

Balkans

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Sufism has always marked the practice of Islam in the Balkans, since the Ottoman conquest, especially through the implantation of brotherhood networks. With the withdrawal of the Ottomans, from the end of the 17th up to the beginning of the 20th century, part of these networks disappeared, since a lot of their members either perished in the wars or fled to Turkey. Another part of these networks remained – especially on the western side of the Peninsula – and continued to regulate the religious as well as the social life of significant Muslim groups. However, in the latter half of the 20th century, the communist regimes in Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Romania and Albania endeavoured to weaken the religious institutions. In Albania, they were even completely dismantled by the authorities in 1967.

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the new political situation is fraught with 'positive' consequences for Muslims in the Balkans: liberty of expression and of circulation, intensification of contacts with the Muslim world, and the possibility for foreign missionaries to come and proselyte. On the other hand, these Muslims, and their Christian neighbours, are confronted with extremely troubled economic and social situations, and even with conflicts – sometimes armed (e.g. Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo). Religious practices, those of the Sufis in particular, are dependent on developments in local history, as well as on the present political and social context in each country or region. We will not give here a complete and detailed panorama of the Sufi reality in the Balkans of today (whose importance is quite limited in comparison with the size of local Muslim communities), but rather shall try to emphasize the main characteristics of its evolution – from the surviving ancient networks to the appearance of new ones.

The weight of the past

In the eastern part of the Peninsula, in Bulgaria, Romania and Greece (i.e. Western Thrace), ancient Sufi networks have been almost totally destroyed in the 20th century, except for the special case of the Alevi-Kizilbash communities, which in fact have their own heterodox and syncretistic religion. On the western side, in Bosnia-Herzegovina, it seems that the Sufi tradition, which despite much suffering since the end of the Ottoman domination, survived mainly through Mathnawi 'lessons', *mevlud* ceremonies and the activities of a few Nakshbandi *tekkes* and Rifa'i and Kadiri circles. This tradition has experienced a certain revival in the last years. Did the Sufi members play a role, as such, in the recent events? This we do not know, but Sufism and Sufi networks could have been utilized for certain political and ideological reasons. In the other ex-Yugoslav provinces, that is to say in Kosovo and Macedonia, where the bulk of the Muslim population speaks Albanian (and not Slavic as in Bosnia and Herzegovina), the Dervish brotherhoods were, to a certain extent, less challenged than those in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Especially in the second half of the 1970s, a Rifa'i shaykh of Prizren had the possibility to give a new impetus to the local *туруқ*, by unifying them within an organization, and by using the funds offered by emigrant workers. Nevertheless, in these regions, an interesting phenomenon is the appearance of gypsy networks, whose members are often in search of a greater legitimacy within the Muslim society. Although these networks are linked with different *туруқ* (Halvetiyye, Rifa'iyye, Sa'diyye, etc.), we have to admit that the practice of rites tend to be homogenized, with the *ijrah*, a very spectacular ritual of mortifications, becoming for all of them the central point of the *dhikr*.

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Bektashi-dervish
in Korç ,
SouthAlbania.

A New Era for Sufi Trends in the Balkans



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The case of Albania differs greatly for two reasons. There, the Sufi current, which continued to flourish even after the end of Ottoman domination, was totally smothered during the communist period, as were all religious manifestations. The second reason is that, one of the Sufi brotherhoods – the fervent heterodox and syncretistic Bektashiyye – became an independent religious community alongside the Sunni community. When, at the end of 1990, religious practices were re-authorized by the government, the Bektashi community as well as the other mystical brotherhoods tried to re-establish themselves. Descendants of shaykhs first rebuilt *türbes* (mausoleums) in order to regain legitimacy via the saints' *baraka* and thereby to obtain believers' donations for financing. Some of them then attempted to gather small congregations and to perform rituals. Certain new 'shaykhs' came to be helped by Albanian Sufi shaykhs from Kosovo, as was the case for the Rifa'iyye, or for those from other regions. It is often like a slow re-apprenticeship of practices and doctrines, as can be witnessed in the Kadiri *tekke* of Tirana, where in 1993 men and unveiled women performed the *dhikr* in the same circle, while two years later there was already a clear segregation of men and women during these ritual prayers; the lat-

ter wearing white veils for the occasion. The *ilahi* (religious hymns) had also been learned and sung to greater perfection.

Recent evolutions

However, besides the restoration or consolidation of ancient networks, three important evolutions in the Balkan Sufi scenery are noteworthy: first was the introduction of new networks, via 'missionaries' who come to the Balkans, as well as the young Balkan Muslims who go to study in different Muslim countries where some establish contacts with Sufi groups; and second was the introduction and development of movements in the region, which can generally be considered as 'neo-brotherhoods', such as the Süleymanjis or the Nurjus-Fethullahjis, both having originated from Turkey and having been issued from the Nakshbandiyye. For example, the Süleymanjis are implanted in Albania, where they have begun religious classes and have opened a Turkish-Albanian religious centre. The followers of Fethullah Gülen, for example, extended their network and activities in various countries such as Romania, Bulgaria, Macedonia and Albania. They are publishing local editions of their newspaper (*Zaman*) and have opened private secondary schools – in some cases also religious schools.

The third important evolution is Shiite proselytism, which is particularly effective among Sufi milieus of the Western Balkans. In fact, in the same way that they are trying to introduce their doctrine in Turkey among the Alevi groups, the Shiites are working to diffuse Shiism in the Balkans, especially through the re-emerging Sufi networks. In Albania, for example, the Shiites approached the representatives of the Bektashis, the Halvetis, the Rifa'is and other Sufi brotherhoods (whose mystical knowledge is as poor as their financial means). They help them to publish Shiite-oriented books and offer fellowships to allow for young Albanians to study in Iran. In Kosovo and Macedonia, Shiite groups from Iran as well as from Western Europe get in touch also with Muslims who are now convinced of seeing in Shiism the 'true Islam' of the third stage, which is to succeed Sufi Islam – itself considered the second stage after Sunni Islam.

It is difficult to know how the Sufi currents, which remain somewhat marginal with respect to the mainstream of Islam, will develop in the Balkan Peninsula in the future. Already it is clear that they have entered a new era. The Muslim community of these regions is closer to the rest of the *Umma* than before. New trends are being introduced, not only from the East as in the past, but also from the Muslim diasporas of Western Europe. The Sufi networks in the Balkans will certainly carry out the same transformations that were undergone in other parts of the Muslim world concerning the adaptation of their social role in modern society. Furthermore, internally, because of the important political changes, they will have to re-position themselves vis-à-vis the new Muslim religious (and political) authorities. ◆

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