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Historiography of Bektashism

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Summary

The historiography of Bektashism represents a striking example of the entanglement between identity, politics, and historical narrative. Historical representations of the Bektashi tradition have been shaped not only by academic interests but by competing political agendas. Thus, Bektashism has been interpreted through various historiographical lenses: as a tolerant, free-thinking crypto-Christian tradition, an inherently Turkish religious culture, a vehicle for socialist thought, or a tradition aligned with Sunni interpretations of Islam. While more recent scholarship has begun to challenge such essentialist frameworks and introduced more nuanced and pluralistic perspectives, many of these narratives continue to exert influence in both academic and public discourses.

Western European Discourses: Bektashis as Crypto-Christian Freethinkers

One of the earliest and most influential discourses on Bektashism emerged in the 19th century outside the Ottoman Empire, particularly in Western Europe and North America (Kara 2019, 234-257). As travel, missionary activity, and diplomatic engagement intensified, Western scholars and writers encountered Bektashi communities across the Ottoman Empire and began to construct distinct narratives about them. These accounts often portrayed the Bektashi order as liberal, tolerant, and rational – qualities set in deliberate contrast to dominant depictions of Sunni Islam. Central to this image was the Bektashis' apparent disregard for Sharia law and perceived inclusive religious ethos, which led to their idealisation as freethinkers and enlightened mystics. Some observers even framed the order as the most "enlightened" expression of Islam, or as existing entirely outside the bounds of Islam itself (ibid. 237-242). These depictions were reinforced by frequent comparisons to Freemasonry, invoking shared associations of secrecy, enlightenment, and freethinking. While often admiring in tone, such portrayals projected Western ideals onto a selectively interpreted "Other," embedding romanticisation within a broader framework of cultural hierarchy and orientalist appropriation (ibid. 255 f.).

A particularly far-reaching variant of this appropriative discourse was a Christianising

narrative, portraying Bektashism as essentially rooted in Christian traditions (Kara 2019, 242-252; see also Karakaya-Stump 2004; Dressler 2015, 31-77). Christian missionaries, orientalists, diplomats, and travel writers interpreted Bektashism as a crypto-Christian sect – a community that had only superficially converted to Islam while preserving essential Christian beliefs and practices. This interpretation relied on perceived similarities between Bektashi and Christian traditions, including simplified correlations in numerical symbolism (e.g. Hakk-Muhammad-Ali and the Christian Trinity; the Twelve Imams and the Twelve Apostles). A prominent voice in this regard was the German Orientalist Georg Jacob (1862–1937), who situated Bektashism within a wider context of Christian Gnostic movements. Jacob argued that Bektashis maintained Christian beliefs cloaked in Islamic vocabulary, emphasising supposed borrowings from Christian “heresies”, Neoplatonism, and Gnostic traditions (Jakob 1909). His analysis followed a strongly essentialist framework, portraying Bektashi traditions as derivative constructs shaped by external influence and denying the Islamic world agency in the development of its own religious and cultural expressions (Kara 2019, 250). While some Western European and North American authors provided more nuanced accounts of the relationship between Christianity and Bektashism, rather than simply asserting dependency (e.g. Hasluck 1929), or analysed Bektashi history without consistently framing it in relation to other traditions (Birge 1937), the crypto-Christian narrative nevertheless gained broad circulation.

From the early 20th century onwards, Bektashi authors began to engage with Western representations and to reframe them. While assertions of crypto-Christian origins were consistently refuted, depictions of tolerance, liberalism, and freethinking were increasingly embraced as authentic expressions of Bektashi belief (Kara 2010, 369-373). Although these terms had rarely appeared in earlier Bektashi writings, they gradually gained prominence in shaping the community’s modern self-understanding. In the context of political transformation and growing transregional exchange, Bektashi authors reinterpreted elements of their doctrine – such as antinomianism and metaphysical egalitarianism – through the framework of Enlightenment values. Yet rather than passively adopting Western tropes, they selectively integrated and adapted them in ways that resonated with internal categories and responded to contemporary challenges. In this process, ideals of openness and liberalism were not only affirmed but increasingly recast as features of Turkish culture – detached from their Western genealogies and recontextualised within emerging frameworks of Turkish nationalism (ibid 357-363, 369-373).

The Turkish Nationalist Discourse: Bektashis as Heirs of Turkish Culture

From the 1910s onwards, nationalist reinterpretations in Turkey began to challenge

Western portrayals of Bektashism as a crypto-Christian tradition. Turkish nationalist authors such as Baha Said (1882–1939) and, in particular, Fuad Köprülü (1888–1966) redefined Bektashism – along with Kizilbash-Alevism – as distinctly Turkish and heterodox forms of Islam rooted in pre-Islamic Turkic religious practices. This emerging historiographical approach detached Bektashism from Christianising and Western interpretations and embedded it instead within a narrative of ethno-cultural continuity and national identity.

Baha Said presented Hacı Bektaş Veli as a mystical scholar who harmonised Islamic teachings with the pre-Islamic beliefs of Turkic peoples (Baha Said 1926). Similarly, Köprülü, one of the most influential scholars of the early Republican period, interpreted Bektashism and Kizilbash-Alevism as continuations of religious traditions prevalent among Turkic communities prior to Islamisation. He described Bektashism as a form of heterodox popular mysticism that preserved elements of a Turkic religious past – superficially Islamised, yet mostly shaped by pre-Islamic Turkic traditions (Körpülü 1925; Dressler 2015, 239-251). Within this framework, Köprülü assigned a central role to Ahmed Yesevi, portraying him as a mediator between pre-Islamic Turkic culture and Islamic mysticism, and as a formative influence on the emergence of Bektashism (Köprülü 1918; Dressler 2015, 189-194; Karamustafa 2005). Despite reaching different conclusions, Köprülü ultimately followed a similarly essentialist logic to Jacob’s, replacing the Christianising narrative with a Turkish nationalist one.

Köprülü’s normative evaluations dismissed certain Bektashi doctrines as corrupt, deviant, or schismatic, and framed Alevism and Bektashism in an elitist and condescending tone (Dressler 2015, 196-199; Kara 2019, 356 f.). As Sunni Islam came to serve an integrative function within the Turkish nationalist movement, Bektashis and Alevis posed a challenge to the project of national homogenisation. They were thus culturally integrated as carriers of Turkish heritage, but at the same time religiously excluded as religious deviants from the Sunni majority ideal (Dressler 2015, 220).

Köprülü’s narrative soon extended beyond academic circles and, from the 1920s onwards, was increasingly adopted by Bektashi agents in Turkey (Kara 2019, 357-363). They began identifying Bektashism as a uniquely Turkish path and expressed support for the Republic, even after Atatürk banned Sufi orders in 1925 (ibid. 360 f.). Interestingly, a similar nationalist narrative emerged in Albania a few years earlier, defining Bektashism as distinctly Albanian tradition and deliberately dissociated from Turkish influences in the context of Albanian nation-building. These competing national narratives ultimately contributed to the fragmentation of the

Bektashi order along national lines – a division that continues to this day (ibid. 367-369; Clayer 2013, 368–383).

Despite the broad acceptance of nationalist historiography among Bektashis, some intellectuals voiced criticism. Rıza Tevfik (1869-1949), for instance, rejected Köprülü's ethnically reductive framework and instead highlighted the philosophical depth and universal orientation of Bektashi thought (Rıza Tevfik 1914a, 1914b; Kara 2019, 363-367). Nevertheless, Köprülü's conceptual framework remained dominant throughout the 20th century, shaping both academic scholarship and Bektashi self-perception. Only in the late 20th and early 21st century did more critical perspectives begin to challenge this paradigm (e.g. Dressler 2015; Karakaya-Stump 2020; Karamustafa 2005; Yıldırım 2019). In this way, nationalist historiography established a long-lasting interpretative paradigm that continues to influence representations of Bektashism today.

The Socialist Discourse: Bektashis as Agents of the Ottoman State

From the 1960s onwards – and especially after the 1980s – a third major discourse emerged, reinterpreting the history of Bektashism and Alevism through socialist and Marxist concepts. Socialist authors sympathetic to Alevi concerns began to apply Marxist historical materialism, which foregrounds the struggle between oppressors and the oppressed, to the development of these traditions (Gorzewski 2010, 159 f.).

In this narrative, figures such as Pir Sultan Abdal and Hacı Bektaş Veli were recast as proto-socialist thinkers and advocates of the people, who were said to have founded early forms of "Turkish communes" (Öz 2008, 70, 77). In contrast, the Bektashi order was often linked to the Ottoman state and portrayed as an instrument of political control. In particular, its institutional reorganisation by Balım Sultan in the early 16th century was interpreted as a state-driven intervention. The Bektashis were thus seen as instruments of the Ottoman Empire to control the oppositional Kizilbash-Alevis, with the Babagan branch, led by the Dedebaba, portrayed as aligned with the state (Gorzewski 2010, 160).

Although the historical split between the Çelebiyyan and Babagan branches likely occurred in the 19th century, the Babagan line was associated in this discourse with proximity to the state. This interpretation may be linked to the fact that prominent representatives of the Babagan branch supported state-sponsored nationalist historiography during the period when socialist narratives became more prominent. The association was thus possibly projected back onto earlier periods (Kara 2025).

The Conformist Discourse: Bektashis as Sunni Muslims

Another strand of scholarship that has shaped the historiography of Bektashism since the founding of the Turkish Republic concerns research on Sufism and theology. While often intersecting with Turkish nationalist discourses, this body of work primarily examines Bektashi history from a religious perspective. The most influential figure in this tradition is undoubtedly Abdülbaki Gölpınarlı (1900–1982), widely regarded as a pioneer of Sufi studies in Anatolia. A student of Köprülü, Gölpınarlı was also among his most prominent critics, advancing beyond the frameworks established by his mentor. Although his works remain foundational and are still frequently cited, Gölpınarlı often portrayed Bektashi doctrines in a critical light, drawing on his own Shi‘i and Mevlevi background in his assessments (Gölpınarlı 1963, 1995; Kara 2025).

Many Sufi historians in Turkey followed Gölpınarlı’s method, which combined sound textual knowledge with a critical theological approach, yet their interpretations of Bektashi history were predominantly shaped by Sunni perspectives (Kara 2025). In particular, Hacı Bektaş Veli is often portrayed in this literature as a Sunni mystic whose teachings were distorted by his later followers. Accordingly, the ‘true’ Bektashism rooted in Hacı Bektaş Veli was a Sunni order, whereas Alid and nonconformist elements commonly associated with Bektashism today are seen as later corruptions (e.g. Öztürk 1990, 12-19; Soileau 2014, 456 f.).

A particular strand of this Sunni-centred representation of Bektashism involves attempts to link the order historically to the Naqshbandi tradition and even to Maturidism. Here, too, the nationalist narrative that Bektashism emerged from the Yesevi tradition serves as a foundational premise. In simplified terms, Maturidism is seen as having influenced Yesevism, which in turn gave rise to both Bektashiyya and Naqshbandiyya. Across these works, there is a shared tendency to focus on selected textual sources, interpreted in isolation from community-based belief systems, and to extract a normative ‘core’ of Bektashi thought. In doing so, these authors often apply the interpretive models of their own religious traditions – particularly those rooted in text-based piety – to Bektashism (Kara 2025).

Conclusion: Beyond Essentialist Discourses

What unites the diverse approaches to the history of Bektashism is the entanglement of historiography and identity constructions. Christian missionaries and Orientalists interpreted Bektashism as a religious counterpart to their own traditions in the “Orient”; Turkish nationalists saw Bektashis as carriers and heirs of Turkish civilisation; socialist writers evaluated their history through the lens of Marxist theory; and Sunni theologians selectively highlighted elements of the tradition that could be read as Sunni in order to appropriate them into a Sunni narrative. Political aims and intentions

are evident throughout these discourses, shaping historiography in instrumental ways – albeit with very different ideological frameworks and possibilities.

To sustain these politically and ideologically charged narratives, authors focused selectively on certain aspects of Bektashi history and doctrine: elements that supported the prevailing narrative were emphasised, while contradictory aspects were relativised or ignored altogether. In doing so, all actors constructed fundamentally essentialist accounts of Bektashism that assumed a fixed core and framed historical developments as superficial modifications. Methodologically, the various discourses thus converged to some extent, despite their divergent content.

More recent scholarship has sought to move beyond essentialist and identity-driven models, uncovering previously neglected dimensions of Bektashi history and offering new insights into the multifaceted, fluid and dynamic history of Bektashism. While not yet consistently reflected in the field, this paradigm shift has reshaped the field and expand its interpretive horizons.

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