

A Cross-Cultural Examination of the Expressive Culture of Turkish-Speaking Alevi/Bektashi and Alevi/Babai (Bobai) Communities in the Eastern Rhodope Mountains of Southern Bulgaria: In Search of Origins and Parallels with Turkish Alevis/Bektashis and Tahtacı.

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Introduction

Turkish heterodox communities in Bulgaria now subsumed under the general category of Alevi (Aliani) are found primarily in the region of Deliorman in northeastern Bulgaria and in the eastern Rhodope Mountains of southern Bulgaria. Statistics recorded in 2001 indicate that there are 53,000 heterodox Muslims in Bulgaria (Mikov 2005). These syncretistic communities are often labeled as “Shi’ites” because of their devotion to the imam ‘Ali and the 12 imams of Shi’ite Islam; as Kızılbaş (‘redheads’), an older term for Alevi referring to a turban with twelve folds worn by Shah Ismail Safevi’s Turkmen military elite who supported their leader’s extremist Shi’ite beliefs (16th century); and more so as Bektashi (referring to the Bektashi order of dervishes and the Çelebi and Babağan branches that exist in Bulgaria) and Babai/Bobai (referring to the Otman Baba branch of dervishes in Bulgaria) in their somewhat closed communities. The practice of *taqiya* ‘dissimulation’ – a masking of true identity in hostile environments has been a common strategy for such sects in Anatolia and the Balkans where fear of adversity from the “others” (Sunnis) has always been omnipresent and resulted in persecution and oppressive measures imposed by state authorities over time (Markoff 2002).

In Turkey these extreme measures were due in some part to suspicion directed toward Alevi sectarian members because they failed to observe the five pillars of Islam, denied the mosque, and held their religious ceremonies (*cemler*) with music and dance in private prayer houses (*cemeviler*) where husbands and wives bound by kinship shared food and drink though supervised by holy men (*dede/baba/mürşid*) with ritual and doctrinal expertise (*dede/baba*). In actual fact, the gatherings are highly structured and disciplined affairs that include recitations from the Qur’an; religious formulas; prayers; blessings; legends; the reviewing of religious beliefs, doctrines and spiritual affiliations; spiritual exercises; the singing of sacred repertoire (*deyiş* and *nefes*), and ritual dancing (*semah*) accompanied by mystical songs and the sacred ritual instrument, a long-necked plucked lute known as the *bağlama* or *saz* (Markoff 2002).

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A Closer Look at Origins

In the past, many Bulgarian and some Turkish scholars stressed that the Deliorman and Rhodope Alevi were descendants of the pre-Ottoman proto-Bulgars, Pechenegs, Kumans and Oğuz. The Bulgarian position also maintained the conversion of Christians and/or heretical Bogomils to a tolerant form of folk Islam that stressed humanitarianism and the equality of men and women, accepted the use of alcohol, and exhibited close ties with Christian and pre-Christian beliefs and traditions. More recently there is general agreement with Turkish scholars of Ottoman history such as Inalcık (1954) who have ascertained evidence of the mass deportation during the fourteenth century of nomadic (Yürük) and semi-nomadic (Turkmen) Turkic tribes from Anatolia to European Turkey (Thrace) and the Balkans. In Bulgaria they settled in the northeast and the Rhodope Mountains of the south. Ottomanists also concur that between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, Turkmen Kızıldağ supporters of Shah Ismail Safevi settled in the Deliorman region of Bulgaria; they were driven from Anatolia because they posed a threat to the Ottoman Sunni state. These Turkic tribes were influenced by wandering dervishes identified as Abdals, Haydaris, Babais, and Kalenderis who belonged to branches of the loosely organized Kalenderi (Qalandar) order of dervishes. The Kalenderi dervishes promoted Shi'ite Safevi propaganda beginning in the early sixteenth century and were instrumental in disseminating modified versions of their "Baba Islam" to rural peoples in Anatolia and Thrace and the Balkans as well (Ocak 1987; Zhelyaskova 1998).

It is interesting that important Bektashi saints of today were Kalenderi dervishes associated with Babai circles and known as Abdalan-i Rum. Some of these who are venerated in Bulgaria through the singing of *nefesler* (sacred songs) are fifteenth century saints Abdal Musa (14th – 15th century - whose tomb is located in Tekke village, close to Elmalı in the Antalya district of southern Turkey), Kaygusuz Abdal, and Otman Baba, an Abdal and Kalenderi sheyh who was both favored and disfavored by the Ottomans, and spent time in the Eastern Rhodopes of Bulgaria with his Yürük disciples (Gramatikova 2002). The importance of Otman Baba's shrine and its *tekke*, frequented by many miracle-seeking Bulgarians today, can no doubt be attributed to the fact that this religious complex functioned officially as a museum throughout communism and was spared even during the "revival process" (Aleksiev 2005). Elmalı Baba, whose shrine is located in the eastern Rhodopes close to Krumovgrad, is also revered, his praises sung in special *nefesler* throughout the region.

It is important to note at this point that a major difference between the Bektashis and Babais is that Bektashis choose to be recruited into the order after which they are supervised by a religious guide (*dede/baba/murşid*) who prepares them for ritual initiation (*ikrar*). Babais, on the other hand, are born into the faith and maintain endogamy as do Alevi and Tahtacı of Turkey, although initiation rites are crucial for legitimate status and full participation in the community.

Members of the broader Alevi religious minority in Bulgaria share a common world view, religious doctrine, customs and rituals, and owe spiritual allegiance to Hacı Bektaş Veli, the 13th century patron saint of the Shi'ite-oriented Bektashi order of dervishes and Bektashi saints whose tombs (*türbeler*) are still functioning, although many of the nearby dervish lodges (*tekkeler*) were destroyed during the nineteenth century at the order of the Ottoman sultan. The most well-known and actively functioning Bektashi shrines in Bulgaria are Demir Baba (close to Ispirih in northern

Bulgaria); Otman (Osman) Baba in Teketo (a quarter in Trakiets, a mixed Sunni/Alevi [Babai] village in the Haskovo district of the eastern Rhodopes); Elmalı Baba (the Bektashi village of Bivolyane [Mandacılar - Turkish], close to Momchilgrad, Kırçali district); Hızır Baba (the Babai village of Gorna Krepost [Kara Ağlar, Turkish]), and AkYazılı Baba in the Silistra region of northern Bulgaria.

Adherents of the Bulgarian heterodox groups make pilgrimages to the shrines, particularly for the annual holidays (*meye*) in honor of their saints. Such gatherings include ritual sacrifice (*kurban*) and offerings to saints, and worship meetings led by religious elders (*dede/baba/mürşid*) that include the singing of sacred songs (*nefesler*) including those for the respective saints, accompanied by *sazlar*. Even though such activities were curtailed in the 1980s, they resumed once again in the 1990s after the fall of communism and attempts to change the identity of the Turkish population through forced integration and assimilation during the so-called “regeneration process” of the mid 1980s (Zhelyaskova 1998). Alevis then retaliated by revitalizing aspects of their heritage that had been abandoned during socialism despite preservation through longstanding concealment of their religious activities. In fact, many young adults have mobilized spiritually and intellectually by immersing themselves in religious doctrines and rites and in the study of the mystical philosophy embedded in the *nefesler* which are sometimes referred to as “the Qur’an.” Ties with Alevi culture in Turkey have also been strengthened by visits to major Alevi/Bektashi shrines, festivals, and associations in the Turkish motherland and the availability of Alevi literature and TV programs.

Expressive Culture in the Eastern Rhodopes

As there are obvious parallels between the expressive culture of the Rhodope heterodox communities and the closely-related Alevi/Bektashi and Tahtacı communities in Turkey, the focus of this paper will now be to identify some of the main features of the Rhodope sacred musical traditions and contexts for performance and to draw parallels with their Turkish counterparts when possible. Historical and ethnographic data concerning both cultures will serve to establish theories for origins of and influences on such sacred poetic-musical practices in Bulgaria. I should mention that the scholarly investigation of such traditions in Bulgaria began very recently (2000) through the diligent efforts of a young Bulgarian ethnomusicologist who admits that a lack of Turkish language skills and knowledge of Turkish folk music theory increased the task that faced her in her research (Margaritova 2005). Although I myself have spent over 20 years studying Alevi/Bektashi and Tahtacı music culture, my fieldwork activities in Bulgaria are only in the beginning stages and include a brief trip to a Kızıldağ/Babai village in Deliorman (1995) and a concentrated period of research in the Eastern Rhodope Mountains during the summer of 2006. Therefore, the current analysis should be viewed as a “work in progress.”

Religious Rituals

In the Eastern Rhodopes today, ritual practices within village Bektashi (Çiftlik, Bivolyane, Teketo) and Babai (Gorna Krepost, Teketo) communities (as is the case with Alevis, Tahtacı and Bektashis in Turkey) function in two forms of communal gatherings. The first type are known as *muhabbet* (conversation or meeting with kindred, spiritually-enlightened individuals) and distinguished by their informal nature as they are open to younger uninitiated sect members who are introduced to rituals and

beliefs through the singing of *nefesler* (in Turkey, the term *deyişler* is used by Alevis and the term *nefes* by rural and urban Bektashis) accompanied by *sazlar/bağlamalar* (*bağlama* is the common term in Turkey) played by ritual specialists known as *zakirler* or *imam Cafer* (in honor of the sixth imam of Shi'ite Islam), and ritual dancing (*semah*).

The second type (*cem* or *ayin*) of gatherings for worship also include *saz*-accompanied *nefesler* and *semahlar*, but are characterized as formal because of the important role they play in maintaining group solidarity and renewing and reviewing sect doctrines and creeds. These rituals are reserved for initiated individuals and can be categorized according to their functions: for example, the establishment of fictive kinship (*musahib* or *pobratim* [Bulgarian term] *ayini*) between married couples; the symbolic ritual initiation and affirmation of beliefs of sect members who have established ritual kinship (*ikrar verme*), and the settling of disputes within the community in a central ritual known as the *ayin-i cem* (rite of integration). Although these gatherings and rituals are typically held in private homes (*muhabbet evi*, *cem evi*), one can now find newly-built prayer houses (*dergâh evi*) situated close to a number of saints' shrines where dervish lodges once stood.

Musical Repertoire

The musical repertoire found in religious gatherings (*muhabbetler/cemler/ayinler*) can be divided into the two broad categories of *oturak nefesler* (sacred mystical songs of a serious nature that are sung while seated [*oturak*] and demand full concentration because they embody a full spectrum of spiritual heritage and beliefs) and *semahlar* (ritual dances). Subcategories of *nefesler* include *düvazlar* (hymns in praise of the 12 Shi'ite imams); *methiyeler* (songs in praise of the prophet Muhammad, Imam Ali, the twelve Shi'ite imams, Hacı Bektaş Veli and other Bektashi saints), *Nevruz nefesler* (songs sung during *Nevruz*, the Persian new year on March 21, and *mersiyeler* (laments for Imam Hüseyin who was martyred at Kerbela). Similar genres are found in Turkish Alevi, Tahtacı and urban and village Bektashi communities

In his research (1985-1990) with a Bektashi *baba* from the village of Çiftlik (Kırcaali province) who had immigrated to Turkey in 1950, Turkish ethnomusicologist Süleyman Şenel discovered that the Rhodope *nefesler* were further classified into tune families known as *makamlar* - not to be confused with the modes of Turkish classical music - that are utilized for the sung mystical poetry of well-loved Alevi/Bektashi poets such as Yunus Emre (thirteenth century); Nesimi (fourteenth century); Kaygusuz Abdal (fifteenth century); and Pir Sultan Abdal, Hata'i (Shah Ismail), and Genç Abdal (16th century). Several of these melody types are still known and employed in Çiftlik today by an uninitiated *zakir* in his twenties who has mastered traditional *saz/bağlama* techniques and learned the *nefesler* of his and surrounding Bektashi and Babai communities.

The results of my research in 2006 revealed findings similar to those of Şenel. For example, one general category of *nefes* melody types utilized without ritual dancing is identified as *oturak makamı* as mentioned above. Other specific melody types are associated with the *semah* genre which is divided into sections that gradually increase in tempo. Some of these include the *ağırlama makamı* and the *doğruca makamı* (both slow-paced melodies utilized for the slow section of a *semah*); *kırklar makamı* (a melody type used for the *Kırklar Semahı* or 'Dance of the Forty Saints'), and *çift karşılama* (a ritual dance for couples). The use of the term *karşılama* is noteworthy in

terms of origins as it is a secular music and dance genre, in a meter of 9/8 found in Thrace and the Aegean regions of Turkey. It is also noteworthy that two of the most important *semah* genres in the Rhodopes – the *Turnalar Semahı* ('Dance of the Cranes') and the *Kırklar Semahı* ('Dance of the Forty') – are also prominent in all parts of Turkey. Other typical *semahlar* in the Eastern Rhodopes for both Bektashis and Babais are the *Babalar Semahı* that is performed by the *baba* and an assistant at the beginning of ritual gatherings and the *Sirasına Semahı*, with several sections, that is performed during informal and formal gatherings.

Modes and Meters

Nefes and *semah* tune families (stock melodies) in the Eastern Rhodopes for the most part utilize a scale that resembles the *makam Hüseyini* (and occasionally *makam Karciğâr*) of Turkish art music, although there are hints of mixtures with anhemitonic pentatonicism which is typical for the folk music of ethnic Bulgarians in the region and for semi-nomadic Yürüks and Tahtacıs (woodcutters who profess the Alevi/Bektasi faith) who live in Western Turkey and the Taurus Mountains as well.

Although free rhythm *nefesler* exist, the most common meters for the broader repertoire are 9/8 (2223 and 2322), 7/8 (322), 4/4, 2/4, and 11/8 (22322) – a meter which is more characteristic of Bulgarian folk music than Turkish. *Semahlar* are generally performed in three sections, each using a different *nefes* which progress from slower (*ağırlama* sections) to faster (*kıvrak* sections) tempos as do some *semahlar* and folk dance melodies in many parts of Turkey. It is interesting that 9/8 meter is not only common for the fastest sections of many *semahlar* in eastern and western Turkey, but is also prevalent in folk songs (*türküler*) and dance melodies (*oyun havaları*) such as the *karşılama* in Thrace and Aegean Turkey, the *teke zotlatması* of the Yürüks, the *mengi* of the Tahtacıs and *semah* genres of Bektashis in the Taurus Mountains.

Instruments

Although smaller members (*tambura*, *çöğür* varieties) of the *bağlama* family were used in the past, the folk lutes of the eastern Rhodopes are primarily the standard, medium-sized, long-necked *bağlamalar* found in Turkey with three double courses, one triple and two double courses, or two doubles courses and a single string in the middle. The courses are tuned to La-Re-Sol, (from high to low pitch), the most common tuning (*bozuk düzeni* or *karadüzen*) in Turkey and particularly in Thrace and Western Turkey. The short-necked (*kısa saplı*) lutes with the traditional La-Re-Mi tuning (*bağlama* or *aşık* tuning) associated with Alevis from eastern Turkey can be found in Bulgaria now, but the instruments are tuned in the local fashion in order to preserve traditional performance practice and style. In addition, the strings are plucked and strummed with a plastic plectrum rather than with the open-handed 'with the fingers' (*parmakla*) Central-Asian Turkmen style found with Alevis in eastern Anatolia and nomadic peoples in western Turkey (Markoff 2003). When accompanying *nefesler*, the instruments either offer an ostinato-like rhythmic accompaniment to the sung melody (*perdesiz* [literally, no use of frets or use of only open strings while accompanying a *nefes*] *makamı*) or supply a simplified version of the melody that results in a heterophonic relationship between instrument and voice.

Conclusion

This overview of the sacred repertoire of several Babai and Bektashi communities in the eastern Rhodope Mountains of Bulgaria has resulted in a number of discoveries that can serve as a foundation for further comparative research between these Balkan-based, heterodox and mystically-oriented sectarian groups and their counterparts in Turkey. Commonalities between Turkey and Bulgaria involve similarities in poetic, musical and ritual dance genres; the performance of the *saz/bağlama* by ritual specialists, and similarities in the use of instrument tunings, musical modes and meters.

Although the tune families in the Rhodopes appear to be fairly unique, one subtle, yet noticeable feature – namely the descending anhemitonic pentatonic scale with the use of glissandi – is prevalent in the folk music of Bulgarian Slavs in the Rhodopes and with Yürüks, Tahtacıs, and Alevi and Bektashis in western (Aegean) and southwestern (Mediterranean) Turkey. The other feature is the prominent use of 9/8 (2322 and 2223) meter in a fashion that is highly reminiscent of Bektashi, Tahtacı and Alevi *semahlar* and the *karşılama* and *teke zotlatması* (goat leaping) folk dance genres of the aforementioned regions.

In closing, I should reiterate that further research in Bulgaria is crucial for a more comprehensive scientific analysis and should include a study of Turkish secular folk music in the Rhodopes as well as fieldwork in more Bektashi and Babai villages in that region and in Deliorman as well. In addition, a closer examination of folk musical genres and Alevi/Bektashi and Tahtacı sacred repertoire in Thrace, Western Turkey, and the Taurus mountains will add yet another necessary dimension to this complex quest for origins and transnational, diasporic parallels.

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