



## **Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program**

*The opinions, recommendations, and conclusions of the grantee are his/her own and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IREX or the US Department of State.*

**Mentor Mustafa,  
Predoctoral Student  
Boston University  
IARO 2006-2007  
Albania**

**The Bektashi Ecumenical Experience: Heterodox Islam, National Identity, and  
Modernity in Post-Communist Albania.**

### **Topic of research**

My research fits best within the realm of social sciences and within this broad area of inquiry my project looked into the contemporary context of religious revival and religious life in Albania. This study utilizes the methodological tools of anthropology of religion in order to explore the local and regional variants of practice of a religious community. The Bektashi are a Sufi brotherhood adhering to Islamic mysticism and the teachings of a 13th century saintly figure of Haxhi Bektash Veli. Their communities are presently organized vertically with a demarcated and centralized spiritual and administrative leadership. However this manner of social organization allows for a great deal of local autonomy and involvement of the peripheral constituents of the community. The local-central dynamics of this kind of social organization are extended here to suggest a model for governance that addresses the problems with transitional democracies like Albania that are further frustrated by the lack of concurrence between the local and central governments.

### **Relevance and contribution to field.**

The western public often draws their conceptions of Islam from sources that identify the Islamic world as homogenously orthodox and often as militantly driven. My research on

a heterodox and syncretic Muslim community offers a different perspective on Islam. Moreover, in light of a strong missionary presence in Albania, policy-makers may benefit from the documentation of an indigenous community that reflects in its institutional organization, doctrine, and practice the ideals of pluralistic tolerance. Within a religious framework, in Albania, notions of national identity and modernity need not be complicated through transnational loyalties. Rather, my research suggests that they may be better served by utilizing the available indigenous cultural resources. Our understanding of this point is especially important for post-communist Albania, in light of the country's complex cultural mosaic, and the role of sectarian divisions in civil violence elsewhere around the world.

## **Approach and Research Methodology**

The most appropriate research methodology suited for the ambitions of my research proposal – an inquiry into the local-regional interconnections within a hierarchical religious community and its relevance as a model for governance for a transitional democracy – is the multi-sited approach. Three important sites were chosen in the districts of Tirana, Elbasan, and Gjirokastër. Tirana shelters the World Headquarters of the Bektashi Order of Dervishes (Kryegjyshata Botërore Bektashiane). Aside from its spiritual leadership role, this institution is the administrative center organized around a religious sanctuary, a Sufi lodge or in Albanian a teqe. Kryegjyshata as a leading institution is composed as the administration, and the publishing press Urtësia Bektashiane (lit. Bektashi Wisdom) that serves the wider Bektashi community. Elbasan and Gjirokastër are two districts with considerable Bektashi presence sharing their urban and rural living space with Sunni Muslims, Albanian Christian Orthodox and, in the case of Elbasan, Albanian Catholics. The latter two were chosen as representatives of sites in periphery in order to see how they themselves are organized and operate in relation to the main center in Tirana.

These being my research sites, my research methodology utilized participant observation as a heuristic device. This approach, the hallmark of anthropological research, requires that the researcher lives with or near the community under study, interacts with informants in daily bases for an extended period of time, inquires about their worldviews, practices and beliefs, and through a series of formal and informal interviews sought answers to three research questions a) what is the scope of relevance of religious practice to the communities under study, b) how is the spiritual hierarchy constructed and maintained and how is it held together both locally and regionally, and c) to assess the usefulness of the model generated from a bottom-up approach (i.e. Barth 1993) where the indigenous cultural resources are mobilized to suggest an alternative way of governing, a way that may be useful in Albania or similar contexts elsewhere.

My research activities included the collection of archival materials that are important sources of information that can be mobilized in service of the aims of the proposed research. The bimonthly magazine Urtësia of the Bektashi community was collected and inspected about the contents and sections that touched upon the role of the center for the greater community, and the activities of the peripheral centers that were reported in this publication. Other publications in the local presses were investigated for their contents. The Albanian National Archives and the holdings sheltered in the different institutes of the Albanian Academy of Sciences in Tirana were also subjected to a

search for historical materials about the Bektashi in Albania. This literature was deemed valuable for the construction of a general picture of how the community was organized in the past which allows for a diachronic comparison with how the community is organized at present and the changes that have occurred in social organization of the religious community over time. An additional source of literature were the smaller size holdings in the Bektashi teqes which included calendars, local publications for the community at large, and other rare publications that are not usually available outside of a particular lodge's area of influence. These portions of the literature are important to this study because they allow for a comparison of the literary output that originates from the Headquarter's publishing house in Tirana and the kinds of literature available for public consumption in peripheral centers. In the upcoming stages of research and as I complete the writing component of the doctoral dissertation, I intend to look into these comparisons more closely to pinpoint the overlaps and divergences in the types of literary sources available to the communities under study and to discern what these comparisons may suggest about center-periphery relations.

Aside from participant observation and the collection of literary materials for the study at the three main centers, I conducted shorter trips to additional centers in Albania where I became familiar with their local histories, conducted formal and informal interviews with members of these communities who volunteered their time and support, and participated in their annual celebrations whenever possible. Each lodge annually celebrates the day of the founding of respective religious center. These celebrations are pilgrimages of the sort where adherents of a particular lodge and beyond come together to celebrate the day of the founding of their center. These rare day-long events when the community comes together and were productive research occasions where I experienced the interaction between religious actors representing the local, regional, and national components of the community chosen for the study reported here.

## **Research Findings and Preliminary Conclusions**

This research set out to document the social organization of a religious institution that appeared to strike a balance between a hierarchical and centralized leadership allowing for a good degree of local autonomy. By mapping out how such a system operates to ensure continuity, the model that emerges offers a local alternative to problems associated with center-margins incongruence between the functioning of the central and local government in contemporary Albania. This disjuncture, which has been isolated by De Waal (2005) and other researchers, remains a stumbling block for democratic transformations in a post-communist setting.

How the Bektashi community organized and what is are the ethnographic manifestations of the interactions between central and local components of this particular arrangement? To understand this, some historical context is required. The Bektashi are found throughout Albania although the south and central regions are the historical strongholds of this religious community. At present, however, there is a good mix of northern Geg and southern Tosk ethnic divisions, with a considerable number of spiritual leaders coming from the south as well as the north. The community of adherents constructs their lives in accordance to the Bektashi creed as it was propagated by Haxhi Bektash Veli, a mystic whose following established him posthumously as the spiritual leader of the Order or Pir (founder). The Order may have spread into the Balkans as early as the 14th century by a disciple of Haxhi Bektash Veli,

the much contested saintly figure known as Sari Salltik whose numerous shrines of worship are claimed by Christians and Muslims alike.

A recent BBC report touched upon this saint and some intricacies of religion and especially Islam amongst Albanians. The latter part of this argument is relevant to the topic of my research as it brings out the issue of Islam in Europe. This area of research has been heavily influenced by accounts of Muslim migrants to Western Europe leaving autochthonous Muslims of south-eastern Europe on the background of these important discussions in light of the construction of the new and unified European identity. The posting by Mardell (2008) questions the very existence of European Islam in its title but offers a journalist's account of a much more complex intertwining of issues of identity especially in regards to religion. The reactions to this posting include some interesting remarks from Albanians and non-Albanian readers around the world about issues of religion, religious identity, and other Albanian sentiments towards religion. It is these issues that will be investigated further during my dissertation write up that will utilize the qualitative and quantitative data collected during my research activities in Albania for the last nine months of 2007.

At the local level, the social organization of each community of the Albanian Bektashi aggregates around a teqe, the equivalent of a Sufi lodge that operates much like a monastery offering an educational setting for monastic life, the teachings of Islamic mysticism and Sufistic endeavors devoted to esoteric knowledge and cultivating nearness to God. The lodge offers shelter to the full time residents, dervishes, travelers and other visitors as the center strives to accommodate all guests whatever their diverse religious inclinations. Pilgrims who often make their ways to the Bektashi lodges receive charms and medicinal remedies that utilize traditional healing methods and various indigenous wild plants. Others come in groups to receive blessings through a religious wedding ceremony in the teqe premises. The teqe supports itself through donations by visitors and others who sympathize with its mission to promote peaceful means of coexistence across religious lines through a commitment to the nation and to progress for Albania and humanity.

Historically the lodge owned land as well as livestock which were its main sources of self-sufficiency. However, today the problem of land ownership and repatriation of the properties confiscated by the previous regime have not yet been implemented. The land reform and recovery of lost property remains one important problem in Albania and is further intensified by an uncontrolled emptying of the rural regions and the unchecked expansion of urban centers like Tirana and Durrës. Many legitimate landowners are entangled in legal battles with families that do not have legal titles to the grounds upon which their homes stand. Legitimate landowners were also religious institutions whose lands were stripped away by the Communist state. Each administration that comes to power promises to solve the problem of land reform while also keeping legitimate owner's interests in mind. The Bektashi do not have transnational support like the Vatican for the Albanian Catholics and the many Islamic Foundations both east and west that have an interest in mosques and medreses or educational institutions. For the Bektashi, the return of teqe assets that were confiscated by the previous rule is an immediate and pressing concern. This issue of land ownership has invited a closer dialogue between policy makers and the Bektashi administration.

It is worth noting here that the Bektashi community in Albania presents itself as best suited to represent the national milieu by the fact that the other three religious

communities recognized by the republic of Albania – Sunni Islam, Albania Orthodox and Catholic – have less right to claim to represent Albanian ideals in the national and international arena simply because their centers of leadership are historically compromised by their extensive transnational connections and dependency on external sources of power and legitimacy. In contrast, although transnational connections existed in the past among the Bektashi, the restriction of Sufi activities by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's Republic of Turkey in 1920s meant that the Bektashi spiritual leaders left their historical center in central Anatolia to settle in Albania in 1929. As a result, for the Bektashi of Albania, Macedonia, Greece, and Kosovo, Kryegjyshata Botërore Bektashiane in Tirana became the de facto World Headquarters of the Bektashi Order of Dervishes. It functioned more or less independently of the more populous Bektashi communities in Turkey, Iran and Egypt.

In terms of social organization, each Bektashi lodge is led by its own spiritual leader who is addressed as baba (lit. father in Albanian) who is responsible for all the decisions concerning the well being of the lodge and the community it serves. Within a region, several leaders of different lodges are generally overseen by a gjysh (lit. grandfather in Albanian) and all six of the gjyshata (grandfatherhoods) are under the umbrella of the headquarters of the Bektashi community in Tirana and the spiritual leader of the order Haxhi Dede Reshat Bardhi. This center is responsible for representing the Bektashi community at large to institutions in the national and international arena as well as publishing material which provides the community with the pertinent literature in service of the Bektashi understandings. Each teqe offers a portion of its monthly earnings from donations and the land and stock assets to the headquarters to support its functions and other services it offers to the community at large.

From an administrative point of view, the relationship between the center and the respective lodges is supported by a common vision that is expressed in the Bektashi teachings whose subtle theological and philosophical complexities are beyond the scope of this report. Suffice it to say that, while the fundamental message is one, it is recognized that the ways of teaching the message are different. Accepting the principle that differences can be mobilized toward achieving common goals in a productive and non-antagonistic way allows the commanding potency of central governance to be defused. Rather, local communities have more than usual degrees of freedom to its constituencies and allow local communities to independently run their own affairs. These common commitments to religious understandings that permit open and productive lines of communication that generate social action to promote the common interests of the believers and, ideally, the interests of humanity at large.

Some ethnographic evidence may be mobilized in support of the image of difference within unity that I have presented here. For example, instead of singing the spiritual songs and poems (nefes or lit. breath in Turkish) in a uniform fashion as most are sung in Turkey, in Albania they are sung with the northern Albanian two string instrument (çifteli) and also in the well documented but rather rare polyphonic form of southern Albanian singings styles. These are two very different ways of singing and delivering these religiously important hymns. It is mentioned here as one of many other examples that indicate the kind of leadership that allows and even encourages the preservation of local forms of expression as long as they are within the Bektashi worldview. In fact, it is hard to find local customs and beliefs that are contradicted by the theological premises of Bektashism. In terms of managing the teqe as an economic entity each baba is the equivalent of the head of the household unit who, like a father of a nuclear Albanian

family, is solely responsible for all the decisions that related to the welfare of the lodge and its inhabitants and adherents. All of this is done with a complete obedience and acceptance of the hierarchical social organization and centralized spiritual authority. Bektashis agree that “a herd of sheep would be lost without the herdsman”.

Another example of turning difference into a dynamic that unifies for the divided collective is the relationship between Sunni Islam and Bektashism which is a form of Twelver Islam better known to the contemporary public press as Shiism. My fieldwork materials indicate that unlike elsewhere in the world, in Albania there is a good deal of amicable interaction between the two communities. The Bektashi also have positive relationships with Albanian Christian orthodox and Albanian Catholics. The council on interreligious affairs, whose chair is equally shared by all four represented communities in the council over equal intervals, is one example of constructive dialogue. Among other things, marriages between people of different faiths documented amongst Albanians (Tirtja 1972) is one indication of coexistence. During major religious holidays leaders of the four aforementioned religious communities visit one another and it has become a common practice that in functions of one community one often sees participants from the other three communities. This tradition has been maintained even in diaspora communities like the Bektashi in Detroit, Michigan who maintain healthy relations with the Albanian-American Catholic community as well as the Albanian American Sunni Muslims in the area. Historically these relations were harnessed by the founder of the first Albanian-American Bektashi Monastery Baba Rexhepi (2006) in 1954 in Taylor, Detroit, and by At Fan Noli who was responsible for the establishment of the Albanian Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania in 1937. Both of these founding figures worked for the nationalistic cause, as is also well testified in their letter exchanges and publications in Albanian, and other foreign media outlets. The capacity of Albanians to deal with multi-religious setting is reminiscent of the same phenomenon document by Duijzing (2000) in Kosovo and others (see Young 1999; Clayer 1997; Doja 2000 for further detail).

### **Suggestions for future research**

This research was conducted as a dissertation research endeavor. The preliminary materials presented here are components of the research that fulfill my commitments as an IREX IARO fellow. A large portion of the research materials will be incorporated into a doctoral dissertation project and these suggest a number of venues for future research. Within Albania it would be useful to expand the research venue to other centers besides the ones included here. This would allow for a more comprehensive assessment of the intricacies of congruency (or lack of it) between the center and the margins. Aside from the elements that hold this working relationship together, it would be valuable to explore sources of conflict and how conflict is managed by the existing governance structures. Outside of Albania further research into Bektashi communities in neighboring countries and Turkey would inform us about the ways that the community is organized at the transnational and global arenas. Furthermore, a cross-cultural comparison of this study case with one elsewhere may offer important insights into the organizational model proposed here and its potential utility elsewhere.

## **Recommendations for the US policy community**

This research project offers insight into the ways that US policy abroad should be implemented. In the case of Albania there is a gap between the local and central governance and a disharmony between the functioning of the two levels of the government that has hindered the democratic processes in this young transitional democracy that only in the early 1990s emerged following the collapse of the authoritarian hold of a Stalinist regime. In this case it is best to mobilize native cultural resources and models of authority that are already existent rather than introducing foreign models that are often skeptically perceived as intrusive. The Bektashi model highlights the importance of approaching local problems with local resources.

## **Cited Works and Related Literature**

Barth, Fredrik. (1993). *Balinese Worlds*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Clayer, N. (1997). *Islam, State, and Society in Post-Communist Albania. Muslim Identity and the Balkan State*. H. Poulton and S. Taji-Farouki. New York, New York University Press: 115-138.

De Waal, C. (2005). *Albania Today: A Portrait of Post-Communist Turbulence*. London, I.B. Tauris and Centre for Albanian Studies.

Doja, A. (2000). "The Politics of Religion in the Reconstruction of Identities: the Albanian situation." *Critique of Anthropology* 20(4): 421-438.

Duijzings, G. (2000). *Religion and Politics of Identity in Kosovo*. New York, Columbia University Press.

Hasluck, F. W. (2005). "Shpërndarja Gjeografike e Bektashive (Geographical Presence of Bektashis)." *Perla* 4(39): 129-142.

Ibrahimi, N. (2002). "Roli i Sari Salltukut në Përhapjen e Islamit në Trevat Ballkanike, Para Shek. XIV (the role of Sari Salltek in the Spread of Islam in the Balkans in the 14th Century)." *Univers* 2002(3): 55-68.

Izeti, M. (2001). *Tarikati Bektashian (Bektashi Way)*. Tetovë, Cabej.

Kadare, I. (2006). *Identiteti Evropian i Shqiptarëve: Sprovë (European Identity of Albanians)*. Tiranë, Onufri.

Kressing, F. (2007). *The Specific Situation of Religion in Albania and the Albanian Bektashis - an Example for Crossing Religious and Political Boundaries. Europe and Its Other: Notes on the Balkans*. B. Jezernik, R. Mursic and A. Bartulovic. Ljubljana, Univerza v Ljubljani, Filozofska Fakulteta: 149-168.

Lakshman-Lepain, R. (2000). *Minorities in Southeast Europe: Bektashis of Albania*, Center for Documentation and Information on Minorities in Europe - Southeast Europe (CEDIME-SE): 28.

Mardell, M. (2008). Is there a European Islam? BBC News Report, Jan. 21, 2008.  
[http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/thereporters/markmardell/2008/01/is\\_there\\_a\\_european\\_islam\\_1.html](http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/thereporters/markmardell/2008/01/is_there_a_european_islam_1.html).

Rexhebi, B. (2006). *Misticizma Islame dhe Bektashizma*. Tiranë, Urtësia.

Tirtja, Mark (1972). Mbi martesat e bëra pas çlirimit midis personash nga besime të ndryshme. *Etnografia Shqiptare* IV:61-71.

Tomorit, B. A. (1934). *Nefeze dhe Gazele Bektashiane*. Tiranë, Shtypshkronja Kristo P. Luarasi.

Young, A. (1999). "Religion and Society in Present-Day Albania." *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 124(1): 5-16.