Alevi-Bektashi communities in south-eastern Europe: spiritual heritage and environmental consciousness

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Introduction

Alevi and Bektashi are Sufi, non-Sunni Islamic orders that originate from the Middle East and Anatolia. From the thirteenth century and onwards they spread to Asia Minor and the Balkans, incorporating a wide array of elements from the many beliefs and religious practices they encountered, acquiring a syncretistic character. Defying 'orthodox' Muslim religious practices and reflecting their tribal system of social organisation, what differentiates them from the mainstream Muslim doctrine and practices is a deep respect and love of nature. They number many millions mainly in Turkey and the Balkans, and during the last decades they have started to play a crucial role in the emergence of environmental movements.

In the seventeenth century, Ottoman traveller Evliya Çelebi witnessed something unexpected while visiting the Turkmen nomads of the Karakoyunlu tribe: Muslims worshipping trees, lighting candles next to them and placing pieces of iron as offerings on their barks. Two centuries later, one of Abdul Hamid II's agents reported nomad peoples from Anatolia worshipping 'the great trees and monumental rocks that are touched by the first rays of the rising sun'. Ethnologists in the twentieth century discovered the same phenom-

< Bektashi Tekke on the Kuz-Baba Hill, Vlore, Albania.

ena in Anatolia and the Balkans and even invented the term 'dendrolatry' (tree worship) to describe this practice (Zarcone, 2005).

What those people witnessed was a special relationship of these Muslim populations with nature, which does not exist among other Muslim believers in the Middle East and North Africa. This relation was the outcome of a cross-fertilisation of beliefs and practices inspired, on the one hand, by Islam (and especially the Arab-Muslim philosophy and Ibn Sina and al-Farabi) and Sufism and, on the other, by animism, shamanism and Buddhism (Zarcone, 2005).

Islam and the natural environment

The Alevi-Bektashi religious traditions, although 'heterodox' (i.e. non-Sunni or orthodox Shi'a), are Islamic. Hence, it would be useful to review the positions of the Islamic faith regarding nature and its protection.

Islam is the easiest religion to understand, yet imperfectly understood by non Muslims. It is the faith of one God, whose will was revealed to Muhammad and was included in the sacred book, the Holy Qur'an. It is not well understood because in the West its name is associated with terrorism and intolerance. In Arabic it means peace through surrender or submission to the will of God, and Muslim, is the one who is at peace through submission to God. Islam is a *Dîn* (Tradition) embracing all aspects of life (as in the case of Hinduism). There is

Allah's name by 17th century Ottoman artist Hâfız Osman.

no distinction in Islam between things profane and things sacred. Everything a Muslim does is to please God, so all his good actions are being seen as worship. Therefore, all social, political, legal, administrative and economic activities in the Islamic society are as sacred as praying in the Mosque (Norcliffe, 1999).

In addition, man's position in the world is twofold: he is at the same time '*abd* – slave, or even better *abd-Allah* – the slave of God, and also *khalifah* – vice regent, or representative, which elevates humans above all other creatures of the Creation (NasseJ, 1986).

Prophet Muhammad taught 'The world is green and beautiful, and God (Allah) has appointed you his guardian over it'. Muslims believe that Allah created humans to be the *khalifah*, the vice regents of the creation. By that, it is stated that nature is not ours and we can not do with it as we please. Instead, we must act as its protectors (ARC, 2011).

Additionally, the central concept of Islam is *tawheed,* which means Oneness of God. Everything that exists comes from and depends on the one and only Creator. One of the names of God in the Qur'an is Al-Haqq, which means both Truth and Reality. Allah is unity and this unity should be mirrored in the relation between humans and the natural world. It is the duty of humans to safeguard this unity, by protecting the integrity of the Earth, its flora and fauna, its wildlife and environment. It is their duty to preserve the balance and harmony in Allah's creation (Norcliffe, 1999).

Given that humans are khalifah-guardians, they are also accountable for their actions and their omissions – as responsibility is a direct consequence of this status. On the Day of Reckoning, Islam teaches that everyone created by Allah will return to Allah for Judgment and humans will be judged for the way they treated what was entrusted to them. This concept is called akhirah – the Hereafter and describes the accountability of the khalifah. Moreover, it is clearly stated in the Qur'an that Allah invites everyone to enjoy the fruits of the earth, but to avoid excess leading to waste, 'for Allah does not love wasters' (ARC, 2011).

The concepts of trusteeship, unity, accountability and the avoidance of wastefulness are the main principles of the environmental ethics of Islam. They are not abstract values, but they are all translated in practical directions on how to live, included in Shari'ah, the sacred law of Islam, and the *Sunna*, the example set by the Prophet Muhammad, compiled in his *Hadith* (sayings). For example, there are laws in the Shari'ah mandating animal's protection and avoiding all form of cruelty, as well as the conservation of forests. The prophet Muhammad established large reserves around Mecca and Medina where all living beings are protected. According to his saying: 'Whosoever plants a tree and diligently looks after it until it matures and bears fruit is rewarded' and 'If a Muslim plants a tree or sows a field and men and beasts and birds eat from it, all of it is a charity on his part' (Norcliffe, 1999).

Origins of the Alevi-Bektashi orders

The 'Alevi-Bektashi' is a term used for a large number of different heterodox communities, spread in the Anatolia region, the Balkans and other parts of the world. In Turkey alone, where they number at least 15 million, they are divided by ethnicity (Kurdish, Turkic and Arabic Alevis) and language (speaking Turkish, Kurdish, Kurmanji, Zaza and Arabic) (Ignatov, 2008).

Although some Bektashi scholars and Alevis believe that there are certain differences and variances, they have been generally regarded as parts of an integrated Alevi-Bektashi culture (Mavrommatis, 2008; Kressing, 2002; Doja, 2006a, Melikoff, 1998). In the past, Alevis lived in rural or more isolated areas, while the Bektashis lived in urban centres. Today the name 'Alevi' is usually used in Turkey, and the name 'Bek-

tashi' in the Balkans. What characterises these orders is their deep respect and love for nature and beauty, which is evident in their dances, music and poetry.

Both the Alevi and Bektashi orders consider as their founder Haji Bektash Veli, an Islamic mystic and philosopher from Khorasan province who lived in 1209–1271 in North-eastern Iran, in Anatolia (Karamustafa, 1994). His name can be translated as 'The Pilgrim Saint Bektash' and was probably not the actual founder of the orders but a patron-saint, selected at a later time (Doja, 2006a). The Khorassan province was home to Turkic tribes, and elements of their religious tradition that included pre-Islamic and non-Islamic elements that originated in shamanism, Buddhism, Manichaeism, Christianity and other antique religions were incorporated in the Bektashi practices. As they spread towards the Balkans, they additionally incorporated Neo-Platonist, Christian and Nestorian influence (Kressing, 2002*)*.

Being influenced by Sufi approaches, they sought direct religious experiences as opposed to mainstream Islamic practices originating from prophetic revelations. Although they did not object to the mediating role of earthly representatives of God, in practice they defied Shiite hierarchies and performed rituals without intermediaries (Doja, 2006b). Before the establishment of their Empire (the Sunni triumphs over Shiite dynasties, which coincided with the foundation of the Ottoman Empire), and during times of social, political and military crisis, Ottomans were not themselves identified with Sunni Islam doctrine, but went through a period of assimilation with the heterodox Islam (Doja, 2006a). Common ground must have been found those times between them and the Alevi-Bektashi followers.

The Alevists in particular, allied with Kizilbash – partisans of the Safavids, one of the most important ruling dynasties of Iran, responsible for the spread of Shi'a Islam in Iran as well as major localities of the Caucasus and Indian subcontinent – and expressed the resistance of Turcoman chiefs against the Ottoman State. Bektashism integrated the Kizilbash ideology, which reflected their tribal system of social organisation, and later transformed the Bektashi order to a dervish one (Doja, 2006a). The Kizilbash-Alevists were isolated mostly in Anatolia, in an attempt of the State to suppress Turkey's ethnic heterogeneity (Ignatow, 2008), and preserved rituals and practices that distinguished them from other religious communities. The Bektashi resided mostly in urban centres and were characterised by a more organised structure, although both orders consider their beliefs identical (Melikoff, 1998).

As the Ottoman Empire spread, so did the Alevi-Bektashi orders and they were even associated with the Janissaries troops (Melikoff, 1998). This spread was supported by the Byzantine emperors in the fourteenth century, who used Ottoman troops during the civil wars that menaced the Byzan-

tine state. By the eighteenth century, Bektashi numbers in the Balkans had risen considerably, and a large number of tekkes (buildings designed specifically for prayer gatherings of Sufi brotherhoods) was functioning (Zeginis, 2001).

Starting from the sixteenth century, their beliefs were considered radical and clashed with the 'orthodox' Sunni and Shia Islam. In 1826 the Jannisaries troops were dismissed and the Bektashis were driven to the periphery of the Empire (Kressing, 2002). In 1925, during the revolution led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk - the founder of the secular Republic of Turkey, that put an end to the Ottoman Caliphate - the Sufi orders were officially banned. The Bektashi *tekkes* were closed and their dervishes were exiled. The Bektashi community's headquarters were then moved from Hacıbektaş in central Anatolia to Tirana, Albania (Kressing, 2002).

Alevi-Bektashi doctrine

Both orders are Sufi or otherwise called Dervishes. Their primary difference to Sunni Muslims is the fact that the latter believe that during their lives they are on their pathway to God and that after the 'Final Judgment' they will finally be closer to Him, while Sufis believe that it is possible to be close to God and to fully embrace the Divine Presence in this life, living a primarily ascetic life (analogously to monastic orders of Christianity and Buddhism).

The beliefs of the Alevis and Bektashis are syncretic and received influences from the people they were in contact with. These religious cultures share a lot in common with other Islamic mystical movements, such as the need for an experienced spiritual guide called a *baba* as well as the doctrine of the four gates that must be traversed: Shari'ah (sacred law), Tariqah (the spiritual path), *Ma'rifah* (true Knowledge) and *Haqiqah* (Divine Reality) (Kressing, 2002). Their key characteristics include:

- love and respect for all people
- tolerance towards other religions and ethnic groups
- respect for working people
- equality of men and women who pray side by side, and the practice of monogamy (Leaman and Nasr, 2001).

The Alevi-Bektashi worship takes place in *tekkes,* not mosques. The hierarchical structure of the orders consists of the grades of *ashik, muhip* (novice), *dervish, baba* (similar to a guru) and *dede*. Since the order is mystic, only initiated members are allowed to participate in the ceremonies (Zeginis, 2001).

In the sixteenth century, an emblematic personality and great reformer of the Bektashi order, Balim Sultan, initiated a series of reformations that further favoured syncretism. In an attempt to survive and spread, Bektashism incorporated a number of Christian influences, such as the conception of the triadic God-Muhammad-Ali that is non-existent in the Qur'an, the prohibition of divorce,

the correlation of the worship of the 12 imams with the worship of the 12 Disciples, the use of wine and bread, as in the Christian holy communion and many others (Zeginis, 2001). Turkish scholars, however, have heavily criticised the influences between the two faiths and support the Turkish origins of Bektashism (Doja, 2006b).

Veneration and protection of nature in the Alevi-Bektashi religious tradition

While many references are mentioned in the Qur'an about the protection of nature, they are at the same time dictated separately and not in a unified manner. Just like in Christianity and other faiths, people tend to interpret the guardianship of the natural world – entrusted as a sacred duty to humans by God – as their right to dominate and over-exploit natural resources. As a result, they have separated themselves from the natural world, breaking a powerful bond.

The need of humans to keep a strong connection with nature was fulfilled by the approaches of Bektashism and Alevism. They responded to the desire expressed by many for a pantheistic faith, a faith of the heart more than a faith of the book and a faith of collectivity (Ignatow, 2008).

Although according to the teachings of many religions, nature should be respected, it is usually treated as ordinary, a place where humans, the only species worthy of salvation, are living. It is considered by many scholars that this approach is generally supplementary, and does not come close to the appreciation and esteem most Asian religions show towards nature, whose views are basically influenced by animism and shamanism (Zarcone, 2005).

In the framework of animism, and as it is also mentioned in the theory of 'Supernature', all natural beings have a soul similar to that of humans. In simple words, all beings in nature have the same worth and status among them and none is superior to the other. The doctrine of the 'Oneness of Being' – that is the belief that everything is in God, even space and the whole universe –, central to the Neoplatonic philosophy but also seen under the perspective of Islam and Sufism, comes close to the concept of the *tawheed, the* unity the Qur'an teaches, and stresses the importance of the sense of community among all things in nature (Doja, 2006b).

The doctrine of the Oneness of Being is symbolically depicted in the choreography of the whirling dance of the Mevlevi dervishes (*evleviye)*, representing the descent and return of things that went through all the phases of existence. These doctrines strongly connect to the reincarnationism, an influence directly derived from Buddhism. The Bektashis believe that when people die, if they lived doing good deeds, they will take a human form in their next life, and if they did the opposite, they will reincarnate as animals (Zarcone, 2005).

The most venerated natural elements by the Turkic people since the eleventh century have been trees and forests. People commonly address trees, calling them Mr (*bay*) and this is often demonstrated in toponyms (Mr Tree, *Bay Yïgaç*). A ritual prayer mentions '*may your tree with the generous shade not be cut down'*. And in Western Muslim Anatolia a prayer is addressed to all elements '*mountains, stones, great trees and rivers, carry away the sickness my child is suffering from'* (Zarcone, 2005).

Objects of veneration are also rocks and stones; isolated piles of rocks between hills and valleys are often attributed the name dede, a title associated with revered elders. Veneration of trees and stones is also met, in saints' graves which are commonly surrounded by holy groves or in sanctuaries and holy places. A tree or grove may be worshiped but it is understood that it is the barakah (spiritual influence or blessing) of the holy person that makes it sacred and not that the tree is in itself sacred (Zarcone, 2005). The differentiating factor between the two spiritual traditions is that in Islam specific natural elements are venerated because of certain attributes each element disposes, while in the Alevi-Bektashi tradition all natural elements are equally valued (Ignatow, 2008).

The Alevi semi-nomad tribe of Tahtacï that live in the Taurus Mountains in Southern Turkey are so closely bound up with trees, because as they say 'they love them so much' and pertain that they never harm them. Since inevitably they have to fall some of them, they perform a very complicating ritual, asking for their forgiveness (Zarcone, 2005).

The Alevi societies develop special relations with representatives of the animal kingdom, mainly deer and birds, a practice deriving from animism, as well as the theory of 'Supernature'. The Yürük and Tahtacï tribes that still reside in present-day Turkey, firmly believe that the deer society has a similar structure with the human society, with its own laws, organisation and chiefs, a remnant of ancient Turkic beliefs where human clans maintained relations with animal clans (ibid.).

It has been stated that contrary to Renaissance and Enlightment philosophies, the Alevi-Bektashi theology is inherently friendly to the environment and the Alevi way of life is ecologically sustainable (Endirce, 1998).

Alevis-Bektashis in south-eastern Europe

The Alevis and Bektashis number many millions in present-day Turkey and the Balkan countries of Greece, Albania, FYR of Macedonia, Bulgaria, Romania and Bosnia. Three interesting examples of the Bektashis in the contemporary era are discussed bellow.

The Pomak Bektahis of Greece

Among the Islamic Greek populations that inhabit the Northern Rodopi Mountains in Eastern Thrace, Greece, there are Slavic speaking people called the

Roussa Tekke, Evros Greece.

Pomaks. Many of them are Bektashis and what makes their case special is that the wider area they occupy has been endowed with a rich cultural heritage, which influenced their own culture. There are indications that the region has been continuously inhabited since the early Iron Age (1100–900 BC), and there is a plethora of elements of the ancient Thracian tradition (which also combines Orphic and Dionysian elements) that testifies it, such as rock engravings depicting humans, birds and reptiles, as well as other symbols with magical and averting evil properties, as well as open-air shrines (sacred mountain tops) and dolmens (Aslanis and Arvanitidou, 2001). It is believed that one of the older oracles of the ancient world was situated in the vicinity, the Oracle of Dionysus.

In this area, the second most important Bektashi *tekke* of the world is situated, near the Roussa Village and it is fortunately still in operation. It was founded in 1402 by Kizil-Deli and it is the local Bektashis' most profoundly venerated place of pilgrimage (Mavromatis, 2008). Nowadays, ca. 30 000 Pomaks are living in Greece, all of them in Eastern Thrace (Alexiou, 2009).

It is rather fascinating that even today, a large number of Thracians consider many natural elements (mountains, dolmens, rocks, springs) holy and try to protect them from unsustainable management practices.

The Bektashis of Albania

In 1925, when Mustafa Kemal Atatürk officially banned the dervish orders, the Bektashi community's headquarters were then moved from Hacıbektaş in central Anatolia to Tirana, Albania.

While by and large ethnicity in Southeastern Europe is closely related to specific faiths (Serbs, Bulgarians, Greeks and Romanians are Christian Orthodox, Slovenians, Croats and Hungarians are Roman Catholics, Bosnians, Pomaks and Turks are Muslims), the case of Albania is different. People in the North are Catholics, in the South Orthodox and Bektashi and in the Central and Eastern parts are Sunni Muslims. It is generally agreed that religion in Albania tends to be syncretistic. Elements of the autochthonous folk religions have been preserved in the country, in a much greater extent than in other regions of Europe. It is very common for Albanians to participate in religious ceremonies as a form of social gathering, regardless of their own faith. Approximately 20% of the Albanians claim to have some connection to the Bektashis (approximately 635 000

people) (Kressing, 2002) and Bektashism is one of the four religions recognised by the Albanian State.

The Alevis of Turkey

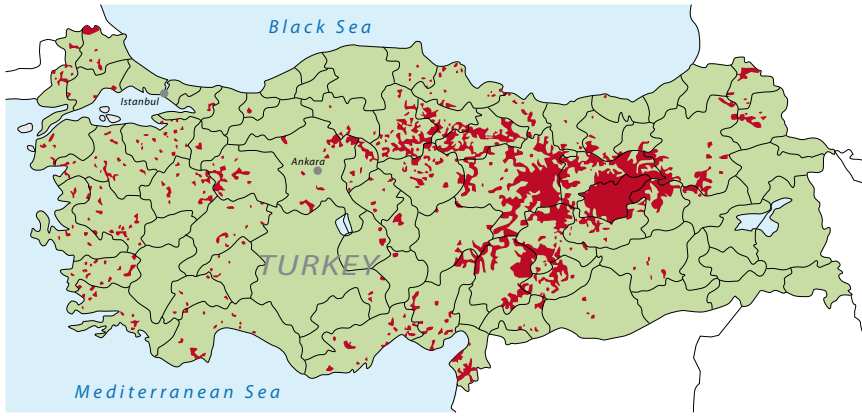
The Turkic Alevis, despite their persecution by the Kemalist government, have managed to survive in great numbers, especially since they occupied remote areas, away from the capital and the central authority. In addition to the fact that they were firmly rooted in the Balkans for centuries through the Turkish Diaspora they can be nowadays traced to France and Northern Europe. In Turkey, it is estimated that, at minimum, they reach a population of 10 million people and, at maximum, 20 million people (a range of 14 to 27 per cent of the country's population) (Ignatow, 2008).

Nowadays, the Alevis ally with the democratic secularists and oppose the fundamentalist influence and the Muslim extremists. They demand Alevism to be recognised as an official Islamic community, equal to but different from Sunnism.

The Alevi religious notions about nature have taken a political character in the 1990s in Turkey, inspiring a spiritual type of ecology among some intellectual circles, as a response to rising environmental dangers from industrialisation and urbanisation (Zarcone, 2005). Following the military coop of 1980 and the constitutional changes in the 1990s, a large number of *hemşire* (hometown) organisations were established in large Turkish cities and in European cities, which strengthen ties of internal migrants with their homelands. These organisations, along with Alevi NGOs with close ties to Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth and many other environmental groups have brought to the fore environmental issues and concerns, as a result of a rising globalisation process (Ignatow, 2008).

In his book The Environment in Alevism and Bektashism (1998), Nukret Endirçe urges the political authorities and

Map depicting the Alevi population of Turkey.



the environmental organisations to protect the environment by adopting specific measures. Annual festivals associated with devotional sites, where veneration is given equally to saints, animals, plants and minerals, offer pilgrims the opportunity to demand measures against the destruction of nature. Participants in this movement insist that the Bektashi-Alevi thought sees nature (doga) as a unit; it sees a harmony that unites all things (Zarcone, 2005).

In the framework of contemporary global environmental movements, a network of environmental and cultural organisations has been developed, with the purpose to oppose the construction of a series of dams in the Tunceli region of Anatolia. Tunceli (or Dersim) remains Turkey's only province with an almost exclusively Alevi population, and is renowned for its natural beauty. According to the project, eight dams are going to be built in the Munzur Valley. Anti-dam activists believe that if the dams will be built, the rise in water will reach the foot of the city and will flood many already isolated regions, cutting off the locals and depopulating the region. A wide network of Turkish Alevi migrants in Germany, Denmark, the Netherlands, Britain and Australia have joined forces and created the necessary structures with the aim of helping the Alevis in Turkey both financially and in terms of organisational support (Ignatow, 2008).

The Alevi activists schedule protests around the annual Tunceli Festival, which is held in August and lasts for four days. In August 2004, apart from the usual discussion panels organised during the festival (in which scientists and civic leaders also participated arguing against the construction of the dams), a theatre play was staged, presenting in an original manner the spiritual qualities the Alevi place on the river and valley. The actors cloaked in sacred animals' costumes (deer and trout) told old village stories about the river (Ignatow, 2008).

There are indications, though, that things might start to change, regarding the recognition of their identity, their religious rights, the legal standing of their places of worship, and their wider acceptance by the Turkish government (Altintaş, 2009).

Conclusions

The Alevi-Bektashi religious culture is unique. Owing to its syncretistic nature it comprises centuries-old beliefs and practices from a vast territory and unifies them into a spiritual tradition that teaches love and respect for all things in nature, animate and inanimate. Combining elements from institutionalised religions and native faiths, it has acquired distinctive qualities and a very unique character. Rooted in two continents and tested in different social and political surroundings and circumstances, it has proved its resilience surviving in the hearts and minds of the faithful.

Although considered a religious minority, their number is quite large in the

Balkans and Asia Minor. Most of them live in Anatolia and for many years have been neglected by the central authorities. In Albania, as well, their community is rather large, and smaller numbers of Alevis and Bektashis can be found all over the Balkans, but also in other parts of the world.

Not well-known in the Western world, their respectful attitude to nature could serve as an example of good practice. Their teachings should become better known and their message of harmonious life with nature should be further promoted. Their voice should be heard by the governments of their countries more clearly and appropriate measures for the sustainable management of protected areas and the environment could be taken.

The natural environment we inherited from our fathers will be probably delivered to our children in a much worse condition. So, as Celal Arslan, an Alevi dede, mentioned during an interview in 2004 (Ignatow, 2008): **'***We give primary importance to the environment all the time for our and our children's future. Our ancestors planted a tree wherever they saw water. The importance of trees has come down to us. When we were young our elders used to say 'Plant trees as long as you live. Even if you yourself cannot benefit, other living things such as birds and wolves can benefit', and they planted a love of nature in us. But over time, the slaughter of nature increased. I am telling you as an Alevi, as a dede, we should give environmental consciousness to our children.'*

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