

Sufism and Ottoman Cultural Relations with the Balkans

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Summary

Sufism played a major social role in Ottoman society. It became essential to the philosophical and theological aspects of Ottoman government and infused the state interpretation of Islam. The role and importance of Sufism was so prominent that it can be said that Ottoman Islam is in large part based in a Sufi understanding of Islam.

Sufis played important political roles in both the defense of and opposition to Ottoman rule in the Balkans, but it seems the role of Sufis in the intellectual and cultural spheres has attracted less notice. In the political considerations of that era, they were forced to take on political responsibilities. But on the intellectual level, the mission of Sufis in the Ottoman period was not only to serve the Ottoman state but to stimulate intellectual and spiritual life.

SUFISM PLAYED a major social role in Ottoman society. It became essential to the philosophical and theological aspects of Ottoman government and infused the state interpretation of Islam. The role and importance of Sufism was so prominent that it may be said

that Ottoman Islam is in large part based on the Sufi understanding of Islam. The Ottoman government was not a typical *Shariah* state with its attendant cultural and political limits. Sufism introduced into governance a pluralistic Islamic interpretation of Qur'an and the Tradition, with a wider, more realistic and better understanding of human life.¹

The Sufi orders in the Ottoman period enjoyed a position superior to the institutions of *Shariah*, and Sufi *shaykhs* occupied key positions throughout the state. Judges, theologians, educators, and even political officials were chosen from members of Sufi *tariqats* and from among Sufi scholars. Organization of economic life was facilitated by the *tariqats*.² The Ottoman system of dealing with non-Muslim communities, an important factor in the maintenance of the Ottoman state for 600 years, was supported by Sufism. Of course, government administration was not based on a Sufi outlook, but Sufi institutions, especially in the social and cultural aspects of life, gave advice and assistance to the government and attained widespread influence. Sufism changed the habits and mode of existence of Turkish nomads, and established the specifically Ottoman form of Islamic culture.

With the coming of the Ottoman state and the transfer of power from the Seljuqs to the Ottomans, Anatolia found itself in a new phase of its history. Unlike the Seljuqs' official language, which was Persian, the Ottomans chose the Turkish language as their administrative medium, and this had a predictable impact on other aspects of culture. Sufism kept the Turkish elements in the background of the new cultural reality that arrived in the Balkan Peninsula.

From the beginning, the Ottomans had extensive ties with the *tariqats* along with the institutions of *futuwwat*, which trained its members in chivalry, and the *akhis* organizations, based in the artisan and merchant guilds, and together they were integrated into the Ottoman army. Their main tasks were to promote Islam and support unity and social cohesion, adjusting individual and social life based on Islamic traditions and defense of the religious legitimacy of the sultan.³

¹ Chittick, William C., *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989, p.15.

² Faroghi, Suraiya, *Peasants, Dervishes and Traders in the Ottoman Empire*, London, Variorum Reprints, 1986, p. 6.

³ Norris, H. T. *Islam in the Balkans: Religion and Society Between Europe and the Arab World*, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993, p. 101.

Sufi combatants inside the Ottoman military were, at the beginning, mostly drawn from the *Alperenler* or “epic warriors,” and were supported by the sultans. Abdal Musa, Abdal Murad, Doğulu Baba and others, who in various wars had accompanied Orhan Gazi, came from among the *Alperenler shaykhs*, a *tariqat* that later continued its existence within the Bektashi order. The *akhis* organizations also played an important role in the formation of the Ottoman government. Osman Gazi’s father-in-law, *shaykh* Edebali, along with Akhi Hassan, Akhi Mahmoud and Jandarli Khalil, were all associated with the *akhis* phenomenon, and all assumed important positions in the Ottoman state.⁴

However, the Sufi *tariqats* generally considered themselves to possess an independent role, even when they served the sultan. They occasionally rose up against the sultan or an unstable government and forced it to reduce its internal and external authority. The rebellions of *Shaykh* Muhammad Bedrettin during the reign of Mehmet I; of *Shaykh* Jalal, the Safavid opponent of Selim I, whose name was lent to numerous “Jalali” protest movements in Anatolia even two centuries after him, and of Baba Zunnun under Suleyman *Kanuni*, are examples of social movements directed by or led in the name of Sufi leaders. For example, Sultan Murat II, once he became aware of the influence of the Sufi Haji Bayram Veli,⁵ called him to the then-imperial capital at Edirne, and only when he was certain that Haji Bayram’s movement was not seditious, permitted him to return home. Unrest and rebellion forced the Ottoman sultans to monitor carefully the activities of the Sufis. They had special means and structures within the Sufi movements, with which to supervise the activities and guide the *tariqats*. Analysis of the Sufi role in the Balkans is impossible if we do not consider the migration of scholars and Sufis from Khorasan (Iran) and elsewhere in Central Asia to Anatolia. The role of Sufis from Khorasan is so prominent that Sufi leaders in the Ottoman period usually considered themselves the spiritual descendants of Khorasani *shaykhs*.⁶ The movement westward of many Sufis, such as Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi, Hajji

⁴ Gölpınarlı, Abdalbaki, *Mevlânâ Celâleddin: Hayatı, Felsefesi, Eserlerinden Seçmeler*, İstanbul, 1951, pp. 245-246.

⁵ Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslam Ansiklopedisi: ‘Bayramiyye’ maddesi, Fuat Bayramoğlu ve Nihat Azamat, 1992, İstanbul, c.5, p. 270.

⁶ Ćehajić, Džemal, *Derviški redovi u Jugoslovenskom zemlĳama sa posebnim osvrtom na Bosnu i Hercegovinu*, Sarajevo: Orijentalni Institut, 1996, 11 p.

Bektash Veli, Najmuddin Razi Daya, Ohadeddin Kermani, Fakhruddin Iraqi, Serajuddin Urmavi, Seyfuddin Farghani and Nasreddin Ibn Bibi played an important role in creating a new Islamic culture and civilization, and political, social and economic life. The migration of Mevlana is one of the most important intellectual events for Ottoman history. During the Ottoman period, no thinker had greater influence than Rumi.

The migration of *Akhiha* and Qalandaris from Khorasan and Central Asia to the Ottoman lands were also very influential events. For example, Koyun Baba, one of the Qalandari *shaykhs*, lived in the era of Fatih Sultan Mehmet. He came from Khorasan and became a resident of Osmancik. Koyun Baba's *türbe* in that town was built by Sultan Bayazet II.

Osman Baba Qalandari arrived in Anatolia during the Timurid invasion. He had a special image, having cut off his beard, all his facial hair, and his eyebrows. Osman Baba Qalandari and his followers traveled from city to city and especially into the Balkan lands. He always had differences with the Ottoman rulers, although he maintained good relations with Fatih Sultan Mehmet.

Shia influence and beliefs are found in many Sufi *tariqats*. Numerous *tariqats* called themselves Shia, even when they, for political reasons, accepted the Sunni interpretation of Islam. The "Shia idea" inspired rebellion against tyranny as well as the study of esoteric teaching. These were reasons for reaction and criticism against the Sunni *ulema*. Sufis, because of the pressure of Sunni religious leaders and government, preferred to act in public according to Sunni teachings and remain Shia in their spiritual teaching. Assuming such a role was not always easy for Sufis. The revolutionary tradition of the Shia uprising against oppressive rulers and demands for social justice remained an important source of social and political mobilization for Sufis.

The Ottomans considered the Shia orientation as a type of unacceptable innovation in religion, and favored the Sunni *tariqats*. However, non-Sunni *tariqats* also continued their activity. For example, the first *yeniçeri* corps, as established by Orhan Gazi to serve the state, was composed of young Christians drafted to serve in the army. They compelled those Christians to become Muslim and to fight for the Ottoman Empire. In such circumstances it was natural that the *yeniçeri* members accepted Bektashi teachings, as a way of interpretation of Islam that was markedly similar to Christianity and acceptable to new Muslims. Later on, Bektashis in Anatolia and the Balkans continued

the important role of gradually bringing Christians to Islam. Because of their relations with the *yeniçeri*, the Bektashis never lost popularity. The ability of the Bektashis to motivate mass movements, because of their special beliefs including a fusion of elements of Islam and Christianity, often provoked the mistrust and suspicion of the state apparatus and the Sunni religious scholars. Perhaps for this reason the Ottoman authorities chose to strengthen the Mevlevi *tariqat*, and later the Naqshbandis, to compete with the Bektashis.

Members of the Mevlevi *tariqat* were drawn from the middle class or higher social strata. They mostly lived in urban communities and represented the leading elements in society, and always favored verse and music. The beliefs of Mevlana were not opposed to official Sunnism. Their customs, with the exception of their *semah* or turning on one foot in *dhikr*, belonged to a traditional interpretation of Islam. Most importantly, the Mevlevi were not politically active. Therefore, beginning in the 17th century, Mevlevi dervishes gained the attention and support of the sultans. In 1648 C.E. at the enthronement of Mehmet IV as the new sultan, for the first time a Mevlevi *shaykh* was the imam for prayer. From then on, this privilege was an official benefit for the Mevlevi *tariqat*.

In addition to the Bektashis and Mevlevi who represented Anatolian Turkish Sufism and were limited to the Ottoman lands, other *tariqats* with origins from other Muslim countries found their way to Ottoman territory, among them the Qadiri *tariqat*, which was formed in Iraq. After the conquest of Iraq by the Ottomans, Qadiris made their way to Anatolia. Also, before the 16th century, the Arabic Sufism of the Rifa'i *tariqat* was present in Asia Minor. Ibn Battuta mentions Rifa'i *zaviyas* or *tekkes* in Amasya and elsewhere. This *tariqat* arrived to the Balkan Peninsula with the expansion of Ottoman rule. Mollah Abd 'Allah Ilahi, a poet, was the first Naqshbandi *shaykh* to go to Asia Minor, and the Naqshbandis subsequently found many followers in Anatolia. Such authors as Mahmud Lami'i of Bursa (d. 1532 C.E.) were also Naqshbandis.

The Halveti order was another popular *tariqat* in Asia Minor. This *tariqat* took its name from Abu Abdullah Sirajuddin Omar Ibn Ekmeleddin Ahji Tabrizi, also known as Omar al-Halveti. In reality, *Shaykh* Yahya Shirvani, the second *pir* of this *tariqat*, is believed to have formed it in the Eastern Caucasus. In a short time, it spread among the

migrant tribes in East Anatolia and Azerbaijan, and finally its center was moved to Amasya. A later group of Sufis spread the Halveti order in the western part of the Ottoman possessions. Shortly after the conquest of Constantinople, its center was relocated there. The behavior and discipline of the Halvetis, the intensity of their commitment and political demands from them led to suspicions about them from the religious leaders. Eventually Fatih Sultan Mehmet asked the *shaykh* of the Halvetis to leave Istanbul. However, at the time of his successors, including Selim II, the Halvetis took on an important political role. In the 16th century, after repression of the Hurufi movement in Iran, its followers fled to Ottoman territory. They tried to establish a strong position among other *tariqats* in Asia Minor or to find supporters inside the government. Because of these efforts, Hurufism had a strong influence on the Bektashis and its traces continue to show an important presence in Anatolia and the Balkans.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, Sufism was present and active among the various classes of society, from ordinary people to government officials. The Sufis had many followers. At that time, their credibility and influence were so great that they even became visible among religious scholars. They also had economic power, especially through the trades and merchants united in *Futuwwat* organizations.

Islam was introduced to the Balkans by Sufis, of whom many came there before the military victories of the Ottomans. Sufism took on the responsibility of creating and establishing Islamic culture and civilization.⁷ The spread of Islam in the Balkans would not have been possible without the Sufi *shaykhs* and *tariqats*. Sari Saltuq, a legendary Bektashi saint, is said to have traveled to various parts of the Balkan Peninsula in the 13th century. It is said that Sari Saltuq settled in Dobrudja on the Black Sea coast, and visited other Balkan localities, with 40 Turkmen Sufis in 1261, a century before the arrival of the Ottoman army. Sari Saltuq *khaniqahs* were established in Dobrudja, Macedonia, Albania, and Bosnia-Herzegovina, then under Christian rule. The apostles of Sari Saltuq later established Bektashi *tekkes*, provided help to the poor and introduced Islam as a new religion among different classes of people, including Bogomils in Bulgaria. After Sari Saltuq, other Sufi *tariqats*

⁷ Schimmel, Annemarie, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975, p. 328.

came to the Balkans. There are Sari Saltuq tombs in Ohrid, in Macedonia, Blagaj in Herzegovina, and in Pashtrik on the border of Kosovo and Albania, which demonstrate his historical and legendary status.

With the dominance of Islam, more Sufis came to the Balkans. In the 15th century the expansion of the Ottoman Empire into southeastern Europe was more rapid than its advance at any other time in the history of the empire. During six centuries, the Ottoman entry into southeastern Europe obviously supported the spread of Islam. Indeed, among the countries that today occupy the Balkan Peninsula (Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, Croatia, Bulgaria, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Greece), the Muslims are well represented. While the highest concentrations of Muslims are found in Albania, Kosovo, and Bosnia-Herzegovina, Muslim minorities remain in all the other Balkan states.

Ottoman rule in the Balkans allowed the Sufis increasingly to build *tekkes* and *zaviyas* in the region. These new institutions became platforms for the spread of Islam as well as the foundation of new communities. The first, Turkish groups of Muslim immigrants often built their villages around *tekkes*.

Balkan Sufis projected the official, Sunni form of Islam. Most of them considered themselves Shia in the inner sense. In some *tariqats* elements of Shia teaching were adhered to in secret. As noted, the Ottoman state supported the Sufi *tariqats*, especially those identified as Sunni. They paid more attention to the Mevlevi, Halveti, Naqshbandi and Qadiri *tariqats*. Their role was both to spread Islam and to prevent the penetration of Shia or other trends that questioned the legitimacy of the sultan. The Mevlevi gradually lost importance and influence in the late Ottoman era and now have little activity in the Balkans. But in the beginning of Ottoman rule in the Balkans, the Mevlevi were important in the advancement of Sufism and Islamic culture. The earliest *tekkes* in the Balkans to be constructed by Ottoman forces were Halveti and Mevlevi. For example, in the cities of Skopje and Sarajevo, the first two *tekkes* of the Ottoman period were built by Isa-beg Ishaković, commander of the Ottoman army. The Ottoman traveler and Sufi Evliya Çelebi, during his visit to Sarajevo in the middle of the 17th century, wrote: "The Mevlevi *tekke* is located on the bank of the Miljacka river."

Among the non-Sunni *tariqats*, the Bektashi gradually established a presence scattered across the Balkans. The tombs of Bektashi Sufis in Macedonia (Sersem Ali Baba, at the Harabati *tekke* in Tetovo), Bulgaria

(that of Demir Baba near Razgrad), Albania (in Korça and elsewhere) and Bosnia (Sarajevo), show the wide activities of this *tariqat*. Bektashi activities were enhanced because of the role of Balim Sultan, a native of Dimetoka in Thessaly, the “second founder” of the order, who reorganized and reinforced it. Distinguished Bektashis were always suspect by the Ottoman government, which after the suppression of the Bektashis in 1826 destroyed or confiscated their *tekkes* and burned their books. The Bektashis were more successful in Albania than anywhere else in the Balkans and eventually became an important element in developing the national-religious identity of the Albanians. They defended and supported movements for the autonomy and then the independence of Albania.

The Hamzevis formed another *tariqat*, which originated in Bosnia. The Hamzevis had elements in common with the Malami-Bayrami Sufis. Hamzevism was more than a Sufi *tariqat* and is remembered as a political and social movement. Their teachings in the 16th century, when they were formed by Hamza Bali (d. 1573), resembled Alevi Shia beliefs as well as those of the Hurufis.⁸ Their emphasis on *vahdet-i-vucud* (unity of existence), focus on social and political issues, and their declaration of the illegitimacy of rule by the sultan were the main characteristics of their teaching.⁹ From the viewpoint of the Ottoman government and orthodox *Ulema*, this teaching was seen as Shiite and subversive.¹⁰ Their movement was suppressed and Hamza Bali and several of his disciples were executed, but the Ottoman government still kept Hamzevi followers in the army. Hamzevis were active for at least two centuries after the death of Hamza Bali, with *tekkes* mainly in Bosnia.

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⁸ Hadžijahić, M., *Tekija kraj Zvornika, postojbina bosanskih hamzevija, Prilozi za orijentalnu filologiju*, X-XI, Sarajevo: Orijentalni institut, 1961, p. 201.

⁹ Kukavica, Edin, *Bajramiije-melamijje/Hamzevijje*, Sarajevo: Sedam, 2009, pp. 303-305.

¹⁰ Nakićević, O., *Na marginama ranog sučeljavanja sunizma i sufizma u Bosna i Hercegovini, Anali Gazi Husrevbegove biblioteke*, XIII-XIV, Sarajevo: Gazi Husrevbegova biblioteka, 1980, p. 179.

Ottoman period was not only to serve the Ottoman state, but also to stimulate thoughtful and creative life.

The history of Sufism in the Ottoman Balkans cannot be understood completely if one only considers the role of Sufi *tariqats*. Sufi thinkers were important in regulating social relations, in cultural challenges to closed and dogmatic ideas, and in fostering a balance in relations between people and the government. The schools of Ibn Arabi and Mevlana formed the intellectual foundations of the Ottoman Empire. The implantation of Islamic civilization in the Balkans could not have been possible without the efforts of these Sufi *shaykhs* and their orders.¹¹ But with the gradual domination of *Shariah*-oriented thought after the 18th century, the Sufi role became weaker. The sequence of Ottoman political and military defeats beginning in the 18th century opened the way for reassertion of dogmatic ideas. The Sufis became more religious than intellectual, more governmental than independent, more external than internal and more conservative than revolutionary.

¹¹ Schwartz, Stephen, *The Other Islam: Sufism and the Road to Global Harmony*, New York: Doubleday, 2010, p. 10.