



Kızılbaş (Kizilbash)

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Summary

The Kizilbash movement emerged in fifteenth-century Anatolia through the transformation of the Safavid order and the convergence of various Sufi, dervish, and messianic currents. Recent scholarship, drawing on newly uncovered manuscript materials, has challenged older portrayals of the Kizilbash as a homogeneous body of superficially Islamized Turcoman tribesmen and instead highlights their social and ethnic diversity as well as their embeddedness in wider Sufi networks. The movement developed within the context of Ottoman-Safavid rivalry, which contributed to the persecution and marginalization of Kizilbash communities in the Ottoman realm, while Kizilbash identity in Safavid Iran was gradually absorbed into Twelver Shi'ism. In Anatolia, however, these communities maintained distinct religious practices and communal structures, especially through localized saintly lineages, and eventually formed the historical basis of the Alevi tradition.

Keywords: Alevi, Kızılbaş, Qizilbash, Rum, Safavids, Shah Ismā'il

Historical Background and Development

Kizilbash (Turk. *Kızılbaş*, Pers. *Qizilbāsh*), literally “red-head,” is an epithet designating affiliates of a religio-political movement in Anatolia formed by a coalition of nonconformist Sufi circles and radical dervish groups under the spiritual leadership of the Safavid family (Pers. *dūdman*, Turk. *ocak*). First appearing in the late fifteenth century, the term derives from the distinctive crimson headgear (Pers. *tāj-i haydarī*) with twelve gores symbolizing the Twelve Imams, worn by the Sufi fighters of the Safavid order. The Kizilbash communities are precursors of modern Alevi groups.

The history and nature of the Kizilbash movement have long been obscured by the scarcity of contemporary self-produced sources and the heavy reliance on hostile outsider accounts, which portrayed the Kizilbash as superficially Islamized Turcoman tribesmen driven by blind devotion to Shah Ismā'il. On the basis of such sources, conventional scholarship often relegated Kizilbash religiosity to a timeless syncretism of Turkish folk Islam or a manifestation of early *ghulāt* Shi'ism. More recent scholarship, however, has fundamentally revised this picture by uncovering previously untapped manuscripts and documents preserved in the family archives of Alevi saintly lineages. These findings challenge the perception of the Kizilbash as a historical anomaly, instead highlighting their deep embeddedness within the wider cosmopolitan Sufi currents of late medieval Anatolia and neighboring regions. They also debunk the myth that all Kizilbash were Turcoman nomads, revealing significant ethnic and social diversity within the early Kizilbash milieu, including Kurds, Zazas, peasants, townspeople, and even lower-ranking bureaucrats in the Ottoman civil and military establishment.

The immediate roots of the Kizilbash movement lie in the transformation of the Safavid order from a contemplative Sufi *ṭarīqa* into a radical religio-political force in the fifteenth century, consolidating under the charismatic leadership of Shah Isma'il (1487-1524). The Kizilbash milieu was not, however, a purely Safavid creation, but had autonomous antecedents grounded in a cluster of interconnected Sufi and dervish groups. The thirteenth- and fourteenth-century proliferation of dervish networks -such as the Abdals of Rum (Turk. *Rum Abdalları*) and the Saints of Khorasan (Turk. *Horasan Erenleri*)- along with the spread of orders like the Vefa'iyye and Bektaşiiyye, provided idioms that later Kizilbash groups would rework. These groups shared a mode of piety marked by an esoteric and 'Alid orientation and by claims to spiritual authority based on personal or genealogical charisma, which stood in tension with the textual authority of legalist Islam. Rather than a rupture, the

emergence of the Kizilbash represents a reconfiguration of these Sufi and dervish networks and their older saintly authorities under the new horizon of Safavid charisma. The distinctive institutions and lineages that developed within this framework would in time crystallize into the hereditary *ocak* system of the Alevis.

The Kizilbash movement must also be situated within the wider matrix of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century messianic and millenarian currents. The messianic dimension of the movement found its most clear expression in the Turkish poetry of Shah Ismā'il, which wove together Mahdist motifs with a monistic conception of the divine. Recent scholarship shows that these poems are best understood within established Sufi literary conventions and in dialogue with other contemporary messianic and millenarian movements, rather than as proof of a crude deification of Shah Ismā'il or a mere revival of early *ghulāt* Shi'ism, as older scholarship often assumed. Indeed, the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries witnessed heightened messianic expectation across all three Abrahamic religions, with apocalyptic imagery and charismatic claimants circulating widely throughout the region. The Kizilbash emerged as one prominent manifestation of this broader phenomenon, though the movement's Mahdist undertones gradually receded as it developed into a more enduring communal Alevi identity.

The Kizilbash were deeply entangled in the political struggles of the sixteenth-century Ottoman-Safavid rivalry. Their spiritual allegiance to Shah Isma'il and participation in anti-Ottoman uprisings made them prime targets of persecution, especially during the reign of Sultan Selim I. The rise of the Safavid state at the turn of the sixteenth century also precipitated a process of Sunni confessionalization within the Ottoman Empire, as the Ottomans came to equate both political loyalty and religious orthodoxy with adherence to a more rigidly defined, sharia-centered Sunni Islam. In this new confessional landscape, the Kizilbash/Alevis emerged as the quintessential "other" of Ottoman Sunnism -politically unreliable and religiously

deviant. Subjected to repeated waves of persecution and enduring socio-economic marginalization even after Selim I, many Kizilbash communities were increasingly confined to peripheral rural areas. Within the Sunni Ottoman world, the very term *Kızılbaş* took on a sharply pejorative sense, connoting both religious heresy and political subversion.

While Kizilbash identity in Safavid Persia was primarily associated with the Turcophone military elite and was assimilated into mainstream Imami Shi'ism within a few generations, it persisted as a distinct identity and confession in Ottoman Anatolia despite a hostile political and religious environment. Kizilbash communities endured across rural Anatolia and neighboring regions, especially in the Balkans, preserving their religious practices and communal structures, which gradually crystallized into a self-contained religious community. Their survival was sustained by localized spiritual networks and saintly lineages (*ocak*) with deep roots in Sufism, which provided continuity and resilience while also serving as a bulwark against Safavid efforts at Shi'itization.

Conclusion

The Kizilbash movement was a multifaceted religio-political phenomenon that emerged from the transformation of the Safavid order in the fifteenth century, drawing upon the Sufi and millenarian currents of its time to forge a powerful coalition of various antinomian Sufi groups and radical dervish orders. Vilified in Ottoman discourse and persecuted as rebels and heretics, and assimilated into sharia-bound Imami Shi'ism in Safavid Iran, the Kizilbash nonetheless laid the foundations for what became the enduring Alevi tradition, which today constitutes about 15% of Turkey's population, with related communities in the Balkans.

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