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From God of Heaven to King of Men: Popular Islam among Turkic Tribes from Central Asia to Anatolia

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The expansion of Islam among Turkic tribes and their conversion to the new faith was the result of a long process of development in which dervishes as well as merchants played an important part. The phenomenon started in Central Asia and spread throughout the Turkic-speaking areas.

The settlement of the Turks in countries originally Iranian, such as Turkestan and Transoxania, was due to the collapse of the empire of the Orkhon Turks and to the decline of the Uighurs who were driven out of present Mongolia in the ninth century by the Kyrgyz. Turkic-speaking people mingled with populations of Iranian stock, among which the Sogdians held an important cultural place.

In the town centres of Transoxiana and Turkestan, Iranian and Turkic cultures coexisted for some time, but soon the predominance of the Turkic language and the progressive turkisation of the people changed the aspect of those regions. During the tenth and eleventh centuries, a period of transition, both Turkic and Sogdian were spoken. Mahmud of Kashgar, who wrote in the eleventh century, tells us that the people of Balasaghun, Talas (Tiraz), Beyze and Istijab spoke Sogdian and Turkic.[1] He also says that the people who lived in the region of Argu (Turkestan) spoke a hybrid language and that those who lived between Bukhara and Samarkand were turkised Sogdians. He refers to them as Sogdak.[2] The facts described by Mahmud of Kashgar are corroborated by an inscription in present-day Mongolia: in the towns of Turkestan and Transoxania the population was Turkic and Iranian and the people spoke both Turkic and Sogdian.[3]

Turkestan and Transoxiana were countries of religious syncretism; the people had known Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, Buddhism, Nestorianism. These creeds were adopted mainly by the population of the towns. During the Samanid period (ninth and tenth centuries), however, Islam became prominent in the towns of Transoxiana, especially after the conversion of the Karakhanids.

In the towns, Islamic culture was easily assimilated. The inhabitants became Muslims.[4] In the country and the steppes, however, the nomadic tribes went on leading their traditional way of life. Though they were progressively becoming sedentary, mainly for reasons of material comfort – such as the need to find pastures for their herds and set up trade relationships with civilised countries – they maintained the customs of their ancestors. When they embraced Islam it was in the form of a syncretic religion that can be described as 'islamised shamanism'. Among the tribes, dervishes and merchants contributed to the propagandisation of the new faith.

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Wandering dervishes had a greater success than the theologians from the cities, for they spoke the language of the people and had the same religious background.[5] They spread Sufism in a popular form. The development of popular Sufism created excellent conditions for the blending of shamanism and Islam.

The outer appearance of the wandering dervish, the *kalendar* or *abdal*, was no different from that of the shaman: both wore caps made of bird feathers symbolising the magic flight of the shaman and carried staffs symbolising his horse, and their tunics were adorned with amulets and bells. An example of this kind of dervish is the fourteenth-century Anatolian saint Barak Baba.[6] The *zikr* of popular Sufism, intended to induce a trance, is no different from the ceremonies conducted by a shaman for the same purpose. In both cases, the trance is sought for healing purposes. According to Russian ethnologist V. N. Basylov[7] shamanistic traditions are maintained in popular Islam today, and such customs are still to be found in Kazakhstan and Central Asia.[8]

In the lives of Turkish saints such as Ahmed Yasavi or Haji Bektash we find many tales about miracles which are full of shamanistic elements. For instance, the saints had the power to turn into birds and fly. Ahmed Yesevi could become a crane, *turna*, an important bird in Turkish folklore. Haji Bektash flew to Anatolia in the shape of a dove. The bird symbol can be found in the rituals of the Bektashis: the dance (*sema*) performed during their ceremonies mimics the flight of the crane. One well-known sema of the Alevis (country Bektashis) is called the 'dance of the crane' (*turnalar semai*). It is performed by twelve girls each representing one of the imams.[9] The saints can also take the shape of animals. In the *Vilâyet-Nâme* – the legendary life of Haji Bektash –[10] the saint and his abdal[11] dervishes are ascribed the ability of appearing in the form of lions. Moving mountains is a miracle commonly performed by saints such as Ahmed Yasavi, Haji Bektash and Demir Baba, the saint of Deli Orman in Bulgaria.[12] The saints can bring the dead back to life. In the *Vilâyet-Nâme* Hadji Bektash brings to life a dead child in a Mongol village. The saints can cause drought or bring rain with the help of the stone called *yada taşi*. Haji Bektash changed oats into wheat and when the country lacked salt he produced salt-mines.[13]

An interesting passage in the *Vilâyet-Nâme* clearly shows the syncretic character of Bektashism. Haji Bektash was not enthusiastic about praying in mosques. He preferred going with his abdals up a mountain where juniper trees (*ardiç*) grew and which was his favourite place for prayer. The dervishes would light a fire there and turn around forty times, performing the sema. One day, in a trance, Haji Bektash threw his cowl into the fire – hence the name of the mountain: Hirka Dağı, 'Cowl Mountain'. When the fire was burnt out the dervishes would scatter the ashes into the wind so as to expunge the holiness of the place.[14] The juniper is a sacred plant in many religions. This is especially true for the variety *Juniperus excelsa* or *macropoda*, which grows at high altitudes in the mountains. It is used for fumigations among the Buddhists of Tibet and the shamanists of Pakistan.[15] Its smoke causes hallucinations. Before the religious ceremonies the Pakistani shaman will chew juniper leaves and berries to bring himself into a state of trance.[16]

The description of the ceremony on Hirka Dağı throws a new light on the personality of Haji Bektash: he is not only a Sufi dervish, he is also a shaman performing ancient rites. In another passage of the *Vilâyet-Nâme*[17] invisible beings (*gaib erenler*) make their presence known to Haji Bektash and his abdals on Hirka Dağı. Seeing candlelight on the top of the mountain the dervishes go up and spend three days and three nights with the invisible spirits. While they are there, time stops, and no one is aware of their absence. These invisible beings will later be absorbed by Islamic tradition, but they are originally the patron spirits of the shaman. Without their presence

ceremonies cannot take place. The smoke of the juniper goes up to heaven like a column and its bitter fumes are as a call to the spirits who come down from heaven to earth.[18] The shamans of Central Asia and Kazakhstan still cultivate these helping spirits and V. Basylov describes them in detail.[19]

We know it was a custom of the ancient Turks and Mongols to pray on mountain tops where they felt nearer to Gök Tengri, the God of Heaven. Gök Tengri needed no temples, because the whole world was his temple, but on the mountain tops he seemed to be nearer to mankind.[20] He is referred to in the inscriptions of the Orkhon and in the *Divan-u Lûgat-it-türk* of Mahmud of Kashgar, and has been described by travellers, chroniclers and historians.[21] Tengri is the Supreme God. He can manifest himself through cosmic signs – thunder, floods, earthquakes, drought – but he always remains distant from the misfortunes of mankind. Kaygusuz Abdal, a Bektashi poet and saint who is buried in the mausoleum of his master Abdal Musa at Elmali, near Antalya, appeals to Tengri in a reproachful way:

Yücelerden yüce gördüm
erbabsin sen koca Tanri

kildan köprü yaratmişsin
gelsin kullar geçsin deyü
hele biz şoyle duralim
yiğitsen geç a Tanri![22]

You are the most sublime,
you are the wisest, O great Tanri!

You made a bridge thinner than a thread
and your slaves have to cross it.
But if we stood aside,
Go, cross it yourself, if you can, Tanri!

The gods of heaven are distant and passive. Other divinities, including the Sun, the principle of life, are closer to mankind. The Sun therefore usually takes the place of the Supreme Being.[23] In the Islamic context the divinised Sun takes the form of Ali, Shah-i Merdan, the king of Mankind. From solar divinity to God in human form, Ali has been the subject of a long and complex evolution and many different influences.

When I heard for the first time the *nefes* (psalm) of the Kizilbash poet Dervish Ali – '*Yeri göğü arşi kürsü yaradan men Ali den gayri Tanri bilmezem* ...[24] ('It was He who created the earth, the heaven, the world, the celestial Throne; I know no other god but Ali!') – I was deeply perturbed. It seemed to have nothing to do with Turkish Islam. Why did the Bektashis, who were not affiliated to the Twelve Imam Shiites or the Ismailis, worship Ali as a god? It struck me that they did not use the name 'Allah', but that of the supreme god of the ancient Turks, Tengri (Tanri in modern Turkish), as if the use of Allah would be blasphemous, whereas Tengri (Tanri) would not. Then I quickly understood that Ali was a solar divinity. In the villages of Central Anatolia he is identified with the rising sun and prayed to at the moment of sunrise. His symbols are solar animals: the lion, the crane (turna, which is commonly identified with the phoenix) and the ram. These symbols appear in the well-known poem by Pir Sultan Abdal:

Hazret-i Şahin avazi
turna derier bir kuşta dir ...
bakişi arslanda kaldi

döğüşü dahi koçta dir.[25]

The voice of His Majesty the Shah [Ali]
is to be found in a bird called 'turna' ...
His look can be seen in the lion
and his combativity in the ram.

The cosmic nature of Ali is confirmed in a later *nefes*, by Sefil Ali, a poet who is not to be found in any anthology, but who may be the same as Dervish Ali who lived in the nineteenth century. Both of them proclaim the divine nature of Ali and their language presents some similar Azeri characteristics. The nefes is sung only in closed circles, where the secret is strictly preserved, for every verse is in some way blasphemous:

Şah-i Merdan cuşa geldi sirri âşikâr eyledi
Yağmuru yağdiran menem deyü Ömere söyledi
ol dem şimşek yalabidi yedi semâ gürledi
Hem Sâkidir hem Bâkidir Nûr-i Rahmanim, Ali!

The King of Men [Ali] fell into a trance and made his secret known.
It is I who bring the rain, said he to Ömer.
And the lightning flashed, the Seven Heavens thundered:
He is the Cup-bearer, he is the Everlasting, the Light of Compassion, Ali!

Ali is called by three of the 99 names of God: Sâki, Bâki, Rahman. He is the god of lightning, of thunder, of the atmosphere. He is Tengri, he is Zeus.

Between Gök Tengri and Ali as the Manifestation (*mazhar*) of God there has been a long process of development. There is no hint of the divinity of Ali in the first form of Bektashism, nor in the *Vilâyet-Nâme*, which is believed to have been written around 1400. We are told only that Haji Bektash bore the 'Sign of Ali': a green stain on the palm of his hand.[26] Between the fourteenth century and the sixteenth century, when it reached its final form, Bektashism was subject to many different influences. One of the most important was that of Hurufism, a cabbalistical doctrine based on the science of letters attributed by the Shiites to Jafer-i Sâdik, the sixth Imam. It can be described as an anthropomorphic and mystical pantheism. It was spread by Fazlullah of Astarabad who was condemned for heresy and executed in 1394 in Alinja near Nakhichevan.[27] The centre of his influence was Baku and most of his followers came from Shirvan. Fazlullah taught the divinisation of man: God must be sought in man himself and the Throne of God is the heart of man. Fazlullah believed that he himself was the manifestation of God. The best known of his disciplines is Nesimî, who is considered to be one of the seven greatest poets of the Bektashi. For Nesimî, at the centre of Creation there is God, who bestows His Light on man. Through sacrifice and self-perfection man can become one with God. 'There can be no doubt', writes Nesimî, 'I am one with God who has no equal. I am both the Primordial Essence and its Attributes.'[28] 'Come to know yourself and you will know God!' 'To know oneself (*'kendini bilmek'*) is one of the fundamental elements in Bektashi doctrine. Through knowledge of himself, man discovers his divine nature.

Hurufism appeared in Azerbaijan, but its greatest expansion was in Anatolia and Rumelia. After the death of Fazlullah many of his disciples fled to Rumelia and Anatolia, bringing with them the message of their master. Among them were Ibn al-Ala and Nesimî. In some sixteenth-century documents published by Ahmet Refik mention is made of *tekyes* (dervish lodges) belonging to Işik (Ishik), a Hurufi group

which became a branch of the Bektashi. Tekyes were to be found in Thrace and the Balkans.[29] To the name of Nesimî we may add those of Yeminî and Virânî, who both lived in the sixteenth century and who also figure among the seven greatest poets of the Bektashi. Both poets reveal the divine nature of Fazlullah whose name is to be read on the face of man. Soon Fazlullah and Ali blended together: they both represented one single Truth which is Divinity. Virânî writes: 'O Thou, my Shah and my refuge: my Fazli-i Rahman-i Ali! Hail to Thee, O King of Men, Ali! Hail, O Fazl-i Yezdân, Ali'.[30] For the Bektashis, the name of God can be read on the face of every man. This name, however, is no longer 'Fazl' but 'Ali': the *'ayn* is represented by the shape of the brow, the *lam* by the line of the nose and the *ya* by the curve of the moustache. A well-known poem by Hilmî Dede Baba (d. 1907), who was one of the last 'Dede Baba' of the Shah Kulu Tekye of Merdivenköy, in Istanbul, reads in part:

Tuttum aynayi yüzüme
Ali göründü gözüme
Nazar eyledim özüme
Ali göründü gözüme.[31]

I held a mirror to my face
Ali appeared to my eye
I cast a look on myself
Ali appeared to my eye.

Some scholars such as the famous F. W. Hasluck have seen in Bektashism no more than a Turkish form of Hurufism.[32] This is an unacceptable simplification. Bektashism has its own specific features. Hurufism is merely an element in Bektashi syncretism. Nevertheless, it had an important part to play in the sublimation of Ali. This sublimation reached its highest point during the spread of the Kizilbash ideology. For the Kizilbash, Ali is not only the manifestation of God (mazhar), but he also appears in the various prophets, with the sole exception of Muhammed, who remains the symbol of the *nebi* (prophet). Ali appears also in the form of each of the Twelve Imams and in that of Haji Bektash himself, who bears on his palm the 'sign of Ali'.

Finally, according to Kizilbash ideology, Ali, the spiritual Shah, is mingled with the temporal Shah, Shah Ismail. This represents a victory of man over divinity. Man has become god.[33] As the Bektashi prayer *Noktai Beyan* (*The Central Point of Explanation*) puts it, 'Adamdan gayri Hak taleb edersen marifeti ilâhiden bî habersin'.[34] ('If you look for God outside Adam, it means that you are deprived of spiritual knowledge.')

Notes and References

[1] *Divan-u Lûgat-it-Turk*, translated by Besim Atalay, vol. 1, p. 30.
[2] *ibid.*, pp. 29–30, 471.
[3] L. Bazin, 'Turcs et Sogdiens: les enseignements de l'inscription de Bugut (Mongolie)', in *Mélanges linguistiques offerts a Emile Benveniste* (Societé de Linguistique, Paris, 1975).
[4] V. V. Bartol'd, 'Istoriya kul'turnoi zhizni Turkestana', *Sochineniya*, II (I) (Moscow, 1963), pp. 233–56.
[5] *loc. cit.*; *id.*, 'Dvenadtstat' lektsii po istorii turetskikh narodov Srednei Azii, *Sochineniya*, vol. V (Moscow, 1968), pp. 116–29.
[6] Fuad Köprülü, *Influence du chamanisme turco-mongol sur les ordres mystiques musulmans* (Istanbul, 1929).
[7] V. N. Basylov, *Shamanstvo narodov Srednei Azii i Kazakhstana* (Nauka, Moscow, 1992),

pp. 48–105.

[8] V. N. Basylov (ed.), *Nomads of Eurasia* (University of Washington Press, Seattle, 1990). See also Basylov, *op. cit.*

[9] I. Mélikoff, 'Les Origines centro-asiatiques du soufisme anatolien', in *id., Sur les Traces du soufisme turc: Recherches sur l'Islam populaire en Anatolie* (Isis, Istanbul, 1992), pp. 150–61.

[10] Abdulbâki Gölpinarli, *Manakib-i Haci Bektaş-i Veli 'Vilâyet-Nâme'* (Istanbul, 1958).

[11] An *abdal* is a wandering dervish similar to the Iranian *kalender*. Abdals were widespread in Anatolia during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Fuad Köprülü, *Türk Halk Edebiyati Ansiklopedisi*, vol. I (Istanbul, 1935), entry 'Abdal'; A. Y. Ocak, *Kalenderîler (XIV–XVI yüzyillar Osmanli Imparatorluğunda marjinal Sûfilik* (Ankara, 1992).

[12] I. Mélikoff, 'La communauté kizilbaş du Deli Orman en Bulgarie', in *id., Sur les Traces du soufisme turc* ..., pp. 105–13.

[13] Gölpinarli, *op. cit.*

[14] *op. cit.*, pp. 24–25, 35–36, 57, 66, 74.

[15] S. G. Karmay, 'Les Dieux des terroirs et les génévriers: un rituel tibétain de purification', *Journal Asiatique*, vol. 283, no. 1, 1995, pp. 161–207; Viviane Lièvre et Jean-Yves Loude, *Le Chamanisme des Kalash du Pakistan* (Editions du CNRS, Presses Universitaires de Lyon, Paris–Lyon, 1990).

[16] Lièvre et Loude, *op. cit.*, pp. 50–52, 490–525.

[17] Gölpinarli, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

[18] G. Tucci et W. Heissig, *Les Religions du Tibet et de la Mongolie* (translated from the German) (Paris, 1973), pp. 170–80; Jean-Paul Roux, *La Religion des Turcs et des Mongols* (Paris, 1984), pp. 149–54.

[19] Lièvre and Loude, *op. cit.*, pp. 50–51, 492 ff.

[20] Basylov, *op. cit.*, pp. 229–78.

[21] See for instance: Guillaume de Rubrouck, *Voyage dans l'Empire Mongol* (translation and commentary by Claude and René Kappler) (Paris, 1985), pp. 210–12, 222–23; Michel le Syrien, *Chronique*, published in the series *Recueil des historiens des Croisades, historiens Orientaux* (Paris, 1872–1876), p. 312. For more details see Roux, *op. cit.*, pp. 122–24.

[22] Atilla Özkirimli, *Alevilik-Bektaşilik ve edebiyati* (Istanbul, 1985), pp. 75–77.

[23] Mircea Eliade, *Traité d'Histoire des religions* (Paris, 1968), pp. 117–19.

[24] Sadeddin Nüzhet Ergun, *Bektaşi-Kizilbaş-Alevi şairleri ve Nefesleri, cilt 3: 19uncu asirdan beri* (Istanbul, 2nd edn), 1956, p. 202.

[25] There are numerous editions of Pir Sultan Abdal's poems. See for instance Cahit Öztelli, *Pir Sultan Abdal, bütün şiirleri* (2nd edn, Istanbul, 1971), p. 104.

[26] Gölpinarli, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

[27] Z. Kulizade, *Khurufizm i ego predstaviteli v Azerbaidzhane* (Baku, 1970); I. Mélikoff, 'Fazlullah d'Astarabad et l'essor du hurufisme en Azerbaydjan, en Anatolie et en Roumélie', in *Sur les Traces du soufisme turc* ..., pp. 163–74.

[28] Kulizade, *op. cit.*, pp. 151–64.

[29] Ahmet Refik, *On altinci asirda Rafizilik ve Bektaşilik* (Istanbul, 1932).

[30] M. Hâlid Bayri, *Virânî, hayati ve eserleri* (Istanbul, 1959), pp. 90–91.

[31] Bedri Noyan, *Mehmet Ali Hilmi Dede Baba: Divani* (Istanbul, 1989), p. 256.

[32] F. W. Hasluck, *Christianity and Islam under the Sultans* (2 vols, Oxford, 1929), p. 565.

[33] I. Mélikoff, 'Le Problème kizilbaş', in *Sur les Traces du soufisme turc* ..., pp. 29–43.

[34] Besim Atalay, *Bektaşilik ve edebiyati* (Istanbul, 1340/1924), p. 30.