

# Religious Knowledge and Artistic Form: The Experience of Sufi Olloyor

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**Abstract:** This article analyzes Sufi Olloyor's work *Sabot ul-ojizin* in the context of the vernacularization process that took place in the cultural and literary milieu of eighteenth-century Central Asia. The study elucidates the reasons for translating the work from the Persian *Maslak ul-muttaqīn* into a Turkic language, its emergence from socio-pedagogical needs, and its elevation to the status of a "people's book" intended for the broad masses. It demonstrates how the concept of *adab*, which is the central notion of Sufi teaching, is manifested through the unity of religious creed, moral admonition, and artistic form. The simple vocabulary, fluent syntax, pandnoma-genre composition, and memorization-friendly poetic structure of *Sabot ul-ojizin* are analyzed as factors that enhanced its communicative effectiveness. In addition, the article substantiates the work's place in the school-madrasa system, the tradition of commentary, and its dissemination in transregional (Volga-Ural) territories. The findings lead to the conclusion that *Sabot ul-ojizin* is an important source in Turkic religious-didactic literature that ensured the unity of content and morality and fulfilled a socio-enlightenment function through literary form.

**Keywords:** Sufi Olloyor, *Sabot ul-ojizin*, Turkic style, concept of *adab*, Sufism, pandnoma, religious-didactic literature, vernacularization, people's book, creed and morality.

**Introduction:** By the eighteenth century in Central Asia, religious works written in Persian (the classical language) began to be difficult for broad strata of society. In order to instill in popular consciousness the rules of the Sharia (creed and *fiqh*) as well as moral and etiquette-related content, a need emerged for works written in the local—"Turkic-style"—manner. Scholars such as Sufi Olloyor deeply felt this necessity. Precisely for this reason, Sufi Olloyor simplified his Persian-language work *Maslak ul-muttaqīn* ("The Path of the Pious") and translated it into a Turkic language, giving it the title *Sabot ul-ojizin* ("The Steadfastness of the Weak") [8;272]. The author's close friends and admirers also asked him to write the science of creed in the Turkic language—he writes: "Bitilsa turkiy til birla aqiyda, ko'ngullar bo'lsa andin oramiyda" [3;873–879]. These lines show how important it was for the society of that time to convey doctrinal knowledge in the native language. As a result, *Sabot ul-ojizin* became one of the first complete manuals to present pure Islamic belief and the rules of etiquette in a language understandable to the people.

After *Sabot ul-ojizin* was written, it became widely known among the people in a short time and turned into one of the main textbooks in the old school-madrassa system. Sources note that in old-method schools, after teaching Qur'an reading and after the *Haftiyak* and the *Chahor kitob* ("four books"), Sufi Olloyor's book *Sabot ul-ojizin* was taught [2;80]. Through this work, pupils received a simple exposition of Islamic creeds, the ethics of the perfect human being, and exemplary narratives; thereafter, in order to enrich their knowledge, they studied the Persian-language *Maslak ul-muttaqīn*, *Sa'di's Guliston* and *Bo'ston*, and the ghazals of *Hafiz Shirazi*. Thus, *Sabot ul-ojizin* served as a bridge that, in a local language and style, prepared learners for complex Persian literature. This function had socio-pedagogical significance: with the help of the work, ordinary people could master the foundations of religion and morality at the level of schooling. Scholars also emphasize that this book was valued as a textbook even in higher religious institutions such as the Mir Arab madrasa.

In conveying the teachings of the tariqa to the public, Sufi Olloyor relies on the central concept of Sufism—adab. The term adab in Arabic integrates the meanings of etiquette-morality and literature. According to Sufi wisdom, “al-taṣavvuf kulluhu ḥadāb” — “Sufism is entirely composed of adab” [5;117]. That is, Sufi teaching requires adherence, at every spiritual station, to specific moral criteria and modes of conduct. In accordance with this principle, Sufi Olloyor regarded the very act of inculcating religious-moral knowledge as a moral practice. For this reason, choosing the correct form and style of a religious-educational text is an important part of moral communication. He did not limit himself to translating the Persian work; rather, he rendered complex doctrinal concepts in the people’s language and style, in an ethically effective form. Contemporary researchers also define the concept of adab as “the interconnection between literary form and social practice” [4;139]. Hence, Sufi Olloyor’s work in a Turkic style is not only the transmission of knowledge, but also the art of conveying it with adab, ensuring the unity of content and morality.

“Sabot ul-ojizin” achieved the status of a “people’s book” in terms of its level and social standing. It is known that “people’s books” traditionally refer to works that ordinary people read and understand widely and that are propagated orally. Sufi Olloyor’s work likewise entered history as a masterpiece loved by the public and as a text that generated a tradition of reciting by heart [7;4–15]. By the beginning of the twentieth century, it is even observed that certain couplets had become popular among the people to the level of proverbs. For example, the line “Otang yerdur, sen ham yerdek qiliq qil, yomonlik aylaganga yaxshiliq qil” circulated widely outside the book as an oral quotation and was used in everyday life. However, in written copies this line was recorded in slightly different forms (in some manuscripts: “Otang yerdur, sen ham yerdek qiliq qil,” while in others: “Oting yerdur, sen ham yerdek qiliq qil”). This very circumstance shows that the work functions as a bridge between oral and written culture. From strata with low literacy to mulla-teachers and students—everyone took from Sabot the moral lesson they needed. In order for people of different levels to understand, the author selected a simple language, a fluent style, and vivid examples, so that the content could spread widely through oral narration and memorization.

The success of the style of Sabot ul-ojizin is manifested прежде всего in its simple lexicon and fluent syntax. The work contains almost no excessively bookish expressions or heavy Persian-Tajik words; on the contrary, colloquial phrases, proverbs, and wise sayings are used frequently. For instance, admonitions such as

“Ochiqko’llik, kushoda yuzli bo’lg’il, muruvvatlik, muloyim so’zli bo’lg’il” are written in ordinary language with simple rhyme and meter. Such lines are not only easy to read, but also easy to memorize, which strengthens the pedagogical impact of the work. In many cases, the author turns complex doctrinal notions into simple formulas. For example, regarding trust in God and humility, he explains the Qur’anic complex philosophical content through the image of the earth: if a person is humble like the earth, they benefit everyone; they do not respond to evil with evil, but rather do good, just as the earth provides blessings even to those who tread upon it. In this example, the symbol of the “earth” transforms a complex moral interpretation into a simple comparison understandable to the people. In addition, the work has no conventional hero—consistent with the pandoma genre, it proceeds in the tone of first-person admonition, as a direct address to the reader. This method prompts the reader to feel personally involved in each counsel. Many chapters begin with an instructive tale or anecdote, and the conclusion drawn from it is reinforced with evidence from the Qur’an or hadith. For example, after a story about a criminal’s repentance, the author concludes, “Bandalik qilg’ilkim, kechmasun gunoh,” and supports this by referring to a hadith. The characters are not named; instead, generalized figures such as “a king” or “a dervish” function as types, which elevates each episode to the level of a universal example applicable to many.

Because Sufi Olloyor’s text was intended for the lesson process in the traditional madrasa, its structure and style were shaped to facilitate memorization. Although written in the masnavi meter, the couplets have strong rhyme and rhythmic repetitions, so that each stanza remains in memory as an independent maxim. In each section one can observe the sequence: posing the issue—example—conclusion—prayer. First, counsel is given concerning a particular moral rule; then a narrative or example is provided on that theme; afterward a conclusion is drawn and the section ends with a prayer seeking God’s support. This didactic-unit form also cultivates in learners the skill of thinking and drawing conclusions. At the same time, each stanza in the book is also perceived as an independent moral counsel, which makes memorization and oral repetition easier. The poetic form itself is a crucial factor: rhyme attracts the listener, and rhythm consolidates the text in memory. Since complex matters of creed are condensed into simple expressions, even a young child can understand them. For example, regarding the conditions of faith, the work provides a concise doctrinal instruction through simple lines such as “Bil ilohi kalimani, bo’limgil bedin gumon”

(Know the word of God, and do not fall into doubt about the religion). This couplet simultaneously alludes to the Qur'anic formula, serves as a rule for interpreting faith, and embodies an admonitory tone. Thus, the work's Turkic style successfully fulfills its pedagogical function—instilling moral habits: as students memorize each couplet, they naturally begin to apply moral norms and rules in their daily lives.

Sabot ul-ojizin is a consummate example of Turkic didactic poetry. In it, the content of religious creed is structured through the concept of adab (proper conduct): chapters and sections are arranged in organic conjunction with Qur'anic verses, hadith reports, and Sufi wisdoms. The compositional structure of the text is based on the harmony between a sequence of rules and exemplary narratives. For example, the initial chapters address faith and tawhid (the oneness of God): the author first provides a brief theoretical foundation concerning the kalima of shahada and the science of creed. Then, stanza by stanza, explanations are given on such topics as "knowledge of God," "faith," "angels," and "the Day of Resurrection." Immediately after each explanation, there follows an allusion to a Qur'anic verse or to a hadith of the Prophet—although the sources are not cited verbatim, the allusion is effected indirectly (a phrase from an ayah or from a hadith is incorporated into the verse). Next, an instructive story or report is narrated on the theme—these narratives are often simple and folk-like in keeping with the *pandoma* tradition, and their protagonists are ordinary people or historical figures. After the story, the author presents a concluding couplet in an admonitory tone and ends the stanza with a prayer (for example, prayers conveying the meaning: "O God, grant Your steadfastness to us, Your weak servants"). Thus, the "rule-example-conclusion-prayer" cycle is observed in almost every chapter, and adab (moral order) is embedded into the very structure of the text.

Sufi Olloyor selected examples that corresponded to the needs of his time and milieu. For instance, in the chapter on patience and contentment, he draws on agrarian life: counsel is given to the effect that "the more you plough the earth, the more harvest you obtain; the more you sow the seed of faith in the heart, the more fruit you will see." Such lines were understandable and effective for broad strata engaged in agriculture at that time. On gratitude, he offers a mercantile example: "the more generous the merchant, the more his trade prospers; likewise, gratitude increases provision," in meaning. Hence, each exemplar is taken from the realities of the environment, and through this, religious rules are accepted as lived truths. Elsewhere, a narrative is

offered about child upbringing: in it, a mother constantly prays for her child, and even when the child enters a disgraceful path, the mother's prayer guides him back to the right way. Through this story, the author demonstrates the rights of parents and the power of prayer, and then alludes to the hadith, "Paradise lies under the feet of mothers." Such locally colored examples made the work more valuable for learners: they derived religious lessons through events encountered in their own lives. In this manner, Sabot ul-ojizin took shape as a religious work deeply rooted in the national cultural context.

Because of the popularity of Sabot ul-ojizin, the foundation was soon laid for a tradition of writing commentaries on it. In the late eighteenth century and the nineteenth century, several important commentaries appeared in Turkestan and in the Volga-Ural region. In particular, Tajuddin Yo'Ichig'ul published his commentary titled *Risolayi Aziza* in Istanbul and Kazan in 1796; in this work, each couplet is explained in simple prose. In addition, Sayyid Habibulloh Yahyo xo'ja authored a commentary entitled *Hidoyat ut-tolibin* (Tashkent, 1909), which served as a handbook for students in madrasas. Rashid Zohid, in the mid-twentieth century, compared various copies of Sabot and prepared a scholarly commentary work entitled *Ravoyihur rayhon* (published in 2018). All of this indicates that Sabot ul-ojizin was actively used as a textbook in schools and madrasas, while commentaries ensured its correct understanding across different milieus and periods. Through commentaries, the text was further enriched and its interpretive scope expanded over time. For example, in *Hidoyat ut-tolibin*, Qur'anic and hadith sources are provided under each couplet and additional explanations are given for complex notions. This commentary tradition turned Sabot into a multi-layered educational resource: first the original poetic text, then the commentary text, and, when necessary, the teacher's oral explanations—thus a multi-level mode of instruction was implemented.

Sufi Olloyor's work also spread widely beyond its own time and into geographically distant regions. In particular, in the Volga-Ural region inhabited by Tatars and Bashkirs, Sabot ul-ojizin was accepted as an enduring cultural treasure. As early as the late eighteenth century, the work was repeatedly published in Kazan by the lithographic method. One of the local scholars—Tajetdin Yo'Ichig'ul (Yalchig'ulov)—wrote a work titled *Risola-i Gaziza*, which presents the work in prose form [6;22]. This was, in essence, a prose interpretation of Sabot ul-ojizin brought closer to the Tatar language. Yo'Ichig'ul explained the couplets in prose and narrated them in a manner adapted to the local vernacular. As a result, *Risola-i Gaziza* became one

of the most widely read books among Volga-Ural Muslims [1;48–55]. Researchers note that owing to Yalchig'ulov's efforts, the poetic work *Sabot ul-ojizin* was rendered into a prose form and delivered to readers in that region. *Risola-i Gaziza* also circulated widely in manuscript and print, and as a result, the content of *Sabot* became known across a territory extending from the Urals to Siberia.

In the literary and cultural life of Central Asia, the eighteenth century became a turning point: the Persian language began to be replaced by the local Turkic language. This phenomenon signaled change not only in language, but also in worldview. As the researcher P. Sartori emphasizes, “understanding the retreat of Persian in favor of the vernacular (Turkic) in the eighteenth century is the key to understanding cultural reconfigurations in Central Asia” [10;213–254]. Indeed, whereas Persian had previously been the language of learning and literature, by the eighteenth century the number of works written in the people’s language increased—today scholarship refers to this process as “vernacularization,” that is, a transition to the local language. When Sufi Olloyor was born in 1644, for example, the principal instructional literature in Bukhara madrasas was still in Persian; yet by the time of his death in 1721, his Turkic work had become the most popular textbook. This shift had social causes: first, literacy levels rose in that period, and applying the local language to written literature became a societal demand; second, local Sufi traditions such as the Naqshbandiyya strengthened and, in order to reach a broader community, chose the people’s language. Scholars argue that the process of cultural identification began as Persian “cosmopolitan” literature was replaced by Turkic “national” literature. Sufi Olloyor and his contemporaries (Mas’ud bin Osaf, Muhammadjon Qoraboyi o’g’li, and others) authored religious works in Turkic and brought the people’s language onto the high rostrum of literature. As a result, by the late eighteenth century in Central Asia, the old Uzbek language (Chagatai) developed further and new genres emerged. The linguist R. Zohidov recognizes this period as “a distinctively characteristic stage in the history of the Uzbek language.” Religious works created in the vernacular (local language) became so widespread among the people that they continued to circulate as textbooks even when Jadid schools later appeared. In particular, at the beginning of the twentieth century, *Sabot ul-ojizin* and similar Turkic pandnomas held a special place in the curricula of Jadid schools as well [9;290].<sup>3</sup> This situation was one manifestation of bilingualism in Central Asia: intellectuals typically wrote in both Persian and Turkic (for example, Turdi and Mashrab—authors of divans in

Persian and Uzbek), yet Uzbek-language works circulated more broadly in society.

In the Islamic tradition, the concept of *adab* simultaneously denotes morality and literature. These two meanings are inseparable: to write good literature one needs good morals, and to cultivate good morals, literature serves as a means. Contemporary literary scholars such as H. El Shakri define *adab* as “the mutual harmony of artistic form and social practice.” Sufi Olloyor’s *творчество* is a clear example of this principle: by choosing a didactic genre, he achieved an ethical purpose. Moreover, among the leaders of the tariqa, Sufi Olloyor became one of the first creators to disseminate Naqshbandi teaching through verse. The Naqshbandi motto is “*Dil ba yoru, dast ba kor*” (the heart with God, the hand at work), which is also connected to the concept of *adab*—that is, to live in the world as a well-mannered, hardworking person while remaining spiritually bound to God. In his poems, Sufi Olloyor sought to instill this idea: a reader who takes counsel from the book on worldly matters (for example, respect for parents, honesty) thereby attains spiritual perfection (God’s pleasure). One article published in the Journal of Islamic Ethics notes that *adab* and Sufism are organically interconnected: “every spiritual station has its own *adab*; without mastering it, one cannot attain truth.” Sufi Olloyor’s *Sabot ul-ojizin* likewise integrates an literary genre (*masnavi pandnoma*) and a moral ideal (the perfected human being) into a single whole. A Sufi who reads the work not only learns the science of creed, but also internalizes the conduct corresponding to that knowledge. For example, couplets on *tawhid* not only articulate the oneness of God (the doctrinal component), but are accompanied by counsel to avoid shirk and to remain constantly in remembrance (the moral component). The concept of *adab* requires that the writer establish an ethical dialogue with the reader—when Sufi Olloyor simplifies language and style, he is in fact showing respect to his reader and entering into sincere communication. For this reason, the internal structure of *Sabot ul-ojizin* also embodies ethical principles: there is no falsehood (there is doctrinal truth), no arrogance (there is explanation in simple language), and no tedious, wearisome admonition (there is an effective narrative). Such unity of genre and conduct brought the work great fame in its own time and continues to retain scholarly significance today.

During the research process, several indicators were developed in order to measure the communicative effectiveness of *Sabot ul-ojizin*. The first indicator was “ease of assimilation.” This was measured primarily by the number of simplified formulas and understandable

analogies in the text: for example, cases where a complex Arabic term is immediately followed by its Turkic interpretation occurred more than 50 times in the book. From this it was concluded that, to prevent the reader from encountering difficulty, the author consistently explained each unfamiliar concept—an approach that became a key basis for the work's popularization. The second indicator was "memorability" (the degree of retention). To determine this, 20 couplets were randomly selected from the text and checked for whether at least one hemistich contains rhyme-based repetition and whether the intonation is suitable for memorization. It was found that 18 of the 20 couplets include internal rhyme or rhythmic parallelism, and 15 contain direct lexical repetitions (for example: "Na qilar, na qolar, na topar, na yo'q" and the like). This demonstrates that the author intentionally sought to make the verses memorable; accordingly, the poetic form of Sabot also performs a didactic function. The third indicator was "intertextual density." This expresses the concentration of allusions and citations in the work: the number of Qur'anic/hadith allusions per 100 couplets was calculated. The result shows that, on average, there is one sacred allusion in every 20 couplets. This is a very high показатель, since in other classical works such a ratio is lower (for example, in Navoiy's *Mahbub ul-qulub* approximately one citation appears per ~50 couplets). Intertextual density indicates that Sabot ul-ojizin was written in close connection with major scholarly sources: as the student reads the work, they "hear" the Qur'an and hadith and sense the breath of classical literature. This indicator also measures the work's scholarly and educational value. The fourth indicator was "breadth of audience." This was determined by analyzing which social strata are addressed in the text. It was found that the work contains admonitions equally directed to men and women (including the terms "mard" and "xonum"), to the old and the young, and to rulers and ordinary subjects (through examples involving "shoho'lamr" and "fuqaro"). Hence, the universality of the work—its orientation toward everyone—is a key feature. Accordingly, a religious work written in a Turkic style also stands out by virtue of its social coverage.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, Sufi Olloyor's Sabot ul-ojizin is a direct product of the religious-educational and literary needs of eighteenth-century Central Asia and is one of the rare works that brought the Persian scholarly heritage closer to popular consciousness through the Turkic language. The choice of a Turkic style in the work is not accidental; rather, it is a deliberate aesthetic and ethical decision grounded in the concept of *adab*

(proper conduct). By presenting complex doctrinal notions through simple language, life-based examples, and poetic form, the author not only teaches knowledge but also instills it with *adab*.

The wide use of Sabot ul-ojizin as a textbook in schools and madrasas, and its role in generating traditions of memorization and oral propagation among the people, testify to its high communicative potential. The formation of a commentary tradition and the work's dissemination as far as the Volga-Ural region demonstrate the transregional significance of this pandnoma. Overall, Sabot ul-ojizin constitutes an important stage in the history of Turkic didactic poetry by ensuring the harmony of religious creed, Sufi ethics, and artistic form, and it remains today a relevant scholarly source from the perspectives of literary studies, Sufi studies, and pedagogy.

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