



## Visiting Bektashi in Bulgaria

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### Abstract

This article is an account of a trip to Alevi Bektashi tekkes and mausoleums in Bulgaria in July 2022, guided by an Alevi Bektashi Sufi, not a professional researcher but a practising Sufi. Among the places visited are the tombs of Kudemli Baba, Elmalı Baba, Otman Baba, Ak Yazılı Sultan, Demir Baba and Kız Ana and Haydar Cemil Baba. The author has included some relevant fragments from the manakip of these Sufis and local legends about them, as well as information about the beliefs, traditions and history of the Bektashi order in Bulgaria. The author also shares his subjective experience of visiting these 'places of power', sacred for all followers of the Sufi tradition. After receiving news that the old Rumelia lodges from the XIII-XVI centuries were still standing, we decided to visit the Bektashi lodges in Rumelia with a small caravan. Information was obtained about the Bulgarian Alevi Bektashi lodges and arifs. Based on this information note, a literature search was made about the places to be visited and the knowledge of the literature was obtained. With this journey, we had the opportunity to visit places that could not be reached by an ordinary touristic travel and to meet people around the visits. Therefore, impressions and experiences related to this caravan and some histories of Alevi Bektashis and great pirs were also included.

### Bulgaristan'da Bektaşî ziyareti

#### Özet

Bu makale, Temmuz 2022'de Bulgaristan'daki Alevi Bektaşî tekke ve türbelerine bir Alevi Bektaşî sufünün rehberliğinde, profesyonel bir araştırmacı değil, pratik bir sufi olan bir kişi tarafından gerçekleştirilen bir seyahatin anlatımıdır. Ziyaret edilen yerler arasında Kudemli Baba, Elmalı Baba, Otman Baba, Ak Yazılı Sultan, Demir Baba ve Kız Ana ile Haydar Cemil Baba'nın türbeleri bulunmaktadır. Yazar, bu sufilerin menakıplarından ve onlarla ilgili yerel efsanelerden bazı ilgili parçaların yanı sıra Bulgaristan'daki Bektaşî tarikatının inançları, gelenekleri ve tarihi hakkında bilgilere de yer vermiştir. Ayrıca yazar, Sufi geleneğinin tüm takipçileri için kutsal olan bu "güç mekânlarını" ziyaret ederken edindiği öznel deneyimlerini de paylaşmıştır. XIII-XVI. yüzyıllardan kalma eski Rumeli tekkelerinin hala ayakta olduğunu haber aldıktan sonra küçük kervanla Rumeli'deki Bektaşî tekkelerini ziyaret etme kararı aldık. Bulgaristan Alevi Bektaşî tekke ve arifleri hakkında bilgi edinildi. Bu bilgi notundan yola çıkarak ziyaret edilecek yerler hakkında literatür taraması yapıldı ve literatürün bilgisi elde edildi. Bu yolculukla sıradan bir turistik seyahatle ulaşamayacağı yerleri ziyaret etme ve ziyaretler çevresindeki insanlarla tanışma fırsatı yakalandı. Bundan dolayı bu kervanla ilgili izlenim ve deneyimler ile Alevi Bektaşî ve büyük pirlerin bazı tarihçelerine de yer verildi.

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#### Article History

Received

21 June 2024

Accepted

08 November 2024

#### Keywords

Bektashi, Bulgaria, Kudemli Baba, Otman Baba, Ak Yazılı Sultan, Demir Baba, Kız Ana.

#### Anahtar Kelimeler

Bektaşî, Bulgaristan, Kudemli Baba, Otman Baba, Akyazılı Sultan, Demir Baba, Kız Ana.

## Introduction

As a follower of a Sufi of the Naqshbandi order, I have participated in many pilgrimage journeys over the last two decades to visit places considered sacred for followers of the Sufi tradition, including those in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkey, Iran, Morocco, Spanish Andalusia and the Balkans. In 2022, Veysel Bayram Ali, an Alevi Bektashi from Bulgaria, guided our visit to the Alevi Bektashi lodges and shrines in that country. Thanks to Veysel Bayram's vast knowledge of the Bektashi history and teachings in the Balkans, and due to his extensive contacts, we were able to visit places inaccessible to ordinary tourists and to have private conversations with dervishes. This article is prepared based on the information received from Veysel Bayram Ali and from the Alevi Sufis we met during the journey, as well as from some other sources about Bektashi found in the references section. I also included some of my personal impressions from these trips, which should be taken as a subjective experience of a person who is not a professional researcher, but a dedicated follower of the Sufi Path.

### Figure 1

*View from the hill where tekke of Kidemli Baba of the 16th century is located (village of Omarchevo)*



## 1. The Bulgarian Alevi Bektashi

In July 2022, our group of four people, guided by a Bulgarian Alevi Bektashi Veysel Bayram Ali, went across the former eastern Rumelia, which once was the Balkan part of the Ottoman Empire.

### Figure 2

*Our Guide Veysel Bayram Ali*



Veysel Bayram belongs to the community of Alevi—Turkic-speaking people from Anatolia, Persia and Azerbaijan, who settled in southeastern Bulgaria in the XIII-XVI centuries. Scientists call this unique denomination Alevi; they call themselves Qizilbash - "red heads".

The name comes from the colour of the headdresses that were once worn by men of this spiritual and chivalrous community reminiscent of the Knights Templar. Nowadays the Bulgarian Qizilbash wear neither red ribbon on their hats, nor any other ritual clothes (except women at certain ceremonies). Says Veysel, "clothes are external, and for us it is not the appearance that matters, but what a person has inside", while recalling the Rumelian dervishes – abdals of olden times, who used to go without clothes at all. But it is still customary for Alevi males to shave their beards and grow long moustaches. There remains the old tradition to wear a headdress for men, especially in holy places.

The Qizilbash are no longer a military order, but rural communities, although in recent years many of the young people have moved to bigger cities. The Qizilbash also retained a deep adherence to the Sufi teaching, for each of them, in fact, embarks on this path from the very birth. During our journey, we passed through Alevi villages, whose all inhabitants were dervishes. In the spiritual centre of such communities is a tekke, where litanies are held weekly, and where the entire community, from young to old, gathers on holidays. The tekke complex usually includes the mausoleum of one or more Sufi saints who used to teach in these places.

The head of the community—both worldly and spiritual—is a dervish of older generation elected by the community members. He is called *Baba* - "father". As we were told, in antiquity and the Middle Ages, this form of spiritual communities had been ubiquitous, but it was a great surprise for us to find in the heart of contemporary Europe some villages where all the inhabitants, as a single organism, at a certain time during the day pronounce the prayer formula given to them by their spiritual guide (Doganyilmaz Duman, 2016, pp. 67-87).

### Figure 3

*Top left: The recently restored Elmali Baba tekke near the Alevi village of Bivolane in the vicinity of Momchilgrad. Top right: Baba Edem, the head of the community, who spoke to us almost exclusively in parables, which meaning we could not comprehend most of the time. Below: mosque and garden at the tekke of Elmali Baba.*





As Idries Shah (first Anchor Books Edition, 1971, p. 330) wrote in *"The Sufis"*, the seven main Sufi Paths – tariqas—all originate from the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.s.) and his three associates—Ali ibn Abu Talib, Abu Bakr and Abdul-Aziz from Mecca. Each of the modern dervishes is connected by line of succession (silsila) to at least one individual from this holy Quaternary. (We often meet the numerological symbolism of numbers four and seven in the teaching of Qizilbash). Alevi's attribute their spiritual succession (Baraka) to Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet (s.a.s.), and in all of their tekkes one can see images of Ali or a calligraphic hieroglyph of a lion—symbol of Ali.

In addition, most modern Alevi's are dervishes of the Bektashi order, following the tariqa of the Sufi Master Haji Bektash, who taught in Anatolia in the 13th century. It is believed that the Sufi Baraka was passed down to Haji Bektash through the lineage of the Turkic Sufi Ahmad Yasawi.

#### Figure 4

*Images of Ali and Haji Bektash in the tekke of Elmalı Baba.*



The Bektashi dervishes consider Prophet Muhammad and his cousin Ali to be the two embodiments of the triune Light. According to Bektashi, Muhammad represents the prophetic line of the Teaching, revealed to all believers, while Ali gave rise to the esoteric part of the Teaching, transmitted through the initiates. Both saints were descendants of the Abrahamic family, the "Tree of prophets" (The Islamic Bulletin, 2000) transmitted not only the sacred knowledge, but also the subtle transformative power or grace known as Baraka. Nothing can be said about the nature of this triune Light—it is considered to be beyond human comprehension.

The teaching of the Alevi's and Bektashi is unique: it cannot be attributed to any of the existing religions, although it includes elements recognizable not only by Muslims and Christians, but even by Buddhists and followers of shamanistic traditions. For example, Alevi's have a ceremony similar to the Eucharist with the consumption of three ritual cups of wine, as well as a rite reminiscent of baptism with water. Like any Sufi School, Bektashi used the principle of "time, place, people" to project mystical teachings in Anatolia, where the population was quite heterogeneous; one part of it followed the Islamic religion, the other—the teachings of Christ, the third—the Turkic pagan beliefs, etc.

Idries Shah writes in *"The Way of the Sufi"* (1970, p. 30) "When the Bektashi began to use the symbolism of the number twelve and, like Ibn Arabi and Rumi, to introduce elements of Christian myth as an important part of their teaching, many believed (and still believe) that they were trying to benefit from having a large Christian population left without spiritual guidance. Such an assumption, however, must be verified by the Sufi assertion that Christian formulations, like many others, contain valuable insights that, under certain conditions, can be applied to the development of man".

### Figure 5

Left: relief on the wall of the Demir Baba tekke in Sveshtari, consisting of three elements symbolizing the sacred Trinity, in the centre of which is a rosette with twelve petals. Right: Bektashi tombstones in the form of dervish hats with twelve petals.



Muslims consider the Bektashi concealed Christians; Christians consider them Muslims, while the Bektashi themselves are not obsessed with issues of religious identity. Qizilbash are tolerant to all spiritual paths, although they are aware that they are walking their own unique route to the Truth, following the spirit of what Rumi wrote:

What shall I do, O believers? I don't know who I am.

I am not a Christian, not a Jew, not a Parsi, not a Muslim.

I'm not from the east, nor from the west... (From *Divan-i-Shams-i-Tabriz*, verse xxxii, p. 124 (Persian version), as quoted by Idries Shah's "The Way of the Sufi", 1970, Dutton, p. 44)

Bektashi are also in full agreement with what Omar Khayyam said:

Every clique has a theory about me,

I am mine. What I am, I am. (Quoted from "The Way of the Sufi", 1970, Dutton, p. 61)

The Bektashi Alevis, with whom I had a chance to communicate, are what they are: seekers of the Reality beyond any formulations.

### Figure 6

In some window niches of the Ak Yazyly Baba tekke in Obrochishte you will find Bektashi symbols, and in another niche—some Christian icons. The two confessions have no disputes regarding this holy place—the door is open there for all people of any faith. What forms the subject of a fierce opposition among the orthodox communities does not present any problem for the Sufis. God is one, they say, but there are as many paths to Him as there are hearts.



Bektashi communities formed as monastic or knightly orders, which, although rare, were certainly not exceptions among Sufi Schools taking on all sorts of guises throughout their history. The Sufi School generally does not and cannot have a “standard” model—it uses the form dictated by the local conditions and the needs of Sufi work.

When the Qizilbash began to be persecuted and exterminated for their “heretical” views, they moved to Rumelia, the eastern part of the Balkans, where the population was more tolerant. Here they settled mainly in the countryside in compact communities that still exist in Bulgaria, Macedonia and Albania, and which we happened to see.

Haji Bektash was the first among the Sufis to encourage the participation of women in rituals long before most of humanity recognized the equality of genders. Veysel Bayram told us that he could not take part in some ceremonies without his wife, because Alevi traditions place great importance on the balance of male and female energies. The harmony of masculine and feminine principles is always present in the Bektashis’ liturgies.

One evening, Veysel and his friends invited us to an Alevi meeting in the village of Chernik in eastern Bulgaria, where professional musicians from Turkey performed traditional litanies. I noticed that many in the hall sang along with the performers, because they had known all these old litanies since childhood. Veysel asked me if the Naqshbandi use music as a teaching tool, and in response I quoted the words of the founder of the Naqshbandi order, Bahauddin Naqshband: “We do not use music, but we don’t mind others using it.” Veysel appreciated this saying.

In the music and recitatives of the Alevi liturgies, rhymes and rhythms based on the four and seven are often used, the significance of which in the teaching of Bektashi we mentioned earlier. Like Sufis of other orders, who became the successors of ancient knowledge, they consider these numbers to be the basis of the manifested world, as well as the foundation of the hidden hierarchy of Tradition. “The world is ruled by Four and Seven,” wrote Omar Khayyam, referring to the idea that the material Universe was created in quaternaries, consisting of two complementary pairs of opposites, and any complete whole is born and exists as a seven-fold (octave).

### Figure 7

*Left: a pattern based on the Quaternary on the inside of the dome of the Ak Yazyly Baba tekke in Obrochishte. Right: a heptagonal symbol carved on the stone wall in the Demir Baba tekke in Sveshtari in the 16th century—a version of the Bektashi “enneagram”. (The red lines are drawn by the author, since the drawing is very indistinct in the photograph).*





The reflection of this symbolism can be found everywhere in the ritual objects of the Qizilbash: for example, in the candlesticks used in their ceremonies.

According to the custom, Bektashi ceremonies begin with the lighting of a candle in a lamp, the four legs of which are reminiscent of the Sacred Quaternary, as well as the four Qutub—the pillars of the Sufi Tradition embodied on earth in each given era. The symbolism of the four is also present in the decoration of wooden staffs or canes, which were often used by Bektashi.

Number four represents the four circles of humanity as taught by Haji Bektash: shariat, tariqat, ma'rifat and haqiqat. The first circle of humanity according to this teaching is shariat. This is the outermost, exoteric circle; it embraces people who follow laws, morality, and religious precepts, practised out of fear of punishment or out of hope for reward in this life or the afterlife. At the same time, the lower nature, the sub-consciousness of sharia people can remain suppressed and unrefined, as Sufis believe (Averianov, 2010).

In order to purify and transform it, a person must embark on the path of learning in a school - tariqat (from Tariq - "the Path"), where seekers-dervishes follow the instructions of their Teacher and the specific practices prescribed by him, until qualitative changes take place in them. The exercises given by the Master may or may not be similar to religious rites.

When the inner self of the disciple has been transformed, as if in an alchemical retort, s/he meets their Presence or inner Guide, who opens to them a direct perception of Truth comprehended without books or instructions. This stage was called ma'rifat or gnosis by the Bektashi, and those who reached it were called Knowers or Arifs.

The innermost of the circles is called haqiqat, from Haqq, the Truth. Very little can be expressed in words about the quality of existence of those who achieve it, except that the consciousness of such an individual dissolves into the Supreme Mind and he becomes the channel of the Divine will, free from urges of his or her lower self or nafs. Such a person was a mysterious XV century Sufi Master Otman Baba (Karamustafa, 1994, pp. 65-84).

## 2. The Mystery of Otman Baba

"I am the one who answers the call of the afflicted,  
Who quenches the thirst of the thirsty,  
Who heals the sick. I am God's hand, strong and mighty, I am God's mystery." (Otman Baba)

Sufis believe that the power which attracts people to a Sufi Master has the nature of magnet, although the seekers may explain this attraction in any other way. Sufi work produces something comparable to a centripetal or magnetic force that attracts a similar force from everywhere. At the centre of action of such a force at any given time and place is a person who is called qutb-al-zaman - "The Pillar, Pole or Magnet of the Age."

A XV. century Sufi Master Otman Baba was considered a magnetic centre of the Sufi work in the eastern lands of Ottoman Empire, and his main work for three decades had been focused in the territories of what is nowadays Bulgaria. Otman Baba was aware of his aim and position in the hidden hierarchy, which he described like this: "Sultans will never comprehend my mystical essence, and when you perceive it, you will see an iron rod from earth to the sky". The "iron rod" symbolizes the essential function of Otman Baba as the axis of the centripetal Sufi force active in those times and places.

Otman Baba was a healer, a miracle worker and also an outcast. He could enthrone a monarch and bring him victory in a battle, or he could send cataclysms to their capital and take the side of their enemy, depending on what the Divine instruction was. At times Otman Baba was invited to the royal palaces for advice, and at times he was thrown into prison and threatened with execution; on some occasions he was granted herds of livestock, and on some he was captured as a slave. Such was the extraordinary life of this Master, reflected in a hagiography compiled five years after his death by a devoted disciple named Kuchuk Abdal, who accompanied his Master during many years of wanderings.

As the Scripture says, “a prophet has no honour in his own country” (John 4: 44): and Otman Baba was such a teacher from afar. His real name was Husam Shah; later on he took a nickname “Otman” to emphasize his influence on the Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II, whose relations with the Sufi will be discussed later. Otman Baba spoke the Oguz dialect of the Turkic language, and his accent indicated that he could have come from Azerbaijan or Khorasan. Kuchuk Abdal reports the date of birth of his Teacher in 1378. If this information is correct, then the saint lived for about 100 years and left to a better world in 1478. According to the descriptions, the Sufi was tall, strongly built, broad-shouldered with a reddish face and “eyes of many colours”, whatever that might mean.

As a young man, Husam Shah had a contact with Sufis in Turkish Anatolia and spent some time in the tekke of Haji Bektash, but then headed west and spent the rest of his life wandering in the eastern Balkans. This is what many Sufi Masters did when they responded to the call of a force that prompted them to travel to a certain place where it needed to be enhanced.

Otman Baba never had a permanent home, and even when wealthy people offered to build a tekke for him and his followers, he refused. At the same time, Kuchuk Abdal writes that his Teacher could appear unexpectedly in some place, as if from nowhere, especially when there was an urgent need for him, and disappeared just as suddenly. For the winter, he and his disciples usually stayed in warmer areas closer to Varna, and the rest of the time he travelled all over Bulgaria, living in huts and caves or under the trees, and sometimes under the open sky. When asked why he lived in the forest eating berries and leaves like animals and drinking dirty water, Otman Baba replied that in the abode of the Almighty God nothing was unclean, and that any food that the Lord sent us was holy.

### Figure 8

*Konak of Otman Baba near the village of Teketo. Konak is the stone marking the supposed place where the saint stopped during his wanderings, or where his last abode was located. The local Bektashi dervishes hold an annual festival in honour of the saint near this place.*



Like many Sufis of a higher ranking, Otman Baba chose the most difficult of paths, the “path of blame”, revealing the hypocrisy of the clergy and telling an inconvenient truth to those in power including Sultan Mehmed II himself. This had often brought jeopardy and persecution to Otman Baba. This behaviour was typical of Malamati dervishes inflicting blame and condemnation on themselves. The name Malamati comes from the Arabic *malamat*, which means “reprimand”. It is believed that the Malamati tradition was started by the Khorasan Master Bayazid Bistami, who once said that he achieved Realization because he treated opportunities provided by both encouragement and blame as equal.



It is possible that Husam Shah embarked on the Malamati path during his stay in the tekke of Haji Bektash. According to one of the legends, he wanted to go inside the "Teacher's House" without taking off his boots, but the dervishes blocked his way. Then Otman Baba pressed his boots so hard on the floor of the kitchen that imprints of his feet were left there. Thus a lesson was taught to those who followed the letter of the rules, but not their substance.

The path of Otman Baba and his followers was the path of ascetics, who renounced the comforts of earthly life and were ready for any ordeals. In Central Asia, Iran and Turkey, such wandering dervishes were known as qalandars. Dressed in skins of wild animals and shaved bald, they looked to some like vagabonds or madmen, so people often expelled them out of their towns. Those who knew who they really were called them abdals – "transformed", or ashiks – "the ones in love with God".

**Figure 9-11**

*Qalandars (Abdals). Drawings of medieval European artists.*



**Figure 12**

*A Qalandar Dervish, a 17th century drawing (Source: <http://darvishi.ru/>)*



The goal of abdals was to transform the lower self (nafs) through perseverance, overcoming greed and pride. Kuchuk Abdal writes that at the initial stage a disciple is a slave to passions and strives to satisfy all his desires. At the next stage, he is already free from desires, but still accepts what is given to him. A transformed abdal no longer wants and does not accept anything from the world-just as a normal person becomes indifferent to children's toys when s/he grows up. According to the stories, Otman Baba either refused any gifts except food, or he gave away everything he received. He personally owned nothing but a rag and a seven-sided hat, with which one story is connected.

The Bektashi usually wore twelve-sided hats, and Otman Baba was wearing this kind of headdress at first. But, one day, Baba was challenged by a dervish who was said to be a miracle worker, and defeated him. Angered, the dervish grabbed Otman Baba's hat, accusing him of witchcraft, and stripped five sides out of it, leaving only seven. And since then Otman Baba started to wear seven-sided hats. Later on, all Alevi dervishes in Bulgaria adopted this tradition.

The followers of Otman Baba challenged the idolization of ritualism by clergy (ulema). The Abdals did not observe namaz, as they believed it was more important to surrender to God unconditionally in a state when the whole existence of a person becomes a silent prayer. Only in this state the seeker, as Otman Baba believed, could hope to comprehend the essence of Scripture, which comes as an insight, a revelation from above that cannot be "earned" by mechanical muttering of prayers, but can be bestowed as an illumination.

Despite all their knowledge and learning, as Otman Baba said, people of the books groan and complain when faced with trials sent by God to purify them. Thus they are caught in a vicious circle where rejection of the Divine orders deprives them of the opportunity to open themselves to the Divine love. God tries those He loves. By refusing to accept the former, a person deprives themselves of the latter.

### Figure 13

*Left: regular Bektashi hat with twelve sides. Right: An old wooden stand in the shape of Otman Baba's seven-sided hat, recently used as a tekke's candlestick.*



The Path of asceticism, although followed by some Sufi tariqas in certain circumstances, is by no means the only possible one for a Sufi. Most dervishes believe in living "in the world, but

not of the world”: they do not reject either property or relationships, but renounce attachment to these things. They believe that anything that a man or woman desires more than God will bring them difficult lessons. To have it all and remain attached to nothing but the Creator is a task much harder than completely withdrawing from the world.

On the other hand, a disciple who embarks on the path of abdal will taste the sweetness of Divine love, which makes all his worldly desires fade. He first recognizes it through his Master, who is already in love with God. As the seeker becomes a wali—a friend of God, said Otman Baba, s/ he feels the reciprocity of their love to the Supreme Being, as if the Creator now had become their Beloved. In the experience of abdal, this love is not imaginary, but more real than anything ever tasted by them. At this stage the abdal understands that all the difficulties and ordeals of the Path were justified, and that the price of suffering and deprivation cannot be compared with the treasure that was granted to them.

#### Figure 14

*Tekke-mausoleum of Otman Baba in the Bulgarian village of Teketo near Haskovo*



The abdals revered Ali as one of two manifestations or “branches” of the transcendent Light of Muhammad. While Muhammad embodied the prophetic branch that became the source of a new religion, Ali was at the root of the tree of awliya (awliya—the plural of wali—a friend of God, connected with the Creator by mystical ties and not needing proxies). All awliya, friends of God, are members of a single entity, which, in turn, is part of the Invisible Elder, who manages the affairs of the world. This supreme hierarchy, both in its physical form and beyond it, monitors the worldly events supporting those in need and those who seek God.

The dervishes of Otman Baba believed that events of their lives were not so much the result of their free will, as an action of the supreme forces, and a person should accept their fate gratefully. Even when the events seem like an ordeal, they have a hidden meaning revealed only on a larger scale of things.

Once during his wanderings, says Kuchuk Abdal, Otman Baba was mistaken for a beggar and sold into slavery. When one of the dervishes found and saved his Master, Otman Baba told him that it was not by chance that he was sold into this particular family, and that while serving them, he tried to teach them as well.

In another incident when Otman Baba and his abdals were captured on charges of heresy and taken to Istanbul, Otman Baba said that it was not the escorts who accompanied the prisoners, but he himself was the escort leading this group, so that their destiny would be realized. God, and no one else, has the decision power, and the prisoners like their guards perform their roles according to the supreme will.



Ordinary human beings, according to Otman Baba, receive knowledge through their rational mind—*ilm-al-yakin*. The gift of intellect granted to the mankind should not be underestimated, since it is this gift that brings a person to the gates of a Sufi school and encourages them to embark on the path of a seeker.

**Figure 15**

A Qalandar dervish telling a fortune to a woman. European engraving (Source: <http://darvishi.ru/>)



However, the reasoning is unable to penetrate into the Divine mysteries. A dervish starting a journey into the unknown perceives the world in a completely different way—through the subtle organs of perception that are being activated in him, *ain-al-yakin* (ain literally meaning "eye"). The intellectualism often becomes a hindrance at this stage, therefore the efforts of the Teacher are often aimed at suppressing excessive rationality in the student.

When a seeker becomes a friend of God—wali, he is able to perceive the truth without proxy of books or instructions. He reached gnosis—*haqq-al-yakin*, and this knowledge is equal to God's knowledge. As Otman Baba said, the body and all their being becomes as one all-seeing eye, but the wali does not attempt to translate this knowledge into words.

Supreme light settles in the heart of the abdal, enabling them to instantly distinguish truth from lies and foresee the future, reading the secret Heavenly Tablet, which is spoken of in the Koran as a repository containing information about everything that was, is and will be.

*You will not understand without sipping the ecstasy of wine  
That lakes, seas, oceans are one.  
You will not understand without reading the book of the Creator,  
That the writer, pen and hand are but one.  
(Kul Hussein, poet of the Bektashi order, 17th century)*

An example of Otman Baba's omniscience is a story of him encountering Sultan Mehmed II in Constantinople. Disguised as a layman, the Sultan entered the tekke where Otman Baba was present at that time. The Sufi who recognized the Sultan by his inner vision, did not reveal that, but approaching the king asked him: "Answer quickly, who is Otman—you or me?" Mehmed replied: "Not me, but you, father." Then Otman Baba said, "Take care of yourself. Believe that Otman is me and you are my son."

Otman Baba once described himself thus: "I am Adam, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad and Ali." He claimed to have come to this world again and again for hundreds of thousands of years. This was said not at all in the sense of the ideas of reincarnation, as some mistakenly understood, but in the same vein as the exclamation of the Sufi martyr Mansur Al-Hallaj "I am the Truth". The transformed Sufi desires no things—spiritual or material, except to return to the Source of all things. When a Sufi says, like Otman Baba, that "God lives in his robe," he does not mean that he should be worshipped, but, on the contrary, that his self has merged with the Supreme Self, like a drop ceases to exist when it falls into the ocean. Dissolving into nothingness, he becomes everything. This is the meaning of the paradoxical Sufi expression "to die before you die".

The individual, whose consciousness has merged with the consciousness of the Creator, becomes one with all the saints, prophets and awliya, just as the light of a candle disappears merging with the flame of fire. A Qalandar poet who wrote under a pen name Kul Hussein, expressed this in his verse:

*If your good deeds are secret, and your thoughts are pure,  
If your heart is filled with wine of love,  
If you have surrendered to the Creator all your being,  
Then awliya, saints, and Ali are one.*

In the same context we should read the following story:

Once Otman Baba came to a town where in a temple there was an ever burning lamp, which was lit, according to a legend, by Sary Saltik, a 13th century Sufi Master (Averyanov, 2012, ss. 38-62), the predecessor of Otman Baba, who also taught in the Balkans and in the Crimea. With one glance, Otman Baba extinguished the lamp, saying to the witnesses of this event:

"The one who lit this lamp—Sary Saltik - and I, and the highest in the Universe are the same One."

A person who reached Realization becomes one not only with the Supreme mind, but also with the consciousness of any created thing. Otman Baba claimed to have ruled the Ottoman Empire through Sultan Mehmed II, seeing with his eyes, hearing with his ears, and speaking with his tongue (Inalcik, 2011, pp. 209-224).

In one of the stories it is narrated that when Otman Baba and Mehmed once had a spiritual conversation, and food was brought to them, the Sultan began to eat, but Otman Baba did not. After a while, Mehmed asked the Master why he refused the food, and the Baba replied that there was no need for food, because he satisfied his hunger through the Sultan. Mehmed realized that Otman Baba was thus pointing out to him the method by which the Master establishes contact with the selected disciples.

The relationship between the Sultan and Otman Baba was, however, extremely controversial. At first, a mystical contact was established between them, which has not been just an ordinary connection between a teacher and a disciple, but rather that of a son with his spiritual father.

The Sultan's contact with the saint began with a prophetic dream, which Mehmed had while still being a prince and living in Anatolia. In a dream, a holy man appeared to him and asked Mehmed:

"Do you recognize me?" The prince replied: "No, I don't," and the elder said:

"The world calls me Husam Shah, and I have come to make you the padishah of Rum (Rum at that time meant the Byzantine lands). When you turn forty, I will come to you and reveal my true Self. If you recognize me, it will be good for you. If not, you will be sorry and ruin yourself."

Apparently, the vision had a strong impact on Sultan, as evidenced by the events that followed.

Once Mehmed and his retinue were riding through Istanbul, and Otman Baba, blocking his way, asked him bluntly:

"Answer me right now, are you a Sultan or am I?" After consulting with his vizier about the identity of the questioner, the Sultan replied:

"You are the padishah, and you are the God's mystery, and I am like a servant to your kind, my father."

Otman Baba said: "You must know that the padishah is me, not you."

Otman Baba predicted Mehmed failure in his campaign against Belgrade in 1456 and advised him to abandon his plans as they were against God's will. Acting contrary to the advice of the saint and indeed having been defeated in that battle, Mehmed recognized the prescience of his spiritual guide.

According to the biography of Otman Baba, Sultan Mehmed's conquest of Constantinople was supported by the power of the saint, who invisibly helped Mehmed in this pursuit. The book says that on the day when the Ottoman army captured Constantinople, Otman Baba was in Veliko Tarnovo, hundreds of miles from the battlefield. He climbed on a rock and loudly exclaimed: "Glory to Allah, Istanbul has been taken!", although the message about this victory could not have gotten to Bulgaria in such a short time.

On the other hand, Mehmed once nearly put Otman Baba to death on conviction by the religious scholars – ulema, when the Sufi and his students were accused of heresy and disobedience to the authorities.

Otman Baba and his abdals were escorted by guards to Istanbul, where they were imprisoned in one of the monasteries, awaiting trial. Due to the awful conditions in which they were kept, seven of the Abdals died. It was for the first time that the disciples saw Otman Baba crying. He said that his heart trembled from the cruelty of God's punishment, which "his son" Mehmed inflicted on himself by giving in to the ill will of the ulema. At the time when a council was being held in the Sultan's palace, where the life of the captive Sufis was being decided, Otman Baba sat down, leaning against a cypress tree and looking around. Then, suddenly turning to the guards and messengers of the Sultan, he exclaimed:

"Hey, vile people, what are you plotting? If we wish, the Sultan's palace will be destroyed, and we will reveal our essence before him".

Having said this, Otman Baba struck the ground three times with his staff, and black clouds began to thicken from three sides over Istanbul, pouring heavy rain on the city, like that during the Noah's flood, and a huge lightning struck the Sultan's palace. Terrified, Mehmed hid in a corner, offering desperate prayers, but the streams from heaven were not ceasing. On the second day of disaster, the frightened ruler gathered a council of viziers, astrologers and sages, and they told him that if he executed Otman Baba, the kingdom of the Sultan would come to an end. Mehmed decided to let the Sufis go, and since then he has not tried to confront them.

Approximately a year before his transition to a better world, Otman Baba and his followers settled in the area in the vicinity of Haskovo, where his mausoleum is now located. Otman Baba liked this place very much, and he bequeathed to his followers to plant gardens and vineyards here. Apparently, this is was the beginning of the village of Teketo, from where we began our pilgrimage in Bulgaria.



**Figure 16***Mausoleum of Otman Baba*

It is not known exactly who erected the mausoleum of Otman Baba, but its construction might have started over the grave of the saint shortly after his death in 1478 by Sultan Mehmed, and was completed by a Mehmed's son a few years later.

Before leaving for a better world, Otman Baba told his disciples:

"From the beginning I was a mystery and will remain a mystery in times to come. No one has walked my path before me, and no one will follow me. Do not cry for me, for I will not die, but I will live forever—both on earth and in heaven".

**Figure 17***Tomb of Otman Baba and the view from his mausoleum*

It's hard to find a more beautiful place in the vicinity of Haskovo than the one where the mausoleum of Otman Baba stands. Like other tekkes in Bulgaria, it is located on the top of the highest hill in the area, which offers an amazing view of the fields and valleys stretching around.

A picturesque view, however, is not the only reason why tekkes and mausoleums of the saints were erected on high grounds. In the Sufi tradition, it was believed that in this way the transforming power – Baraka—of the holy relics can spread around.

### 3. The Invisible Encounters

Contact with the spiritual essence of the Teachers from the past, or “lock-on”, as Sufi Teacher Omar Ali-Shah (Agha) used to call it, (Omar Ali-Shah (1994), *The Sufi Tradition in the West*, Alif, p. 40.) is the main purpose of pilgrimages, or ziarat. Sufis believe that ziarat is a chance to access the information about perfection of a departed Master, which can be “scanned” and even “downloaded” by finding the “password” to the “flash card” - the saint's DNA. A possibility of such lock-on was the reason behind erecting mausoleums, which later became mere objects of idol-worshipping and superstition, as the initial understanding of their function was lost. Some idolize relics; others condemning such an attitude destroy them; however, the knowledge of their true role as points of contact is lost by both the former and the latter.

During our pilgrimage to the Bulgarian tekkes, I had an interesting experience of locking-on to a vibrational trace left by a departed Turkish dervish, which I would like to share below.

We were in a small village not far from Tutrakan—a town in northern Bulgaria close to a Romanian border. The last Bulgarian hermit dervish of the Bektashi order, whose name was Haidar Cemil Baba, lived here, in the Hekim Ali Baba tekke in the village of Denizler (Varnentsi) in Tutrakan district of Silistre province in seclusion until the 60s of the last century. He didn't teach people; his work consisted of an unceasing prayer for the welfare of the local community. He also wrote mystical poems in Turkish. When Haidar Cemil Baba passed away in 1962, he was buried inside the tomb of Hekim Ali Baba.

#### Figure 18

*Left: Mausoleum of Haidar Cemil Baba; right: photograph of him as a young man. Candlestick from the mausoleum near the town of Tutrakan, where the last Bulgarian hermit dervish Haidar Cemil Baba is buried.*



We were allowed to visit it - a simple wooden structure whitewashed on the inside.

Some things that belonged to Haidar Cemil Baba—a staff and some canes—were still kept here, so the late dervish seemed very present here, as if he just went out for a minute and was about to return.



The room was full of flies, so typical in the countryside at mid-summer. Insects buzzed loudly flying in circles under the blackened ceiling beams. I sat down on a low bench in a corner and began to tune in for a zikr - a Sufi exercise. Suddenly, the buzzing stopped. The flies fell silent, as if someone commanded them to stop, and in a complete silence from within me a voice emerged with a prayer. It was as if Baba himself recited *Al-Fatiha*. The prayer was in Arabic, although the Bektashi-Alevi in Bulgaria never use this language in rituals.

I became curious and asked our Guide Veysel if the dervish was from outside of Bulgaria, and Veysel told us that Haidar Cemil was sent by his Teacher from Turkey to replace a departed Master and to keep the Bektashi tradition alive in this remote tekke. And all dervishes in Turkey use Arabic for prayers.

### Figure 19

*Entrance to the Mausoleum of Haidar Cemil Baba and his cane*



I remembered a teaching story about a dervish who tirelessly repeated one of 99 names of God. When one day, while building a house, he was injured by a fallen beam, the blood shed by him left a mark on the ground in the form of the Divine name. The entire being of the dervish was permeated with the sacred vibe.

I also recalled another story once told in Kazakhstan by our female guide Camilla. Camilla's grandfather was a dervish, and when people were near the old man, they could hear his prayer as clearly as if he was saying it out aloud, although his zikr was silent. Miraculously, his entire body followed the vibe of the Divine name, just like his heart did.

As Haidar Cemil Baba repeated his zikr again and again, the sacred word became the vibrational signature not only of his own being, but also of the place where his body was laid to rest. I just happened to attune to the right wave, and due to this coherence a lock-on to the Essence of the dervish became possible.

This was brought up again by another contact that occurred in the mausoleum of Ak Yazyly Baba.

Nowadays this mausoleum is a part of the state museum in the village of Obrochishte by the Black Sea coast, but pilgrims still flock here from all over Bulgaria. The 16th century Sufi Teacher Ak Yazyly Baba was buried there. Very little is known about him, except that he was a disciple and the successor of Otman Baba. The locals believe that the tomb of Ak Yazyly Baba possesses supernatural powers; this was also mentioned by the famous Bulgarian clairvoyant Vangelia, who advised people to turn to their local saint Ak Yazyly Baba for healing instead of going to distant lands. A museum's guide told us that in the morning of the day of our visit, a man came to her saying he had just been cured of a serious illness, and he attributed the healing to the help of the saint. The guide said this kind of things happen all the time.



In a plain whitewashed tomb of Ak Yazyly Baba standing in the middle of a small heptagonal mausoleum there is a tiny hole at the back end. It is believed that if you put your hand there and ask the saint for help, he would surely respond. As we were told, the museum's researchers once put a probe with a camera inside through the hole in the tomb and were able to confirm there were indeed some human remains there.

**Figure 20**

*Entrance to the mausoleum of Ak Yazyly Baba in Obrochishte*



I sat at the tomb and entered the zikir hoping to establish a contact with the essence of the departed Sufi. Surprisingly quickly, I saw an image of a man of impressive build, with a green bandage on his head. He had bright blue eyes and a dark skin, and he looked not like a Turk from the steppes, but more like a Persian from Khorasan. I addressed this Being with a question, or, rather, I made a request regarding one of my relatives. Shortly I received an answer that I did not need to worry about personal affairs, but concentrate on my work for the Tradition, as "they already took care of my family's concerns". As time has passed after our Bulgarian caravan, I can say that my relative's difficulties were indeed resolved after that trip.

**Figure 21**

*Tomb of Ak Yazyly Baba*



Having returned home from Bulgaria, I searched for a long time for information about what a man named Ak Yazly Baba looked like in real life. I found nothing except that the Baba in his young age was a wrestler, which means that he really was strongly built.

Ak Yazly Baba had a disciple, Demir Baba, whose beautiful heptagonal mausoleum built in the 16<sup>th</sup> century is located near the village of Sveshtari in northeastern Bulgaria. Those seeking the tomb of the saint must descend a long staircase into a ravine among the forest-covered hills, then pass through three gates and a vestibule into a small chamber of the mausoleum. Our Guide Veysel Bayram told us that the four gateways leading to Demir Baba symbolize the stages, or makam, which a seeker proceeds through from an unrefined but moral person (shariat), through apprenticeship (tarikah) and direct perception and gnosis (ma'rifat) to the realization in Truth (haqiqat).

### Figure 22-24

*Gateways to the tekke of Demir Baba*



An interesting legend is connected with the birth of Demir Baba. When Ak Yazly Baba grew old, and it became hard for him to walk, one of his disciples carried him around on his own back. This disciple wanted to follow the path of Ak Yazly Baba and spend his life in celibacy, but the Master told the young man that he should not do this, because then "Demir would not be born." Soon the disciple, following the advice of his Teacher, got married, and, according to a legend, all the saints of Rumelia of that time gathered at the wedding: Ak Yazly Baba himself, Kidemli Baba, and a holy woman Kyz Ana. Each of the saints shared their Baraka with the newlyweds, as the latter were to give birth to a future Qutub, the Axis of the Age. And so it happened – in due time a boy was born who was named Demir. He grew up powerful and strong, becoming the successor of Ak Yazly Baba.

Interestingly, the Bulgarian archaeologists who studied the bone remains in the tomb of Demir Baba confirmed that the relics indeed belonged to a person much taller and stronger than his contemporaries.

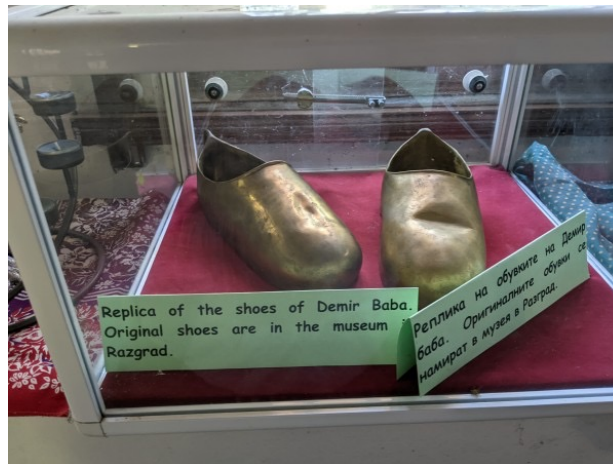
There are many legends about Demir Baba, but most of them are mythologized folklore heavily seasoned with folk fantasy. In one of the tales, at the request of the Moscow Tsar, Demir Baba freed the land of Crimea from a fire-breathing dragon; in another one, he exorcised witches; in the third, he miraculously fed a starving crowd with one loaf of bread, etc. However, behind the myths there often lie some true extraordinary events etched in people's memory as miracles.

It is noteworthy that Demir Baba did not leave any known successors, and the silsila or succession line started by Otman Baba, the patriarch of the Bektashi Sufi in the Bulgarian lands, ended on Demir.



**Figure 25**

*A Replica of shoes worn by Demir Baba at the museum exhibition of his tekke*



The heptagonal tekke with the tomb of Demir Baba is very plain inside. On top of the tomb one can see many personal belongings of those who prayed to the saint for help and healing—after some time, the owners would take their things home along with the blessing of the Sufi. Ancient drawings have been preserved on the walls; the central one has the symbolism of the Holy Trinity.

**Figure 26-27**

*Paintings in iconography style created by artist Todor Todorov<sup>1</sup> based on the legends about Demir Baba.*



<sup>1</sup> Todor Todorov: Born on 8 July 1954 in Sofia. In 1978 graduated Mural painting in Veliko Tarnovo University Kiril & Metodii under professor N. Gelov. Member of Bulgarian Artists Union since 1985.



I sit down on a sheepskin by the wall. There is no one else in the tekke, and nothing distracts me from attuning to the essence of Baba. I address him with a question: why the succession line of the Rumelian Masters ends with him? The answer was almost immediate and came in the form of an image: something like a long pipeline that goes underground for a long time, but at some point comes to the surface, and the water from it emerges in a fountain, so that anyone who needs the water of life can quench their thirst.

**Figure 28-29**

*Paintings in iconography style created by artist Todor Todorov based on the legends about Demir Baba.*



Demir Baba's Baraka and his tekke are open for everyone. Both Christian and Muslim seekers make their pilgrimages here; local residents come for healing, and tourists flock to the tekke attracted by the beauty of the place, where in ancient times stood a Thracian temple. There is a spring at its entrance, whose clear water is believed to cure all ailments.

**Figure 30-31**

*A spring and a stream flowing from it in Demir Baba's tekke*



Such is the tekke of Demir Baba, a person who was blessed by several Sufi saints even before his birth, including an Alevi saint woman named Kyz Ana.

There are not so many women teachers in the Sufi Tradition, so we could not miss visiting the tomb of Kyz Ana in the village of Momino, not far from Targovishte. Our Guide Veysel Bayram warned us that we might not like the state in which we'd find this tekke, but we still decided to proceed.

Kyz Ana, whose name in Turkish means "Virgin Mother", supposedly lived in the XVI century in the same village in northeastern Bulgaria where her resting place is now located.

**Figure 32-33**

*Kyz Ana's tekke in the village of Momino near Targovishte and a cell where dervishes used to stay at Kyz Ana's tekke*



Kyz Ana was indeed a holy maiden. According to the local legend, in her youth she was engaged, but the wedding never took place, because the bride was not quite of this world: from time to time she entered a state in which she was departing from the earthly realm and travelled to the subtler worlds, where she saw the past and the future of people and made prophecies. People from the surrounding villages came to her for advice and healing, and she helped everyone. When Kyz Ana passed to a better world, a dervish lodge was built next to her grave—a place where wandering dervishes stayed between their travels. Their tiny cells are still preserved in the tekke, however, in a miserably abandoned state.

When we arrived at the tekke, a group of people from the village of Momino, whose residents are now mainly settled gypsies (Roma), were sitting at the gate. They had something like a picnic, but kindly sent someone for the keeper of the tekke, who was also from their village. As Veysel told us, since Momino became inhabited by the Roma people, the community of Bektashi dervishes, who currently serve as the guardians in all other Bulgarian tekkes, lost the opportunity to influence the state of the Kyz Ana mausoleum.

What we saw when we climbed the steps and entered the Kyz Ana mausoleum was truly bewildering. The entire tiny room was filled with used clothes, shoes, cheap knick-knacks, and so on. It turned out that the local Roma families acquired a custom of leaving parts of their newlyweds' outfit in the tekke believing that the new family would enjoy the blessing of Kyz Ana forever. Of course, year after year, these things built up. A humble marble gravestone with the name of the saint was barely visible from under the rags.

What we saw was akin to sacrilege to me, and a burning question was raised in my heart:

"Kyz Ana, how did you let this happen in your shrine?" The saint's answer would be a lesson for the rest of my life: "Who are you to know how I should receive my children? Marble or rags - both are but dust for Me. If My children have no other way to turn to the Divine as they know it, then let them address Me in their way. If this is taken away from them, what will they be left with? How would they liaise with the Divine?"



Returning from the tekke, I pondered the lesson I had learned from the Virgin Mother: by blaming others for creating idols, it is so easy to fall into the snares of a worse idol-the feeling of being always right.

### **Conclusion**

The Sufi tradition in Bulgaria, established by great Turkic spiritual leaders, such as Otman Baba, Ak Yazyly Baba, Demir Baba and others, is still alive and well-preserved by the Bulgarian Alevi Bektashi community, as observed by a person who considers herself a practising Sufi. While having its unique flavour, the teaching of the Bulgarian Bektashi has been and remains a part of the greater Sufi tradition established by the founders of the Islamic faith. The tekkes of Teketo, Bivolane, Obrochishte, Sveshtari and other settlements, serving as the cultural and religious centres for Alevi Bektashi communities in Bulgaria, at the same time fulfill their role as instruments of inner development. They continue to attract pilgrims from all over the world, performing crucial function for the spiritual evolution of humanity as a whole.



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