

## The Currents of Moslem and Bektashi Writing in Albania (1850-1950)<sup>1</sup>

by  
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Though the most creative and innovative forces of Albanian literature and culture in the second half of the nineteenth century were encompassed within the Rilindja movement of national awakening, Albanian literature in Arabic script did not wane completely<sup>2</sup>. Indeed, the Moslem and Bektashi literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with its primarily religious fixation continued to evolve in accordance with the literary, cultural and, in particular, spiritual traditions set in the eighteenth century and, in the process, came to evince not only a higher level of skill, discipline and erudition, but also an increase in artistic and linguistic refinement. Nonetheless, it must be said that the more directly religious focus of Albanian writing in Arabic script in this period resulted in its gradually more restrictive usage as a vehicle of literary expression and thus in its estrangement from the mainstream of Albanian literature and culture.

It was the Bektashi who best maintained the link between the Albanian nationalist movement and the cultural traditions of the Orient in the nineteenth century. The relatively liberal and open-minded character of their religious practices and their pantheistic beliefs including both Islamic and Christian elements enabled them to strive to break down the barriers separating the Moslem, Catholic and Orthodox communities. The best known Albanian Bektashi author by far was **Naim bey Frashëri** (1846-1900) whose religious, nationalist and didactic works, because of their significance and exceptional impact on the national awakening in the late nineteenth century, are best treated within the realms of Rilindja literature.

Among the many other Bektashi poets of the period was **Baba Muharem Mahzuni** or Mehzuni (d. 1867) from Gjirokastër who, from 1845 to his death, lived at the famous Bektashi *teke* (monastery) of Durballi in Thessaly, one of the oldest in the Balkans. He wrote verse both in Turkish and in Albanian. Amongst his disciples at the great *teke* of Durballi was **Baba Abidin Leskoviku** from Leskovik in southern Albania, founder of the Leskovik *teke*. Leskoviku composed spiritual verse in Turkish and Albanian, including a hymn to Durballi. Another talented author of much mystical verse was **Baba Adem Vexh-hi** (1841-1927) from Gjakovë. He travelled widely, in particular on pilgrimages to Mecca, Medina and Kerbela. In 1877, he was sent as a *baba* (father) to Prizren where he opened a *teke*. From 1922 to his death, he headed the *teke* in his native Gjakovë. **Baba Meleq Shëmbërdhenji**, also known as *Meleq Staravecka*, was from the Skrapar region of southern Albania and was educated at the now abandoned Bektashi *teke* in Cairo, where he became a dervish. He returned to Albania and took part in the nationalist movement, in particular by illegally distributing books and spreading new ideas. Shëmbërdhenji

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<sup>1</sup> The present article is an adapted version of material from the author's coming *History of Albanian Literature*.

<sup>2</sup> On Moslem literature in Albania before the mid-nineteenth century, see the present author's article: Albanian literature in the Moslem tradition. Eighteenth and nineteenth century Albanian writing in Arabic script. in: *Oriens, Journal of the International Society for Oriental Research*, Leiden, 33 (1992), p. 287-306.

held the title of *baba* at the *teke* bearing his name until 1914 when the latter was destroyed. He is the author of both nationalist and religious verse in Albanian collected in a now extremely rare volume published in the twenties. Shëmbërdhenji is considered one of the best Bektashi poets of the period. He was also a friend and admirer of Naim Frashëri whom he called, "*Zemra e Shqipërisë, gurra e urtësisë, pishtar i vegjëlisë, shejtor i njerëzisë*" (The heart of Albania, the fountain of wisdom, torch-bearer of the poor, saint of humanity). The Bektashi tradition of religious and patriotic verse, inspired both by the sect's mystic and pantheistic beliefs and by its nationalist aspirations, continued well into the twentieth century. **Baba Ibrahim** from the *teke* of Qesarakë near Kolonjë in southern Albania was active, like many other Bektashi leaders, in the secret distribution of Albanian books and literature, and suffered imprisonment by Turkish military forces. In 1913, he was also arrested by the Greek authorities but was subsequently freed by nationalist figure, poet and guerrilla Sali Butka (1852-1938). When the Greeks took Kolonjë again, Baba Ibrahim was forced to flee and his *teke* was burnt down. In one of his poems, *Dimri* (Winter), he compares the Albanian nation, ravaged by war and oppression, to the burden of a long hard winter. **Baba Salihu** from the southern Albanian village of Matohasanaj near Tepelenë used his *teke* as an illegal Albanian-language elementary school. He was also active in the distribution of Albanian books and was imprisoned by the Turks in 1902. It was in prison that he wrote much of his poetry and translated the epic *Hadîqatû as-su'adâ* (The garden of the blessed) of the great Azerbaijan poet Fuzûlî (1494-1556), the work which had also inspired the nineteenth-century poet Dalip Frashëri in his Albanian epic *Hadika*. Also from the Tepelenë region was **Baba Ahmed Turani** (d. 1928), who travelled to the Middle East in his youth. He took the title *baba* in 1908 in his native village of Turan. In 1914, his *teke*, like many others, was burned down by Greek extremists and he was forced to move to Vlorë. He is said to have been a talented poet. Another author of Bektashi spiritual verse in the period was **Salih Nijazi Dedei** (1876-1941) of Starje e Kolonjës who was raised in Anatolia, became a *baba* in 1908 and a *kryegjysh* (elder) of the Bektashi community in 1916. He remained in Turkey even after the closing of the *tekes* there. He returned to Albania at the end of 1930 and was shot to death on 28 November 1941 in Tiranë, apparently for his opposition to Italian rule. **Baba Hamza Gjakova** (1882-1952) from Gjakovë also journeyed to the Middle East as a young man and returned to take the title *baba* at the *teke* of Shtipi in Macedonia in 1912. He was the author of much verse of Bektashi and Shi'ite inspiration. One of the best educated Bektashi writers of the period was **Baba Selim Ruhi** (1869-1944) from Elbasan who became a *baba* in 1907 and is the author of three poetic *divans* in Arabic, Turkish and Persian. Towards the end of his life, he also wrote in Albanian. The German oriental scholar Franz Babinger (1891-1967) who visited Baba Selim at his *teke* described his verse as being exceptionally beautiful. Poet, writer and translator **Baba Ali Tomori** (d. 1947) was born in Shalë near Tepelenë and studied in Janina (Iōannina in northern Greece) as had Naim and Sami Frashëri. After the burning of the *tekes* in 1913-1915, he moved to Cairo, returning to Albania only after the end of World War I. He helped organize the three Bektashi Congresses held in Albania in the twenties (1921 in Prishtë, 1926 in Gjirokastër, and 1929 in Korçë) which led to the establishment of a recognized religious community in the country. Tomori is the author of at least six books of Bektashi literature and history, including poetry translations and original verse, some of which was published under the pseudonym Ali Tyrabiu. He opposed all religious fanaticism in his writings and endeavoured to combine Christian and Bektashi elements. Tomori was one of the rare Bektashi authors who abandoned Arabic script and used the Latin alphabet for publication, a change worthy of note. Some of his works also appeared in newspapers and journals of the period. In 1947, he was accused of espionage, sentenced to death and executed.

The last of the Bektashi poets in this tradition is **Ibrahim Hasnaj** (b. 1912) of Tiranë,

who uses the pseudonyms Hima and Bardhyl Nizami. Hasnaj, who is also remembered for his rediscovery of the early nineteenth-century Bektashi poet Zenel Bastari, became a Bektashi himself in 1937, the year he began writing verse. He was secretary-general of the pre-war Bektashi community and editor-in-chief of the Bektashi periodical *Djersa* (Sweat), of which eight issues were published up to 1947. Ibrahim Hasnaj was imprisoned for ten years from 1947 to 1957 in Tiranë prison, initially in a cell with writers Petro Marko, Andrea Varfi and Mitrush Kuteli, and suffered a further five years internment. He is the author of three volumes of as yet unpublished mystical verse of Bektashi inspiration: *Unë dhe ndiesitë e mia*, 1939 (My absolution and I), *Lot skamnorësh*, 1940 (Tears of the suffering), and *Rreze të zjarrita*, 1980 (Fiery rays). It goes without saying that these volumes, written in Latin script, remained well hidden over the long years in which religion was persecuted in Albania and any literary expression thereof was extremely dangerous. With the final lifting of the ban on religion, the seventy-eight year old Ibrahim Hasnaj was chosen president of the provisional committee of the Bektashi community which was solemnly re-established in Tiranë on 27 January 1991.

Although the Bektashi had gradually come to enjoy full recognition as a religious community by the 1930s, they had lost ground culturally. The burning and looting of the southern Albanian *tekes* by Greek extremists during the Balkan War and World War I constituted an immeasurable cultural loss from which Bektashi writing never recovered. In addition, the transition to Latin script which would have offered greater opportunities for the publication and mass distribution of literary and religious works did not take place to any substantial extent. Indeed it was no doubt the inability of what remained of Bektashi literature to adapt to the Latin alphabet and to contemporary publishing which signalled its final demise.

Though by far the strongest group, the Bektashi were not the only dervish order to devote itself to religious verse in Arabic script. **Dervish Salihu** (1820s-1890s), born in the village of Libizhdë e Hasit near Prizren, was an adherent of the Kadiri. He grew up in Rahovec where the sheik of the local *teke* recognized his aptitude and interest in philosophy and mysticism and sent him to Kocani in eastern Macedonia for further education among the Kadiri under Myhliz Dedja. There he became a dervish and returned to his native Libizhdë e Hasit to open a Kadiri *teke* himself. He actively supported the League of Prizren in his old age and had many adherents, including political figure Bajram Curri (1862-1925). Although the manuscripts containing his poetry were all destroyed, in particular during the Balkan wars, some of his verse has been preserved in the liturgy of many of the Alevi orders. Dervish Salihu's son, **Sheh Kadria** (d. ca. 1903), was another Kadiri poet and public figure of note who was murdered in Gjakovë about 1903. From **Sheh Emmini i Sadive** (d. 1918), a leading religious and political figure from Gjakovë who is said to have headed a *teke* there for seventy-five years, we have one piece of religious verse entitled *Thirr me zemër* (Call out with your heart). **Sheh Jonuzi** (1848-1909), also known as Hajdar and by the pseudonym Sabri, was a Melami dervish born in Jashanicë e Toplicë in Kosovo. He studied theology in Istanbul and returned to Kosovo to open a school in Suhadoll i Ulët near Mitrovicë where teaching was given in Albanian, something quite illegal at the time. He was often at odds with the religious and government authorities of the period and suffered much persecution. Sheh Jonuzi is the author of nine *ilâhî* (religious hymn), an *elifi*, i.e. a collection of twenty-nine poems designed to teach the Arabic alphabet, and about ten other poems.

Moslem literature in Albania and indeed Albanian literature in general was an exclusively male prerogative and, with a very few exceptions, was to remain so until the 1960s. At the turn of the century, we nonetheless find the trace of what may be the first female poet in Albania, **Nesibe of Gjirokastër**, the author of a *qasîde* (historical ode) in thirty-one quatrains, dated 1897 [1313 A.H.], depicting the fighting which took place in the southern Albanian border region

between Greek and Turkish forces. In one of these common frontier skirmishes, the Greeks had bombarded Sarandë and were obviously threatening Gjirokastrë itself. The *qasîde* or *gijftei* of Nesibe was discovered in the 1950s by Osman Myderrizi in a 48-page manuscript containing twenty-five poems by various authors including Nezim Frakulla, which found its way via Shkodër and Durrës to Tiranë. It is conceivable that Nesibe was simply the variant spelling for a male poet called **Nesib Mezini** though the latter, in one of his own poems, recommends that Nesibe "leave the *qasîde* alone." We know nothing more of her life at any rate. Also in the manuscript in question is historical verse, though not of the same quality, by one **Abdulhamid of Gjirokastrë** and religious poetry of Bektashi inspiration by **Hoxhë Dobi**, both no doubt of the turn of the century.

The oriental tradition of the *mevlud*, religious verse celebrating the birth of the prophet Mohammed, which has been referred to in the literary production of earlier Albanian authors, notably Hasan Zyko Kamberi, Abdullah Sulejman Konispoli and Ismail Floqi, continued to find favour with a number of Moslem authors throughout the second half of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth. The most direct source of inspiration for Albanian writers remained the famous *mevlud* of the Turkish poet Suleyman Çelebi (d. 1422). **Hafëz Ali Ulqinaku** (1853-1913), who was a Moslem writer from Ulcinj (as his surname denotes), an Albanian-speaking port on the Montenegrin coast, made a translation of Çelebi's *mevlud*, entitled simply *Ter ume-i mevlud 'alâ lisân-i arnavûd* (Translation of a *mevlud* into the Albanian language), which he published in Istanbul at the beginning of 1878 [1295 A.H.]. Ulqinaku was also the author of other translations from Turkish and of a large Turkish-Albanian, Albanian-Turkish dictionary compiled in Arabic script about 1897. The Turkish-Albanian section of the dictionary comprises 915 pages whereas the subsequent Albanian-Turkish section, of which we possess the original, covers only 168 pages and includes about 4,000 different Albanian lexemes. **Tahir efendi Halil Popova** (1856?-1949), known too as *Mehmet Tahir efendi*, from the village of Popovë near Vuçitërnë in Kosovo, also wrote a *mevlud* based on that of Çelebi and had it published in Istanbul about 1876. Popova's *mevlud*, which is said to have been recited widely in Moslem circles in Kosovo until recently, and that of Ulqinaku are thus the earliest known Albanian-language works to have been published in Arabic script, a good decade before Jani Vreto's modified version in the Latin alphabet of Muhamet Kyçyku's *Erveheja*, written originally in Arabic script about 1820. Other *mevluds*, be they originals or translations of Çelebi, are known to have been written in Albanian by the nineteenth century **Haxhi Çiçkoja** of Korçë, by **Tahir efendi Lluka** (d. 1908), by **Hafëz Ali Korça** (1874-1957), member of the High Council of the Sheria (a *mevlud* dated 1909), and by **Hafëz Abdullah Sëmlaku** whose *mevlud* went through four editions, the last of which published in Korçë 1944. **Hafiz Ibrahim Dalliu** (1878-1952), a writer known for his biting satire and editor of the Tiranë weekly newspaper *Dajti* from 1923 to 1926, was the author of a 250-page *mevlud*, the longest in Geg dialect.

Almost all remaining authors of twentieth-century Moslem literature we know of at present are from Kosovo. One of the most prolific of these was **Hilmi Abdyl Maliqi** (1856?-1928), also known as *Sheh Mala of Rahovec* or *Sheh Maliqi*. He was born in Kopila Gllavë near Rahovec and received a good education both in Rahovec and at the *Medresa* (Islamic school) of Mehmet Pasha in Prizren, learning not only Albanian and Serbo-Croatian, but also Turkish, Persian and Arabic. His mystical, descriptive and sentimental verse in a *divan* consisting of seventy-seven poems, as yet for the most part unpublished, marks a transition from traditional oriental verse to the classical poetry of the late Rilindja period. Maliqi was also the author of sixteen *risalet* or religious epistles and of translations from Turkish, Persian and Arabic, including a four-hundred-page translation of the *Wâridât* of the Arab poet, jurist and rebel Bedr ed-Dîn of Samâwnâ (1358-1416). Maliqi's manuscripts are said to be preserved at the *teke* of

Rahovec. Maliqi's contemporary **Haxhi Ymer Lutfi Paçarizi** (1871-1929) was a poet and mystic from Prizren who studied at the Fatih *Medresa* in Istanbul. Though steeped in Islamic tradition, he welcomed the October Revolution and supported the fledgling Communist Party in Skopje as early as 1920, an activity which brought him into conflict with the Serbian police. A noted disciple of Hilmi Maliqi was **Shaip Zurnaxhiu** (1884-1951), a Melami dervish from the village of Mamushë. He was the author of seventeen poems in Albanian, twenty in Turkish and five in Serbo-Croatian, all written in Arabic script. His emotionally charged verse in an Albanian less suffused with oriental vocabulary includes spiritual topics and love lyrics. Although Arabic script had been used for Albanian for almost two centuries, it was never fully suited to the Albanian phonological system and could cause quite a number of misunderstandings for the inexperienced reader. **Rexhep Voka** (1847-1917), a Moslem scholar from Tetovë (Tetovo) in Macedonia, devoted himself to the problem and came up with an alphabet in Arabic script comprising forty-four letters, both consonants and vowels, which he published in his *Elifbaja shqip*, Istanbul 1911 [A.H. 1327] (Albanian spelling book). Rexhep Voka, born in the village of Shipkovicë in the largely Albanian-speaking Tetovë region, began his studies in Istanbul in 1868 where he later worked as a teacher and journalist. He returned to Tetovë in 1895 and was active as a mufti in Monastir (Bitola) during the revolution of the Young Turks as well as a member of the *Bashkimi* (Unity) Society. Voka was the author of three other works of note: *Vendimet e Kongresit të Dibërës*, Monastir 1909 [A.H. 1325] (Resolutions of the Congress of Dibër); *Mendime*, Istanbul 1911 [A.H. 1328] (Thoughts) in which he expounds on the backward state of Albania and the necessity of education; and *Arnavudçe müfessal ilmihal*, Istanbul 1911 (Primer of religion in Albanian). Rexhep Voka's alphabet did not go unnoticed as it was used the year after its publication by one **Fazil of Tiranë** to print a 32-page Albanian grammar with the Turkish title *Sarfi iptidai arnavudi*, Istanbul 1911 (Elementary Albanian grammar). By this time, however, the days of writing in Arabic script for non-religious works were numbered.

Also from this period are a number of little known Moslem poets of whom only a few poems have survived. Among them are: **Dervish Veseli** (1887-1950) of Rahovec, who travelled widely in the Middle East and was killed accidentally at the Great Sa'di *teke* of Gjakovë in 1950; **Hafiz Imer Shemsiu** (1893-1945), imam of Talinoc, who opened an Albanian-language elementary school in Sazli-Talinoc and of whose estimated thirty religious poems we have but three; **Dervish Idrizi**, a blacksmith from Gjakovë and author of one poem dated 1908; educator **Faik Maloku** (1900-1935), also known as *Faik efendi* of Prishtinë, and **Sheh Osmoni** of Junik, of whom we have two poems each; and **Hafiz Islami** (ca. 1910 - ca. 1934), pseudonym of Islam Mehmet Bytyqi, from the village of Mllanaviq i Llapushës, who after religious studies in Gjakovë under Fahri Efendi died young while performing military service in Slovenia. A certain **Sheh Ahmed** of Shkodër, a dervish of the Rukai sect, was also little known until recently when twenty-three of his religious and subtly nationalist poems were discovered in a manuscript from Strellç i Epërm near Deçan. **Sheh Hyseni i Halvetive** (1873-1926) was a religious scholar of the Halveti sect in Prizren of whom we have one twenty-four line *ilâhî* of no particular literary or theological value. Nothing seems to have survived of the works of **Azem Efendi Olluri** (1825-1913) of Kroimiroc in Kosovo or of his contemporary **Hasan Efendi Hoti** of Drenica in Kosovo, whose Albanian-language divan was in his son's possession until 1945.

Two poets active in the 1930s and 1940s bring to a close the history of Albanian literature in Arabic script. **Vejsel Xhelaludin Guta** (1900-1979) was born in the village of Zaskok near Ferizaj in Kosovo and studied at the Medresa of Mehmet Pasha in Prizren where he learned Arabic and Persian. He later worked as an imam and school teacher in Vojnoc near Shtime. Of his verse, we have five *ilâhîs* and one other poem dated 1942. **Mulla Hysein Hysni Statovci** (b. 1900), born in Batllavë, lived in Prishtinë and Podujevë where he served as vice-

principal of the Moslem elementary school opened by the above-mentioned Faik Maloku. He was involved in political and social life of pre-war Kosovo and was a strong supporter of Albanian-language teaching. His poems were written between the years 1935 and 1947.

With these last two religious poets, still active during the Second World War, the tradition of Albanian in Arabic script vanishes once and for all. Though Albanian literature in Arabic script had always been strongly influenced by Islam and the cultural traditions of the Orient, by the twentieth century it had become a devotional and liturgical pastime cultivated almost exclusively by dervishes, imams and local religious figures in Kosovo. Although an anachronism in itself, it maintained one modest flame of Albanian culture in southern Yugoslavia at a time when writing and education in Albanian were unthinkable and those who openly advocated them were subject to swift and ruthless persecution by the Serbian authorities. In such a repressive atmosphere, this literature offered a haven for Albanian writers since its Arabic script and its ostensibly religious character made it too remote or too pious for the Belgrade authorities to attack and suppress, an incomprehensible world of oriental mysticism cherished in the seclusion of the *tekes*, mosques and *medresas* by a seemingly uneducated, impoverished and little understood Moslem minority within the Christian realm of the southern Slavs.

Other Moslem literature was no doubt written in Arabic script between the wars in Albania too, parallel to the dynamically developing 'real' literature in the Latin alphabet, but few traces of the former have come to light. It is to be feared that many such works in Arabic script, whether with literary pretensions or not, were lost or destroyed during the revolutionary campaign for the abolition of religion in Albania in 1967 which resulted not only in the dissolution of all religious communities but also in the physical destruction of virtually all mosques, *tekes*, churches and monasteries in the country. It is widely admitted in Albania now at any rate that many works of art were simply cast onto garbage heaps or burnt. The three volumes of verse by Bektashi poet Ibrahim Hasnaj would seem to constitute an exception. The coming years will show what else has survived of this vanished cultural tradition.