Mobilizing Magic: Occultism in Central Asia and the Continuity of High Persianate Culture under Russian Rule

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Introduction

Sometime between 1881 and 1885, the scholar Mullā Sayyid Maḥmūd Khwāja wrote a letter to Amir Muẓaffar (r. 1860-85), Manghit ruler of Bukhara, chiding him for his weakness in the face of Russian occupation and proposing a revitalization of science as the solution—the occult science of jafr.1 This science,

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1 This document is preserved in the State Archive of Uzbekistan (Tsentrāl’nyi Gusudarstvennyi Arkhiv Respubliki Uzbekistana: henceforth TsGARUz), F i-126 (“Qushbegi Fond”) O 1 D 1978, f. 20. The term jafr (lit., ‘calfskin’) properly designates the science of letter divination, particularly as associated with both ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib and the detached sura-initial letters of the Qurʾān (muqaṭṭaʿāt), held to contain within them all knowledge of past, present and future to the end of time. From the 16th century onward, however, jafr was in the Persianate world increasingly used metonymically to refer to the kabbalistic science of letters (ʿilm-i ḥurūf), or lettrism, as a whole, as is the case here—Maḥmūd Khwāja clearly has in mind letter or talismanic magic, not prognostication. The standard Arabic term for the occult sciences more generally, including astrology (aḥkām-i nujūm), alchemy (kīmiyā) and a variety of magical and divinatory techniques, is ʿulūm ghariba, meaning those sciences that are unusual, rare or difficult, i.e., elite; less frequently used terms are ʿulūm khafṣyya and ʿulūm ghāmida, sciences that are hidden or occult. These terms are routinely used in classifications of the sciences, biographical dictionaries, chronicles, etc. Its 19th-century European flavor notwithstanding, the term occultism is thus used here simply to denote a scholarly preoccupation with one or more of the occult sciences, while ‘science’ awkwardly translates the Arabic term ʿilm (lit., ‘knowledge’), which rather corresponds to the broader concept of scientia or Wissenschaft, including Geisteswissenschaft.
the sayyid argued, is a proven means for repelling the invaders and restoring Manghit royal prestige. Irresistibly effective both medically and militarily, it had facilitated the Bukharan victory over the rival city-state of Shahrisabz a generation earlier, and more recently forced the retreat of a Russian expeditionary force from the border town of Jam. Historical precedent for these outcomes is moreover incontrovertible: the glories of the Timurid through Manghit lines over the past 500 years were propelled in the first place by a commitment to occultism, and the fortunes of individual dynasts, including Subḥān Quli Khan (r. 1681-1702) and Abū l-Fayż Khan (r. 1711-47), rose or fell in direct measure of their level of patronage of jafr specialists at court and on campaign. Amir Temür (r. 1370-1405) himself miraculously conquered Asia and rendered the Russians tributary precisely by reason of his unprecedentedly enthusiastic embrace of the science, thereby setting the standard for his successors for centuries. A return to occultism must therefore entail a return to power.

Needless to say, these claims present a problem for modern researchers. May they be safely dismissed out of historiographical hand, grist fit only for the anthropologist’s mill? That is, should Sayyid Maḥmūd Khwāja be approached as a superstitious throwback spinning fantasies of lost glory in the face of overwhelming colonial modernity? An untutored shaman flogging his nomadic wares to sentimental, weak-minded, post-nomadic Turkic rulers in an urban Persianate environment in decline? Or was he what he claims to be—a representative member of the cosmopolitan Persianate religious-scholarly elite (ulama) tracing its intellectual and cultural genealogy back to the heyday of the Timurid Empire and beyond? And if so, what are we to make of his assertion of the central role of occultism in constellating high Turko-Mongol

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2 Amir Muẓaffar’s father, Naṣr Allāh Manghit (r. 1827-60), had finally defeated the rival city-state of Shahrisabz at great cost in 1859, though it was not definitively integrated into the Manghit amirate until 1870, and that with Russian support. Further historical context is provided in the footnotes accompanying the translation in the appendix.


4 Maḥmūd Khwāja’s positing of an unbroken political continuity between the Tuqay-Timurids (here represented by Subḥān Quli Khan and Abū l-Fayž Khan) and the Manghits who supplanted them in the mid-18th century is striking, given that the latter deposed the former under Muḥammad Rahīm Khan (r. 1747-59), and that (confusingly) the Tuqay-Timurids were Chinggisids, but not Timurids. The name of this lineage is derived not from Temür/Tamerlane, but rather from Toqay-Temür, son of Jochi, and grandson of Chinggis Khan (as opposed to Shiban son of Jochi, whose direct descendants ruled Central Asia from 1500-99).