among the researchers, there is a tendency to connect the history of underground mosques in Mangistau with very ancient knowledge, even before Islam. During the Mangistau international complex scientific expedition organized between May and September 2018 (scientific leader - B.I. Nurdauletova-ғылыми жетекшісі – Б.И.Нұрдаулетова), Azerbaijani scientists proposed considering underground mosques in Mangistau as phenomena that appeared before the Muslim period. According to their opinion, the cave of Shakpak Ata Mosque was excavated during the time of Zarathustra (*Заратуштра*). When Islam came to the region, such temples were turned towards the Qibla (құбыла) and into Muslim mosques (мұсылман мешіті). According to the belief of the early times, the body of a dead person was given to animals and birds and was buried in a cleaned bone jar or stone pits (таc ойықтар). Human bones are visible at the Shakpak Ata underground mosque's entrance and in the upper building crevices. Scientists say that the Shakpak Ata underground mosque may once have been a burial place for such a person. Archaeologists found flint tools and workshops of the first Neanderthal people (неандерталь адамдар) who lived in the Acheulean period (ашель дәуірі) 800 thousand years ago and concluded that this place is the oldest human habitation in the Kazakh country. A temple very similar to this one, located in Bothentau (Бөтенрай) in the Karakalpak region, was discovered by scientists attributed to the IV - III centuries in BC. (Еділхан, 2018).

B. Abdirakhmanov compares the layout of the rooms in the Shopan Ata mosque to the shape of a cross. Later, the rooms were adjusted in the direction of the Kaaba. Shopan Ata and Chakpak Ata underground mosques were created by renovating the

caves of divine knowledge according to the content of Islam, and the first mosque structure built by Sufis in Mangystau should be the Karaman Ata underground mosque. It is said that places for Sufi worship - prayer hall (намазхана), zikr house (зикрхана), shilhana (шилхана)<sup>4</sup> - were included in the original form of the mosque construction; that is, no traces of reworking are visible (Әбдірахманов, 2004, 90).

However, M. Mendikulov, who studied the ancient architecture of Mangystau, looking at the complexity of the construction (requires special engineering knowledge) and the style of the Arabic graphic inscriptions on the walls, concluded that the construction of the Shakpak Ata underground mosque dates back to the first half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. This date corresponds to the culturally and economically flourishing era of the Golden Horde state, and the Shopan Ata underground mosque must have been built at the time when the first Sufis set foot in Mangystau, that is, in the XII-XIII centuries (Мендикулов, 1987, 24).

## 2. “Big” and “Small” Underground Mosques

Shopan Ata, Shakpak Ata, Karaman Ata, Sultan Upi, Masat Ata, and Beket Ata are the founder of the underground mosques and great teachers who spread the Sufi teachings founded by Khoja Ahmet Yasawi and possessors of mystical virtues - as saints, people remember them with legends and stories—preserved forever. The beginning of the activity of large underground mosques as a spiritual center of Sufi teachings dates back to the 12<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. These were the first teachers - «Grandfathers (Аталар),» saints (әулие-пірлер) - who harmonized the theory and practice of Sufism with the field nomadic culture, formed the rules and instructions, and distributed them to the Turkic people. Written data based on legends about them can be found in journals, final reports, and diaries of military expeditions organized by the Russian Empire in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

“**Shopan Ata mosque**” is located more than 200 kilometers from Aktau city in the territory of Senek village. According to the legend, Shopan Ata is one of the disciples of Khoja Ahmet Yasavi, who was sent to Mangystau. Shopan Ata found the staff thrown by his teacher and built a mosque with eleven underground chambers on this place. Legend has it that a tree grew from a stick stuck in the ground, and it has been 800 years since it happened. According to legend, there is an idea that a person who turns around the tree three times will be cured of a severe illness. At present, the pilgrims of Beket Ata first visit Ata’s teacher - Shopan Ata, and then go to Beket Ata.

**The Sultan-Upi underground mosque** is between Ashchymuryн (Ащымұрын) and Oira (Ойра), near the Cas pian coast, 57 km north-east of Fort Shevchenko. The underground mosque, carved out of the stone layer of the earth, consists of 11 rooms with several chambers connected, and stone pillars are installed inside the mosque. About the spiritual and religious character of the monument: «Sultan Upi underground mosque was built around the 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries. It was built as a khanaka-temple (ханака-ғибадатхана) for the Sufi community.» According to the legends preserved in the mouths of the people, Sultan is the son of the famous Süleyman Bakırgani (Сүлеймен Бақырғани).» The name of Sultan Upi (or Sultan Epe) was established in 1873. It is mentioned in the 7<sup>th</sup> edition of the book «Предания адаевцев о святых секты ханафие, живших и умерших на Мангышлаке//Сборник сведений о кавказских горцах» (Legends of the Adaevites about the saints of the Hanafi sect

4 It is also known as Childekhana (Шилдехана) which is a celebration the birth of a new baby.



who lived and died on Mangyshlak // Collection of information about the Caucasian highlanders) published in Tbilisi (Тифлис). According to the legends presented in this work, Hakim Ata (Süleyman Bakırgani) had three sons from his wife: Muhammad-khoja (Мұхаммед-қожа), Asker-khoja (Әскер-қожа), Kubbi-khoja (Құбби-қожа). Kazakhs say that Kubbi Khoja was called Sultan Uri (Предания адаевцев, 1873).

**Shakpak Ata** underground mosque is carved from the western side of the white rock (ақбор жартаc). It is located in the south of Shilikudyk (Шиликүдык) Valley, Sarytas (Сарытас) Bay. This underground mosque is a magnificent and prominent building compared to other underground mosques. The mosque consists of 4 rooms in the shape of a cross; the central room at the top is dome-shaped, and the walls are decorated with inscriptions written in Arabic letters and many pictures. A square building on the dome's upper surface is planted with white stone clay (Артықбаев). In 1969, the well-known research scientist Medoev described this remarkable building as follows:

The building is made with a dome based on the model of the architecture of the ancient East. The interior and the doors of the mosque are interesting to the viewer. According to folk legend, Shakpak-ata was a famous hero in the war with the Kalmyks. During the battle, the weapon of the possessor of this property emits fire like sparks from flint; that is why he was called Shakpak-ata. On the walls of the mosque rooms, windows for placing books are carved, and special handles for placing lamps are carved on them (Медоев, 1979).

A private room can be seen at the top of Shakpak Ata cave mosque. According to the members of the expedition (I. Jemenei-И.Жеменей, S. Ashurov-С.Ашуров), it may be a «fire place (отхана)» built by ancient «fire worshipers (отқа табынушылар).» There are also graves where corpses are buried in the caves located on the two front sides. The surface of those graves is covered with stone slabs, and even the bones of the corpse are clearly visible. Among the ancient people, there was a custom of throwing the bodies of dead people on the ground instead of burying them. The corpse is left open until insects-ants (күрт-кұмырсқа), birds and animals (аң-құстар) eat it completely, and the skeleton is covered with a stone slab. Sapar Ashurov (Сапар Ашуров), the leading scientist of the Department of Press and Scientific Relations of the Institute of Archeology and Ethnography of the National Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan, reported that there is a place that is supposed to be the grave of fire worshipers of the exact nature in «Kuz kamal (Қыз қамал)» in the city of Baku, Azerbaijan (Артықбаев).

**Masat ata complex.** The complex consists of a burial ground with a history of several millennia and a rock-hewn mosque. (Foto 1) On the stone square next to the mosque, traces similar to hoofs of adult and young horses (pictures 2, 3) and human feet have been preserved. The human footprint is 150 m long.



Foto 1: Masat Ata (Macar Ara) underground mosque.



Foto 2: Footprints on the stone outside the mosque.

According to the local legend, Masat Ata was a prominent religiousman (дінбасы) and possessor of secret virtues in his time. His enemies, who could not see his influence on the country, tried to kill him several times, but the arrow did not enter the saint's body (әулиенің денесі), and the sword (кылыш) did not penetrate him. Enemies find a way and go to his wife; she says that the body of the religious leader softens during morning prayer. Enemies cut off the head of Masat Ata, who was praying the morning prayer; the saint ran up high with his head in his skirt without lowering it to the ground, followed by a foal mare that saw a change. During morning prayer, the saint's body and nearby stones melt, and the footprints of running people and galloping horses are carved into the stones.

The name Masat is not found in the Kazakh language. The prominent archaeologist K. Akishev (К.Ақышев) writes that the Sakas (Scythians-скифтер) had kings named

Octomasad (Октомасад) and Tagimasad (Тагимасад), and also says that «masad is the Scythian version of the ancient Indo-Iranian word masat (great-ұлы).» Compared to that, this complex dates back to the Scythian-Sak period, BC. It comes from 500-600 years (Еділхан, 2018).

In the 11th century, the prominent Persian-Uzbek scientist Biruni (Бируни): «... the fresh source (or well) of that lake is in the mountain called Mungууr (Мыңғыр? Author) in the country of Kimak (қимақ). There is a stone near that eye, on which there are traces of a man's foot, palm with fingers and the sole of his knee resting on the ground, a baby's foot and a donkey's hoof,» he wrote. Historians often refer to the message of this ancient scientist, for example, Kazvini (Казвини) from Khorasan in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, German-Russian scientist V. Barthold (В.Бартольд) in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and Kazakh-Russian scientist Yu. Zuev (Ю.Зуев), in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, relies on this historical fact in their works. B. Komekov (Б.Көмеков), an outstanding Kazakh scientist who studies the history of the Kimak country, says that the border of this country extended to Mangystau. According to these facts, In the 9<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> centuries, the complex was an essential and popular object hung in the mouth. (Еділхан, 2018). A mihrab is carved on the mosque's wall on the qiblah side. (Foto 3-4)



Foto 3-4. Interior of the mosque: door, mihrab, scepter, window, Koran, candle niches

A member of the expedition, a Turkish scientist Ekinci, says that in the legends related to the Turkish Sufis, there is often a case of beheading saints and wrapping them in skirts. The local legend of Mankhistau points to the fact that this region has been in close contact with the Turkic world for many centuries.

Karaman Ata (**Қараман ата**) underground mosque is 35 kilometers southwest of Shetpe (Шетпе) village, Mangistau district, 5 kilometers west of Kandybas (Қандыбас) winter. This mosque was specially built as an ordinary Muslim mosque in the centuries when Islam fully penetrated the region. Karaman Ata's underground mosque consists of many rooms. Special nightstands are made in the rooms to purify the air and capture sunlight. In winter, it was covered to protect it from rain. (Fotos 5-6)



Foto 5. Karaman Ata underground mosque.



Foto 6: Interior view of the mosque

Karaman Ata's mosque was a «courthouse (әділетхана).» When there was a dispute in the country, it became tense, and there was no solution; they used to come to this place, make an oath, and come to an agreement. Therefore, this place has become a symbol of justice (Әділет символы) over time. People have kept the tradition of coming here and «swearing (антгасып)» to stay faithful to their promises. Thus, Karaman Ata is a historical person recognized as a «symbol of justice» among the people.

Based on the available materials and the results of the field expeditions conducted in 2018 and 2020 to the historical places of Mangistau, we concluded that there are currently 27 underground mosques in Mangistau and Ustirt. We conditionally divide them into «large (үлкен)» underground mosques and «small (шағын)» underground mosques based on their period, size, and scope of their activities.

The architecture of the enormous underground mosques we mentioned above is complex, large, and consists of several structural sections. For example, the rooms of the Beket Ata underground mosque in Oglandy (Оғланды) are round, with a height of 2.7 to 3.5 meters, while the rooms of the Shakpak Ata underground mosque are located in the form of a cross and the height of the inner walls is 3.9 m. Conventionally, «large» underground mosques consist of 4 to 12 rooms (Shopan Ata), in the structure of which there are places of worship: places for prayer (намаз оқитын) and dhikr (зікір салатын орындар), a chapel (хилует-шілхана), a lecture hall (дәрісхана), a cemetery (қабырхана), a cistern in the yard (су жинайтын күп), a place for healing people (healing spring, sacred tree, etc.) (адам емдейтін орын-шипалы бұлақ, қасиетті ағаш т.б.), there will be rooms for teachers and students (ұстаз бен шәкірттер), utility rooms (шаруашылық бөлмелері). The roofs are dome-shaped, a hole is made from the center of the light, and columns (stone pillars-таc тіреулер) made of the rock itself or specially made by hand are installed. In the rooms for worship, there is a place for candlesticks carved out of rock and bookshelves. Inscriptions in Arabic script, drawings representing Sufi knowledge (for example, an open palm-ашық алақан), tribal symbols, and sometimes the names of buried saints, carpenters, and teachers who later gave lectures may be written on the walls. (Fotos 7-8)





Foto 7: Script: “I seek refuge in Allah from the persecuted Satan, there is no God but Allah, Muhammad is the messenger of God” Shakpak Ata underground mosque



Foto 8: “Open palm” on the wall of Shakpak Ata underground mosque

The mihrabs (михрабтар) are directed to Mecca (Мекке), and the doors are built facing east. The main feature of these sacred places is the burial of the remains of the mosque owners - head teachers, their location in rugged mountain gorges that cannot be reached by human foot, and the presence of legends that deepen their sanctity.

Undoubtedly, these «ancestors» had students such as Khojas (қожалар), Akhuns (ахундар), Ishans (ишандар), Sufis (сұпылар) who took lessons from Sufi schools and continued their spiritual path. There is reason to say that «small underground mosques» are a witness to such spiritual continuity. These mosques are tiny, carved out of low cliffs and rocks. They served until the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The information about the spiritual persons who built them must be completed, and the folklore-ethnographic description is also insignificant. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that these underground mosques were of great importance in inculcating Sufi teachings in the minds of the generation in a particular era.

«Small underground» mosques have a height of about 2 m and consist of 2-3 round or square yurt-like rooms (the first entrance), small hills, and ridges, some of which are excavated from the flat ground. (Foto 9) One room may be used for worship, and the other room may be used for teaching students. From the walls of the room, a carved mihrab, a candlestick, shelves for books, and light holes are made, facing Mecca, and they are covered with stones from the outside. (Fotos 10-11)



Foto 9: Sayyid Ishan underground mosque.



Foto 10. Underground in Borly-Torym.



Foto 11. Seydin Ishan, mihrab.



Foto 12. Interior view of Koben underground mosque.

In such small mosques, the skillet (келье) was carved out of the wall, or one room must have been used as a skillet, zikrkhana (зікрхана), and household. Secret places with 1-2 rooms without additional buildings around them - mosque (мешіт), madrasa (медресе), cell (күжыра), shilkhana (шілхана), zikrkhana (зікрхана), performed several functions, such as a shelter for travelers who set out on a journey from summer heat and winter storms. Another feature is that human remains are not kept in small underground mosques. A cemetery is only in the second room of the small underground mosque in Zhaman Saura (Жаман Саура), but there is a legend that «the body of the saint was taken there by angels.» Also, there is information about the Kulshan Ata (Құлшан Ата) underground mosque in the records of the topographer of the military expedition of the Russian Empire to explore the plateau and the coast of the Caspian Sea, lieutenant Alekseev the Second (Алексеєв), describing the structure of the mosque. the Russian researcher said: «In the room on the left side, the head is facing the northeast, the dead body of a person lies wrapped in a worn-out cloth, which has long been crushed by time. On his head is an iron scepter fixed to a tree, silver-plated and engraved with various inscriptions. Half of the yellowed canvas was hung on the page opposite to it» (ЖЫЛҚЫШЫҰЛЫ, 2015, 20), he said, describing the picture he saw with his own eyes. According to local elders, the body of Kulshan Ata also disappeared under mysterious circumstances. Currently, there is an underground mosque, but there is no corpse.

There are old cemeteries near the underground mosques on the upper slopes of the mountains. This shows that the underground mosque served as a night house for those



visiting the holy saint (әулиеге зиярат) in the cemetery.

Such as Bura Ata (Бура Ата), Seydin Ishan (Сейдин ишан), Segizazhi (Сегізәжі), Zholaskan (Жоласқан) etc. the period of construction of small underground mosques is unknown, and underground mosques named after local Adai (адай) tribesmen such as Koskulak Kulbas Ahun (Қосқұлақ Құлбас ахун), Koskulak Kazangar auliye (Қосқұлақ Қазанғап әулие), Zhamanadai Esturly Sufi (Жаманадай Естұрлы сұпы), Murat Zhari Nurmagambet Beristam Sufi (Мұрат Жары Нұрмағамбет Берістам сұпы), Kunanorys Sarbek (Құнанорыс Сарбек) were probably built around the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The words ata (*ата*), hajj (pilgrim-қажы-әжі), khoja (қожа), sufi (сұпы), ishan (ишан), auliye (әулие), ahun (ахун), and haziret (хазірет) added to the names of mosque owners mean the religious rank, family name, and title of spiritual teachers in Sufi teachings. Bura Ata, Seydin Ishan, Segizazhi, and Zholaskan underground mosques have round sunmarks of the owners in the cemeteries. Looking at it, it can be seen that the owners of the mosque are pious teachers from the family of landlords. However, it is not known who exactly they were. Moreover, Eskeldi Tolegen Ishan (Ескелді Төлеген ишан), Koskulak Kulbas Ahun (Қосқұлақ Құлбас ахун), Koskulak Kazangar Saint (Қосқұлақ Қазанғап әулие), Zhamanadai Esturly Sufi (Жаманадай Естұрлы сұпы), Murat Zhari Nurmagambet Beristam Sufi (Мұрат Жары Нұрмағамбет Берістам сұпы), Kunan oris Sarbek (Құнан орыс Сарбек) etc. - as their names suggest, there are few records preserved in the country about the holy persons from the Adai tribe, their lives, virtues and clothes. For example, Sonabay Sufi and his son Tolegen Ishan are well-known people from the wise clan of Aday in the country. Sonabai Sufi (Сонабай сұпы) was a religious man who had mastered Sufi teachings, and he was a teacher who held a mosque and was a famous reformer. His son, Tolegen Ishan (Төлеген ишан), was a diviner and a holy man who held a mosque. He dedicated his life to this holy path without creating a family. There are reports that those who embarked on a dangerous journey had a dream and visions when they spent the night (Жылқышыұлы, 2015, 156-157).

## Conclusion

As Serikbol Kondybai (Серікбол Қондыбай), a famous researcher and mythologist from Mangystau, in his book *Mangystau geography. Holy places of Mangystau and Ustirt* (Published in 2008, Almati) righteously mentioned that Kazakh people first faced the Islam in the form of Sufism. It is because Khoja Ahmet Yasawi paved the way for this sect of Islam on the Kazakh steppes originating in a small city named Yasi. He inspired and educated a number of followers in the path of Sufism because he became the chief part of the Kazakhs. One of his followers Beket Ata, who lived much later, followed the path of Sufi Islam.

Usually, preachers who came from Turkestan, Nurata, and Khorasan and spread the religion are mentioned as the first generation of saints (әулиелер). Legends about them are connected with the image of Khoja Ahmet Yasawi. For example, it is said that the saints Shopan Ata and Danispan (Дәніспан) Ata from Mangystau came to Mangystau following the arrow shot by Khoja Ahmet from the house, and Esen Ata and Karaman Ata are also contemporaries of Khoja Ahmet Yasawi.

During the reign of Uzbek Khan, the ruler of the Golden Horde, Islam experienced a period of prosperity in Central Asia and Kazakhstan. After the declaration of the Muslim religion as the state religion, religious preachers (уағызшылар) and mashaiks

(машайықтар) from the Islamicized regions of Central Asia began to flow to western Kazakhstan, including Mangystau. According to S. Kondybai, this migration process occurred intensively between 1320 and 1260. According to Kondybai's works, the official believers gathered in Sarayshik, Saray, and Khazhitarkhan, while the unofficial religious preachers came to the Esen-Kazakh families in Mangistau. Most of the Mashayiks who came to Mangystau came from Nur-Ata (Нұр-Ата), Turkestan, and Sozak (Созақ); some came from Iran, Turkmenistan, and Khorezm.

So, based on S. Kondybai's opinion, two areas of sainthood (әулиелік ареал) were formed in the Kazakh land. First one was formed during the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. The second is between 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. The spiritual continuity of both is apparent. At the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the main seat of the Yasawi-Sufi religion was the Karatau-Nuratau (Қаратау-Нұратау) region; in the middle of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, under the influence of this center, another «Yasawi area (Ясауилік ареал)» appeared in Western Kazakhstan. In the Turkestan-Karatau (Түркістан-Қаратау) region, the appearance of «copies» of saints such as Baba Tukti Shashty Aziz (Баба Түкті Шашты Әзіз), Koshkar (Қошқар) Ata, and Shopan Ata in Mangistau and Ustirt is connected with such «export of saints.»

Mangistau underground mosques are a meeting place for Sufis-darvishes (сопы-дәруіштер) who came to spread the Yasawi teachings, a shelter from the irreligious (дінсіздер), and a place of learning that teaches the practice and theory of Sufism. In this place, a murid and a murshid (sufi and follower-мүрид иен мүршид) take an oath, a place where they face God, and a holy place that shows miracles to people to show them the power of God. Place (sacred spring, sacred tree, running of saints with their severed heads on their skirts, footprints on stones, swearing, fighting, rescuing sunken ships, flying as a swan, etc.), in a word, the khanaka of Sufis. In Mangistau, “khanake kakkap (Ханака қаққандар)” is used for people who “go astray, unfaithful.” Those who knock the khanaka have deviated from the Sufi path and have not been faithful to their vow to the teacher. This is because the central concept of Sufism is based on the relationship between murid and murshid.

There are several reasons why the underground mosques in Mangystau and Ustirt are not built in the form of above-ground architectural structures but in the form of underground rock caves: 1. The main reason is based on the Sufism concept of “dying before dying,” entering the underground; 2. It is related to the natural and geographical situation of Mangistau and Ustirt (it is impossible to build a building because it is far from urban settlements); 3. Places of accommodation conveniently built for the path of religious preachers and pilgrims; 4. Stay away from the eyes of “irreligious people and aliens”; 5. Distance from the general world, privacy, sanctity, etc.

The primary function of the «small» underground mosques that appeared in Mangystau and Ustirt at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was to continue the teachings of the «fathers (аталар)» to the next generation when the Kazakh people were in a spiritual deadlock.

In order to preserve the golden fabric of this spirituality, Kazakh spiritual leaders, Sufi, Ahun, and saints turned their mosques in secret caves hidden from view into madrasahs where students are trained, not only places of worship. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the famous teacher of the Mangistau school of agriculture, Sattigul Zhangabylovich said:

Шариғат шамы жағылған, Тарихат жолы табылған, Хақиқатқа бағынған. Әр орында мешіт бар Құдай үшін салынған, Бірден-бірге қалынған. Қожа Ахмет, Пір Бекет Солардан үлгі алынған. Азырақ баян етейін Абдолла, Әбді ғалымнан, Сақтанған лағын-залымнан, Дін үшін жанған шамымнан, Айтқаны зікір-салауат Қашсын деп шайтан маңымнан. Жақсылардың азайып Уақыты еді арылған,	Sharia candle is lit, The path of history is found, Obedient to the truth. There is a mosque everywhere Built for God One by one. Khoja Ahmet, Pir Beket An example is taken from them. Let me tell you less Abdullah, from Abdi scholar, Protected from filth, From my lighted candle for religion, What he says is zikr-salaat Let the devil run away from me. Few of the good ones It was time,
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the guardians of the nation who preserved Kazakh spirituality and passed it on. Even now, the «big» and «small» underground mosques in Mangystau continue their spiritual-cognitive, educational, and historical-enlightenment activities.

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