The House of the Open Door: From Ibn Arabi to Al Bosnevi. The Mediterranean Sufism That Took Root in the Balkans

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Sufi influence is a cohesive element of Islam in the Balkans, a living tradition and a conscious practice in accordance with rules that are inseparable from the behaviour of the dervishes. The Sufi tradition of the Balkans dates back to the 15th century, when several orders settled in the territory that would directly influence the transmission of Islam, as well as the socio-cultural, economic and architectural fabric of the region. Despite the various difficulties and prohibitions they have endured over the centuries, the survival of the Sufi communities has been possible thanks to their open and inspiring, Mediterranean and universal character, which today, when the wounds of war are not yet healed, is more necessary than ever.

In central Bosnia, among green and mountainous landscapes, just where the Mediterranean and continental climate touch, and where the post-war political and economic situation has left the small rural municipalities dedicated to growing raspberries to their fate, there is a lamp that, in the middle of the night, lights a house that is always open. You can enter and delight in the beauty of the paintings and calligraphies that adorn its walls, in the canvases painted by its rugs and the poetry heard, or explore the transcendental rhythms of the measured exhalations of the *zikr*, because "there are as many paths to God as there are breaths in human beings" (Ibn Arabi). Among forgotten necropolises of medieval monuments (*stecak*) on which the vast layers of history of the region have gradually settled, the Sufi influence remains a cohesive element of Islam in the Balkans from a way of experiencing tradition *(adet)* towards a conscious way of life and practice in accordance with rules that are inseparable from the behaviour (*adab*) of the dervishes (Hadzimejlic, 2008). Sufism in the Balkans has been present for over six centuries, even before the expansion of Islam through the Ottomans. In the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, it is fused into the landscape and, until recently, it was almost invisible due to its complete assimilation into the cultural and historical tradition. Today it is more noticeable but has not lost an iota of that open spirit that makes it so local, Mediterranean and universal.

The Mediterranean Span of Sufism That Reached the Balkans

A century before the expansion of the Ottoman Empire, two great spiritual centres developed and spread almost in parallel, and the Balkans were no exception. The teachings of Ibn Arabi of Murcia (d. 1240), also known as al-Shayj al-Akbar and today the greatest master within the sciences of Sufism, were expressed in Arabic and continued by others such as his disciple Sadruddin Qunawi (d. 1274) or the mystic Mevlana Rumi (d. 1273), a close friend of Sadruddin in the city of Konya, whose wisdom he cultivated in Persian (Beneito, 2017).

Following them we find figures such as Hajji Bektash (d. 1271), founder of the *tariqa* or Sufi order of the Bektashi, and the poet Yunus Emre (d. 1320), who would provide the Turkish language's contribution (Hirtenstein, 2014) to the consolidation of the "transmission of living Sufism to our days, making it a spirituality of universal scope" (Beneito, 2017). Thus, love of Ibn Arabi and Qunawi led the Bosnian Abdullah Bosnevi (d. 1644) to write one of the great commentaries in Turkish on the work of Ibn Arabi, *Fusus Al Hikam* or *The Bezels of Wisdom*, firmly contributing to the dissemination of Sufism. His remains lie next to the tomb of Sadruddin in Konya, near the great Rumi.

Coinciding with this period of formation of the pioneering Sufi brotherhoods or *tariqas*, one of the first Sufis to reach the Balkan Peninsula was the 13th century *Bektashi* Sari Saltuk, decades before the first Ottoman military units. The traveller Ibn Battuta wrote about him because his life was always engulfed in an aura of legend (Hadzimejlic, 2008). His tomb is in at least seven places in the region, such as Blagaj, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Babadag, in Romania, and even the vicinity of Ohrid, in Macedonia, and Kruya, in Albania, among others, all places of visit and prayer not only for Muslims.

During the Ottoman administration in the 15th and 16th centuries, several Sufi orders also took root in the Balkans, and directly influenced the spiritual transmission of Islam, as well as the socio-cultural, economic and architectural fabric of the region. Through collective participation in vernacular architecture (Tatlic, 2019), and the charitable institution of the Vakuf, which the richest members of society supported in order to contribute to the construction of hospitals, mosques or markets in exchange for a tax reduction, the first *tekiyas* or *zawias* (lodges of the orders) were built, as well as several lodgings or schools (madrasas), centres from which Islam spread among the local population (Hadzimejlic, 2008). However, the Sufi orders were also economic drivers and contributed to the development of the guilds (*esnaf*) of artisans and merchants, where their code of honour (*futuwwa*) permeated social relations (Asceric-Todd, 2015).

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The most widespread *tariqas* during Ottoman rule were the Halveti and the Bektashi, followed by the Nakshibendi, the Kadiri, and the Rifai, in terms of number of adherents and territorial distribution. All have managed to survive to this day, while others, such as the Mevlevi, Bayrami, Melami, Sa'adi, Yalveti, Shazili and Bedevi, appeared at different stages and became increasingly scarce (Hadzimejlic, 2008). The Nakshibendi was a pioneering brotherhood that settled in the region between the 15th and 17th centuries, and its areas of influence were in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia. The Bektashi, a majority in Albania today, had more than a hundred *teki-*

Tekiya Mesudijja in Kacuni, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

yas throughout the Balkan Peninsula in 1912. In the 17th century the Kaderi and Mevlevi brotherhoods arrived, followers of the Rumi transmissions, which in a short period of time had lodges in Plodliv, Thessalonica, Skopje, Belgrade, Pecs and Sarajevo.

The establishment of these brotherhoods among the cultural elites was relatively fast, since most of their masters or *sujuj* had been trained in the great centres of knowledge of the time: Istanbul, Baghdad, Damascus, Cairo or Medina, whose followers included great writers, interpreters and translators of local languages. In rural regions, the brotherhoods also played an important role in the process of Islamisation, demonstrating flexibility and syncretism towards "old practices." This is the case of the Hemzevi, located in the Drina river valley, whose heterodoxy, even after its prohibition as an order by the Ottomans, survived in the form of practices among other *tariqas* and also among the local population.

In the 19th century, with the decline of the Ottoman Empire, in the recently recognised new Balkan nation states there were hardly any pockets of Islam outside of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Austro-Hungarian annexation did not involve the disappearance of the Sufis, who, albeit to a lesser extent, continued to maintain ties with their brotherhoods in the Islamic world. In the interwar period, with the Muslim population of Bosnia and Herzegovina

destined to become a minority within the kingdom of Yugoslavia, the activity of the *tariqas* was further reduced if possible and, after the Second World War, within Tito's Yugoslavia, it was totally prohibited. This was due to the action of the institutionalised modernist ulemas, who considered the brotherhoods archaic and heretical strongholds. All the *tekiyas* in Bosnia and Herzegovina were closed, although in Kosovo and Macedonia their activities continued, it seems, because the masters' houses were used as lodges. The ban was maintained until the mid-1970s and they became legal again in 1974, when a more "open" Yugoslavian constitution gave rise to the creation of the Association of Islamic Dervish Orders (ZIDRA) to promote the study and practice of Sufism.

Bezels and Creativity

The two decades of prohibition and semi-clandestinity of the activity of the *tariqas* caused significant damage to the Sufi tradition, especially to the continuity of their chains of succession (*silsiah*). However, these remained active and, in the post-socialism period, gained acceptance from both the religious establishment and secularism, even after the break-up of Yugoslavia (1991-1995), with its terrible toll of civilian victims, forced displacements and migration. In the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, immersed in a post-war period, there was a reformulation of spirituality, as noted by Henig (2014). It was, in effect, a kind of Sufi rebirth characterised by what the author defines as "creative moments" leading to a new sacred topography "that unfolds by cutting across state borders and ethnic identities and transcending national intimacy, while creating new bonds of translocal amity." "The fall of socialism also opened the field for 'embodying' a new Muslim subjectivity through ritual practice such as *zikr*. This is now more available to Bosnian Muslims than ever before, the freedom to choose what kind of embodied faith one wants to nurture. This is important for ethical self-formation," as explained for this article by Zora Kostadinova, doctoral candidate at the University College of London (UCL), where she is researching the ethical subjectivities and everyday practices of the Sufis in Sarajevo.

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The continuity of the Sufi chains of succession or bezels would probably have suffered a greater disruption if the transmission had not been so deeply rooted. For example, in the 17th century and after a century of acting in the shadow of the Halveti, the *tariqa* Nakshibendi in Bosnia and Herzegovina experienced an awakening thanks to the figures of Hajj Mejli-baba and Abd al-Rahman Sirri-baba Sikiriğ who established the core of the brotherhood in central Bosnia. More than three centuries of continuity followed through Husayn-baba from Fojnica, educated in Kursumlija, in the school of Sarajevo, and then in Constantinople, Konya, Bukhara and Samarkand. Husayn-baba, after decades of training in the Nakshibandi brotherhood, returned to Bosnia by order of his master and established the lodge in Vukeljici with a single disciple, Sirri-baba Sikirić. He became the main master of the Nakshibendi order, in Bosnia, and appointed Muhammad Mejli (Hajji Mejli-baba) as his successor in the *tekiya* of Vukeljici, from where the Hadzimejlic family came, today the cradle of Sufi masters. Cazim Hadzimejlic, Professor of Conservation and Restoration at the Sarajevo Academy of Fine Arts, and of History of Art and Archaeology at the University of Sarajevo, is one of its members. Furthermore, he is one of the great

Sufi Ensamble Mesudijja performance, Trobada de Música del Festival Internacional Mostra Viva del Mediterrani, Valencia (Laura Pérez).

restorers of the monumental and architectural heritage of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the region, as well as a famous calligrapher. From the *tekiya* Mesudijja, the house whose doors are always open and whose foundations were laid by his father, the sheik Mesud Hadzimejlic (d. 2009), affirms: "There was a disruption not only because of the ban but also the confiscation of the lodges, foundations, property, and therefore tradition. The period of persecution lasted for more than one hundred and fifty years. Today Sufism is enjoying a period of freedom in which the *tekiyas* are places where people meet in search of spiritual cognition of God that is achieved through deep contemplation. It is also essential to educate your character in order to get closer to God and reduce your ego by being pleasant to others (*adab*), serving others (*hizmet*) and following a method (*usul*). 'Come, come, whoever you are!' said Rumi, which is no more than a divine mandate of behaviour towards others."

Kostadinova points out that the Islam tradition in Bosnia and Herzegovina has always meant honouring the "neighbour", something that the anthropologist Tone Bringa already noted when speaking of the importance of the neighbourhood (*komsiluk*). According to Kostadinova (2018): "Perhaps one of the great postwar tragedies is exactly the disappearance of the forms of sociality that glued multiconfessional local communities together. The tradition of Sufism is important in this regard. If you go to a Sufi lodge, you will find that at the entrance of lodges there stands written: Adab Ya Hu, or what the local translate as 'Odgoji Boze', or 'Oh, God render us with decency'. For my interlocutors, to have *adab* was the most important achievement of their religious practice. *Adab* is an internal transformation of character which demands a profound level of self-reflection in the process of transforming oneself, which is what essentially Sufism is about. The idiom *adab* is very polyvalent, but in the context of Sarajevo where I stayed, to have *adab* or *edep* (they use the Turkish form) means to show ethical standards towards everyone you meet. Thus, what is prioritised with *adab* is not the ethnic or religious affiliation of our 'neighbour' but the fact that our neighbour is human, and also part of the larger Divine manifestation."

The mystic Ibn Arabi called this inner contemplation "silence of the heart". "It is an inner stillness that involves developing a gaze beyond material and sensitive perception," argues Pablo Beneito, Professor at the Department of Translation and Interpretation at the University of Murcia, President of MIAS-Latina and one of the most renowned experts in the study of the work of Ibn Arabi. Within Sufi thought and following Ibn Arabi's terminology, imagination is, as Beneito (2017) notes, "on the one hand, the soul, understood as the intermediate human self, subtle and dense, one and multiple, visible and invisible, corporeal and spiritual; and, on the other, the imaginative faculty that enables opposites to be integrated." Interviewed for this article, Beneito explains that "the world of underlying ideas opens a multipurpose plane of knowledge with open and integrating epistemological elements that make it, today, extremely relevant and capable of connecting with contemporary currents of thought in which unity is perceived from the diversity of the singularities of the senses. This conception arouses among Sufis a particular experience of the arts as mediations receptive to the creative inspiration of reality."

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Meanwhile, Professor Hadzimejlic points out: "All of this makes *tekiyas* extremely inspiring spaces. Among the Sufis there were always poets, musicians, artists and scholars participating in the life of their brotherhoods. All artists yearn to breathe soul into their works; the practice of *tesawuf* allows us to reflect our souls in our works. The transmission of the historical legacy goes one step further. I define *tekiyas* as open art galleries, in which different forms of cultural transmission can be found, from works of art or calligraphy to highlighting the ethnographic tradition with textiles, carpets, utensils or wrought copper works."

The Virtue of Observation

Contemplation would not be possible without reflection and a skill or an "ear" for observation. Anthropologist Larisa Jasarevic, a professor at the University of Chicago, has spent years studying ethnography through medicinal beekeeping in contemporary Bosnia and Herzegovina, often framed in Islamic and Sufi understanding of the environment. Thus, Jasarevic explores oral transmissions concerning bees, nature and the being in correlation with it. Today, "in rural areas of the country there are lands deeply marked by the recent bloodshed, and a priori useless for industrial agriculture, where the bees and their keepers value the biological diversity of the new wildness (*divljina*)" (Jasarevic, 2018) where the products (honey, pollen, propolis or royal jelly) have a medicinal value (Ibid, 2018). Natural disasters, climate change or what could be called end of the world signs have a clearly ecological transmission character in Bosnian-Sufi tradition, argued the author during the interview for this article.

Throughout her years of research, Jasarevic has found permanent elements of proximity between the Sufi footprint and acceptance and coexistence beyond the faith. During the interview, she highlighted two historically documented legends that, today, are a point of social communion. The first is that of Sejh Sinan-baba, a Sufi who arrived in Bosnia in the 16th century either from Anatolia or from today's Hungary. On his long journey, he was helped and fed by a Christian peasant called Pobro, and they became like brothers in that

meeting. Near the end of his days, Sinan-baba ordered that they be buried near each other and that, whenever anyone visited his tomb, they should say a prayer at the tomb of his "brother". Hence the tomb (*turbe*) of Sinan-baba, near the old city of Srebrenica, place of pilgrimage and supplication, leads along a pebbled path to the tomb of Pobro. "A mystic and poor man united their souls," notes Jasarevic, and adds that in Bosnia, throughout history, Sufism or the *tariqa* and *sharia* (Islamic law) always went hand in hand because many Sufis were also imams "who brought the two paths together, like a couple holding hands." The second legend takes us a short distance from the place: in Canici, on the road to Tuzla, is the tomb or *turbe* of the Sufi Hasan baba, which is difficult to reach and whose closest village has a predominantly Catholic population. In its garden, the roses are cared for and candles lit. "Many of these holy places for Muslims are also visited by other faiths," explains Jasarevic, because "Sufism has been completely integrated into the cultural landscape of the regions where these historical figures are seen among the whole population, above all, as good people (*evliyas*)." Kostadinova recalls the Sufi saying *Ko u ovaj saraj svrati, hljeb mu dajte za vjeru ga ne pitajte* (To those who come to this city, give them bread and don't ask them about their faith). Another example she mentions is the *zikr* (the ritual) when the *salawat* (blessings) are recited, which mention Jesus in their chain of prophetic succession: "On 31 December, the Sufis have a whole evening programme devoted to Jesus' birth (Isaiah) often attended by non-Muslim visitors."

In post-war Bosnian society, severely punished by the losses of loved ones and social ties, the Sufi practice still provides spaces of coexistence and the search for cures for wounds beyond the war. "The *tekiya* provides a form of enlightenment, hope and willingness, strength, encouragement of work and personal overcoming, a synergy that connects and does not divide. A conscious effort to liberate the soul from shackles and external pressures and, in this sense, of improving the psyche and the body," explains Hadzimejlic.

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"Sufis in particular are sensitised to forms of interactions with *jamaat* members in the process of *terbijet* or upbringing or the purification of the soul. This process is led by their sheikh, but at times in certain encounters they see an opportunity for self-reflection and, through that, for character building. All of these things, if you will, are in one way or another addressing some confluences of the existential quest and religion, which are not always war related, though the war is an important reference point for many Bosnian Muslims, including for many of my interlocutors," explains Kostadinova. "The important thing to note is, they are not Sufis or Muslims, because they suffered war. This would be a very reductionist approach, and not reflecting reality. They love their faith. But it is true to say that in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina a community gathered around a Sufi lodge does indeed have a very positive social function," she adds. Beneito comments: "On my visits to the country I see a living Sufi community, full of young people, with a certain traditionalist character, but integrationist and open to dialogue, that foresees the monolithic interpretation of religion." Hadzimejlic, meanwhile, notes: "The *tekiya* contemplates the human being, but for a complete understanding an approach through spirituality is necessary. Only then is it possible to establish the earthly dialogue that nourishes the soul and, in this way, helps the body."

As to whether Sufism in the region is going through a golden age or its manifest practice risks losing its authenticity, these are open questions. It is partly what has happened to certain manifestations, today listed as intangible cultural heritage of humanity, such as the dance of the whirling dervishes of Konya called Semáa. "Expectations are high, as are the assessments because of Sufi's visibility today," notes Jasarevic. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, in the house of the open door, the Semáa is also practised. Sometimes manifestly, and even participating in events such as the Mostra Viva del Mediterrani held in Valencia in 2019, and sometimes in the gloom of an intimate liturgical ceremony that fades into the Bosnian night when the voices are silenced. When only the flicker of the lamp remains, showing the way to the door.

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