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BEKTASHISM IN THE BALKANS: CASE OF ALBANIA AND MACEDONIA

Balkanlarda Bektaşilik: Arnavutluk ve Makedonya Örneği

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Abstract

The Bektashis, one of the very important dervish orders in the Ottoman Empire, especially during the 15th and 16th century had played important role into spreading of Islam into South-Eastern Europe, especially on the territory of the today's Republic of Albania. They had also been very influenced in the regions of Macedonia and Kosovo, while in Bosnia and Herzegovina they were of little relevance.

This paper has the aim to show the importance of this order in Albania, Macedonia and Kosovo, especially after the dervish orders were banned in Turkey. During the twenties of the 20th century the center of the Bektashis was in Albania. After Albania was officially proclaimed atheist country in 1967, the center had moved to Kosovo, to the town of Djakovica.

Also, the order has great significance in Western Macedonia, especially in the town of Tetovo and its neighborhood. One of the most beautiful Bektashi tekke built in Tetovo is still place of worship and great beauty. It is called Arbatı Babe Tekkesi and it is known as one of the most beautiful Bektashi tekke preserved until our days. It was built at the end of the 16th century and still is open to its followers.

Keywords: Bektashism, Albania, Macedonia, Islam, Tekke

Öz

Özellikle 15. ve 16. yüzyıllarda Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'ndaki en önemli derviş gruplarından biri olan Bektaşiler, özellikle bugünkü Arnavutluk Cumhuriyeti topraklarında İslam'ın Güneydoğu Avrupa'ya yayılmasında önemli rol oynamışlardır. Aynı zamanda, Makedonya ve Kosova bölgelerinde de çok etkili olmuşlardı; Bosna ve Hersek'te ise bunlar çok az etkiliydi.

Bu yazı, Arnavutluk, Makedonya ve Kosova'da, özellikle tekkelerin Türkiye'de yasaklanmasından sonra, bu düzenin önemini gösterme amacına sahiptir. 20. yüzyılın yirmili yıllarında, Bektaşiliğin merkezi Arnavutluk idi. Arnavutluk 1967'de resmen ateist bir ülke ilan edilince, merkez Kosova'ya ve Cakovica kasabasına taşındı.

Ayrıca, Batı Makedonya'da, özellikle de Kalkandelen'de, düzenin önemi büyüktür. Tetovo'da inşa edilen en güzel Bektaşî tekkesi, hala ibadet ve güzelliğin yeridir. Harabatı Baba Tekkesi olarak adlandırılır ve günümüze kadar korunmuş olan en güzel Bektaşî tekkelerinden biri olarak bilinir. 16. yüzyılın sonunda inşa edilmiş olup hala takipçilerine açıktır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Bektaşilik, Arnavutluk, Makedonya, İslam, Tekke

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I. Introduction

Islamic mysticism, *taṣawwuf*, is etymologically based on the Arabic word *ṣuf* means wool (this form represents *Masdar* of the fifth verbal form). It is usually concluded that the term itself suggest the humble behavior of the followers, whose only desire is to give their soul to the God. The various orders of Sufis, usually called dervishes had been form in 12th and 13th century.¹

The *taṣawwuf* had come to the Balkans with the Ottoman Turks. The Islam had spread on a larger scale on the territory of the today's state of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania. However, in Bosnia had prevailed and still prevails the Orthodox Sunni version of Islam, while the most important orders were ones the closest to the Sunni tradition, such as: Nakshibendi, Rufaiis, Qadiris....²

As for the Bektashi order, one their most important center was region of the modern Republic of Albania, which has the largest Muslim community in Europe, after Turkey. (Doja, A political history of Bektashism in Albania, 2006)

Case of spreading of Islam in Albania is a very specific one. The Albanian did not have their national state before the Ottoman conquest. However, during the Ottoman rule, the Albanian population had entered the Ottoman army and administration and therefore converted into Islam. According to the Ottoman census books, their massive conversion begun with the end of the 16th century, and it went on rapidly during the centuries to follow. In Albania was also very important to emphasize the activities of the dervishes, who had contributed a lot to the conversion of the Albanians. Today, although most of the Albanians are Muslims, there are still Albanian Catholics and Orthodox as well. To all three congregations, the national identity comes before the religious one.³

What was the reason that Albania had become the center of the Bektashi order and not some other region in south-Eastern Europe? The reasons could be divided into two sets: first goes back to the further past, with the Ottoman

¹ For more details about Islamic mysticism, or *Sufism* as it is usually called, see for example: N. Green, *Sufism. A Global History*. Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.

² For more details about the dervish orders in Bosnia, see: Dž. Čehajić, *Derviški redovi u jugoslovenskim zemljama sa posbenim osvrtom na Bosnu i Hercegovinu*, Sarajevo: Orijentalni Institut , 1986.

³ For more details see: A. Doja, „A political history of Bektashism in Albania“, *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 7, no. 1 (2006), 83-107.

conquest of the region, but mainly to the wars at the end of 17th and beginning of 18th century and second with the abolishment of the orders in Turkey and the policy led by Turkey in the religious affairs up to nineties of the last century.

As the Bektashi dervishes were widely spread among the janissary troops, a lot of Albanians especially from the mountain regions (tribes called Gege) joined the Ottoman Army. Soon they had gained good positions within it, and the Bektashi influence had become very strong. However, it is not surprising that it was very acceptable by the converts, since it contained a lot of syncretic elements and was more easily adopted than the Orthodox Sunni Islam.⁴ Thus Bektashism had taken its firm roots on the Albanian soil.

After the proclamation of the Republic of Turkey, its founder and leader Mustafa Kemal Atatürk abolished the Sufi orders in 1925. Since the *dede* or the head of the Bektashi order was of the Albanian origin it was only natural for him to go to Albania, who had gained its independence in 1912. He continued his work there, and that certainly could be the reason why the Bektashi order is still not only present but also strong in this European country.

According to the Iranian author Ali Akbar Ziaee, who had spent several years residing in Albania and researching the culture and the past in the Balkans, the Bektashis, seemingly apart of these wandering dervishes gradually transform into colonizing dervishes whose main task become to convert recently conquered countries to Islam. This may also explain the rationale for appointing the order of Bektashis to guide and patronize the janissaries as they were recruited from among the Christian children converted to Islam and raised in Turkish circles. Already in 15th century this order of dervishes was protected by the Ottoman dynasty, having been granted a significant endowment. Apart from personal piety or the desire to strengthen the Ottoman dynasty through the piers of dervishes on a super national level on a more mundane plane these donations must have been motivated by the wish to both attract and recompense the loyalties of pious subjects to knit them more closely into the Ottoman fabric. This explains why the Bektashis were increasingly on the point of being considered paradoxically perhaps given their heterodox inclination as the state religious order. The Bektashis were in fact were un-

⁴ For more details see: Olga Zirojević, *Islamizacija na južnoslovenskim prostorima*, Beograd: Bookbridge, 2012.

orthodox and had gained such a strong reverence for the house of Ali that it might be called a Shiite order. However, since the Ottomans tolerated both Sunni legalism and institutional Sufism but forbade all varieties of Shiism the Bektashis were a self-proclaimed Sunni movement. (Ziaee, 2010)

A general claim is that the Bektashis preserved many traits of oppositional movements and heretic groups and shaped them into synthesis during times of a mutual penetration of Turkic and Byzantine cultural trades. There is an unmistakable evidence for the participation of Hacı Bektas himself and his adherents in the Turkoman uprising against Seljuq rule 1239-1240 the so called Babai revolt. However, there remains probably very little resemblance between the Turkic beliefs of Hacı Bektas's time in the 13th century and those that form the heterodox but sophisticated doctrines at the turn of the 16th century when the Bektashis were organized as an established order of dervishes. The considerable number of doctrines and practices supposed to lay at the heterogeneous origins of Bektashism has led to heated disputes between specialist over the prevalence of one or another influence and finally to claim that the Bektashi order did not have the well-defined theology that it could accommodate much local influence and that its fundamental character is an all encompassing syncretism. In its complexity many have considered Bektashism as a „syncretistic problem“ kind of „kaleidoscope“ each time revealing one or another facet which escaped attention. After many times taking up and resuming the same work the Bektashis came to be considered as a simple „victims“ of their colonizing and civilizing role which must have transformed them into overtly heterodox order allowing the infiltration of foreign heretic influences. (A. Doja , A political history of Bektashism from Ottoman Anatolia to Contemporary Turkey, 430-431)

With the destruction of the Janissary order by the decree of Sultan Mahmud II in 1836, the Bektashi went through as they called it „the first tragedy of Bektashis“. Their tekkes and zawiya were closed, destroyed or handed over to Sufi order. Their dervishes had exiled; some of them had successfully hidden themselves in the rough terrains of the Western Balkans, while other converted to the other order such as Naqshibendi, Rufais and so on. (O. Jazexhi, *The Bektashi Tarikat of Dervishes*, https://docgo.net/philosophy-of-money.html?utm_source=the-Bektashi-dervishes-o-jazexi, 5)

The history of the Bektashi, as it had been already mentioned, had its milestone with the creation of the Turkish Republic in 1923. Mustafa Kemal

Ataturk, on the swing of his reforms of modernization and even westernization had banned the Bektashi order in 1925. Thus, the Bekstashis had fled from their center in central Anatolia (situated between Kirsehir and Kayseri) and fled to Albania. They call it a „second tragedy of Bektashis“. (O. Jazexhi, op.cit, 7)

The Albania had not been chosen by random. At the time of the abolition of the order the Dede of the order was Albanian Sali Niazi. Thus Albania, was the logical choice. Sali Niazi had moved to Tirana in 1931 received where he had been warmly received. Previous to that on 28th of September 1929, as a preparation for transfer of tekke from Anatolia to Albania was held a great conference in the Tekke in Prishitina and established the first modern constitution of the order. This constitution was accepted officially by the Albanian government (O. Jazexhi, op. cit, 9) It is very important to point out to the fact that one of the main articles of the constitution previses that the head of the order could be removed if in conflict with the state. (O. Jazexhi, op. cit, 9)

Dedebaba Salih Nijazi (1876-1942) was one of the most prominent figures of the Bektashi movement in the 20th century. He was born in the town of Starye in the heart of the plane of the coastal Albania, where he got his primary education. He had moved with his family to Anatolia, where he had spent considerable amount of time in the central Bektashi tekke Hacı Bektaş Velli. By the decision of the Council of Elected Seven in 1913 he was appointed of the head of the above mentioned tekke. Very soon he had become popular among the Bektashi followers in Turkey, Syria, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Greece, Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, Albania, as well as on the territories of ex-Yugoslavia. He has superior intelligence and believed in education. He has financed the opening of the first school in Hacı Bektaşköy in 1920. After the ban of all the orders, he had left for Albania. On 17th January 1930 he was elected as a head of the Albanian Bektashi community which encompassed at the time around 100.000 members. He was also head of the Bektashi tekkes in Kosovo, Macedonia, Greece, Egypt, as well as on the Greek Islands, Romania, Bulgaria, Bosna and Herzegovina and Serbia. During the next ten years he had successfully organized reforms within the Bektashi order, thus he gained great authority and influence. He was killed in 1942, after the Italian occupation of Albania in 1939, under the unclear circumstances. (Ziaee, 2010)

The Bektashi order had huge impact on the Albanian culture. One of the very important writers Naim Frasheri was follower of the Bektashi order.

Naim Frasheri (1846-1900) is the most famous poet of the Albanian renaissance of the 19th century. He is also famous for being a Bektashi. The significance of Naim Frasheri as a national poet rests upon mystical and religious messages he transmitted to the Bektashi followers. He influenced the Albanian writers at the beginning of the 20th century enormously. Many of his poems were set to music during his life time, like Bektashi songs in the religious ceremonies. (Ziaee, 2010)

Albania had stayed the center of the Bektashi order until the decree issued by the autocratic leader of Albania Enver Hoxa, in 1967, banning all religious communities and their activities on the territory of the Republic of Albania. Albania had thus become the only officially atheist country in the world. At that moment the center of the Bektashi order moved from Albania to neighboring region of Kosovo and Metohija, populated by the Albanians, at the time part of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Also, the followers of the Bektashi order could have been found among the Albanians living in the Western Macedonia, at that time also part of the federative Yugoslavia.

Although Yugoslavia was also socialist country, where the religion did not play the important part of the social and political structures, it was tolerated and even the religious communities had their own rights, although they had to follow the main line of the state policy.

The Islamic Religious Community (Islamska Verska Zajednica) had been institutionally organized in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1930, by acceptance of its constitution and statute. Those documents did not specifically mention the dervish orders (*tariqāt*) but it had been taken for granted that they were valid for them as well. However, the Sunni ulema had been very critical of the behavior of the followers of the *tariqāts*. In one document, created by the highest ulema members in Yugoslavia, it had been written that the *tariqāts* should not be banned, but that their followers should reject all the practice that is not in accordance with the orthodox Sunni religious thought. The main critique addressed their „panteistic believes“ and also they were asked not to regard „their sheykhs as divinity“. (D. Novaković, „Islamska verska zajednica i derviški redovi“, Istorija XX veka no. 2 (2002), 106. Further: (Новаковић, 2002))

The question of position of *tariqāts* had been definitely solved by the Constitution of Islamic Religious Community of Yugoslavia dated 1936, which

predicts in its Article no 36 that all the tekkes and their property had status of *vaqfs*, thus under the control of the organs of the Islamic Religious Community. Also, all the sheykhs should have the corresponding qualifications to perform their duties and were under the supervision of the religious authorities. Also, all the religious rituals should have been performed according to the „usual practice“, which really meant again according to the Sunni Hanefi rules. Reis-ul-Ulema as the head of the Community had the right to proclaim certain rituals inappropriate and to forbid their practice. (Новаковић, 2002)

After the end of the Second World War and establishment of the Communist regime both in Albania and Yugoslavia, the position of all religious communities was about the change. Although they were tolerated in both countries (as it has already been mentioned in Albania until 1967), the interference of the state organs and especially organs of the Communist Party could be traced. The religious communities, Bektashis included, were also interesting party for observance by the intelligence and security services of both countries. However, in Albania it has ended with the prohibition of all religious activities, while in Yugoslavia they continued to be tolerated although not always accepted with sympathies.

Also, the Bektashi order has great significance in Western Macedonia, especially in the town of Tetovo and its neighborhood. One of the most beautiful Bektashi tekkes has been preserved in this region. The Arabati Baba Tekke is a tekke located in Tetovo, Republic of Macedonia. The tekke was originally built in 1538 around the türbe of Sersem Ali Baba, an Ottoman dervish. In 1799, a waqf provided by Recep Paşa established the current grounds of the tekke. The finest surviving Bektashi monastery in Europe, the sprawling complex features flowered lawns, prayer rooms, dining halls, lodgings and a great marble fountain inside a wooden pavilion. (<http://www.telegraf.rs/vesti/jugosfera/2933860-na-granici-sa-srbijom-je-najocuvanije-svetiliste-islamskog-misticnog-monaskog-reda-u-evropi-legenda-kaze-da-je-osnovao-surak-sulejmana-velicanstvenog-foto>)

As the legend says, Ali Baba was the brother-in-law of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent, and had been a high-ranking Baba in the important Dimetoka Teke (now in Didymoteicho) when his sister (who was one of the sultan's wives) fell into disfavor with her husband. As a result, Ali Baba was banished to Kalkandelen (present-day Tetovo) at periphery of the Ottoman Empire where he established his own Tekke. (Ibid)

Another version of the story goes that Ali Baba was an official of the Ottoman Empire who gave up his position in order to live the simple life of a Bektashi monk. Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent, angered by the departure of one of his favorite officials, yelled after Ali as he departed Istanbul, “*If you will be a fool, then go.*” *Sersem*, the old Turkish for ‘fool’, became Ali Baba’s nickname thereafter. (Ibid)

Whichever is the true story (the Turks favour the first one), Sersem travelled the vast empire of Turkey until he came upon the River Penain the tranquil mountains of Tetovo. There he settled until his death in 1538, quietly practicing the way of the Bektashi order. After his death, his only pupil to survive him, Arabati Baba, founded a monastery in Tetovo to commemorate Sersem’s life. (Ibid)



Harabati Baba Tekkesi, Tetovo.

The present-day buildings were built at the end of the 18th century by Rexhep Pasha, also a dervish, whose tomb lies next to Sersem’s in the tekke mausoleum. Not all the buildings are still standing today; in the courtyard was originally built to house the sick daughter of Abdurrahman Pasha. (Ibid)



The reception inn is still in disrepair, although the library is being refurbished. One of the buildings has been turned into a Sunni mosque, but the inns around the Bektashi graveyard have been preserved for the Baba. (Ibid)

The Teke in Tetovo remained the seat of the Bektashi until 1912 when the Ottomans were driven out of Macedonia. Although the teke saw a small revival between 1941 and 1945, the lands were taken as state property during Yugoslav times and made into a hotel and museum. In recent years, however, the Bektashi order has regained access to the tekke and the site is being slowly refurbished. Although in considerable disrepair it is still the largest and most well-preserved tekke in the western Balkans. (Ibid)

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