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Multi-Religious Features of Law and Authority in the Russian Lands During the 13th–14th Centuries

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Introduction: this article reinterprets the multicultural environment in the territory of the Golden Horde (*Ulus of Jochi*) as a site of religious authority formation. The paper also examines several recurring authority signals that can be compared across reigns and regions: patronage of jurists and educational institutions (appointments, court scholars, madrasas, juridical language); Sufi mediation (*tariqa* affiliations, lodges/khanakas, shrine patronage, saintly genealogies, vernacular ethical instruction); public markers of Islamic presence (mosques, cemeteries, architectural patronage, urban religious space); and explicit negotiations with non-Islamic or extra-juridical norms (customary law, steppe political practice, and pragmatic accommodations). The **purpose** is to examine the mechanisms of this formation through a three-stage analysis of successive reigns. First, for each period, the study reconstructs the dominant “authority package” – the combination of political-administrative mechanisms, juridical actors and claims, and Sufi-mediated institutions through which religious legitimacy was produced. Second, it evaluates the likely social reach of this package by asking how it could extend beyond the court through patronage, education, ritual affiliation, and dispute settlement. Third, it compares the three reigns to identify shifts in the locus of authority and their implications for the social embedding of Islam. Focusing on the reigns of Berke Khan, Uzbek Khan, and Janibek Khan, the analysis examines how successive configurations of authority emerged at the intersection of Islamic legal normativity, Sufi-mediated institutions, and khanate governance. **Methods:** the methodology is based on comparative-historical and hermeneutical analysis of key narrative corpora and modern historiography. **Results:** the study contrasts three models: an elite-symbolic model of Islamization associated with Berke’s courtly patronage; a mediated integration model under Uzbek Khan, in which Sufi network, particularly the Yassawiyya, translated Islamic ethics into Turkic

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social contexts while accommodating legal pluralism; and a later reconfiguration toward more formalized Sharia-centered governance under Janibek Khan. **Conclusions:** the article argues that Islam's integrative capacity in steppe polities depended less on formal adoption than on institutions capable of mediating between law, spirituality, and existing normative orders. Conceptually, it proposes a transferable typology of Islamization as a process of negotiation between juridical authority, ethical-spiritual mediation, and political organization, offering a comparative lens for other pluralistic pre-modern empires.

Keywords: Golden Horde; Russian lands; religion; culture; Middle Ages; multiculturalism

Исследование мультирелигиозных показателей закона и власти на русских землях в XIII–XIV веках

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Введение: в статье переосмысливается мультикультурная среда в русских землях периода Золотой Орды (Улуса Джучи) как формирование религиозной власти. Рассматриваются следующие значимые вопросы: покровительство юристам и образовательным учреждениям (назначения, придворные ученые, медресе, юридический язык), а также суфийское посредничество (принадлежность к тарикам, логи/ханакы, покровительство святыням, генеалогии святых, этические наставления на местных языках), публичные признаки исламского присутствия (мечети, кладбища, архитектурное покровительство и городское религиозное пространство) и, наконец, явные переговоры с неисламскими или внеюридическими нормами (обычное право, степная политическая практика и прагматические компромиссы). **Цель:** исследовать механизмы формирования религиозной власти в мультикультурной среде Золотой Орды (Улуса Джучи) на основе анализа трех этапов. Во-первых, для каждого периода правления реконструируется доминирующий «пакет полномочий»: сочетание политико-административных механизмов, юридических субъектов и претензий, а также институтов, созданных при посредничестве суфиев, через которые формировалась религиозная легитимность. Во-вторых, оценивается вероятное социальное влияние «пакета полномочий» через анализ того, как он мог распространяться за пределы двора через покровительство, образование, ритуальную принадлежность и разрешение споров. В-третьих, проводится сравнение трех периодов правления для выявления изменений в центре власти и их последствий для социального укоренения ислама. На примере правлений Берке-хана, Узбек-хана и Джанибек-хана анализируется, как последовательные конфигурации власти возникали на пересечении исламской правовой нормативности, институтов, опосредованных суфизмом, и ханского управления. **Методы:** сравнительно-исторический и герменевтический анализ ключевых нарративных корпусов и современной историографии. **Результаты:** исследование противопоставляет три модели: элитарно-символическую модель исламизации, связанную с придворным покровительством при Берке; опосредованную интеграционную модель при Узбек-хане, в которой суфийские сети, особенно Яссавийя, переводили исламскую этику в тюркский социальный контекст, одновременно учитывая правовой плюрализм; и более позднюю реконфигурацию в сторону более формализованного шариатского управления при Джанибек-хане. **Выводы:** утверждается, что интеграционная способность ислама в степных государствах зависела не столько от формального принятия, сколько от институтов, способных выступать посредниками между правом, духовностью и существующими нормативными порядками. Концептуально предлагается типология исламизации как процесса взаимодействия между юридической властью, этико-духовным посредничеством и политической организацией, которая может быть использована для сравнительного анализа других плюралистических досовременных империй.

Ключевые слова: Золотая Орда; русские земли; религия; культура; Средневековье; мультикультурализм

Introduction

Formation and development of the multi-religious authority in the medieval Russian lands of the Golden Horde period is often narrated as a top-down event: a ruler converts, the polity becomes Islamic, and religious institutions follow. While this political chronology is indispensable, it can obscure the social and institutional pathways through which Islamic normativity became meaningful and enforceable in the multiethnic, largely mobile empire and combined nomadic governance, urban nodes, and a layered legal environment in which traditional political culture, Turkic customary norms, and Islamic jurisprudence could coexist.

The Golden Horde's historical geography amplified this complexity. The khanate controlled steppe corridors and riverine routes linking the Black Sea and the Volga-Ural zone to Central Asia and the Near East. These routes facilitated the movement of merchants, scholars, emissaries, and ritual specialists. They also sustained religious plurality: Islam circulated alongside inherited Mongol religious practices and the established presence of Christian communities and other traditions in frontier and urban contexts. Islamization therefore cannot be reduced to doctrinal substitution; it is better approached as an evolving settlement within a pluralistic imperial ecology.

From a religious-studies perspective, Islamization is treated here as the gradual social embedding of Islamic normativity – ritual, ethical, legal, and institutional – within a political community. “Religious authority” denotes the socially recognized capacity to define, transmit, and (where possible) enforce that normativity. Authority is therefore relational: it is produced through interaction between rulers, jurists (*ulama*), Sufi shaykhs, and local communities, and it is shaped by the available infrastructures of mediation (courts, waqf patronage, educational networks, lodges, ritual lineages, and moral exemplars) [18].

This article asks a focused question: how did Islamic law and Sufi networks operate individually and in combination as instruments for constructing and contesting religious authority in the Golden Horde? Rather than asking when the Horde “became Islamic,” the analysis compares three reigns often treated as turning points – Berke Khan, Uzbek Khan, and Janibek Khan – to identify shifts in the locus of authority and their likely consequences for social integration.

The article advances three contributions. First, it integrates political, legal, and Sufi perspectives into a single authority-centered framework. Second, it clarifies the state-supporting functions and limits of Kubrawiyya-linked patronage, Yassawiyya mediation, and Sharia-centered legal institutionalization in a steppe environment characterized by legal pluralism. Third, it proposes a typology of Islamization as authority negotiation between law, spirituality, and political organization as an approach that can travel beyond the Golden Horde case.

Historiographical and Conceptual Context

Scholarship on the Golden Horde Islamization has tended to privilege one explanatory register at a time. Classical political historiography foregrounds elite conversion and state policy, reading Islamization through court alliances, diplomatic alignments, and confessional declarations [4; 5; 6]. This work established crucial chronologies, but its emphasis on rulers and diplomacy often leaves the mechanisms of social penetration underspecified: it is not always clear how Islamic norms moved from court rhetoric into everyday moral and legal expectations.

Legal-centered studies assess Islamization through the expansion of Sharia and the emergence of juridical institutions. They underline that Hanafi legal reasoning and courtly patronage of “*ulama*” did not automatically produce uniform Sharia implementation across the ulus; instead, Islamic law interacted with customary and administrative norms in context-dependent ways [15]. The key insight here is legal pluralism: Sharia became one authoritative vocabulary among several, and its reach varied by region, social milieu (urban vs. steppe), and political priorities [2].

Sufism-centered approaches shift attention to mediation and lived religion. In steppe and frontier contexts, Sufi institutions could translate Islamic ethics and ritual into vernacular, culturally resonant forms, operating through moral authority, communal affiliation, ritual discipline, and symbolic continuity [7; 16]. Within Turkic religious history, the Yassawiyya is frequently treated as a paradigmatic vehicle for such translation because of its vernacular orientation and adaptability to nomadic social organization [12; 13].

Recent scholarship has increasingly attempted to bring institutions and material culture into the picture, using the spread of mosques, madrasas, khanakas, cemeteries, and architectural patronage as indicators of Islam's growing public presence [9; 11]. Research in Golden Horde-focused venues has also refined discussions of chronology and institutional incorporation [3; 14], while broader syntheses situate the Horde more explicitly within Islamic imperial connectivities [8]. This work is valuable insofar as it resists equating elite conversion with social transformation. However, built evidence still needs to be interpreted through the lens of authority: the presence of institutions tells us that Islamic infrastructures existed, but not automatically how they mediated between state policies, jurists, and local communities [14].

Despite these advances, fewer accounts systematically compare how different configurations of authority operated across successive reigns within the Horde. The present study therefore treats Islamization as a sequence of authority settlements – always partial, negotiated, and reversible, in which rulers could shift their reliance among jurists, Sufi networks, and inherited normative orders. This comparative focus helps explain why certain arrangements supported cohesion while others generated frictions between formal norms and local practice.

Analytically, a “model of religious authority” is defined here by three dimensions. Normative reference: which norms are invoked as binding (Sharia, customary law, Chinggisid political norms, or hybrid forms). Institutional carriers: which actors and institutions are empowered to articulate and transmit the norms (jurists and courts; Sufi shaykhs and lodges; rulers and administrative agents; or combinations). Modes of compliance: whether normativity is pursued primarily through coercive enforcement, distributive patronage, reputational mechanisms, or ethical cultivation. Mapping these dimensions helps clarify why two periods that are both “Islamic” at the level of elite identification can differ sharply in their social reach.

Framed in this way, Islamization becomes an institutional problem as much as a theological one: it concerns how Islamic normativity is carried into social life and how it competes with, accommodates, or reorders existing norms. This framing also reduces the temptation to read later legal-institutional forms back into earlier periods. A ruler’s piety or legal rhetoric matters, but its social effects depend on the authority infrastructures available to translate rhetoric into practice.

A recurring theme across these literatures is legal pluralism. Even when khans endorsed Islamic norms, Sharia rarely operated as an exclusive system. It interacted with steppe customary regulation and with Chinggisid political norms that continued to structure coercion, taxation, and adjudication. This matters analytically because the “degree” of Islamization cannot be inferred from legal rhetoric alone: the same khanate may display Hanafi legal discourse at court while relying on customary procedures in peripheral uluses, especially where mobility and lineage politics constrain bureaucratic reach [10; 15]. Treating Islamization as authority formation therefore requires tracking not only the presence of jurists but also the institutional channels through which legal normativity could be made practically binding.

Sufi orders appear here not as a mere “mystical add-on” to Islamic law, but as mobile institutional frameworks that could travel with populations. In steppe and semi-steppe environments, wandering shaykhs, interconnected lodge systems, shrine-centered devotional practices, and moral instruction in local idioms provided replicable ways to build shared recognition and allegiance without deep or intrusive state administration. In DeWeese’s view, this intermediary role is crucial for understanding how Islam becomes socially operative beyond the conversion of elites, while Trimmingham’s typology helps explain how *tariqas* could persist as durable communities that tied courtly patronage to local moral economies [7; 16].

Finally, the present article uses Berke, Uzbek, and Janibek as analytically convenient “moments” in which different balances between law, mediation, and political organization become visible. This is not meant to imply that each reign is uniform across space or that other rulers were unimportant. Rather, the periodization is a

heuristic device for comparing configurations of authority: Berke highlights the possibilities and limits of courtly conversion; Uzbek illustrates mediated integration as a state-building strategy; and Janibek foregrounds the promises and risks of stronger juridical institutionalization [4; 8].

Materials and Methods

This study uses a qualitative historical comparative design based on textual and historiographical analysis. It draws on narrative compilations and chronicles commonly used in Golden Horde studies, alongside modern research on Jochid governance, legal pluralism, and Sufi institutions [1; 4; 6; 7].

The analysis proceeds in three steps. First, it reconstructs for each reign the dominant “authority package”: the mix of political-administrative mechanisms, juridical actors and claims, and Sufi-mediated institutions through which religious legitimacy was produced. Second, it evaluates the likely social reach of that package by asking how it could travel beyond the court through patronage, education, ritual affiliation, and dispute settlement. Third, it compares the three reigns to identify shifts in the locus of authority and their implications for the social embedding of Islam.

Hermeneutical reading is used to interpret how sources frame legitimacy, law, and religious practice, recognizing that narrative materials encode ideological claims rather than transparent reportage. The method therefore focuses less on extracting “facts” in isolation and more on identifying patterned representations of authority (e.g., the invocation of Sharia, the moral portrayal of rulers, the prominence of shaykhs and scholars, and the language of piety and reform).

Two limitations follow. The article does not attempt a comprehensive regional survey across the ulus, and it does not treat material culture as a direct proxy for belief. Instead, it uses institutional presence and reported patronage patterns as indicators of shifting authority relations, while acknowledging unevenness and local variation across urban centers and mobile populations.

To operationalize the comparison, the analysis treats reported instances of patronage, appointment, and institutional sponsorship as “authority signals.” These include: references to qadis and courts; the presence of endowed learning and ritual spaces; narratives of shaykh–ruler interaction; and claims about the enforcement of Sharia norms. The goal is not to produce a quantitative index, but to identify recurring patterns through which sources describe the production of legitimacy and norm compliance.

In operational terms, the study distinguishes between claims to normative authority (how sources describe Islamic rule, Sharia, or saintly charisma) and authority infrastructures (the institutions that make such claims actionable). This distinction helps prevent the common slippage between the existence of Islamic vocabulary and the social embedding of Islamic practice.

The analysis therefore reads narrative and historiographical sources “against the grain,” asking what kinds of actors and institutions are presupposed when a text portrays a khan as a Muslim ruler or as an enforcer of Sharia.

For coding purposes, the article treats the following as recurring authority signals that can be compared across reigns and regions:

- patronage of jurists and educational institutions (appointments, court scholars, madrasas, juridical language);
- Sufi mediation (tariqa affiliations, lodges/khanakas, shrine patronage, saintly genealogies, vernacular ethical instruction);
- public markers of Islamic presence (mosques, cemeteries, architectural patronage, and urban religious space);
- explicit negotiations with non-Islamic or extra-juridical norms (customary law, steppe political practice, and pragmatic accommodations).

1. Berke Khan:

Elite Conversion and Courtly Patronage

Berke Khan is often presented as the first major Jochid ruler to align the Horde decisively with the Islamic world. This alignment had geopolitical consequences (especially in the context of relations with neighboring powers) and it also created new possibilities for legitimating Jochid rule through Islamic idioms. Yet the social meaning of this shift depends on whether Islam was embedded beyond the court. The evidence most strongly supports an early configuration in which Islam functioned primarily as elite affiliation and diplomatic resource.

At this stage, the khan’s patronage could attract Muslim scholars and Sufi figures connected to Central Asian urban centers. Such figures could provide an “Islamic language” of rulership, moral exemplarity, justice, and pious sponsorship without necessarily generating durable institutions capable of regulating everyday life in mobile constituencies. This matters because in steppe politics authority does not flow only through centralized administration; it is negotiated through dispersed leadership structures and the practical management of conflicts and alliances.

Historiographical reconstructions emphasize continuity in political structures: Chinggisid governance and Turkic customary norms retained significant regulatory weight during this period [4]. In such a setting, Islamic normativity could circulate as a legitimating vocabulary, but it would compete with other normative orders that already organized taxation, arbitration, and military obligations. Islamization here is therefore best described as “symbolic-patronage” rather than “institutional consolidation.”

The Kubrawiyya is frequently associated with early courtly Islamization in the Jochid realm. As an urban-linked Sufi tradition, it could provide recognized spiritual

genealogy and learned prestige, particularly valuable at court. However, the structural limitation of such a model is social reach: authority anchored in courtly and urban milieus is less capable of mediating Islamic norms into dispersed steppe constituencies. Where mediation is thin, Islamic symbols can remain detached from the everyday governance of disputes, ritual life, and ethical discipline.

Accordingly, Berke’s reign illustrates a first authority configuration: the khan’s adoption of Islamic identity is significant, but it does not yet imply a thick institutional ecology of Sharia courts, endowed religious infrastructures, and wide Sufi-mediated communal networks. This configuration establishes key precedents – especially the possibility of Islamic legitimacy for Jochid rule – while leaving open the question of how Islam could become socially embedded across the ulus.

A key feature of the Berke configuration is that the primary arena of Islamization is the court. The khan’s Islamic identity could be amplified by foreign-policy positioning and by engagement with Muslim polities and mercantile networks. In such contexts, Islam operates as a language of alliance and moral distinction. Yet, because mobile constituencies were not governed through dense bureaucratic penetration, court Islamization did not automatically reorganize the everyday normative order of the steppe. The authority problem remains: who mediates Islamic norms into local arbitration and communal practice, and with what institutional resources?

From this angle, Berke’s Islamization can be read as a court-centered legitimacy project that operates through diplomatic alignment and selective patronage rather than through systemic juridical change. Sources that emphasize Berke’s Muslim identity tend to foreground his position within wider Islamic geopolitics, but they provide thinner evidence for the routine regulation of steppe social life through Sharia. The likely outcome is an authority pattern in which Islamic norms function as a prestige language at the centre, while customary adjudication and Chinggisid political practice continue to organize conflict management in the peripheries [4; 5; 6].

2. Uzbek Khan: Mediated Integration Through Sufi Networks and Managed Pluralism

Uzbek Khan’s reign is widely regarded as a decisive stage in the Horde Islamization because Islam gained a more systematic role in governance and public legitimation. The distinctive feature of this stage, however, is not simple “legalization” of rule. Rather, it is the emergence of a mediated settlement in which Islamic norms were promoted while legal pluralism and steppe social structures were managed rather than abolished.

On the political plane, Uzbek Khan’s sponsorship of Islamic identity strengthened imperial connectivity to wider Muslim circuits of learning and legitimacy. In practice, such connectivity could be expressed through the patronage of mosques, learning, and ritual specialists,

and by presenting the khanate as operating within the broader Sunni ecumene. Yet the success of this policy depended on translation mechanisms. In the ulus, authority was not produced exclusively through centralized courts; it relied on informal leadership, tribal structures, and moral economies. Sufi institutions could operate as mediators precisely because they combined portable practices with charismatic authority and communal discipline [7].

The Yassawiyya, in particular, is often described as culturally resonant within Turkic contexts because its ethical instruction and vernacular orientation allowed Islamic concepts to be integrated without dismantling existing social idioms [12; 13]. In authority terms, the Yassawiyya provided a bridge between state-level Islamic legitimacy and local moral life: it offered a repertoire of practices, lineages, and ethical expectations through which Islam could be internalized as a lived norm rather than only a courtly symbol. Such mediation is especially consequential where populations are mobile and where political authority cannot rely solely on fixed bureaucratic infrastructures.

Importantly, mediated integration does not mean the absence of law. Uzbek Khan's policies can be read as attempting to expand Islamic normativity while avoiding overreach. Juridical authority (within the Hanafi-Maturidi tradition) could be patronized and used selectively, especially in urban centers and administrative settings, while customary law and local arbitration continued to structure many disputes. Legal pluralism thus persisted, but its balance could shift: Sharia became more visible in public legitimation and in certain institutional settings without necessarily becoming the exclusive normative order.

This constellation of factors helps account for why the Uzbek period is frequently characterized as comparatively stable. In contexts where Sufi forms of mediation retained their institutional strength, religious authority could be reproduced and transmitted through trust-based ties, vernacular moral instruction, and practices of communal affiliation, thereby mitigating the likelihood that formal legal norms would be experienced as external, unfamiliar, or merely coercive. On this reading, Uzbek Khan's Islamization is most accurately conceptualized as a form of "mediated institutionalization": a synthesis of political endorsement with culturally flexible networks capable of translating normative commitments into locally intelligible social practice and of sustaining ethical discipline over time.

In the Uzbek configuration, this authority problem is addressed more directly. Sufi mediation expands the channels through which Islamic identity becomes locally meaningful: initiation lineages, ethical teaching, ritual repertoires, and reputational authority create forms of belonging that travel with mobile communities. At the same time, state patronage can stabilize these channels by supporting endowed infrastructures in urban nodes – settings in which juridical and educational institutions are more viable. The resulting system is not fully

centralized, but it is more densely mediated: Islamization gains depth because multiple carriers (political, juridical, and Sufi) reinforce one another rather than operating in isolation.

This configuration reflects a form of mediated Islamization in which Sufi networks, juridical institutions, and political authority reinforce one another rather than functioning independently [17].

Material and spatial indicators are consistent with this mediated integration. Urban growth and architectural patronage under Uzbek Khan increased the visibility of Islam in public space, particularly in major centers associated with khanate authority. Archaeological work on Golden Horde cities underscores that mosques, cemeteries, and related institutions can be read as evidence of expanding Islamic infrastructures, while studies of mosque decorum and regional variation caution against assuming uniformity across the ulus [9; 11]. Read together with institutional analyses of administrative incorporation, these findings suggest a pragmatic state-building package: strengthen Islamic public presence, connect the court to Hanafi learning, and rely on culturally resonant Sufi mediation to translate norms into steppe social idioms [3; 14].

3. Janibek Khan: Reconfiguration Toward Sharia-Centered Institutional Authority

Janibek Khan's reign is frequently described as a period of stronger commitment to Sharia and the authority of jurists. In principle, legal institutionalization can deepen Islamization by establishing predictable norms, courts, and scholarly infrastructures. In practice, in a pluralistic steppe polity, legal expansion creates a coordination problem: law becomes socially effective only when it is mediated, internalized, and seen as legitimate across diverse constituencies.

Legal-centered scholarship highlights that even where rulers promoted Sharia, implementation remained uneven and selective [1]. This unevenness reflects the layered normative environment of the ulus, in which customary law and inherited administrative practices remained functional. Attempts to privilege Sharia as the dominant language of governance could therefore generate friction if they outpaced the capacity of institutions to translate legal norms into everyday practice.

From the perspective of religious authority, Janibek's reconfiguration can be framed as a shift in the locus of legitimacy from a settlement in which Sufi mediation and managed pluralism buffered legal authority, toward greater reliance on jurists and formal norms. This shift does not imply that Sufi networks disappeared, but it suggests that their mediating role could be reduced in the state's legitimation strategy. In turn, jurists and courts could become more prominent as symbols of "proper" Islamic governance.

The potential consequence is a weakening of informal channels that previously linked imperial authority with local communities. Where mediation is diminished,

Sharia-centered governance risks becoming administratively visible yet socially thin: its norms may be invoked in elite and urban contexts while remaining contested, ignored, or selectively adapted elsewhere [15]. In such conditions, legal formalization can produce clarity for the state but ambivalence for local actors whose normative expectations are shaped by customary orders, kinship-based structures, and mobile social organization.

Janibek's reign therefore illustrates a third configuration: "institutional legal consolidation" pursued in a context where the integrative capacity of mediation may have been less robust than in the Uzbek period. This configuration is analytically important because it shows that increasing formal Islamic governance does not automatically increase social cohesion; the outcome depends on whether juridical authority is accompanied by credible, culturally resonant mediating institutions.

The Janibek configuration illustrates the tension that can arise when the balance shifts toward juridical authority. Legal consolidation promises uniformity, but uniformity is difficult to achieve across a polity that spans cities, frontier zones, and steppe corridors. If juridical authority is perceived as closely aligned with the center and insufficiently mediated into local moral economies, it can provoke strategic compliance (invoked when advantageous) rather than deep internalization. The analysis therefore treats Janibek's period not as "more Islamic" in a simple sense, but as differently Islamic: it privileges a distinct technology of authority with distinct risks.

The authority trade-off becomes clearer if Janibek's legalism is placed against the baseline of managed pluralism. Where customary law remained socially authoritative, stronger juridical expectations could be experienced as external or "courtly," especially if enforcement depended on urban institutions and sedentary

specialists. Legal pluralism therefore does not disappear; it becomes more politicized, because competing normative registers are now linked to competing claims about who may legitimately speak for Islam. In such contexts, Sharia-centered institutionalization may deepen Islamic governance in some locales while simultaneously eroding the integrative capacity of informal religious networks elsewhere [15].

4. Comparative Synthesis: Three Authority Configurations

Comparing these reigns suggests that the key variable in Golden Horde Islamization is not simply the ruler's confessional stance, but the institutional distribution of religious authority. Berke's period is marked by elite-symbolic Islamization with limited institutional depth, Uzbek's – by mediated integration combining Sufi networks and selective legal patronage, and Janibek's – by a tilt toward Sharia-centered consolidation that risked outpacing mediation. The comparative implication is that Islamization in pluralistic steppe polities is best understood as a sequence of negotiated authority settlements rather than a uniform transition.

Seen in this way, conversion functions as an enabling condition rather than a sufficient cause. It opens a space for Islamic idioms of legitimacy, but whether those idioms become socially durable depends on the institutions that carry them. Sufi networks and juridical infrastructures represent different modes of carrying: the first emphasizes ethical translation and affiliation; the second emphasizes normative standardization and adjudication. Political authority can combine these modes, but it must also manage the continued operation of customary norms and administrative practices that remain effective in steppe contexts.

Table

Schedule of the basic authority issues of the Golden Horde reigns

Period/ruler (ideal type)	Primary authority carriers	Key mediating infrastructures	Legal environment	Expected social embedding
Berke Khan (symbolic– patronage)	Khan and court; selected scholars/shaykhs	Court patronage; limited institutional ecology	Strong customary and Chinggisid norms; Sharia weakly routinized	Shallow beyond elites; Islam as prestige language
Uzbek Khan (mediated integration)	Khan + jurists + Sufi networks	Yassawiyya-type mediation; public institutions expand	Managed pluralism (Hanafi discourse alongside custom)	Broader embedding via translation; cohesion benefits
Janibek Khan (institutional– legal)	Jurists and state- linked legal institutions	Courts/education; mediation relatively reduced	Push toward Sharia- centered governance within pluralism	Deeper legal presence in centers; friction risk in peripheries

The Table above summarizes the argument in schematic form. It should be read as comparative heuristics rather than a claim that any reign was internally uniform. Its value is to make visible the distinct combinations of actors and infrastructures that can, in principle, generate "Islamization" as a social

fact: courtly conversion and patronage without deep routinization; mediated integration that translates norms into local idioms while managing pluralism; and juridical consolidation that expands legal authority but may lose integrative flexibility if mediation is weakened.

5. Authority Infrastructures Across Space: Court, City, and Steppe

The three configurations also imply different spatial logics. In the court and major urban centers, juridical and educational institutions can be more visible: scholars can gather, courts can operate with more regularity, and endowed spaces can anchor teaching and ritual. In the steppe, where populations are more dispersed and mobility is a structural condition, authority tends to rely more heavily on portable and relational mechanisms – personal leadership, reputational bonds, and institutions that can travel (including Sufi lineages and itinerant teaching).

Berke's symbolic patronage Islamization is concentrated at court and in elite circles, with limited evidence of dense mediation into steppe society. Uzbek's mediated integration strengthens the bridge between spaces: Islamic identity is supported at the center while Sufi networks provide an interface with local communities. Janibek's legal consolidation tends to emphasize the urban–administrative end of the spectrum. Where this emphasis is not matched by strong mediating institutions, the centre–periphery interface can become fragile.

This spatial framing helps avoid an all-or-nothing measurement of Islamization. The same polity can display different degrees and modes of Islamization in different spaces, and rulers may calibrate authority strategies accordingly. The analytical question is therefore how authority carriers connect (or fail to connect) these spaces into a coherent normative order.

The spatial contrast between court, city, and steppe also illuminates how different authority models could coexist without direct contradiction. Jurists, courts, and educational institutions were typically node-bound: they concentrated in urban centers such as Sarai and regional towns, where literate administration, stable patronage, and settled audiences enabled routine adjudication and teaching. By contrast, Sufi mediation was both node-bound and networked. Lodges, shrines, and burial sites provided local anchors, yet authority could also travel through itinerant preaching, disciple chains, and portable ritual repertoires. In practice, this meant that a legalist turn could deepen Islamization in cities while leaving the steppe governed through negotiated pluralism. Conversely, a Sufi-mediated strategy could widen the social reach of Islamic ethics in the countryside even when formal courts remained thin. Seen this way, Islamization is not a single scalar process, but a patterned distribution of infrastructures across space. Any assessment must therefore specify which spaces are being measured (court, urban nodes, or pastoral peripheries) and which mechanisms connect them (taxation and patronage, pilgrimage and shrine veneration, or the movement of specialists) [9; 11].

Discussion

Islamization as negotiation between law, mediation, and political organization.

The Golden Horde case clarifies why “Islamization” is a misleadingly singular term. What changes historically is the configuration of authority through which Islamic normativity becomes actionable. Three analytical claims follow.

First, juridical authority and political authority do not map neatly onto one another. Sharia can be endorsed by rulers without being uniformly enforceable, and the presence of jurists or courts does not guarantee social embedding. Legal pluralism is therefore not a residual anomaly but a structural condition in steppe empires, where multiple normative vocabularies remain operational. The key question is not whether pluralism exists, but how rulers and religious actors manage it through selective patronage, negotiated adjudication, or the tolerance of parallel normative domains [13].

Second, Sufi mediation should be treated as an institutional technology of translation. In societies where formal administrative penetration is limited and social order relies on personal bonds, Sufi networks can provide portable institutions lodges, lineages, ritual repertoires, and moral exemplars that render Islamic normativity socially meaningful. Such networks also create reputational economies: affiliation can signal moral standing, while shaykhs can function as brokers between rulers and communities.

The Yassawiyya's historical significance lies less in doctrinal novelty than in its capacity to align Islamic ethics with Turkic social idioms, thereby expanding the social reach of Islam without demanding immediate juridical uniformity [12]. Where such mediation is strong, Islam can appear as a shared moral language that supports cohesion; where it is weak, legal norms can remain abstract or contested.

Third, the relationship between religion and political stability is contingent. Religion supports cohesion when it supplies widely recognized legitimacy and reduces transaction costs between centre and periphery. In the Uzbek configuration, mediated authority helped Islam function as a shared moral and symbolic framework across diverse communities. Where authority shifts toward formalization without sufficient mediation, legal claims can become sites of contestation rather than integration, especially under conditions of succession tension, regional diversity, and economic stress. Religious authority can therefore be stabilizing or destabilizing depending on its institutional ecology [4].

These claims can be summarized as a transferable typology of Islamization as authority negotiation:

- symbolic – patronage Islamization (elite conversion, limited institutional reach);
- mediated integration (Sufi networks translating Islamic norms while legal pluralism is managed);
- institutional – legal consolidation (expansion of juridical authority with risks if mediation weakens).

Applied comparatively, this typology suggests that the depth of Islamization depends less on confessional declarations than on the balance among jurists, Sufi mediators, and political-administrative structures.

A practical implication for the Golden Horde historiography is that debates over “how Islamic” the khanate was should be reformulated into questions about which authority infrastructures were operative in which spaces (court, city, steppe), and how these infrastructures interacted. This directs attention to patronage patterns, the social reach of educational and Sufi networks, and the negotiated coexistence of Sharia and customary norms, rather than to conversion as a single causal switch.

One advantage of an authority-centered approach is that it clarifies what is at stake in debates about the relative influence of jurists and Sufi shaykhs. These actors are not simply “competing religious groups”; they often represent different mechanisms of norm production and social control. Jurists provide standardized categories for adjudication and governance, which can be crucial for administrative coherence. Sufi shaykhs can provide moral discipline and community-making mechanisms that socialize norms in contexts where formal legal reach is limited. In many pre-modern settings, durable Islamization involves some settlement between these mechanisms rather than the outright triumph of one.

The Golden Horde case also suggests why later phases of legal institutionalization may not always translate into stronger cohesion. If legal authority becomes a primary marker of legitimacy, disputes over who controls legal interpretation (which jurists, which courts, which patronage networks) can become politically charged. Conversely, where mediation is robust, Islam can operate as a shared moral economy that reduces the salience of legal contestation by embedding norms in ethical practice and communal affiliation.

A further implication concerns the “transport” of authority. In mobile polities, authority is persuasive when it can circulate through interpersonal ties, ritual repertoires, and recognizable lineages, not only through fixed institutions. This helps explain why tariqa-based mediation could outperform purely legalist strategies in steppe settings: it offers portable forms of recognition (shaykh-disciple relations, shrine networks, vernacular didactic genres) that do not require dense bureaucracy. In this respect, Sufi mediation is less a rival to law than a mechanism that can render legal and ethical norms socially intelligible, thereby widening the audience for juridical claims [7; 12; 16].

The analysis is necessarily constrained by the unevenness of the source record. Courtly narratives and later compilations tend to overrepresent elite viewpoints, while archaeological indicators of Islamic presence can show institutional expansion without directly revealing how norms were practiced or contested in everyday life. Future work can sharpen the typology by pairing regional case studies with material-culture datasets (urban religious space, funerary practices,

architectural patronage) and with closer attention to how legal pluralism was administered on the ground. Such a program would complement existing institutional reconstructions and help specify where, and for whom, the balance among jurists, Sufi mediators, and khanate governance was most consequential [9; 11].

A complementary way to read the three models is through the policy instruments that make religious authority operational. In a Chinggisid polity, endorsing Sharia or sponsoring jurists was not only a confessional gesture; it could also standardize transactions in urban nodes (marriage, inheritance, commercial disputes) and provide a recognizable grammar of legitimacy for diplomacy and taxation. Yet juridical authority is costly to extend: it requires literate personnel, institutions, and a degree of social trust in adjudicators. Sufi networks, by contrast, can supply trust and recognition through personal ties and ritual repertoires that travel, lowering the social friction of norm adoption, but they can also become alternative centers of loyalty if not integrated into state strategies. The Uzbek configuration can therefore be interpreted as a relatively successful equilibrium: legal discourse and public institutions expand, while mediation provides cultural translation and stabilizes compliance. The later turn toward heavier legal institutionalization may deepen normative clarity in some spaces but risks brittleness where mediation weakens and plural norms remain authoritative [8].

Conclusions

This article has argued that Islamization in the Golden Horde is best analyzed as a contested and shifting formation of religious authority. Across the reigns of Berke Khan, Uzbek Khan, and Janibek Khan, the locus of authority moved among elite patronage, Sufi-mediated translation, and Sharia-centered institutionalization. The comparative record suggests that Islam became socially durable when Islamic normativity was embedded through institutions capable of mediation between law, spirituality, and existing normative orders.

The Uzbek period illustrates the stabilizing potential of mediated integration, particularly when culturally resonant Sufi networks help align Islamic ethics with Turkic social contexts while legal pluralism is managed. Later moves toward stronger juridical formalization demonstrate that legal consolidation alone can be socially thin if mediation is insufficient. The proposed typology therefore offers a generalizable way to compare Islamization processes across pre-modern pluralistic polities, shifting attention from conversion events to authority configurations and their institutional supports.

Beyond the Golden Horde, the typology proposed here offers a comparative lens for other pluralistic and post-imperial settings in which rulers sought Islamic legitimacy while governing populations with strong customary repertoires. It redirects attention from conversion narratives to the infrastructures that make religious authority durable: courts and educational institutions,

Sufi networks and ritual spaces, and the fiscal and patronage mechanisms that connect specialists to communities. Applied comparatively, the approach suggests two testable expectations. First, legal consolidation is most likely to widen everyday practice where administrative penetration and trusted local intermediaries exist; where they do not, it risks remaining a courtly project. Second, mediated integration can generate cohesion by translating norms into local idioms, but its political utility depends on how rulers manage the relationship between mediators and jurists. Future research could refine these expectations by combining textual work with regional archaeological datasets and by tracing how particular networks (jurists, lodge affiliates, shrine patrons) intersected with trade routes and urbanization [8].

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