

Hajji Bayram and the Early Ottoman Tradition

In order to understand the poetic tradition of the Ottomans, especially Sufi poetry, it is essential to have some understanding of the general historical background, political, social and above all, religious/spiritual.

General Background

The Ottoman dynasty took their name from ‘Uthmān (known in Turkish as Osman Gazi, 1258–1326), one of many political leaders (known as *beys*) who carved out principalities for themselves under the Seljuk Empire. By pledging allegiance to the Seljuk sultan, these *beys* were given permission to set up as local lords, and in the case of Osman’s father, he was given a principality (*beylik*) close to the Sea of Marmara, which bordered on the weakening and ever-shrinking Byzantine Empire – as it turned out, this was fortuitous since they were far from the chaos of Mongol invasion, which destroyed everything that stood in its way including the ‘Abbasid caliphate in Baghdad, and close to the wealth of Byzantium, which was the real political prize. Osman was a dynamic leader and warrior, who harnessed the power of the ghazis (fighters for Islam), men who fought on the border because they believed in the religious duty of expanding the Islamic world (Dar al-Islam). Gradually Osman and his successors established themselves as the pre-eminent force not only on the western border but also throughout Anatolia, and just before he died in 1326, Osman captured from the Byzantines the all-important strategic city of Bursa, which became the first capital of the Ottomans.

Connections with Sufism

What, you may wonder, does all this have to do with Islamic mysticism and mystical poetry? As Jane mentioned last week, from the very beginning the Ottomans regarded themselves as coming under the spiritual influence of Ibn ‘Arabi. Osman himself had a close relationship with a shaykh called Edebali, as can be seen in the following story (which is told in various highly embellished versions). One night when he was a guest at the master’s lodge (*dergah*), he had a dream which he told to Edebali the next morning. “My Shaykh, I saw you in a dream, and a (crescent or full?) moon appeared in your chest. It rose, rose and then descended into my chest. Then from my navel there sprang a tree: it grew and branched out so much that the shadow of its branches covered the whole world. What is the meaning of my dream?” After a short silence, Edebali replied: “Congratulations, o Osman! The Almighty God has bestowed sovereignty upon you and your descendants. My daughter will be your wife, and the whole world will be under the protection of your children.”

In some versions of the dream-vision, Osman is shown four rivers flowing from the roots of the tree, which could be interpreted as the Euphrates, Tigris, Danube and Nile; four mountain ranges (Caucasus, Atlas, Taurus, Haemus) etc. While evidently it became embellished as a founding legend or myth, it does reveal the essential spiritual connection which a proper ruler was expected to have. This also comes out in the testament that Osman gave to his son Orhan: “Look after religious matters before all other duties. It is religious precepts that build a strong state...

Scholars, virtuous men, artists and literary men are the real power of the state, so treat them with kindness and honour... Take a lesson from me, since I came to these places as a weak leader and I reached success through the grace of the Almighty Lord, even though I did not deserve to.”¹

The story also substantiated Ottoman claims to supremacy and to a long-lived dynasty: Sultan Bayezid I, known as the ‘Thunderer’ (Yıldırım), planted one of the longest-living trees, an oriental plane, on the lower slopes of Uludağ (Mount Olympus), as a symbol of the dynasty – and the tree still survives to this day.

But what is less well-known is the connection that Edebali himself had to Ibn ‘Arabi and his teachings. For almost a century prior to the Ottomans two major spiritual forces had been at work in Anatolia: the teachings of Ibn ‘Arabi, expressed in Arabic, the pinnacle of Sufi knowledge, had been quietly disseminated through the activities of Sadruddin al-Qunawi (d. 1274) and his disciples; and the teachings of Rumi (d. 1273), expressed in Persian, had been given form in the establishment of a *tariqa* (Sufi brotherhood), the Mevlevis. In addition, a third force should be mentioned: a more down-to-earth Turkish/Turkic spirituality as taught by various masters including Hajji Bektash (d. 1271, founder of the Bektashi *tariqa*) and the famous poet Yunus Emre (d. 1320, whom we studied in IMP3). It is the blending and interweaving of these three elements that characterises Ottoman spirituality. In brief, it is during this period that spiritual teaching of a most profound kind was both becoming organised (in various forms from *tariqas* to guild-based movements such as the Ahis) and open to people of all walks of life; it was penetrating into the very fabric of the culture.

Hence Bursa, the new capital, became a magnet for dervishes from as far away as Bukhara, and we may note here the important *tariqas* which were established in Bursa, especially during the time of Hajji Bayram (i.e. fifteenth century): the Kubrawiyya by Sultan Bayazid’s son-in-law, Emir Sultan, who came from Bukhara (d. 833/1429); a branch of the Suhrawardiyya called Zayniyya, named after a man from Khurasan, Zaynuddin Khafi (d. /1438); the Qadiriyya, established in the town by one of Hajji Bayram’s students, Eşrefoğlu Rumi (d. 874/1469); the

¹ You will find the full pseudo-English translation of the testament on <http://www.osmanli700.gen.tr/english/sultans/01/index.html>.

Naqshbandiyya, established in Istanbul by Molla ‘Abdullah Ilahi (d. 896/1491).² It is perhaps, then, little surprise to find the second Ottoman ruler Orhan building a religious college in Iznik in 1331, one year after its capture from the Byzantines, for a much-respected scholar who had written a commentary on Ibn ‘Arabi’s *Fusus*, Da’ud al-Qaysari (d. 1350); Orhan also endowed another college in Bursa, the Manastir madrasa, which was headed by Molla Shamsuddin Fenari (d. 834/1430), the first Ottoman mufti and qadi, another prominent student of Ibn ‘Arabi. This direct connection of the ruling elite to scholars steeped in Ibn ‘Arabi would continue at least until after the time of Suleyman the Magnificent, i.e. 16th or 17th century, and perhaps in a less overt fashion for much longer.³

Hajji Bayram (753-833/1352-1430)

Let us now look at the life of Hajji Bayram, one of the most important Sufi masters in the Ottoman Empire. Born in a small village near Ankara (i.e. central Anatolia) in 1352, two years after the death of Da’ud al-Qaysari, he was originally named Nu’mān.

He received his Sufi training from a Khalwati shaykh called Hamiduddin Aksarayi, usually known by his nickname Somuncu Baba (d. 810/1408), because he used to bake a special kind of bread (*somun*) for the workers who were building the great mosque of Bursa, the wondrous Ulu Cami⁴. Somuncu Baba, who was one of the ‘unknown’ saints, had studied Ibn ‘Arabi and spent time in Damascus, before taking up residence in Bursa.

To give you a sense of the stature of the man, let us recall a story about the inaugural prayers marking the opening of the Great Mosque in 1399: the sultan Bayazid I asked his son-in-law Emir Sultan to lead the prayer, but when Emir Sultan got up, he announced that it would be inappropriate to lead the prayer and deliver the sermon when the ‘Succour of the Age’ (ghawth-i a‘zam) was among them, and he pointed to Somuncu Baba. Somuncu Baba of course could not refuse such a request in the presence of so many people including the sultan, so he led the prayer and then delivered a famous seven-fold commentary on the Fatiha, the opening chapter of the Quran. Molla Fanari, who came from the initiatic line of al-Qunawi and was in the congregation, said: “Everyone in the congregation has understood the first commentary on the Fatiha; as for the second, some of those here have been able to unravel and penetrate its meaning. Those who have

² For more information about Ottoman spiritual life, see <http://masud.co.uk/cms/sheikh-abdal-hakim-murad/spiritual-life-in-ottoman-turkey-2/>

³ For more details, see Jane Clark, ‘Early Best-sellers in the Akbarian Tradition’, JMIAS XXXIII, 2003. <http://www.ibnarabisociety.org/articlespdf/bestsellers.pdf>

⁴ For pictures of the Ulu Cami, see <http://www.bursaulucamii.com/galeri.html>

understood the third are very few, and the fourth and subsequent commentaries are beyond our comprehension. Only Somuncu Baba knows these.”⁵

At this time Hajji Bayram was a teacher at a madrasa in Ankara, but left to follow Somuncu Baba, who gave him the name Bayram because they met on the Muslim festival of sacrifice, known in Turkish as ‘Qurban Bayram’. Somuncu Baba left Bursa as it was getting too ‘hot’ for him, and with Hajji Bayram he travelled to Damascus and Mecca before returning to live in Aksaray. When he died, he named Hajji Bayram as his successor (*khalifa*).

Hajji Bayram then moved back to Ankara and founded the Bayramiyya as a combination of the Khalwatiyya and Naqshbandiyya, but with a solid underpinning of Ibn ‘Arabi’s teachings. He was evidently a much-loved teacher, and his dervish lodge and school, established in Ankara, became widely known and attracted students from a large area. Perhaps his popularity lay in the fact that he managed to combine two worlds, the scholarship of the *madrasa* and the daily practice of the *tekke* or dervish lodge. In short, a scholar Sufi, if you like.

He also became a respected advisor to the Ottoman Sultan Murad II. During his last visit to the Sultan in Edirne, he famously predicted that the Sultan's son would conquer Constantinople, then in Byzantine hands.

When he died in 1430 (his tomb in Ankara is still much visited and venerated today), he nominated as his successor Aq Shamsuddin, another Sufi scholar steeped in Ibn ‘Arabi, who went on to become the advisor of Mehmet II (Fatih) who conquered Istanbul. At least three major lines take their lineage from Hajji Bayram: the Shamsiyya branch of Aq Shamsuddin (d. 863/1459), the Melami branch of Emir Sikkini (d. 880/1475), and later the Jalwati branch of Mehmet Uftade (d. 988/1580). All three maintained the teachings of Ibn ‘Arabi at the very core of their understanding of spirituality⁶.

As for the poems of Hajji Bayram, according to the great Turkish scholar Gölpınarlı, only five of those associated with his name are genuine. It is these that we will study in a new translation (done by Henry Bayman and myself). The poems are in the apparently simple style of Turkish hymns (*ilahis*): like those of Yunus Emre, they contain an often surprising profundity.

⁵ For further details on the Melamis, see Victoria Holbrook, ‘Ibn ‘Arabi and the Ottoman Dervish Traditions’, JMIAS IX, 1991 <http://www.ibnarabisociety.org/articles/melami1.html>

⁶ For example, the seventh in the Melami line was the teacher of Abdullah Bosnevi, who wrote the first Fusus commentary in Turkish.