



A Historical Study of the Interaction between Mongol Women and Sufis during the Ilkhanid Era

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Extended Abstract

One of the periods worthy of reflection and research in Iranian history is the period between the invasion of Genghis Khan in the early 13th century and the establishment of the Safavid Empire in the early 16th century. This period profoundly affected the Iranian world, and the cultural flourishing during this time is one of the most important study topics. One of the key criteria for evaluating the culture and civilization of the Ilkhanate era is the attention—or lack thereof—given to women and their position in various social spheres. With the rise of the Mongol Ilkhanates, a favorable environment was created for the presence of women in Iranian society, allowing their presence and influence to be greater than in any other period in Iranian history. This development was considered a revolution in Iranian society at the time, resulting in the widespread involvement of women in political and social affairs and in various spheres of government. Sufism, which had long been rooted in the individual and social lives of the people of Iran as the institutionalized religion before the devastating Mongol invasion, found new life and vitality during the Ilkhanid period, entering its greatest era of prosperity.

The emergence of great Sufi orders, such as the Kubrawiyya, Nurbakhshiyya, and Naqshbandiyya, supported this view. The reasons for this were, first, the political and social turmoil caused by the Mongol invasion, as well as the function of Sufism in alleviating the suffering and misfortunes of the plundered and oppressed people. Second, the rise of great Sufi sheiks during the Ilkhanid era contributed to the revival of Sufism and the expansion of Sufi activities among the general public and even among the Ilkhanids. In this revival, researchers have particularly highlighted the roles of the Rumi of Balkh and Ibn Arabi. Another key factor in the growth and expansion of Sufism during the Ilkhanate era was the support of the Muslim Ilkhanids and their ministers for the prominent Sufi sheiks of the time, such as Ala al-Dawla Semnani and Safi al-Din Ardebili. Furthermore, Sufism during this era had distinct characteristics, including the increasing influence of Shiism and the emergence of Shiite tendencies among Sufis. This was due to the rise and spread of orders such as the Kubrawiyya



(with sheiks like Najm al-Din Kubra, Saad al-Din Hamawiya, and Ala al-Dawla Semnani), as well as the Juriya and Safavid orders.

One of the effects of Sufism on the society, thought, and culture of the Ilkhanate era was the influence, interest, and enthusiasm of Mongol women for the ascetic conduct and miracles of Sufi sheiks. The first political and social need, not only of the Ilkhanate state but of any other state, was to gain legitimacy in society and transform their power into authority. To achieve this, the Mongols turned to sheiks, who had significant influence in that time's social and religious spheres. It is an undeniable fact that the sheiks' dominance over public opinion was so strong that if they did not approve of the government, they were considered a dangerous enemy to the state.

On the other hand, the Mongols were highly superstitious and greatly influenced by the virtues of the Sufis. A Mongol deeply feared a cleric and his anger and influence, and this superstitious awe was later transferred to the "elder." Another reason the Mongols supported the Sufis was their social function in fostering a sense of weakness and submission in society. By preaching poverty, the influence of divine will in historical events, and submission to divine destiny, the Sufis weakened the spirit of resistance among the people against foreigners. These factors led the Mongols to seek the assistance of the Sufis in managing affairs. For example, the position of Sheikh al-Shiyukhi was included among the government's official positions, and in 618 AH, the administration of Tabriz was entrusted to a group of nobles and sheiks.

Mongol women were an influential class in society, playing a significant role in various matters, just as men did. They enjoyed considerable power in the Ilkhanate government, sharing state affairs with their husbands, and were considered one of the Mongol government's four pillars (Ilkhan, women, emerging aristocracy, and subjects). Women's relationships with Sufi sheiks were among the most important factors in spreading Islam in communities under the rule of the Ilkhanates, much like the influence of Christianity and Buddhism. As one of the influential elements in the Ilkhanate government, Mongol women contributed significantly to the financial and spiritual support of Sufism and Sufi sheiks.

This article, using a descriptive-analytical approach, aims to analyze the relationships between Mongol women and Sufi sheiks, seeking a reasoned answer to the question: What strategy did the women of the Ilkhanate era adopt in their interactions with the Sufis of their time? Several issues are worth considering when examining the relationships of Mongol women with Sufis. Given the alienation of the Mongols in Iranian society and the religious considerations raised for the government apparatus, Ilkhanid women took important strategic actions in Iranian society during that period to comply with court policies and demonstrate their adequacy.

Their actions were in line with the instructions of the Mongol Ilkhanids, and the prosperity of the Mongol tribal territory expanded as imperial power grew. The opinions of the Mongol khatuns were considered in the administration of the empire. The relative freedom of women in various matters of society, along with the religious freedom and tolerance the Ilkhanids exhibited in interacting with Islamic and non-Islamic



communities, accelerated the process of women's relations with Sufi sheiks. Strong hidden traditions within Iranian society influenced the actions of the Mongol khatuns in their interactions with Sufi women. Measures such as giving gifts, seeking blessings from Sufi women, and the mutual spiritual support exchanged between the sheiks and women are among the factors examined in this study of Mongol women's interactions with Sufi women.

Keywords: Ilkhans, Mongol women, Sufis, religious tolerance, interaction and support.



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