

Meral Salman

The Ceremonies of the Hacı Bektaş Veli as the Battlefield for the Alevi-Bektashi Identity Construction

Introduction

The Alevi-Bektashis in Turkey are a heterogeneous community whose way of religious belief and ritual differs from the belief and ritual of the dominant Sunni population in Turkey. Most of the Alevi-Bektashis accept Hacı Bektaş Veli, who lived in the 13th century in the middle part of the Anatolia, in Hacıbektaş district, as the patron saint and as the founder of the Bektashi order. Moreover, his dervish lodge in Hacıbektaş has been still accepted as the main dervish lodge by the Alevi-Bektashis, although it was closed in 1925, after the constitution of the Turkish Republic. After a closure almost 40 years, on 16 August 1964, the dervish lodge was reopened as a museum and from that time on, the Memorial Ceremony of Hacı Bektaş Veli has been organized.

Acknowledging that identity is always in the process of formation and it is multiply constructed across different, intersecting and antagonistic discourses, practices and positions¹, the purpose of this paper is to examine how the Alevi-Bektashi identity is constructed through the Memorial Ceremony of Hacı Bektaş Veli by different actors from the state agents to the Alevi-Bektashis who participate in the ceremony. It will be claimed that the identity formation process through this festival is a dynamic and multivoiced process which can be understood with Gramscian concept of hegemony, which means ideological, cultural and moral leadership over subordinated group. On the other hand, the establishment of hegemony is a dynamic process and presupposes taking into consideration the interest and tendencies of the subordinated group.²

Hacı Bektaş Veli's "Historical Identity" and the Bektashi Order

There are few early writings on Hacı Bektaş Veli which should be evaluated taking into the consideration that these texts are not independent from their writers' way of thinking and the conditions and rules of producing a literary text in their times. One of them was written in 14.cc by Eflaki, who asserts that Hacı Bektaş Veli was the main caliph of one of the leaders of the Babailer revolt in 13th cc in Anatolia. He had a heart that was full of skills and bright but

¹ Hall, S. (1997). "Introduction: Who Needs 'Identity'?" In Hall, S. & Gay, D. P. (Eds). *Questions of Cultural Identity* (p.3) London: Sage Publications

² Gramsci, Antonio (2000). *The Gramsci Reader Selected Writings 1916-1935*. Forgacs, D. (Ed.). New York: New York University Press.

he did not respect outside appearance and thus he did not obey the Islamic Laws.³ In 15.cc, Aşıkpaşazade defines Hacı Bektaş Veli as a dervish who obsessed by divine love far from being sheikh or being disciple and who did not establish the Bektashi order⁴. Although Hacı Bektaş Veli left no writings, one of his disciples wrote at the late 15.cc or the early 16.cc a hagiography, *Vilayetname* about him. *Vilayetname* signifies the construction of Hacı Bektaş Veli as a saint and narrates his life story and explains how he established the Bektashi order. In 17.cc, Evliya Çelebi mentions that Hacı Bektaş Veli had an important role in the foundation of the Ottoman State⁵.

The first research on the Alevism-Bektashism was conducted in the early 20th cc. by the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), under the Panturkist and Turk Nationalist effect which claims that there should be a form of Islam particular to Turks that is purified from the effects of Arab and Persia. During the nation-state constitution process, the Alevi-Bektashis were accepted as true Turks, who preserved the Middle Asian traditions. Hacı Bektaş was presented as a “great Turkish thinker or mystic who Turkified Anatolia”. Regardless of its anachronism, this discourse has been improved by the later researches and has been accepted widely. In similar way, the Bektashi order is presented simply as a means of the Ottoman state without regarding the unequal, unstable and conflicting relation between the order and the Ottoman state throughout the centuries.

The Bektashi order was formed in 13th century. In 16th century the order was separated into two branches, after the defeat of the revolt of Kalender Çelebi who was the head of the Bektashi order. The revolt was similar to other revolts in Anatolia against the Ottoman governors in this century due to the tension between the Ottoman state and the Safavid state. The Çelebis, the *Dedegan* branch has claimed being descendants from Hacı Bektaş and have been still recognized by the many Alevi-Bektashis as their spiritual authority. Even today, some of the Çelebis live in the Hacıbektaş district and have organic relation with the Alevi-Bektashis from different regions of Turkey. The *babas*, the *Babagan* branch have asserted that Hacı Bektaş was celibate and had no children except from the children of way.

When the Janissary army was destroyed by the Ottoman state in 19th cc, due to the relation between the Janissary army and the Bektashi order, many of the Bektashi lodges were

³ Eflaki, A. (2001). *Ariflerin MenkıbeleriI- II* Tahsin Yazıcı, (Trans.by.). İstanbul: İslam Klasikleri Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı Yayınları

⁴ Aşık Paşazade. (2003). *Osmanoğulları'nın Tarihi*. İstanbul: K Kitaplığı

⁵ Evliya Çelebi b. D. M. Z. (1999) *Evliya Çelebi Seyehatnamesi Topkapı Sarayı Bağdat 304 Yazmasının Transkripsiyonu-Dizini I.Kitap*. Gökyay, O.Ş (Ed.) İstanbul: YKY

demolished or turned into mosques or schools. A mosque was built in the main lodge in Hacıbektaş, and a Nakshibendi sheikh was sent to there⁶.

The second closure of the Bektashi order was in 1925, after the constitution of the Republic, with a law about closing all the dervish lodges which was passed by the Grand National Assembly of the Republic of Turkey. With this law all religious functions of the religious order was forbidden. A later law was passed requiring that all articles within the lodges should be held for the use of the Ethnographical Museum⁷.

The Momerial Ceremonies of Hacı Bektaş Veli

After the establishment of Republic, at the time of single party rule, although the Alevi-Bektashis could take part in the all aspects of life like the Sunni people, their belief was not approved by the state. Related with the socio-economic events in the late 1950s like industrialization and migration to the cities, and the conditions after military take-over in 1960, which provided partly freedom in the political field, the Alevi-Bektashis began to found associations; print publications about the Alevism-Bektashism and to arrange night programmes and lectures.

After the abolition of the dervish lodge, in practice, Hacıbektaş lost its centrality for the *Babagan* branch. The Çelebi family, the *Dedegan* Branch has continued to live in Hacıbektaş and also their contacts with the Alevi-Bektashis who have affiliated with them have gone on. From 1925 to 1964 the dervish lodge was used as a police station and then as a school but it was generally empty and was in ruins. In 1950's, when the Democratic Party was in government, the government decided to open some lodges to visit and they add the Hacıbektaş lodge to the list.

Having been restored, the museum opened on 16th August 1964 by the statesmen and some of the ministers of the government. The opening ceremony was organized by the Tourism Association in Hacıbektaş under the strict control of the governor. People of the town took part in the organization actively and they shared their houses with the visitors during the ceremony. In accordance with the statesmen directive, the ceremony was arranged like a national holiday. While ignoring that the Alevi-Bektashis from different regions came to Hacıbektaş in order to visit the dervish lodge and their saint, the statesmen opened the museum as tourist attraction stressing Hacı Bektaş Veli's "historical identity as the Turkish thinker and the mystic who served for Turkish thought." However, after a long period of

⁶ Birge, J. K. (1965). *The Bektashi Order of Dervishes*. Bristol: Burtleigh Press

⁷ *ibid*.p.84

suppression and prohibition, both opening the dervish lodge as museum and arranging a memorial ceremony can be accepted as a hegemonic process of the state over the Alevi-Bektashi community who became more active in these years.

With the military intervention in 1971, the state oppressed the leftist. On the other hand, in 1970s, the leftist thought was widespread among the Alevi-Bektashis. Also the hegemonic process of the state at the ceremonies created its counter in these years. At this period, the young and leftist administrators of the Tourism Association organized cultural activities which were far from the tourist attraction and the national holiday. Between 1975 and 1980, the festival turned into an activity to which the leftist academicians, authors and artists attended and concerts, conservation and theatre activities took place in the program. Hacı Bektaş Veli was presented as a revolutionist, populist and pacifist leader who participated in the revolt of Babailer and who made an effort to enlightenment to the suppressed and exploited people of Anatolia. While the festivals were arranged under the strict control and prohibitions of the state, there were great numbers of security forces nearly as the number of the visitors.

With the military take-over in 1980, the civil society was destroyed; besides other associations, unions and parties in Turkey, the Tourism Association was closed down. The festival had been organized till 1984 under the leadership of the Head Official of Hacıbektaş. In 1984, the Municipality of Hacıbektaş took the organization of the ceremonies over and till 1989 the ceremonies had been organized with the participation of the mainly leftist authors, academicians and artists without attracting more attention.

After the military take-over in 1980 there has been a transformation in the economic, political and cultural fields in Turkey. During 1980s, the ethnic differences, social and cultural divisions had become apparent in Turkish life. The increasing ethnic and the nationalist movements in the world after the collapse of the Socialist Block, the increasing Islamist movements, the Kurdish Issue and the repression of the left by the military take-over in Turkey had also affected the Alevi-Bektashi community. Considering the structural alterations in the community and the rising of “the Alevi elites”, the reflection of this process on the Alevi-Bektashis was to define the Alevi-Bektashi identity through the cultural identity policies and to found associations.

Dating from 1989, with the intervention of the state to the festival organization, representatives of other political parties on the government joined in participants. Also dating from 1994, with the participation of the President Demirel in the ceremony, the events turned

into a public event, to which besides representatives of all political parties, all kinds of political groups and the media attended. In this way, the memorial ceremonies turned into a political field in which political promises were made in order to gain votes, the political issues have been discussed and also been protested and the demands were declared. Although at the opening ceremony all of the political groups and parties did not take part, all of them took part in the politic field of the ceremony. Especially after the decisions of February 28, which was the army's memorandum addressing the radical Islamist movements, the Islamist press gave a large place to the ceremonies. They reacted against the politicians who presented the Alevi-Bektashis as the defender of secularism and they presented Hacı Bektaş Veli as a Sunni mystic who served to spread the Islam in Anatolia. Moreover, in spite of the effort of the state to ally with the Alevis against the Kurds, a Kurdish political party took part in the ceremonies at which speeches with the accents of Turkish-Islam synthesis and Turkish nationalism again and again given by the statesmen. From the leftist political parties to radical leftist groups always takes part in the political field. On the other hand, unlike in 1960s and 1970s, the Alevi-Bektashi identity has not overlapped the left. The leftist has been unable to struggle for counter-hegemony and has given its place to the Alevi-Bektashi Associations. Because the hegemony as a process cannot be singular, it is not amazing that the Alevi-Bektashi associations have established an alternative hegemony against the state's hegemony in the festivals especially since 1992. It was in 1992 when the associations presented a declaration to the government. They took part in the organization of the festival, and from 1997 to 2003 they gave speeches in the opening ceremony in the name of the Alevi-Bektashi community. In 2004 the new Mayor did not allow the Alevi Bektashi Federation (ABF) to give a speech at the opening ceremony and the disagreement between the Mayor and the ABF ended with the protest of the ABF, so they did not take part in the ceremony. Under the leadership of the new Mayor of Hacıbektaş, a new period of the ceremonies has begun.

Conclusion

Consequently, beginning with the opening ceremony of the dervish lodge as a museum, the memorial ceremonies of Hacı Bektaş Veli has turned into a political field where the struggle for constructing the Alevi-Bektashi identity has become concrete. Hacı Bektaş Veli, besides his being the patron saint, through this festival has become an important sign for the Alevi-Bektashi identity. Although the main dervish lodge in Hacıbektaş was officially closed, through the memorial ceremonies, Hacıbektaş continues to be a center of the Alevism - Bektashism with its multivoiced characteristic.