

THE LIFE, ACTIVITIES, AND WORKS OF MUHAMMAD ALI (DUKCHI ESHON)

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Abstract

This article analyzes the religious, intellectual, and socio-spiritual activities of Muhammad Ali (Dukchi Eshon), one of the leading representatives of Sufism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The author examines his role within the Naqshbandiyya order, his influence on the spiritual life of the Fergana Valley, and the intellectual circle that formed around him. Special attention is given to the works "Manāqib-i Dūkchī Eshon" and "Ibrat al-ghāfilīn", which are studied from a textual and historical perspective.

Keywords

Dukchi Eshon, Naqshbandiyya, Sufism, spirituality, irshad, Fergana Valley, manaqib, Ibrat al-ghafilin, Islamic history, moral reform, Central Asia.

In the latter half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, the peoples of Central Asia experienced profound social, political, religious, and cultural transformations. During this period, on one hand, the colonial policy of the Russian Empire intensified, while on the other hand, Muslim societies strengthened their efforts to preserve their traditional values and protect their religious and national identity. In this historical context, the Fergana Valley—distinguished by its ancient scholarly and educational traditions, Sufi schools, and the activities of prominent scholars—became one of the main centers of these processes.

Amid such a complex historical environment lived and worked the renowned Naqshbandi sheikh Muhammad Ali (Dukchi Eshon) (circa 1856–1898), who became not only a religious leader of his time but also a symbol of social justice, spiritual revival, and moral resistance against colonial oppression.

The personality of Dukchi Eshon represents a unique convergence of the religious, spiritual, and political spheres in the history of Central Asia. As a follower of the Naqshbandiyya order founded by Baha' al-Din Naqshband, he adhered to the principle of "dil ba yoru, dast ba kor" ("heart with the Friend, hand at work"), harmonizing Sufism with the practical life of the people.

Muhammad Ali ibn Hasan, known in history as Dukchi Eshon, was born in the Namangan region of the Fergana Valley in the second half of the 19th century.⁵⁰ He was one of the prominent representatives of the Naqshbandiyya order. He initially received his religious and spiritual education from his father and local scholars, and later continued his studies under some of the major Sufi masters of his time, entering the spiritual path of the tariqa. The title “Eshon” attached to his name denotes his status within the Sufi hierarchy, that is, the rank of irshad—spiritual guidance and leadership.

He emerged as a spiritual and intellectual leader within the complex cultural and political context of his time. The latter half of the nineteenth century was a period of severe trials for the peoples of Central Asia. As a result of the expansionist policy of the Russian Empire, the Kokand Khanate was abolished in 1876, and the entire Fergana Valley was incorporated into the Turkestan General-Governorship. This transformation intensified the spiritual anguish of the local Muslim population and placed upon religious scholars and Sufi sheikhs the responsibility of providing moral guidance, preserving spiritual integrity, and calling the people to patience, faith, and unity.

In this historical milieu, Muhammad Ali (Dukchi) Eshon disseminated his teachings among the people, aiming to nurture them in the spirit of justice, piety, faith, and moral awakening. According to historical sources, Dukchi Eshon belonged to the Fergana branch of the Naqshbandiyya order, and in his spiritual practice he adhered to the principle of “khalwat dar anjuman”—that is, to be among the people while remaining inwardly with the Divine.⁵¹ He instructed his disciples to value inner purity, sincerity, and honesty over external ritualism, emphasizing that true Sufism lies in the refinement of the soul and the cultivation of the heart.

The activities of Dukchi Eshon were not limited to spiritual mentorship; they also possessed a pronounced social dimension. His gatherings were attended not only by disciples but also by representatives of the local population who suffered from colonial oppression and political injustice, seeking his counsel and moral support. For this reason, he became known among the people as a “shaykh of the masses.”⁵² According to historical sources, Dukchi Eshon wielded considerable influence throughout the Fergana Valley, particularly in the regions of Namangan and Andijan. He consistently promoted the ideals of justice, integrity, faith, and social unity among the population. Dukchi Eshon’s name is most often associated

⁵⁰ Babadjanov, B. M. *Manāqib-i Dūkchī Eshon*. – Almati: 2004. – B. 452.

⁵¹ Komatsu, Hisao. “Hagiographic Literature in Central Asia in the 19th Century.” *Acta Slavica Iaponica*, vol. 17, 2000, pp. 45–68.

⁵² Kügelgen, Anke von. *Legitimations of Authority in Central Asia: The Case of Naqshbandiyya*. – Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 2002. – P. 201.

with the Andijan uprising of 1898, which symbolized both the socio-political discontent of the local Muslim community and the spiritual resistance inspired by Sufi leaders.

Through his spiritual influence, Dukchi Eshon played an active role in awakening the moral and religious consciousness of the people against oppression, although some researchers emphasize that he did not directly command the rebellion as a military movement.⁵³ In 1898, he was arrested by Russian colonial authorities and executed the same year. Despite this, in the memory of the people, Dukchi Eshon is not remembered as a “rebel instigator,” but rather as a gnostic (‘arif) and shaykh who sacrificed his life for faith, freedom, and conscience. His activities strengthened among the populace the ideas of spiritual revival, national self-awareness, and inner resistance to colonial domination.

Around Dukchi Eshon gathered hundreds of disciples and students, some of whom later became prominent scholars and religious leaders. In his teachings, he emphasized maintaining a balance between Sufism (tasawwuf) and jurisprudence (fiqh), as well as between the outer (zāhir) and inner (bātin) dimensions of faith. He instilled in his disciples the principle that “knowledge attains beauty only through action,” thereby asserting that true perfection could be achieved not merely through study but through the embodiment of knowledge in righteous practice. In this sense, Dukchi Eshon can be viewed not only as a Sufi master but also as a spiritual reformer. Information about Dukchi Eshon’s life and activities is preserved primarily in the hagiographic work “Manāqib-i Dukchi Eshon,” written by one of his disciples in the late nineteenth century. This text provides extensive details about the shaykh’s life, miracles (karāmāt), spiritual guidance (irshād), and the historical events of the time. The work serves as an invaluable source not only for the study of the history of Sufism, but also for understanding the social and intellectual context of the late nineteenth century, including the spiritual state and religious consciousness of the people. Consequently, “Manāqib-i Dukchi Eshon” holds significant scholarly value for contemporary research in the fields of historiography, source studies, linguistics, and Sufi studies.

Today, the legacy of Dukchi Eshon, particularly through the work “Manāqib-i Dukchi Eshon,” plays a significant role in the revival of national spirituality and historical memory in Uzbekistan. The analysis of this text is valuable not only from a religious and Sufi perspective, but also from the standpoints of linguistics and source studies. The work represents a vivid example of the transitional stage between the Chagatai language and modern Uzbek, reflecting a harmonious combination of vernacular expressions, dialectal features, and Islamic terminology.

⁵³ Paul, Jürgen. “Hagiographic Writing in Khurasan as a Literary Genre.” *Der Islam*, vol. 70, 1993, pp. 193–209.

The manuscript consists of 165 folios and, in terms of composition, adheres to the classical Sufi genre of *manāqib* (saints' biographies). The text begins with a *basmala*, followed by sections of praise (*ḥamd*) and prophetic eulogy (*na't*), after which the virtues of renowned saints from the *Naqshbandiyya silsila* (spiritual chain) are described. The final sections narrate the birth, childhood, miracles (*karāmāt*), and relationships with disciples of Muhammad Ali (Dukchi) Eshon, providing a comprehensive portrayal of his life and spiritual influence.⁵⁴ This literary structure primarily serves to guide the reader toward a devotional perception of the shaykh's sanctity through the narration of miracles (*karāmāt*) and, subsequently, to substantiate his spiritual authority and role as a *murshid* (spiritual guide).⁵⁵ Although the author of the work is not explicitly identified, scholars suggest that it was written by one of Dukchi Eshon's close disciples. According to B. M. Babadjanov's research, the text represents a unique document reflecting the socio-religious foundations of cultural movements in the Fergana Valley during the late nineteenth century. Therefore, it is of exceptional value not only as a Sufi text, but also as a historical source.

The manuscript "*Manāqib-i Dukchi Eshon*" is currently preserved in the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Uzbekistan, within the Abu Rayhon Beruni Manuscript Collection (inventory no. 1724).⁵⁶ The existing version is not the original autograph but a copied manuscript, yet its language, content, and stylistic features provide sufficient authenticity to serve as a primary source for studying the religious and intellectual thought of the late nineteenth century. The miracles attributed to Dukchi Eshon—such as traversing great distances instantaneously, discerning the inner intentions of his disciples, and foreseeing future events—are based on the Sufi concept of "*khāriq al-ʿāda*", meaning phenomena that transcend the limits of ordinary experience. Within the history of Sufism, such *karāmāt* are interpreted as symbolic affirmations of the shaykh's spiritual rank (*walāya*) and his proximity to the Divine.

It would also be appropriate to discuss another work associated with the name of Muhammad Ali (Dukchi) Eshon. Among the writings that emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries within the Central Asian Sufi tradition, the treatise entitled "*Ibrat al-Ghāfilīn*" ("An Admonition to the Negligent") occupies a distinctive place. Structurally, the work takes the form of a *nasihat-nāma* (book of

⁵⁴ Babadjanov B. M. *Manāqib-i Dūkchī Eshon*. – Almati: 2004. – B. 463.

⁵⁵ Komatsu, Hisao. "Hagiographic Literature in Central Asia in the 19th Century." *Acta Slavica Iaponica*, vol. 17, 2000, pp. 45–68.

⁵⁶ Institute of Oriental Studies, Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Abu Rayhon Beruni Manuscript Fund, inv. no. 1724.

counsel), while in content it represents a Sufi-ethical treatise aimed at inspiring spiritual awakening, moral perfection, and the disciplining of the self (nafs).

The thematic foundation of “Ibrat al-Ghāfilīn” is built upon the concepts of awareness after heedlessness (ghafla), purification of the heart (tazkiya al-qalb), struggle against the lower self (jihād al-nafs), and attaining divine knowledge (ma’rifa). In the text, heedlessness is described as the principal enemy of human perfection, and the path to overcoming it is said to lie through remembrance (dhikr), reflection (tafakkur), obedience (ṭā’a), and honesty (ṣidq).⁵⁷ The author, by citing Qur’anic verses, Prophetic traditions (ḥadīths), Sufi aphorisms, and the sayings of Naqshbandī masters, urges the disciple to cultivate spiritual vigilance, love for the Divine (maḥabba), and noble human virtues. Thus, “Ibrat al-Ghāfilīn” serves as both a manual of moral refinement and a mirror of the ethical-spiritual thought characteristic of the late nineteenth-century Central Asian Sufi milieu.

The question of the authorship of this work remains at the center of scholarly debate. Although some researchers attribute it directly to Muhammad Ali (Dukchi) Eshon, the author’s name is not explicitly mentioned in the text. Nevertheless, the style, language, terminology, and spiritual content of the treatise correspond closely to the Naqshbandī milieu of the Fergana Valley, where Dukchi Eshon was active. Expressions such as “ṣāhib-i sulūk” (one who treads the spiritual path), “ṭahārat al-qalb” (purification of the heart), “ṣāhib-i dhikr” (the possessor of remembrance), and “sililat al-mashāyikh” (the chain of spiritual masters) are in full harmony with the fundamental concepts of Naqshbandiyya doctrine. Furthermore, the principles advanced in the text—such as “khalwat dar anjuman” (“solitude within the crowd”) and “dil ba yār, dast ba kār” (“heart with the Beloved, hands at work”)—occupy a prominent place in Dukchi Eshon’s own teachings. Therefore, many scholars, including B. M. Babadjanov and Hisao Komatsu, regard this treatise as a product of the spiritual and literary environment that developed around Dukchi Eshon’s school.⁵⁸

Linguistic analysis also supports this conclusion: “Ibrat al-Ghāfilīn” was written in the final transitional form of the Chagatai language, which was moving toward modern Uzbek during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The text combines Arabic and Persian terminologies with lexical elements from the Fergana–Namangan dialects, indicating that the work was composed for a broad, vernacular audience rather than for a limited scholarly elite. Scholars generally date the treatise to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a period when the

⁵⁷ Komatsu, Hisao. “Hagiographic Literature in Central Asia in the 19th Century.” *Acta Slavica Iaponica*, vol. 17, 2000, pp. 45–68.

⁵⁸ Babadjanov, B. M. “Naqshbandiyya in the Fergana Valley.” In: *Central Asian Sufism Studies*. – Tashkent, 2006. – B. 54.

Fergana Valley experienced an active proliferation of written Sufi works in genres such as *manāqib* (hagiographies), *nasihat-nāma* (didactic admonitions), and *risāla* (spiritual treatises). “*Ibrat al-Ghāfilīn*” emerged precisely as a product of this literary and mystical revival, reflecting the intellectual and spiritual currents of its age.

Several manuscript copies of the work are known today. The most significant among them is preserved in the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Uzbekistan, under inventory number 2319. This copy is a later transcription that does not mention the author’s name, yet its stylistic features and terminology reveal a direct connection to the Dukchi Eshon school of spiritual guidance (*irshād*). “*Ibrat al-Ghāfilīn*” represents an invaluable source for the study of Sufism, history, and linguistics. It serves as a primary document for understanding the religious thought, Sufi-ethical values, and spiritual education system of the late nineteenth century. Alongside “*Manāqib-i Dukchi Eshon*,” it is regarded as one of the key written sources that complement and illuminate the teachings and spiritual legacy of Dukchi Eshon.⁵⁹

In conclusion, Muhammad Ali (Dukchi) Eshon stands as one of the most prominent figures in the religious and spiritual life of Central Asia at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. His activity was not confined merely to religious leadership or Sufi practice; rather, it reflected the complex political, social, and cultural dynamics of his era. The most significant aspect of his legacy lies in his ability to interpret and convey the principles of the Naqshbandiyya order to the common people in a simple yet profoundly philosophical form. Throughout his *irshād* (spiritual guidance) activities, Dukchi Eshon devoted particular attention to the education of disciples, their spiritual development, and the strengthening of moral values within society. Through his life and work, the social, political, and mystical dimensions of Sufism are revealed as an integrated and dynamic whole. Overall, the works associated with Dukchi Eshon – namely “*Manāqib-i Dukchi Eshon*” and “*Ibrat al-Ghāfilīn*” – are of inestimable importance for reconstructing the religious and spiritual landscape of the Fergana Valley, for studying the Islamic consciousness of the late nineteenth century, and for demonstrating the continuity of Sufi traditions in Central Asia.

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