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Abstract

“The Bektashi Order: The Development of Bektashi Order among the Albanian Speaking Population in the Balkan Region”

Kestrina Peza

Institute of Near Eastern and African Studies at Charles University in Prague, Czech Republic
kestrina.peza@gmail.com

While referring to Albanians, many politicians and journalists in Europe and abroad have a tendency to mention that Albanian population in Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia are more or less Muslims. Unfortunately nowadays the world understands that to be a Muslim for sure means the same as the orthodox Muslims in Iraq or Afghanistan. But the reality is absolutely different. The Islam in Albanian speaking countries (in Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia) spread through Sufi orders where the most significant and visible especially in Albania was Bektashi order. The first appearance of this order in the Balkan countries is known since the 13th century. This order was more adjustable for the Albanian Christian population than the pure Islam, because in reality the doctrine of the Bektashians was and is a mixture of Islam, Christianity and Paganism; it is known for its tolerance toward other religions, equality of rights between man and woman within the order, different approach to the Islam rules etc. This order had a very tight connection to the Janissaries, the infantry units of the Ottoman Empire coming from the Christian population of the Ottoman Empire. Janissaries were abolished in 1826 and many clerics of the Bektashi order came to Albania to escape from the persecution of Sultan Mahmud II.

The self declared Albanian King Zogu I. allowed Bektashians in 1929 to build their world center in Tirana, Albania. During World War II the members of this order were supporting and fighting together with the forces of Albanian Nationalistic Movement for the liberation of Albania. Enver Hoxha's regime abolished religions in 1967 and even this order faced a very hard persecution by the regime. From 1992 the Bektashi order is trying to organize itself and to spread its peaceful and tolerant doctrine among other doctrines of the Islam religion.

I am working on my PhD thesis on Islam mystic orders within the Albanian speaking countries. Until now I already found out that in Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia there are many orders as Bektashi, Qadiri, Chalwati, Saadi and others. By the moment I am focusing more on the Bektashi Order.

The Historical Development of the Bektashi Order

The Bektashi Order (or tariqa in Arabic language or tarikat in Albanian language) is a Shia Sufi order within the Islam religion that understands the real mystic doctrine of Islam in a non-dogmatic way. Sufi orders since the beginning were focusing on spreading the pure Islam that means the work with the soul and being more near God. They were not fighting for positions, but were eager to learn more about the God (Allah), they took care to achieve a highest level of spiritual beauty within a person. According to prof. Kropáček in his *Spiritual Ways of Islam*, the Order or Tariqa means “the way” or “the meaning”, that is a way to a more pure belief in God by leaving the normal life and beginning a new life with people thinking in the same way¹. According to Archives of the World Center of Bektashi Order, it is a way that leads the person who believes in God and directs him to the point he or she should achieve. As an Islamic doctrine, it has its roots in Quran and the lessons of the Prophet Mohammed and his family (Imam Ali, Fatime, Imam Hasan and Imam Hysen). This order dedicates a big respect to Imam Ali. They believe just in one God, in Allah. The Bektashi Order respects all monotheist religions. In this order you should pray twice, one in the morning when the sun rises and once in the evening, while during these two prayers the believers pray to Allah for the maintenance and the development of the humankind².

Every order was founded by a certain person and in the case of Bektashi order it was Hadzidzi Bektash Wali (in Albanian Haxhi Bektashi Velija). He was born in 1249 (Albanian sources mention that he was born in 1248) in a family that had tights with the Prophetic family of Mohammed and since the childhood he showed a big intelligence. He began his studies in Persia. When he became adult, he went to learn from the mystic teacher of that time Lokman Perende and achieved big success in his moral views and began to focus on the mystic orders. He was inspired by a famous traveler at that time Hodza Ahmet Jesevi. At the end the 13th century he came from Persia to Anatolia in today's Turkey. The first role in the creation of his new ideas at Hádžidží Bektáš Walf played his contacts with Buddhism and Hinduism during his traveling to India, Tibet and China. The first holy place or tekke (in Albanian teqe) was founded in 1282 in Turkey in the same place that today is called Hadzidzi Bektash, where we can find his tomb. This tekke was and is known worldwide and was recognized as a world center for the Bektashi Order³.

From the beginning this order is against the false doctrines among the Islamic religion and is trying to unify all the Muslims. Hadzidzi Bektash was aware of the fact that his teachings need to be spread and therefore he decided to send his dervishes or heralds of his order to different world countries as Asia, Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Egypt, Rumania, Hungary, Bulgaria, countries of Ex-Yugoslavia, Greece, Albania etc. Some Albanian sources mention that he sent 999 dervishes, some 99 thousands⁴. At the beginning of the 16th century the Bektashi order has its school on the big college of Dimoteka in Bulgaria, where 400 hundred dervishes went through Islamic teaching every year.

The main missioner that was in charge of spreading the Bektashi order at the end of the 13th century and the beginning of the 14th century in the Balkan region was Sari Salltek, one of the most leading figures of this order in Albanian speaking countries. He traveled to these lands together with his two dervishes named Ulu and Kyçuk Abdalli. About Sari Salltek is known that at the beginning he represented himself as a Christian priest due to the fact, that the Albanian population was Christian at that time. He did that in order to get as many followers as possible and was very active in Skopje and around Ohrid's Lake (today FYROM), from Kruja city until the southern part of Albania and in Janina (today Greece), Rumania, Hungary, Bosnia and Herzegovina, in Serbia etc. Sari Salltek and his dervishes predicted peace and tolerance everywhere they went. In 1325 Sari Salltek and his followers lived for several months in Kruja city in the mountain named from him, where is a holy place called tekke. The legends speak about his excellent knowledge of herbs that helps the local populations to be cured from different illnesses. The local population loved him due to the fact that his teaching was very interesting and it was a mixture of the local culture with Islamic tradition. Sari Salltek was wearing a black clothing and some legends mention that he made not because of being a priest, but because he wanted to express sorrow for the Battle of Qerbela and the dead imams (the tragedy of Qerbela in the 9th century, when Imam Hysen and his family were killed, it is the biggest tragedy for the order). He was a traveling dervish, so all over Albania you can find places that express his presence. Albanian Bektashians consider him as a very important persona for their order. For them it is a preacher, a doctor, mystical missioner, a person that

¹ Luboš Kropáček, *Spiritual Ways of Islam*, Prague 2011

² The Archive of World Center of the Bektashi Order, Tirana 2013

³ The Archive of World Center of the Bektashi Order, Tirana 2013

⁴ Talking with Babë Edmond Brahimaj, *The Head of the World Center of the Bektashi Order*, Tirana 2011/2012/2013

helped old people, young children without families. The most know holy place for Bektashians is the cave in Kruja with the tekke next to it and the Footnote of Sari Salltek before going to Kruja. The above mentioned dervishes that followed him are buried in Tekke of Sari Salltek in Kruja (*Tekke built in the 13th century- in August/September every year Albanians from all over Albania and abroad come here for the pilgrim*). His tomb is supposed to be in Corfu, in Greece, in a church there, but there are other six places, where Bektashians mention that he is buried there. So until now nobody is sure where his tomb is⁵.

Sari Salltek and his followers spread the Islamic mysticism in the 13th-14th century in the Balkan region. Since the beginning the Bektashians are focused on the same rights for men and women, tolerance toward other religions. The Bektashian doctrine is a mixture of Islam, Christianity, Buddhism's, Hinduisms and local religions. Therefore they were successful among the Balkan population. The order was more near the local population. This order from the beginning was stronger around Kruja and at the southern part of Albania. It spread also to Macedonia (tekke Haribati in Tetovo) and Kosovo (Tekke in Gjakovo city). Since the 13th century there were many tekkes built. At the beginning the tekkes were building outside the main cities, because these places were for mystical meditation and for those who traveled from one place to another. Later on the tekkes were built inside the cities to be more near the local people⁶.

Tekkes were places when Bektashians that devoted their life to the order lived and mediated. They had their own economy, it was something like monasteries. Tekkes were centers of religion, schools, places for very ill people, art and cultural centers. They were considered places for very poor people to come and to eat.

Today's the Head of Bektashi Order Kryegjysh Edmond mentioned in May 2011 that: „Until 1770 was Bektashi Order a foreign mystic Sufi order, but from 1770 onward we can talk about Albanian Bektashi Order, that was known for its help given to Albanians in their fight for the creation of an independent Albanian country“⁷.

The Bektashi Order was very near Janissaries Army and its development was connected to the success of this order. Janissaries were the army of Sultan and usually the members of this army were Christian's children taken from their Christian families in the European countries, mostly from Balkan countries. In the same way was taken from his Christian family Kastriot Albanian national hero Gjergj Kastriot Skenderbeu (known like Skanderbeg, 1405-1468), as his brother, all were educated in Turkey. In 1443 Gjergj Kastriot Skenderbeu left the Ottoman Empire Army and came back to Albania to liberate the country for 25 years until his death in 1468. The children taken in this way from their families were forced to accept Islam and for them the Bektashi order was a better solution than the Sunni Islam, it was an easier way than the normal Islam during that time. Janissary Army was a very strong and successful army among Ottoman Empire. Sometimes they decided who was going to be the next Sultan of the empire. Their power and ambitious were very big. As it sometimes happen, they became a problem for the empire and their revolution in 1826 was stopped by Sultan Mahmud II. (1808-1839), who officially dismissed them in the same year. Sultan decided to stop the activities of the Bektashi order. Many clerics of this order in Albanian speaking countries decided to move their tekkes to the mountains to stay away from the repressions of the Ottoman Empire. That is the reason why many tekkes even nowadays are in the mountains like in Tomorri, Melçani, Libohova, Gramsh, Ersekë etc.

Many Albanian personalities declared themselves to be Bektashians, among others in the 19th and the 20th century Naim Frashëri and his brothers Abdyl and Sami. Naim Frashëri is mentioned to be one of the most important writers among the Bektashi orders. His brother Sami Frashëri published in Bucharest in 1899 the book „Albania, *How it was, how it is and how will be*“, when he described Albanian nation as one of the oldest nations in the Balkan region and has the right to create its own state within the territories, where ethnical Albanian lived, he paved the so-called idea „Big Albania“.

After the declaration of the independence of Albania in 1912, the Bektashi order became stronger, because the majority of the population in Albania at that time was Bektashians. The strength of this order became bigger after the 1st Congress of Bektashi order in 1921 that continued with the congresses of 1924 and 1929. These congresses were important for establishing the position of Bektashi order among the Albanian population. The order again declared that its main goals are humanism, tolerance and nationalism.

On the 13th of December 1925 the Parliament of the Republic of Turkey decided to close all tekkes in the country. The World Head of Bektashi Order at that time was Kryegjysh Sali Niazi Dede (he was an Albanian from Starje in Kolonja) and together with other members of the Bektashi Order decided to bring the World Center of Bektashi Order to Albania. The 3rd Bektashian Congress in Korçë in 1929 decided to have the world center in Albania, firstly in Melçan in Korça, a year later after a special decree from the King Ahmet Zogu I (1898-1961) (also a Bektashian) decided to establish the world center in Tirana and Kryegjysh was voted Kryegjysh Salih Niazi. From

⁵ The Archive of World Center of the Bektashi Order, Tirana 2013

⁶ The Archive of World Center of the Bektashi Order, Tirana 2013

⁷ Talking with Babë Edmond Brahimaj, *The Head of the World Center of the Bektashi Order*, Tirana 2011/2012/2013

1930 until now the main center is still in Tirana. Dede Sali Niazi was killed by Italians in 28th of November 1941, because they knew that he was against the fascist occupation of Albania.

During the war many Bektashian clerics were fighting against Italians and Germans from 1939 until 1945. Many clerics were members of partisan groups that were fighting in different battles. Their presence in the war against occupators and the tight connections with many communist leaders made the repressions against this order lighter, but it did not help them in 1967 when the communist regime declared Albania as an atheist country and closed down all holy places. But it did not mean that Albanians stopped visiting the holy places. They continued on going to these places in a secret way. Despite that fact, the main leader of the Bektashi Order at that time Dedë Ahmeti together with his right hand, the later head Dedë Reshat Bardhi, continued in the activities for the order until 1992, when Albania changed into a democratic country. The World Center was open again on the 22nd of March 1991 under the special care of Mother Teresa, a worldwide know Christian sister⁸.

Dede Reshat Bardhi was recognized in 1993 by all Bektashians as the world leader of the Bektashi Order. The order again began to organize itself and declared its own focuses – tolerance among religions, spreading of the social peace, human harmony, the dialogue between people and the spiritual strength. The order itself is a modern one. Is tolerant toward alcohol and pork meat – people should choose by themselves what is the best for them. It does not recognize many marriages of a man like in Sunni Islam and it is tolerant toward marriages of Bektashians with other religions.

Despite tekkes in Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia, Northern Greece and Montenegro, there are Bektashian holy places in America, Canada, Australia, Germany, Holland, Great Britain, Turkey, Egypt, Macedonia, Bulgaria, Rumania, and Hungary etc. After 1990 in Albanian were rebuilt 200 tekkes and tyrbes (tombs of Babe's and Dervishes) in Albania.

The most known Albanian Bektashians was the above mentioned Gjergj Kastriot Skënderbeu, above mentioned brothers Frashëri with the most known Albanian poet Naim Frashëri, Ali Pashë Tepelena (the governor of Janina, Greece), Ismail Qemali who was the Prime Minister that declared state of Albania in 1912 etc.

Hierarchy of the Bektashi Order and their clothing⁹

"Ashik" –means in love, these are people that express likeness toward Bektashi Order, but are not the members of order. They might come from a Bektashi family, but are not involved with order (men and women could be ashiks).

"Muhib or Myhib" or "Spiritual Members" - The Arab word "muhib" means "wants" or "friend", these are members of the order. They believe in order, went through a spiritual teaching during a special ceremony in tekke in the room of prayers called mejdan. The ceremony consists in a ritual of complex cleaning together with praying and at the end the leader of the tekke must accept him (men and women could be muhibs).

"Devish Candidate" - These are Muhibs that wants to become Dervishes and the Leader of Tekke (Baba) agrees with that. They went through a 'procedure of proving', during this time they should stay in a tekke and should show that they are capable enough to become Dervish. Here again they need to undergo a special ceremony during that Baba give to them a "Taxh-in" ("kurore" in Albanian, a typical wool white head) and receive "petku" that is white clothing to cover the hole body, and qemeri that is a thick red belt. So he becomes a cleric of the Bektashi Order. Dervishes take care of tekke and of the Baba of the tekke. They serve the needs of tekke, at the same the serve the community around.

There are two types of Dervishes: "Dervish Myxheret" and "Dervish Single"

Dervish Myxheret is a married man, at the moment he becomes Dervish, he leaves his family in order to become a member of the Order. Dervish Single is not married. Dervish Myxheret during the ceremony of becoming Dervish, they create a hole in his ear and put an ear ring there to show that he decided to leave the family and to become a member of the order. The Dervish receives a special stone with 12 edges in one chain. This stone shows that Dervish achieved his last period of proving and leaving the life he has been doing until now and beginning the life of spirituality.

Baba (in Albanians means father)

Baba is the person who leads tekke or a Bektashi Center that controls some tekkes that is called Gjyshata (there are six Gjyshatas in the Bektashi Order in Albanian speaking countries). Baba is the head, Dervishes help him. He wears white clothing and has a white head with a green belt, and a green belt.

⁸ The Archive of World Center of the Bektashi Order, Tirana 2013

⁹ The Archive of World Center of the Bektashi Order, Tirana 2013

There are married Babas (called mute evil babe) and single Baba (my here al babe).

To be a Baba, two steps should be followed: 1. To be chosen by Muhibs and Dervishes of the Tekke. 2. The Main Leader appoints this Dervish as Baba.

Dede (Halife in the Turkish language, Gjysh in Albanian, it means the followers)

A Baba could become Dede after a special religious ceremony, but before this Baba must have shown that he deserves to become Dede. He must have shown his dedication to the order and a high level of spirituality. Dede is a Baba that went through the last ceremony of achieving the Bektashian Doctrine and they lead Gjyshata that has tekkes under them. Dede (Halife) has on his head a big head called Turban with a green color around white taxhi and it has green clothing called herka. A Baba could become Dede, if another Baba Dede proposes him and the World Kryegjysh appoints him.

The Biggest Dede (Kryegjysh)

From 1929 The Head of the Bektashi Community in Albania is also Kryegjysh. Kryegjysh is a Dede who has never been married and he is proposed by the High Council of Dede (Council of Halife) among the members. He is appointed by the Supreme Clerical Council. Kryegjysh wears green belt and green coat.

Rituals of Bektashians¹⁰

As we mentioned above, the Bektashians pray twice a day, in the morning and in the noon.

Bektashians celebrate some important days during the year. The ceremonies mostly are open to the public, despite the ceremonies when some people become members or prayers, these ceremonies are closed for the public and open to the spiritual members, so to clerics and myhibs. That is the same for all Sufi orders.

The most important ceremonies during the year are:

Ashurja - 10 days of Matem (there are days for remembering the tragedy of Qerbela in the 9th century, when Imam Hysen and his family were killed). This year this ceremony began on the 3rd of November and it will end on the 16th of November in Kruja tekke. During these days the believers do not eat anything like just in Ramadan and at the end of the day they eat a typical sweet food called Ashure.

The Celebration of Sulltan Novruz-in the 22nd of March of every year, the celebration of the birthday of Imam Ali, son in law of Prophet Mohamed. It is the beginning of spring, the new seasons begin. Usually in Kruja city all people come together and celebrate it three days. In the first day all member of the family come together, in the second day all old men come together and celebrate, in the third day all women and young ladies come together to celebrate. They pray and sing. During this day many Albanian all over the Balkan region come to World Center in Tirana or to other tekkes to celebrate this important day.

Pilgrims are every year in these places:

In the mountain Tomorr in 20 – 25 August in order to remembers the Battle of Qerbela in the 9th century, it is a greeting ceremony for the warrior of Qerbela Abaz Aliu. During this visit pilgrims go to visit Tekke of Tomorr (Kulmak), Tyrbe (the tomb) of Abaz Aliu, the Footnote of Abaz Aliu. The Bektashian tradition is apparent, people pray, they make kurban (killing of sheeps), talking between clerics, meeting with the Kryegjysh Haxhi Baba Edmond Brahimaj.

Another pilgrimage is *in Frashër* on the 5th of September in the Tekke of Baba Alush.

Another already mentioned pilgrimage is *in Kruja* etc.

Outside Albania there is a pilgrimage in *Haxhi Bektash in Turkey* and on the 10th of August *in Detroit - Michigan in USA* is the celebration of Baba Rexhepi in the Albanian Tekke there open in 1954.

And of course they do celebrate *Ramadan* and *Bajram* together with other Muslims in the world.

A short biography of the previous Kryegjysh of the Bektashi Order¹¹

Among clerics of the Bektashi one of the most important is Haxhi Dede Reshat Bardhi. Reshat Bardhi was born on the 4th of March 1935 in the Kukës, in the northern part of Albania. In the childhood he learnt Albanian and Arabic by a Muslim Sunni Cleric in the northern part of Albania. During the war, his family moved to Tirana and lived near the World Center of Bektashi Order. During his studies he met many Bektashian clerics and after long debates with them, he found the Bektashi order a very important order for him.

At the beginning of the 1950's he met the Kryegjysh of that time Dede Ahmet Myftari, that understood that Reshat Bardhi has special qualities and he is going to be a very important Bektashian. Reshat Bardhi under the leading of Kryegjysh Ahmet Myftari becomes Dervish at 1954. Kryegjysh Ahmet Myftari was expelled by the communist

¹⁰ The Archive of World Center of the Bektashi Order, Tirana 2013

¹¹ The Archive of World Center of the Bektashi Order, Tirana 2013

regime from Tirana in 1958 and Dervish Reshat Bardhi went with him. They continued together on spreading the Bektashi teachings among Albania with Albanian security police behind their shoulders. But they did not stop. Kryegjysh Ahmet Myftari died in 1980 and Reshat Bardhi became a Kryegjysh. After 1991 when the communist regime collapsed, he could openly reorganize the Bektashi order in Albania with all its structures. He was officially appointed as Kryegjysh during the 6th Congress of Bektashi Order in Tirana in 1993. All Bektashians all over the world together with members of different religions in Albania and abroad respected him for his tolerance and spiritual understanding of other religions. He died in April 2011 and the Bektashi Order lost on of the most important people that did so much for reorganization of this order.

The situation of the order today:

The new elected Kryegjysh is Edmond Brahimaj. He was born in Vlora and was the right hand of Kryegjysh Reshat Bardhi. He was working for army forces of Albania in the past. He has a very strong personality and under his leading, the Bektashi Order is getting back all properties of the order confiscated during the Communist Regime¹².

The order today has 23 clerics, from these 12 are Babas, the rest are Dervishes. The number is quite low due to the fact that the order requires to leave the family and to begin the life within the order, but that requires a big dedication and not everybody is able to do that.

Author: **Kestrina PEZA**

Kestrina Peza was born in Albania in 1979. She finished the primary school in Tirana, Albania, the secondary school in Prague, Czech Republic. She attended her Bachelor studies at State University of New York (Prague, Czech Republic) in International Economic and Political Studies from 2000 to 2004. She earned an MBA at State University of New York (Prague, Czech Republic) in Banking and Finance in 2008. And since 2010 she is studying PhD in the Institute of Near Eastern and African Studies (Charles University in Prague) with a focus on Mystic Orders among Albanian population in the Balkan Region. Since 2000 she is a Certified Interpreter of the Albanian Language in the Czech Republic interpreting for different state and non-state agencies. She is a member of Chamber of Interpreters, Union of Interpreters and Rotary Club Prague International.

¹² Talking with Nuri Çuni, *The Head Secretary of the World Center of the Bektashi Order*, Tirana 2012/2013

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