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## THE MAZAR OF THE SEVEN MAIDENS: A SHRINE THAT ONCE LIVED BUT STILL STANDS IN PICHAN

[Arařtırma Makalesi-Research Article]

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### Abstract

*Professor Rahilä Dawut is the world's leading scholar on the study of Uyghur mazar. Her pioneering publications in Uyghur, Chinese, and English as well as her digital archiving projects on indigenous expressions of religious identity have set the standard for the ethnographic study and preservation of Uyghur culture. Her unlawful detention comes at a shock to her colleagues, friends, and family, and her absence marks an irreplaceable loss to the academic community. Written in celebration of Professor Dawut's contributions to Uyghur studies and research on mazar more specifically, this essay translates Professor Dawut's 2001 chapter on the Mazar of the Seven Maidens (Yättä Qizlirim Maziri) located in Pichan County. It then provides ethnographic description of a 2015 visit to the shrine. This section places its focus on the ritual elements that link pilgrims past and present, the land, local saints, and, ultimately, the Divine. The article concludes with a message of hope for Professor Dawut and Uyghurs persisting in their homeland.*

**Keywords:** Mazar, Pilgrimage, Turpan, Pichan, Saint Veneration.

## YEDİ KIZ MEZARI: BİR ZAMANLAR YAŞAYAN AMA PİÇAN'DA HÂLÂ DURAN BİR TAPINAK

### Öz

*Profesör Rahilä Dawut, Uygur mezarlarının arařtırılmasında dünyanın önde gelen bilim insanlarından. Uygurca, Çince ve İngilizcedeki öncü yayınları ve dini kimliğin yerli ifadeleri üzerine dijital arşivleme projeleri, Uygur kültürünün etnografik çalışması ve korunması için standartları Dawut tarafından belirlenmiştir. Arařtırmacının kanunsuz şekilde tutuklu oluşu meslektaşları, arkadaşları ve ailesi için şok etkisi yaratmış ve onun yokluğu akademik camiada yeri doldurulamaz bir kayıptır. Profesör Dawut'un Uygur arařtırmalarına ve özellikle mezar üzerine arařtırmalarına katkılarında dolayı kaleme alınan bu yazı, Dawut'un Piçan'da bulunan 2001 tarihli Yedi Kız Mezarı (Yättä Qizlirim Maziri) hakkındaki kitap bölümünün tercümesini içermektedir. Yazıda daha sonra 2015 yılında türbeye yapılan ziyaretin etnografik tanımı sunulmaktadır. Bu kısımda geçmiş ve şimdiki hacılara, ülkeye, yerel azizlere ve nihayetinde ilahi olarak birbirine bağlanan ritüel unsurlara odaklanılmaktadır. Makale, Profesör Dawut ve ülkeleri için direnen Uygurlar için bir umut mesajı ile sona ermektedir.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Mezar, Hac, Turfan, Piçan, Azize Saygı.

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Before the Uyghurs were enclosed by the Chinese administrative borders called the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), the communities of East Turkestan were already connected—and their identities crystalized—through constellations of sacred tombs called mazar. Meaning “holy place,” “pilgrimage,” and “to witness,” mazar marked the final resting spots of important scholars, nobles, clerics, martyrs, and local heroes, many of whom helped to spread Islam in the region (Tursun, 2007: 326). They were often visited in hopes the saint’s spiritual charisma could cure sickness, make barren women fertile, resolve disputes, and strengthen one’s relationships with the Divine. Yet, they functioned more than a place for mystical religious expression: they were venues for social interaction. Mazars provided communities with sanctified places to visit the graves of loved ones, recite holy texts, gather for festivals, and offer charity to the poor (Thum, 2014: 96-132). As a Uyghur colleague from Turpan explained to me: “Uyghur people are linked through social institutions that span outward from mähällä to jäm’iyät, to mosque, then mazar and finally bazaar. Indeed, mazars connect people as much with each other as they do the Divine.

Professor Dawut is the world’s leading scholar on Uyghur mazar. Her Uyghur, Chinese, and English language scholarship has inspired and informed two generations of researchers. I was fortunate to meet her several times. However, our professional relationship and friendship only developed after I finished my dissertation and began exploring new projects. I was interested in local expressions of piety—with a special interest in saint veneration—and how religious devotions continue to shape Uyghur identity. Over a conversation in her office in 2015, Professor Dawut suggested this research could be possible in Turpan where khaniqa or sufi lodges were still active. I returned to my room that evening and read Professor Dawut’s (2001: 238-239) entry on the Mazar of the Seven Maiden, which I translate here in full:

*The Mazar of the Seven Maidens is located above a mountain that is situated approximately one kilometer south from Putuq Hamlet of the Chuwanqir Mähällä in Lämjin Village, Pichan County.<sup>1</sup> The location’s geographic coordinates are directly at 89°56’12” longitude and 42°51’67” latitude. It is 320 meters above sea level.*

*The Mazar of the Seven Maidens is seven domed tombs built in a row northwest of a cemetery. According to legend, during fighting against Buddhists, seven girls escaped and arrived at this spot. Then, the Buddhists chasing the girls slaughtered them. Afterwards, people commemorating them had a tomb built and named it Mazar of the Seven Maidens. In a valley opposite of the location of the Mazar of the Seven Maidens stands a mountain, which is the site of the Mazar of the Seven Lads. According to legend, these boys were also martyred during the war with Buddhists. It is said, during the summer at dusk the seven maidens and seven lads swim in the river of this valley and eat watermelon together.*

*According to estimates, the cemetery of Seven Maidens’ Mazar was established between the Tang Dynasty and the Idikut Dynasty. The sacred land of the Mazar of Seven Maidens includes an area of 150 thousand square meters. Due to local people tilling the land and excavating the earth and salt, part of the cemetery has been destroyed. Generally speaking, however, the cemetery has been preserved quite well. The tombs can basically be divided into three different types: (1) tombs of loose rocks measuring two meters in diameter and being 50 centimeters tall; (2) tombs built facing one direction and separated by a distance of two-four meters and the diameter and height being the same as the first type of tomb and; (3) tombs that are surrounded on four sides by a square structured formed from piled rocks.*

<sup>1</sup> Pichan County is under the jurisdiction of Turpan Prefecture and is located approximately 90 kilometers east of Turpan city. In 2010, its population stood at 231,297 people, 66 per cent of whom were Uyghur.

*The Mazar of the Seven Maidens' cemetery is designated as a cultural site protected by the Autonomous Region.*

Excited by this story, I arranged a trip to Pichan the next morning: we would leave in two days.

Professor Dawut's book *Uyghur Mazars* in hand, I set off with my wife, classmate, and a professional driver/friend from Turpan whom I met the previous year. Part ethnographic survey, part pilgrims' guide, the book directed us to the general vicinity of the Mazar of the Seven Maidens. After visiting the holy tombs at Toyuq, which have been transformed into a tourist friendly "Mazar Village," we headed deeper into Pichan in search of the Seven Maidens. Once in Putuq, the driver received specific instruction on how to find the tomb.

The car came to a screeching stop. In the middle of the rural road was a path that led up the foothills of a mountain. Seven domes awaited their guests' arrival.

Initially, the mazar appeared desolate. Close to noon local time, the domed tombs barely casted shadows on the dusty mixture of golden sand and gravel.<sup>2</sup> They stood still in the barren desert and bore down at distant green field as if the tombs were reminding locales of their mortality. A bier (Uy. *täwut*) rested in an otherwise empty structure.<sup>3</sup> Turning my gaze to the ground, I was met by the stare of a sheep's skull, bleached from the intense sun.



**Photograph 1:** The Mazar of the Seven Maidens

Although marked by stillness and symbols of death, the Mazar of the Seven Maidens breathed with abundant life. Wind gusts violently striking flags (Uy. *'alam*), scarves, and strips of cloth produced a cadence that sounded as though boots—maybe of past pilgrims or the seven maidens themselves—were marching up the nearby mountain. A simple *qorchaq* (doll) formed from two sticks placed near the opening of a domed tomb was likely placed by a young woman who hoped to bring new life into the world.<sup>4</sup> Below the main ritualistic pole (Uy. *tugh*), which was decorated with brightly-colored *'alam*, was a sparkling

<sup>2</sup> We also visited on Monday. Mazar activities more commonly occur on Wednesdays and Thursdays. See, (Thum, 2014: 98).

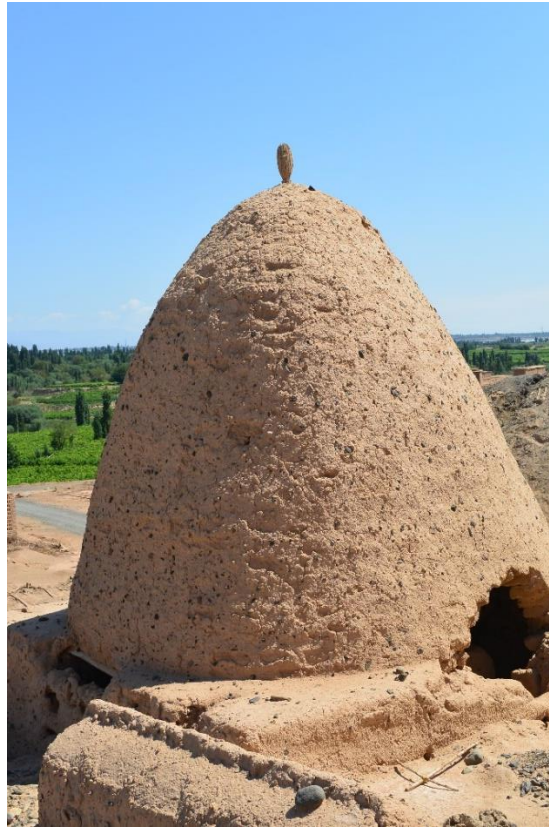
<sup>3</sup> Professor Dawut does not identify this building in her description. Judging from its lack of *mehrab* and *minbar*, even simply constructed, I suspect it is a meeting place for mystics (Uy. *haniqa*).

<sup>4</sup> Of course, not having interviewed the individual who offered this *qorchaq*, this interpretation is speculation. To be sure, *qorchaq* are often left by women wishing to become pregnant, but they can also be offered to cure ailments. See, (Dawut, 2016: 9; Ross, 2016: 125).

green *dastihan* tablecloth set with two bowls deliberately held down by seven stones. Pilgrims had recently “burned lamps” (Uy. *chiragh qilish*)<sup>5</sup> for the saint or deceased loved one at this spot. Instead of feelings of despair, I was overcome with a sense of hope.



**Photograph 2:** Tugh-'alam



**Photograph 3:** Qorchaq placed at opening of a tomb

<sup>5</sup> Rian Thum (personal communication) offered two explanations. Noting he had never seen two bowls placed on a *dastihan*, he raised the possibility that they were used as oil lamps and lit to commemorate the dead. Additionally, the bowls may have been used for a sacrificial meal even though this ritual is usually performed by groups of at least a dozen pilgrims. See also, (Bellér-Hann, 2008: 366).

Indeed in 2015, the site was still very much a “living shrine” (Ross, 2016). As Thum (2014: 124) as shown in his work on Uyghur sacred space, the Mazar of Seven Maidens marked an important place in Uyghur imaginings of their land and inscribed meaning in an otherwise meaningless space of vast desert. Through the constant replacing of ‘alam, providing offerings, and reciting prayers handed down from parents and grandparents, this mazar—like so many others—provided a transtemporal yet tangible link among pilgrims past and present, local history, and the Divine.



**Photograph 4:** Bowls set on dastihan

Tragically as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is tightening its hold on the XUAR, it is strangling the life out of mazar veneration. Since 2018, officials have ordered the razing of the Jā’firi Sadiq and Ordam mazars (URL-1) while many others have been desacralized and transformed into tourist attractions (Harris and Dawut, 2002). The destruction and desecration of these holy sites add to the growing list of the CCP’s prohibitions against Uyghur expression of Islam.

Yet, according to satellite imagery, the Mazar of the Seven Maidens still stands atop its mountain perch in Pichan. Although this mazar is unlikely to attract activity during these dark times, it exists to be re-discovered and revived. As it accomplished with Professor Dawut and me, the Mazar of the Seven Maidens may bring people together again.



**Photograph 5:** Tombs of the Seven Maidens

## Conclusion

This essay translates Rahilä Dawut's chapter about the Mazar of the Seven Maidens in Pichan County and provides ethnographic description of a 2015 visit to the shrine. The ethnographic description makes clear that local mazar in Pichan continued to be important sites of religious, cultural, and social activity prior to the Chen Quanguo era. Perhaps more importantly, however, the essay pays tribute to the scholarship, generosity, and kindness of Professor Dawut. It should be read as an unfinished, preliminary report with the hopes that, one day, Professor Dawut and I can collaborate on this project. Indeed, as it accomplished with Professor Dawut and me several years ago, the Mazar of the Seven Maidens will hopefully bring people together again.

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