

THE RELIGIOUS AND LITERARY CONTRIBUTION OF BABA XHEMAL STAMBOLLI-TURKU IN THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY IN THE CITY OF ELBASAN

BABA CEMAL İSTANBULLU-TÜRKİ’NİN 20. YÜZYILIN BAŞLARINDA
ELBASAN ŞEHRİNDEKİ DİNİ YAŞAMA VE EDEBİYATA KATKISI

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Sorumlu Yazar

Öz

Bu makale, dönemin entelektüel elitinin önemli bir parçası olan ve Elbasan kentinden nispeten uzun bir süre faaliyet gösteren tanınmış bir dinî ve edebî şahsiyet olan Baba Cemal İstambulî-Türkî’nün etkisini ve mirasını incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Çalışma ile Cemal Baba’nın Elbasan’da Bektaşî inancının liderlerinden biri olarak faaliyetlerini yürüttüğü tarihsel bağlamın açıklığa kavuşturulması arzulanmaktadır. Ayrıca, bu çalışma dokümantasyon araştırması, yayınlanmış literatürün analizi yoluyla onun hayatının ve çalışmalarının iki temel yönüne odaklanmaktadır. Bunlar: dinî alana katkısı ve yerel edebiyat ve kültürün gelişimi üzerindeki etkisidir. 20. yüzyılın ilk onyılları, Arnavutluk’un bağımsızlık yolculuğuna ve devletin kuruluşuna giden yoldaki kronolojik olarak yoğun döneme denk gelmektedir. Bu dönemde Bektaşî inancının mensupları ve önderlerinin, devlet kurma gibi zorlu bir süreçten geçtikleri gözlemlenmiştir. Cemal Baba, İslam inancının yayılmasında, Bektaşîlere eğitim ve manevî rehberlikte bulunmanın yanı sıra dinî geleneklerin korunmasında da önemli rol oynamıştır. Ayrıca önemli bir yazar ve şair olarak özellikle Arnavut kültürü ve toplumu için zor dönemlerde Arnavut edebiyatının zenginleşmesine katkı da bulunmuştur. Bu çalışmanın amacı, Elbasan kentinin dinî ve edebî alanlarında değerli bir miras bırakan, bu kentin kültür ve kimliğinin gelişimine etki eden manevî bir lider ve düşünür olarak Cemal Baba’nın figürünün önemini vurgulamaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Cemal Baba, Bektaşilik, Tekke, Arnavutluk.

Abstract

This paper aims to examine the influence and legacy of Baba Xhemal Stambolli-Turku, a well-known religious and literary figure, and an integral part of the intellectual elite of his time who operated for a relatively long period in the city of Elbasan. Through the narrative, we seek to clarify the historical context in which Xhemal Stambolli carried out his activities as one of the leaders of the Bektashi

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faith in Elbasan. Additionally, through the research of documentation, the analysis of published literature, and the use of surveys, this study focuses on two main aspects of his life and work: his contribution to the religious field and his impact on the development of local literature and culture. The early decades of the 20th century coincide chronologically with the most intense period leading towards the path of independence and the creation of the Albanian state. It is worth appreciating the fact that the followers and leaders of the Bektashi faith had a generally positive political approach towards this process in the difficult journey of state-building. Baba Xhemali played an important role in spreading the Islamic faith, engaging in the education and spiritual guidance of the faithful, as well as in preserving religious traditions. Furthermore, he became an important writer and poet, contributing to the enrichment of Albanian literature, especially in difficult periods for Albanian culture and society. This study aims to highlight the importance of Baba Xhemali's figure as a spiritual leader and thinker who left a valuable legacy in the religious and literary fields of the city of Elbasan, influencing the development of the culture and identity of this city.

Key Words: Xhemal Stambolli, Bektashism, Dervish lodge, Albania, Elbasan.

Introduction

In this article, I have tried to highlight the high human values of Father Xhemal Stambolli-Turku, as one of the most esteemed representatives of the Bektashi community of this city and what Bektashism offers through its principles. By offering the model of a knowledgeable, devout, and tolerant person, Baba Xhemali left an unforgettable mark on popular memory, and the generations that followed continue to speak of his work with respect and admiration. Although documentary sources about him are very scarce, his figure inspired me to embark on a difficult but deserving path. His activity, like that of many other clergymen, was obscured or diminished during the difficult period of Albanian communism. Many religious institutions were demolished, destroyed, or repurposed, along with the material and documentary archives they possessed. However, it was impossible to avoid the task of highlighting, even if not in a complete form, the legacy of the illustrious figure of Xhemal Stambolli, as one of the prominent personalities not only of faith but also of culture. He was one of the prominent leaders of the Albanian community and an important contributor to the development of the city's culture and education. Xhemal Stambolli Turku was born into a family with ties to the traditions and values of the Turkish community, and although he was born in Turkey, he settled in Elbasan, where he had a significant impact on the social and cultural life of the city. He participated in numerous cultural and educational activities and was known for promoting education and culture. His activities were associated with the development of the city's educational and cultural institutions, and he was a strong supporter of learning and schools. Xhemal Stambolli Turku also contributed to raising awareness of the importance of preserving cultural heritage and the development of Elbasan's social infrastructure. Overall, he played an important role in strengthening the ties between the Albanian and Turkish communities, contributing to the maintenance of a harmonious and cooperative atmosphere among the various ethnic groups living in the city.

Human history has shown that personalities are its best writers, making their identity known to society for eternity. In this context, this definition becomes even more significant when these personalities emerge from the field of religion, where the elevation of a name comes as a blend of the spiritual, the mystical, and objectivity. At

the core of this study lies the personality of Baba Xhemal Stambolli, an active figure in the intellectual elite of the time, whose name today is carried by the tekke built on the older tekke of Baba Ali Horosani.

The philosophical meaning of elites assumes the concept that they represent the cream of a society, community, class, group, profession, and others who have an impact on the course of social, political, economic, religious, and cultural development. Meanwhile, the political and sociological perspective affirms the definition that they emerge from social strata composed of people with authority and influence, who hold important positions in religious, political, economic, administrative, state, and other sectors (Ekrem, 2007, 102-103).

Furthermore, a well-known scholar articulates the view that, in their social, educational, professional, etc., traditions, elites are always more privileged than the population that is not part of them. What draws attention in the definitions formulated about the meaning and functioning of elites is the perception made by the scholar Mills. According to him, elites have both membership and common interests, so their main decisions, for which they are responsible, serve common goals (Mills, 2001). Given this perspective, it is important to understand that not all historical figures, as part of these elites with the doctrines, philosophies, political programs, or religions they represent, find the right ground to elaborate and further develop their content. In this regard, it should be emphasized that the city of Elbasan maintains its status as an avant-garde city compared to other cities in Albania, a status directly linked to the identity of this city, historically shaped based on the social-economic and cultural developments achieved step by step. In this context, in the 17th century, Elbasan, like no other Albanian city, experienced a rapid rise in the socio-economic sphere as a result of the flourishing of a variety of crafts organized into guilds.

The high standards achieved in this aspect, incomparable with its counterparts, give us the intellectual right to boldly call this century the *Century of Elbasan* (Varoshi-Kadzadej, 2020, 90-91). We are aware that during this century, Berat also experienced development, but the documentation of the time chronologically confirms that its entry into the development process came after Elbasan. In fact, the high standards achieved by Elbasan in social, economic, and cultural development in the 17th century were also noted by the famous Ottoman chronicler Evliya Çelebi, who referred to Elbasan as “the bride of the world and the location of scholars and virtuous men, poets, and mystics” (Elsie, 2011, 182).

Almost the same definition is maintained for Elbasan by the English scholar Edith Durham, who, during her visit to Albania in the early 20th century, stated that “in Elbasan, one is struck by the efforts made for knowledge and culture... there is a considerable number of educated and learned people...” (Durham, 1990, 81). Such historical development influenced the creation of an emancipated and enlightened environment. We believe it was one of the factors that conditioned the existence and functioning in Elbasan of a common cause between the political and intellectual elite and the broader urban population. Based on the definitions above, I believe that it was precisely these standards of the city of Elbasan’s enlightenment that served as a powerful magnetic force for Xhemal Stambolli, a region in which he would develop his philosophy and religious practices of the Bektashi rite. Furthermore, in this city, founded by Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror, Ottoman culture was deeply rooted, serving as a warm hub of hospitality not only for Baba Xhemali but also for all Bektashi believers. History has shown that a large number of Bektashi believers have made a valuable contribution to their national cause. Bektashism, as a Shiite Muslim

faith, through its philosophy of dogma and its activity, found widespread support among Albanians, becoming a community that was both religious and patriotic. It is enough to mention prominent names such as Ali Pasha of Tepelena, Bajram Curri, Ali Daut Begu, Mulla Idriz Gjilani, Baba Mustafa Martanesh, etc (Hysi, 2024, 88). The contribution of Albanian Bektashis was not limited only to Albania. The scholar and professor at Munzur University in Turkey, Aziz Altı, through his study, informs us that an Albanian who had arrived in Istanbul from Albania named Baba Fejzullah, using his position in the Bektashi lodges, would use the financial resources collected in aid of the lodge to systematically send them to people in Albania who were aiming to create the independent Albanian state (Altı, 2024, 21)

1. The Emancipation of Elbasan and The Humane Principles of Bektashism. Two Values That Are Embraced

According to scholar Fahri Maden, Bektashism spread in the Balkans in two ways. First, as early as the 13th century, before the Ottoman Empire controlled these regions, it spread through the activities of wandering dervishes who began building the first tekkes and tombs. During this period, the practices of this faith were not widely spread and were often isolated. Sari Saltuk is undoubtedly the central figure who transmitted the early teachings of Islam in these areas. The heroism and fruits of his work are often found in local traditions, oral stories, and legends, which are a direct indication of the fame and good name he left behind throughout the centuries. On the other hand, the Janissaries and their camps, which were mostly formed from an educational perspective based on Bektashi teachings, were another important center for the spread of Bektashism. Through their recruitment system and activities in the territories they covered, they had a significant impact in this regard. According to Birge, the Bektashis came to Albania with the army of Sultan Murat II and spread this order mainly in the southern areas of Albania between the years 1790-1822. A significant role in this process was also played by the Pasha of Ioannina, Ali Pasha Tepelena, who, due to his religious affiliation, was part of the Bektashi community. However, although today we encounter a large number of Bektashi believers in these southern regions, Elbasan remains the city most representative of this order. Given the historical past of this city, such a thing is reasonable. This is because this city was founded in 1466 by Mehmet the Conqueror to control the activities of Skanderbeg who had started a rebellion against the Ottomans. After the construction of the castle, muslim believers from all the regions around the Elbasan castle came and settled inside it where they built their lives, bringing with them their religious tradition (Kiel, 1 Şubat 2025). Among Albanian Muslims, Bektashism would undoubtedly be as influential as in the heart of the Ottoman Empire. According to Fahri Maden, the traces of Bektashism in Elbasan date back at least to the first half of the 16th century, when a number of dervishes and elders who were followers of the Haxhi Bektashi line and sincere propagators of the brotherhood he had inspired were settled in the city. Evliya Celebi, among other pieces of information about the spread of Islam in Elbasan, mentions the construction of the Halveti tekke and the imaret built by Gazi Sinan Pasha. According to Celebi, this tekke was the largest compared to the other tekkes in Elbasan during that period, as it had a rich waqf and the highest number of dervishes (Maden, 2024, 55). As a result of the activity of Albanian or Turkish clerics, the spirit of Hacı Bektash Veli was awakened among this population, serving both the believers and all of humanity in this city. Thus, the 1644 Ottoman archive data inform us about the presence of Janissaries in the protection of the fortress of

Shkodra in Albania. Such military units were also found in other cities of Albania, such as Delvinë, Vlorë, and Berat. Secondly, Bektashism in the Balkans and Albania spread widely through the organized opening of tekkes and the activities of Bektashi fathers at a time when the Ottoman Empire fully administered these territories (Maden, 2024, 63-64). Through his work, scholar Maden also informs us that one of the regions where Bektashism was widely embraced is the city of Elbasan. His values of emancipation and the highest human principles, this city would demonstrate even in difficult moments for the Bektashi tradition. The communist persecution was not the first instance of a confrontation between the values of religion and violence. Around two centuries ago, the Bektashis in the Ottoman Empire faced decrees that restricted their freedom of belief. The banning of Bektashism in 1826 had significant consequences for religious and social life in Albania, including in Elbasan, one of the country's most well-known cities. According to Margaret Hasluck, this 1826 ban had little impact and results in Albania. The scholar argues that during this period, Albania became a strong refuge for Bektashis from all over the region. She even emphasizes the fact that the decree banning Bektashism did not prevent the followers of this faith from practicing their rituals freely. The truth, however, is that the consequences of this intolerant policy were felt violently, especially in the city of Elbasan (Maden, 2024, 69). This ban of July 8, 1826, was imposed by Sultan Mahmud II (1808-1839) at a meeting he called with the highest officials of the Ottoman administration, aiming to centralize and strengthen the authority of the Ottoman state and, according to him, to eliminate elements that could threaten his power. Bektashism was widely spread across the Ottoman Empire and had a deep influence in Albania and the region. This action came after uprisings and resistance movements that had involved the Bektashis, who were well-organized and had a strong influence, especially in rural areas and cities like Elbasan.

They had an extensive network of tekkes and organizations and were known for their spiritual and social influence. The source of the Bektashis' organizational strength had its origins in the first centuries of the creation of the Ottoman Empire. During the period of the Ottoman Empire, Bektashism played an important role in the social and religious life of many groups, especially among soldiers and the lower classes. For example, one of the most well-known groups supported by Bektashism were the janissaries, who helped spread this tariqa. Bektashism had a strong influence within the Ottoman army, and this connection contributed to the spread of the Bektashi faith across many territories of the Ottoman Empire. Another factor that helped the growth of Bektashism in the Ottoman Empire was its support by Ottoman authorities, in addition to its influence on the development of social and religious life. After the conquest of the Balkans, many Albanians, Macedonians, and other groups converted to Bektashism, creating a close connection between the faith and national identity. An important point is that Bektashism offered a more liberal and tolerant approach to individuals and different groups, favoring a broad acceptance of religious and cultural diversity. This means that the Bektashi faith easily adapted to the multicultural and multi-religious realities of the Ottoman Empire, which extended over various parts of the world (Hysi, 2024, 89,91,95).

After the ban, many Bektashis were persecuted and faced difficulties in practicing their faith. They were forced to hide their religious identity and often faced punishments from the Ottoman authorities. The Bektashi tekkes were important for the community and for religious and social activities. After the ban, many tekkes were closed and destroyed, depriving the Bektashis of a space where they could worship

and organize. The Bektashis had a significant influence on the social and cultural life of Albania. They were often intermediaries in relations between different religious and national groups, and their closure affected the balance of society. Furthermore, their educational and health activities were reduced (Frashëri, 1977, 176-180). Despite these difficult conditions, the Bektashi community in the city of Elbasan managed to preserve the moral and spiritual wealth of their tradition. Although located in the peripheral areas of the empire, the Albanian Bektashis did not remain isolated in their narrow provincial interests. Committed to the high leaders of the religion, they tried to influence as far as Istanbul, maintaining their position. Thus, in the rivalry between the Babagans and the Celebins, a large number of letters from the Albanian Bektashi clergy went to Istanbul, expressing their concern and approval. In a letter dated May 18, 1912, addressed to Istanbul, the head of the Bektashi lodge of Elbasan, Salih Baba, and the engaged merchants of the city asking for Babagan Bektashi leader to replace the Naksi in the Haci Bektaş Veli tekke. (Altı, 2024, 25). In 1929, one of the five Bektashi Orders in Albania was the Elbasan Order, centered around the tekke of Baba Xhafer. A characteristic of the Bektashis of this city is the close relationship with the tekkes that existed in other regions of Albania, such as in Gjakova (now a city in Kosovo) and Tetova (now a city in North Macedonia). The main credit for enabling this wide cooperation between the believers and religious institutions goes to Baba Qazim Bakalli, who served as a cleric in all three tekkes (Maden, 2024, 65). Bektashism, like all of Islam, spread primarily during the Ottoman period when Elbasan was one of the main cities of the Shkodra Vilayet. This faith began to gain momentum in this city through the spiritual influence of its leaders, who often had close ties with the local community and the development of trade and craftsmanship. During this period, Elbasan was a large city, where the influence of the Ottoman administration, as well as religious formations such as Bektashism, had a pronounced impact on everyday life. Elbasan had several Bektashi tekkes that served as spiritual and cultural centers. The tekkes of Elbasan became gathering points for Bektashi believers and also contributed to the preservation of Bektashi traditions and rituals. They were important centers for learning and spreading the values of Bektashism, such as religious tolerance, equality, and respect for others. Bektashism in Elbasan was influenced by prominent figures of this faith, including Baba Xhemal Stambolli, who was one of the most well-known leaders of Bektashism in the city.

Xhemal Stambolli was not only a spiritual leader but also made a significant contribution to the development of the religious and cultural life of the city, helping to preserve the traditions of the faith and increasing the number of followers. Bektashism, due to its open and tolerant nature, contributed to the peaceful coexistence of different religious and ethnic groups in Elbasan. Many Bektashis were engaged in the education and development of the city, playing an active role in maintaining interfaith harmony. In Elbasan, Bektashism also had an important impact on literature and art. Bektashi writers and poets from Elbasan left a rich legacy in Albanian culture, bringing values such as love for humanity and nature, as well as promoting peace and unity.

The new political-social context that accompanied the creation of the Turkish Republic in the 1920s would lead to a completely new reality for religious beliefs in general and Bektashi faith in particular. This resulted in the autonomy and independence of the Bektashi community of Albania, separating them from other Islamic organizations. It is no coincidence that a significant number of Bektashi clerics chose Elbasan as the source of their spiritual inspiration to continue the sacred mission of spreading the faith. In this regard, Elbasan, a city at the forefront of

many phenomena with a national character and traditionally shaped from a cultural perspective, distinguished by scholars and travelers over the years for its prominent values, would provide its best example, guided by the highest social principles such as hospitality, tolerance, cooperation, and emancipation.



Photo 1: *Tekke of Xhemal Stambolli-Turkut (From private archive of tekke Xhemal Stambolli)*

Bektashis significantly contributed to the education of the city of Elbasan. They opened schools and educational centers for teaching both Bektashi believers and members of other religious groups. In addition to religious teachings, they were also engaged in the development of general education. Bektashism had a major impact on Albanian literature, and Elbasan was one of the main centers of this influence. Bektashi writers and poets from Elbasan, like Baba Xhemal Stambolli, contributed to enriching Albanian culture and literature with profound human, philosophical, and spiritual values. Bektashi poetry is known for its deep thought and richness of symbols.

Through friendly conversations on November 23 2023 with Admir Baba and Faik Baba the leaders of the Xhemal Turku Tekke in Elbasan during the visit on the Tekke, they confessed that baba Xhemal Stambolli strongly emphasized the importance of love and tolerance among people, one of the foundations of Bektashism. He placed great importance on the concept of ‘spiritual brotherhood’ and harmony between individuals and different religious and cultural groups. In this context, he encouraged his followers to be open to diversity and to respect the views and beliefs of others, an approach that aligned with the humanist values of Bektashism. Like many other Bektashi leaders, Baba Xhemali considered the soul and spiritual devotion as the main path to achieving knowledge of God. For him, Bektashism was not just a formal religion, but a spiritual guide that required deepening of consciousness and transcendence. He believed that knowing oneself and reaching a state of spiritual purity was necessary to achieve closeness to God. In his teachings, Baba Xhemali emphasized the importance of dedication to the mystical teachings of Bektashism. He saw Bektashism as a path that required a personal and direct experience with God, through practices like meditation, prayer, and self-discipline. This was a deep

expression of what Bektashism represented: a close and direct connection between man and the Creator.

One of the most prominent aspects of Baba Xhemali's perspective was his belief in social and religious equality. He believed that to achieve a just and harmonious society, the rights and dignity of every individual must be respected, regardless of social status, race, or religion. He saw Bektashism as a guide for creating an equal and direct society, where everyone had the opportunity to achieve spiritual salvation. According to the tekke Xhemal Stambolli elders, baba Admir and baba Faik, baba Xhemal's personal life, there is not much detailed information regarding his marriage or the creation of a family. Like many well-known figures of Bektashism, who followed a religious tradition that often focused more on serving and fulfilling the mission of their faith rather than on creating a biological family, it is possible that Baba Xhemal was more dedicated to his spiritual mission and followed the common practices of Bektashis, which often did not include marriage. I was informed also by baba Faik and baba Admir that there was an unwritten rule among Bektashis that the houses of God should be built at a distance from one another, approximately 6 hours of travel. Based on this fact, and considering that there were three tekkes in the city of Elbasan, it can be concluded that the number of Bektashi believers in this city was significant, and the tekkes were respected as a necessary and functional need.

In this context, we can mention some of the most well-known tekkes in the city of Elbasan, including the Great Tekke founded by Ibrahim Baba in 1803 (Soyyer, 2019, 160), the Tekke of Xhemal Stambolli-Turku, and the Tekke of the Well. According to researchers, another important institution existed at a distance of 30 minutes from Elbasan. This was the zaouia of Baba Mustafa. Although the exact date of its construction is missing, it is thought that this important institution with many functions was built by Ali Pasha Tepelena at the end of the 18th century. Another very important fact that gives the city of Elbasan a special role as the birthplace of Bektashism. The zaouia of Baba Mustafa does not exist today because with the prohibition of Bektashism and the attempt to demolish the cult objects of this rite, this institution was destroyed (Alti, 2019, 189). The latter, the Tekke of the Well, is a lesser-known one, founded in 1920 by Baba Hamiti of Dibra, who had served in Istanbul and at the Harabati Tekke in Tetova. After the Balkan Wars, he moved to Elbasan and helped build the new tekke on the ruins of the tekke of Sheh Hysen Dylgjari, which was located in the city's neighborhood of the same name, near the place known as "The Well that Washes Itself."

Like many other religious sites, the Tekke of the Well tragically suffered the fate of being destroyed by the communist regime's hammer, losing its importance and role as a spiritual center for the community. This serves as a reminder of the impact of the policies of the former regime on spiritual and cultural heritage, leading to the destruction of many tekkes and religious institutions, including those of the Bektashis, thus limiting the development and practice of different beliefs (Elsie, 2020, 407).



Photo 2: *Xhemal Stamboll-Turku (From private archive of tekke Xhemal Stambolli)*



Photo 3: *Photo of Baba Xhemali with a dervish (From private archive of tekke Xhemal Stambolli)*

1.1. The Life and Work of Baba Xhemal Istanbul-Turku, an Overview of The Wealth of Bektashism.

I am Selman Xhemali, I am the essence of love, I have desired the perfection of love from eternity (Maden, 2024, 79).

Baba Xhemali was born and raised in Istanbul and moved to Albania in 1926, when the tekkes in Turkey were closed (Elsie, 2020, 405). He stayed for a long time as a guest in the house of Hashim Hakani and Beqir Plangarica. Although the exact data

regarding his birthdate is missing, the well-known scholar of his life and distinguished work dedicated to teaching and spreading Bektashism, Baba Bedri Noja, has stated that Xhemal Stambolli was born in 1878 (Maden, 2024, 78). Baba Selmani was a typical Bektashi baba. He was an unremarkable man in appearance, with long hair that often stuck out from the characteristic hat worn by Bektashis. Since he was a muxhered, his ear had been pierced, and he wore a large earring in it. His attire was wide and had long sleeves, which suited him very well. His arrival in Albania is linked to the fact that Albanian dervishes had invited Baba Xhemali after hearing about his strict and dignified manner. This behavior led Baba Xhemali, after a short time in Elbasan, to learn the rules and customs of the Albanians, adapting to them and always respecting the devotion of the Bektashi believers in Elbasan. After meeting with the Head Sheikh Sali Niazi, Xhemal Stambolli would become actively involved in the organization and improvement of the Bektashi community in Elbasan during the years 1930-1941 (Maden, 2024, 81). The Elbasan Gjyshata, through information published on its social network, tells us that when Baba Xhemali was informed by the director of the mortgage, Mehmet Bejtja, that an old registry of the waqf listed a plot of land named Teqja e Baba Ali Horosanit on the banks of the Shkumbin River near the Tomb of Goca, he became interested and bought this land for 800 golden francs. Robert Elsie, in his work "The Albanians and Bektashis," provides a story from the scholar John Kingsley Birge, who says: "*In the new teqe, there is a large square pillar, with an entrance on all four sides, symbolizing the Four Gates. This symbolism will be true to the doctrine only if a person walks around the pillar, turning through the four gates to return to the Reality from which they came.*" (Elsie, 2020, 406).

In 1929, the teqe would open its doors for its followers, and only a year later, Baba Xhemali would purchase much land around it to create gardens with trees and flowering plants. (Elsie, 2020, 406).

According to the American scholar John Kingsley Birge, Baba Xhemali was a man with a broad culture and talent in literary creation. His poems were well-known and distributed everywhere, in which he used the honorary surname Selman Xhemali as the author (Birge, 2008, 464). In his study, Fahri Maden mentions that among those who learned from Baba Selman Xhemali was J.K. Birge himself. After visiting the tekke in Elbasan, Birge received Baba Selman's blessing and even managed to collect enough material, which he published in his book "The Bektashi Order of Dervishes." From Baba Xhemali's teachings, Birge mentions an extremely interesting fact. According to him, the Bektashi father had told him that Selim I was one of the dervishes of Ballëm Sultan. This was also evidenced by his photos, where he could be seen wearing a crescent-shaped earring, which had been given to him by Ballëm Sultan as a sign of an isolated dervish. Although Selim had promised that when he came to power, he would eliminate the differences in Islam, he was unable to realize his objective and wish because the viziers were Sunni, and such a strategy required time and could not be easily implemented. Among his many works, we present one of them to the reader as follows:

The whole world is a slave to this spirit,
Everything that exists in it turns to dust,
The pleasure of lovers,
Fills the battlefield of love with roses.

“The Order”

He is engaged in new matters at every moment,
He brought down Zeid and Amir, saying,
Those who make their name halal are drunkards,
They turn Ibrahim’s rose into honey.

He who found salvation in Noah’s ship,
If he wants to become a pilgrim, he sees Arafat,
The tongue of the Muslim recites the salavat,
He who repents finds the way.

It is a word I say, though I do not know,
I have not cried, nor have I ever laughed in my life,
I have died once, I will not die again,
He who does not wish to die turns into light.

The color of lovers is pale,
The mill of our hearts is made of golden olive wood,
The chest of those who suffer is burned,
Those who do not suffer, their life turns to loss.

Selman appeared and recognized Hajdar,
Hajdar rightly recognized every place,
He recognized Keuther that exists,

Some turn into God, some into slaves.

Beauty became the ruler of its own pleasure,
He found the unknown in his own heart,
The garden of roses of truth became his season,
The nightingales of love turn into roses ((Maden, 2024, 84-85).

In another of his creations in the form of poetry, Selman Xhemali describes life, its beauty and emotions as follows:

The nightingales of love turn into roses

The whole world is a slave to this flow,
Everything returns to the general flow,
The great pleasure of those who are in love,
‘In the field of love’ it spins like a rose,
A word I say, not even I know,
I have never cried, I do not laugh for life,
I have died once, I will not die again,
He who wants to die, returns to this state.
The color of lovers is pale,
Our hearts are full of silver,
The hearts of those who suffer are burned,
Those who do not suffer, their lives turn into nothingness,
Selman became receptive and recognized Haydar,
with Haydar he recognized every place,
In truth he recognized the waterfall,
Some become God, some become slaves.

Xhemal became the creator of pleasure.
 He found the unbearable pain in his heart,
 What happened to the season of the garden of truths?
 The nightingales of love turn into roses. (Maden, 2024, 7)

Through the account of Rıza Tefvik, a contemporary of Baba Xhemali, Bulent Akin provides us with the following details: “On Bebek hill, in Istanbul was the small house of the famous Bektashi sheikh, the late Baba Abdünnafi. Many distinguished people would gather there. Among the members of this society, Baba Selman Xhemali, one of my older contemporaries and dear friends, was a very prominent figure. He was a man with a clear mind and very vigilant. Baba Xhemali gave me a magazine as a gift about thirty-five years ago. Along with his very elegant inspirations, it included the poems of many ancient people. In fact, he entered the Bektashi Order, receiving permission from Baba Abdünnafi, and was deemed worthy of the title “Baba” in a short period. In 1913, he fulfilled his duty as a Bektashi Baba at the Kazimiye Tekke in Baghdad. During the War of Independence, he came to Denizli and served in the national forces. To avoid removing the Bektashi crown on his head during the hat reform, he went to Albania with Haydar Baba, a lawyer from Çanakkale, and the sheikh of the Topkapi Tekke, Bektaş Baba. For a time, he served as a Bektashi Baba in Elbasan (Akin, 1 Şubat 2025).

Dear, from his new friendship with Baba Xhemali, Birge informs us that the hadith ‘I am the city of knowledge, and Ali is its gate’ is interpreted by Xhemal Selmani as follows: *This should be understood in the sense that Prophet Muhammad a.s. taught the external truths that Muslims must believe in and practice, but that the deeper understanding of these truths could only be accessed through Ali. According to him, the Qur’an has four meanings: the external text or phrase is for ordinary people, the elegance is for the wise, the secrets are for the saints, and the truth is for the prophets. An example of this can be found in fasting, which was presented by Prophet Muhammad a.s. The external meaning, or according to Sharia, is to abstain from food at certain times. Its inner meaning, or in the context of the tariqa, is not to steal, not to see or hear evil, and not to harm others* (Maden, 2024, 83-84). Since Baba Xhemali is the Baba of the Bektashis, the themes of his poems consist of Sufi thought within the framework of Bektashi beliefs, as well as the practices, customs, and principles of Bektashism.

It has been noted that Baba Xhemali, who used the pseudonyms Xhemali and Selman in his poems, extensively included Persian and Arabic words and compositions depending on the Sufi themes he addressed in his works. Phrases such as “Matlub-ı elest,” “hikmet-iSelmân-ı Ali,” “mirâc-ı emel,” “minhac-ı Hudâ,” “Kâbe-yiLahût,” “gülizâr-ı dehr,” “bağ-ı behişt,” “lane-ivuslat,” etc., appear in his poetry. His twelve-page work, called *Tarikatnâme*¹, which deals with the customs and rituals of the

1 *This 12-page work deals with the customs and rituals of the Bektashi order. Today, it is housed in the manuscript section of the Bogazici University Library. There, it was translated into modern Turkish. The appendices of the work also include a copy written by Baba Selmani himself, as well as its transcription in modern letters. Below, we present a passage from the text:*

“O Beautiful Soul! Although the radiant sharia brought by the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and the path of Muhammad are known to those who are familiar with the way, I dared, with compassion, to write this brochure to enlighten the traveling murids. Goodness and success come from Allah. The Messenger of Allah—peace be upon him and his family—has said, ‘Sharia is my word, tariqa is my action, knowledge is my state, truth is my secret, morality is my religion, love is my essence, enthusiasm and fear are my companions, knowledge is my strength, gentleness is my friend, faith in me

Bektashi Order, was published in 1934 (<https://teis.yesevi.edu.tr/madde-detay/cemali-selman-selman-cemali-baba>). Those who “took the hand” from Baba Xhemali are many. One of them was Asim Kemeter Giritlioglu, a member of a noble family from Denizli. He became a baba in 1925 through the oath given by Baba Selman Xhemali. According to Bedri Noja, Baba Kemeter was a worthy baba of the Bektashi family. He was well-educated, courteous, and a good knower of the rules and ethics of proper conduct. Baba Xhemali and his assistant, Fejzi Akereni, guided him to follow the sacred path of Bektashism. At that time, Akereni worked as a treasury lawyer in Izmir. Baba Akereni became a well-known spiritual leader in Bektashism. He was a man with a thick, white beard and a deep gaze that made a strong impression on everyone. Among those who received blessings from Baba Xhemali, it is said that John Kinsley Birge was also one of them. Birge wrote to Baba Xhemali with praise, describing him as one of the most distinguished figures of Bektashism, a man with deep knowledge of mysticism, and a very good scholar of the science of Sufism. Baba Xhemali teaches us that the stronger a person’s faith, the greater their spiritual closeness to their Creator will be. According to him, a tariqat is only true on the path of spirituality, with people who are witnesses to knowledge, accepting the truth—what is lawful and drawn from love. The Prophet says, “Futuwah, bravery, is divided into three parts: the first is the protection of Allah’s commands, the second is the respect for our sunnah, and the third is to converse with the friends of Allah.” It is known that famous mystics are loyal dervishes and must accept Shah-i Murtezane. Until a person reaches the appropriate maturity, they must go through three good actions. *First, they should taste the knowledge of sharia, second, the knowledge of tariqat, and third, the knowledge of reality, so that the state of truth reveals its face to them. This generation has seven names, seven conditions, seven connections, and seven dissolutions. From each of these comes a good behavior. It is essential to abandon these seven bad behaviors and display seven good ones. The first is to close the door of greed and open the door of gratitude and grace for blessings. The second is to close the door of anger and rage and open the door of gentleness and harmony. The third is to close the door of ambition and greed and open the door of contentment and approval. The fourth is to close the door of worldly food and pleasures and open the door of asceticism. The fifth is to close the door of having expectations from people and open the door of turning only to God. The sixth is to close the door of being preoccupied with unnecessary words and open the door of knowledge, truth, and salvation. The seventh is to close the door of bad deeds and open the door of love and friendship with the Most Merciful. Whoever possesses these seven characteristics in their person is liberated and becomes the most distinguished and praiseworthy of all beings* (Maden, 2024, 100-101-102).

Although various studies state that the exact date of his death, as well as the day of his birth, are unknown, Noja mentions that according to the accounts of Hamid Erjek Nazilli, Xhemal Stambolli emigrated to Elbasan at the age of 43. The year 1930 is believed to have been the year of his emigration to this city. As for the date of his death, what is known for certain is that Selman Xhemali passed away in the 1940s. His entire life was a work of devotion to the Creator and assistance to Bektashism. Baba Xhemali was succeeded in 1949 by Baba Ali Rizaj from Porodina in the Korça region, who led until 1953, when he became the head of the Krujë Dervish Lodge. Baba Sherif Canomataj from Tepelena would lead this lodge until 1967, when Albania would officially be declared the first atheist country in the world. After the collapse

is my light, pleasure is my treasure, truthfulness is my destination, poverty is my pride, which is more valuable than my other deeds.” (Maden, 2024, 96).

of the communist regime in Albania, the lodge was reopened by Baba Sherifi on June 14, 1993. Later, the Teqe of Xhemal Stambolli Turku was led by the late Baba Faiku.² He departed from this world towards the mercy of the Creator on November 29, 2024, a worthy leader of the Bektashi believers who, with his devotion and work, won the hearts not only of his followers but also of the entire community of Elbasan and beyond. Today, this lodge is under the leadership of Baba Admir. The tomb of Baba Selman Xhemali is located in the courtyard of the lodge he built, serving as a monument to the eternal memory of his name and sanctity.

Conclusion

In the introduction of this paper, I attempted to briefly highlight the role that elites play in a society. Not only their works and mission are indicators of their significant contributions, but mostly the spirit, model, and image they convey to a wide community. Xhemal Stambolli undoubtedly deserves an honorable place in the pantheon of human values. Unfortunately, due to the aggression of the communist regime in Albania from 1944 to 1990, many documentary sources related to religion and religious figures have been destroyed or burned, severely complicating the work of researchers and those passionate about such leaders in portraying their activities in a more complete way. However, the historical traces of figures like Baba Xhemali are difficult to be erased by the fate of oblivion, no matter how harsh the regime was in regard to their contribution. Baba Xhemal Stambolli played an important role in strengthening and preserving the religious tradition in Elbasan, a city with a rich multicultural and multireligious history. He is a model of the union of religious thought and education, contributing to the spiritual and social development of the Elbasan society and beyond. Elbasan has played an important role as one of the main centers of Bektashism. This city has been a significant point for the dissemination of Bektashi teachings, as well as a spiritual and religious center for the followers of this order. This order, known for emphasizing religious tolerance, belief in equality among people, and helping the poor, has had a close connection with the Albanian people. Bektashism has played an important role in the formation of the Albanian national identity, especially during difficult historical periods, such as the wars for independence. Elbasan, as an important center of Bektashism, has contributed to

2 From the speech of Baba Admir, Baba of the Xhemal Stambolli tekke: Haxhi Baba Faik Selmani, son of Ganiu and Hano, was born in the village of Luftinjë, in the city of Tepelenë, on August 20, 1942, in a family with a long Bektashi tradition. His grandparents and parents were supporters of the lodges, especially in Koshtan, Maricaj, and Memaliaj. He received his first religious teachings from Baba Muharrem Allkushi (Gllava) during the times when, despite the harsh communist regime prohibiting religion by law, these dervishes of Haxhi Bektash Veliu kept the Bektashi order alive. Secretly, they would light candles at the tomb of Baba Isuf Horasani until Baba Muharrem passed away. In 1985, Baba Faik continued the development of religious Islamic traditions in secret, in close collaboration with Baba Sherif Canometi in Elbasan, until the early 1990s, when the regime was forced to allow the reopening of religious beliefs. Haxhi Baba Faik Selmani made a notable contribution in collaboration with Baba Sherif Canometaj, Baba Barjam Mahmutaj, and Dede Reshat Bardhi, both in reopening the World Bektashi Headquarters in Tirana and in the reconstruction of the religious sites in the Gjirokastër and Elbasan Grand Lodges. After such distinguished activity, in 1997, he was granted the title "Dervish" by the World Head of the time, Haxhi Dede Reshat Bardhi, and was appointed Grandfather of the Elbasan Lodge, where he serves devoutly to this day. Haxhi Baba Faik Selmani had the privilege of performing the Hajj ceremony in Mecca and Medina, visiting the holy sites in Karbala, Baghdad, and Haxhi Bektash in Turkey, where he met and won the admiration of prominent religious figures from these countries. Followed by hundreds of myhubs and beloved followers of the order, Haxhi Baba Faik Selmani has built Lodges and Tombs in Koshtan, Luftinjë, Zhabokikë 1 and 2, Gllavë, Gramsh, Elbasan, and beyond. Baba Faik Selmani deserves the honor and respect of fathers, myhubs, and believers, even at the Lodge of Baba Rexhepi in America.

preserving Albanian traditions and values, helping to strengthen a sense of national unity. He contributed to the growth of faith and the development of spirituality among the Muslim community in the city, maintaining a strong connection with religious institutions and leading with spiritual teachings and pure religious practices.

Baba Xhemal Stamboll Turku is a key figure in the development and spread of the Bektashi faith in Albania, especially in Elbasan, a city known for its religious and cultural traditions. Baba Xhemal's close connection with Elbasan and the Bektashi community in this city has significantly influenced the strengthening of this religious and philosophical work. Elbasan was a stronghold of Bektashi believers, providing hospitality and warmth for Baba Xhemal's activities. This city, with its deep religious history, was a suitable environment for the development of ideas and practices of the Bektashi faith, making Elbasan an important base for Baba Xhemal's work and mission. Xhemal Stamboll Turku contributed not only in religious aspects but also in literary ones. His writings, which include poetry, essays, and sermons, reflect the essence of Bektashi philosophy and are a great treasure for Albanian cultural heritage. Through his writings, Baba Xhemal gave a new dimension to the Bektashi movement, linking it with the spiritual aspirations of Albanians. One of the most important aspects of Baba Xhemal's perspective was the emphasis on the importance of spiritual unity and harmony between individuals and nature, considering these values as fundamental for a healthy and sustainable society. He viewed the Bektashi faith as a guide for spiritual life, where love, respect for others, and devotion to God were priorities. For Baba Xhemal, Bektashism was a profound form of spiritual freedom, where the individual could find light and meaning in life through dedication and meditation, without being bound by rigid rules or external forms of religious practice. An important indicator of Baba Xhemal's significance in Bektashism and literature is his treatment by and visits from prominent scholars of Bektashism. Notable figures such as the well-known American scholar, Charles Ambrose Birge, and Bedri Noja, one of the leading authorities on Bektashism in Albania, visited and wrote about Baba Xhemal at his tekke. This is an important testimony to his value as an outstanding figure in both Bektashi faith and Albanian literature, showing his profound influence on the development of Bektashi philosophy in Albania. Through his engagement in social and religious life, Baba Xhemal supported and guided entire generations of believers, preserving Bektashi traditions and giving them a significant role in the spiritual development of the community.

The Bektashi community, with leaders like Baba Xhemal, played an important role in strengthening the national spirit of Albanians, particularly during difficult periods of history.

In summary, Baba Xhemal's connection with Elbasan and the Bektashi community is a powerful example of the integration of faith with spiritual and literary aspirations. His literary contribution is a precious asset that makes him an unforgettable figure in Albanian culture and history. His perspective on Bektashism and faith places Baba Xhemal among the most respected and recognized leaders, not only as a spiritual guide but also as a thinker and philosopher who contributed to the enrichment of the Albanian national spirit.

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