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BOSNIAN INVOLVEMENT IN HETEROODOX MOVEMENTS DURING THE OTTOMAN PERIOD: THE CASE OF THE HAMZEVİS & BEKTASHİS

Emin LELEČIĆ

It is recognized that modern scholarship has prompted many historians of Ottoman History to look upon Bosnia-Hercegovina as a traditional stronghold of orthodox Sunnism as well as social conservatism. The explanations for this reasonably accurate view of the societal and religious sensibilities of Ottoman Bosnians are many, and very appropriate to discuss in the boundaries of any work endeavoring to describe the involvement of Bosnians in heterodox Islamic movements. Bosnia's many medreses and other centers of Islamic learning are well-known even to this day and the number of highly educated ulema that hailed from the region during the Ottoman period matched that of any other area of the empire. In many ways, Bosnia-Hercegovina shared, to a large extent, the same communal traits, as other predominantly Muslim regions of the Balkans and Anatolia, save one. And this one missing characteristic that was so readily visible in many other regions of the Ottoman Empire was the lack in Bosnia of any significant and discernible presence of Islamic "heterodoxy".¹

Whereas one could find non-Sunni Islamic groups and movements scattered throughout the wide expanse of the empire and through the vastness of its history, Bosnia remained relatively immune to such phenomenon. Even as Sunni Islam was the authoritative doctrine of the Porte, one could find large communities of Druze and Isma‘ilis in Lebanon and Syria, Yezidis in Iraq, as well as Kızılbaş and other Alevi-type groups in Anatolia, all of who had often uncertain and insecure relations with the state. Even lands close to Bosnia, like Albania and Bulgaria, possessed a considerable heterodox component in its Muslim population, groups such as Kızılbaş, Bedruddinists, as well as Bektashis.

Given Bosnia's reputation for being a nest of Bogomilism and heresy in its pre-Ottoman history, in addition to its rugged geography, one would think that heterodox movements would be rife in this land, even after the introduction of Islam. During the Middle Ages, Bosnia was home to the Bosnian Church, a renegade sect that was viewed by both Catholics and Orthodox as a dangerous heresy.² One of the reasons for the development and continued survival of this church up to the Ottoman period undoubtedly rests in Bosnia's mountainous geography, a factor which instilled its people with a deep sense of individuality and independence. For many years the Catholic Church vigorously sought to repress the Bosnian Church using both the armed might of the Hungarian and Croat kings, but to no avail. It was only the large scale conversion of the population to Islam in the late 15th and early 16th centuries that finally caused the church to disappear.

¹ Carleton College, Northfield/USA.
² This lack of heterodoxy does not imply the lack of what has been termed "folk" Islam, which is an altogether different phenomenon. "Folk" Islam most certainly did exist in Ottoman Bosnia and continues to do so to this day.

² The traditional view of the Bosnia Church is that they were part of a neo-Manichean sect known as the Bogomils. Modern scholarship, however, has challenged the Bogomil theory in favor of portraying the church as simply a renegade branch of the Catholic Church that exerted its independence in the fastness of rugged central Bosnia.
Given such a past, it becomes all the more puzzling as to why corresponding heterodox movements within the boundaries of Islam remained unpopular during the Ottoman period when the majority of Bosnians had become Muslim. Forming theories to explain this question is beyond the scope of this paper, yet here I will endeavor to show that non-normative (i.e. heterodox) movements did indeed exist in Bosnia, albeit for a short time and in limited scope, and that individual Ottoman Bosnians did make contributions to the persistence of such movements, either at home or abroad, well into the 19th century. I will discuss the origins and beliefs of one of the more well-known heterodox movements of the 16th and 17th centuries that had an active Bosnian component (in fact it was named after a Bosnian), the existence of an “official” heterodox association among Bosnians (the Bektashis), as well as at the life and poetry of one Bosnian “heretic” in particular, Mulhid Vahdeti.

The Ottoman State & its relationship with Sufism

During the seven centuries of its existence the Ottoman State developed a solid, yet often peculiar, relationship with Islam. In the service of the Porte, Islam was a powerful political tool that was enormously influential and authoritative in mobilizing the loyalty of the empire's Muslim population. In order to justify the use of Islam as a channel for political stability, the Ottoman government went to great lengths to preserve the hierarchy of religious scholarship, the ulama-class, so that it would effectively serve the wellbeing and stability of the state.

At the same time, other groups within the Ottoman State put forth interpretations of Islam that were often unconstrained by and at times even at odds with state-sanctioned dogma. These groups were the Sufi fraternities, or tarikats. In contrast to the ulama class, the tarikats were, in theory, independent of the state control, and on the whole they embodied varied social, and occasionally political sectors within the Ottoman population. Nevertheless it would be an oversimplification to consider the Sufi tarikats and the ulama class as incessantly conflicting forces, since membership in both quite frequently overlapped. Most Sufi orders throughout much of Ottoman history were clearly “orthodox” in outlook; namely the Naqshibandis, the Bayramis, Qadiris, Rifa'is as well as the extremely influential Khalwatis. Not unlike the ulama class, the power and influence of the tarikats was widespread within the Ottoman Empire, albeit a power deeply rooted in popular piety rather that state sanction. Yet unlike the ulama class, tarikat affiliation embraced individuals of all social, economic, and political spheres, ranging from the lowest of peasants to court dignitaries.

As mentioned above the preponderance of Ottoman tarikats supported the existing administrative order, as well as the ulama establishment and the Sunni dogma it upheld. Even so, there were a number of tarikats whose affiliates espoused radical and non-conformist interpretations of Islam, and who often became embittered opponents of the ulama class and, by extension, the state. The administration spent a great deal of effort to control or eradicate these groups, and at times went as far as executing their leaders. The Ottoman State, which used Sunni Islam to legitimize its power, could hardly be expected to tolerate nonconformist departures from official dogma.

3 For more on orthodox Sufi involvement in the struggle against deviant Islamic movements in the Ottoman Empire see: Nathalie Clayer, Mystiques, État et société. Les Halvetis dans l'aire balkanique de la fin du XVe siècle à nos jours, Leiden-New York-Köln, E.J. Brill, 1994. Many of those who issued fethes against Hamza Sali were in fact Khalwati şeyhs.

4 The Ottomans were successful, for example, in containing numerous eccentric Qalandar and Abdal groups by encouraging their amalgamation into a restructured and state-sanctioned Bektashi Order placed under the supervision of Bālim Sultan (d.1520) See Ahmet Karamustafa, God's Unruly Friends, Univ. of Utah Press, 1999.
In essence the difference between the so-called orthodox and heterodox tarikats lay in religious doctrine. While the majority tarikats (even normative ones) acknowledged the concept of vahdet-i vucud in some form or another, and displayed often overt Shi'i inclinations, orders branded as heretical were usually charged with taking these two matters to extremes. The vision of pantheism that developed in most of these heterodox Sufi movements merged with the beliefs that these groups ascribed to their şeyhs, their spiritual guides, which, as we shall see, produced not only religious but political challenges as well.5

What made Heterodoxy a Threat to Political Power?

Before the 13th century Sufis were seen, more or less, as pious teachers or exemplary ascetics rather than divine intermediaries and wonderworkers. But as the tarikats developed more defined hierarchical structures in the wake of the Mongol invasions, the position of the şeyh (the spiritual master and guide) was advanced to that of a holy man; one who exerted spiritual command as a mediator between man and God, who possessed Divine grace (kerame4) and whose divinely granted power far surpassed that of any worldly authority.

Despite their seemingly otherworldly concerns, the beliefs of these types of Sufis did on occasion contain serious political repercussions.6 If a certain şeyh was able to amass a considerable following, and if that şeyh's followers believed that he was indeed the kütb (axis) of the universe, then the status of the Ottoman sultan (or any other secular ruler for that matter) would be brought into question. The kütb was seen as the true sovereign of both the spiritual and material worlds, bestowed with the ability to transform social unrest into revolutionary action.7

A şeyh's spiritual magnetism allowed him to form a single, united movement from very diverse elements and backgrounds. But when these tarikat or quasi-tarikat groups crossed the fine line between the spiritual and political realms, the Ottoman state understandably intervened, frightful of the appeal these movements would have over the masses. Many of such early movements (like the Kızılbaş, Celalis, Şah Kalander and Bedrettinists) presented a considerable threat to Ottoman power, especially when they found support from rebellious princes or in neighboring Safavid Persia. One such Sufi-inspired movement that deliberately blurred the lines between spiritual and political domains was the Bayrami-Melami tarikat.

From Bayramis to Hamzevis

The Bayrami tarikat (established by Hacı Bayram Veli, d. 1430 CE) became one of the most well-known Sufi orders of the Ottoman Empire. Hacı Bayram was a man of great personal piety and spiritual talent and he gathered so much popular recognition that Sultan Murad II was forced to sent representatives to central Anatolia to investigate whether or not he posed any kind of threat as the leader of yet another rebellious movement.8 According to legend, the sultan was so overwhelmed by Hacı Bayram's godliness (and apparent orthodoxy) at their meeting that he became one of his followers. And the sultan was not the only powerful person inspired by this meeting as the Bayrami tarikat came to be tied to the House of Osman in the coming decades.

As mentioned above, the sultan had good reason to be wary of the increasing popularity of Hacı Bayram. The fact that Hacı Bayram's initiatic chain (silisile) stemmed from the 11th

5 Ahmet Yaşar Oca8, "The Ottoman Empire and Islam: framework for a new interpretation," at humanities.uchicago.edu/sawyer/islam/ocak.html, page 12.
6 Ibid. page 2.
7 Ahmet Yasar Oca8, "Les Melâmis-Bayramî (Hamzavi) et l'administration Ottomane aux XVI-XVII siècles," in Melâmis-Bayramîs: Études sur trois mouvements mystiques musulmans, Clayer, Popovic, & Zarcone (eds.), Editions lsis, Istanbul, 1998, page 100. It was quite common in Ottoman Sufi parfance to refer to the great spiritual masters as "Sultan".
8 It must be remembered that Hacı Bayram was a contemporary of the famed Şeyh Bedrettin Simavi.
century Melami movement from Khorasan by way of the embryonic Safavi Order certainly did much to raise eyebrows. The doctrines commonly associated with the Melamis had already long been considered outlandish and sacrilegious by the standards of many of Sunni ulema, and Haci Bayram must have purged (or perhaps masked) these beliefs and practices from the public in order to placate an apprehensive sultan.

Following Haci Bayram Veli’s death in 1430 CE, his order split into two distinct branches. One became the continuation of Haci Bayram’s “orthodox” legacy, and was led by Haci Bayram’s halife, Akşemsettin (d. 1459 CE), who was, furthermore, a member of the ulema class and intimately connected with the Ottoman palace. The other branch, led by an eccentric dervish named Ömer Sikkini (d. 1476 CE), sought to revive the unorthodox Melami doctrines and practices that may well have originally been taught by Haci Bayram Veli but later apparently discarded. This branch came to be known as the Melami-Bayrami, and it was characterized by ecstatic practices as well as an extreme understanding of vahdet-i vucud. Ömer Sikkini additionally espoused particular messianic doctrines that were essentially extensions of his interpretation of vahdet-i vucud but, nevertheless carried serious political implications.

By constantly traversing the fine line between the spiritual and political realms, the Melami-Bayramis began to attract the attention of the Ottoman authorities, who were understandably nervous about any religious movement whose teachings were tinged with messianic overtones. The two Melami kutbas that followed Ömer Dede, Binyarın Ayasi (1522 CE) and Pir ‘Ali Aksaray (1527 CE), were both imprisoned by the Ottomans, most likely for allowing claims of Mahdishipto be advanced on their behalf. The appearance of Öğlan Şeyh (1508-1528 CE), who was also known as Çelebi Şeyh İsmail Maşuki, as a new Melami kutb brought the order into open confrontation with the Ottoman authorities. Öğlan Şeyh had begun to gather around him a number of influential people in Istanbul, partially through his unguarded preaching of vahdet-i vucud. Even though he was simply upholding the credo of his two predecessors, the government put Öğlan Şeyh on trial for heresy and he was publicly executed in 1528 CE. In actuality the Ottoman administration (unlike the ulema) was not overly concerned with particularities of the religious claims made by many unconventional Sufi şeyhhs. It was only when Öğlan Şeyh moved out of the rustic milieu of Central Anatolia and into the capital, where he acquired a literate and prominent following, that the government felt the need to eliminate him, dreading potential social and political upheaval.

Despite Öğlan Şeyh’s execution, his followers continued to be active, albeit clandestinely. Several years after his execution, the government ordered the ulema to issue a fetva in reaction to the persistent rumors of Melami activity that anyone who proclaimed Öğlan Şeyh to have been killed unjustly was himself a heretic deserving of death. It is believed that during this new wave of persecution a successor of Öğlan Şeyh, Husamettin Ankaravi (who was Hamza Bali’s master) was arrested and executed in 1568 CE, after a failed uprising that was in all probability based on same form of messianic assertion. Consequently, the historical stage was set for

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9 Ocak, p. 100. He asserts that “there is no doubt that the Bayrami tarikat was a continuation of the 9th century Melami tradition of Khorasan, through the Safavid tarikat, from which the Bayramiyeye ensued.”

10 Hamid Algar, “The Hamzeviye: A Deviant Movement in Bosnian Sufism” Islamic Studies, Islamabad, XXXVI: 2-3, 1997, page 244. Here he mentions the possibility that Pir ‘Ali Aksaray was executed by the Ottomans.

11 Ibid. page 245. Algar states that Öğlan Şeyh’s “zikr consisted of the ambiguous expression ‘Allahim’, which could have meant either ‘my God!’ or ‘I am God!’”

12 Ibid.

13 Ocak, page 104.
Hamza Bali (d. 1573 CE), an apparently charismatic and influential spiritual master, to become one of the greatest martyrs of the Melami-Bayramis, whose followers would eventually come to be known as the Hamzevis.\(^{14}\)

Hamza Bali’s life prior to his succession as a Melami *kutb* remains ambiguous. Born in the mountainous region along the Drina River valley, he left his home in his youth and eventually arrived in Istanbul. There he became a dervish at the hand of Husamettin Ankaravi and soon developed a strong reputation for piety and asceticism. We can safely assume that after the execution of his *müşref*, he fled Istanbul and returned to his native Bosnia to avoid a similar fate and to spread his master’s teachings.\(^{15}\) While in Bosnia, the charismatic Hamza Bali was able to attract many followers; as Sari Abdullah Efendi put it, “whoever came into his presence, whether from the elite or the common people, would be drawn involuntarily to him.”\(^{16}\) His personal attraction must have been significant, for he managed to gather disciples far beyond Bosnia: in Ottoman Hungary, in Istanbul among the already existing Melami circles, as well as in the ranks of the Janissaries.\(^ {17}\) Contemporaneous sources point to the fact that Hamza Bali carried out his role as the Melami *kutb* to a new extreme by setting up a parallel government among his followers in northeastern Bosnia. In addition, according to Müniiri Belgradi (d. 1617 CE), Hamza was bent on assembling a following comprised of influential individuals – dignitaries, notables, and the feared Janissaries, in Istanbul and throughout the empire, who would be eventually be brought to bear against the sultan.\(^ {18}\) Considering the fact that during Hamza’s time in Bosnia his followers had developed a self-governing religious and social organization, and what Müniiri Belgradi mentions, the movement certainly conjures up the image of a well-coordinated and appealing conspiracy against the sultan and the powers that be.\(^ {19}\)

**The Hamzevi Movement & the Hurufis**

While it is difficult with the information currently available to determine with any precision what exactly Hamza Bali taught as religious doctrine, and as to why he was able to attract the attention of so many, it is possible to consider likely possibilities. Without doubt, the primary reason for the intervention of Ottoman authorities was essentially not religious doctrine in itself, but rather the political claims put forth by Hamza and his followers that jeopardized the power-structure and social order. It is important to take into consideration the fact that all those Melami-Bayrami şeyhns who met their fate on the chopping block had shared a common source for their authority, and that was the doctrine transmitted through the Melami *siliste*. Consequently, it becomes crucial to examine what exactly was taught in Melami tekkes that triggered so much turmoil and unrest.

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\(^{14}\) There are no significant variations between the Melami-Bayrami order before or after Hamza Bali.


\(^{16}\) Algar, page 247.

\(^{17}\) Muhamed Hadžijahić and Adem Handžić, “О прогону Хамзевија у Босни 1573. године,” *Pрилози за Оријенталну Филологију*, XX-XXI/1970-71, Sarajevo, page 66 - “the movement enjoyed great support among the people, and especially amongst the Janissaries.”

\(^{18}\) Clayer, page 156.

\(^{19}\) Đzemail Čehajić, “Društveno-politički, religiozni, književni i drugi aspekti derviških redova u jugoslavenskim zemljama” in *Pripozi za Orijentalnu Filologiju*, 34/1984, Sarajevo 1985, page 111. Here Čehajić states that “the Hamzevis had an independent internal organization - courts of law, and other things, and acted as an independent body within the Ottoman Empire. In an uprising in 1582, the Hamzevis formed a government [which included a sultan, vizier, defterdar, kadiasker, etc.] and this government was supposed to take over when the time came.”
One likely source for the teachings of Hamza Bali can be found in the connection between heterodox Sufi movements in the Anatolia of the 15th century and that most abhorrent of heresies, Hurufism. The Hurufi movement was established by Fazlullah Astarabadi (d. 1394 CE) and began its existence in Persia, where, like the Hamzevis, it faced relentless persecution from both the religious and political authorities. Yet in spite of this persecution and its gradual eradication in Persia, Hurufi doctrines found enduring and clandestine appeal in Anatolia and the Balkans among the circles of several Sufi movements.

It is important to briefly discuss some of the more crucial features of Hurufism. One of the most galling heresies advanced by Fazlullah Astarabadi was that he was viewed by his followers “as the initiator of a new religious dispensation in which the esoteric plan of the universe, alluded to symbolically in the teachings of earlier religions, had become explicit.” In addition to this, Fazlullah taught a radical new interpretation of creation based on “new interpretations of Qur’anic texts, as for example the view that everlasting reward and punishment promised in the Qur’an were symbolic descriptions of states of knowledge and wisdom.” For instance the Qur’anic description of how God first made the heavens and the earth, and then “sat Himself upon the Throne” was taken by the Hurufis to “mean the creation of Adam, explaining that ‘sitting’ was a metaphor for God’s imprinting a full image of himself upon day.”

All of Fazlullah’s doctrines, including the very intricate science of letters (ilm-i huruf), converged to make evident the most important and greatest of all secrets—that man is the Divine.

To clarify this radical departure of normative Islam, Fazlullah taught that creation progressed through a progression of three cycles: “the cycle of prophethood (nubuvvet), from Adam to Muhammad; that of sainthood (velayet), from ‘Ali to Fazlullah; and, beginning with Fazlullah, that of divinity (ulühiyyet).” With each successive cycle the secret behind existence is increasingly exposed, until the coming of Fazlullah, who ultimately reveals the secret in its completeness, and the cycle of divinity is introduced, which “is a complete representation of the divine in human form.” Hence it becomes apparent that Fazlullah was not only claiming to be an incarnation of the divine, but the long-awaited “Seal of Sainthood (hatem-i velayet), the Perfect Man (insan-i kamil), and the Mahdi.”

Before going into a deeper appraisal of Hamzevi (and Melami-Bayrami) doctrine and examining its likely connection to Hurufism, it is necessary to point out that at present we can only speculate on this issue given that no explicit connection either proving or disproving such a link has of yet been discovered. Given this, it will be best to open our analysis of Hamzevi religious doctrine with the most reliable sources we do have available: the fetvas ordering the executions of Hamza Bali and Oğlan Şeyh. In the execution ruling issued against Hamza Bali, we find the verdict stating that,

He is a heretic (muhid) and he led Muslims astray urging them not to believe; likewise it had been established that he has imparted views insulting the honor of

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20 Of all the modern scholarship on the Hamzevis available to me, Hamid Algar in his two articles “The Hamzeviya” and “Hurufism” and the Melamatiyya article (pp.223-228) in the Encyclopedia of Islam vol. VI are the only two sources who briefly mention this possibility.


22 Bashir, page 170.

23 Ibid., page 176

24 Ibid., page 178

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

566
Muhammad and that he has denied the resurrection and the Day of Judgment entirely.\(^{27}\)

Of course it is possible to read all kinds of things into these accusations, but two points seem indicative of Hurufi inspiration. Regardless of sectarian affiliation, no Muslim would ever think of making an affront to the nobility of the Prophet, unless what is meant here by 'insulting' has nothing to do with slander of some sort, but rather a belief that the era of Muhammad's prophethood has come to an end and that a new and greater cycle of some sort (like the one unveiled through Fazlullah's declarations) has superseded it. In addition the charge that Hamza Bali wholly denied the "resurrection and the Day of Judgment" also echoes the Hurufi concept which allocates these events symbolic rather than the literal meanings, as upheld in normative Islamic theology.

It is also possible to see in earlier fetvas how these beliefs join together with those of previous martyred Melami şeyhs. An additional accusation leveled against Hamza Bali was that he was a devotee of Oğlan Şeyh, whose own execution was ordered based upon the following charges:

He preached immorality and eternity of this world; he did not accept the limits imposed by the law concerning halal and haram, he saw hell and paradise as relative concepts, and declared that Allah incarnated Himself as man, in him.\(^{28}\)

If one studies this passage without being attentive to the context of the fetva, one would most probably suspect these two men of evidently being Hurufis. Any one of these charges has a counterpart in Fazlullah's thought. For example, "eternity of this world" becomes dear if one understands that for Hurufis acquiring knowledge was the real meaning of the belief in entering eternal heaven, for once one became an initiate into the teachings of Fazlullah and began to acquire true knowledge, one was considered to have entered heaven. Furthermore, if the Hurufi initiate was in heaven, then worldly laws and obligations (the şeriat) no longer had any relevance, which would, naturally, explain the accusation that Oğlan Şeyh flouted the boundaries of halal and haram.\(^{29}\)

The last charge, that of hulul (Divine incarnation), is such an obvious echo of Fazlullah's message about man's true nature that it makes the connection between Hurufis and Bayrami-Melamis (Hamzevis) that much more plausible.\(^{30}\) This charge of hulul directed against Oğlan Şeyh is not simply an unsubstantiated accusation made by obdurate hocas, but is a belief confirmed in his own poetry in which he openly proclaims, "my body is identical with God."\(^{31}\) Furthermore, one of Oğlan Şeyh's disciples and successors, Ahmet Sarban (d.1542 CE)\(^{32}\), wrote in unmistakably Hurufi form,

\[\text{O you who desire to see the Beloved,} \\
\text{Look with care on each person you see!} \\
\text{Know that the human mirror} \\
\text{Is the very form of the All-Merciful;}\]

\(^{27}\) Hadžijahić & Handžić, page 69.
\(^{28}\) Ocak, page 102-103.
\(^{29}\) Following Fazlullah's death the Hurufis divided into two groups: one that determined that since "paradise and hell consist of knowledge and ignorance respectively," and as initiates of Fazlullah's knowledge, "were in paradise, and all obligations had been abrogated for them." (Bashir, page 180-181) Similarly, it cannot be forgotten that within the Melami tradition there had always been a predisposition (at least publicly) to put on a display of seeming irreligiosity.
\(^{30}\) Bashir, page 182.
\(^{31}\) Algar, page 253.
Come, look in the mirror,  
And see in it that King!  

The Hurufi connection to the Melami-Bayramis and subsequent Hamzevis becomes all the more apparent when reading the poetry of other devotees. Idris Muhtefi, a Hamzevi who resided in Istanbul in the years following Hamza’s execution, openly makes mention to Fazlullah in one of his poems, and in another celebrates the Hurufi notion of the ‘Seven Lines’ through which God is reflected in the face of man.  

Further connection between Hamzevi and Hurufi doctrines can be found in looking at four 16th century sources that originated in Hamza’s homeland, Bosnia: one anti-Hamzevi poem, an ilmihal, as well as two letters written with the purpose of dissuading a young Bosnian from further involvement with the heretics. While there are many vague references in the first letter to the Hamzevis’ supposed antinomianism, the second letter presents an unmistakable connection to Hurufism. Its author, a certain Mehmed Amiki (who was most certainly from among the ulema class), informs the young man that his Hamzevi şeyhs, “learning from others some secret but misunderstood meanings to letters and words, have been deluded.” Later in the letter Amiki refutes the youth’s attempted defense of the doctrine of hulul (the justification of which is given with particular verses from the Qur’an) by unequivocally discrediting this interpretation of the sacred scripture and declaring vahdet-i vucuda a belief “contrary to the creed of the Ehl-i Sunna.”  

It is, however, within the pages of the ilmihal (a booklet designed to indoctrinate basic Islamic beliefs and practices) that the Hamzevis are coupled unequivocally with the Hurufs. The text explicitly states that the two have allied themselves and “spread out in the world, broadcasting to the people of Bosnia that the ulema are all hypocrites in order to attain the objective of propagating their blasphemous doctrine.”  

Vahdeti Bosnevi  

One Bosnian “heretic” that I will now look at is Vahdeti Bosnevi, who came to be recognized for his ability to express in the form of poetry the very teachings mentioned above. Vahdeti (whose given name was most probably Ahmet) was born in the small eastern Bosnian town of Dobrun, where he spent a considerable period of his life. He acquired a deep passion for poetry and the Persian language in his youth, which furthered his spiritual inclinations and, more importantly, opened him to the world of Fazlullah Astarabadi. At some point in his life...
Vahdeti left Bosnia and moved to Istanbul. But the imperial capital was not his final destination, for he seems to have been constantly on the move. It is unknown why he never settled in one location, but in all probability his Hurufi attitudes made him many enemies. 43

Poetic pseudonyms (mahlaş) were quite conventional among Ottoman poets of the time, but for our Bosnian it carries a significant connotation. The name Vahdeti makes clear his enthusiasm for the concept of vahdet-i vucud - unity of being. In addition to the geographical appellation Bosnevi, the title Mulhid (heretic) has commonly been attached to his name, which may have been done by his enemies or have been willingly adopted as a badge of open dissent.

Despite the survival of his poetry, little is known about Vahdeti’s life. The exact dates of his birth and death are undetermined, although we can be fairly certain that he was still alive in 1603 CE, a date that conveniently places him in the period of the Hamzevi uprisings in Bosnia. 44 It is also unclear as to what tarikat Vahdeti was affiliated with, if any. Except for a poem that exalts the great mystical master Rumi (d.1270 CE), which has lead a number of scholars to conclude that he was a Mevlevi of some sort, Vahdeti offers no references in his poetry to any other Sufi şeyhs or tarikats, even to Hamza Bali. Be that as it may, his radical understanding of vahdet-i vucud and constant references to Fazlullah, among other things, irrefutably denote his Hurufi leanings, something that has led others to mistakenly presume that he was a Bektashi. 45 I propose that his Hurufi inclinations were a result of his involvement with the Hamzevis.

Given the persistent poetic allusions to Hurufism, a more relevant question to ask here may be this: when and how did Vahdeti become attached to this heresy? It is possible that he became acquainted with Hurufism during his many years of travel throughout the empire, which, if the case, would open up many other questions. On the other hand it is more probable, I believe, that Vahdeti came into contact with Hurufi ideas while living in Bosnia. If this is the case, Vahdeti could then with great certainty be linked to the Hamzevi movement, whose clear connection to the Hurufis has been discussed above, and more significantly, was quite active in his native eastern Bosnia during his lifetime. In 1573 CE Hamzevi activity was so substantial along the Drina River that the ulema of Bosnia and Rumel delivered fetves demanding their suppression. Ottoman authorities arrested and put to death several Hamzevi leaders, which was followed a decade later by another failed insurrection in the same area. If Mulhid Vahdeti was indeed affiliated with the Hamzevis, he may have been involved in this unrest, which would have caused him to flee abroad in order to escape arrest.

**Bektashism among the Bosnian People**

By the mid-1600s the Hamzevi movement was effectively shattered in Bosnia. Although rumors of clandestine Hamzevi activity continued for the next two hundred years, its end effectively brought to a close any large-scale heterodox Islamic presence in Bosnia-

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44 Ilić, “Mulhid Wahdeti”, page 5. He states that Vahdeti must alive in this year because he composed a poem dedicated to the youthful Sultan Ahmed I, who began his rule in 1603 CE. Čehajić, however, gives the date of his death (based on several 17th century sources) as 1598 CE.

45 Ilić, for example, tries to link Vahdeti to a Melami-type branch of the Mevlevis (the Semsi kol), while Čehajić lists him as a Bektashi. Only Hadžiži, in his “Hamzevija seka i jen osnivač Hamza Bošnjak,” makes a connection between Vahdeti and the Hamzevis. It must be noted that there are no discernable traces of the Mevlevi order at all in the Balkans during this time period (the first Mevlevi tekkés are not found in the region prior to the 1650's) and that the Bektashis had yet to become the significant force they would be in the coming centuries. For a thorough examination of Sufi orders in the Balkans see Huseyin Abiva, *The Vanished Heart* (unpublished manuscript).
Hercegovina. Despite the Hamzevis' gradual reappearance in Istanbul in the 17th and 18th centuries, there seems to have been no such reemergence in the land of Hamza Bali's birth. Traces of Hamza remained confined to a few villages in the area of Zvornik, where local tradition has preserved his name, but little else.

Sunni Islam prevailed over the land and religious conformity became the norm. The only other heterodox movement in which Bosnians participated in any number was that of the Bektashi Sufi order. Yet information on the Bektashi presence in Bosnia-Hercegovina remains highly speculative in nature. This land presents an exceptional case in the Ottoman Balkans in that Bektashism did not succeed in leaving any enduring marks on its population. The reasons for this are the same that prevented the spread of the above mentioned Hamzevi movement, i.e. the presence of powerful urban Sunni religious institutions, represented not only by institutions of higher learning but by the orthodox Sufi tarikats. However given that the Bektashi order had behind it the endorsement of the State, the Sunni establishment could not aggressively persecute it as it did with Hamza Bali and his followers, even if many of the religious ideas taught by both movements were fairly similar.

Despite the profusion of tekkes found throughout Albania, Macedonia, Bulgaria, Greece and Serbia, the only Bektashi tekke found within the borders of Bosnia-Hercegovina that has been described with any verifiable detail was the one found in Čajniče, a small town on the border between Bosnia and the Sandžak of Novi Pazar. When he visited the town in the 1660's the distinguished traveler Evliya Çelebi noted, with all the precision of a modern tour guide, this flourishing Bektashi tekke:

"On a small hill some thousand steps away, are Gazi Murad Baba garden's with a Bektashi asitane, which is worthy to be seen. It's so high a lookout, bursting with shade trees, that from it the whole town of Čajniče can be seen. In every corner of the place, many charming and pious dervishes perform music with wonderful melodies and at any time different groups prepare musical programs, like, for example, those made and organized by Husayn Baykara. In short, the inhabitants of the towns gather at this spot of feast and entertainment with all sorts of dishes and drinks, preparing gatherings and meetings of numerous kinds."

In addition to this tekke, the only other actual mention of Bektashis existing in Bosnia during the Ottoman period from contemporary sources was made by Džemal Čehajić in his landmark study on Sufi orders in the former Yugoslavia Derviški redovi na jugoslovenskim zemljama. In it he mentions his discovery of a sicil dated from 1844 CE that was found in the library of the Gazi Husrevbeg Mosque that records the petition of a Sarajevan Bektashi baba named Salahuddin for an increase in his measly monthly stipend. The only other substantial information that this sicil states is that Salahuddin Baba lived in the Golobrdica mahale. It is unknown that a certain dervish buried in the graveyard of the Sünbül camii, named Mehmetzade Osman (d. 1808 CE) and whose grave marker is adorned with the title "son of Haci Bektaş" was

46 Most of these rumors were unsubstantiated accusations against political foes. For an example of the use of the term Hamzevi as slander see Muhamed Hadžijahic, "Hamzevije u svjetlu poslanice užičkog šehje" in Prilozi za Orijentalnu Filologiju III-IV/1952-53, Sarajevo 1953.
47 See Algar's article.
48 Nedim Filipović claims to have found the name of a Bektashi tekke and its shaykh, one Cangudaz, from a defter of the nahije of Bosanski-Brod for the year 1489.
49 Evliya Çelebi, Putopis-Odloemci o jugoslovenskim zemljama. tr. Hazim Sabanović (Svjetlost, Sarajevo 1967) p.402
50 Čehajic, Derviški redovi na jugoslovenskim zemljama (Sarajevo, 1986). Several highly speculative references to Bektashi tekkes in Bosnia have been made in the past, including ones mention in Banja Luka.
involved with this small Sarajevo Bektashi community. Given the close proximity between the Golobrdica and Sünbül mahales to each other it is highly likely that there was a connection between the two individuals. What remains to be further determined is whether these two Bosnian Bektashis were ethnic Bosnjaks or if they were Albanians, Turks or something else.

Throughout the post-Ottoman period, the Bektashi presence in Bosnia was restricted for the most part to ethnic-Albanian émigrés living in Sarajevo who came from Kosova and Macedonia. Notwithstanding the existence of these Bektashis, no formal tekkes were opened and rituals were conducted in private homes presided over by visiting babas from lands further south, most notably Baba Qazim Bakalli (d. 1983) of Gjakova (Đakovica) and his predecessor Baba Hamza (d. 1947 CE).

There is, interestingly enough, one location in Bosnia-Hercegovina that in all probability had a Bektashi connection at one time or another that has yet to be substantiated: the celebrated Buna Tekke. Nestled in to the idyllic Buna River valley near the town of Blagaj, the tekke seems to emanate with spirituality. Although it is currently used by both Naqshibanı and Qadiri Sufı Orders and at one time was used by the Khalwātis the modest two-story Ottoman period building possesses numerous signs indicating that Bektashis may very well have once made use of it. Foremost among these is the türbe of the 13th century Bektashi saint, San Saltık that is affixed to the tekke. In addition the entire tekke structure lacks the visible signs of a Sunni tekke, i.e. the lack of a mihrab as well as an area for congregational prayer (namaz). The rustic and secluded location of the tekke itself would lead one to believe that it was not established by any orthodox tarıqat given that those orders were for the most part urban in nature.

While it would appear that the spread of the Way of Hacı Bektaş Veli remained essentially absent in this largely Slavic land, there were quite a number of individuals of Bosnian extraction living beyond the borders of the province who were Bektashis, several of whom even supervised tekkes. The most noteworthy of these Bosnian Bektashis was a certain Bosnevi Baba who lived during the 19th century. Little is known of his life and there is no information on where he came from in Bosnia. Why Bosnevi ended up in the Macedonian town of Kičevo is open to speculation, though it can be proposed that it was here where he entered the order as he often made mention in his poetry of Kičevo’s 16th century Bektashi saint, Hızır Baba, being his mürşid. One more Bektashi of Slavic origin was the 18th century Ahmed Gurbı Baba who had his roots in the town of Novi Pazar. He began his spiritual quest as an affiliate of the Saqıyyah tarıqat and then later became a Bektashi. He composed a touching verse dedicated to his hometown:

Gal, diyərm Bosna’dir bil sen benim
Hem Yeni Pazar oluptur meskenim.
Halkımız gazı, kamusu serfiraz
Bir bilir Allahi, terk etmez namaz.
Dilerim, hifzeylesin Allah anı
Her kederden zahir-0 batın gani.

There was a baba of Bosnian origin by the name of Şemsuddin ‘Ali (d. 1694 CE) who sat as postnişin of the famous Durali Baba Tekke of Reni, Greece. During the second half of the

52 From an interview with Fejzullah Hadzibajrić taken by Jasna Šamić found in “Where are the Bektashis of Bosnia?” (http://www.bektashi.net/history-bosnoba.html). This article also mentions that the last Bektashi dervish of purely Bosnian origin was a certain Bakaršić who died in 1932 and was buried in the Grlica Brdo cemetery.
54 See Şevki Koca’s Yunanistan’da İrşad Ocağı: Reni (Durbâl) ve İскеçe (Koutche) Hasıb Baba Bektası Dergâhı (n.d., http://alewiten.com/irsad.htm)
18th century a certain Bosnian Derviş Mustafa sat in the Karyağdi Tekke in Istanbul. We also have further record of two mürşids of the celebrated Maghawirl (Kaygusuz Sultan) dergah in Cairo who were of Bosnian origin: one Kasım Baba (d. 1213 AH), who seems to have been the head cook of the tekke at one time; and İsmail Baba (d. 1268 AH), once its chief butcher.

Conclusion

The presence of heterodox movements in Bosnia remains to this day obscured behind the few available records. Nevertheless it can be brought to light through speculation and, perhaps, a little creative imagination. I have demonstrated here that there were significant heterodox influences in Bosnia and among the Bosnian Diaspora, and that there were connections between them. However, the conservative spirit of Ottoman Bosnian Sunni Islam overshadows all heterodox movements that made their appearance in Bosnia. Orthodoxy managed successfully to keep heterodox on the margins, or when that did not work, to suppress it by force.

One of the purposes of this paper has been to clarify the nature of the most influential heterodox movement in Ottoman Bosnia, the Hamzevis. I believe that there were Hurufi influences among the Hamzevis, as evidenced by the link between the Bosnian Hurufi poet Mulhid Vahdeti and the Hamzevi movements. It is very intriguing that the only other heterodox movement in which Bosnians participated in any number was the Bektashi Sufi order, which is known for its deep connections to Hurufism. This leads us to speculate that Hurufi thought played a significant role, or maybe was even the underlying factor, in defining the boundaries between heterodoxy and orthodoxy in Ottoman Bosnia and beyond, throughout the Islamic world.

Bibliography


56 Şevki Koca, Mısırda bir ırenler ocağı: El-Magaravi (Kaygusuz) Bektashi Dergâhı. Nametullah Hafiz states in his The Development of Bektashism in Yugoslavia that Ismail Baba was initiated in the Hızır Baba Tekke of Kičevo.


Tebliğin incelendiği Hamzevi tarikatının temeli Hacı Bayram Veli’ye dayanır. Hacı Bayram Veli’nin vefatından sonra tarikat, liderliğini Akşemsettin’in yaptığı Sünni bir kol, ve diğerini ise Ömer Sikkini’nin temsil ettiği Sünni olmayan bir kola-Melami-Bayrami koluna aynılır. Özellikle ikinci kolun, Sünni olmayan yorumlar nedeniyle Ömer Dede, Bûnyamin Ayaşi (1522) ve Pir Ali Aksaraylı (1527) gibi liderleri Mehdiilik iddiası üzerine Osmanlı otoritesi
takibata uğrayıp hapsedilmiştir. Bu liderlerden sonra Çelebi İsmail Maşuki olarak da bilinen Oğlan Şeyh ortaya çıkmış, yaptığı yorumlar ve düşünceleri kendisini Osmanlı otoritesiyle karşı karşıya getirmiş ve nihayet 1528 yılında idam edilmiştir. Onun idişine takip eden Melami-Bayrami tarafından Hamza Bali (İ573) dönemi başlamıştır.

Hamza Bali Drina Nehri vadisinde doğmuş, genç yaşında vatanını terk ederek İstanbul'a gitti, orada Hüsamettin Ankaravi'nin elinde bir derviş olmuş, takvam ve zühdü ile kısa zamanda kendini yetiştirmiştir. Şeyhin idamından sonra İstanbul'dan kaçmış, Bosna'ya dönmüştür. Bu dönüşünde karıncak kişiliğinden dolayı bir çok kişi etrafında toplandı, görüşleri Melami çevresinde ve Kuzey Bosna'da yayılmaya devam etmişler ve Oğlan Şeyh'in haksız yere idam edildiğini yaymaya başlamışlar. Ayrıca başlangıçta Melami-Bayramı ismini ve Melami silsile boyunca devam eden tarihleri ve giónlere karşı çıkmak zorunda kalmışlardır.

Tebligiye göre Hamza Bal'ının ismiyle Osmanlı Devleti tarafından takibata uğraması onun dini görüşlerinden ziyade politik gücü ve sosyal düzene karşı oluşturduğu tehlikedir. Bütün aynı akıbete uğrayan bütün Melami-Bayramı şeyhleri ve Melami silsile boyunca devam eden dini görüşleri göz önune almak önemlidir. Netice itibariyle Melami tekkeleri kargaşayı ve huzursuzluğu sevkeden düşünceyi ne olduğunu incelemek gerekir.


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