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## **THE ROLE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF SACRED PLACES AND SHRINES IN THE ETHNOCULTURE OF THE UZBEK PEOPLE**

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### **Abstract**

This article analyzes the concept of ziyorat, the history of studying sacred sites and shrines in Uzbekistan, as well as the pilgrimage rituals associated with these sacred places and shrines of the Uzbek people. In preparing the article, extensive use was made of materials from ethnological field research conducted within the Tashkent oasis.

**Keywords:** Place of pilgrimage, mentality, national value, Islamic religion, holy place, Zangi-ata, patriotism, culture, ritual, nature.

### **O‘ZBEK XALQI ETNOMADANIYATIDA MUQADDAS QADAMJO VA ZIYORAGOHLARNING O‘RNI VA AHAMIYATI**

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### **Annotatsiya**

Ushbu maqola ziyorat tushunchasi, O‘zbekistonda muqaddas qadamjo va ziyoratgohlarning o‘rganilish tarixi, shuningdek, o‘zbek xalqining muqaddas qadamjo va ziyoratgohlar bilan bog‘liq ziyorat marosimlari tahlil qilingan. Maqolani tayyorlashda Toshkent vohasi miqyosida o‘tkazilgan etnologik dala tadqiqotlari materiallaridan keng foydalanilgan.



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**Kalit so‘zlar:** ziyoratgoh, mentalitet, milliy qadriyat, etnomadaniyat, islom dini, muqaddas qadamjo, Zangi ota, vatanparvarlik, madaniyat, marosim, tabiat.

## 1. Relevance

Among the peoples of the world, the Uzbek nation stands out for its rich cultural heritage, values, and unique customs and traditions. The material and spiritual wealth that has been formed and refined by our people over the centuries represents a great achievement of human intellect and thought. Throughout life, a person draws spiritual nourishment, strength, and support from the priceless spiritual heritage passed down from their ancestors. In particular, it would not be wrong to say that sacred sites and places of pilgrimage, along with influencing the formation of the Uzbek mentality, have become an integral part of ethnoculture.

These shrines serve not only as spiritual sources for people who come from near and far to visit them, but also as places of interaction between different individuals and cultures. Moreover, they play an important role in shaping humane feelings in the upbringing of the younger generation.

At the same time, research on sacred pilgrimage sites contributes to the illumination of the historical foundations, development paths, and values of the traditional culture of the Uzbek people.

## 2. Methods

The article is written based on generally accepted historical methods – the principles of historicism, comparative-logical analysis, sequence, and objectivity. The earliest information about the shrines located in the territory of Uzbekistan began to appear in the works of Muslim historians from the 10th century. For instance, *The History of Bukhara* written in 944 by Abu Ja’far Narshakhi is considered a work that extensively describes ethnographic materials concerning the social and political life, religious beliefs, and rituals of the local population. In studying the history of shrines, the works of scholars such as M.E. Masson, Yu.V. Knorozov, V.V. Bartold, M.S. Andreev, S.P. Tolstov, O.A. Sukhareva, P.P. Ivanov, A. Ranovich, L.Yu. Mankovskaya, G.P. Snesev, V.N. Basilov, V.A. Arshavskaya, S. Mirkhasilov, Dj.X. Karmysheva and E.V. Rtveldze, are of great



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importance. These sources mainly provide scholarly information about the cult of saints, the architectural structure of shrines, epigraphy, and archaeological monuments [1].

### **3. Research Results**

The term – *ziyorat*, widely used among our people, is of Arabic origin and means “to visit a certain place or person.” In Islam, *ziyorat* refers to visiting sacred tombs, holy sites, and shrines and performing certain rituals there.

In Islam, visiting graves is considered a virtuous act. According to hadiths, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said: “*Visit the graveyards, for they remind you of the Hereafter.*” [2] Remembering the Hereafter deters a person from evil and draws them toward goodness.

The ritual of pilgrimage usually involves reciting certain verses from the Qur’an (especially Surah al-Fatiha) at the gravesite, praying for the deceased, and performing acts of charity or almsgiving.

According to Islamic belief, when visiting the tombs of saints, seeking help from their spirits, asking for the fulfillment of wishes, healing from illnesses, or being granted children is impermissible, as the realization of such requests lies only within the will of Allah.. Whether the person visited is a prophet, saint, or Sufi sheikh, instead of asking them for salvation, it is appropriate to pray for their souls and dedicate the rewards of charity and good deeds to them. Worshipping any person is considered *shirk* (idolatry) in Islam.. Visiting shrines is a component of Uzbek ethnoculture, and over the centuries, a unique etiquette of pilgrimage has formed.

By the 8<sup>th</sup> century, with the establishment of Islam in Mawarannahr (Transoxiana), significant political and social changes occurred, as Islam introduced a new ideology. Consequently, pre-existing religious beliefs and customs among the population merged with Islamic traditions.. For example, the veneration of saints emerged as a synthesis of pre-Islamic ancestor worship and Islamic beliefs. Therefore, many sacred sites that existed before Islam later became associated with Muslim saints.. Sacred sites and pilgrimage places across not only Uzbekistan but all of Central Asia are connected with figures such as the Prophet Muhammad’s companions and other revered individuals – Hazrat



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Uthman ibn Affan, Ali ibn Abu Talib, Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqas, Akosha, Mu'adh ibn Jabal, Hazrat Bilal, Abdurrahman ibn A'waf, Uwais Qarani, Qutham ibn Abbas, Ja'far ibn Husayn Sayyid Battol Ghozi, and Akhtamsahoba.. Although it is historically inaccurate to claim that these figures lived in our land, their names were widely used by Islamic preachers in the fight against local pre-Islamic beliefs. For instance, shrines associated with the name of Hazrat Ali can be found in various regions of our republic. According to researcher V.L. Ogudin, there are 18 shrines connected to Hazrat Ali in the Fergana Valley.

By the medieval period, the process of Islamization of ancient sacred sites had been completed, and they were transformed into the tombs of Muslim saints or "qadamjo" (places touched by saints).. It was believed that large trees grew where saints had come, springs emerged where their hands or staffs touched, and the marks of their hands and feet remained in places where they prayed.. The customs practiced at these places were adapted to Islamic norms, and symbolic graves, cells (*hujra*), and *chillahona* (a retreat cell for forty days of solitary prayer and supplication to God) were built.

This can be illustrated by the *Masjid Ali* shrine located in the Tashkent region. The *Masjid Ali* shrine is associated with Hazrat Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).. As is known, Hazrat Ali is revered among Muslims as part of the *Ahl al-Bayt* (the Prophet's family), and his descendants, the *Sayyids*, are regarded as the Prophet's successors. According to local beliefs, Hazrat Ali came to this place on his legendary horse, Duldul. While resting under a plane tree and seeking water for ablution before prayer, he prayed to Allah, and a spring miraculously appeared. Therefore, the locals named the spring *Avliyo Bulok* ("Saint's Spring"). Hazrat Ali watered his horse Duldul with this spring water.. Today, the shrine is famous for its 750–800-year-old giant plane tree and its healing "sacred spring," the water of which contains silver elements and is believed to cure various skin diseases. Pilgrims pray for Hazrat Ali and offer sacrifices. Traditionally, people used to tie pieces of cloth to the tree while making a wish (though this practice is currently prohibited as it is considered *shirk*).

**Sacred Sites (Mausoleums)** are among the main elements of local Islam, where local saints are depicted as bearers of divine power, enriched with Quranic and Sufi concepts as well as folk beliefs. The word "*awliyo*" (saint) derives from the



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Arabic word “*wali*”, meaning “friend of Allah” or “a person close to God.”. According to Sufi teachings, a saint is someone who knows the essence and attributes of God, fulfills His commands, refrains from sinful acts, and renounces worldly pleasures and luxuries. In Islamic tradition, saints are people who have attained closeness to Allah due to their deeds or virtues, and whose prayers are believed to be answered. Saints are ranked below prophets.

In folk beliefs, saints are portrayed as miracle-workers, patrons (*pirs*) of various professions, agriculture, and animal husbandry, and as possessors of boundless power influencing human life. For instance, Noah (Nuh alayhissalom) is considered the patron of carpenters; Prophet Daniel – of soap makers and weavers; Khidr (Hazrat Khizr) – of farmers and bringer of blessings.. Among Uzbeks, faith in saints is explained as follows: “*A saint is not God, but not separate from God.*”

It is known that the fame of sacred mausoleums is determined by the miraculous power (*karomat*) of the saint buried there. If a saint was known for performing many miracles during his lifetime, his tomb would be crowded with pilgrims after his death. Remembering and visiting such revered friends of Allah, i.e., saints, has long been regarded as a virtuous deed. When passing by sacred places, people would greet them; if on horseback, they would dismount, visit the shrine, and then continue their journey.. Destroying shrines or sacred mausoleums was considered sinful, and it was believed that those who did so would suffer misfortune.

Pilgrims usually recite prayers dedicated to the soul of the saint, ask for help in resolving their problems, offer sacrifices, and leave donations at the shrine. In general, shrines served as a means of showing respect and faith toward saints, bringing spiritual satisfaction, and fulfilling each person’s noble wishes and desires.. At sacred sites and shrines, traditional rituals included circling the saint’s tomb seven times, touching the gravestone with the face, lighting candles for the saint’s soul, tying cloth pieces to trees while making wishes, and tossing coins into springs.. Childless people prayed for children, the sick for healing, and craftsmen, farmers, and herders for abundance.. People usually visited shrines in spring (April and May) and autumn (September and October), and most often on Wednesdays, Saturdays, and Sundays.



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In the Republic, sacred sites and mausoleums associated with Islamic “holy” places and veneration can be historically and socially divided into the following groups:

1. Pre-Islamic shrines originating from the Zoroastrian and pagan periods, which were later adapted by some Islamic clerics to suit their own interests;
2. Sufi shrines, where representatives of Sufism were sanctified and their graves became holy sites;
3. Tombs of certain rulers and officials who were elevated to the rank of saints, and mausoleums built at their burial sites;
4. Graves of craftsmen, who were later revered as saints;
5. Mausoleums of those who resisted the political and religious authority of rulers and were later venerated as saints by the common people [3].

Looking back at history, during the Soviet era, due to ideological pressure, all religious beliefs and customs were suppressed. After securing political and military dominance, the Bolsheviks launched a massive campaign against religion. In the 1930s, *waqf* (religious endowments) of religious institutions (mausoleums, shrines, madrasas, mosques, and schools) were completely abolished, and the institutions themselves were closed. Many Muslim scholars were executed or exiled to Siberia and other regions of the former USSR. Their buildings were repurposed as residential houses, warehouses, workshops, and similar facilities.

Because mausoleums and shrines were viewed as tools of religious exploitation and centers of superstition, they were neglected, lost their historical and architectural appearance, and some were completely destroyed. For example, the Zangiota Shrine, one of the major religious centers of Central Asia, was closed in 1930 under Soviet ideological influence, and religious figures were persecuted. Local production workshops were set up within the architectural complex, and madrasa cells were turned into workers’ living quarters. Due to industrial activities, the unique architectural monument gradually began to deteriorate. Since no restoration work was carried out, the Zangiota Mausoleum and the Namozgoh Mosque reached an irreparable state. Although the mosque was officially reopened in 1945, it was closed again in 1946 and converted into an atheist museum.

There are many such examples in history.. Despite the Soviet regime's violent policy of secularization, it could not completely eradicate the Uzbek people's religious spirit.. In traditional families, the elder generation continued to introduce their descendants to the foundations of faith, Sharia laws, and Islamic ethics.. Visiting shrines and performing pilgrimage rituals gradually became family traditions.

In 1989, at the request of Muslims, the Zangiota Jome Mosque and Shrine were reopened once again.



**Figure 1. Zangiota Complex Figure 2. Zangiota Complex  
(1925) (2019)**

### **Conclusion**

In the ethnoculture of the Uzbek people, since ancient times, most of the significant events in human life have been regarded as the result of visiting sacred places. Over the centuries, belief systems related to personal issues in everyday life have evolved, influencing other important aspects within the context of the national mentality – such as love and devotion to the motherland, reverence for the pure spirits of ancestors, and the formation of moral respect and courtesy. In particular, the cult of saints at sacred sites and pilgrimage places plays an



important role in nurturing young people in the spirit of purity, faith, and diligence [4].

The spirit of patriotism, love for the homeland, and courage is embodied in figures such as Sheikh Najmiddin Kubro, who sacrificed his life defending his homeland from enemies, and Amir Temur the Great Conqueror, who fought against Mongol domination and laid the foundation of our national statehood. Likewise, the life and activity of Islam Abduganiyevich Karimov, the First President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, who ensured 26 years of independent development of Uzbekistan, serve as a model for fostering patriotism and loyalty in serving the nation.

At the entrance to the mausoleum dedicated to I. Karimov, built in 2018 at the Hazrati Khizr Mosque in the center of Samarkand, not far from the Mausoleum of the Timurids, these words are inscribed in Uzbek, Russian, and English: *“This sacred place is the eternal resting place of the First President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, a great statesman and politician, the dear and beloved son of the Uzbek people – Islam Abduganiyevich Karimov.”*. These words evoke boundless feelings of respect and reverence in the heart of every Uzbek.



**Figure 3. Mausoleum of Amir Temur  
(Samarkand)**



**Figure 4. Mausoleum of  
Islam Karimov (Samarkand)**



Pilgrimage sites associated with nature cults have also remained an inseparable part of the lifestyle of the Uzbek people for centuries. Natural shrines that emerged without human intervention – such as springs, caves, healing soils, and rare groves – have served not only as places of healing but also as sites that inspire people to love nature, enjoy its beauty, enhance their aesthetic appreciation, and cultivate in young people a sense of affection and respect toward the environment.. Due to the development of modern medicine, such pilgrimage sites today mainly function as recreational areas. Examples include Kirkqiz Spring, Machit Ali Shrine, Parpi Ota, Obishukur Spring in Tashkent region, Balikli Lake in Namangan, and Avliyo Ota and Parpi Ota shrines in Jizzakh region. These sacred places serve as zones maintaining harmony between humans and nature, and in today's world – where environmental issues are becoming more severe – they hold great ecological significance [5].



**Figure 3. The 800–850-year-old plane tree at the Chinar Bobo Shrine**

According to the etiquette of pilgrimage, it is forbidden to harm plants or living creatures within sacred sites, which is why the ecosystem in these areas has been well preserved. The veneration of ancient trees is widespread at such places, and legends about trees turning into humans or life originating from a tree are found not only in Uzbek oral folklore but also in the traditions of many nations around the world.



In the modern era of rapid globalization and growing environmental problems, shrines and sacred pilgrimage sites act as reserves for national traditions as well as for the natural ecosystem. This, in turn, calls for conducting archaeological, ethnological, hagiographical, linguistic, source-based, Islamic, and archival research at these sites

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