

The Role of Sufis in Converting the Mongols into Islam

HAJI MUHAMMAD BUKHARI LUBIS
Jabatan Pengajian Arab & Tamadun Islam
Fakulti Pengajian Islam
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

If one were to examine the history of eastern world, he would find that during one period the Islamic world had been conquered by the Mongols. The first Mongol invasion took place in Persia, beginning in 1220 A. D.; and consequently, they ruled these Islamic territories more than one century. This paper will give an account of certain Sufis (r. h.) who had successfully converted a few Mongol rulers¹ into Islam.

Historical information available has shown that the Mongol rulers followed various religions; for example, Chingiz Khan (1206-1227) and Ogedei Khan (1229-1241) were shamanists. They had no desire to any other religion. Although, one of them, namely Chingiz Khan, was interested in other religious creeds and he made inquires, both directly and indirectly, about methodology and customs of foreign religious communities.² Guyuk Khan (1246-1248) had strong learning towards Christianity, eventhough he remained a shamaist.³ Mongke Khan (1251-1258) is said to have been indifferent regarding religious faith, but as soon as Qubilai Khan (1260-1294) embraced the Buddhist faith and his brother, Hulegu Khan (1256-1265), showed favour towards this creed then Shamanism lost all its official significance. However, this did not happen within the religious traditions and customs of the Mongols.⁴ During this period, sorceres were numerous and respected, and Abaqa Khan (1265-1281) is said to have greeted with joy a magician, named Baraq, who visited him in 1278.⁵

It is significant to note that those Mongol kings who accepted Islam were converted to this religion by pious Sufis. Most of Sufi Shaykhs belonged to the Kubrawiyah Sufi order which was one of the major Sufi orders during the Mongol period in Central Asia and Khurasan.⁶ Regarding the actual conversion, the first Mongol ruler who became a Muslim was Berke Khan (1257-1266). He was the fifth ruler of the Golden Horde and the grandson of the infamous Chingiz Khan. Berke Khan was converted in Bukhara by Shaykh Sayf al-Din Bakharzi (r.h.), an eminent disciple of Shaykh Najm al-Din

Kubra (r.h.) the eponymous founder of Kubrawiyah Sufi order.⁷ According to Hamid Qalandar, Shaykh Nasir al-Din Mahmud (r.h.) states that Berke Khan accepted Islam after having a vision in which Shaykh Bakharzi (r.h.) appeared and suggested he become a Muslim.⁸

The first Ilkhans of Persia who became a Muslim was Teguder Khan (1281-1284) (the third ruler) and had taken the Islamic/Arabic name of Ahmad. However, this was purely a personal matter and had no sequel.⁹

According to Rashid al-Din, renowned author of Mongol history, at the beginning of Sha^cban 949 A. H./1295 A. D., the seventh ruler of the Ilkhans of Persia, Ghazan Khan (1295-1304) declared his acceptance of Islam. Shaykh Sadr al-Din Ibrahim (r.h.), son of Shakh Sa^cd al-Din Hamuya (r.h.) who was a disciple of Najm al-Din Kubra (r.h.), presided over the conversion to Islam of Ghazan Khan.¹⁰ In Iranian history, this incident is viewed with great significance because Ghazan Khan made the whole of his court and large numbers of the Mongols in Iran become Muslims; hence, changing the structure and leadership of the society. Ghazan Khan started a veritable prosecution of Buddhists and other non-believers of Islam, as Rashid al-Din writes:

When the Lord of Islam, Ghazan, became a Muslim, he commanded that all the idols should be broken and all the pagodas (*but-khana*) and (*atash-kada*) destroyed, together with all the other temples the presence of which in Muslim countries is forbidden by the *Shari^ca*, and that all the community (*jama^cat*) of the idolatrous *bakhshi* [a Turkish word derived from the Chinese *po-shih* "teacher"] should be converted [forcibly] to Islam. But since the Most High God did not aid them, they had no true faith, but were Muslims only outwardly and by necessity, and in their district (*nahiya*) there were signs of unbelief (*kuf^r*) and of aberration (*dalalat*). After a certain time the King of Islam perceived their hypocrisy and said to them: "Let those among you who wish it return to India, to Kashmir, to Tibet, and to the countries whence they came; and let those who remain here cease to be hypocrites, and let them believe in that which they have in their hearts and cease from defiling with their hypocrisy the true religion of Islam. And if it should come to my ears that they are building fire-temples or pagodas, I will without hesitation put them to the sword." But some persevered in their hypocrisy, while others again returned to their wicked beliefs. And Ghazan said: "My father was an idolater and died an idolater and built for himself a temple which he made *vaqf* for that community [of the *bakhshi*]. That temple I have destroyed; go ye there and live on alms [among those ruins]."¹¹

After his initial period of enthusiasm of accepting Islam, Ghazan Khan made his life a religious one and increased his understanding of the religion; and increased his sincere piety through the religion. Consequently, it is not surprising that he was later able to talk in front of judges (*qudat*), religious leaders (*mashayikh*), ascetics (*zuhhad*), scholars (ahl-e ^cilm) and sincere believers (ahle-e taqva) about the religion, as well as, give advice to them.¹²

There has been related an extremely interesting account of a Mongol prince who became a strict Muslim. Although his conversion to Islam was not presided by a Sufi; nevertheless his story is worth-mentioning since his Islamic enthusiasm can be related to Ghazan Khan in many ways.

In the story of the Mongol prince, Ananda,¹³ it is related that he was brought up by a Turkistan Muslim, Mihtar Hasan Aqtachi and his wife, Zulaykha. Due to his childhood training, Islam established firm roots in his heart. There were nearly 150,000 Mongol troops subordinate to him, and he converted the majority of them to the religion of Islam. One of his emirs, Sartaq, opposed Islam and complained to the Qa'an that Ananda was always in the mosque, or praying or fasting or reading the Qur'an; he complained that the prince had circumcised the children of most of the Mongols; and he complained that the prince had converted the majority of his army to Islam. The Qa'an was extremely disturbed about this report. He tried to prevent Ananda from performing acts of devotion and worship, to withdraw the Muslims from his court, and to encourage Ananda to worship idols and burn incense in idol-temples. The Qa'an failed to establish the request and afterwards came to Ananda asking;

If you have seen a vision, or heard a voice or something has appeared before you, or someone has guided you to Islam, then tell me so that he or it may guide me too.

Ananda replied;

Supreme God guided me through knowledge of Himself.

Then the Qa'an stated;

It was a demon that guided you.

But Ananda replied;

If it was a demon that guided me then who was it that guided Ghazan Khan who is *my aqa*?

The Qa'an fell silent and reflected for a while on these words.¹⁴

Although Ananda had believed and practised Islam from his childhood, he was motivated and often went to extreme when he heard that the Lord of Islam, Ghazan Khan, had become a Muslim, and that all the Mongols in Persia had become Muslims which subsequently lead to destruction of all idols and idol-temples. Then, Ananda, in imitation of Ghazan Khan, strove to strengthen the faith of Islam.

Ananda went to the Qa'an on the occasion of a *quriltai* and he was treated with respect. Ananda openly paraded his Islam with sincerity. Having heard about the conversion of the Lord of Islam, Ghazan Khan, the Qa'an expressed his approval by saying:

In becoming a Muslim, Ananda has followed Ghazan Khan. Let him practise his Islam as his heart desires, because I have reflected and I have found that Islam is a good way of life and religion.

Though afterwards, Ananda went to even greater extremes in propagation of Islamic belief.¹⁵

Briefly, these have been legendary accounts of some Sufi in spreading Islamic teachings and converting some of the powerful Mongol rulers into Islam. On one hand, this historical event conflicts with the standard opinion which viewed the Sufis as overly passive and self-indulged with their concentration of only the hereafter, which logically would leave them easy victims for the Mongol conquest. However, on the contrary, it appears rather obvious that the Sufis, indeed, saved the heritage of Islamic sciences and preached the religion even to the invading enemies of mankind. Alhamduli'llah the Sufis succeeded.

NOTES

1. Also known as Mongol Khans.
2. E. G. Juvayni, *Tarikh Jihan-gushay*, ed. Qazvini, vol. I: 80-81; or Boyle's translation of Juvayni's, *The History of the World-Conquerer*, vol. I, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1958), 103-104.
3. Quoted from A. Bausani, "Religion under the Mongols," in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, ed. Boyle, vol. 5: 540.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Rashid al-Din, *Jami' al-Tavarikh*, vol. I, (ed. 'Abd al-Karim 'A. 'Ali-Zada (Baku: Farhangistan, 1957), 267.
6. Cf. Hamid Algar, "Kubra," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, New Edition*.
7. Quoted from Hamid Algar (trans.), *The Path of God's Bondsmen from Origin to Return* (New York: Caravan Books, 1982), 4 (Introduction); and Rizvi, *A History of Sufism in India*, (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Pub. Prt. Limited, 1978) v. I 226-227. For details cf. Jean Rishard, "La Conversion de Berke et les Debuts de l'Islamisation de la Horde d'Or," *Revue des Etudes Islamiques*, 35 (1967): 173-178.
8. *Khariu'l-Majalis*, 181. Quoted from Rizvi, 227.
9. Quoted from Bausani, 542.
10. Rashid al-Din, *Jami' al-Tavarikh*, V. 3: ed. 'Abd al-Karim 'A. 'Ali-Zada (Baku: Farhangistan, 1957), 297.
11. *Ibid.*, 396-397. Translated by Bausani, op. cit., 542.
12. Rashid al-Din, 405-408.
13. Who is the son of Mangqala, the third son of Qubilai Khan and the elder brother of Nomoghan.
14. Boyle (trans.), *The Successors of Genghis Khan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), 323-324.
15. *Ibid.*, 325.