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HAJI BEKTASH VELI AND THE BEKTASHI PATH IN ALBANIA AND MACEDONIA

By Arben Sulejmani

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Introduction

The Bektashi World Community officially represents the spiritual teachings of the Bektashi Sufi Order, one of the many mystical branches found within Islam. This religious order was founded in the 13th century by the Sufi saint Hajji Bektash Veli. The ultimate goal of the Bektash spiritual path is the perfection of the human soul. It is a path which fortifies its wayfarers with ethical and spiritual principles, which bring closeness to the Divine. Being founded on the revealed religion of Islam, Bektashism offers a unique and distinctive reading of the Qur'an, as well as the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, the Twelve Imams and the great Sufi mystics.

With its sacred headquarters in Tirana, Albania, the Bektashi World Community has members in over 31 nations, with the largest concentration of Bektashi believers being found in Albania, Turkey, Bulgaria, Kosovo and Macedonia.

A Brief Overview of the Bektashi Sufi Order

This mystical school of Islam was established by the great Sufi saint Hunkar Hajji Bektash Veli (d. ca. 1341 CE). From the time he was little, Hajji Bektash displayed qualities seldom found in children, and when he reached the age of maturity, he began his spiritual studies with the eminent Sufi mystics of his region. After some time, the saintly master Ahmad Yasawi directed Hajji Bektash to go to Anatolia and propagate spiritual awareness. In 1282 CE he established a Sufi center, a *tekke* in the small central Anatolian town of

Karahüyük, a town that now bears his name, Hacıbektash. From here Hajji Bektash Veli sent his missionaries far and wide, so that Bektashi path expanded to throughout Anatolia and the Balkans, gathering countless clergymen and adherents.

As the Bektashi order spread throughout the lands of the nascent Ottoman Empire there was a need to reform its organization and regulation. This task was entrusted to Balım Sultan (ca. 1460-1517), who is commonly called the order's *Pir-ī Thānī*, or "Second Grandmaster." It is Balım Sultan who gave the Bektashi order the structure, rituals and litanies by which it is recognizable today. Balım Sultan gave the order a well-defined organizational structure, which encompassed the laity (*ashiks*), initiates (*muhibs*), *dervishes*, *babas*, *halifebabas*, and finally *dedebaba* at the top. He saw to it that the widely-dispersed Bektashi tekkes were regulated through *dedeliks* (alb. *gjyshat*) that were to oversee different geographical regions. Unique among Sufi brotherhoods, Balım Sultan also instituted the practice of celibacy, a path many Bektashi dervishes have chosen.

Although for nearly four centuries the leader (called *dedebaba*) of the Bektashi order had sat in the mother *tekke* in Hacıbektas, in 1930 the sacred seat of the *dedebaba* was moved to Tirana, Albania, where it has been located ever since. The current head of the Bektashi World Community is Hajji *Dedebaba* Edmond Brahimaj, a man whose efforts and tremendous organizational skills have greatly enhanced the spiritual influence of the community.

A Brief History of the Bektashis

Some eight hundred years ago Haji Bektash Veli (ca. 1248 CE to 1340 CE) founded the mystical Islamic Sufi order which thereafter bore his name. The Bektashi spiritual path that took shape in the thirteenth century had by the fourteenth century flourished and expanded its area of influence well beyond the central Anatolian region where it was founded. By the beginning of the fifteenth century Bektashism became a major ingredient to the diverse religious environment of the Ottoman Empire. With its non-normative Islamic doctrines and rituals, as well as its relative openness towards subject Christians and Jews, Bektashism rapidly became very popular among the masses.

Baba Mondi's Teaching

Baba Mondi (the leader of the world's Bektashi community) was once sitting with a group of Christians and Muslims. Each of them was carrying their respective holy books in their hands. They were all reading passages from the Qur'an, Torah, the Gospels, and the Book of Psalms when some commotion occurred. The leaders and clerics of these religions began to argue. Baba Mondi tried to intervene to bring some understanding. And this is what he said: "The archangel Gabriel revealed these holy books and they compel us believe that Moses, Jesus and all of the other prophets were real and that they exhibit the characteristics of the prophets as defined by sacred scriptures in way these prophets lived and treated others. The message for Muslims, Christians and Jews is that every prophet sent throughout history – be it Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus or Muhammad - shows humanity the way how to reach God. Thus they should all be respected and followed. We too follow the prophets as did those who came before us."

They said, "Our prophet declared that the seventy-two nations obtain their secret from us." Baba Mondi replied, "This is true, but the seventy third will be the winner. We are like the simple reed flute, or *ney*, which despite being nothing more than a hollow piece of wood can produce hundreds of tones solely through the grace of our human breath. Bektashism is a candle's flame which shines into people's hearts and gives them light and blessings. The whole world is now in darkness and in need of light. Every place is enlightened with this flame."

We have many sources saying that the Bektashi order descends from one of the grandsons of Prophet Muhammad: the seventh of the Twelve Imams, Musa al-Kazim. This chain of spiritual transmission that goes back to the Prophet Muhammad might not be academically verifiable, but Bektashi followers and lovers firmly believe in this.

The Bektashi Sufi order from the very earliest period of Haji Bektash Veli's lifetime had a structured organization with uniform doctrines and ritual. The *Vilayetnameh* and the *Makalat* are fundamental texts containing the basic rites and rules of Bektashism, and these books helped Bektashi *babas* and *dervishes* to continue in way of their patron saint (*pir*), Haji Bektash Veli. It is interesting to note that the structured hierarchy of this order helped the Ottoman sultan's give their famed Janissary Corps a structured organisation.

Institutionalized celibacy, or *mücerretlik* (tr.) or *beqaria* (al.) was initiated by Haji Veli Bektash and subsequently followed by Bektashi order. This form of detachment from the world was something unknown among Muslims prior to the time of Haji Veli Bektash.

Bektashi order was directed by Haji Veli Bektash from “Pirevi” (headquarters) and it continued to be directed from the Pirevi, with the *dedebaba* (al. Kryegjysh) as the head of all Bektashis.

The spiritual thought of Haji Bektash Veli differs in many ways from more orthodox Sufism, both before and after his time. Aşıkpaşazade, who gave us information on his understanding of Sufism, wrote that Haji Bektash Veli possessed the quality of *cebze*, or one completely taken up by with his mystical experience. Köprülü, who referenced Eminüddin b. Davud Fakih, defines him as being a *meczub-i mutlak*, or one absolutely annihilated in the Divine. Yet these attributions are not sufficient to describe Haji Bektash Veli.

Considering the time when Haji Bektash Veli lived, it is difficult to accept these assumptions at face value. Some modern researchers try to present Haji Bektash Veli as a Sunni mystic, while others affiliate him with Shi’ism. Yet such propositions are not consistent with scientific and historical facts. According to a source from the sixteenth century, Haji Bektash Veli was accepted by Sufis as one of the prominent *kutb* (axis of sainthood) and was highly respected. An important reason for that is that he was known as a *veli*, or saint, and thus had a prominent place in the hearts and minds of the people starting from the thirteenth century. He had become a holy person in the minds of the people.

Haji Bektash Veli had played a significant role in Islamizing Anatolia. Yet, his influence was not limited to Anatolia for his *khalifahs*, or deputies, spread his teachings throughout the Balkans, to its westernmost boundaries. One of these *khalifahs*, Sarı Saltık, spread Bektashi teachings into what is now Albania, northern Greece, Macedonia, Kosova, southern Serbia and Montenegro. According to the *Velayetnameh*, Sarı Saltık was personally sent by Haji Bektah Veli to Islamize these lands.

It is now widely accepted by historians that the transition from Christianity to Islam among segments of the population did not begin in the wake of the Ottoman conquests of the fifteenth century, but rather it was a lengthy process of religious transition that started much earlier. Sarı Saltık brought Bektashism as far as the Adriatic and Ionian coasts in the early fourteenth century, and it is essential to be cognizant of the presence of Islamic mystic orders

and their activities throughout the Balkans. Sarı Saltık also brought Bektashism to Bulgaria, Bosnia and Romania, and later to Hungary. He was a great saint and spiritual master of this peculiar form of Islamic mysticism, and his tombs are today to be found in seven different locations.

Unlike Catholicism, Orthodoxy and Sunni Islam of the time, Bektashis used the vernacular as their language of prayer and poetry. Their use of Ottoman Turkish, Albanian, Greek, Bosnian, and Bulgarian as prayer languages in an era when Arabic and Farsi were the prevailing religious languages of Islam, clearly manifested their social consciousness. This attitude further contributed to the development of the Turkish language. Haji Bektash Veli himself was not an ethnic Turk, and in addition to Farsi and Arabic, his followers were firm supporters of the Ottoman Turkish language. They ensured that Ottoman culture had a vital place in the cross-cultural arena that defined their era. In addition, the Bektashi order played an important role in spreading the outlawed Albanian-language school books during the late nineteenth century and giving active support to their intellectual groups. When the matter of the Albanian alphabet was taken up in 1908 most Bektashis supported the use of Latin script, simply because of its ease of use for the common man. This was quite unlike most devout Sunni Muslims, who supported the use of the Arabic script for writing Albanian. The three Frashëri brothers--Abdyl, Naim, and Sami (the later known in Turkey as Şemsettin Sami)--played an important role in the development of Albanian literature and nationalism. All three were of Bektashi origin. Turkish Bektashis played an important intellectual, cultural, philological, and philosophical role in their society and they also played a role in the adaptation of the Latin script, albeit for the Turkish language.

While the Bektashi order has been present among the Albanian people from the time of the arrival of Bektashis to Albanian lands, it only grew to be markedly influential toward the end of nineteenth century. Looking through the centuries-long record of Sufi orders in Albanian lands, we notice that the Bektashis were by far the most widespread and influential. There were also diverse Sufi communities which placed themselves more under the umbrella of Sunni Islam, such as the Nakşibendis and Halvetis. Amid these Sufi mystical communities, the Bektashis hold a distinctive position considering its conspicuously non-Sunni character.

For nearly five centuries the Ottoman Empire contained a great diversity of ethno-cultural and religious elements, which left deep marks upon the cultural and religious

landscape of Balkans. Orthodox Christian princes in the Balkans had political ties with the Muslim princes, sheiks and emirs all the way to the end of the Ottoman period. These ties, though political in nature, brought the people of the both sides closer. No doubt, the Sufi dervishes played an important role in breaking down invisible barriers that divided people. It was through these dervishes that notions of spiritual bliss and syncretic beliefs were brought to the peoples of Balkans. Bektashis (who are also known as the “Sons of Adam”) applied the Islamic doctrines of universal inclusion and religious tolerance more so than any other Muslim group. During the Ottoman period Bektashis very often established close social ties with Christians, Jews and others non-Muslim Communities.

Bektashism in the Time of Balim Sultan

Bektashis have frequently made use of numerous religious and social undercurrents to expound spiritual realities, more so than other Sufi orders. The most notable of these undercurrents were the thoughts of Fazlullah Astarabadi (d. 1394CE), the founder of the Hurufi movement; the eccentric piety of the wandering Kalandar dervishes, and the organizational structure the renowned artisan guilds of the Akhis. By the late sixteenth century passionate Shi’ite beliefs, bolstered by Safavid propaganda, became widespread throughout Anatolia. Added to this was the need to often conform to the official doctrine of Sunni Islam as upheld by the Ottoman state.

In the face of these often conflicting undercurrents there was a need for a responsible leader to lay down structured rules, rituals and organization for the Bektashi order. In the 15th and 16th century this man was Balim Sultan (who is commonly referred to as *Pir-i Thani* or the “Second Founder”). It was he who brought to Bektashism its formal hierarchical structure. Balim Sultan also instituted celibacy, which played an important role in Bektashism and which made them distinct from the other Islamic mystics and Sufi orders. During the ceremony accompanying the *mucerit* (celibate) vows, the right ear of the dervish is pierced and from then on they wear an earring called *mengjush* as reminder of their vow and recognized as celibate dervish. This ritualized celibacy cannot be found in any other Islamic brotherhood. During the Ottoman period the celibate ritual could only take place within the

*tekke*¹ of Haji Veli Bektash (although a few other places were added in the late 19th-century). Today this ritual is solely carried out in the Bektashi World Center in Tirana.

To this day the Bektashi order continues to be directed by the *Dedebaba* (lit. great-grandfather) who is appointed to his position by his *murshid* (his spiritual master, in this case the former *dedebaba*) by a holy decree, or otherwise by a council of twelve “grandfathers” (*gjysh, dedes*), the highest grade in the Bektashi spiritual hierarchy. These are men charged with overseeing between 15 and 20 *tekkes*. Only one of them can become *dedebaba*, a tradition that goes back to Haji Bektash’s day. Thus today’s world leader, Haji Dede Edmond, follows the ancient method the order. Underneath the *dedes* are the *babas*, men charged with running the *tekkes* and being spiritual guides to both dervishes and laity. Below them in rank are the *dervishes*, followed by *muhibs* (initiates), *ashiks* (uninitiated sympathizers) and then Bektashi families.

Although it was acceptable for *babas, dervishes* and *muhibs* to be married, *dedes* and *dedebabas* had to be celibate. In fact, the majority of Bektashi *babas* during the time of Haji Bektash and during the Ottoman period were celibate, as were those living in post-Ottoman Albania, which continued to this day. This celibacy was perceived as being done in imitation of the patron saint, Haji Bektash Veli, who never married and left no physical descendants.

The best summation of Bektashi belief is perhaps best stated by American historian of Bektashism, Huseyin Abiva:

Bektashism has often been perceived by outsiders as being deeply unorthodox and syncretic in nature. This may be an understandable conclusion, yet it fails to grasp the wider picture. Bektashis had always expressed their firm attachment to the *Ehl-i Beyt*, (the Prophet’s family), an attachment that had a noticeable place in Haji Bektash’s teachings. Such ideological utilization was not limited exclusively to the early phases of Bektashism, in the late 19th century liberalism, anti-clericalism and, more significantly, Albanian and Turkish nationalism were utilized by many (though not all) Bektashis as vehicles with the challenges brought on by the rapid social and political changes of the times could be answered, albeit with a spiritual twist.

Ever since the days of Balım Sultan in the 15th - 16th centuries, the essence of Bektashi theology can be summed up as follows: ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib, the first cousin of Prophet Muhammad, occupies a predominant position. He was the most loyal and trusted follower of the Prophet, and they are seen as being of one blood, one flesh, one spirit and one essence. Ali is the reflection of the Divine, the revealer of the esoteric Quran, while the Prophet is seen as the vehicle by which the exoteric Quran became manifest in the world.

While Muhammad personifies the *Shari'at*, 'Ali personifies the *tariqah*. Muhammad said; "I am the city of knowledge and Ali is its gate; one cannot enter a city without passing through the gate." Bektashis make no distinction between these two pivotal figures of Islam and they are customarily referred to simply as Muhammad 'Ali, with no disconnection of the names. *Hakk* (Reality, i.e.God)-Muhammad-'Ali form a unified reality expressing a single truth (*hakikat*).

This formula of Hakk-Muhammad-'Ali should not be confused with the Christian concept of the Trinity (first Mohammad is son of his father Abdullah and mother Amine), as has so often been done by those outside of the order. Rather, this compounded perception of certainty (*yakin, Sinqeritet*) demonstrates a Bektashi acceptance of the philosophy of *vahdet-i vucud* (lit. Unity of essences.), a theory of existence advanced by the great medieval mystic Ibn 'Arabi, who is held in great esteem by members of the order. The Divine is far greater in His Reality than His creation. He is nonetheless visible in creation and, more importantly, His mark is visible on the face of each and every human being. Despite orthodox objections to such notions, it is a belief that can be supported with numerous Qur'anic verses as well as Prophetic sayings (*hadith*). The famed Bektashi poet Naim Frashëri said: "The whole cosmos is God; therefore, he who knows himself, knows God."

In addition to the devotion to Muhammad and 'Ali, love for *Ahl ul-Bayt* (the Prophets family) Bektashis have discernible veneration of the Twelve Imams that have descended from 'Ali, as well as the "fourteen innocent ones" (*katermbedhjet foshnjat e pafajshme* or *Masum-i pak*), the martyred children of the holy figures. There is also adoration of the *shtatembedhjet besniket* or *Oneyedi kemerbestigan*, the seventeen loyal companions of 'Ali, all of whom were girded with the esoteric knowledge.

Veneration of the number twelve takes on many symbolic forms in Bektashism. This veneration can be seen in the garb of *dervishes* and *babas*. The *taxh* (or headgear) of *dervishes*, *babas* and *dedes* is called *Husaini taxh* in remembrance of Imam Husain. Embellishing the *Husaini taxh* are twelve gores (*terks*), each representing one of the Imams. Bektashi *babas* and *dervishes* wear around their necks a *teslim-i tash*, a stone carved with twelve flutes, also representing the Twelve Imams as well as dying to the ways of the world (i.e. "Die before you die," or "check yourself before you are checked!").

Bektashis openly claim to adhere to the *mezheb* (legal school) of the sixth Imam, Jafar as-Sadiq, despite their seemingly non-emphasis of outward ritual and legalism. As one Bektashi poet wrote:

Since the gathering of Eternity, we are followers of *Ehl-i Beyt*.

Here, making this confession yet again, we are followers of *Ehl-i Beyt*.

Bektashis give reverence to the “close people of God” (*evliyas* i.e. saints). Central to belief in the power of these pious individuals is the notion that the entire material and spiritual universe is sustained by a hierarchy of saints, the head of which is known as the *kutb* (axis). Beneath this *kutb* is an array of saints grouped according to their spiritual rank, Haji Veli Bektash is recognized as the founder of the order and his central role in Bektashi devotion is unquestionable. Holy figures, including Balım Sultan, as well as those saints who played role in the expansion of the order, like Sarı Saltık, Sersem Ali Dede, Abdal Musa and Kaygusuz Sultan, are all regularly included in Bektashi litanies. One manifestation of the veneration of *evliyas* has been construction and visitation of *turbes* (or mausoleums). Most Bektashi *tekkes* found throughout Anatolia and the Balkans have (or had) *turbes* attached to them that contained the graves of famous *babas* and *dervishes*. These *tekkes* and *turbes* continue to be sights of regular pilgrimage for Bektashis, non-Bektashis and even non-Muslims. *Turbes* are seen as powerhouses of both spiritual and worldly blessings, as well as conduits for *barakah* (mystic grace).

A Living Tradition

At the beginning of twentieth century, Bektashis faced another set of difficulties. By the end of the Ottoman period, the order had spread throughout thirty-one states. The hardest situations were those faced in communist countries; although the new post-communist millennium did not change positions of Bektashis in all places, as many of their properties are still in hands of governments.

Bektashis are to love their neighbours as they would their own selves, whether they be Muslims, Christians, Jewish or something else, they treat all with respect, thereby presenting themselves as one with all upright people. Bektashi *tekkes* and *turbes* were not only places of

prayer and supplication for Muslims, but they were visited by Christians as well. These places were generally known as centres of harmonious spiritual and charitable activities. One can look at the example of the pilgrimage up Mount Tomorr in Albania, where thousands of people come every late August regardless of race, region, religion, and nationality.

One common requirement found in all Sufi orders is the need for a *murshid*, a spiritual guide. The role of the *murshid* is central to one's spiritual progress in Bektashism. Accompanied by a *murshid*, a neophyte is able to carefully journey to the state of *Insani Kamil*, the "Perfect Human". Along the way, four emblematic gateways are crossed:

- The first is *Shari'at* (exoteric law),
- Second is *Tariqat* (the spiritual path),
- Third is *Ma'rifat* (gnosis)
- And finally *Haqiqat* (the state of reality).

As briefly mentioned above, the Bektashi order is hierarchical in character. In this hierarchy, *ashiks* form the lowest grade. They are those uninitiated sympathizers, who may, at some time in future, become candidates for admittance. Once an *asik* receives invitation, he or she is raised to the next level of membership, which is the rank of *muhib* and is allowed to participate in every ceremony held within the *tekke's meydan*, a hall reserved for the performance of the *ayin-i xhem*. The *muhib* is put into a probationary period during which service to the *tekke* is carried out. This period can last 3 years or he or she can stay *muhib* forever. Following this period, if the *baba* of *tekke* determines the *muhib* spiritually fit, a ceremony can be performed that can raise him to the rank of *dervish*, (women cannot be dressed as dervishes, but nothing stops her in gaining an even higher spiritual rank). At that point, the newly elevated *dervish* must decide to undertake a life of celibacy (*mucerredlik-muxheret*) or marriage (*mutehillik-mutehil*). Needless to say those who choose celibacy gain a much more esteemed rank in eyes of the community in recognition of their commitment and sacrifice.

Above the level of *dervish* are the *babas*, the spiritual guides of the *tekkes*, the *dedes*, men who have the authority to nominate a worthy dervish to the rank of *baba*, and finally, the *dedebaba*, the designated head of the entire Bektashi order. All of these men don a symbolic dress whose foremost components are the *taxh*, the *hirka*, which is a white ankle-length gown,

and the *kemer*, *palheng*, and *kamberiye* (a broad woollen girdle). They also wear the *teslim-i tash* and a *haideriyye*, a sleeveless vest, made of white cloth. The *halifes*, however, wear one of green cloth.

Among the principal celebrations of Bektashis are the *matem* and the Sultan *Nevruz*. The word *matem* literally means “bereavement”, and it is a period of fasting and abstinence during the first ten days of the month of Muharram. This fast is carried out in commemoration of the martyrdom Imam Husain. The faithful meet every night in the *tekke* during the *matem* to read accounts of the passion of Imam Husain (customarily the epic *Hadikat-i Su’ada* by the 16th century poet Fuzuli) and to recite litanies. Despite the sombre mood of the *matem*, there are no displays of bodily mortification in Bekashi *tekkes* as observed in mainstream *Shi’i* circles. The *matem* period is ended on the tenth day with the ceremony of *ashure*, during which a sweet pudding (also called *ashure*), containing cereals and various fruits, is prepared and served. As for the Sultan *Nevruz*, a day which corresponds to the spring equinox, it is a much more cheerful celebration. It is a day observed by Bektashis as the birthday of ‘Ali. On occasion of the Sultan *Nevruz* lambs are sacrificed and large ceremonial feasts are held.

There are more regular gatherings, called *muhabets*, during which a *baba* explains doctrines and gives spiritual upliftment, customarily by means of *nefes* (breath), Bektashi poetry that is often put to song.

The Case of the *Harabati Tekke* in Tetovo

The *Harabati Baba Tekke* in the Macedonian city of Tetova is, at this time, the headquarters of the Macedonia’s Bektashi community. It is also the regional center for the north Balkans. It was founded between 1538 and 1548 by Sersem Ali Dede, one of the great Bektashi babas, philosophers, theologians, and poets of the day.

In time the *Harabati Tekke* became a religious and cultural centre, being endowed with a rich and expansive library. Some of the earliest manuscripts held—until recently—were from the fifteenth century, as with the document of Mehmed Alemdar dated from 1486 CE/891 AH. Taking in consideration that the *Harabati Tekke* was perhaps the number two *tekke* in the Bektashi world, large numbers of *dervishes* came here to raise their level of

knowledge as well as their spiritual rank. Such *dervishes* later went on to be in the vanguard of spreading Bektashi Islam throughout the region and the world.

In addition to the director of the *tekke*, the *dede*, there were a certain number of *babas*, some forty *dervishes*, and others, serving there. The copying of works with fine calligraphy were carried out here, selected by the clergy of *Harabati Tekke* resulting from different requests for copies made from places as far away as Manastir (now Bitola) and Sarajevo. The *babas* taught *dervish* students here to prepare them for future roles as *babas*. There they also learned wall painting (some of which can be seen in the *tekke* today), and carpentry. A private elementary school was given space in the *Harabati Tekke*, which was approved by the Ottoman government in 1889.

The *Harabati Tekke* was place visited by many senior officials, diplomats, travellers, and intellectuals from the empire and abroad. According to the French traveller Ami Boué, who visited Tetovo in the first half of the nineteenth century, the local governor, Abdurrahman Pasha, had a *konak* (summer residency) built on the *tekke* grounds. The University of Göttingen's August Grisebach, who in 1839 visited the residences of Abdurrahman Pasha and Havzi Pasha, stayed in *Harabati Tekke*. Grisebach noted that the Albanians he encountered had a special psychology: pride, courage, friendliness and they exhibited a high level of hospitality. The *Harabati Tekke* and three other Sufi *tekkes* were also mentioned by Andrea Stoyanov, a Bulgarian teacher, in his notes published in the newspaper *Стамболийски Новини [Stamboliiski Novini]* (1891-1892) entitled: "Notes from my travels in Tetovo." He states that the town at that time had four *tekkes*, one which was very rich (i.e. the *Harabati*).

The Harabati Bektashi Tekke Under Seige: The True Picture

On August 15, 2002, a group of Islamist fundamentalist thugs armed with Kalashnikovs and pistols busted into the expansive *Harabati Baba Tekke* (Sufi lodge) in Tetovo, Macedonia and seized control of a large part of it, professing to be "recovering" it for the performance of the five daily prayers. Nearly eight years later this band of ruffians remains, impressing their religious fanaticism on this picturesque and idyllic Bektashi compound and often harassing its many visitors. With the unspoken consent of the Sunni

religious hierarchy of Macedonia (*Riyaset* of the *Islamska Zajednica vo Republica Makedonija*) this band of fundamentalists continues to utilize several structures within the 300 year-old Sufi lodge, most notably the *Kubeli Meydan* (the hall where Bektashi rituals had traditionally been performed) which they use as an ad hoc mosque, deafeningly blaring the *ezan* (the Islamic call to prayer) from the loud-speakers they have attached to that structure's chimney, two of which confrontationally face towards the area of which the Bektashis still maintain control. These Islamic fundamentalists have even gone so far as to disfigure the historical integrity of compound by tearing out part of the *Kubeli Meydan's* wall facing southeast and installing a concrete *mihrab* (the niche indicating the direction of the holy city of Mecca). They have also chopped down a number of ancient trees that had once graced the *tekke's* compound, turning its once-meditative blend of spirituality and nature into an ugly shell of its former glory. Fundamentalist "security agents" have even taken up residence in the old *Mihman Evi* (guest house) and from there they regularly accost visitors from Europe, the Middle East, America and elsewhere, telling them that this is the property of the Islamic Community and to keep away from the Bektashi "heretics".

The *Harabati Baba Tekke* was built in the late 18th century around the tomb of the great 16th century Bektashi saint, Sersem Ali Baba. Copies of *vakf* (trust) documents exist attesting to the fact that the compound was indeed meant to be a Bektashi *tekke* from the beginning, not a Sunni-run mosque. In fact, one of these documents affirm that the Sufi compound is to be used as a Bektashi monastery *ad infinitum* and in the event that this ceases to be the case, ownership of all of the properties of the *tekke* are to revert back to the family of the donor, Rexhep Pasha. The *Harabati Baba Tekke* was used as a Bektashi lodge until 1945 when the communists confiscated it and removed its last *shaykh*, Baba Qazim Bakalli (d. 1983). In the 1960s the sprawling compound was turned into a tourist attraction and three of the seven buildings that make up the *tekke* were utilized as a hotel, a restaurant, and a disco. The *Kubeli Meydan*, the center of Bektashi ritual worship, was put to use as a small art museum. The drunken depravity of many of the "hotel's" guests led to repeated incidents of desecration (tombstones smashed and urinated on, fornication carried out in the tomb complex, etc.) and in 1992 a fire started in the main tomb complex (*türbe*) by inebriated partygoers causing significant damage to the graves of the many saints buried within. In 1994 the Bektashi community -- led by the late Baba Tayyar Gashi and the late Baba Tahir Emmini --

had enough of this befouling of their sacred site and it staged a sit-in, an act which eventually gained them partial control of the complex. A positive resolution to the issue of ownership of the property was well on its way until August of 2002, when the aforementioned Wahhabi religious fanatics claimed the *tekke* as a mosque.

The irony of the claims of the fundamentalists is that the *Harabati Baba Tekke* was NEVER used as a mosque. In addition to the testimony offered by the original *vakf* documents, the fact that the *Kubeli Meydan* (where these interlopers now hold their prayers) was devoid of a *mihrab* should be a rather significant indication that the five canonical daily prayers were never offered here. Bektashis have no need for *mihrabs* in their *meydans* seeing that their ceremonial prayer does not require one. Another discernible sign that the structure was never a mosque is that the *Kubeli Meydan* does not have a minaret from where the call to prayer is made (*ezan*). Nevertheless to alleviate this oversight the fundamentalist Islamist intruders have hoisted loudspeakers up the building's chimney.

The overriding question is why would Islamists need to appropriate this age-old Sufi *tekke* to use as a mosque? There are over twenty-five mosques on the city of Tetovo, twelve of which are in the locality of the *tekke*. Why is it that these fundamentalists could not see fit to pray in these places? Could there be other reasons for this belligerent invasion? Could it be that the main intention of these fanatics boils down to the control of property. The *Harabati Baba Tekke* has the potential for tremendous wealth due to the fact that its *vakf* (trust) property-holdings are quite vast. If the *tekke* is restored in its totality to the Bektashi community, the funds that could be generated through these properties will be significant and they will provide ample income for the maintenance of the community's needs.

Another question is whether or not the Bektashis are a Muslim “sect,” that should be administered by the *Riyaset* of the Islamic Community of the Republic of Macedonia, which officially represents the Sunni community in the country. Now if one were to accept the Bektashis to be counted as Sunnis (as the *Riyaset* does) it is understandable that such a case would not make sense. However, the overwhelming preponderance of Bektashis in Macedonia may see themselves as Muslim but not as sunnis. Moreover, as far as the administration of communities and *tekkes* is concerned, the large and influential Bektashi community in neighboring Albania has been organizationally detached from the Sunni community since the late 1920s. They have been since that time two different communities

organizationally and fully respect the rights of each other! This is unfortunately not the case in Macedonia.

The *Riyaset* of Macedonia may see itself as the sole representative of Islam in the country, but it is not. The *Riyaset* will not recognize that the Bektashis are a group of Muslims who differ from themselves. In Muslim and non-Muslim countries around the world the right is given to each Islamic sect and denomination to govern itself. For instance, in India and Pakistan the Sunni and Shi'i communities have separate administrative autonomy. It is as simple as that. Yet we find, here in "free" and "progressive" Europe the Sunni *Riyaset* in Macedonia has done its part in both openly and furtively blocking recognition of the Bektashi community as an self-regulating religious community, and it is a great travesty that the government of the Republic of Macedonia has not overridden such brazen displays of religious bigotry and chauvinism. Despite its own claims to the contrary, it is an obvious fact that the *Islamska Zaednica* solely represents the Sunni branch of Islam, and the organization itself has, over the last decade, been fraught with internal battles between moderate trends and those fundamentalists who receive their religious indoctrination from the tumultuous Middle East. It is also well-known that for the most part the *Riyaset* looks upon the Bektashi community as being heretical and deviant, and even goes so far to encourage such attitudes among its members, rather than promoting diversity and brotherhood.

What is more bothersome in this regard is that other Sufi dervish orders (Halvetis, Rifa'is, Kadiris, etc.) have been granted a large degree of legal recognition by the government as a separate community (The Islamic Dervish Religious Community) whereas the Bektashis - - even being a Sufi order! -- have not. This is especially perplexing given the fact that the aforementioned Sufi orders (Halvetis, Rifa'is, Kadiris, etc.) are technically described as historically belonged to the Sunni branch of Islam, and hence, would logically fall under the jurisdiction of the *Riyaset*.

To date the Macedonian government has taken little interest in resolving this case. In fact the Bektashi community has not been recognized by the government as a separate religious community vis-à-vis the Sunnis despite its regular appeals since 1993 to be so. The lack of response from the Macedonian government is rather suspicious especially given its positive treatment of other Macedonian Sufi orders.

If the legal action taken by the Bektashi community in Macedonia to remove these fundamentalist interlopers from its property comes to naught, it will surely be a blow to both religious freedom and religious moderation. The Bektashi community asks for the all peace-loving and benevolent people around the world to come to the assistance of its beleaguered *tekke* and further the cause of human dignity.

Editorial assistance by Laura Crockett

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