

SCRIBAL CULTURE IN LATE 19TH CENTURY BADAKHSHAN: A CASE STUDY OF MUBARAK-I WAKHANI

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Abstract: Scribal art is a relatively new phenomenon in the remote mountainous regions of Badakhshan in Central Asia. Divided into Tajik and Afghan domains, the linguistic landscape of these regions is dominated by numerous unwritten Pamir languages, but for centuries Persian has been the language of religion, politics, education and literature. Examining the case of Mubārak-i Wakhānī, an eminent 19th century mystical poet and scholar, who was also a paper-maker, scribe and bookbinder, this study aims to understand how scribal culture evolved in a predominately oral-tradition oriented corner of the Persianate world, and to what extent Wakhānī contributed towards its further growth in terms of production, distribution and preservation of handwritten texts.

Key words: Badakhshan, Ismaili, Mubārak-i Wakhānī, Wakhan, Sufism

КУЛЬТУРА ПИСЬМЕННОСТИ В БАДАХШАНЕ КОНЦА XIX ВЕКА: НА ПРИМЕРЕ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЙ МУБАРАК-И ВАХАНИ.

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Аннотация: Активная деятельность по переписке и изготовлению книг – относительно новое явление в отдаленных горных районах Бадахшана, что в Центральной Азии. В языковом ландшафте этого разделенного на таджикскую и афганскую части региона распространен ряд бесписьменных памирских языков, однако на протяжении веков языком политики, образования и литературы региона являлся персидский. На примере Мубарак-и Вахани, выдающегося поэта-мистика и ученого XIX века, который был также мастером по изготовлению бумаги, писцом и переплетчиком, в данной работе рассматривается как развивалась культура письма в этом ориентированном преимущественно на устную традицию уголке, который находился под влиянием персидской культуры, и в какой степени Вахани способствовал дальнейшему росту этого влияния с точки зрения создания, распространения и сохранения рукописных текстов.

Ключевые слова: Бадахшан, исмаилиты, Мубарак-и Вахани, Вахан, суфизм

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Mubārak-i Wakhānī (1839–1903), a mystical poet and religious scholar, was born and spent his entire life in the village of Yamg in the Wakhan valley of modern Tajik Badakhshan. Being the author of more than sixteen books of prose and poetry in Persian, he had also a good command of the Arabic language, and wrote poetic commentaries on selected verses of the Qur'ān. Wakhānī was also interested in art, calligraphy, music, astronomy and paper-making – skills which were well-endorsed by his contemporaries as well as later observers. For instance, Faḍl' alī Bek Surkhafsar, one of the authors of the famous *Tārīkh-i Badakhshān* ('History of Badakhshan'), regarded him 'a pious man who deserved the nymph of paradise and eternity' (*Tarjamat al-Bayān*). Appreciating Wakhānī's intellectual capacity to cope with the science of his time, the famous Soviet scholar Andrey Bertels [1984] called him 'the Avicenna of Badakhshan'. There are some important studies on Wakhānī in Tajik, English and Russian including those by Abibov [1971, 1972], Iloliev [2005, 2008, 2019], Matrobov [2010] and Mirhasan [2015]. In my monograph [Iloliev 2008], I compiled his biography and thoroughly examined his often intertwined Ismaili-Sufi thoughts. This article aims to examine Wakhānī's tools and techniques of paper production, book design and the use of calligraphy and painting in his books. His major books include *Qalb al-Ṣafā* ('the Pure Heart'), *Kalām-i Sa'ādat* ('the Book of Felicity'), *Pandnāma-yi Risālat* ('the Book of Prophetic Wisdom'), *Kashf al-Ṣalawāt* ('Unveiling the Prayers'), *Ṭālib al-Maṭlūb* ('A Seeker of the Sought'), *Hājāt va Munājāt* ('the Needs and Inward Prayers'), *Dāstān-i Tafsīr-i Āyāt-i Kalām dar Haqīqat-i Mujādila-yi Iblīs va Ādam* ('Qur'ānic Commentaries on the Truth about the Dispute between Satan and Adam'), *Risāla-yi Chihil Dunyā* ('A Treatise of the Forty Worlds'), *Qaṭrat al-Baḥr* ('A Drop of the Ocean'), *Tarjamat al-Bayān* ('Clarity of Expression'), *Dīvān-i Kulliyāt* ('Collection of Poems') and many others [Iloliev 2008].

It should be noted that paper-making was one of the most challenging but remarkable skills that Wakhānī acquired in his economically disadvantaged context. As his pen-name (i.e. Wakhānī) indicates, he came from Wakhan, a remote area located between the high mountains of the Pamirs to the north and the Hindu Kush to the south, where paper was exceptionally rare and expensive commodity imported from other parts of the world. This was probably one of the reasons why Wakhānī had to develop his own skills of making paper. We are short of written sources on Wakhānī's tools and techniques of paper production, but during my PhD fieldwork [2003] I was able to gather some first-hand information about this topic from Wakhānī's close relatives – his grandson Mubārak Qadam, who was instrumental in collecting Wakhānī's manuscripts and establishing his museum-shrine (in 1994), and a 120-year old relative

Jahānārā (d. 2004). According to them Wakhānī produced his paper with a special mechanical tool called *dastgāh-i kāghaz-barār* ('the paper-making tool'), which consisted of four wooden counters stuck to a flat four-angled stone with an iron mechanic tool in the middle and an animal horn probably serving as a pipe for transmitting the materials from which the paper was made. The paper materials included rice (*birinj*), eelgrass (*ābsabz*), reeds (*qamish*), hair (*mūy*) and apricot twigs (*shulmak*). Mubārak Qadam was told by his mother (Wakhānī's daughter-in-law) how she had participated in the process of preparing the raw materials for the paper. According to her testimony, first they had to mix the rice seeds with the aforementioned materials, feed them through a hopper into a mill and then grind them into a powder. Secondly, the powder mixed with water needed to be fermented into dough and later divided into several small parts. Thirdly, the dough had to be flattened to almost paper thinness. However, it was Wakhānī's job to perform the final and most crucial process of turning it into paper, about which only he alone knew.

Wakhānī's unique paper-making tool did not survive either at his hometown of Yamg or in St. Petersburg, where it was claimed to be preserved. According to Abibov [1972, 278], until 1970–1975, the machine remained intact in the private collection of one of Wakhānī's grandsons (Zarabo, d. 1989), and that he personally witnessed its existence. Wakhānī's relatives claim that the machine was taken away by a Russian scholar from Leningrad sometimes in the late 1970s or early 1980s, but they do not remember the scholar's name or his/her academic affiliations. As my personal investigations show, none of the state academic institutions and museums of St. Petersburg seems to possess that unique historical relic. One may speculate that, if the aforementioned claim is true, then the machine must have been kept in a private collection of one of the former Soviet scholars visiting Badakhshan at the time.



A. Overview⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Photo by Damon Lynch 28.03.2014: <https://web.500px.com/photo/67345051/Museum-of-the-Ismaili-Sufi-Mubarak-i-Wakhani-by-Damon-Lynch/> (accessed: 30.10.2019).



B. One of the walls.

Pic. 1. Inside the Museum of Mubārak-i Wakhānī. The museum is located in his hometown of Yamg in the Ishkashim district of Tajikistan. It was opened in 1994.

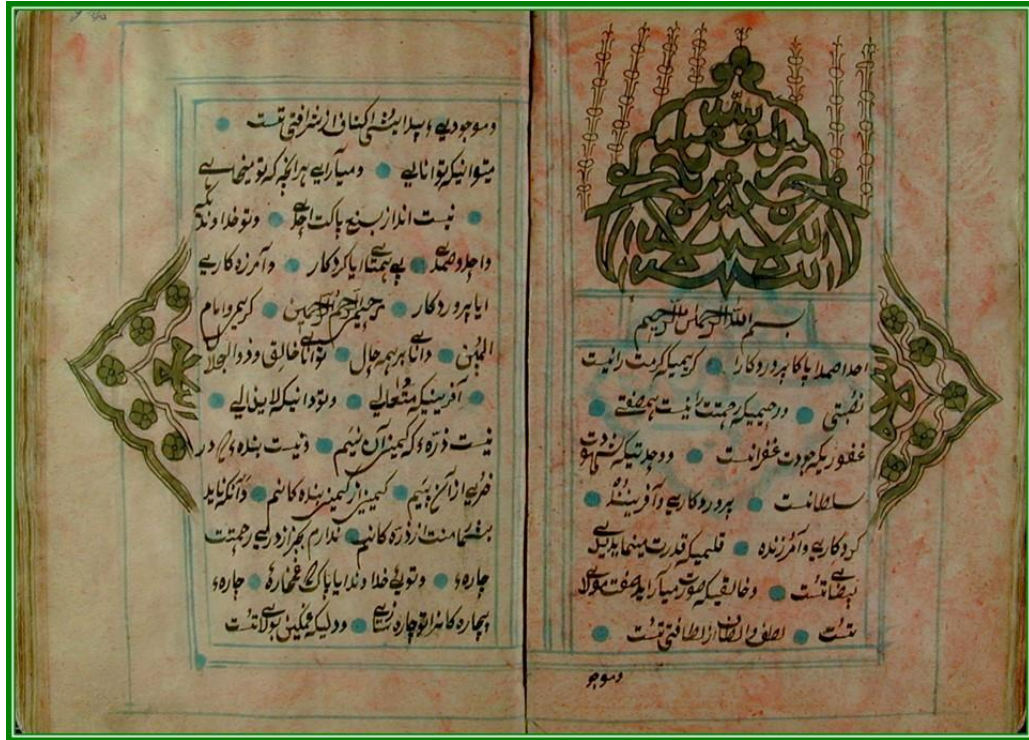
In his poems Wakhānī passionately talks about paper and its significance in his life. For instance, in *Dīvān-i-Kulliyāt*, he describes paper as a vehicle of preservation as well as transmission of his ideas and thoughts. Wakhānī was preoccupied with the job of making paper and a philosophy that he attached to its production. He asserts that the desire to write enabled him to produce paper, a silent material, which, once covered with ink, becomes the spokesperson of one's thoughts, a scheme of one's mind:

گر رفت ز دوش ما کاغذ دارم پی هوش و گوش کاغذ
دارد روشی قلم مبارک سر زد چه قدر خموش کاغذ
[*Dīvān-i Kulliyāt*, fol. 87a]

Even if I am not thinking of paper
My brain is still preoccupied by it.
When Mubārak desires to move his pen,
Dozens of silent pages will come to life.

Wakhānī's artistic designs are evident in the various forms of Islamic calligraphy and miniatures used in his books and other objects, for instance, in the ceiling of a house in Yamg. He tends to use different Islamic styles of handwriting, such as *nasta'liq*, *naskh* and *riq'ā* designed in a multi-coloured frame in which the poem is printed. The line of the frame, which is usually divided into four sub-frames, is decorated with vegetable ornaments of various sorts and shapes. On the top of the first page of each manuscript, Wakhānī draws a domed frame filled with the names of Allah, Muhammad and 'Alī. Under the domed frame, there is usually a common Islamic expression: "In the name of God, the Most Compassionate, and the Most Merciful". Usually it is the

first, second and occasionally the third and fourth pages of his books that are well decorated.



Pic. 2. A folio from “Hājāt wa Munājāt” (‘the Needs and Inward Prayers’), a book of prayers, which consists of invocations and supplications asking for divine love, mercy and forgiveness.



Pic. 3. A folio from “Tughrā-yi Sultānī” (‘the Seal of Sultan’). It is a relatively small book of panegyric invocations in the praise of the 48th Ismaili Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah.



Pic. 4. A folio from “*Dīvān-i A ‘shār*” (‘Collection of Poems’). This collection includes lyric poems on various topics, including divine love and the human effort required to gain it through selfless devotion and asceticism.

Conclusion

Mubārak-i Wakhānī lived his entire life in a remote mountainous area in the Pamirs, far away from Central Asia’s main economic and intellectual centres of the nineteenth century. Yet, he managed to challenge this milieu and test his intellectual and practical abilities by developing new knowledge and skills that hardly existed in Wakhan at that time, such as paper-making and calligraphy. After inventing a special mechanical tool, he produced paper from locally available materials to document his often intertwined Ismaili-Sufi thoughts in the form of *irfān* (gnosis) poetry. It is believed that all his books were written on his own hand-made good quality papers. Most of his manuscripts are still intact in his museum-shrine in the Yamg village of Tajikistan. His handwriting is elegantly presented in various forms of Arabic/Persian calligraphy, which also contains many elements of Islamic art including geometric figures and vegetal ornamentations. The main *kātib* (scribe) is Wakhānī himself, but some of the manuscripts were scribed by his students.

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