SUFISM, MUSIC AND SOCIETY
IN TURKEY AND THE MIDDLE EAST

Papers Read at a Conference Held
at the Swedish Research Institute
in Istanbul, November 27-29, 1997

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SWEDISH RESEARCH INSTITUTE IN ISTANBUL
TRANSACTIONS VOL. 10
Tasavvuf, Music and Social Change in the Balkans since the Beginning of the Twentieth Century with Special Consideration of Albania

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The following pages is the fruit of the work of an historian, and not that of a musicologist or ethno-musicologist; an historian, who until now, most certainly wrongly, did not attach enough importance to music when working on tarikat in the Balkans, Moreover, the writer had no possibility to fill this gap by doing field research in Albania before writing this paper because of the events that occurred in that country in 1997. Nevertheless, I shall try to give first a brief picture of the context in which Sufism survived in the Balkans after the end of the Ottoman domination. Then I shall present some features concerning Sufi music in these regions in the twentieth century, before considering in more detail the Albanian case by studying two periods of transformation: after the end of the Ottoman domination, and the other after the breakdown of the communist regime.

Social Changes Endured by the Balkan Muslims and the Survival of the Mystical Brotherhoods in the Twentieth Century

If we compare the situation of Balkan Muslims since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire with that of their co-religionists within Turkey, it is obvious that it is not at all the same. Even within the Balkans, we have discrepancies from one country to another, and from one period to another. The Balkans consist of five countries: Albania, Yugoslavia, Greece, Bulgaria, and Romania; and they have lived through three different periods during the twentieth century: the period between the two world wars; the period during the communist regimes; and the period since 1990.

Except in Albania, and in certain regions of the former-Yugoslavia, the end of the Ottoman domination was followed by a numerical weakening of the Balkan Muslim communities (following, in the early periods, massacres, conversions, and, later, above all, migration during or after the wars, and emigration resulting from the lower status of Muslim minorities in the newly created countries (on this subject, see Toumarkine, 1997). The phenomenon was more accentuated in the Eastern part of the Peninsula where the Muslim population was predominantly Turkophone. As well as the small group of Muslims in Romania, there remained, in these regions, the two substantial groups of the Muslims of Bulgaria and those of Western Thrace in Greece. However, the biggest Muslim communities remained in the Western part of the

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Balkans, in Albania (where the majority of the population was Muslim) and in the former-Yugoslavia (i.e. Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo-Metohija and Macedonia).

In addition to the weakening of and change in social status, two other factors were fraught with consequences for the Balkan Muslims: the fact that emigration had been particularly important among the elite, be they religious or non-religious; and, later on, the establishment of communist regimes in all the countries being considered except Greece (about these phenomena, see Popovic, 1986).

In this context, the Sufi networks were also weakened, because of the emigration of numerous sheikhs and dervishes to Turkey. In Romania, Bulgaria and Greece, they disappeared almost completely, except in the case of the Kızılbaş community of Eastern Bulgaria. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, they had already been weakened during the Austro-Hungarian occupation, from 1878 onwards, but survived till the interdiction of 1952. In Macedonia and Kosovo-Metohija, where stronger groups of Muslims (Albanians, Turks and Slavs) remained, the networks were affected above all in the towns, and later on also in the Turkish villages of Macedonia during the great wave of departures which took place in the fifties (see particularly Clayer-Popovic, 1992). When the Yugoslav regime relaxed its position towards Islam from the seventies on, the Sufi activity had a new start in Bosnia-Herzegovina, as well as in Kosovo-Metohija and in Macedonia. In the latter regions, this revival was reinforced by the creation of gypsy networks.

Some Features of Sufi Music in the Balkans and its Development in the Twentieth Century

Being a non specialist, and also because, as far as I know, the subject has not been really studied until now, I can give here only a few rather disparate elements concerning the development of Sufi music in the Balkans in general during the twentieth century. In view of what I said about the survival of Sufi networks, one can imagine that Sufi music could survive and develop itself above all in the Western part of the Peninsula.

Some information was provided about Macedonia around the year 1925 by Glifa Elezovic. According to him, ilahis were sung in tekkes at this time in Turkish and Arabic. These ilahis had a lyrical or philosophical character, and were composed according to a special rule and sung monophonically on the metric cycle called dü yek (4/4), or, for some, on the pattern 2/4 or marş usuli. Among the Bektashis, the nefes were sung on metric pattern called aksak (9/8). The Mevlevis used the ney, tımbelek and kudum, and also the ud, the violin and the kanun. The Rifa'is and the


3 The case of the kızılbaş of Bulgaria constitutes certainly an exception in the eastern part of the Balkan Peninsula.

4 Here I suppose that G. Elezovic refers to the use of Arabic words, or to Arabic prayers included in some ilahis.

5 The patterns dü yek and aksak can be found in the treasure of metric cycles of Ottoman and modern Turkish art music (I thank Dr. Anders Hammarlund for this remark and for a set of other suggestions).
Sa’dis used *defs* (tambourines with cymbals, or *daire*), *kudums* and cymbals (*zils*). In the other brotherhoods only *kudums* were used (Elezovic, 1925, 16-19).

In fact, even in the Western part of the Balkans, some traditions like the Mevlevi one vanished with the closing between the 1930s and the 1950s of all the Mevlevi establishments. Regarding the Bektashi tradition, we shall see hereafter what occurred in Albania, the stronghold of the brotherhood. For the other *tarikats*, one can imagine for the period up to the outbreak of the Second World War, a kind of stagnation, or a phenomenon of “nationalization” for non-Turkish groups, comparable to the process that I shall describe for Albania. In fact, with the communist takeover in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Sufi music was forbidden in 1952, when the *tekkes* were closed down in this Yugoslav republic. When the *tarikats* re-emerged in the 1970s, the Sufis were allowed to recover places and objects which had belonged to them, except for the musical instruments. In Kosovo and Macedonia, where the activity of the *tekkes* was not prohibited, but where the Sufi networks were weakened by the political pressure and by migration, in the mid seventies the tradition re-emerged and the ceremonies of *zikr* were multiplied through the opening of new *tekkes*, notably by the sheikh *rifa’i* of Prizren, and the creation of gypsy networks (Sufi networks developing and recruiting members among Gypsies).

For the last few years, one question could form the basis of future research: to what extent were (and are) the dervishes from Bosnia-Herzegovina on one hand, and those from Kosovo and Macedonia on the other, influenced by the production in Turkey (or elsewhere), of audio-cassettes diffused through the Turkish television, or contacts with friends or relatives who have emigrated to Turkey? Besides modernization, this could be a main factor in the evolution of local Sufi music, since there

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6 In fact, the Mevlevi tradition survives in Bosnia-Herzegovina, through the existence of annual meetings, called “Academies of Şebi Arus”, but without any music.

7 Let us point out the fact that, in spite of the political change, a strong *mevlud* tradition remained all over the Balkan, among the Muslim communities.
is no longer pressure from the political side, and no real interest coming from the surrounding non-Muslim society.  

The Albanian Case

As already mentioned, Albania was the only Balkan country born after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire that had a majority of Muslims. But approximately one-fifth of the Albanian Muslims belonged to the Bektashi order of dervishes, which, in the new state, became a semi-official (and thereafter, official) religious community. Among the non-Bektashis, a lot of Muslims were members of other tarikats, especially of the Halvetiyye, but also the Kadiiriyye, the Sa‘diyye, the Gülsheniyye or the Tidjaniyye. Except for the Tidjaniyye, and probably also the Bektashiyye, all the tarikats that were active in Albania until 1967, the date of the absolute prohibition of religion in the country, used musical instruments: the Sa‘dis (standing), the Rifa’is, the Kadiris (on their knees, using kudums, zils and mazhars) and even the Halvetis (sitting and standing). It is said in a document preserved in the Archives in Tirana, that Halvetis had “strong” nefes, which were not to be divulged or to be sold - which is an allusion, I supposed, to a “business” regarding the nefes of other tarikats. The Mevlevi tradition, which was present during the Ottoman period only in central Albania in the town of Elbasan, survived in the twenties through the unique existence of a türbedar (keeper of a mausoleum). Thus it is doubtful whether the rich Mevlevi music could have continued under these conditions.

But can we detect an evolution in the Albanian Sufi music between the end of the Ottoman period and 1967, in view of the social and political changes? Before 1944, in Albania - as in Turkey - the question of modernity versus tradition arose. The politics of the President (and thereafter King) Zog was a kind of mixture of both. Besides the two trends - let’s say “orientalist” for that of the Ancients (Të vjetër), and “occidentalist”, for that of “The young” (Të rrinjtë) - a movement of “neo-Albanianism” developed which insisted on the individual soul and essence of the Albanian people, and which was sympathetic to Bektashism and Sufism in general. In the field of music, the political authorities made some efforts to develop occidental music (Selenica, 1928: CLXVI). On the other hand, the ties with Turkey were weakened after 1925, the date of the ban on the tarikats in this country, while the Albanian tarikats, like all the religious communities in Albania, were restructured on a national level. In this context, an important factor in the evolution in tekke music before World War II, which I want to stress now, is a kind of “Albanization” and “nationalization” of Sufi music, especially among the Bektashis.

Through “Albanization” and “nationalization” I want to talk about two phenomena which certainly had already begun during the last century of the Ottoman peri-
od, but which were considerably amplified and increased in the framework of the Albanian state: on the one hand, the creation of an Albanian repertoire through the translation - or rather the “adaptation” - of the Turco-Arabic one, or through the composition of new pieces; and on the other, the introduction of national and nationalist motifs. Already in the nineteenth century, there were translation-adaptations of religious works recited or chanted in tekkes: the most famous example is that of the Hadikat ʿus-suṣada which is recited and partly chanted during the matem (beginning of Muharrrem) in remembrance of the martyrdom of Imam Hüseyin. In 1258/1842, it was adapted from the version of Fuzuli, and translated from Turkish into Albanian by Dalip Frashëri.13 Nefes and ʿilahis were also translated into or composed in Albanian, always in order to make their content understandable to people who did not know Turkish.14 Furthermore, some Bektashi “clerics” began to compose nefes having a patriotic or nationalist spirit (Clayer, 1995, 292-296) - indeed the Bektashi element was very active in the awakening of Albanian nationalism.

From the 1920s onward, the activities of Baba Ali Tomori, one of the most modern educated Albanian Bektashi Babas, (he studied in the gymnasium of Yannina) tended more and more in this direction.15 Like his predecessors of the second half of the nineteenth century, he composed nefes and gazels, but tried progressively to purify the language.

In a small collection published in 1934 by one of his muhib, we can read in the introduction:

The Bektashi nefes and gazel are not only hymns. They possess a high degree of philosophy or theology, through which the sick heart of the human being is cured. Bektashi poets in the Albanian language existed already before this language had its own script. They wrote in Arabic script, and, because this language remained undeveloped, they of necessity used Arabic [in fact Arabic, Turkish or Persian] terms, which, because of their individual taste, they need to use as they are, without any changes (Lumani, 1934, 6).

I shall give three examples of this kind of nefes composed by Albanian Bektashis. One composed by Baba Abidin of Leskovik (South-East Albania) at the end of the Ottoman domination, begins as follows:

Një dyber [diilber] kur e vështrona / me sy të hakut [Hak]i në gjonul ç’u përvëlova / për askut, Shukut...
When I looked at a beloved / with the eyes of God / how my heart was broken / for desire of the Shah [Ali]

The nefes written by Baba Ali Tomori, when purely religious, are on the same model, using Arabic and Turkish words, considered “to have a special taste” (in fact,

13 See Osman Myderrizi, “Lesirra laseta e Bektashive”, Bulletin për Stheneat shoqerore, Tirane, 1955/3, pp. 131-142. According to Falk Konica, at the end of the Ottoman period, the Hadikat was recited in Toskeria (i.e. South Albania), in Albanian or in Greek, and, among the Bektashis of the region of Tetovo/Kalkandelen, in Turkish (cf. Kalendari i Malëve më zbuturimë per 1900, Brussels, Perllinda e Shqiptarëve, p. 25-26. Today, the Bektashis of Tetovo are chanting nefes in Albanian and Turkish (cf. Murat Küşük, “Makedonija da Haci Bektaş Veli Mührü, Harabât Baba Tekkesi”, Cem, 6/61 (Aralık 1996), 35.


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often “technical” terms of the mystical doctrine), even if, on the other hand, he tried in general to use a clear form of Albanian, without foreign words, as in the second part of the following verses:

Të zgjuar vakt’ i sabalıut me zıı ne Balıçen e slıalıııt te miirguar prej gjunalıut se
islıte vakt i sualit 1 Prane lu/eve qendruar 1 prej te qarit i puslıuar 1 nga te pamët i
huitar i se më zë kok e zevallt...

Awake the time of the morning / caught me in the garden of the Shah / exiled from the
sin / Because it was the time of the judgement / standing near the flowers / stopped
by the tears/ disconcerted by the appearances / because the time of the sinking of the
sun after noon caught me...”

But Baba Ali Tomori composed others nefes on a totally new model, without any
oriental words and, thus, without their flavour. For example:

Çitı sytë e slıkononi jetën si u be / fleüt-fleütë tă lexoni l botën gjër më një...
Open the eyes and look /at life how it /blooms; read /the word...

The above-mentioned collection, published in 1934, contains also four other
pieces which belong to quite another genre. There are two hymns composed by Baba
Ali Tomori - one in honour of the king, the other in honour of the Albanian flag -
taken from an unpublished book of his of “hymns for solemn Bektashi ceremonies”.
The second one, for example, begins with the following verses:

Ky flamur ësht i bekuar l se gjudra ka dëftyer, i Zoti udh’i ka rrëfyer, l gjith’armiqtë i
tea thyer l dhe atdhen e ka shpëtnar. l Slum i shejigë është ky flamur l slum i shtrënjë
është ky flamur
This flag is blessed / Because it has shown wonders / God has indicated the way / All
the enemies he routed / And the fatherland he has saved / Very holy is this flag / Very
dear is this flag).

The two other poems are entitled “Kombësija” (Nationality) and “feja” (Religion). They are, like the two hymns, testimonies of what I called the “nationalization” of the Albanian Bektashi works, i.e. of the integration of nationalistic motifs.

Zoti math në këtë baltë / më ka bërë Shaqiptëtar, l gjuhën shqip t’ëmbël s’i njalë / ma ka fal për kombëtar / ...
Dieu le Haut de cette boue / m’a fait albanais / la langue albanaise douce comme le
miel / il me l’a offerte pour [que je sois] national[iste]...

Here I want to stress the parallel which can be made between the position of
Bektashism in Turkey vis-à-vis Turkish nationalism and the position of Bektashism
in Albania vis-à-vis Albanian nationalism. Bedri Noyan writes:

Görülliyor ki Türk millet ve milliyeti Bektaşlılığa çok borçludur. Çünkü Bektaşlılık
dünyadan geçmiş, ukhadan geçmiş, mal, mülk para, şöhre ve şandandan geçmiş, sadece
vatandan geçmemişdir. Türk milletinden ve Türkülken geçmişmemiştir.” (Noyan, 1985,
174).

We see that the Turkish nation and nationality is very indebted to Bektaşism because
Bektashism renounces the world, renounces eternity, renounces goods, possessions,
money, renounces fame and glory - only the fatherland it does not renounce. It does
not renounce the Turkish nation or the Turkish soul.”

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After the works of Baba Ali Tomori, I shall take the example studied by Frances Trix of the Mersiye sung on the occasion of the day of the ashura, as a remembrance of Imam Hüseyin’s martyrdom. According to her, between the First World War and the Second World War the Mersiye was still sung in Turkish, in one of the Bektaši tekkes of Gjirokastër - and probably elsewhere in South Albania.16 When a new tekke was founded in 1954 near Detroit (USA) by one of the dervishes coming from this establishment, this dervish - Baba Rexhebi - “translated” the lament into Albanian. Frances Trix compared the two versions and analysed the process of “adaptation”. She wrote as follows:

A striking similarity of the Ottoman17 and Albanian laments is in the melodic contour. This is, of course, not apparent from written texts, and metric analyses only distract. The Albanian is in trochaic octosyllabes, an accentual meter; where the Ottoman is analyzed as a quantative sort of remel. But when Baba chants the Ottoman mersiye, and when he, or the people he trained chant the Albanian one, the melodic contours are very similar. This is not particularly unusual as melodic structures are some of the most persistant of cultural structures, preserved beneath the conscious level of words.

Another similarity between the Ottoman and Albanian laments, and one apparent to both ears and eyes, is the refrain. Both have unvarying refrains that invoke Husein: “Ya Huseyn” in the Turkish, and “O Imam Hysejn” in the Albanian. [...] These invariant refrains also allow for participation of many people or people new to the ceremony. [...]
After the first couplets, however, the Ottoman and Albanian laments part. The Ottoman proceeds to laud the beauty of Husein in multiple couplets, whereas the Albanian strikes a more narrative note. This is a pervasive difference in the two laments. Where the Ottoman extols, the Albanian recounts and instructs. [...] 

The metric structure of Baba’s lament places it squarely in this Balkan tradition of lamenting the dead. The line in epic verse and dirges in Albanian folk poetry is an eight-syllable trochaic line with special emphasis on the penultimate syllable. The lines in Baba’s lament have this same structure. [...] 

Besides line structure, the imagery in Baba’s lament is typical of Balkan laments. This is not to say that the Ottoman lament does not contain some of the same images. [...] the images in Baba’s lament are restricted to those of light and water, and build in more narrative fashion with standard Balkan terms. [...] 

Besides the use of the images of light and water in Balkan fashion, Baba’s lament contains an ethical dimension related to codes of honour and bravery in combat. These elements are especially characteristic not of Balkan laments in general, but of Albanian dirges and Albanian epics and songs” (Trix, 1995/b, 415-420).

To summarize, whereas the “melodic contours” seem similar to the listener, the metric structure has been changed for a local one, and the content has been adapted to local folkloric imagery and epic tradition. In spite of the transformation, however, the model remains. Nevertheless, sometimes this could have curious consequences. Here I am thinking in particular about the creation of ilahis in Albanian, composed on the following model: a succession of verses, beginning by the successive letters of the Arabo-Turkish alphabet (Elif, Ba, Ta, Tha, Jim, and so on). I found two examples of this: the first dates from the mid-nineteenth century, and was consequently written down in Albanian in Arabic script (Myderrizi, 1957, 183-186); the second one, more surprisingly, is a composition of a certain Sheh Ramazan Picari, a rifa‘i sheikh from the environs of Tirana, but published in 1933, several years after the adoption of the Latin alphabet for the Albanian language. The words placed at the beginning of each verse were both Arabe-Turkish (Allah, Xhevap, Hin, Selamet, Shehid, Zullum, ...) or purely Albanian (Besa, Ti, Thirrje, Dishrojne, Rruga, Zemra, etc.).18

Let us take now the problem of the revival of Sufism and Sufi music after the break during the communist period of 1967-1990. Since the “rehabilitation” of religious beliefs and practices at the end of November of 1990, a few tekkes have reopened, especially Bektashi and Rifa‘i ones (the Halvetis, Kadiris and Sa‘dis reopened as well but in most of them there is no real Sufi life).

As far as the Bektashis are concerned, we have a testimony from Frances Trix who attended a ceremony of the blessing of a türbe rebuilt in 1991, during which traditional laments for religious babas were chanted by young women. In the villages, unlike the situation in towns and cities, the tradition was transmitted during the communist period, publicly before 1967, and then privately. A tape was made of the chanting during the ceremony, and thereafter copies have been circulated, playing an important role in the revival of the community. In the same way, official ceremonies in the central tekke of Tirana (kryegjshata) have been filmed and videos circulated, which have contributed to the rebirth of the Bektashi community (Trix, 1995: 540-544). When I was in Tirana for the Bektashi Congress, in July 1993, I realized for myself how important the chanting of ilahas was during the meals which took place in the great dining room of the tekke with participants coming from all over the Bektashi regions. These ilahas were sung in unison by the entire congregation

with a leading chanter, or by a single person in the case of gazels. The rhythm used was 4/4, in a non-pentatonic scale (unlike the popular music of South Albania), and the melodies showed diverse influences, coming from different types of Balkan music (from the Aegean coasts, from the Pindus, from Macedonia, from Rumeli Türküsü, etc.).

As for the Rifa’is, a zaviye was opened in Tirana, as well as three or four other centres of this order elsewhere in the country. In a former Kadiri tekke of the capital, a Rifa’i sheikh is accustomed to leading the zikr also. I was able to attend the ceremony of zikr several times in 1993, 1995 and 1996, in both of these establishments. The quite young sheikh of the first one (quickly promoted to this rank by the sheikh of Prizren, in Kosovo) is a professional flautist at the Albanian National Opera, who is much helped by an older zakir who was certainly affiliated to the tarikat before 1967. In the first years, the assembly performed a “minimal” zikr, not very elaborated, if we compare it, for example, with the zikr of the Rifa’is dervishes of Prizren (sometimes there were some problems in the recitation of ilahis, when the participants did not know the words well). But in time, the sheikh took more and more care over the musical aesthetic, preferring some more complex formulae in the zikr to show his expertise. Contrary to the Bektashi ilahis and nefes, the ilahis chanted in the two afore-mentioned establishments are, it seems, on oriental modes (aksak, etc.), sometimes executed to the accompaniment of a kudum beaten with a strap. Here we can see, probably, the difference in nature of these tarikats, the Rifa’iyye being of Arabic origin.

To conclude, in the Albanian case, which differs from the other ones in the Balkans by the fact that the country had a majority of Muslim citizens, one of the main factors of the evolution in Sufi music seems to have been the process of “Albanization” and “nationalization”, at least in the Bektashi works. By “Albanization” and “nationalization”, I mean a process of adaptation from a Turkish model, regarding the metric structure of compositions (as in the case of the Mersiye), but above all regarding the language, and, beyond the language, sometimes the image and the spirit-epic as in the case of the Mersiye, or “nationalistic” in the case of some nefes or hymns composed by Baba Ali Tomori for Bektashi ceremonies.

And, last but not least, I want to stress the fact that the principal aim of this contribution was to draw attention to a quite virgin field of research, and to inspire some musicologists, or ethno-musicologists, to study the numerous aspects of Sufi music in the Balkans, and especially in Albania.

Bibliography

19 I am very much indebted to my friend Leonidas Embiricos for giving me indications concerning the types of registered melodies which seem to be common to the Christians of the regions mentioned. Of course, these are only indications, and real research is to be carried out in this field by ethno-musicologists in the future.
Elezovic (G.), 1925: *Derviski redovë muslimanski tekije u Skoplju*, Skopje, “Stara Srbija”.


