

# Between Social Transformation and Continuity: Bektashi Sufi Music Tradition in the Republic of Macedonia

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## Abstract

Bektashism order as a spiritual direction in Sufism has always aroused attention regarding social behavior stemming from its doctrine and ideology. In the Republic of Macedonia, Bektashi dervish order has its roots in the 13th century, before the arrival of the Ottomans, through the activity of the dervishes who traveled and settled in this territory. One of the most important and influential tekkes is Harabati Baba in Tetovo, built during the 16th century, which in the course of history has passed through turbulent social ordeals, but still remains a synonym of Bektashism in the Republic of Macedonia. Hence came our idea to present in this paper the social transformations resulting from the change in the ethnic structure of the followers, and the social and political situation of the country. We view this situation through musical tradition, because it is an important part of the ritual and serves as a fundamental tool in the expression of mystical theosophy. We achieved our goal through field research, by interviews and analysis of audio and printed music materials that are used today and testify to the change of the sound image of the music tradition of Bektashi in Harabati Baba Tekke in Tetovo.

**Keywords:** Sufi, Bektashi dervish order, musical tradition, social transformation, Macedonia

## 1. Introduction

“Let us all be friends for ever  
Let us take and make life easy  
Let us be lovers and beloved ones-  
Nobody owns the earth.”

(Yunus Emre)

As one of the 12 basic dervish orders in Islam, Bektashism is a mystical path which aims at purifying the soul of a man to bring him to reach the ultimate goal—closest to God. As a doctrine that is based on the principles of Islam, Bektashism has its own interpretations of the Quran and the learning of the prophet Muhammad and of the 12 imams.

This dervish order also exists in the Republic of Macedonia through its activities in several sacred objects, the so-called tekkes. The oldest one, Harabati Baba Tekke in Tetovo, was founded in 1526. According to its significance, for centuries, this tekke has been one of the most important and most influential Bektashi cores in the entire region. In the course of history, this tekke experienced large turbulences during its existence, particularly with the work ban from 1826 to 1870, with the decree by the Sultan Mahmud II, as well as by the stoppage during the period from 1947 to 1993 because of its seizure by the Law on Nationalization (1946) in the Communist system in Yugoslavia. During these stoppages, Bektashi performed the spiritual services in the homes or in the Bektashi tekkes in adjacent cities. Three years after the independence of the Republic of Macedonia, in 1994 began the revitalization of Harabati Baba tekke, which lasts until today. At the same time, efforts are being made for its recognition by the Islamic Religious Community in Macedonia, which is being opposed due to unsettled relations.

One of the most important means of spiritual addressing during the ceremony of the Bektashi is the music that is actually a result of folk music and literature creativity. In this sense, the music, as a sublimate of the folk

tradition and spiritual expression, has been modified according to the social ordeals of circumstances that Harabati Baba tekke and the followers passed through. Today, these transformations are significant in relation to the ethnic structure and the number of followers, which entail changes in the melodic-poetic form of expressing the spiritual feelings. Hence, the purpose of this paper is to present, through the prism of social transformations, the continuity and today's image of the music tradition of Bektashi at Harabati Baba tekke.

In view of the basic doctrine of the Bektashi ideology, mysticism, and reticence (Bektash—secret, mysterious) of the spiritual ceremonies, we realized our research of the musical tradition through a technique of direct conversations, nondirective or free interviews with the dervish Abdulmutalib as the main source of information. We supplemented the field findings on musical traditions with the analysis of printed and audio materials from the spiritual musical repertoire, which are used in the tekke.

## 2. Characteristics of the Bektashi Order

Bektashism order as a spiritual direction in Sufism has always aroused attention regarding social behavior stemming from its doctrine and ideology. The essence of Sufism is learning to do without desire, or envy or achievement anything more than humility. Although the conceptual platform of the founder of this dervish order—Hadji Bektash Veli (13th century) was based on the Quran, in the Bektashi ideology, there are elements of several religions and faiths (Fırlalı, 1991), and therefore it is defined as "heterodox Islam." The main feature of the Bektashi rituals is mysticism, with isopsephy (Tur. ebced hesabı), i.e., philosophy of letters, and that is why findings about them rely mainly on the oral tradition.

The first penetrations of Bektashi in the Balkans were made way back in the 13th century, before the arrival of the Ottomans in these territories as a result of the activities of the dervishes who traveled and settled in these regions (Noyan, 1987). One of them was the dervish Sari Saltuk who came in 1263 with 12,000 Turkmen families (Gölpınarlı, 1995).

The other factor that contributed to the expansion of this dervish order in the Balkans is the Janissary-Bektashi relation (Trimingham, 1971; Koçu, 1964). The expansion of the Bektashism at the time of Ottomans in Macedonia is confirmed by the fact that 12 Bektashi tekkes were active.

In 1826, during the time of Sultan Mahmut II, the decree was adopted for banning the activity of this dervish order. With this decree, most of the tekkes were closed or, otherwise, continued to work under the shelter and under the name of a dervish order Naksibendi (Gündüz, 1984).

With the ban of the dervish orders in the Republic of Turkey, enforced by Ataturk in 1925, the leadership of the Bektashi moved to Ankara and awaited official approval from the Turkish state. Five years later, in 1929, the world center of Bektashi moved to Albania, where they were supported by the king Zog. During the regime of Enver Hoxha (1967–1990) and the secularization of the state, Bektashism dispersed to Detroit, because of its connection with the Albanian diaspora, and also because of the possibility of a free religious expression in the United States.

### 2.1 Musical Characteristics of the Bektashi Spiritual Rituals

Musical form and instruments used during spiritual rituals are closer to profane music sphere. Bektashi literature is considered to be a continuation of the folk literature, and the music as a part of the folk music creativity, and that is why they have local characteristics. The authors of some of the texts were eminent poets, mostly members of this dervish order, which deeply penetrated in the essence and the philosophical basis of Bektashism. Among them are included Yunus Emre, Pir Sultan Abdal, Bosnevi, Azmi and so on, and in the recent period the poetry of Yusuf Mazuri is especially prevalent.

Poetry of Bektashi is called *nutuk* (Tur. speech), and the music by which it is performed gives life, vitality, and peace of mind, and that is why it is called *nefes*—the sound of breath (Tur. breath). *Nefes* has an important function to transfer Alevi-Bektashi doctrine from generation to generation. They are written in verse like folk poems about love and nature, mostly related with Sufi and order dogmas. The language used is generally pure Turkish. The themes in *nefes* are expressed with a special style and the words are used in their figurative meaning. The reason to use figurative language is to distinguish Bektashi doctrine from other doctrines and to lead the Bektashis to understand the teaching by using their brains. Therefore, in Bektashi language the words have more than one meaning. The words gain meaning according to the interpretation of listeners.

Hence, during ceremonies, the main musical-poetic form is *nefes*, and also are performed *gazel*—improvization, *mersije*—elegy for the imam Hussein, *duvaz*—poem dedicated to the 12 imams, as well as the *nevrüz*—anthem for the holiday Nevruz (Talu, 2002). Some types of *nefes*, such as *deste nefes*, are sung in two or three voices. There also appears some forms of imitation and lying bass tones, representing a kind of harmony that basically is

not peculiar to the Turkish music. With regard to the rhythmic pattern, the most frequent usual is Aksak rhythm, 9/8 beat.

The performers of the Bektashi music are called *zahir* or *asik*. From the musical instruments of the past, string instruments are mainly used, and today other types of instruments are represented too, such as accordion, clarinet, guitar, and violin, especially in the urban areas. During the Bektashi spiritual ceremonies, in addition to singing of the spiritual compositions, dancing which is called *sema* is practiced too. It is a ritual dance which is practiced accompanied by vocal–instrumental performances.

### 3. Dervish Order Bektashi in R. Macedonia

Today, active in R. Macedonia are the tekkes Harabati Baba in Tetovo, Dikmen Baba in the village of Kanatlarci, H'd'r Baba in Resen. In 2010, in Kicevo, was formed a new group under the leadership of Zija Baba. By ethnic structure, members of the Bektashi order in R. Macedonia are from the Albanian, Turkish, and Gorani community, and they are divided by tekkes.

#### 3.1 Bektashi Tekke in Tetovo

The founder of the Bektashi tekke in Tetovo was Sersem Ali Baba in 1526, and his successor was Harabati Sultan, and that is where the name of tekke comes from. During many centuries of tekke's existence, 18 leaders have been interchanged, and they were selected by merit.

After the death of the last local elder Baba Tahir Emiri (1993–2006) from Tetovo, the dedelik from Tirana appointed Baba Edmond Brahimaj (Baba Mondî), who came from and lived in the Republic of Albania, as the head of the Bektashi order in Harabati Baba in Tetovo. He was the head of the entire Bektashi order of the Albanian population in this region (Albania, Kosovo, and Macedonia). Because of that, part of this dervish order separated and leaned toward the Bektashi in Kicevo under the leadership of Zija Baba, associated with the Turkish ethnic community. In this branch, which is recognized by the official Islamic Religious Community in the Republic of Macedonia under the name "Ehli Bejt community," is included Bektashi of the tekke Dikmen Baba from the village of Kanatlarci.

Among the most important dates in the recent history of the tekke is 22 March 1994, when on the occasion of celebrating the feast Nevruz, Bektashi dervishes were allowed to return to their home territory in Harabati Baba Tekke in Tetovo. From that period, until now, the property problems start with the Islamic Religious Community; they are still present, and they reflect on the number of followers, the financial situation, as well as the condition of the monument constructed by Redjep Pasha during the 18th century. However, the architectonic attractiveness of the tekke as the most unique monument of the Islamic culture in Macedonia, with 11 turbes, fountain, tower, dervishane, etc., still contributes to the continuous interest, maintaining this cult place as a historic symbol, where an American flag is placed next to the Albanian and the Bektashi flags.

Today, the only dervish in Harabati Baba tekke is Abdulmutalib Bakiri (1955 -), native of the neighboring villages, who, from the stages of spiritual development, has passed through the hierarchical levels of *mohit* (1987) and *dervish* (1994). He is a dervish who leads the religious ceremonies in the absence of Dede Baba Mondî, and along with Professor Arben Sulejmani, he represents the Tetovo Bektashi at the official state and religious manifestations (Prof. Arben Sulejmani, pers. comm.).

According to the information obtained from an interview with the dervish, there is an interest in the order however the number of individuals who are potential members fully embracing the followings and ideology of this theosophy is very small. An additional reason for the discretion in public declaring is due to the strong social cohesion of the official Islamic religion. Namely, the bulk of the Muslim population in the city and the wider surroundings belong to the Sunnite branch of Islam, and Bektashism is considered to be a kind of heresy because of certain rituals in their rites (Abdulmutalib, pers. comm.).

#### 3.2 Musical Tradition and Rituals

Harabati Baba tekke for centuries had a significant sociocultural role for the entire surroundings and attached importance to the arts—literature, music, and painting. This is confirmed by poetic forms written on panels and on tomb stones, paintings that have remained on some of the tekke walls, as well as the discovered musical instruments, *sazes*. Due to the ideological basis which is based on mysticism, music in the rituals of the Bektashi is considered to be the most powerful tool for the education of the personality, purifying of the heart, and food for the soul.

Unlike during the past, when spiritual rituals of the Bektashi dervish order in Harabati Baba tekke were performed regularly every Thursday and Sunday evening, today they are reduced without certain time periods.

These rituals are called *muhabet* and consist of verbal communication and performance of musical forms. In the verbal part, conversations are made regarding the essential issues, as well as about the philosophical aspects of this dervish order. Subject of discussion in muhabets can be prepared, or it can arise spontaneously from the needs of the dzemat (congregation).

In Harabati Baba, two types of muhabets are applied: Ajin-i-dzem (informal ceremonies) and official ceremonies (on special occasions).

The main objective of the informal ceremonies is the verbal communication where current problems of members of the dervish order and their surroundings are discussed. From the musical forms are performed at least three nefeses, the choice of which is made according to the needs of the *dzem*—followers and the occasion of the ritual. Analyses of the texts are made, and the main points of the Bektashi philosophy are expressed through the poetic language of the authors of the texts.

After discussion among the spiritual leader the Baba, the dervish Abdulmutalib, and the people present, snack and *dem* (alcohol) are served as a compulsory part of the assembly. The consumption of alcohol is one of the practices of this dervish order which does not comply with the Islamic (Sheriat) rules. A candle is placed on the table as a symbol of the sun, light, and joy.

The second type of muhabets has official and festive nature for the Bektashi in Tetovo. This type of rituals is practiced during the spiritual festivals Asure and Nevruz, mention of the former spiritual leaders, sending off the deceased, and celebrating the Albanian national holidays. In the formal ones, special importance is paid to the ceremony of *Ikrar Ayin*, which is performed on the occasion of receiving new members, held only once at the naming of Abdulmutalib, a dervish, and it is the third of the total number of five degrees of the spiritual Bektashi hierarchy.

Muhabets can be organized at the initiative of one of the dervishes, followers, and supporters from the wider surroundings. This initiative is most often linked to the intimate reason of the initiator who bears the material costs.

### 3.3 Musical Characteristics of the Nefes

In addition to the small number of traditional nefeses inherited from the Ottoman period, today, in the spiritual ceremonies of the Bektashi in Harabati Baba tekke are practiced nefeses which are creations of the authors from Albania. Factors that have contributed to the change in repertoire arise from the ethnic structure of the believers, today predominantly Albanians and the direct connection with the headquarters of Bektashi in Albania. Changes in the language of the literary contents, from Turkish to Albanian, and of the music characteristics as a result of the Albanian folk music, contribute to the profile of today's sound image of music in the rituals.

This occurrence is in the spirit of the intention of the Bektashi music practice, to draw inspiration from the folk creativity.

Another factor which affects the newly developed music image is the Bektashi motto "to keep up with the times, to be contemporary in order to keep the continuity of interest of the followers." This openness to the benefits of "the new time" also refers to the application of technical means of the new audio-culture in the form of production and reproduction of sound, such as CDs, satellite programs, electronic instruments—synthesizers, digitizing the melograms (records) of nefeses, etc. This process of exchange of musical information helps in the transfer of musical practice in the rituals which was still transmitted in the oral way.

In tracking the audio and the sheet materials that were issued in the Republic of Albania, we focused on the melodic and the rhythmic structure, the forms of the performances, and the poetic contents of nefeses. The most common tonal structures are the makams Hidjaz and Ushak. The prevalence of these makams is due to their characteristics that were suitable for expressing the lyrical and warm feelings. The most frequent rhythmic pattern in nefeses is the *usul Sofyan* (4/4), which again convenes with the rhythmic pattern characteristic for the rural folklore in these regions. In addition to *Sofyan*, the *usul Devr-i Turan* (7/8) is practiced.

Nefeses are mostly one-voiced, but under the influence of the Albanian music tradition, and because of the direct connection with it, two-voiced or three-voiced nefeses are also present. The nefeses which are performed by the present people are vocal without the accompaniment of musical instruments. The lack of performer on musical instrument for a longer period results in the disruption of transferring the tradition of studying musical instrument in the tekke. With the migration of the Turkish population in the midst of the last century and the change in the ethnic structure of the region, the tradition of playing the traditional Turkish instrument *saz* is being lost. Therefore, it is often practiced by listening to the recorded audio material of the performances with musical instruments of the Western provenance, such as accordion, clarinet, and synthesizer.

#### 4. Conclusion

This research has shown that in spite of the large turbulences, the Bektashism in the Harabati Baba tekke, as a sum of beliefs, emotions, symbols, and rituals still persists as part of the social and cultural surroundings in this region. Music still has an important place in their religious ceremonies. However, the ordeals through which the tekke has passed especially in the last decades produced social transformations that are reflected on the musical segment of this dervish order. The sound image of the musical forms is amended and spontaneously adapted to the needs induced by the changed ethnic structure of the followers. This situation is most significant in relation to language, melodic-poetic content, the use of musical instruments, and the performance of nefes in general. Changes can be interpreted as a strategy for the survival of Bektashism in the Harabati Baba tekke in Tetovo in an attempt to maintain the continuity of their spiritual tradition of many centuries.

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