



The Concept of Hikma in Sufi Lore: A Brief Case Study of Khoja Ahmad Yasawi's Divan-i Hikmat

Sufi Geleneğinde Hikmat Kavramı:
Hoca Ahmed Yasavi'nin Divan-i Hikmat'ı Üzerine Kısa
Bir değerlendirme

Dr. Abdul Basit ZAFAR¹

¹University of Bonn, Germany

· azafar@uni-bonn · ORCID > 0000-0003-0840-5865

Makale Bilgisi/Article Information

Makale Türü/Article Types: Araştırma Makalesi/Research Article

Geliş Tarihi/Received: 20 Şubat/February 2025

Kabul Tarihi/Accepted: 20 Haziran/June 2025

Yıl/Year: 2025 | **Sayı – Issue:** 59 | **Sayfa/Pages:** 687-698

Atıf/Cite as: Zafar, A. B. "The Concept of Hikma in Sufi Lore: A Brief Case Study of Khoja Ahmad Yasawi's Divan-i Hikmat"
Ondokuz Mayıs Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi, 59, Aralık 2025: 687-698.

Yazar Notu/ Author Note: This study is a revised and expanded version of a paper aimed for the international symposium titled "Yasavi's Heritage in the Dialogue of Time and Culture: Humanitarian Guidelines and Challenges of Modernity," held in Turkestan on 15–16 May 2025 under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture and Information of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan. It has not yet been published.

THE CONCEPT OF HİKMA IN SUFİ LORE: A BRIEF CASE STUDY OF KHOJA AHMAD YASAWI'S DİVÂN-I HİKMAT

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the broad idea of wisdom (hikma) as articulated in Islamic history and considers the poetic Compendium of Wisdom (Divân-i Hikmat) of Khoja Ahmad Yasawi as its case study. Yasawi was a seminal Sufi saint in the religious and cultural landscape of Central Asia during the heyday of the Seljuk Empire (circa 1100-1200 CE). Yasawi's poetry and teachings evoke a lived religious experience that echoes in the spiritual imagination of Turkic Muslim communities to this very day. Like his person, his Hikmat also played a crucial role in the Islamization of the region. Khoja Yasawi's Divân is embedded in Hanafi-Mâtûrîdî scholastic discourse at large, yet it has much more to offer a believer. Each part is considered a hikmat that contains wisdom in its holistic sense. The Divân has many versions stretched across Central Asia and remained part of oral tradition, as noted by DeWeese (2013). The work stretches between biographical themes, high terms of Parisinate Sufism, zikrs, and anecdotal dialogue. Therefore, Yasawi's contribution to the Central Asian highlands transcends doctrinal supersessionism and has an invitation to self-inquiry and humility. The paper explores hikmat in a broad sense, focusing on Khoja Yasawi's Divân as an oral tradition and on his ascetic discipline, ethical focus, and way of being within his historical context. This paper not only explores the religious importance of hikma within Sufi metaphysics but also looks at how Yasawi's hikma is reflected in his poetry, providing a detailed understanding of how religious ideas and love for the divine come together in the Central Asian Sufi tradition of the Yasawi order.

Keywords: Sufi Lore, Khoja Ahmad Yasawi, Divân -î Hikmat, Central Asia, Vernacular Theology.



SUFİ GELENEĞİNDE HİKMAT KAVRAMI: HOCA AHMED YASAVI'NİN DİVÂN-İ HİKMAT'I ÜZERİNE KISA BİR DEĞERLENDİRME

ÖZ

Bu makale, İslam tarihinde ifade edilen bilgelik (hikma) kavramının genel anlamını ele almakta ve Hoca Ahmed Yasavi'nin şiirsel eseri *Divân-i Hikmeti* örnek vaka olarak incelemektedir. Yasavi, Selçuklu İmparatorluğu'nun altın çağında (yaklaşık 1100–1200 CE) Orta Asya'nın dinî ve kültürel manzarasında belirleyici

bir sufi figür olarak öne çıkmıştır. Onun şiirleri ve öğretileri, Türk Müslüman topluluklarının manevî tahayyülünde yüzyıllar boyunca varlığını sürdüren ve bugün dahi hissedilen bir dinî tecrübenin ifadesidir. Şahsiyeti gibi, *hikmet* anlayışı da bölgenin İslamlaşma sürecinde kayda değer bir rol oynamıştır. Yasavi'nin *Divânı*, Hanefî-Mâtürîdî ilahiyat söylemiyle örtüşmekle birlikte, bunun ötesinde inananlara çok daha geniş bir anlam ufku sunmaktadır. Her bölüm, bütünsel anlamda bilgelik taşıyan bir *hikmet* olarak değerlendirilmiştir. Eserin Orta Asya'da farklı versiyonları bulunmakta ve DeWeese'nin (2013) vurguladığı üzere sözlü gelenek aracılığıyla günümüze ulaşmaktadır. İçerik bakımından *Divân*, biyografik anlatılardan İran-Sufi geleneğinin yüksek tasavvufi kavramlarına, zikirlerden kısa anekdotik diyaloglara uzanan geniş bir yelpazeyi kapsar. Bu nedenle Yasavi'nin Orta Asya yaylalarındaki katkısı, salt doktriner üstünlük iddiasını aşarak bireyi öz sorgulamaya ve alçakgönüllülüğe yöneltir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sufi Geleneği, Hoca Ahmed Yasavi, Divân-İ Hikmet, Orta Asya, Halk Teolojisi.



1. INTRODUCTION

The term *hikma*, frequently rendered as “wisdom,” is one of the most fundamental concepts in Islamic intellectual and Sufi history. Unlike philosophy, in Islamic sciences the term has a multilayered understanding, i.e., *Hikma* as inferred from revelation, prophetic sayings, and Sufi aphorisms. This brief paper tries to reflect on *Divân-i Hikmat*-a compendium of Turkic Sufi poetry attributed to Khoja Ahmad Yasawi (d. 1166) as a distinctive formulation of *hikma* within Sufi lore. Yasawi, revered as Pîr-i Türkistan, holds a foundational place in the spread of Islam in Central Asia, and his works played a vital role in shaping the spiritual identity of Turkic Muslims.^[1] His *hikmat*, composed in accessible Turkic verse, are not just meant to memorized but also lived in rituals and are thought to convey important spiritual knowledge, moral guidance, and personal transformation.^[2]

[1] Devin DeWeese, “Khawaja Ahmad Yasawi as an Islamising Saint: Rethinking the Role of Sufi s in the Islamisation of the Turks of Central Asia,” in *Islamisation: Comparative Perspectives from History*, ed. A. C. S. Peacock (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 336–42.

[2] Hikmâtchi (reciters of *hikmat*). *Hikmat* is also transmitted through the oral chain of transmission, and its ritual and ceremonial performance has kept its ethos alive. Central Asian communities sing and celebrate its verses, which, as Harris observed in Uyghur traditions in Xinjiang, have healing power. Like a few other Sufi works that are transmitted in living performance of ‘textual spheres’ traversing national borders. See: Rachel Harris, “Text and Performance in the Hikmât of Khoja Ahmad Yasawi,” *Rast Müzikoloji Dergisi* 7, no. 2 (October 25, 2019): 2152–68, <https://doi.org/10.12975/pp2152-2168>.

While traditional Islamic philosophy usually explains *ḥikma* using abstract ideas, Yasawi presents wisdom as something experienced in daily life and within a community, shown through practices like self-discipline (*riyāḍa*), remembrance (*zikr*), humility (*tawāḍuʿ*), and spiritual effort (*mujāhada*). Unlike strict literalist approaches, Yasawi sees *ḥikma* as connected to changing the heart, developing good character, and seeking closeness to the Divine. In contrast to scholastic formalism, *ḥikma* in Yasawi's vision is embedded in the heart's transformation, the ethical shaping of the self, and the quest for Divine proximity (*qurba*). In Islamic intellectual history, the concept of *ḥikma* holds a central yet multifaceted role. The Qur'an describes *ḥikma* as a divine gift bestowed upon prophets and the righteous: "He gives wisdom to whom He wills, and whoever has been given wisdom has certainly been given much good."^[3]

Early Quranic exegetes, such as Mujāhid (d. 722 CE) and al-Ṭabarī (d. 923 CE), glossed al-*ḥikma* in terms of deep and thorough understanding of scripture (al-fahm fī al-kitāb) or as synonymous with prophetic conduct (al-Sunna al-nabawīyya). However, as Islamic intellectual traditions encountered Greco-Roman philosophical tradition, the term's semantic range expanded significantly. For Muslim philosophers, *ḥikma* was aligned with divine wisdom (*ḥikma ilāhiyya*) and came to denote metaphysical insight into the reality of being (*ḥaqīqat al-wujūd*). Sufi interpretations, such as those found in al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (d. 898) and later Ibn ʿArabī (d. 1240), associated *ḥikma* with the unveiling of truth (*kashf*), spiritual discernment (*basīra*), and the ethical transformation of the self (*taṣfiya al-nafs*). Therefore, *ḥikma* could be understood in a range of meaning that may include humility and self-negation in the case of Yasawi's work. It is at precisely this juncture that Sufi conceptions of *ḥikma* diverge, offering a more integrated and experiential model of wisdom.^[4] In contrast to the rationalist paradigm, Sufi articulations of *ḥikma* reframe wisdom as self-mastery as well as an inner unveiling of truth (*kashf*) that transforms the heart.

2. THE DIVĀN-İ ḤIKMAT AS A SUFİ LORE

The Divān-i Ḥikmat, attributed to Khoja Aḥmad Yasawi, is a cultural, pedagogical, and spiritual lore that bridges scholarly Islam with vernacular piety. Composed in Turkic verse, often using syllabic meters familiar from folk poetry, the work operates on multiple levels: it instructs, warns, praises, and laments. It is both communal and individual, oral and textual, esoteric and accessible. In this

^[3] *wa-man yu'ta al-ḥikmata fa-qad ūtiya khayran kathīran*; highlights that wisdom isn't just about knowledge; it requires a deep understanding and openness, placing *ḥikma* within an important context of knowledge and ethics. (Qur'an 2:269)

^[4] Kemal Yavuz Ataman, "Ahmed Yesevi and Global Wisdom," *Afro Eurasian Studies* 9, no. 1 (April 13, 2022): 46–60, <https://doi.org/10.33722/afes.1093015>.

sense, it exemplifies the lived ethos of wisdom within a Sufi milieu deeply embedded in its Central Asian context.

The hikmats, though attributed to Yasawi as examples of Turkic mystical and missionary poetry,^[5] raise a critical question: it seems implausible that verses heavily infused with Arabic and Persian would be effective tools for reaching non-Muslim Turkic tribes in the context of conversion or Islamization. It is possible that Yasawi's words, along with the efforts of his trained disciples in their preaching and ministries, did influence the spread of Islam and were later credited to their shaykh and pīr. Alternatively, this attribution may reflect a post-Soviet reconstruction of Islamic history shaped by ideological and cultural revision.^[6] Lenz-Raymann notes that Hanafism played a significant role in this broader process, as it "facilitated the Islamization of pre-Islamic norms and traditions" and "helped to escape tensions between the new and old systems of beliefs, thus accelerating the smooth adoption of Islam." The capacity to preserve familiar customs while introducing a new religious framework made the transition more accessible for Central Asian societies.

Many scholars emphasize that Hanafism law offered a more flexible approach than others: "On the whole, the legal doctrines of Abu Hanifa evidence a liberality and a respect for personal freedom that are less emphasized among other jurists."^[7] Within this framework, Sufis, particularly those aligned with the Hanafi-Maturidi tradition-played a pivotal role as creative agents: the narrators, poets, and storytellers who shaped how Islam was understood and lived. It is in this light that Khoja Yasawi's words, along with his successors' development of the Yasawi Sufi tradition, can be considered active components of Islamization among the Turkic peoples of Central Asia.^[8] They transmitted doctrinal teachings while re-narrating them through the lived experiences of communities on the social frontiers of Islam, thereby embedding the new faith within familiar cultural narratives. DeWeese indicates the Sufi shaikhs of the Yasawi tradition who, a few centuries later, developed social bonds with non-Muslim nomadic Turkic tribes. The multitudes of narratives are part of folklore, as he points out a big difference between the time before and during the Mongol era, saying that social and family connections, along with Sufis acting as 'reclassifiers' between Turkic people and

[5] DeWeese, "Khwaja Ahmad Yasavi as an Islamising Saint: Rethinking the Role of Sufi s in the Islamisation of the Turks of Central Asia," 337.

[6] DeWeese, 339.

[7] Kathrin Lenz-Raymann, *Securitization of Islam: A Vicious Circle: Counter-Terrorism and Freedom of Religion in Central Asia*, Global, Local Islam (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2014), 52.

[8] DeWeese, "Khwaja Ahmad Yasavi as an Islamising Saint: Rethinking the Role of Sufi s in the Islamisation of the Turks of Central Asia," 348–49.

Mongols,^[9] helped bridge the gap between the Mongol system and the free-spirited nomadic lifestyle, as they managed the holy sites and shrines.

One of the most significant features of Yasawi's *Divān* is its use of Old Anatolian or Chagatai Turkish—a marked departure from the prevailing literary norms of Arabic and Persian in the Islamic world of his time.^[10] By employing the mother tongue of the peoples, Yasawi democratized access to Sufi wisdom.^[11] This decision was not merely linguistic but profoundly pedagogical. It signalled a commitment to make inner truths intelligible to common believers without compromising the depth of their meaning. Yasawi's language is direct, emotive, and symbolic. It addresses the reader or listener in the second person, invoking God, the Prophet, and the murshid with intimacy and urgency. Within this linguistic and spiritual frame, wisdom takes shape as something embodied and experiential, held in collective memory, recited in prayer, and sustained in the devotional life of the Turkic communities.

3. STRUCTURE AND THEMES OF YASAWI'S DİVÂN

The extant copies of *Divān-i Hikmat* exhibit considerable variation in language and content,^[12] suggesting that they were compiled by different individuals across diverse regions. As some original *Hikmats* faded or changed over time, others were added in a similar tone and spirit, gradually reshaping the collection. These lamenting poems reflect Yasawi's theological outlook and the ethos of his spiritual path, forming a vital part of the intellectual and devotional framework among Turkic communities. The poems typically follow a didactic structure, beginning with invocations such as *bismillah*, praise for the Prophet, or expressions of the speaker's unworthiness, before turning to themes such as death, the fleeting nature of the world, the inner struggle with the *nafs*, repentance, the guidance of the *pīr*, and love for God and His Messenger. In these verses, Yasawi appears as an intensely engaged spiritual figure, an anguished seeker who confesses his shortcomings and pleads for divine mercy.

[9] DeWeese, 348–49.

[10] Cf. Daniel Beben, “Aḥmad Yasavī and the Ismāʿīlīs of Badakhshān: Towards a New Social History of Sufi-Shīʿī Relations in Central Asia,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 63, no. 5–6 (November 11, 2020): 643–81, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685209-12341523>.

[11] For a detailed study of the Yasawi Sufi tradition, see Devin DeWeese's remarks in his “Foreword” to Mehmet Fuat Köprülü's Mehmed Fuad Köprülü, *Early Mystics in Turkish Literature*, trans. Gary Leiser and Robert Dankoff, Routledge Sufi Series (London: Routledge New York, 2006), viii–xxvii; Cf. Andrew A.C.S. Peacock, *Islam, Literature and Society in Mongol Anatolia*, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 18–19, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108582124>.

[12] KEMAL ERASLAN, “AHMED YESEVÎ,” in *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (Diyanet Vakfı Yayınları), accessed October 4, 2025, <https://islamansiklopedisi.org.tr/ahmed-yesevi>.

Most of Divān has an autobiographical undertone: the very structure of the Divān becomes a pathway (sulūk) for the seeker.^[13] In his doctoral thesis (2022), Zhanbolat Sambetov explores the evolution and transmission of Hikmat verses within the broader framework of Yasawi influence in Kazakh social and cultural life. Contrary to the usual literary trajectory from orality to writing, Yasawi is shown to have reversed this flow by converting written theological knowledge into an orally transmitted mystical tradition. Over time, these poems not only formed the cornerstone of Turkic Sufi literature but were revered as quasi-scriptural texts—often referred to as the “Turkic Qur’an” or *Defter-i Sani*. While some sources claim Yasawi composed 4,400 hikmats, critical voices such as DeWeese following Aleksandr Borovkov, stress that no extant manuscript contains only Yasawi’s authentic compositions.^[14]

Fuad Köprülü’s well-known assertion that the current corpus may not contain a single authentic hikmat is echoed, yet he maintains that the style and spirit preserve Yasawi’s legacy.^[15] Sambetov surveys manuscript transmission across a wide geographical range—Berlin, Tashkent, Istanbul, Manchester, and Kashgar—highlighting 250 identifiable Hikmats and 175 manuscripts in Uzbekistan alone. He also draws attention to the gender-inclusive nature of the tradition, identifying female reciters (*Yesevi-han*) and communal settings like *otin-oy*, noting their role in preserving spiritual and didactic functions of Hikmat recitation.^[16]

4. HİKMAT (WISDOM) AS LIVED TRADITION

Divān-i Hikmat does not define wisdom (hikma) in any abstract terms; rather, it is lived, endured, suffered, and realized through spiritual discipline and inner transformation. In this section, we focus on selected *Hikmats* that exemplify how Yasawi translates esoteric insight into poetic aphorism and embodied experience. These verses reflect the Sufi understanding that true knowledge must be lived; attained through the annihilation of the self in God (*fanā*), through servanthood and humility (*‘ubūdiyya*), and through an enduring longing (*shawq*) for divine unity. In

[13] Linguistically, the Hikmats are composed in Eastern Turkic dialects (Karakhanian or Chagatai), making them accessible in modern Turkistan without translation—though comprehension requires theological and linguistic literacy. Structurally, they blend folk and classical poetic forms, using quatrains (dörtlük) and ghazal meters. Sambetov ultimately affirms that the Yasawi tradition—transmitted through disciples and successive hikmetçi poets—provided not only a resilient moral discourse but also an enduring vernacular theology in Central Asia. Zhanbolat Sambetov, “Kazakistan’ın Sosyal, Kültürel ve Siyasal Hayatında Yeseviliğin Etkileri” (Isparta, Süleyman Demirel University, 2022), 62–70.

[14] Devin DeWeese, “Ahmad Yasawi and the Divan-i Hikmat in Soviet Scholarship,” in *The Heritage of Soviet Oriental Studies*, ed. Michael Kemper, 1. issued in paperback, Routledge Contemporary Russia and Eastern Europe Series 25 (London: Routledge, 2013), 262–65.

[15] Köprülü, *Early Mystics in Turkish Literature*.

[16] Handan Akyiğit, “Ahmed Yesevi’nin Düşünce Sisteminde Hoşgörü ve Kültürel Çoğulculuk,” *Er-dem*, December 20, 2020, 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.32704/erdem.838405>.

many *hikmats*, Yasawi attributes his spiritual awakening first to his guide Arslan Baba and later to Yūsuf al-Ḥamadānī, another master encountered along his path.

The figure of the *murshid* (spiritual guide) holds a central place in Sufi tradition, serving as one who deepens acquired religious knowledge and unveils the inner dimensions of ritual and divine wisdom. The *murshid* is more than a teacher of theory or speech; he is one who has walked the path and carries the wisdom of presence, the lived spiritual state (*ḥāl*). In first *Hikmat*, Yasawi recounts the moment of spiritual inheritance, a moment filled with blessing and the symbolic transmission of the Prophetic legacy. The “trust of the Prophet” (*amānat*) given to him by Arslan Baba is not a body of textual knowledge but a living, radiant secret. This encounter marks the beginning of his initiation and the awakening of his *hikma*.

5. VERNACULAR THEOLOGY IN DIVĀN-I HİKMAT

Khoja Aḥmad Yasawi’s *hikma* represents a synthesis, a lived harmonization of Islamic law (*sharī‘a*) and the spiritual path (*ṭarīqa*), of the outer (*zāhir*) and the inner (*bāṭin*), rather than simply a confluence of theology and poetry. While firmly grounded in Sunni orthodoxy, particularly the Ḥanafī school and Māturīdī theology, Yasawi’s voice emerges as that of a poet-mystic rather than a jurist. Even so, the *Divān-i Hikmat* remains doctrinally careful in its formulations. The wisdom it conveys always remains rooted in the scriptural tradition. Yasawi does not set aside Islamic law; rather, he weaves it into a vernacular theology that speaks directly to the heart.

Yasawi’s theological context was deeply shaped by Māturīdī theology (*kalām*), which emphasized divine justice (‘*adl*), human agency (*ikhtiyār*), and the intelligibility of revelation. While Māturīdism upheld the use of reason, it consistently grounded all knowledge in the divine will. In his *hikma*, Yasawi conveys this balance through evocative poetic imagery rather than scholastic exposition. He frequently invokes themes such as the Day of Judgment (*qiyāma*), divine punishment (‘*adhāb*), and the moral accountability of the self. In *Hikmat* 10, it says: “İşitip okuyup yere girdi Kul Hoca Aḥmad.” This verse appears frequently, concluding several *hikmats*, where Yasawi’s poetic voice resonates with *adab* (spiritual etiquette). In this context, *adab* serves as a bridge between inner realization and outer conformity to the path, encompassing death, accountability, and the hope for redemption. For Khoja Yasawi, the spiritual path (*ṭarīqa*) remains inseparable from religious law. Yasawi’s choice to write in Old Turkic (Chagatai) rather than Arabic or Persian is itself an act of wisdom. By employing the vernacular, he democratized sacred knowledge and made complex theological truths accessible to nomadic and settled Turkic peoples. He translated wisdom into a language not only of words but of rhythms, rhymes, and resonances that could be recited, sung, and memorized.^[17]

^[17] “If there is a literary Turkish language spoken and written in a wide geography, a great attribute is due to the work of Pīr-e-Turkistan, Khoja Aḥmad Yasawi.” Hoca Ahmed Yesevī, *Divān-i Hikmet*,

Yasawi's diction is intentionally plain, but not simplistic. He uses repetition, imperatives, and proverbs to build mnemonic and emotional resonance. He critiques false sheikhs, worldly arrogance, and the forgetfulness of death-all in a tongue familiar to his audience. This makes Divān not an elite philosophy but a mode of vernacular theology. For instance, he offers direct criticism of those who adopt mystical appearances without grounded knowledge or sincere observance. Likewise the forementioned line from Hikmat 74 functions both defensively and pedagogically. It sets boundaries, affirms orthodoxy, and preserves the integrity of the spiritual path, ensuring it remains free from antinomian tendencies or heretical distortions. This stance holds particular significance in the Central Asian context in which Yasawi lived and taught; a region shaped by influences from futuwwa (spiritual chivalry), *malāmatī* (path of blame), and even *qalandarī* (renunciant) expressions. It expresses the inner dread of falling away from the divine path. He turns his failings into didactic narratives. The body becomes both witness and site of spiritual struggle. This aligns with Sufi principles of spiritual training (riyāda), annihilation (fanā'), and subsistence in God (baqā').

6. THE LEGACY OF KHOJA YASAWI'S DIVĀN

In the Sufi tradition, wisdom (hikma) is conveyed not through abstract doctrinal formulation alone, but through *hikāya* (narrative), parable, *manāqib* (accounts of saints), and poetic remembrance. These forms preserve theological insight along with the spiritual character and temperament of a tradition. In the case of Khoja Yasawi, hikma serves as both ethical orientation and narrative practice-a fusion of lived example, oral verse, and spiritual transmission that operates as a collective moral compass.

The hagiographic traditions surrounding Yasawi do more than recount his life; they carry ethical and metaphysical teachings within their fabric. As Devin DeWese observes, Yasawi's hagiographic image gained special resonance during the Mongol and post-Mongol periods, when Sufi communities sought to affirm their presence within shifting political and social landscapes. Yasawi appears not only as a poet or ascetic but also as an Islamizing saint, one who inspired transformation by embodying the moral and mystical weight of Islam.^[18]

ed. Mustafa Tatcı, 29 (Ankara: Hoca Ahmet Yesevi Uluslararası Türk-Kazak Üniversitesi, 2017), 16–24.

[18] Braune emphasizes the need for more nuanced approaches by tracing the Kazakhs' Islamic integration to their historical roots in the Jochid Ulus and 14th-century Islamdom. His bibliography draws upon newly accessible Central Asian sources and is intended to support scholars navigating the contested Kazakh religious history "Islam as Practiced by the Kazaks: A Bibliography for Scholars," Middle East Librarians Association, no. 78 (2005): 1–17.

Simon Michael Braune contributes to this field by offering the first annotated bibliography centred on Islam as practiced among the Kazaks, addressing a longstanding gap in the literature. He challenges inherited views shaped by Tsarist and Soviet narratives that depicted Kazakh Islam as nominal or syncretic. Braune underscores the growing scholarly agreement that binary oppositions such as Islam and shamanism, orthodoxy and heterodoxy, fail to capture the complexity of Kazakh religious life.^[19]

6.1. Oral Hagiographic Tradition

Kaymaz in his study, approaches the *Divān-i Hikmat* through a verbal and idiomatic lens, with particular focus on the use of Turkish proverbs within the text. Proverbs, as concise and anonymous expressions of ancestral wisdom shaped through generations of lived experience, offer a ready-made treasury of language for poets and storytellers.^[20] All periods of the Turkish language, from Old Turkish to the present, have employed them as a powerful literary tool. Much of the *Divān-i Hikmat* was likely preserved through oral transmission before being written down, as established by Sambetov. This oral dimension granted Yasawi's *hikma* a distinctive fluidity and capacity to adapt, enabling his voice to resonate across nomadic, semi-nomadic, and urban contexts and across historical periods and geographies.

The poetic form of these teachings-rhythmic, aphoristic, and mnemonic-made them especially suitable for memorization, repetition, and recitation. Their narratives, often framed as miraculous events, serve as allegories for spiritual transformation: how adversaries become companions, how sorrow gives way to divine grace, and how ethical change takes root in collective consciousness. This oral character is not secondary but central. It renders *hikma* an embodied and communal act, something to be performed, sung, or lived rather than merely read. In this way, Khoja Yasawi's *hikma* functions as a form of social ritual, weaving together memory, theology, and moral formation within a shared tradition. This oral and performative dimension also ensured that *Divān* became embedded in the ethical fabric of communities-not just in legal codes or theological schools, but in the way people buried their dead, greeted guests, or taught their children.

[19] Braune. Ibid.

[20] In his study, Kaymaz examines how such proverbial expressions appear in the verses of Khoja Ahmet Yesevi's *Divān-i Hikmet*. For instance, the proverb "*Er ol, er olmazsan kara yer ol*" [Be a man of courage; if not, become one with the earth] is embedded in Yesevi's *hikmet*s, explore their stylistic functions, and analyze their role as markers of a distinct literary register within the work. See Zeki Kaymaz, "Divān-I Hikmet'te Atasözleri Ve Kullanılış Özellikleri," *Türk Dünyası Dergisi*, no. 46 (October 30, 2018): 159–71, <https://doi.org/10.24155/tdk.2018.84>.

7. THE IMPULSES OF VERNACULAR LANGUAGE

The enduring authority of Khoja Yasawi's *Dīvān* across generations and geographies does not stem from its formal originality or linguistic sophistication, but from something deeper that speaks to the collective spiritual experience. Rather, its power lies in how deeply it is woven into the self-the nafs under discipline, the body in prayer, the tongue in remembrance. For Yasawi, hikma is not learned in books alone but carved into the soul through humility, suffering, and love.^[21]

Akyiğit emphasizes that Khoja Yasawi's inclusive approach-welcoming pre-Islamic Turkic traditions so long as they did not contradict Islamic principles-allowed for a seamless integration of Islam into Turkic cultural life. This method not only facilitated the Turks' adoption of Islam without forsaking their ethnic identity but also laid the groundwork for a culturally rooted Islamic worldview across Anatolia. Through the efforts of Yasawi's dervishes and alperenler, Islam spread widely, shaping a society anchored in religious faith, communal values, and loyalty to land and tradition.^[22]

Yasawi's deliberate use of Turkic verse, instead of Arabic or Persian, is not simply a stylistic choice. It reflects an ethical commitment to accessibility. Unlike the elite intellectual traditions of his era, Khoja Yasawi places hikma within the language of the common people. His Turkish is spoken, straightforward, and abundant in spiritual colloquialisms as a unique expression of spiritual etiquette (adab) in its own right. This choice of language was deliberate. While Arabic served as the language of theology and jurisprudence, and Persian held the esteemed position of literary and mystical sophistication, Yasawi's choice to embrace vernacular Turkish represented a theological move towards democratization. By using the language of everyday believers, he made hikma active: wisdom transformed from being the domain of the scholarly elite into a practical ethic woven into the rhythms of

[21] Akyiğit argues that this model of pluralism and tolerance, grounded in social solidarity rather than Western liberal individualism, provides an essential indigenous framework for rethinking contemporary approaches to cultural integration and cohesion in Turkic history. See Akyiğit, "Ahmed Yesevî'nin Düşünce Sisteminde Hoşgörü ve Kültürel Çoğulculuk." A rather contextual piece of evidence comes as Beben examines a Persian treatise titled *Risāla dar ādāb-i tarīqat* (Treatise on the Etiquette of the Sufi Path), attributed to Khoja Yasawi, which appears in an 18th-century Ismā'īlī manuscript (MS 1959-25) from the Shughnān region of Badakhshān. Though the text itself is a conventional Sufi manual on spiritual conduct—particularly concerning the *pīr-murīd* (master-disciple) relationship—its presence in an Ismā'īlī codex is noteworthy. Beben argues that this adoption reflects more than thematic overlap; while the structural analogy between the Sufi shaykh and the Ismā'īlī Imām offers some explanatory power, the manuscript reveals a deeper, underexplored social and literary engagement between Sufi and Ismā'īlī communities in pre-modern Central Asia. The reception of Khoja Yasawi's text within Ismā'īlī tradition, thus, points to a shared ethical vocabulary and practical spiritual discourse that transcended sectarian boundaries. See Beben, "Ahmad Yasavī and the Ismā'īlīs of Badakhshān."

[22] Akyiğit, "Ahmed Yesevî'nin Düşünce Sisteminde Hoşgörü ve Kültürel Çoğulculuk."

prayer, memory, and song. The ethical strength of this language is thus manifested rather than theoretical, as evidenced by the repeated appeals of the *ḥikmats*.

Divine guidance is invoked through the intimate use of sacred names within personal prayer. Khoja Yasawi unites sacred utterance with individual supplication, allowing each verse to function as both *zikr* (remembrance) and *du‘ā* (prayer). The Sufi understanding that language shapes the structure of reality is evident throughout the *Divān*: speech is not ornamental but generative, forming the very foundations of the moral world.

9. FINAL REMARKS

Khoja Aḥmad Yasawi’s *Divān-i Ḥikmat* is not merely a vestige of lyrical devotion but a dynamic theology that asserts wisdom (*ḥikma*) must be incarnate, communal, and permeated with divine recall. Its strength resides in the refusal to dissociate thought from existence, as Yasawi imparts that to know is to serve, to grieve, to love, and finally to experience a metaphorical death prior to physical demise. This perspective disturbs both philosophical abstractions and legalistic rigidities, necessitating the acknowledgment of wisdom as a trust (*amāna*) conveyed via humility and closeness to the divine. In my opinion, the uniqueness of Yasawi’s teachings lies in their ability to integrate theology with practice, emphasizing that esoteric knowledge lacks permanence until it alters the seeker’s life.

The modern cultural rebirth in Kazakhstan clearly illustrates this, as it is based not on a return to scholasticism but on the revitalization of Yasawi’s spiritual legacy.^[23] Kazakhstani Islamic education, influenced by figures like Avicenna, al-Fārābī, and Yasawi, is cultivating a post-secular ethos that is both localized and broad, aspiring to utilize Yasawi’s *ḥikma* as a framework for identity, ethics, and rejuvenation.^[24] This revival affirms that the *Divān-i Ḥikmat* is an accessible archive: prophetic, poetic, and pragmatic, asserting that wisdom is not mere embellishment but the essence of a life devoted to surrender.

Engagement with Akbarī, Rūmī, Qalandarī, and Turkic oral traditions is essential; only by contextualizing Yasawi within these broader genealogies can we comprehend the profundity of his vision. Beyond being merely an object of study, his *ḥikma* provides a corrective framework for contemporary Islamic philosophy, shifting the perception of knowledge from mere possession to a profound relation-

[23] Anar Mustafayeva et al., “Islamic Higher Education as a Part of Kazakhs’ Cultural Revival,” *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies* 10, no. 3 (July 21, 2023): 103–27, <https://doi.org/10.29333/ejecs/1515>.

[24] For Soviet-era interpretations of Yasawi and the *Divān-i Hikmat*, see DeWeese, “Khwaja Ahmad Yasavi as an Islamising Saint: Rethinking the Role of Sufi s in the Islamisation of the Turks of Central Asia”; DeWeese, “Ahmad Yasavi and the Divan-i Hikmat in Soviet Scholarship,” 262–90.

onship with the divine. The Divān-i Hikmat does not conclude a segment of Sufi history; rather, it inaugurates a perspective wherein wisdom is once more prophetic, disruptive, and transforming for the ethical imagination of contemporary society.

BİBLİOGRAPHY

- Akyiğit, Handan. "Ahmed Yesevî'nin Düşünce Sisteminde Hoşgörü ve Kültürel Çoğulculuk." *Erdem*, December 20, 2020, 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.32704/erdem.838405>.
- Ataman, Kemal Yavuz. "Ahmed Yesevi and Global Wisdom." *Afro Eurasian Studies* 9, no. 1 (April 13, 2022): 46–60. <https://doi.org/10.33722/afes.1093015>.
- Beben, Daniel. "Ahmad Yasavî and the Ismā'īlīs of Badakhshān: Towards a New Social History of Sufi-Shī'ī Relations in Central Asia." *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 63, no. 5–6 (November 11, 2020): 643–81. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685209-12341523>.
- Braune, Simon M. "Islam as Practiced by the Kazaks: A Bibliography for Scholars." *Middle East Librarians Association*, no. 78 (2005): 1–17.
- DeWeese, Devin. "Ahmad Yasavi and the Divan-i Hikmat in Soviet Scholarship." In *The Heritage of Soviet Oriental Studies*, edited by Michael Kemper, 1. issued in paperback. Routledge Contemporary Russia and Eastern Europe Series 25. London: Routledge, 2013.
- . "Khwaja Ahmad Yasavi as an Islamising Saint: Rethinking the Role of Sufi s in the Islamisation of the Turks of Central Asia." In *Islamisation: Comparative Perspectives from History*, edited by A. C. S. Peacock. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017.
- Eraslan, Kemal. "Ahmed Yesevî." In *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi*. Diyanet Vakfı Yayınları. Accessed October 4, 2025. <https://islamansiklopedisi.org.tr/ahmed-yesevi>.
- Harris, Rachel. "Text and Performance in the Hikmât of Khoja Ahmad Yasawi." *Rast Müzikoloji Dergisi* 7, no. 2 (October 25, 2019): 2152–68. <https://doi.org/10.12975/pp2152-2168>.
- Kaymaz, Zeki. "Divân-I Hikmet Te Atasözleri Ve Kullanılış Özellikleri." *Türk Dünyası Dergisi*, no. 46 (October 30, 2018): 159–71. <https://doi.org/10.24155/tdk.2018.84>.
- Köprülü, Mehmed Fuad. *Early Mystics in Turkish Literature*. Translated by Gary Leiser and Robert Dankoff. Routledge Sufi Series. London: Routledge New York, 2006.
- Lenz-Raymann, Kathrin. *Securitization of Islam: A Vicious Circle: Counter-Terrorism and Freedom of Religion in Central Asia*. Global, Local Islam. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2014.
- Mustafayeva, Anar, Yktiyyar Paltore, Meruyert Pernekulova, and Issakhanova Meirim. "Islamic Higher Education as a Part of Kazakhs' Cultural Revival." *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies* 10, no. 3 (July 21, 2023): 103–27. <https://doi.org/10.29333/ejecs/1515>.
- Peacock, Andrew A.C.S. *Islam, Literature and Society in Mongol Anatolia*. 1st ed. Cambridge University Press, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108582124>.
- Sambetov, Zhanbolat. "Kazakistan'ın Sosyal, Kültürel ve Siyasi Hayatında Yeseviliğin Etkileri." Süleyman Demirel University, 2022.
- Yesevî, Hoca Ahmed. *Divân-ı Hikmet*. Edited by Mustafa Tatçı. 29. Ankara: Hoca Ahmet Yesevi Uluslararası Türk-Kazak Üniversitesi, 2017.