

THE BEKTASHI TARIKAH OF DERVISHES

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The Bektashis in History

The Bektashi Tarikah of Dervishes that nowadays is known as a Muslim religious community in Albania (*Komuniteti Bektashian*), is an Islamic Sufi order (*tariqat*) that embraces a considerable portion of the Muslim population of Albania. This *tariqat* is believed to have originated with Haji Bektash Veli (d. ca. 1290), an Islamic saint who lived in Anatolia in the second half of the 13th century. Bektashi legends maintain that Haji Bektash became the “patron saint” of the Janissaries during the reigns of Orhan or Murat I and played a leading role in the Islamization of young Christian recruits from the Balkans who had found place in the Ottoman army.

Many scholars believe that Haji Bektash Veli appeared among the dervishes of Anatolia during the 13th century and was most likely a disciple of Baba Ishak, a figure who revolted against the Seljuks in the 1240s. Sami Frashëri, a notable *muhib* (affiliate) and scholar of Bektashism in Albania, claimed that Haji Bektash Veli was one of the lofty *awliya'* (saints), and that he originated from the city of Nishabur in the Persian province of Khorasan. Haji Bektash Veli received his knowledge from Luqman Parandah and later journeyed to Anatolia. During his lifetime the saint is said to have met Sultan Orhan (ruled from 1326-1359 CE) and even blessed the newly-formed Janissary Corps, although such late dates are problematic. Even though he is considered to be the first *pir* of the Bektashis, the Bektashi order itself was established by a Sufi master named Balim Sultan (d. ca 1520 CE), who organized the order and built the mother *tekke* (the *Pirevi*, the central lodge of the order) in the central Anatolian town now know as Hacibektaş.¹

¹ Shemsedin Sami, *Qamus ul-Alam*, Istanbul 1889, vol II, p. 1332

According to Frashëri, the Bektashi order was transformed into a real *tariqah* at the beginning of the 16th century by the grand master Balim Sultan, who is held as the “Second *Pir*”, or high master, of the order.² With Balim Sultan, the Bektashi order developed into an organization with a highly structured and centralized hierarchy. While Bektashi doctrine is heterodox in disposition and its creed closer to Shi’i Islam rather than normative Sunni Islam, the Ottoman state and its *ulama* tolerated the order’s presence in the empire for a long time. Partially thanks to its patronization of the Janissary corps, the Bektashis made considerable grounds in spreading their mystical way among the Muslim population of the Balkans,³ particularly in the rugged areas of southern Albania and northern Greece.

Scores of orientalist have claimed that the attitude of Bektashis towards Islam is marked by their disregard for the externals of Islamic ritual and worship, a point which most Bektashis reject as a misleading notion.⁴ Their acceptance of the *Shari’at* (Islamic law) as witnessed by British scholar John Kingsley Birge⁵ has been robustly verified by Albanian Bektashis, such as Baba Selim Kaliçani and Baba Rexhepi (d. 1995).⁶ Baba Selim noted that Bektashis not only perform their daily prayers (*namaz*) in mosques or their *meydans* and believe in the *Shari’at*, but they perform two more recommended prayers at morning and noon.⁷

Doctrinally speaking, the Bektashis can be considered a sect of Shi’ism, even though some people confuse them with Sunni Islam.⁸ As with the Twelver Shi’i school of Iran, Bektashis accept the Twelve Imams, and hold Ja’far as-Sadiq (d. 765 CE) as their most important *imam*. The Bektashi doctrine has been aptly summarized by the distinguished national poet Naim Frashëri - perhaps the most well-known *muhib* in Albania - as follows:

The Bektashis believe in the True and Mighty God, in Muhammed – Ali, Hadijah, Fatimah, Hasan and Husein. They believe in the twelve imams

² *Bektashiyya*, Encyclopedia of Islam, Brill Academic Publishers, 2003

³ S. Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey*, Cambridge University Press 1976, p. 187

⁴ Baba Selim Kalicani, *Testamenti Bektashian*, pp. 60 – 66

⁵ John Kingsley Birge, *The Bektashi Order of Dervishes*, London: Luzac Oriental. Reprint: 1994, p. 107

⁶ see for example: Rexhebi, Baba. 1970. *Misticizma Islame dhe Bektashizma*. New York: Waldon Press.

⁷ *Testamenti Bektashian*, p. 48

⁸ Norris, Harry T. 1993. *Islam in the Balkans: religion and society between Europe and the Arab world*. London: Hurst, p. 89

*that are: Imam Ali / Imam Hasan / Imam Husein / Imam Zeynel Abedin / Imam Muhammed Bakir / Imam Jafar al Sadik / Imam Musa Kazim / Imam Ali Riza / Imam Muhammed Teki / Imam Ali Neki / Imam Hasan Askeri / Imam Muhammed Mehdi.*⁹

However unlike mainstream Shi'is, Bektashis see their connection with the mystical path via Imam Musa al-Kazim (d. 799 CE), and Haji Bektash is portrayed as his descendant.

The Bektashis mourn Imam Husayn and the martyrs of Karbala' as the other Shi'is do. Their special mourning period is called the *ma'tam*, and it is a ritual of fasting and lamentation that lasts from 1st to the 10th of the Islamic month of Muharram. Apart from the *ma'tam* the Bektashis of Albania have developed a number of other, more localized, celebrations. One of them is their yearly pilgrimage in August to Mt. Tomor, where they offer *kurbans* in memory of 'Abbas ibn 'Ali – the martyred half-brother of Imam Husain - who they believe, miraculously flew with his horse from Karbala' to the top of this mountain. Another Bektashi celebration is the ancient Persian holiday of Nawruz that Bektashis believe to be Imam Ali's birthday.

Like all the other Muslims, the Bektashis believe in Allah, the Day of Judgment, in the angels, the prophets and so on. However their belief in these points is often taken from the esoteric (*bâtin*) view rather than the exoteric (*zahir*), or literal, view. This is a point of divergence between normative Islam and Bektashism. Moreover some Bektashis share some pagan beliefs which are not found in the mainstream Islam. One of them is their belief in the reincarnation of the souls and their perfection after the death in a state like – Nirvana or its punishment in the form of animals. Because of this, Bektashis do not eat the meat of the rabbit, since they believe that Yazid, the killer of Imam Hussein in the battle of Karbala, was reincarnated into a rabbit.

Bektashis place much emphasis on the concept of *Wahdat ul-Wujud*, the "Unity of Being" as formulated by the great Sufi Ibn Arabi (d. 1240 CE). This has often been erroneously labeled by Western Orientalists as pantheism, although it is a concept closer to pantheism. Bektashis base their practices and rituals on their non-orthodox and mystical interpretation and understanding of the Qur'an and Prophetic practice (*Sunnah*). They have no written doctrine specific to them, thus rules and rituals may differ

⁹ Naim Frasheri, *Fletorja e Bektashinjet*, Bukuresht 1896, p. 9

depending on under whose influence one has been taught. They also believe that the Qur'an has two levels of meaning: an outer (*zahir*) and an inner (*batin*) and hold the latter to be superior and eternal.

Even though academics have tried to link the Bektashi form of Islam with Christianity and claim that Bektashis believe in a trinity reminiscent of Christianity, their belief in one is not the same. While it is true that in a number of their supplications (*du'as*), Bektashis mention the names "Allah – Muhammed – Ali" in a single breath, they view Allah as the creator, Muhammed as the path-maker and Imam Ali and Haji Bektash Veli as guides. The majority of Bektashis would probably not be at ease being described as trinitarians, at least not in the Christian sense,¹⁰ since their mention of "Allah – Muhammed – Ali" is part of their belief in the concept of *Wahdat al-Wujud* (Unity of Being). At the beginning of the 20th century, Bektashis rigorously rejected the attempts of a Greek Bektashi, a certain Baba Kaso, who wanted to introduce the formula "*Ati, biri, shejti*" (the father, the son and the holy ghost) into their belief.¹¹

Since its organization by Balim Sultan the Bektashi order has possessed a structured religious hierarchy. At present, its supreme leader is the *dedebaba* – or – *kryegjysh* - the "great-grandfather", who usually is supported in his mission by individuals known as *dedes* or 'grandfathers' (also known as *khalifahs*). Under these *dedes* are the *babas*, the dervishes who head the *tekkes* and are qualified to give spiritual guidance (*irshad*). Then we find the normal dervishes, then the *muhibs* (members that have given their oath to the order) and finally the *ashiks*, who are the sympathetic laity. In the modern history of Albania, the *muhib* grade has often been more influential in the fate of the order than the *babas* or dervishes themselves. One such example of such a *muhib* is Naim Frashëri, who is held by the present day Albanian Bektashis as their greatest champion.¹²

The Bektashi dervishes wear a white cap (*taj*) consisting of four folds and twelve gores. The number four symbolizes the four stations of the mystical path, which are:

1. *Shari'ah* (the outer law)

¹⁰ *Testamenti Bektashian*, pp. 46 – 48

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 207

¹² For more see Ger Duijzings (2005), *Qerbelaja e Naim Frashërit: Feja dhe politika në Shqipëri, Feja dhe Shqiptaret*, Përpjekja, nr.20, pp. 44 – 57

2. *Tariqah* (the inner path)
3. *Ma'rifat* (mystic awareness)
4. *Haqiqah* (Reality)

While the twelve gores point to the number of the *Imams* as well as the vices to be surmounted:

1. darkness, 2. forgetfulness, 3. sin, 4. undesirable taste, 5. hopelessness, 6. beautiful clothing, 7. animal desire, 8. arrogance, 9. revenge, 10. impatience, 11. the grief that comes because of failure. 12. forgetfulness of God.¹³

The Bektashis also claim that the usage of the cap with four folds originated from the time of Sultan Mahmud II, when *babas* kept a four folded *taj* resembling the Tijani dervishes in order to hide their identity. They began to wear a 12 gored *taj* again only during the reign of Sultan ‘Abd ul-Hamid II.¹⁴

Bektashism in Albania

The history of the Bektashi Order of Dervishes has fascinated the imaginations of numerous scholars, writers and poets during the 19 and 20th centuries. Even though the Bektashi order was established in Anatolia, it made huge inroads in the Balkans during the last three centuries of Ottoman rule. As mentioned above, the history of the Bektashi order was closely linked with the Janissary Corps. The Janissaries constituted the core of the Ottoman army and its members came mainly from Christian backgrounds converted in Islam were overwhelmingly Bektashis. Known as the “Sons of Haji Bektash” (*Haji Bektash Ogullari*), their uniforms, organization and leadership were connected with the order.¹⁵

With the destruction of the Janissaries on the order of Sultan Mahmud II in 1826 CE, the Bektashis suffered what they call in their history as *‘gjëma e parë e*

¹³ *Testamenti Bektashian*, pp. 105 – 106

¹⁴ *Ibid.* Pp. 210 – 211

¹⁵ Birge, pp. 74 – 75

Bektashizmës’ or the first tragedy of the Bektashis.¹⁶ Their *tekkes* and *zawiyas* (smaller lodges) were closed, destroyed or handed over to other Sufi orders. Their dervishes exiled, while a number of Bektashis managed to survive only by converting into Nakshibendis¹⁷ or hiding in the rugged terrain of Western Balkans, or even claiming to belong to other tarikats, such as Tijanis, Rufais and so on.

Even that the Janissaries seem to have been the main importers of Bektashism in Albania, the origin of the *tariqah* remains obscure and often confuses the researcher. Reliable evidence indicates that the emergence of Bektashism cannot be dated earlier than the turn of the seventeenth century, which is also consistent with the massive Islamization of the Albanians. However the Bektashis claim to have been in Albania before the Ottomans. One of their claims is based on the 13 century legends of Sari Salltik. In the *Vilayetname* book of Haji Bektash Veli, Sari Saltik is mentioned as his disciple.¹⁸ Sari Salltik is announced in a number of sources as one of the earliest dervishes that came in the Balkans for preaching Islam. The famous Ottoman traveler, Evlija Çelebi, in his book *Siyahetname*, notes that Sari Salltik took his orders in Turkistan by Hoja Ahmed Jesevi to go in: "... *the lands of the Rum. Go in the place of seven kingdoms and become famous.*" The legend also says that Sari Salltik went in Anatolia together with 700 dervishes¹⁹ and later spread the message of Islam into Rumelia. The Bektashis have inherited by popular folk-stories many legends about Sari Salltik and claim that he was one of their own. They have built even a tekke on his memory in the mountain city of Kruja in central Albania. There, they make annual pilgrimages in memory of his mission and sacrifice.

Apart from Sari Saltik, the tekke of Dimoteka mentioned in a number of sources seems to have been one of the most important centers for the spread of Bektashism in Rumelia. Bektashi historians, note that the spread of Bektashism among the Albanians was made by a number of dervishes, such as Pir Sultan Abdal of Kosova and Shah Kalendar of Elbasan, who were even martyred for spreading the faith.²⁰ The Bektashi

¹⁶ Selim Kalicani, *Bektashizmi si sekt mistik islam*, p. 152

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 158

¹⁸ Nexhat Ibrahim, *ISLAMI NË TROJET ILIRO-SHQIPTARE GJATË SHEKUJVE*, Logos-A – Shkup, 1419/1998

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Selim Kalicani, *Bektashizmi si sekt mistik islam*, p. 187

mythology shows its dervishes, pirs and saints as fighting with the dragons, flying with horses, challenging the local priests with miracles, converting princes in Islam and liberating people from injustice and repression.

The first *tekke* that Bektashis believe to have established near the Albanian populated areas is the *tekke* of Thessaly in Greece, established by Durbali Sultan. From there the Bektashi message spread among the Albanian populated areas of Western Balkans. Under the leadership of Resmi Baba, the Bektashis established the teke of Tetova, and later spread in Kërçova, Prizren and Gjakova. In Albania proper the first teke was that of Gjirokastra built in the 17th century by Asim Baba. Later they built the *tekke* of Shemimi Baba in the city of Kruja, the *tekke* of Elbasan by Jefai Ibrahim Baba etc.²¹

Bektashis claim that the repercussions of sultan Mahmud II followed them even in Albania. As a result one of their greatest *tekkes*, that of Baba Aliko in Berat was burned by the followers of the sultan.²² Whatever the truth might be, the Bektashis enjoyed great freedoms and growth in the Ottoman Balkans during the Era of Tanzimat reforms. Birge notes that by the middle of the 19th century they were very influential with the Ottoman elites and some claimed that even the mother of sultan Abdul Aziz was a Bektashi.²³

The history of Bektashism witnessed a second great turn when the Turkish Republic was created by Kemal Atatürk. With the banning of all the Sufi orders in 1925, the Bektashis were forced to abandon their *pir – evi* (Saint's Home) in Haji Bektash (between Kayseri and Kirsheir) and migrate to Albania. This period that Bektashis call as their second '*gjëmë*' – disaster, led to the transformation of the Albanian part of the order from a Turkish – Ottoman *tariqat* into Albanian. The grand-dede of the order, Sali Niazi Dede, who was Albanian, left Ankara for Tirana in 1931. The newly established Albanian state that viewed the anti-Turkish version of Bektashi Islam positively, received them warmly. For preparing the transfer of the teke from Anatolia in Albania, in 28 September 1929 Albanian Bektashis held a grand conference in the Teke of Prishtë in Albania under the leadership of Baba Kamber and established the first modern constitution for the order. This constitution which was embraced by the Albanian government declared that:

²¹ Ibid, pp. 186 – 188

²² Ibid, p. 188

²³ Birge, p. 80

- a. Bektashis are a sect of Islam represented by the institution of Kryegjyshata in Albania
- b. The order is lead by the 1. *kryegjysh* (arch – dede), 2. the *gjyshërit* (dedes), 3. *prindërit* (babas), 4. the dervishes and 5. other functionaries.
- c. The language of the sect is Albanian
- d. The Bektashi Sect is administered by six gjyshëri (dedelik): 1. The Gjyshëri of Kruja, 2. Gjyshëri of Elbasan, 3. Gjyshëri of Korça, 4. Gjyshëri of Frashëri, 5. Gjyshëri of Prishtë and 6. Gjyshëri of Gjirokastra.²⁴

A provision on the constitution was that the arch-dede or other dedes could loose their job, if they were to come in conflict with the state.²⁵

The political transformation of the Bektashi Tariqat, after its establishment of their World Headquarters in Tirana was detrimental for the nature of the order. The newly formed Albanian state that was interested to create a new anti-Turkish Islam – opposed to Sunnism, used Bektashi's old dream of creating a state for themselves,²⁶ for promoting an Albanian version of Islam in the country. As Mehdi Frashëri, one of the major Bektashi exponents of Albanian nationalism notes, in Albania '*from four religions that country has, the Catholic and Bektashi were and are supportive of nationalism. While the Sunism and Orthodoxy have been against it.*'²⁷

The desire of Albanian nationalist to promote Bektashism as a separate religion from Islam came since 1920, when the first post-Ottoman Albanian government was created and Bektashis were mentioned and represented as belonging to a different religious community from the rest of the Muslims. The fact that Bektashi tekkes were centers of anti-Ottomanism during the last days of the Ottoman Empire was used by Albanian nationalists for creating the myth of their modern nationalism as being connected with Bektashism. The slogan '*we are not Turks, nor Giaurs, but Albanians*'

²⁴ Selim Kalicani, *Bektashizmi si sekt mistik islam*, pp. 190 - 196

²⁵ Ibid, p. 197

²⁶ Hasluck, Frederick William (1929), *Christianity and Islam under the sultans*, The Clarendon press, p. 438

²⁷ Mehdi Frashëri (2000b), *Historia e lashte e Shqiperise dhe e shqiptareve*, Phoenix, p. 48

used by Bektashis was what the new Albanian state needed. Bektashi *mühîps* such as Naim and Sami Frashëri envisaged the creation of the modern Albania, by excluding religion from its identity and having Bektashism as its best example. In the book ‘*Albania how it was, is and will become*’ written in 1879, Shemsedin Sami is noting:

*...true and good Albanians and those who want to save Albania have to put always the nation before the faith; his brother is not his co-believer, but his co-national. The real Albanians are true brothers with each other; their brotherhood should be as strong as nothing can be able to divide or penetrate them. True Albanians must be like the frankmasons and Bektashis that are true brothers to each other.*²⁸

The desire of the Albanian Bektashi *mühîps* to elevate Bektashism into the level of a religious community led them to organize a number of congresses. In 1929, they tried to change the status of Bektashiyah from a sect into that of a religious community. However they failed, since the Dervishes rejected this label and preferred to see themselves as a sect of Islam.²⁹ King Zog I who was interested on hosting the Bektashis in Albania, played an important role on convincing them to place their order in Tirana, the capital of the new Albanian state. His positive attitude was detrimental on convincing the Bektashis to finally transfer their World Headquarters from Haji Bektash in Turkey, in Tirana in 1930. The anti-Turkish myths that Bektashis forged for their order and their belief in Albanianism seems to have attracted King Zog, for which both he and Enver Hoxha are sometimes believed to be of Bektashi origin.³⁰

The status of the Bektashi Tariqat was elevated into the level of a religious community in Albania, only in 1946, when the communists organized the Fourth Bektashi Congress. The transformation of the Bektashis from a Muslim sect into a religious community came through the pressure of some Bektashi *Babas*, such as Baba Faja Martaneshi and Baba Fejzo that were members of the Communist Party of Albania. The changes that communism wanted to bring to the Tariqat under the reformist *Babas* were out of proportions for the conservative dervishes. When Baba Faja Martaneshi and

²⁸ Frashëri, 1899, *op. cited.*, pp. 144 – 145

²⁹ Selim Kalicani, *Bektashizmi si sekt mistik islam*, p. 212

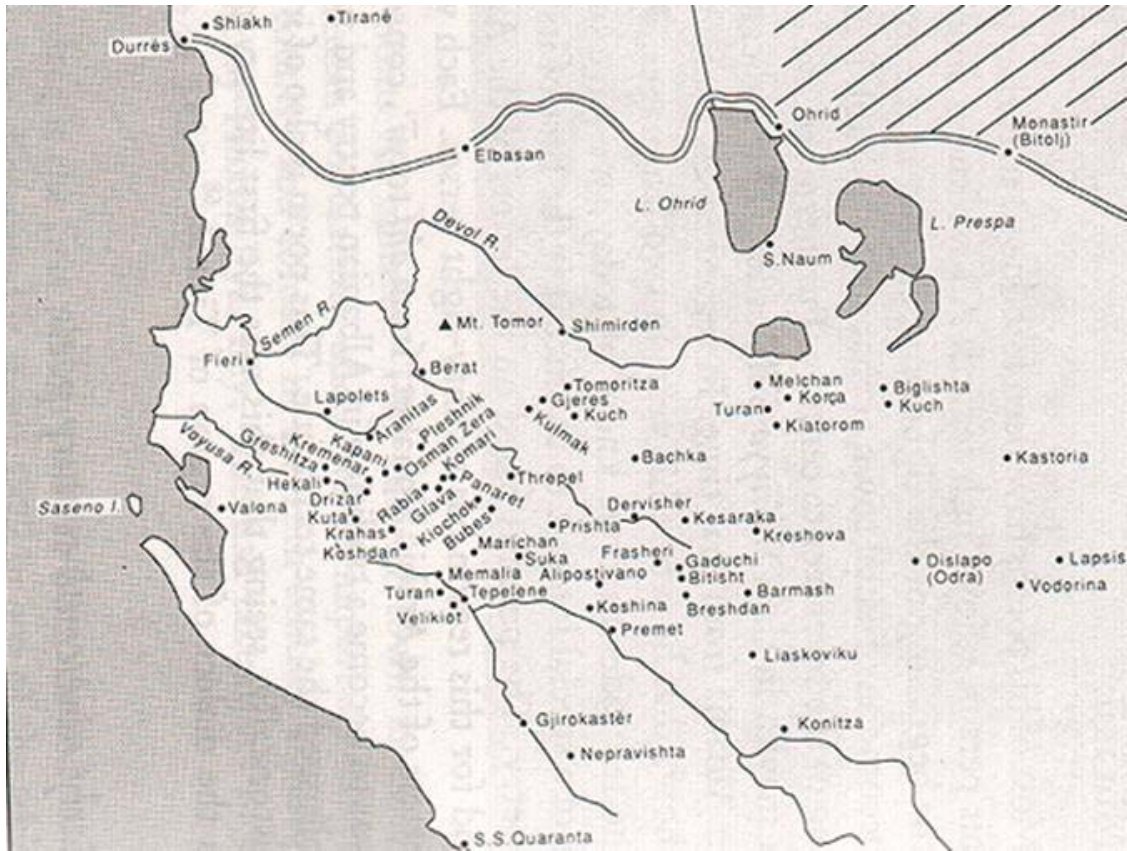
³⁰ (Norton 2001: 194; Clayer 2002: 155-156)

Baba Fejzo pushed the grand – dervish Abaz Hilmi Dede in 1947 to change the celibacy laws of the order and allow the dervishes to marry and have families, he killed the reformist *babas* and than himself.³¹ After this incident, the communists destroyed the Tariqat, by executing, imprisoning or removing several babas and dervishes from their job.

When religious practice was allowed back in Albania in 1990, the Bektashi Tariqat reestablished itself. However the order today does not have any real knowledgeable dervish left, with the exception of Baba Selim Kaliçani who passed away in 2000 and was in conflict with the new inventions of the Bektashi center in Tirana.

The Bektashis operate many tekkes today in Albania. The current head of the order is Haji Reshat Bardhi and the main tekke is Kryegjyshata of Tirana. While some 15% of the people of today's Albania are thought to be Bektashis and are concentrated mainly in the South of Albania, the Tariqat is a very important part of the overall Muslim community of Albania.

³¹ Selim Kalicani, *Bektashizmi si sekt mistik islam*, p. 228 – 229



A map on the distribution of Bektashis in Albania by H. T. Norris

In Kosova and Macedonia, Bektashis have also some important *tekkes* and communities. The most important *tekke* in Macedonia is the Harabati Baba in Tetova. After the death of Baba Tahir Emini (1941-2006), the *dedelik* of Tirana took over the *tekke* and appointed Baba Edmond Brahimaj (Baba Mondi), formerly head of the Turan Tekke of Korçë, to oversee the Harabati Baba Tekke. While in Kosova, the Bektashis have a *tekke* in the town of Gjakova under the leadership of Baba Mumin Lama.