

Modern Approaches to the Kızılbaş-Alevi and Bektashi Studies

EMINE YÜKSEL
UNIVERSITY OF SZEGED

Introduction

The Alevi¹ and Bektashi studies have gained momentum after the 1990s as a result of not only the maturity of the socio-political conjuncture, but also the increasing interest in these two communities. The collapse of the socialist bloc, the rise of political Islam, the establishment of Alevi associations, and the emphasis on “Alevism” as a unifying identity against the Kurdish nationalism were important political events that enabled Alevi to rediscover themselves. In this process, Alevism was defined in various ways, while at the same time maintaining its validity up to the present. These are the views that define Alevism as ‘true Islam’, ‘an ethnic-political entity that emphasizes secularism by being outside of its religious contexts’ and ‘a unique structure with its heterodox and syncretic structure which stands equidistant from these two views.’²

On the basis of these perspectives, researchers from various fields studied multiple topics related to the Alevi and Bektashi communities, such as *cem* ceremony, *semah*, music culture, Alevi organizations, urbanization, migration, women and gender. Naturally, the increasing interest on the subject led to the changes and developments of Alevi and Bektashi historiography over time. While some researchers approached the subject with nationalist, essentialist and political concerns, others conducted their research based on historical data. Therefore, this article focuses on the evolution of scholarly knowledge produced on Alevi and Bektashi groups, in order to better understand the changing perspectives and the approaches of scholars from the end of the 19th century to the present time.

¹ The ‘Alevi’ is a modern term that started to be used in nineteenth century to define the Kızılbaş, Bektashi, Abdal, Tahtacı, and related groups under one category both by Alevis and non-Alevis. For the term Kızılbaş and its implications in the early modern period see, Ayşe Baltacıoğlu Brammer, ‘One Word, Many Implications: The Term ‘Kızılbaş’ in the Early Modern Ottoman Context’, *Ottoman Sunnism: New Perspectives*, ed. Vefa Erginbaş, Edinburgh University Press, 2019, 47–70. For the analysis of term ‘Alevi’ in the late Ottoman and early republican period, see Markus Dressler, *Writing Religion: The Making of Turkish Alevi Islam*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. For the analysis of term ‘Bektashi’ see Rıza Yıldırım, ‘Bektaşî Kime Derler? “Bektaşî” Kavraminin Kapsamı Ve Sınırları Üzerine Tarihsel Bir Analiz Denemesi’, *Türk Kültürü ve Hacı Bektaş Veli Araştırma Dergisi*, 2010/55, 23–58.

² Reha Çamuroğlu, ‘Türkiye’de Alevî Uyanışı’ *Alevî Kimliği*, (ed.) Tord Olsson, Elizabeth Özdalga, Catherine Raudvere, çev. Bilge Kurt Torun ve Hayati Torun, İstanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 105–108.

Early Research on the Kızılbaş-Alevi and Bektashi

The first modern writings on the Alevi and Bektashi communities emerged during the last period of the Ottoman Empire. The earliest authors were missionaries, travelers, and orientalist, who witnessed or came into the contact with them during the nineteenth century.³ Their accounts included scholarly, political, and religious knowledge which inform their country regarding Anatolia, Islam, and Ottomans and focalized mostly religious and racial differences of Kızılbaş-Alevi.⁴ The European observers, especially in the German language scholarship, made more references to the racial categorization, meanwhile the American missionaries putted more emphasis on the concept of religious conversion and the Christian affinities of Kızılbaş-Alevi. Among these accounts, the ones written by the American protestant missionaries were romantic and based on the discourse of discovering the old Christian heritage in the sacred geography of Christianity.⁵

The missionaries' interest to record and document these communities spurred the uneasiness of the Ottoman local administration, who closely monitored them and sent information to the capital. In their eyes such activity could have led to the possible conversion of the Kızılbaş-Alevi to Christianity and their potential alliance with the other great powers. As a result of these fears, the Ottoman administration during the reign of Abdulhamid produced a number of Sunnization policies that targeted the Kızılbaş-Alevi.⁶ These operations on the Kızılbaş-Alevi communities were one of the responses that Ottomans gave to these missionary accounts and the foreign interest on the Eastern provinces of Ottoman Empire.

During the Young Turk era, Ottoman policies emphasized the Kızılbaş-Alevi and Bektashi's Turkishness, overlooking their religious orientation. The shift stemmed from the nationalists' political and ideological objectives and plans over the control of Anatolia. Nonetheless, the achievement of such political plans was stalled and endangered by multiple factors such as the national ambitions of Greek-Orthodox and Armenian Christian populations, the Kızılbaş-Alevi's socio-religious difference and their ambiguous affiliations and loyalties, the threat of Kurdish nationalism and separatism, and the fear of alliances between Armenians, Kurds, Kızılbaş-Alevi and Russians against Ottomans.⁷

As a result of fear, unrest, and possible alliances, the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) started to put interest in Kızılbaş-Alevi and Bektashi and financed a number of field

³ For the most prominent studies for the Kızılbaş-Alevi in the missionary accounts at the late Ottoman period, see, Hans-Lukas Kieser, 'Some Remarks on Alevi Responses to the Missionaries in Eastern Anatolia (19th – 20th centuries),' In *Altruism and Imperialism: Western Cultural and Religious Missions in the Middle East*, ed. Eleanor H. Tejirian and Reeva Spector Simon, New York: Middle East Institute, Columbia University, 2002, 120–142; Ayfer Karakaya, 'The Emergence of the Kızılbaş in Western Thought: Missionary Accounts and Aftermath,' in *Archeology, Anthropology and Heritage in the Balkans and Anatolia. The Life and Times of F.W. Hasluck 1878–1892*, David Shankland, Vol I, Istanbul: The Iassis Press, 2004, p. 329–353; Markus Dressler, *Writing Religion*; Yalçın Çakmak, *Sultanın Kızılbaşları: II. Abdülhamit Dönemi Alevi Algısı ve Siyaseti*, Ankara, İletişim Yayınları, 2020.

⁴ Dressler, *Writing Religion*, 34–37.

⁵ Ibid, 51. The most prominent of these missionary groups was the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions which had different stations in the Anatolia.

⁶ See, Yalçın Çakmak, *Sultanın Kızılbaşları*.

⁷ Dressler, *Writing Religion*, 122.

researches in Ottoman territories. Baha Said, one of the most renowned writers on the issue and his fellow CUP activists started to their investigations in certain provinces of Anatolia in 1914–1915. Their research also continued uninterrupted among the tribes of the Tahtacı and Çepni in the coming years to collect information about their social situations, professions, and regional histories.⁸ These field research centered the attention to learn their loyalties toward the Young Turks and to search for new military and political strategies after the Balkan Wars and World War I. Turkish Hearts (*Türk Ocakları*), the General Directorate for the Settlement of Tribes and Refugees (*İskan-ı Aşair ve Muhacirin Müdüriyet-i Umumiyesi*, later renamed *Aşair ve Muhacirin Müdüriyet-i Umumiyesi*) were notably active on supporting research on different tribes and non-Sunni Muslim communities.⁹

Early Publications on the Kızılbaş-Alevi and Bektashi

It did not take long to publish the results of the field researches and inquires in certain nationalist journals. The authors of these publications produced affirmative information about Kızılbaş-Alevi and Bektashi in accordance with the aims of the Young Turks. In these articles, writers basically fought against two arguments; the first, against the common Ottoman perception of Kızılbaş and Bektashi as deviant heretics, and the second against the Christian author's early writings that emphasize Christian and pagan elements within Alevi and Bektashi.¹⁰ Therefore, the earliest publications attempted to convince the readers about Kızılbaş -Alevi and Bektashi's Turkishness and Islamic adaptation.

The articles published in the *Türk Yurdu*, and other nationalist journals showed evidently how the nationalists perceived Kızılbaş-Alevi, Bektashi and related groups and how they try to integrate these communities into the new Turkish nation by means of emphasizing their ethnic identity over their religious orientation. Baha Said, a Turkish nationalist, was one of the first writers who published his articles about the Kızılbaş-Alevi, Bektashi and related groups in the journals such *Muhibban*, *Millî Talîm ve Terbiye Mecmuası*, *Memleket Gazetesi*, *Meslek Gazetesi* and *Türk Yurdu*. The discourse in the nineteenth century missionary accounts and the political challenges of the Ottoman Empire shaped his own nationalist ideas regarding the Kızılbaş-Alevi and Bektashi. Thus, he chose to use a rhetoric that attempts to give positive connotations to these communities, thereby he praised their Turkishness and overemphasized their so-called shamanic roots.

In his earlier articles published in *Millî Talim ve Terbiye Mecmuası*, he gave wide coverage to the Kızılbaş and Bektashi religious origins and their national character. His discourse focused mostly on the prominent Bektashi and Kızılbaş characters and their unquestioned Turkishness. For example, according to him, *Hacı Bektaş Veli was a genius who brought together original Turkish religion with Manichaeism and Islam*. He illustrated Baba İlyas as the first Turkist in Anatolia and recognized Bektashism as the 'national sect'. In addition, he underlined the old Turkish traditions that still surviving within the Kızılbaş and Bektashi traditions, such as the *ocak*-based structure, the freedom for women and the *saz*

⁸ Ibid, 126.

⁹ Ibid, 126–127.

¹⁰ Ibid, 22.

instrument. Herein, he approached Kızılbaş and Bektashi as two separate sects and evaluate Kızılbaş as *the traditional ones who didn't accept the reforms in the Bektashi sect*.¹¹

In another series of article published in the same journal, this time, he separated the sects as Turanian and Semitic and evaluated the Druse, Nusayri, Ibadi, Batini, Yezidi, Bektashi, and Kızılbaş under the category of Turanian sects against Semitic sects that maintain Jewish superstitions. He recommended calling these Turanian sects 'Alevi', considering that their main source of the denomination is Ali.¹² He further on pushed his political view by emphasizing the solidarity and unity of the Turkish nation against its enemies. Baha Said accused the local co-conspirators and the enemies of Turkey for "*destroying the national unity by building sectarian and national differences in the Eastern provinces in order to present the Armenian population as the majority in the East*". As stated by him, "*Sufiyan, Kızılbaş and Tahtacı are not members of separate faiths, they are all Turks who rely on the Shiite and the Ocak of Hacı Bektaş*."¹³ In the last article of the series, he found a connection between shamanism and these communities, indicating that also Taoism, totemism, natural cults, and Buddhism affected Alevi and Bektashi creed. In these articles, he used the term Alevi as an encompassing term for different Alid-Shiite groups, while at the same time attributing other definitions to the term, without explaining it.¹⁴

In his publications in *Türk Yurdu* in 1926–27, the tone that specify the Kızılbaş-Alevi, Bektashi and related groups' Turkishness heightened even more. Throughout the articles, he condemned the Ottoman policy of Kızılbaş and emphasized the superiority of Turkish culture over Arab and Persian cultures. While writing on the historical adventures of different groups such as Kızılbaş, Bektashi, Babai, Tahtacı, and Ahi in Seljuk and Ottoman period, he suggested to envision these groups within the Turkish culture, even though his studies did not draw a clear boundary in regard to their religious differences. As stated by him:

*While examining the character of Kızılbaş and Bektashis, it decidedly would not be correct to degrade them to the Alid and İmamiye Shiism. Because the rules and manners of the path (erkan-ı tarikat) of Alevis were the same and not different than the customs of Oghuz and the tent of Shaman Turks. The temple of the shaman and lodge of Bektashi were the same. While studying Alevi communities, to accept them as they are, is more fundamental and successful method of research, instead of researching them under the name of a sect or philosophical school.*¹⁵

In the center of Baha Said's interpretation of Kızılbaş-Alevi and Bektashi groups laid the importance of their Turkishness. However, his ideas regarding their religious orientation were far from being recognized as one of their crucial features. Instead, he preferred to define their beliefs as backward: "*The most obvious purpose of Turkish Alevi institutions*

¹¹ Baha Said, 'Anadolu'da İçtimâî Zümreler ve Anadolu İçtimâiatı,' In *Baha Said Bey, Türkiye'de Alevî-Bektaşî, Ahî ve Nusayrî Zümreleri*, ed. İsmail Görkem, Istanbul: Kitabevi 2006 [1918], 121–122.

¹² Baha Said, 'Memleketin İç Yüzü: Anadolu'da Gizli Mabetler I.' In *Türkiye'de Alevî-Bektaşî*, 127–129.

¹³ Baha Said, 'Anadolu'da Gizli Mabetler III.' In *Baha Said Bey, Türkiye'de Alevî-Bektaşî*, 139.

¹⁴ Dressler, *Writing Religion*, 132.

¹⁵ Baha Said, 'Türkiye'de Alevî Zümreleri: Tekke Aleviliği-İçtimâî Alevilik,' *Türk Yurdu*, vol. 11, ed. Murat Şefkatlı, Istanbul: Tutibay, 2001 [1926] a, 112.

was the protection of the Turkish language, blood, and lineage. Nevertheless, they are still waiting for Mahdi. If Alevi understand that it is a Christian and Jewish theory, they would be hopeless and downhearted. However, Alevi lack these ideals."¹⁶

Baha Said, in his articles, constantly repeated the same arguments and topics in the context of Turkishness of Kızılbaş-Alevi, Bektashi, Tahtacı and related groups. Regarding the religious orientation of them, he accepted the influences outside the Turkish religion, albeit secondarily. Not only he did not use purely academic language, but also, he had no proper methodology, and was mostly confused when using the terminology.

Another important scholar who produced knowledge regarding Kızılbaş-Alevi, Bektashi and related groups in the same period was Mehmet Fuat Köprülü. His scholarship not only established a model for future studies on aforementioned groups on Islam and Turkish history, but also his concepts and thoughts remained indisputable even until the present day. His historiography was culturally essentialist, idealist and romantic as any other nationalist narrative of his time, however, the way how he positioned Kızılbaş-Alevi and Bektashi in historical context distinguished him from other contemporary writers.¹⁷ As Markus Dressler rightfully pointed out in his detailed study on Köprülü's historiography and religiography: "Köprülü, as a scholar, advocated the heritage of Ottoman Empire as a part of a broader Islamic civilization with a strong Turkish element, unlike Kemalist revisionist of the time who see the Ottoman period outside of the evolution of Turkish history."¹⁸ Therefore, neither he marginalized the Ottomans in his works nor treated the Kızılbaş-Alevi and Bektashi communities as pure Turks.

Köprülü's overall aim in the study of Turkish history was to prove the extension and continuity of Turkish culture from its pre-Islamic times to the Seljuk and Ottoman eras in Anatolia, through an analysis of the mystic literature from Central Asia. As it was the case in Baha Said's articles, Köprülü's narrative also had two objectives; to reject the theories that correlated Kızılbaş-Alevi, and Bektashi with Christianity, and to challenge the allegations that Persian culture was more influential on Anatolian Islam than the Turkish culture. His efforts to prove this theory were quite visible in his earlier work *Türk Edebiyatında İlk Mutasavvıflar* (1919). This study mainly consisted of two parts: the works of Yunus Emre and Ahmet Yesevi and their influence on the Turkish literature. Herein, Köprülü based his research on Sufi literature on the fact that the age of great mystics was a period that reflects 'national taste' and 'national spirit'.¹⁹

Köprülü started his above-summarized narrative with the gradual Islamization of Turks and creation of Sufi literature. As stated by him, in the Central Asia, Turkish dervishes explained Islam to other non-Muslim Turks in a language they could simply and clearly understand, and in a way that they would enjoy it. Ahmet Yesevi was the most important representative of these mystics who enabled the Islamization of the Turks. Although he was a high culture scholar who spent most of his life in Arab and Persian Islamic centers, when it was necessary to appeal to Turkish masses who had newly converted to Islam and preserved their national culture, it was essential to address them in a language that would appeal to their tastes.

¹⁶ Ibid, 111.

¹⁷ Dressler, *Writing Religion*, 168.

¹⁸ Ibid, 173.

¹⁹ Köprülü, *Türk Edebiyatında İlk Mutasavvıflar*, 1.

In his interpretation, Turkish literature, in which the purest form of Turkishness can be found, reached from Central Asia to Anatolia without any interruption. There were plenty of Yesevi dervishes among the Turkish masses who came to Anatolia from Central Asia and Khorasan, and they carried the Central Asian elements and established mysticism in Anatolia. Even though multiple factors such as Christian traditions of Anatolia, Batinism, and the Vahdet-i Vücut philosophy of Ibn Arabi affected the continuous religious change, the continuity of Central Asian Turkish Culture demonstrated itself as the most dominant, especially in the poetry of Yunus Emre. The works of Yunus, whose poems/hymns have survived and are still loved and composed, were very influential on Bektashi and Kızılbaş Turkmens due to the wide and free understanding of mysticism they contained.²⁰ His work especially had significant impact on the Bektashi, who attached great importance to Turkish language even in their rituals. For Bektashi dervishes who are simple individuals without madrasa education like other sheiks, instead of Persian literature, folk literature represented by Yunus was priceless.²¹

Nonetheless, Köprülü's idea of the Yesevi dervishes coming to Anatolia and influencing the Bektashi order has created a model that is difficult to break down for many academics studying Bektashi history. According to him, the Yesevi Order was effective in the formation of the Babai and Bektashi in Anatolia in the second half of the thirteenth century.²² Köprülü also introduced Hacı Bektaş Veli as the most famous of the Babai caliphs who came to Anatolia in the thirteenth century. He stated that he sees the revolt of the Babai as the beginning of the formation of groups such as Kızılbaş and Bektashi in Anatolia.²³ In accordance with Bektashi tradition, Köprülü noted that Hacı Bektaş was the disciple of Lokman Perende, one of Ahmet Yesevi's *khalifes* who had deepened in the external (*zahir*) and internal (*batın*) sciences. Hacı Bektaş showed many miracles to both Lokman Perende and Ahmet Yesevi and then Ahmet Yesevi sent Hacı Bektaş to Anatolia.²⁴ This approach unfortunately created the perception among academics that the Yesevi Order could not be studied independently of Bektashism.

As for the religious nature, Köprülü treated Alevism and Bektashism as a syncretic belief that emerged from the Turkish nomadic life, combination of Islam with pre-Islamic beliefs, and incorporation of Haydari, Kalender, and Hurufî influences in Anatolia. As Dressler stated:

He harmonized aspects of change with aspects of continuity. He employed three major conceptual brackets, namely Shamanism, Batinism and Alevism. All of them characterized by certain vagueness, and elasticity, which made it possible for him to connect different phases in the development of Turkish people and their national consciousness as it emerged and developed in the

²⁰ Ibid, 282–285.

²¹ Ibid, 349.

²² Köprülü, M.F., *Osmanlı Devletinin Kuruluşu*, Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1999, 98.

²³ Köprülü, M.F., *Türk Edebiyatında İlk Mutasavvıflar*, 207–211; Köprülü, “Bektaş,” *İslam Ansiklopedisi*, c.2, İstanbul, 1943, 461; Köprülü, M.F. “Bektaşiliğin Menşeleri: Küçük Asya’da İslâm Batınlığının Tekâmül-i Tarihîsi Hakkında Bir Tecrübe,” In *Türk Yurdu* 9, ed. Murat Şefkatlı, Ankara: Tütübay [1925], 2002, 74.

²⁴ Köprülü, *Türk Edebiyatında İlk Mutasavvıflar*, 52–54.

*journey of Turks from central Asia to Anatolia. In his narrative, shamanism was a code word for Turkish culture prior to Islam. It was transformed as a result of Turkish migrations to Western Asia and Turks gradual adaptation to Islam where it went a symbiosis with Batinism.*²⁵

After Köprülü, academicians who followed in his footsteps, used his methodology and concepts in their own research. One of these prominent researchers was French Turcologist Irène Mélikoff. Mélikoff produced various works on Alevi and Bektashi communities, in which she presented them as 'Islamized Shamanism'. In her works, similar to Köprülü and Said, she overemphasized the old Turkish, mostly shamanist, elements in Alevi and Bektashi faith. She mainly relied on the hagiographic sources to prove the connection between old Turkish components and Alevi and Bektashi belief. For instance, she defined Alevi *dede* or Bektashi *baba* as a continuation of the pre-Islamic Turkish shaman, namely *kamozan*, who were able to travel to the world of spirits as a mediator and healer.²⁶ Based on the figures in *Vilayetname*, she envisioned saints just like shamans, who fight with giants, visit underworld to communicate with spirits.²⁷ According to her, Alevi concept of God was also Gök tanrı of Shamanic Turks.²⁸ Also, Alevi ritual *ayn-i cem*, religious hymns (*nefes*), the ritual of *semah*, consumption of alcohol during religious ceremonies and unveiled women participating to rituals were all maintenance of shamanism in Alevi and Bektashi beliefs. The *mythos of Kırklar* was also a tradition of Central Asian origin, as much as it was a Sufi tradition and mythology.²⁹ On the other hand, *hulul*, incarnation of divine in human body, especially in the case of Ali, was a Central Asian element inspired by Manichean and Buddhist examples.³⁰

Looking at the Mélikoff's approach in general, one finds that her definition of Alevi and Bektashism is the synthesis of the Turkish shamanism and syncretism of Islam with Manichean and Christian elements. According to Dressler, one of the problems of her approach to these communities is that "she conceptualizes Alevism and Bektashism so closely, to the point that she asserts Alevism is nothing other than a form of Bektashism, indeed two could be presented as one 'Alevi-Bektashi' tradition."³¹ He finds her conceptualization static, essentialist and lacks sufficient conceptual differentiation between vernacular and scholarly discourses. Apart from Dressler, Hamid Algar also finds her approach to Bektashism as "an

²⁵ Ibid, 249.

²⁶ Irène Mélikoff, *Hadji Bektach. Un mythe et ses avatars. Genèse et évolution du soufisme populaire en Turquie*. Leiden, Brill, 1998, 9.

²⁷ Irène Mélikoff, *Abū Muslim. Le « Porte-Hache » du Khorassan dans la tradition épique turco-iraniennne*. Paris, Adrien Maisonneuve, 1962, 40–41.

²⁸ Mélikoff, *Hadji Bektach*, 13–20.

²⁹ Irène Mélikoff, « Recherches sur les composantes du syncrétisme Bektachi-Alevi, » *Studia Turcologica Memoriae Alexii Bombaci Dicata*, Napoli : Istituto Universitario Orientale, 1982, 387.

³⁰ Mélikoff 1998, 13–21.

³¹ Dressler, *Writing Religion*, 259.

archaeological undertaking, one that involves the excavation of successive layers of influence, borrowing, and adaptation."³²

Non-Nationalist Approaches to the Kızılbaş-Alevi and Bektashi

Abdülbaki Gölpınarlı was another prominent scholar of Sufism and Mediaeval Anatolia, and he followed the footsteps of Köprülü in terms of merging Batinism, extreme Shia, Bektashism, Turkish shamanism and the Alevism. He published several articles and books about the Kızılbaş-Alevi and Bektashi figures and literature, as well as the translations of important documents. One of the essential features that separate him from the earlier academics was that he did not put nationalism to the center of his interpretation of Kızılbaş-Alevi and Bektashi communities. He used the theological and historical arguments together, without giving any priority to the dominant Islamic understanding of his time. Moreover, as Karamustafa stated, eventough his view did not initiate a new perspective on the Islamization of Turks and the role of Sufism in this process, Gölpınarlı was the first to identify the importance of Vefai Sufi Order.³³

We should also mention Ahmet Yaşar Ocak, an important scholar who produce scholarly knowledge on Kızılbaş-Alevi and Bektashi studies. Compared to Mélikoff and Köprülü, he gave more space to the non-Islamic religious movements such as Buddhism, Manichaeism as Alevi and Bektashi religious components.³⁴ Even though he did not deny the shamanist elements, he questioned their dominance on the formation of Alevi and Bektashi beliefs. This approach distinguishes him from Köprülü. He mostly built upon his ideas and thesis about Muslim currents in Anatolia by utilizing hagiographic works, in which the religious authority revealed itself in charisma, mysticism and lineage of the saints, rather than legal and scriptural knowledge.³⁵

Different from late Ottoman and early republican writers, Ocak did not adapt his narrative to the nationalist discourse and did not employ it as an analytic category. However, his discourse contributed to the standard opinion regarding the otherness of the aforementioned communities. This is most evident in the terms that Ocak uses, that are, *Islamic heterodoxy*, *high Islam*, *popular-folk Islam* which are inherited from Köprülü. Nevertheless, unlike Köprülü, Ocak explains in detail in which sense he uses these terms. In his book, *Türk Sufiliğine Bakışlar* he explains them as follows:

As such, the appearances of Islam in different geographies, even within the same geography, due to social and cultural differences in the historical process will naturally differ... Here, terms such as heterodoxy of Islam, and het-

³² Hamid Algar, Review: "Hadji Bektach: Un mythe et ses avatars. Genèse et évolution du soufisme populaire en Turquie by Irene Mélikoff," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (Nov. 2004), 687.

³³ Ahmet T. Karamustafa, "Origins of Anatolian Sufism." In *Sufism and Sufi s in Ottoman Society: Sources, Doctrine, Rituals, Turuq, Architecture, Literature and Fine Arts, Modernism*, ed. Ahmet Yaşar Ocak, Ankara: Turkish Historical Society, 2005, 72–73.

³⁴ See, Ahmet Yaşar Ocak, *Alevi ve Bektaşî İnançlarının İslam Öncesi Temelleri*, İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2003.

³⁵ Dressler, *Writing Religion*, 259.

erodox Islam, which the reader will encounter frequently in the articles in this book, reflect the name of a form of Islam, an interpretation of Islam outside of the Sunni perception, created by such a differentiation.

In the preceding paragraphs, he also indicates that these terms appear in two different forms based on the Islamic life and culture: *High Islam* or *urban Islam* (*yüksek islam – şehirli islam*) and *popular Islam* or *folk Islam*:

High Islam is an 'urban Islam', which is faithful to the book-based principles of Islam and that at the same time has produced a developed and refined culture and art. This Islam is based on the interpretation called Ahl al-Sunnah, or simply Sunnism, in the history of Turkey. On the other hand, the second one is folk Islam which is based on rural (villagers and nomadic) people as its social base, due to its historical origin, and what sociologists and anthropologists call popular Islam, which reveals a popular art and culture mixed with partially mythological beliefs and cults. There are two forms of this folk Islam among Turkish society. The first is the form exhibited by the people who have adopted the Sunni interpretation. Second, what we call heterodox Islam is the form represented by the Alevi-Bektashi community in Turkey today.³⁶ Since this version, which we call heterodox Turkish Islam, was formed among nomadic Turks and on the basis of ancient pre-Islamic religious-mystical beliefs, it has often been viewed with a different content from the scriptural (directly based on the Qur'an) form in the developed settled cultural circles.³⁷

Apart from his classification and approach, one of the most important contributions of Ocak to Alevi and Bektashi studies is his analysis on Vefai Order in Anatolia. In his article titled *The Wafâ'î tariqa (Wafâ'iyya) during and after the period of the Seljuks of Turkey: A new approach to the history of popular mysticism in Turkey*, Ocak examined some Alevi *ocaks'* relations to the Vefai Order based on the genealogies and reached results that weaken Köprülü's Ahmet Yesevi thesis.³⁸ He also wrote about dervish groups such as Kalenderi and Haydari, and their relationship with other dervish groups in Anatolia, once again using the categories of high culture and popular culture.³⁹

Criticism to Nationalistic and Essentialist Approaches

In the works of Alevi Bektashi history written in the late Ottoman and early republican periods, writers used popular research methods of the era in the history writing, but exhibited an essentialist, nationalist, and romantic feature, while focusing on religious and ethnic

³⁶ Ahmet Yaşar Ocak, *Türk Süfiliğine Bakışlar*, İstanbul: İletişim, 1999, 15–16.

³⁷ Ibid, 17.

³⁸ "The Wafâ'î tariqa (Wafâ'iyya) during and after the period of the Seljuks of Turkey: A new approach to the history of popular mysticism in Turkey," *Mésogeios* 25–26 (2005), 209–248.

³⁹ Ahmet Yaşar Ocak, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğunda Marjinal Süfilik: Kalenderiler (XIV-XVII. Yüzyıllar)*, Ankara: TTK Yayınları, 1992.

origins. The perception of Alevi and Bektashism, which formed by the pioneering ideas of Köprülü and Said during the early republican era, was criticized by post-nationalist researchers regarding the methodology and terminology they used. These studies especially criticized Köprülü's theories and thoughts in areas such as Islam, Turks, and Sufism – especially on Ahmet Yesevi – and refuted them as new findings increased.

From these academics, Devin DeWeese was the earliest to review Köprülü's ideas and he presented his new findings regarding Ahmet Yesevi and Yesevi Order in the light of new sources. In his foreword to *Early Mystics*,⁴⁰ DeWeese criticized Köprülü's handling of sources, his overemphasized nationalistic tone and his approach that viewed Central Asia through an Anatolian prism rather than on its own terms through its own sources.⁴¹ Even though he admitted that Köprülü did not have the resources available to us today and that this fact limited his perspective, he pointed out his problematic approach both to the subject matter and its sources.⁴² According to DeWeese, Köprülü's categorization of his sources as 'historical' and 'legendary' with an essentialist approach, and the importance he attached to reputation of the sources prevented him from criticizing them seriously. Therefore, he failed to explore the actual structure and context of the narratives for clues.⁴³ DeWeese also criticized him regarding his utilization of sources. For example, while explaining Ahmet Yesevi's life Köprülü jumped from one source to another without giving precise information about the exact source he used, which avoided him to understand the possible contradictions and inconsistencies among his sources.⁴⁴ DeWeese also touched on the notorious dichotomy of heterodoxy and orthodoxy in Köprülü's work, which had a purpose of presenting a 'tainted Islam', filled with shamanic remnants from pre-Islamic Turkic religion and colored by the popular religious tastes, as the fountainhead of the Yesevi tradition and the religious profile of the Turks of Central Asia.⁴⁵

He also addressed Köprülü's great narrative of Yesevi presence in Anatolia in the context of his Anatolian centric attitude. According to Köprülü, the legacy of Ahmet Yesevi in both Sufism and literature is found not in Central Asia, but Anatolian Bektashi literature as a result of immigrations to West from Mongol invasion. Even though he drew a distinction between historical Ahmet Yesevi and the later Bektashi tradition, his perseverance to maintain the aforementioned theory motivated him to search for Ahmet Yesevi's memory and legacy in the Bektashi tradition. As DeWeese stated, this reinforced the presumption that the only way to study the Yesevi tradition was to study Bektashiyye and more generally the currents of Anatolian Sufism that were believed to have been shaped in Central Asia. Köprülü had thought that Anatolian Bektashi, Haydari and Babai sources are more reliable on Ahmet Yesevi and his legacy than other works which he implicitly dismissed because they

⁴⁰ Devin DeWeese, "Foreword," In Köprülü, Mehmed Fuad, *Early Mystics in Turkish Literature*. Translated with an introduction by Gary Leiser and Robert Dankoff, London: Routledge. 2006, viii–xxvii.

⁴¹ Ibid, viii.

⁴² Ibid, xi.

⁴³ Ibid, xv.

⁴⁴ Ibid, xv.

⁴⁵ Ibid, xvi.

had a Naqshbandi influence. In DeWeese's view, this approach is the biggest obstacle to raise our understanding of the Yesevi tradition.⁴⁶

Similarly, to DeWeese, Ahmet T. Karamustafa remarked Köprülü and his follower's methodology and approach to Islam, Sufism, and saints. In his article *Origins of Anatolian Sufism*, mostly relying on DeWeese's findings regarding Yesevi Order, Karamustafa reached a conclusion that there was no straightforward evidence to indicate that Yesevi directed his Sufi preaching to illiterate Turkish speakers or that he composed *hikmets* for this purpose. Eventhough he attracted Turkish followings because of his probable Turkish identity, there is no indication that he adopted the goal of converting Turks to Islam. Furthermore, it is not possible, according to Karamustafa, to assume that the *hikmets* contained in this collection directly reflect the views of Yesevi himself.⁴⁷ On the other hand Karamustafa questioned Köprülü's claim of Yesevi dervishes came to Anatolia during the Mongol invasion. He challenged this view and stated that there was no evidence, except Hacı Bektaş Veli, that numerous Yesevi dervishes coming to Anatolia from Central Asia.⁴⁸ As he stated, Yesevi Order took shape long after the death of its eponymous figurehead and it is not possible to talk about a Yesevi Order during the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, in the same manner that one can talk about an institutionalized Yesevi presence during the following three centuries⁴⁹. It is quite natural to think that Hacı Bektaş, who developed his Sufi identity in the same cultural environment as Ahmet Yesevi, may have been influenced by him, but it is not reasonable to try to put the Sufi identity of Hacı Bektaş, a strong personality like Ahmet Yesevi, under the guise of Yesevi identity, which has not yet been formed.⁵⁰

Karamustafa also proposed to set aside the view that Hacı Bektaş was the disciple of Baba İlyas. According to this view Hacı Bektaş was not a Yesevi, but Vefai or was first Yesevi or Haydari then became Vefai. The strongest evidence for his claim was found in Eflaki's *Menakibu'l Arifin*, in which Hacı Bektaş was mentioned once as 'the favorite disciple.' However, Asıkpasazade and Elvan Çelebi do not indicate Hacı Bektaş as the disciple of Baba İlyas eventhough they themselves are the descendants of the latter.⁵¹

When it comes to the formation of Alevism in the context of the Islamization of Anatolia, Karamustafa asserted that the cult of saints and the desire to affiliate oneself to the lineage of the prophet laid in the center of the formation of Alevi *ocaks*. It was believed that the saints such as Baba İlyas and Hacı Bektaş were sayyids, and the sayyids were at the center of the *ocak* institution that emerged as a part of the Islamization process among the Turkmen. In other words, the root of the structure, which is defined as Alevi *ocaks* today, is based on the restructuring of some Turkmen and Kurdish communities within the framework of sayyids during the Islamization process.⁵² At the same time, the concept of *velayet*

⁴⁶ Ibid, xix.

⁴⁷ Karamustafa, *Origins of Sufi Islam in Anatolia*, 77.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 79.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 83.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid, 82.

⁵² Ahmet Karamustafa, "Anadolu'nun İslamlaşması Bağlamında Aleviliğin Oluşumu," in *Kızılbaşlık, Alevilik, Bektaşilik: Tarih, Kimlik, İnanç, Ritüel*, ed. Yalçın Çakmak, İmran Gürtaş İstanbul, İletişim, 2015, 48.

played a significant role and left its seeds among both mystics and the common people. Acts such as swearing allegiance to the living saints and the *mürşids* began to be woven like a net among the people. The folks also started to attribute meanings to the heroes of Islam, *gazis*, *babas* and *abdals* and adapted them as saints. Thus, various dervish groups began to form in Anatolia.⁵³ Added to this was the alliance of the Safavid Shahs with the Turkmen living in the Ottoman lands. Therefore, Kızılbaş emerged a type of folk Islam that has been shaped since the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, gaining a new color by being connected to the Safavid lineage.⁵⁴

New sources, approaches and methodologies

As the new sources came into surface, the understanding of Kızılbaş-Alevi, Bektashi and other dervish groups in Anatolia and neighboring geographies gradually changed. Historians used these sources to challenge the old theories cemented by late Ottoman and early republican authors in terms of their approaches that depicted Alevi and Bektashi as backward, heterodox, and syncretic. Also, they used these new sources to refute the long-accepted idea that these communities had not a written tradition, but an oral-based tradition of history. These sources, varied in style and content, consisted of mostly *buyruk*, *icazet-name* and *şecere texts*, *mecmua*, *divan*, *cönk*, *vakfiye* as well as the reports of missionaries and travelers.

Ayfer Karakaya-Stump was one of the first researcher to bring the views of American missionaries on Kızılbaş-Alevi to the scholarship.⁵⁵ She evidently showed that missionaries focused more on Kızılbaş-Alevi's origins and illustrated them as heterodox and syncretic. She also pointed out that in the aftermath, these approaches were inherited by many researchers who approached these communities in the same way. Karakaya criticized Köprülü because of his similar approach. She reviewed Köprülü's attitude to Alevism and Bektashism through the concepts of heterodoxy and orthodoxy on one hand, and on the other hand, she criticized his attempt to explain the religious understanding of these communities according to social and economic differentiation and stratification. Köprülü based Sunnism on the settled, urban, administrative, and written cultural environment, while he approached Alevi and Bektashi as a rural society who consisted of nomadic Turkmen tribes and situated them in the verbal cultural circles. According to Karakaya, this situation caused the Alevi-Bektashi communities to be seen as backward communities that understood religion superficially. Criticizing Köprülü's approach that sees Alevi and Bektashism as syncretic, she stated that all religions are syncretic in nature, and that the usage of this concept causes the aforementioned groups appear to be complex, non-holistic and non-original.

Nonetheless, what makes Karakaya's studies important for the field lays on her findings regarding the Alevi *ocak's* Vefai origins and how she challenges Köprülü's thesis of Central Asia as a root of Anatolian Sufism. According to her, Anatolian Sufism draws a multi-

⁵³ Ibid, 49.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 51–52.

⁵⁵ See, Karakaya-Stump, *The Emergence of the Kızılbaş in Western Thought: Missionary Accounts and Their Aftermath*.

ethnic landscape, and its legacy is to be sought not in Central Asia but in its relations with neighboring regions.⁵⁶ Karakaya, in majority of her publications, discussed the relationship of some Alevi *ocaks* with the Vefai Order, based on the *icazetname* and *şecere* documents she collected from the private libraries of the Alevi communities. According to her, the building blocks of the Anatolian Kızılbaş milieu were not individual tribes' coalition but various mystics, Sufi circles and wandering dervish groups from late Medieval Anatolia who adjoined under the spiritual and political leadership of the Safavid shahs. Already shaped Vefai network in Medieval Eastern Anatolia became one of the main components of this milieu in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.⁵⁷

On the other hand, Rıza Yıldırım focused more on Safavid links of Kızılbaş. His works covered wide range of topics from the transformation of the Safavid Sufi Order to their emergence as a political entity and to the contemporary Kızılbaş identity. He as well criticizes Mehmet Köprülü and his followers for conceptualizing Kızılbaş-Alevi religion as "heterodoxy," and searching the origins of the Kızılbaş-Alevi religion in medieval Sufi orders. According to him, present-day scholars even though they criticize Köprülü's views, they keep following his perspective which indicated that the origins of Kızılbaş-Alevi religion must be sought in Medieval Sufi Orders. As he states, this view neglects the Kızılbaş of Safavid Iran in the formation of the Kızılbaş-Alevi religion and thereby creates "an artificial line of demarcation between the categories of Kızılbaş and Alevi."⁵⁸

He states that Kızılbaş movement emerged as a tribal confederation – mostly Turcomans – in the second half of the fifteenth century and denies the claims that approach Kızılbaş as a coalition of mystics, Sufi and dervish groups.⁵⁹ He argues that the Kızılbaş-Alevi were not an extension of the Bektashi or of any other Sufi orders, such as the Yesevi, Kalenderi, or Vefai Order, but were the adherents of the Safavid dynasty as well as disciples of the Safavid Order.⁶⁰ According to him, Safavids had no intention to spread the Sharia abiding Shiism among the Anatolian followers as the Kızılbaş in Safavid Iran and the Kızılbaş in Ottoman Anatolia and the Balkans (today also called Alevi) are the same people and that they belonged to the same socio-religious order, which he terms 'Safavid-Kızılbaş ecumene'.⁶¹

Therefore, he rejects Karakaya-Stump's argument that the roots of the Alevi *ocaks* trace back to the Vefai Order and they incorporated into the Kızılbaş movement in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and that the continuation of these Vefai connected Alevi *ocaks* mediated between the Safavids and their Anatolian followers in the sixteenth and

⁵⁶ Ayfer Karakaya-Stump, "The Wafā'iyya, the Bektashiyye and Genealogies of 'Heterodox' Islam in Anatolia: Rethinking the Köprülü Paradigm," *Turcica* (44) 2012–2013, 295–296.

⁵⁷ Ayfer Karakaya-Stump, *The Kızılbaş/Alevi in Ottoman Anatolia: Sufism, Politics and Community*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020, 46, 227, 324.

⁵⁸ Rıza Yıldırım, "The Safavid-Qizilbash Ecumene and the Formation of the Qizilbash-Alevi Community in the Ottoman Empire, c. 1500–c. 1700," *Iranian Studies*, Vol. 52, Nos. 3–4, 2019, 450.

⁵⁹ See, Rıza Yıldırım, *Aleviliğin Doğuşu*, İstanbul, İletişim, 2017; Yıldırım, *The Safavid-Qizilbash Ecumene*.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 451. For the same assertion that the Safavid and Ottoman Qizilbashes shared the same religious and social institutions also see, Rıza Yıldırım, *Menakıb-ı Evliya (Buyruk) Tarihsel Arka Plan, Metin Analizi, Edisyon Kritik Metin*, İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2020.

⁶¹ Yıldırım, *The Safavid-Qizilbash Ecumene*, 456.

seventeenth centuries. As he suggests, *ocaks*, in later centuries were shaped from the *khalife* families. As a result of the collapse of the Safavids dynasty, the communication between the Kızılbaş in Anatolia and Iran was broken, leading to the development of the other strategies to sustain their existence. In the absence of Safavid authority, the development of the *ocak-talib* system is implemented and each *ocak* turned into an autonomous socio-religious entity.⁶²

Another academic, Ayşe Baltacıoğlu-Brammer researched Kızılbaş communities from a different perspective. She argues that the first wave of the revisionist writers – the followers of Köprülü-Ocak tradition – saw the issue of Kızılbaş as a mere security problem in the context of the Ottoman state building process. This approach reinforced the essentialist stance regarding the relationship of these groups, by describing a sharp difference between ‘low’ and ‘high’ Islam and overlooking the geographical and ethnic diversity within the Kızılbaş populations.⁶³ On the other hand, the second wave revisionist historians, who criticized ‘Köprülü-Ocak tradition’, focused on the Kızılbaş communities in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as an ‘umbrella movement’ against the Ottoman central authority. However, this approach reduced the Ottoman Kızılbaş policy to one of suppression and persecution while neglecting the fact that Kızılbaş Islam was more than a frontier phenomenon. These studies examined the adaptation of obstinate Sunni identity of Ottoman State, as the reason for repressive policies rather than as a result of the Kızılbaş threat.⁶⁴ To avoid one-sided explanations, Baltacıoğlu-Brammer uses both Safavid, Ottoman and European primary sources in her studies and discusses Safavid, Ottoman and Kızılbaş relations not only from a religious perspective, but also from a socio-political, cultural, and financial points.

Lastly, we should mention Zeynep Oktay Uslu, whose studies mainly centered on *abdals*, but in wider frame on Alevi-Bektashi history and literature. Her studies on *abdal* groups in fourteenth-seventeenth centuries revealed that the doctrine of Muḥammad-Ali as well as the veneration of the Twelve Imams and the *ahl al-bayt* were already established in these circles in the fourteenth century. Therefore, according to Oktay-Uslu, it is high time to leave the theory suggesting that these doctrines entered Alevi and Bektashi milieu with Safavid propaganda.⁶⁵ She also shows that the doctrines of *tevilla-teberra* as well as Ḥurufi thought became part of Bektashi and Abdal doctrine from the fifteenth century onwards, while the veneration of the Fourteen Pure Innocents (*çardeh maşum-ı pak*) probably became widespread in the sixteenth century. Moreover, she rightfully demonstrates that in most cases Bektashi and *abdal* categories must not treaded as two distinctive categories as the authors of this milieu express themselves both as Bektashi and Abdal. However, we should not also conflate these two categories. Therefore, Oktay-Uslu proposes to understand the individuals as a first step in analyzing the bigger picture of Bektashi environment and a larger Anatolian religious history.⁶⁶

⁶² Ibid, 462.

⁶³ Ayşe Baltacıoğlu-Brammer, *Safavid Conversion Propaganda in Ottoman Anatolia and the Ottoman Reaction, 1440s–1630s*, unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Ohio State University, 2016, 7.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 8.

⁶⁵ Zeynep Oktay Uslu, *The Perfect Man in Bektashism and Alevism: Kaygusuz Abdāl’s Kitāb-ı Mağlaṭa*, unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Université Paris Sciences et Lettres, 2017, English, 334.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 33.

Conclusion

The modern scholarship related to the Kızılbaş-Alevi and Bektashi groups started at the last phase of Ottoman Empire and gained momentum at the beginning of republican period. The earliest studies were mostly based on the field research of CUP members and supporters and were published in the nationalistic journals of the time. These articles were essentialist in their nature, and the content of them aimed to establish a public opinion on the Turkishness of the Kızılbaş-Alevi and Bektashi communities. Apart from these semi-academic and journalistic style articles, many scholars wrote about these communities in an academic level. The most important one was Mehmet Fuat Köprülü, whose methodology and approaches still influences the present-day researchers. Especially, his claim that Ahmet Yesevi and Yesevi dervishes had an essential effect on Turkish Sufism, Alevi and Bektashism, widely accepted by researchers due to the fact that it has nationalistic connotations in it. However, the new generation of researchers who do not fall to the nationalistic tendencies in their studies refuted Köprülü's arguments. Partly Ocak, extensively DeWeese and Karamustafa criticized Köprülü in terms of his Yesevi thesis, pointing out that the sources do not reveal such a conclusion.

Besides the first revisionist researchers' efforts to refute Köprülü's approaches, newly emerged Alevi sources used by young researchers also weakened Köprülü's Yesevi thesis. These group of researchers, especially Ayfer Karakaya brought into the spotlight the Vefai Order's relation to the Kızılbaş-Alevi and Bektashi groups by using Alevi private libraries. At the same time, Yıldırım pointed out that Köprülü and researchers who tried to find the roots of Kızılbaş-Alevi in Medieval Sufi orders, often neglected the importance of Safavid Kızılbaş on the formation of Kızılbaş-Alevi communities in Ottoman Empire. Therefore, he also integrated Safavid sources to his research. Ayşe Baltacıoğlu-Brammer used another approach, in which she evaluated the Kızılbaş movement not only from the perspective of religion, but also from the socio-political, cultural, and financial aspects. And finally, Zeynep Oktay Uslu pointed to the importance of interpreting the perspectives of individuals as a starting point in analyzing the big picture of the Bektashi milieu and the wider history of Anatolian religions.

As it can be understood, the main character of the first period Alevi and Bektashi studies – considering the conditions of the period in which it was conducted – had a nationalistic and essentialist nature. Although later studies diverged somewhat from nationalist references, they treated these communities as heterodox and syncretic, and reinforced the general idea that they had a 'corrupt' understanding of Islam. Recent important studies on Alevi and Bektashi have refuted these earlier claims, especially those of Köprülü, and have developed new terms, resources and methodologies while portraying these communities. Hopefully, this field, still in its infancy, will enable us to explore new sources and perspectives in the future and will guide us on how to evaluate the history, beliefs, and culture of these communities.