

Irène Mélikoff, *Hadji Bektach : un mythe et ses avatars. Genèse et évolution du soufisme populaire en Turquie*. Leiden : Brill, 1998 [Islamic History and Civilization, Studies and Texts, volume 20]. xxvi + 317 pp., bibliographie, index. ISBN 90 04 10954 4.

Scholarly research on the Bektashis and Alevi, which for a long time was a somewhat esoteric branch of turcology, has rapidly gained momentum in the past two decades -- paralleling a remarkable resurgence of Alevism in Turkey and the European diaspora, where the Alevi were giving up the low profile they had long kept and assumed a sudden new prominence in public life. As major landmarks in research one could mention Suraiya Faroqi's study of the social and economic foundations of the Bektashi order in Ottoman Anatolia (*Der Bektaschi-Orden in Anatolien*, WZKMS 2, Wien, 1981), Ahmet Yaşar Ocak's philological studies of *menâkıbnâme* and other relevant texts (Ankara, 1983 and 1984), anthropological studies of Alevism such as Altan Gokalp's *Têtes rouges et bouches noires* (Paris, 1980) and Krisztina Kehl-Bodrogi's *Die Kizilba-*

Aleviten (Berlin, 1988), the 1986 Strasbourg conference on the Bektashi order and the 1995 Berlin conference on Alevism, resulting in the collective volumes *Bektachiyya* (ed. A. Popovic & G. Veinstein, Istanbul, 1995) and *Syncretistic religious communities in the Near East* (ed. K. Kehl-Bodrogi et al., Leiden, 1997).

The late 1980s also marked the beginning of a *hausse* in publishing by Alevi intellectuals addressing Alevi audiences in an effort to redefine what Alevism and Alevi identity are about. (This new Alevi literature is surveyed by Karin Vorhoff in her *Zwischen Glaube, Nation und neuer Gemeinschaft : Alevitische Identität in der Türkei der Gegenwart*, Berlin, 1995.) Besides much invented tradition and politically inspired debate, this wave of Alevi publishing has also yielded authoritative accounts by the spiritual leaders of the Bektashi order as well as a great amount of information on local beliefs and practices that had previously been kept secret.

The availability of much new, often very detailed information on the history, literature, belief system, rituals and social life of the Alevis and Bektashis was not, until recently, complemented by general surveys offering both systematic critical

evaluation and synthesis of all this material. There is need for a successor to John Kingsley Birge's celebrated study (*The Bektashi order of dervishes*, London and Hartford, 1937), which will always remain a key work of reference but is obviously dated as well as limited in geographical scope. The present work looks like it could become the new standard reference work on the subject. Few people would indeed be better placed to attempt a synthesis of this kind than Irène Mélikoff, who has probably been more deeply involved in and committed to the Alevi-Bektashi heritage than any other western scholar. Much recent research on the subject has been stimulated by her seminal articles (the most important of which were collected in *Sur les traces du soufisme turc*, Istanbul, 1992). Highly respected in academic circles as well as by Alevi intellectuals, Professor Mélikoff has written a book with claims to authority in both worlds.

Hadji Bektach : un mythe et ses avatars covers a wide range of subjects : the process of islamisation of old Turkish religion ("shamanism"), the Turcomans of Anatolia, Haji Bektash as a mythical and an historical figure, the heterogeneous elements that went into "*le syncrétisme bektachi*", the history of the Bektashi order,

Alevi-Bektashi beliefs and rituals, Bektashi literature, and the present revival of Alevism. The book aspires to be at once a survey of the state of the art of Alevi-Bektashi studies and an account of Professor Mélikoff's personal involvement and scholarly career. Given the broad scope of the subject matter and the author's dual intention, it is perhaps not surprising that the book is not balanced and that some chapters or sections are more satisfactory than others. Mélikoff is at her best in the chapter that gave the book its title and in the one dealing with beliefs and ritual. Here she presents a masterly overview of the present state of our knowledge. In some other sections, however, she appears to be carried away by her own involvement with Alevism and her commitment to views that are partisan in some cases or even untenable in others. I should at once add that she refers in various passages of the book to experiences and discussions that challenged those views, and that she does not hide how much she was shaken by them.

When a young Kurdish Alevi asks Madame Mélikoff why she never mentions the Kurds in her writings, she gives a revealing answer: "There are many things about which I don't speak. For instance, I do not

say that there are crypto-Armenians among you" (189).

This leaves the reader more than a little curious to know which other things she has decided to leave unsaid.

Both Kurds and Armenians do, incidentally, receive mention in this book although Mélikoff minimises their importance in the formation of present Alevism. In a revision of her earlier work, she does acknowledge that a considerable number of Central and East Anatolian Alevi speak Kurdish (Kurmanci or Zazaki) and that there are surprising similarities between the Alevi and the Yezidi and Ahl-i Haqq religions (both of which emerged among the Kurds), but she is clearly very uncomfortable with these facts. Her uneasiness is compounded by the attraction that Kurdish nationalism is increasingly exerting for at least a part of the Kurdish-speaking Alevi (and even, one may add, for some Turkish-speaking Alevi).

Of the various efforts to reclaim (*récupérer*) Alevism, she considers that by Kurdish nationalists as a great danger for the Alevi community (266-9). One of the concomitants of the recent Alevi resurgence in Turkey and the European diaspora has been a lively and highly politicised debate on Alevi identity, in which Turkish and Kurdish nationalists, Sunni and Shi`i

islamists as well as Marxists and Kemalists have reclaimed Alevism and attempted to impose their own definitions upon it. It is perhaps because of the present efforts by some circles to assimilate Alevism to Twelver Shi`ism, which she considers an even greater danger than the Kurdish one, that Professor Mélikoff plays down the role of Shi`i and Iranian elements in the formation of Bektashism/Alevism. According to her, there were no Shi`i influences to speak of before Hurufism and the Kızılbaş movement made their impact (47-55), and she emphasises the Turco-Mongol aspect of the latter movement (130-1).

As for the Sunni *récupération*, Mélikoff briefly mentions the efforts of certain contemporary Sunni circles to prove that "true Alevism" respected the *shari`a* and that present Alevis therefore have deviated from original Alevism (272). She devotes, however, an extensive discussion to the orthodox text attributed to Haji Bektash, the *Makâlât*, which is often referred to in this argument (61-8). She decides that Haji Bektash cannot have written this text, for reasons that all boil down to his having been basically a *kalender*-type dervish. She does not, on the other hand, challenge the traditional accounts associating the versions of the text

in Turkish prose and verse with early (14th/15th century) Bektashi environments, but she does not engage the implications of the presence of *shari`a*-oriented sufi thought in these allegedly antinomian circles. Professor Mélikoff's sympathies and academic interests are primarily with the least islamicised side of the broad Bektashi/Alevi spectrum. The segments of the Bektashi and Alevi communities that have adopted much of Sunni Islam remain outside the scope of her survey.

The only *récupération* of Alevism that Professor Mélikoff does not deplore (or perhaps does not recognise as such) is the Turkish nationalist one that postulates Central Asian Turkish origins for virtually every aspect of it. Turkish religious elements are, of course, to be expected in such early Turkish texts as the *Vilayetname* and other *menaqlbname* -- although even here one cannot assume that everything that is not orthodox Muslim in these texts must have Central Asian Turkic origins. Elements that Mélikoff claims to be "shamanistic" (and by implication Turkish) include the belief in invisible beings, sacred mountains, magical flight and the transformation of human beings into birds and other animals (89-90). There is no doubt that these

existed in old Turkish religion, but they were by no means unique to it and probably already existed in the region before the first Turks arrived. Mélikoff reads "shamanistic" rites "as performed by the ancient Turks and Mongols" into the texts (105), and declares that the ritual dance of the Bektashis and Alevis, *sema[h]*, originated as part of such shamanistic rites (112). Apart from the fact that shamans also dance (but differently), I am not aware of any evidence (nor does Mélikoff adduce any) pointing to a Central Asian origin of the *sema[h]*. The chief religious ritual of the Bektashis and Alevis, the *ayin-i cem* -- of which she gives a good and detailed description (138-43) -- resembles, according to Mélikoff, a traditional Turkish *toy* because women and men take part together and an alcoholic beverage is shared (141-42). An earlier generation of scholars believed this ritual to have Christian origins; replacing the Last Supper by the *toy* as an archetype is an act of political preference but hardly a step towards a better understanding of Bektashism.

Professor Mélikoff explicitly distances herself from such earlier scholars as Hasluck, Birge, Kissling and Vryonis, who have wanted to recognise many Christian elements in Bektashism. (One senses that her

emphasis on the essential Turkishness of Bektashism reflects her sympathy with Turkish self-assertion against foreign domination, political as well as academic.) She does not deny that there are such Christian elements but declares them to be superficial only (160). Elsewhere in the book, however, she has recourse to her own hypothesis of Christian origins in an attempt to explain the similarities between Alevi and Ahl-i Haqq beliefs and practices. Taking up an offhand suggestion by V. Ivanow, she points to the Paulician heresy, "which has given rise to various heterodox doctrines whose traces are found among the Ahl-i Haqq and Alevis" as the possible origin of those similarities (194). The little that is known of this Armenian sect, however, cannot be easily related to the beliefs of present-day syncretistic sects in the region. I fail to see a logical reason why one should postulate a common Armenian origin to explain Iranian elements in the religious beliefs held by people speaking Iranian languages. (This is not to deny the Armenian element in Alevism; the popular religions of the various ethnic groups inhabiting the region had much in common anyway, if only as a result of the frequent conversions.)

The surprising similarities between Yezidism,

Ahl-i Haqq and Alevism (especially that of Dersim) raise many questions that cannot yet be answered satisfactorily, but recent work on these religions indicates that the Kurdish (or at least Iranian) element in Bektashism/Alevism is more important than has long been assumed. Professor Mélikoff finds this hard to accept. For her, the Kurds are the most fanatical of Sunnis and the hereditary enemies of the Alevis and Yezidis. This is why she warns Alevis against the threat of Kurdish propaganda targeting their communities. She appears to be unaware that many traditional Anatolian Alevi communities, including some Turkish-speaking ones, use the term "Turk" for Sunni outsiders but not for themselves. Just as little as one can conclude from this observation that Alevism is essentially non-Turkish is there reason to consider it as inherently non-Kurdish.

Present-day Kurdish nationalists are not, as Mélikoff suggests, the first to claim that the Kurdish-speaking Alevis are Kurds (many of the first Kurdish nationalists of the 1960s were in fact themselves Alevis). Ottoman documents commonly refer to the Kurdish-speaking Alevi tribes as *Ekrâd* or *Türkmân Ekrâdt*. One recent finding is especially surprising. Professor Mélikoff mentions Irène Beldiceanu-

Steinherr's finding that the very first Bektashis were apparently a *tribal* grouping consisting of a mixture of Çepni and a group named Bekta•lu (93). According to certain Ottoman documents the latter were nomadic *Türkmân Ekrâdı* (Cevdet Türkay, *Ba•bakanlık ar•ivi belgeleri'ne göre Osmanlı •mparatorlu•u'nda oymak, a•iret ve cemaatlar*, Istanbul 1979, p. 239). As for the former, Altan Gokalp found (as he once told me but does not mention in his book) a Kurdish-speaking section among the Çepni whom he studied!

It is of course not my intention to substitute a claim of Kurdish origins of Alevism for the thesis of its genesis from Turkish origins. The emergence and development of Alevism cannot be understood without acknowledging the ethnic and cultural complexity of Anatolia and the long history of its religions. Returning to the origins of the Bektashi order, it is regrettable that Professor Mélikoff does not take account of the important recent work by Ahmet Karamustafa on heterodox dervish groups in the 13th-16th centuries (*God's unruly friends*, Salt Lake City, 1994, and especially "Kalenders, Abdals, Hayderis: the formation of the Bekta•iye in the sixteenth century", in H. Inalcik & C. Kafadar, *Süleyman the Second and his time*,

Istanbul, 1993). This work is highly relevant and suggests a much stronger Iranian influence as well as a more profound knowledge of Islam among the dervishes of this period than Mélikoff perceives.

The final chapter of Mélikoff's book, dealing with recent developments, appears to be largely based on her conversations with a single knowledgeable Alevi informant. Her account is adequate in that the major developments are mentioned, but it hardly does justice to the variety of attitudes adopted by Alevis and there is no attempt to explain the developments or to place them into their political context. Readers interested in a more in-depth treatment of the contemporary situation are advised to consult Karin Vorhoff's book (mentioned above) and recent work by Krisztina Kehl-Bodrogi (e.g. in *Orient* 34, 1993 and *Sociologus* 28, 1998).

To sum up, *Hadji Bektach : un mythe et ses avatars* does not, as one might have hoped, offer a complete survey of the state of the art of Alevi/Bektashi studies. Much recent research, which in part was stimulated by Professor Mélikoff's own earlier contributions, is not taken into account here. (Some recent publications are

listed in the bibliography, however, along with many of the more important recent works by Turkish Alevi authors, which similarly are not evaluated in the book.)

The field has by now probably become too vast and varied to be commanded by a single scholar. The book does, however, present the insights and conclusions of the leading scholar in the field, gained in the course of a career spanning more than four decades of research. It is the first major monograph on its subject in a western language since a long time, and it is likely to remain a major work of reference for a long time to come, consulted along with Birge, Hasluck and a few others.

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