Claiming Heritage, Renewing Authority
Sufi-orientated activities in post-Yugoslav Bosnia-Herzegovina

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A growing interest in the political aspects of Sufism has recently been apparent within the field of Islamic Studies, or rather: a shift in academic focus from Sufism as a specific theological characteristic towards an acknowledgement of the impact Sufi communities and Sufi-orientated ritual life have – and have always had – on their immediate social surroundings (Werbner 1999; Heck 2007; Bruinessen and Howell 2009; Geaves et al. 2009; Raudvere and Stenberg 2009; Schielke 2010).

This article will discuss the role and status of Sufi groups in Bosnia-Herzegovina today, an issue where Turkish influences are unavoidable, irrespective of whether the focus is on conceptions of the Balkans’ Ottoman legacy or on contemporary arenas for religious alternatives in public life (Öktem 2010, 2011). Today old Sufi establishments face competition from groups with roots abroad both in terms of community leadership and the relationship between the individual groups and the state administration. Sufi-orientated activities play a role within the established Muslim congregations, the ritual aspects in particular attracting previously non-practicing Muslims. Many aspects of the Sufi theme can and should of course be related to the region’s Ottoman past, the authoritarian repression of religion in the Yugoslav Federation, and the war in the 1990s. These particular features have had an impact on religious practices as well as on the institutional organisation of Islam in the region. Many tendencies in Bosnian Sufi activities can, however, be observed in a wide range of religious communities worldwide (certainly not only in Islamic groups), and this should be taken into consideration before an overly culturalistic picture is drawn. To mention but a few tendencies in the wake of globalisation and increasingly transnational lives, the following three influential trends can initially be pointed at in order to sketch something more than a regional background for the cases subsequently discussed.

Pious fellowships and a sense of religious belonging are used globally in the construction of local cohesion and in identity politics to an extent that contradicts the conventional image of modernity and secularism as incompatible with religious devotion. But it is not
simply a question of “the return of religion”. Agents, spaces, and modes of communication have been transformed (Calhoun 2011; Raudvere 2012b). Traditional forms of religious authority and legitimacy are challenged worldwide by young people, well-educated in fields other than theology, and trained to make independent decisions and defend individually formulated opinions. This, together with the fact that sacred scriptures and theological interpretations are easily accessible on the Internet, has an impact on how new groups are formed at the crossroads of social movements and contemporary forms of religious expression. Moreover, new spaces for interpretation are fashioned by small groups outside the established religious institutions, and these seem to give rise to a multitude of local groups and NGO-like organisations with more or less theological ambitions. These changing conditions for contemporary religion unavoidably engender issues within the communities about who is a legitimate interpreter. These worldwide phenomena can also be observed in Bosnia today, where new voices claim space for Muslim interpretation alongside conservative trends focused on family values and public moral conduct, sometimes in connection with nationalistic politics.

Looking at the diverse Sufi-orientated groups in contemporary Bosnia and the miscellaneous devotional practices that take place on a weekly basis within formal and informal fellowships, it is apparent that a combination of the global tendencies regarding public religion and the consequences of particular historical events in the Balkans constitute a shared feature of all active groups. Attitudes to cultural heritage and the region’s Islamic past form the base for competing self-presentations. Taking positions in relation to each other by means of defining heritage and legitimate authority makes the Sufi activities political in the broadest sense of the term, as this indicates a use of history for contemporary self-definition, memory and narration (Todorova 2004; Özyürek 2006, 2007).

Islam and the Sufi Webs in the Balkans

In international media and political debate, Muslim life in Bosnia-Herzegovina is often associated with an emerging radicalisation and an increasing Arabisation since the war in the Balkans in the 1990s. It is definitely true that there have been recent missionary activities, but the monolithic picture of Bosnia as a breeding ground for international terrorism has been contested (Öktem 2010, 2011) and the many varied modes of practising Islam in the region have been highlighted (Duijzings 2000; Clayer and Bougarel 2001; Neuburger 2004; Bougarel et al. 2007; Ghodsee 2010; Raudvere 2012a). In many cases the variants of Muslim ritual expression encountered in the Balkans have their roots in Sufi-related practices (intense prayers, commemorations, pilgrimages to local sacred sites, votive ceremonies), sometimes also flavoured by the close historical relations to Christian holy sites – a perspective of the past rejected or ignored by most religious groups today.

Sufism (tesavvuf) and the ritual life connected with its meeting places and local pilgrim sites have been criticised, if not attacked, as “folk Islam” from two very different ideological angles. Both secular liberals and representatives of purist Muslim interpretations have for more than a century raised objections to what they see as over-emotional and irrational Sufi customs. Some regard Sufism as a variant of archaic superstitious folk religion, impossible to integrate with what is perceived as modern Islam (Krämer and Schmidtke 2006; Bruinessen 2007; Schielke 2007; Kerslake, Öktem and
Robbins 2010), and therefore turn to more purist alternatives, not infrequently proselytising Arab, Arabising or Turkish groups. To complicate the picture even further, the Sufi legacy – despite its connection to folk religion – is nevertheless presented by politicians as exemplifying a particularly European feature of Islam prevalent in the Balkans. There is thus an apparent ambiguity in regard to what many experience as “Bosnian traditions”. On the one hand, Sufism is thought to remain authentic and independent of the Arabisation of the original Islamic message. Conversely, it is considered as representing qualities that could easily be integrated with modernity: liberal, open to other denominations and focused on personal piety. In short, Sufism has been a tool for defining cultural memory from various standpoints as much as a mode of religious expression.

Among today’s Sufi groups, some look to history, others to ways of expressing religiosity that make sense in the contemporary world. For several, the national issue is a vital element of Bosnian Sufi identity. Sufism as an alternative form of piety is certainly not a one-way path in this kaleidoscopic landscape. The active groups claim tradition and heritage, and look for a Muslim (but not by necessity specifically Ottoman) past, while simultaneously connecting to modern modes of communication and developing transnational links and networks. The issue of ritual authority and theological interpretative legitimacy has been a focal point in Bosnian debates on Sufism. This article will therefore present cases that exemplify both varying scales of the activities and the legal status of the Sufi groups.

The many changes in the Balkans during the 20th century have made history and religion important components of identity politics (Babuna 1997, 2004; Todorova 1997). The academic debate about the nature of the early encounters between Christian groups and the Muslim conquerors of the Balkans in the 15th century – and what kind of contacts preceded Ottoman rule – has been long-running (Pinson 1993; Malcolm 1994; Fine 1994). Here, only the vital role the Sufi groups played in establishing Islam and the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans will be addressed, including how they became part of everyday life in towns as well as in the countryside (Popovic 1994). Besides its obvious religious role, an order (tariqat) provided important social, cultural and economic networks across urban and rural divisions. With their transnational contacts and strong cohesion within the groups, the Sufi orders adapted to changes within a framework of traditionalism. They have therefore become emblematic among detractors as well as sympathisers for their ability to change and at the same time retain their core features and values.
Active Amnesia — Both collective memory and collective amnesia have had a significant impact on Sarajevo’s urban landscape over the past sixty years. In the mid-1950s, the Mevlevi lodge (tekija) from 1462 was torn down as part of the anti-religious campaigns of the Tito era (Donia 2006: 251ff.). The site was vacant for decades and constituted a blank memorial of the former building and the unwanted Muslim Sarajevan history (Clive 2007). When a petrol station was built there in 1989, it became a turning point for positions taken in what would develop into the break-up of the federation and ethnic conflicts. Today, the mayor of Konya has taken on the role as defender of this Ottoman Sufi heritage (in his capacity as the representative of Rumi’s city) and has offered to build a replica of the tekija complex.

 Especially in the countryside, ritual practices constituted a contact zone between Christians and Muslims with shared pilgrimage sites for the veneration of saints who provided blessings and cures. Even during the Yugoslav period, spaces were shared for religious practice and narrations about miracles and holy persons.

 The ritual practices, part of the traditional Sufi repertoire, became deeply rooted in local religious expressions and offered a broader palette of piety than the ceremonies conducted by a master (șeh). Devotional gatherings such as commemoration of the dead (tevhid), recitations in praise of the birth of the Prophet Muhammad (mevlud), and calling blessing upon Prophet Muhammad (salavat) all have fewer requirements of formal ritual leadership and are based on private initiative and personal needs. They are embedded in local life and inscribed in a web of social relations that give them a meaning far beyond the religious. The leaders of these rituals can be independent from institutional religious authorities. Furthermore, the Sufi-orientated rituals are less dependent on specific ritual sites, as they are to a great extent performed in domestic or semi-domestic settings. Women have traditionally been particularly active as hostesses and reciters during such gatherings (Raudvere 2002, 2012a), especially at emotional events such as funerals, commemorations, sending off pilgrims to Mecca and welcoming them back. Finally, the artistic and aesthetic expressions of the Sufi legacy should not be underestimated as a key means of identity construction, especially the rich oral traditions. Non-practising
Muslims in Bosnia nevertheless have strong emotional bonds to the repertoire of songs, narratives and legends associated with Sufism.

The Organisation of Sufi Activities

The historical organisation of the Sufi orders in the Balkans is not merely a map of past administration; to a great extent, the more than a century old structure still has an effect on how contemporary Sufi groups are able to work, their role(s) and status. The Balkans are definitely on the fringe of what is conventionally regarded as the Muslim world, but since the 14th century the region has been a dynamic border zone on both the East–West and North–South axes, with Istanbul as its node. The Sufi orders were widely interconnected both as organisations and sources of authority, and with very close links to the centres of the Muslim world. Transnationality – a supposedly modern phenomenon – was built into this web of liaisons, making it possible to transfer ideas, religious authority, people and commodities over long distances. The shrine of a founder of an order (pir) remained the focal point for devotion and communication across borders, and generated lingering imagery, narratives and identities that included both the past and the present. The decline of the Ottoman Empire, the Congress of Berlin and the Habsburg rule over the region from 1878 engendered new influences, changing conditions for the elite’s liberal elements, and altered life styles for the urban middle class (Donia 1981). The separation from the Istanbul sphere of influence involved not only a political and economic turn towards Vienna, but also an openness to strong influences from modernist ideologies stressing primary identities other than the ethno-religious ones offered by the Ottoman millet system.

The Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Islamska zajednica u Bosni i Hercegovini) is an administrative body with the responsibility for organising public Muslim life. It has throughout all political changes remained the national structure for control and unification. The first article of its statutes defines the Islamic Community as “the sole and united community of Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina, of Bosnian Muslims outside their homeland, and of other Muslims who accept it as their own”. In other words, it is intended to oversee all activities taking place in the name of Islam in the country. In some respects similar to the Turkish Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), the Islamic Community was, however, inaugurated as far back as 1882 by the Austro-Hungarian regime with the explicit intention of establishing a national administration for Muslim affairs. A new way of organising and understanding public Islamic life was thereby introduced. It was an effort to construct a “European” and “modern” religious administration, based on a territorial definition of its subjects, and simultaneously an attempt to cut the links with Istanbul and Bosnia’s Ottoman past. Equally important, given its statutes, the Community has the authority to define what Bosnian Islam is – and what it is not. Even today, any association or foundation with Muslim or Islamic in its name must de facto have formal approval from the Islamic Community in order to register as an official organisation with the secular authorities. This is of vital importance to today’s new Sufi groups when trying to establish themselves in the public sphere, as they are often confronted with the choice between being officially accepted and part of the public realm or remaining within semi-private spaces.

A second significant characteristic of today’s organisation of the Bosnian Sufi orders consists of the still noticeable effects of the repression of religious activities during the
Socialist federation (Popovic 1990, 2009). In 1952, Sufi activities were forbidden and the tekije were closed down, and thus the followers became less connected to specific premises with manifest historical memories. To compensate for this, certain individuals were known to maintain the ritual and literary repertoire, and irregularly arrange gatherings in private homes. Eventually, towards the end of the Tito era, certain mosques were known to host Sufi activities like mevlud recitals, repetitive zikr prayers, and Mesnevija readings. Sufi circles in local mosques and formal orders were more or less open again about their activities from the late 1960s. In 1966 the novelist Meša Selimović used the Sufi environment around the Hadži Sinanova tekija to provide an 18th-century frame to his criticism of contemporaneously rigid Socialist society in Death and the Dervish (trans. 1996). The novel’s depiction of the Ottoman administrative hierarchies was far from a flattering historical mirror image of Tito’s Yugoslavia. To many readers at the time, and later, the book represented not only a camouflaged criticism; it was also their first encounter with an attempt to include the life of the dervishes in a shared cultural background – though from a literary perspective, not a historian’s.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Yugoslavia saw the beginnings of religious mobilisation mixed with ethnic and nationalistic motives throughout the federation and among all denominations. This new visibility of religion also influenced the Sufi circles. After long negotiations and internal tarikat disagreements, it became accepted for the orders to organise within the Islamic Community. In 1977 the Tarikat Centre (Tarikatski centar) was established within the Islamic Community. Article 71 in the latter’s constitution still declares that Sufi orders, established in accordance with Islamic law and tarikat traditions, are part of the Islamic Community. The orders and tekije were thereby recognised as an element of public Muslim life in Bosnia. Yet it was mostly a concern for the established orders and their branches, foremost the Nakšibendi and Kaderi. Even before the disintegration of Yugoslavia, tarikat branches not previously active in the region started to recruit followers, and they were soon followed in the 1990s by newly established branches and neo-Sufi groups. Many of these new constellations – among them the Gülen groups and the Halidis and Hakkanis of the Nakšibendi web of branches – have strong connections to Turkey and tend to attract younger followers due to the wide range of activities and modes of communication they offer (Öktem 2010; Raudvere 2012b). As will be shown below, a group’s status within the Islamic Community is crucial. Few, if any, of the Sufi-orientated emerging groups have been recognised – in any sense of the term – by the Community.

One purpose of the Tarikat Centre administration within the Islamic Community is evidently control and structure, but the organisation has also provided a stable platform for joint activities and manifestations between the orders that started to take form already during the Yugoslav period, and have thereby secured the more recent visibility of the Sufi legacy in Bosnian Islam. Three examples of such joint activities can be mentioned in order to indicate the shifting character of the activities that gather members and affiliates of various orders. The first two stem from the Bosnian Muslim tradition of organising pilgrimages to sacred places in nature connected with legendary narratives. These dovište have a long history and vary in scale from national manifestations to highly limited local ones. The third case exemplifies how the attraction of old masters and their teaching traditions is embedded in a commemorative culture that advances the virtues of the Ottoman era.
In June every year tens of thousands meet to climb the seven kilometres from the small town of Prusac to the spring at Ajvatovica which, according to legend, began to flow thanks to Ajvaz-dedo and his forty days of praying for water (Clayer 1995). Condemned during the Socialist period, this dovišta was revitalised in 1990 and soon became one of the foremost nationalistic manifestations for the Bosnian Muslims. The procession – with horsemen, flags and banners – also has a distinct Turkish presence, with groups indicating their identity with organisational standards and the national Turkish flag alongside Bosnian symbols. The path up to the spring ends in a huge field, where midday-prayer (podne-namaz) is led by the head of the Islamic Community, the Reis-ul-Ulema or grand mufti. The gathering has a profound Muslim nationalistic character and participation is generally regarded as a clear political statement. The night before the procession a joint zikr ceremony during which the names of God are chanted is organised in the Handanija mosque where visiting Turkish şeyhs are greeted as guests of honour and the links between Bosnian and Turkish branches of various orders are emphasised. The zikr is only a minor event during the two days around Prusac. Only about a few hundred people attend the long nocturnal ceremony. That being said, the zikr is integrated as a constitutive part of the Ajvatovica event organised by the Islamic Community, and high-ranking şeyhs and their deputies (sing. vekil) take part. It is illustrative that participants in the pilgrimage the following day describe the nightly ceremony as something to hold in high esteem, but not mandatory, as it appears to be considered a ritual form for a particularly devoted group.

At the Blagaj tekija not far from Mostar, another joint public manifestation takes place every May and, as in the case with Ajvatovica, Muslim newspapers like Preporod report in detail and comment on which şeyhs attend, information also noted by people without any intention of taking part. The event at Blagaj is of a more distinctly Sufi character and with the various tarikat groups and their leaders in visible focus. The Tarikat Centre organises the event together with the local Islamic Community and the communal zikr constitutes the main ceremony. In other Muslim contexts, a certain competitiveness between the orders can at times be observed. This very decidedly joint ritual event (though far from free of tensions and indications of hierarchies) is a legacy from the Yugoslav period, when the orders not only had an ambiguous legal status, but many groups lacked appointed şeyhs, and at times even vekils. The joint activities were all the more appreciated and reckoned as authentic. This difficult situation brought the orders closer to each other and the consequences are still noticeable in the annual celebration. The Blagaj tekija complex contains the tomb (turbe) of Sali Saltik, an important 13th-century figure in the legendary history of the Muslim conquest of the Balkans. This venerated man is also one of the few links in contemporary Bosnian Sufi tradition that relates back to the Bektaši heritage, more alive in Albania, Macedonia and Kosovo today than in Bosnia. Blagaj, with its recently restored tekija turned into a museum, is a popular scenic site where the underground river Buna springs forth. Just as in Ajvatovica, the place and its spring are invested with memory, but in this case it is also the Ottoman complex that stands as a symbol of enduring tradition, irrespective of the changes in history. It is regarded as a manifestation of collective memory built on selected parts of Bosnian history.

The third example of joint gatherings is much less public and more focused on long-term Sufi teachings and disciples developing relationships with their masters. Already in 1957, a society was established – without any objection from the Islamic Community (and long before the Tarikat Centre was established) – with the aim of organising an annual Šebi
Arus night in commemoration of Djelaluddin Rumi’s death on 17 December. Since 1974, the society has published a yearbook of tesavvuf history and literature. The gathering takes place at the Potok tekija in Sarajevo and was, until his death in 2010, very much focused on the charismatic Sufi teacher Seid Strik and his Mesnevija readings. In contrast to Ajvatoica and Buna, the Šebi Arus night is attended only by a small congregation. Some of the participants have more or less formal ties to Sarajevan Nakšibendi and Kaderi groups in Sarajevo, and cherish the emphasis cultivated in these circles on traditional Sufi life and the relationship between master and disciple. Other participants have a strong bond with classical literature. The readings in Persian are followed by translations and comments in Bosnian. After the night prayer (jacija-namaz) readings, interpretations, further prayers, praises and zikr are integrated into an almost seamless whole. Even today, the ritual hierarchy is marked in the circle (halka) with prominent positions for the old masters who were active in the Yugoslav era. Most of these masters have by now passed away, but the memory of them lingers on and the narratives evoke the idealised image of the master and the disciple. Part of the heritage from the Yugoslav period is therefore a distinct focus on individual teachers, not on the orders’ structure as such. Although far from the explicitly political atmosphere at Ajvatovica, participants in the Šebi Arus night take pride in transmitting something they sense combines essential and universal Sufi teaching through the words of Rumi with a solemn expression of a particular Bosnian tradition. The small historical tekija, with its rich collection of memorabilia adorning the walls, underlines the sense of historical continuity.

The above-mentioned examples of joint activities indicate the range of Sufi representations in contemporary Bosnia: from nationalistic mass manifestations to long-term pious apprenticeship; from an emphasis on ritual to a focus on textual traditions and teachings. However, all three are situated in various ways under the umbrella of the national Islamic Community, indicating the significant influence of this administrative body. The complex legal status of the Sufi orders in the Yugoslav Federation brought the few enduring orders together and made the ecumenical gatherings a tool for survival, and they have remained an important feature for Sufi life in contemporary Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Three Modes of Exerting Contemporary Sufi Authority

In order to sketch the different platforms on which Sufi orders appear in Bosnia and Herzegovina today, three more examples will be provided which share much of what is generally conceived as Sufi tradition, but are also indicative of diverging reactions to the significant changes that have transformed the structures around the Sufi orders over the last twenty years, as mentioned in the introduction. Each in its own way bears witness to new Sufi identities, shifts in authority, and a search for new interpretive domains.

The cases here discussed are illustrative of the status of the historical orders: the developments within the branches of the traditional orders and the new independent and more informal groups. It is quite impossible to make any categorical distinctions between them as the orders are not to be thought of as congregations within the Islamic Community, but as a kind of religious affiliation that people have in parallel with their membership in the Community. As is often the case in modern religion, individuals move between groups, religious and cultural activities are sometimes hard to distinguish, and religious identity is one of many other means to mark a position in civil society and
public life. The cases also indicate various ways of taking up the custodian role in order to argue for a particular Bosnian heritage. The first two examples come from the officially recognised orders and share significant features: They take part in joint activities organised by the Tarikat Centre and their šejhs are well known in religious circles. Some of them are public voices, and the orders and their leaders are accepted in broad circles as custodians of essentially Bosnian heritage. Most members of the established orders define themselves as traditional and as keepers of a heritage that “survived Communism” and look with suspicion on the influx of new groups and the new spaces for religious expression they establish. The examples below underline how organisation, leadership and commitment have been transformed in the wake of regional political change and as a consequence of globalisation.

22 Of the orders historically operating in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Popovic 1994; Izeti 2004), Nakšibendi and Kaderi groups are the most active today. Both still have dominating families connected to specific tekije. These historical orders are repairing the damage inflicted during more than forty years of authoritarian harassment of religious groups. For a long period after World War II, leadership succession was a major problem, both in terms of maintaining the formal chain of authority (silsile) and in the context of social dynamics. Zikr, so important for community cohesion, was led by vekils when no appointed šejhs were available, or replaced by other forms of prayer. As the tekije were closed down (in several cases demolished) during the Yugoslav era and Sufi gatherings had to continue in a more or less private sphere, the orders’ relation to the state became a concern to some šejhs, vekils and other Sufi leaders.

23 The Hadži Sinanova tekija is the meeting-place of one of Sarajevo’s Kaderi groups. The oldest parts of the compound date from the 18th century, but unlike Blagaj the site is not part of a museum. As an architectural landmark in the city, it is recognised by most Sarajevans as an important part of the city’s Muslim legacy. Around seventy people regularly attend the zikr gatherings and their average age is quite high. Younger adherents attracted to various activities refer to tradition and aesthetics, music, calligraphy and Ottoman poetry as important reasons for attendance alongside the religious matter. At the tekija elaborate rituals are still performed every week with ilahije, kaside and other songs from a rich repertoire interwoven in the extensive zikr ceremonies that for a long time were conducted by two vekils sharing the leadership obligations, one of them was later appointed šejh. An active interest in the cultural history of Bosnian Sufism is very apparent among several members, and an obvious intent to preserve the musical and literary Sufi heritage in the tekija’s library can be noted. An important part of the self-image of this group is to be guardians of tradition in times of change.

24 The second case exemplifies how old branches can sprout new groups that provide a balance between the features of a historical tarikat and the modes of communication and mobilisation in contemporary movements. Under the leadership of šejh Halil Brzina (b. 1952), a well-known general of the 7th Muslim Brigade during the war in the 1990s, this Nakšibendi branch has had considerable success over the last decade among young educated people. Šejh Brzina has apparent charisma, but, as an engineer by profession, no traditional theological credentials. Nevertheless, he has gained a certain position within the Islamic Community and established several sub-branches in Bosnia and diaspora. He has close links to the leader of the Chicago Bosnian Muslim community, Senad Agić, who is a regular guest at Brzina’s centre. The meeting place in central Sarajevo is a restored
historical tekija from the 16th century, rebuilt after the war to host a large community that has grown thanks to an apparently appealing discourse mediating between tradition and renewal. The group can offer well-attended intense prayers combined with activities that promote engagement in social matters. The main role of the šejh is as to be a spiritual leader and a trusted guide in social and moral matters. The meeting place carries symbolic importance and connects the contemporary themes in preaching and practice to historical legacy. The structure of the activities at the tekija underlines the biweekly zikr as the core ritual, and the wearing of insignia by males indicates formal affiliation and position in the hierarchy. Membership of the order and loyalty to the šejh are also vital to the young followers in their social interaction outside the tekija, and links them to a certain expected conduct that comes with the group identity.

The final example is the equally successful independent Sufi-orientated group around Sulejman Bugari (b. 1966), most often referred to as hafiz Bugari. He has a traditional theological education and training: After graduating from the Gazi Husrev-begova medresa, he studied at the Islamic Faculty in Sarajevo and in Medina, Saudi Arabia. Bugari is active as an imam within the Islamic Community and does not define himself as a šejh or a Sufi. The everyday base for his activities is not a tekija, but the Bijela mosque in the Vratnik area of Sarajevo, where large crowds congregate for his teaching (both early and later in the day) in connection with the regular namaz prayers. Bugari is nevertheless identified in mainstream Muslim circles as ‘Sufi-orientated’ due to his way of teaching and the community’s commitment to social work outside the immediate group. Responding to a direct question of whether he found the label tarikat too constricting, he emphasised that the spirituality within local Bosnian Islam could provide answers to contemporary issues such as stress, drug addiction and the general lack of societal cohesion. It is therefore not uncommon to hear references to him as being a guide of Melami character, hinting at the low public profile of the Melami Sufis in spiritual matters, and with serving the community as their foremost moral commitment. His focus is on teaching and social work, and the ritual emphasis is on the daily prayers at the mosque, not on the weekly zikr gatherings like the orders. Hafiz Bugari is an example of an accentuated focus on the instructor himself that still emphasises the traditional master-disciple relation, but in a new modus. In contrast to the more secretive older Sufi teachers who could be difficult to approach, Bugari utilises the media and has made a conscious move into the midst of the public sphere, in Bosnia and among diaspora communities. He has a heterogeneous, not necessary organised, crowd of followers and he reaches individuals in a zone between the conventional believers and the non-practising majority of Muslims. The people around Bugari essentially define themselves as followers of a teacher rather than members of a group. Bugari’s is the only one of the new Sufi constellations with a domestic origin (although Bugari himself was born in Kosovo). In contrast to Turkish orders with missionary ambitions, the flow of influence in this case moves in the other direction. Bugari has undertaken extensive teaching tours in Europe and the US among the Bosnia diaspora communities, where his books are widely distributed as a complement to his material available online. It is undoubtedly the case that both his success and his mode of teaching have stirred criticism, and Bugari has taken a unique position, working as he does from within the Islamic Community, but definitely outside the Tarikat Centre as he is not proclaiming himself as a Sufi master – just presenting himself as an imam.
A wide range is apparent under the umbrella term of informal Sufi-orientated groups, even in a small country like Bosnia. Some of them are informal, in the sense that they are not recognised by the Islamic Community or not even in dialogue with the traditional Sufi orders. Here we find the orders recently established in Bosnia and Herzegovina, most of them with Nakšibendi roots. Both Halidi and Hakkani groups (with their Turkish background) arrange activities in Sarajevo, but their comparatively great success is due to word-of-mouth efficacy and funding from abroad. From a Tarikat Center perspective, however, they are invisible. There are also examples of private zikr fellowships, following a custom that grew in importance during the Yugoslav period. Most of these groups are “homeless” in terms of space – with no other meeting places than private homes – and they do not register as formal groups, both because of the Tarikat Centre’s demands for links to formal tarikat hierarchies in order to be acknowledged and because their unofficial status guarantees liberty in theological interpretation and ritual leadership. The cases have illustrated how a renewed interest in Sufism has taken various paths in Bosnia today. There is an awareness of Sufi ritual and artistic heritage, and the fact that Sufism has been a significant part of Muslim life in the Balkans. Already the Yugoslav era harmed the traditional leadership structure inside the historical orders. Today’s Sufi leaders may well build authority on credentials other than being the disciple of a past şeyh. References to history and authenticity therefore become important means when constructing contemporary Sufi identities.

Claiming Heritage, Renewing Authority

Even if Bosnia and Herzegovina is a small country with a Muslim population of 1.8 out of a total of 4.2 million, the spectrum of the Sufi groups’ alternatives for personal forms of piety is considerable. The individual choice of whether to look for attachment to a specific teacher, a particular ritual mode, community or fellowship can be contrasted with the conventional Sufi affiliation based on family traditions, bonds which to some extent are still today prevalent in the historical orders. Personal preferences regarding spirituality play a role, but so do attitudes to theological authority, spiritual guidance, national identity and collective memory.

Sufism is not infrequently referred to as an essential part of “Bosnian Islam”, even far beyond those circles that take part in Sufi life, statements which have more to do with visions of the past and a determination to construct a European Muslim identity. The groups active today are, on the contrary, so heterogeneous – irrespective of whether they are regarded from the perspective of theology, ritual practice, or authority – that they are hardly indicative of any single Bosnian Sufi identity. Any conclusive remark is therefore highly dependent on from what point of departure Sufism is defined: their specific theological stands, their ways of organising the orders and their hierarchies, or their ritual forms of devotion. This article has emphasised the institutional status of the orders and the appearance of new groups, but it is not only a question of whether the constellations are formally recognised (which was a sensitive issue in the authoritarian federation). More important in the long run is probably the interrelationship between groups organised in tarikat structures and the less formalised groups. Recent Nakšibendi groups like the Halidi and Hakkani organise their instruction sessions and rituals without any contact with the Tarikat Centre or the historical Nakšibendi orders and their tekije. A tendency towards two parallel Sufi tracks can therefore be discerned, which is very
different from the open attitude between the orders inside the Centre and from the ‘ecumenical’ legacy from the Yugoslav era. The annual joint assemblies described above also have more small-scale local equivalents. There are examples of more or less regular zikr gatherings over the tarikat borders in Sarajevo, where people with Nakşibendi, Kaderi, Rufai, and Melami affiliations gather. Some of these events are organised around the visit of a Turkish şeyh or someone from the Bosnian diaspora, and people with no formal tarikat affiliation also attend. Participants do not necessarily define themselves as associated with any tarikat, or with tesavvuf at all, but rather relate to various rituals selected for identities founded in local history. The events are occasionally spoken of as re-establishing a heritage that has almost vanished and the need for custodians.

The Turkish impact on Sufi-orientated activities in post-war Bosnia is obvious (Solberg 2007; Öktem 2010, 2011). Former vekils have been appointed şeyhs through their links to Turkish orders, and Turkish Sufi literature is translated. However, the Gülen movement, known for its intense proselytising, does not emphasise its Sufi background despite being extensively engaged in large-scale educational projects at several places in Bosnia. This is quite paradoxical: Turkish Sufi movements have been a rich source of influence on Islam in the Balkans since the 15th century, but today, at a time of intensified Turkish presence, the Gülen groups keep their Sufi teachings for internal edification. One explanation to this strategy is most certainly that they thereby avoid having to negotiate with the Islamic Community.

Various Sufi groups have responded differently to the major changes in post-war Bosnia. The most significant change undoubtedly concerns the authority structures. On the one hand, there is a definitive political and cultural liberalisation that has opened up the field for varied modes of religious expressions, new kinds of leaders gaining authority from other areas of competence and legitimacy, as well as transnational influences from global groups and the large diasporic communities of Bosnian Muslims. The attraction of the Sufi groups active today in Bosnia comes from two sources: first, references to authentic tradition, charismatic leaders, fellowships and groups that offer lifestyles in line with Muslim conduct (edep), and, secondly, their use as tools for establishing independent theological interpretations and for highly individualised spirituality. Bosnian Sufi identity balances between national heritage (with or without political connotations) and a search for spirituality (with or without affiliation to a group or an order); it connects to the contemporary world and its specific issues in a way that is relevant for Bosnians today, as well as being symptomatic of late-modern religion worldwide.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Notes

1. This article is based on material collected during periods of fieldwork in Bosnia-Herzegovina from 2007 and onward. The results are derived from the author’s participation in the research project ‘Muslim Devotion’ hosted by the Chr. Michelsen Institute, Bergen, Norway.

2. Tone Bringa’s study Being Muslim the Bosnian Way (1995), however, provides a necessary modification of the idealised image of the relations between Christians and Muslims before the war in the 1990s. Today, cultural amnesia of a recent past battles with more nostalgic views of a previous multicultural history.
3. Cf. the discussions in Turkey about which Muslim groups that are recognised by Diyanet and which are not; for example, the Alevis and the ambivalent status of the Sufi orders which are highly visible and active, although still formally banned by law since 1925.

4. The policy toward the Sufi orders shifted within the Yugoslav Federation, and even within Bosnia and Herzegovina. A certain increased tolerance was apparent in the late 1960s, but on the other hand, the two most important tekije in Sarajevo were closed down again in 1972 by the Islamic authorities, only to slowly reopen toward the end of the decade.

5. A şeyh is an appointed leader of a local Sufi group (large or small) who belongs to a line (silsile) from the founder (pir) of the order; a vekil is the deputy of a şeyh. These appointments give the authority to lead zikr (repetitive prayer), accept new disciples to the order and be guidance in religious (and other matters). At many Sufi meeting places (tekija, pl. tekije), there is a mausoleum (turbe) with the graves of deceased şeyhs, sometimes even the founder of the (sub)-branch.

6. Şebi Arus (or şeb-i Arus), ‘The night of unification’, commemorates the day of death; interpreted as his unity with God and therefore also thought of as ‘The wedding night’.

ABSTRACTS

This article discusses the role and status of Sufi groups in Bosnia-Herzegovina today, an issue where Turkish influences are unavoidable, irrespective of whether the focus is on conceptions of the Balkans’ Ottoman legacy or on contemporary arenas for religious alternatives in public life. Today old Sufi establishments face competition from groups with roots abroad both in terms of community leadership and the relationship between the individual groups and the state administration. Sufi-orientated activities play a role within the established Muslim congregations, the ritual aspects in particular attracting previously non-practicing Muslims. Many aspects of the Sufi theme can and should of course be related to the region’s Ottoman past, the authoritarian repression of religion in the Yugoslav Federation, and the war in the 1990s. These particular features have had an impact on religious practices as well as on the institutional organisation of Islam in the region.

The attraction of the Sufi groups active today in Bosnia comes from two sources: first, references to authentic tradition, charismatic leaders, fellowships and groups that offer lifestyles in line with Muslim conduct, and secondly, their tools for establishing independent theological interpretations and for highly individualised spirituality. Bosnian Sufi identity balances between national heritage (with or without political connotations) and a search for spirituality (with or without affiliation to a group or an order); it connects to the contemporary world and its specific issues in a way that is relevant for Bosnians today, as well as being symptomatic of late-modern religion worldwide.

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