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The Safavid-Qizilbash Ecumene and the Formation of the Qizilbash-Alevi Community in the Ottoman Empire, c. 1500–c. 1700

Alevi, the largest religious minority of Turkey, also living in Europe and the Balkans, are distinguished from both Sunnis and Shi'ites by their latitudinarian attitude toward Islamic Law. Conceptualizing this feature as "heterodoxy," earlier Turkish scholarship sought the roots of Alevi religiosity in Turkish traditions which traced back to Central Asia, on the one hand, and in medieval Anatolian Sufi orders such as the Yasawi, Bektashi, Qalandari, and Wafa'i, on the other. A new line of scholarship has critiqued the earlier conceptualization of Alevi as "heterodox" as well as the assumption of Central Asian connections. In the meantime, the new scholarship too has focused on medieval Anatolian Sufi orders, especially the Bektashi and Wafa'i, as the fountainhead of Alevi tradition. Critically engaging with both scholarships, this paper argues that it was the Safavid-Qizilbash movement in Anatolia, Azerbaijan, and Iran rather than medieval Sufi orders, that gave birth to Alevi religiosity.

Keywords: Alevi; Qizilbash; Safavids; Bektashi; Turkoman; Ottomans; Sufi Orders

Introduction

At approximately 15 percent of the population, Alevi constitute the largest religious minority group in Turkey. Aside from the main body living within the borders of modern Turkey, there are related Alevi groups in surrounding regions once ruled by the Ottoman and the Safavid empires, as well as a substantial population among immigrant communities in Europe. Alevi have been studied by Turkish scholars since the beginning of the twentieth century. The study of the Alevi religion was established by Fuat Köprülü and developed by Irène Mélikoff and Ahmet Yaşar Ocak. They

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The author would like to express his gratitude to Devin J. Stewart, Fariba Zarinebaf, Amelia Gallagher, and the anonymous reviewers of *Iranian Studies* for their constructive and thought-provoking comments on the earlier drafts of this paper.

defined the Alevi religion as a Turkish heterodoxy par excellence which emerged out of Turkish popular Islam and expressed resistance to cosmopolitan Sunni orthodoxy. These scholars tried to find the roots of the Alevi tradition in medieval Sufi orders such as the Yasawi, Bektashi, Qalandari, and Wafā'i.¹ A recent line of revisionist scholarship raised strong criticisms of Köprülü's binary conceptualization, arguing that its sweeping generalization hinders our understanding of the multifaceted religious landscape of medieval Anatolia. The idea that the Alevi religion is a heterodoxy that developed against an imagined normative Islam, i.e. Sunni orthodoxy, has been vehemently rejected by this type of revisionist scholarship. Yet, the second component of Köprülü's paradigm, that is, considering medieval Sufi orders as the fountainhead of Alevi tradition, remains central to the new scholarship.²

Both Köprülü and his critics have paid little or no attention to the Safavid-Qizilbash movement as a constitutive element of the Alevi religious system. In this article, I argue that this is a grave misrepresentation of Alevi history for several reasons. First of all, such an unbalanced emphasis on medieval Sufi orders instead of the Qizilbash movement draws an artificial line between the categories of "Alevi" and "Qizilbash," even though it acknowledges some sort of overlap. As I will discuss below, this proposition is clearly disproved by Alevi sources that have recently come to light. These sources show that the Alevis and the Qizilbash were not two different groups. Rather, the two different names referred to one and the same religious community. Indeed, the proper historical name for Alevis, as seen in earlier sources, is Qizilbash. Using the term "Alevi" to refer to the Qizilbash became widespread only in the second half of the nineteenth century, due to the conciliatory policies of Sultan Abdulhamid II (r. 1876–1909) toward the Qizilbash.³ Therefore, I prefer to use the term "Qizilbah-Alevis" to indicate that the Qizilbash and the Alevis are the same community of faith. This term also highlights my focus on the Qizilbash in Ottoman territories.⁴

A close examination of the sources demonstrates that the socioreligious makeup, rituals, and doctrines of the Qizilbash-Alevi people were institutionalized and stabilized in the course of the Safavid-Qizilbash revolution in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. This claim is supported by myriad references in their religious practices and sacred narratives to this formative period.⁵ Therefore, I argue that the Qizilbash-Alevis were not an extension of the Bektashi *ṭarīqah* or of any other Sufi

¹Köprülü, *Türk Edebiyatında*; Köprülü, "Anadolu'da İslamiyet"; Köprülü, "Bektaşiliğin Menşe'leri"; Köprülü, *Influence du chamanisme*; Köprülü, "Bektaş"; Köprülü, "Ahmet Yesevi"; Mélikoff, "L'Islam hétérodoxe"; Mélikoff, *Sur les traces*; Mélikoff, *De l'épopée*; Mélikoff, *Au banquet*; Ocak, "Les milieux soufis"; Ocak, "Un aperçu"; Ocak, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nda*; Ocak, "The Wafā'i tarīqa."

²DeWeese, "Foreword"; Karamustafa, "Yesevlik, Melâmetilik, Kalenderilik"; Karamustafa, "Kaygusuz Abdal"; Dressler, *Writing Religion*; Karakaya-Stump, "The Vefā'iyye"; Karakaya-Stump, "Subjects of the Sultan." For a revisionist approach, see Yıldırım, "Sunni-Orthodox vs. Shi'ite-Heterodox?" For a comprehensive discussion of the literature on Alevis, see Yıldırım, *Geleneksel Alevilik*, 39–74.

³Yıldırım, *Geleneksel Alevilik*, 39–45.

⁴In the meantime, I use the term "Qizilbash" to signify all Qizilbash people across the Ottoman and Safavid empires and the term "Alevi" to signify modern Qizilbash living in Turkey and Europe.

⁵For some preliminary studies on this track of scholarship, see Yıldırım, "Inventing a Sufi Tradition"; Yıldırım, "In the Name of Husayn's Blood"; Yıldırım, *Aleviliğin Doğuşu*.

orders, such as the Yasawi, Qalandari, or Wafa'i order, but adherents of the Safavid dynasty as well as disciples of the Safavid *tariqah*.

Not only Turkish historiography creates a misrepresentation of Qizilbash and Alevi as two different people; so too does Safavid historiography. Though acknowledging substantial Anatolian roots of the Safavid revolution, the latter has not sufficiently considered the history of the Qizilbash-Alevi who remained in Ottoman territory.⁶ This is because existing scholarship has relied on sources produced by Persian bureaucrats and Arab and Persian religious scholars. These sources are silent about the Anatolian Qizilbash. More strikingly, they include almost no information about the internal organization and religious practices of the Qizilbash who constituted the military caste of the Safavid state. Meanwhile, few of the written sources, if any, that were produced by the Qizilbash aristocracy have survived to the present day. As a result, Safavid historiography provides little information about the Qizilbash, even though they were the military and political overlords of the Safavid state.

In the meantime, remnants of the Qizilbash movement in Anatolia, i.e. the Alevi, managed to preserve some documents and manuscripts that trace back to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Since they are considered sacred and kept secret, most of these sources have only become known recently. One may classify these Alevi sources under three main categories: (1) religious treatises and guidebooks, (2) authorization documents such as the diploma of *khilāfat* (*shajarah*) and the diploma of *sayyidhood* (*siyādatnāmah*), and (3) letters addressed to local Qizilbash-Alevi communities or individuals.⁷

Among the religious treatises and guidebooks, the most important and the most central for the Qizilbash-Alevi religious system is a genre of religious writing called *Manāqib-e Shaykh Saḡī*, more popularly known among contemporary Alevi as the *Buyruk* ("Command"). Scholars have assumed that the *Buyruk* genre consists exclusively of Alevi texts, whose origin goes back to the Safavid propaganda among Ottoman Qizilbash in the sixteenth century and that it has no relevance to the Qizilbash in the Safavid world.⁸ My own studies, based on more than fifty copies

⁶For the most relevant studies in this respect, see the following section in this paper. For an approach that seeks to link the Ottoman and the Safavid aspects, see Zarinebaf, "Rebels and Renegades."

⁷Most of the newly discovered documents that fall into the second and third categories in my classification are published in the following works: Ocaq, *Ortaçağ Anadolu'sunda*; Aytaş, *Belgeler Işığında*; Karakaya-Stump, "Subjects of the Sultan"; Karakaya-Stump, "Documents and *Buyruk* Manuscripts"; Karakaya-Stump, *Vefailik, Bektaşilik, Kızılbaşlık*. During my own field studies in more than 600 Alevi villages in the years 2013, 2014, and 2015, I discovered some 250 manuscripts dealing with the Alevi faith and rituals. Most frequent among these manuscripts are copies of *Buyruk*, *Fazilet-nāmah* (a legendary account of 'Alī Ibn Abī Ṭālib's deeds written in 1519), *Maqal-e Ḥusayn* (a legendary narrative of Imam Ḥusayn's martyrdom), and collections of Shah Ismail's poems under the penname Shah Khaṭā'i. For my preliminary discussions of the data collected in this fieldwork, see Yıldırım, *Geleneksel Alevilik*; see especially pp. 295–302 for a discussion of these manuscripts. For an introductory evaluation of Alevi written sources, see Yıldırım, "Literary Foundations."

⁸For the most important studies on the *Buyruk*, see Otter-Beaujean, "Schriftliche Überlieferung versus mündliche Tradition"; Yaman, "Alevilerin İnanç ve İbadetlerinin Temel Kitabı"; Yaman, *Buyruk*; Kaplan, "Buyruklara Göre Kızılbaşlık"; Kaplan, *Erkân-nāme 1*; Kaplan, *Yazılı Kaynaklarına Göre Alevilik*;

that I discovered in public libraries and among the private possessions of Alevi religious leaders, have led me to conclude otherwise. I argue that the *Buyruk* emerged in the sixteenth century as the canonical text of the Safavid-Qizilbash Sufi order, that is, the Safavid Sufi order as it was transformed under Shaykh Junayd, Shaykh Haydar, and Shah Ismail. Hence, it addressed not only the Qizilbash followers in Ottoman territory but also the Qizilbash aristocracy within the Safavid realm.⁹

This study suggests that these recently discovered Qizilbash-Alevi sources may significantly extend our knowledge of Qizilbash-Alevi history. They may also shed a light on the above-mentioned absent aspect of Safavid history. To this end, this study scrutinizes the internal socioreligious organization and religiosity of the Qizilbash-Alevi people mainly through these Alevi sources. Finally, it argues that the Qizilbash in the Ottoman and Safavid territories were the integral parts of the same socioreligious *ecumene*, that is, the Safavid-Qizilbash order. Hence, the history of the Qizilbash-Alevi of modern Turkey is part of the history of the Safavid-Qizilbash.

Formation of the Safavid-Qizilbash Sufi Order and the Anatolian Branch of the Safavid-Qizilbash Ecumene

Since the 1930s, scholars have noticed close ties between Anatolian Turkomans and the transmutation of the Safavid Sufi order by the mid-fifteenth century.¹⁰ Hanna Sohrweide convincingly documented the Anatolian roots of the Safavid/Qizilbash revolution.¹¹ Concomitantly, studies by Jean Aubin, Roger M. Savory, Hans Roemer, and Michel M. Mazzaoui further expanded our understanding of the revolutionary period in the Safavid history.¹² One point on which this foundational literature agrees is that the transformation of Shaykh Şafî's quietist and Sunni-oriented *ṭarīqah* into a Messianic revolutionary movement was, above all, due to Turkoman disciples who hailed from among tribes of Anatolia, Syria, and Azerbaijan. Under the energetic leadership of young Shaykh Junayd (1447–60), the Safavid order turned into a uniting locus for dissident Turkomans who resided in Ottoman, Aqqyunlu, Zulqadirlu, and Mamluk territories.¹³ The mass adherence of these

Kaplan, *Şeyh Safî Buyruğu*; Bisâti, *Şeyh Sâfi Buyruğu*; Taşğın, "Şeyh Safî Menâkıbı ve Buyruklar"; Karakaya-Stump, "Documents and *Buyruk* Manuscripts"; Karakaya-Stump, "Alevi Dede Ailelerine Ait Buyruk Mecmuaları."

⁹For an extensive discussion of the historical, social and religious context of the *Buyruk* and a critical edition of the earliest *Buyruk* text, see Yıldırım, *Menâkib-ı Evliyâ (Buyruk)*.

¹⁰Hinz, *Irans Aufstieg*; Minorsky, "The Poetry of Shah Ismail I"; Minorsky, *Tadhkirat al-Muluk*.

¹¹Sohrweide, "Der Sieg."

¹²Roemer, "Die Safawiden"; Roemer, "The Qizilbash Turcomans"; Nikitine, "Essai d'Analyse"; Savory, *Iran under the Safavids*; Savory, "Some Reflections"; Savory, "The Consolidation"; Savory, "The Office of *Khalifat Al-Khulafâ*"; Savory, "The Principal Offices"; Aubin, "Études Safavides I"; Aubin, "L'avènement des Safavides"; Aubin, "Revolution chiite"; Mazzaoui, *The Origins*; Mazzaoui, "The Ghâzi Backgrounds"; Haneda, *Le Châh et les Qizilbâs*.

¹³In addition to works cited above, especially for the Turkoman political tradition in the background of the Safavid revolution, see Woods, *The Aqqyunlu*.