

The History of the Spread of Naqshbandi in the Ottoman Empire

Ismailov Gafurjon Khasanovich*

Doctoral Candidate (PhD), Bukhara State University, Bukhara, Republic of Uzbekistan.
Corresponding Author Email: ismoilov9191@mail.ru



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ABSTRACT

Sufi orders, particularly the Naqshbandi, played an exceptional role in the development of the Ottoman Empire. In this regard, the relations between Central Asia and Turkey go back to centuries-old roots. Naqshbandi shaykhs and dervishes held a special place in the trade, cultural, and socio-economic relations between the two brotherly peoples. This article provides information about the arrival of Naqshbandi in the Ottoman territories, its history, development, and prominent shaykhs.

Keywords: Naqshbandi Order; Ottoman Empire; Sufism; Central Asia; Bukhara; Anatolia; Istanbul Tekkes; Sufi Networks; Naqshbandi Shaykhs; Dervishes; Tekke Culture; Islamic Spirituality; Sunni Sufism; Religious Reform.

1. Introduction

The Naqshbandi order was founded in the 14th century in Bukhara by Bahauddin Naqshband (d. 791/1389), and is named after him [1]. The Naqshbandi order is considered the continuation of the Khwajagan order, which was formed in Khorasan in the 12th century by Sufi masters and later reached Bukhara through them [2]. Therefore, it may be said that the Naqshbandi order emerged as a new and distinctive Sufi order arising from the synthesis of the Sufi culture of the Khorasan region and the madrasa traditions of Bukhara [3].

1.1. Study Objectives

This study aims to explore the historical spread and influence of the Naqshbandi order within the Ottoman Empire by focusing on its origins, development, and key actors. The specific objectives of the study are:

to trace how the Naqshbandi order entered Ottoman lands and the historical conditions that supported its expansion.

to examine the role played by Naqshbandi shaykhs and dervishes from Central Asia in strengthening religious, cultural, and social ties between Central Asia and the Ottoman world.

to highlight the contributions of influential Naqshbandi figures and reformers, particularly those who shaped the order's spiritual outlook and institutional structure over time.

to analyze the establishment and distribution of Naqshbandi tekkes and their significance in Ottoman urban and religious life.

to assess the relationship between the Naqshbandi order and the Ottoman state, especially during periods of political reform and centralization.

to clarify the spiritual practices and guiding principles of the Naqshbandi order that distinguished it from other Sufi traditions in the Ottoman context.

2. Methodology

In this article, the travelogues of migrants, historical works written by historians of the 16th–19th centuries, the memoirs of Muslims who travelled for Hajj, archival materials, as well as official documents, reports, and gravestone inscriptions preserved in tekkes up to the present day, were comparatively examined. Statistical, biographical, and historical-comparative methods were used in the writing of the article.

3. Discussion and Results

Unlike other Sufi orders, the Naqshbandi traces its spiritual lineage back to the Prophet (peace be upon him) through Abu Bakr. Despite this information, long-standing Sufi orders generally do not have a single founder. For this reason, it is difficult to state precisely in which year the Naqshbandi order was established. The reason is that the intellectual foundations of the order were formed based on earlier traditions. Nevertheless, in order to classify the order and distinguish it from other traditions, it became necessary to assign it a name. In this context, it became customary to name the order after one of its leading and influential shaykhs. Thus, not every Sufi order is necessarily named after its actual founder.

Before receiving its current name, the Naqshbandi order was known by three different names. Initially, it was called Siddiqiyya, referring to the epithet “Siddiq” of Abu Bakr. Since one of the names of the 9th-century shaykh Bayazid Bistami was Tayfur, the order later became known as Tayfuriyya. Before the name Naqshbandi was adopted, the order used the name Khwajagan, meaning “masters” or “shaykhs.” Eventually, after Muhammad Bahauddin Naqshband, who was known as Shah-i Naqshband, the order came to be called Naqshbandi [4].

There were important shaykhs and historical periods that played a significant role in the expansion and consolidation of the Naqshbandi order. One of them was Ubaydullah Ahrar, who lived in the 15th century and contributed greatly to the strengthening of the order in Central Asia. Under his leadership, all Naqshbandi groups were united. He was also active in political affairs and supported Abu Sa'id Mirza in the succession struggle during the Timurid era. As a result, after Abu Sa'id Mirza ascended the throne, the status of the order became even stronger [5].

Another important period in the history of the Naqshbandi order is associated with the activity of Ahmad Sirhindi, who lived between 1564 and 1624. This era is viewed as a period of reform during which significant changes occurred in the intellectual structure of the order. Sirhindi reconsidered the doctrine of *Wahdat al-Wujud* (the unity of existence), which he had previously accepted, and came to understand that it posed a danger to Islamic thought and to the doctrine of the order. Therefore, he advanced the idea of *Wahdat al-Shuhud* (the unity of witness). In the teaching of *Wahdat al-Wujud*, the prevailing view is: “Everything is Him, that is, the Creator,” while in the concept of *Wahdat al-Shuhud*, the idea is: “Everything is from Him, meaning everything is His reflection.” In addition, Sunnism remained the dominant doctrinal orientation within the Naqshbandi order [6].

Sirhindi's reform further strengthened the Naqshbandi order's adherence to the Sunni tradition. As a result, even some religious scholars who had maintained a more distant stance toward Sufi doctrine began to feel a closer affinity with the Naqshbandi path, increasing its influence [7].

The first Naqshbandi *tekke* in Anatolia was established in the 15th century in Amasya by Bedreddin Mahmud Chalabi. The first shaykh of this *tekke* was Mahmud Bukhari, one of the successors of Bahauddin Naqshband [8]. Until the reign of Bayezid II, the Amasya *tekke* remained affiliated with the Naqshbandi order; however, it later came under the influence of the Khalwatiyya order. In subsequent periods, the Naqshbandi order divided into various branches and gained opportunities for wide expansion across Anatolia. One of the most important branches of this order was the Khalidi branch, founded by Mawlana Khalid Baghdadi. This branch began to spread rapidly particularly after the closure of the Janissary corps (*Yeniçeri Ocağı*) and, in parallel, the state-imposed ban on the Bektashi order [9].

During the reign of Sultan Mahmud II, the Khalidi branch of the Naqshbandi order can be divided into two stages. The first stage occurred particularly during the period of the Greek uprising. During this time, the influence of Sunni Islam increased both in Ottoman society and in state administration, and the Khalidi branch supported this policy. Consequently, the Khalidi order gained the attention and support of many members of the elite and entered a period of rise.

The second stage emerged following the abolition of the Bektashi order. Due to modernization and centralization policies, the reforms carried out by the government intensified. However, representatives of the Khalidi branch expressed a critical attitude toward the reforms, and as a result, some of them were exiled by Sultan Mahmud II [10].

The primary objective of the firm measures taken by Sultan Mahmud II was to reform the state system that had fallen behind the times as a result of modernization and to centralize all authority. In this process, it was considered necessary to eliminate elements that posed potential danger to the state. Under the leadership of Halet Efendi, a campaign against the Khalidi branch began and yielded results in a short time [11]. As a result of the measures adopted by 1828, almost all members of the Khalidi branch were exiled from Istanbul to Sivas [12].

Thus, Sultan Mahmud II resolved the issue of the Khalidi branch, which had acquired significant political influence and power in a short period of time, and eliminated another obstacle to the reforms he had planned.

Within the Naqshbandi order, there are eleven fundamental principles that disciples must observe in daily life and during the practice of dhikr. These principles are known as *Kalimat-i Qudsiyya*. Eight of them are attributed to Abdulkhaliq Ghijduvani, while three are attributed to Bahauddin Naqshband [13].

These principles consist of the following:

1. Valuing every breath
2. Walking with one's head lowered
3. Moving from wrongdoing toward goodness
4. Feeling only the presence of God even when in a crowd
5. Constantly remembering God
6. Keeping the heart distant from worldly matters

7. Always keeping God in mind
8. Maintaining self-control in every situation
9. Observing the prescribed number of recitations
10. Performing dhikr with an understanding of its meaning

In the Naqshbandi order, dhikr was sometimes performed collectively, and this form was called Khatm-i Khojagan [15]. Initially, this dhikr was recited with the intention that a wish be fulfilled or that harm be averted. From the 18th century onward, it began to be performed regularly and in various forms [16].

The Khatm-i Khojagan dhikr was recited in the following order:

- Surah al-Fatiha – 7 times
- Salawat – 100 times
- Surah al-Inshirah – 79 times
- Surah al-Ikhlās – 1001 times
- Surah al-Fatiha – again 7 times
- Salawat – again 100 times

After this, a supplication (du‘a) was made.

Another form of dhikr in the Naqshbandi order is Rabita.

Through rabita, disciples would envision the image of their shaykh and seek to receive spiritual grace from his inner power. Through this practice, they felt that they were spiritually together with the shaykh and believed that in this way their hearts would be purified from the evils of worldly life [17].

The lists show that within the inner city, where there were 104 tekkes in total, the Naqshbandi order possessed 51 tekkes. In the Eyüp district, the Naqshbandi order was the second Sufi order with the largest number of tekkes, which distinguishes it from other orders in this area. After the Naqshbandi order, the order with the next largest number of tekkes was the Khalwatiyya order, which had 8 tekkes in this region.

All Uzbek tekkes also belonged to the Naqshbandi order and represented the group with the largest tekke network. In the Naqshbandi tradition, there is no system of a central tekke, *pir* house, or *ositona* (main center). Therefore, it is difficult to make a precise comparison in this regard.

In the Jarrahpaşa area—which includes Kocamustafapaşa, Şehremini, and Jarrahpaşa—the Naqshbandi tekkes were observed to be densely concentrated along the Silivrikapı road. Notably, three tekkes existed near the Hekimoğlu Ali Pasha tekke complex, located among gardens associated with the Khalwatiyya and Qadiriyya orders.

Among the main tekkes, the Boli Süleyman Agha tekke—referred to as the “Naqshbandi Boli Tekke near Silivrikapı”—was located in this region and had a community of 38 residents.

In areas inhabited by non-Muslim populations—particularly in Yedikule and Samatya—there were no Naqshbandi tekkes. However, outside the city walls, across from the Kazlıçeşme and Yeniköy Mevlevihane, there were two Naqshbandi tekkes.

4. Conclusion

The mutual affinity observed in some tekkes shared by the Mevlevi and Naqshbandi orders is also evident here. The Naqshbandi tekkes in this area were generally established at key points where tekkes were typically concentrated. Since numerous wooden houses were surrounded by many charitable buildings of various sizes, it is highly likely that the tekkes were located among these structures in accordance with the needs and demands of the local population.

Along with the two tekkes located outside the city walls, there were a total of 11 Naqshbandi tekkes in this region. The presence of 11 Naqshbandi tekkes alongside 36 Khalwatiyya tekkes indicates the dominant position of the Khalwatiyya order in this area. Of course, this does not mean that the Khalwatiyya order was equally widespread in all neighborhoods.

In conclusion, among the Islamic Sufi orders, the Naqshbandi order spread more widely and more rapidly throughout the Ottoman Empire. Its proximity to political circles, its strong emphasis on education, and its special care for the needy were likely key factors contributing to this development.

5. Future Research Suggestions

Future research could benefit from comparing the Naqshbandi order with other Sufi orders in the Ottoman Empire in order to better understand their different roles, methods, and social influence.

A deeper examination of Ottoman archival sources may help clarify how relationships between Naqshbandi shaykhs and the state evolved during periods of political reform and centralization.

More localized studies focusing on individual cities or regions could shed light on how local conditions influenced the establishment and activities of Naqshbandi tekkes.

Future studies might explore the everyday religious life of Naqshbandi followers, particularly their roles in education, charity, and community organization.

Interdisciplinary approaches drawing on history, sociology, and religious studies could offer a richer and more nuanced understanding of the long-term impact of the Naqshbandi order.

Comparative research using both Central Asian and Ottoman sources may further highlight the transregional character of Naqshbandi networks and their lasting cultural influence.

Declarations

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Consent for publication

The author declares that he/she consented to the publication of this study.

Authors' contributions

Author's independent contribution.

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