When Folk Religion Meets Orthodoxy: The Case of Imam Birgivi

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When Folk Religion Meets Orthodoksy: The Case of Imam Birgivi	Halk Dini Ortodoksi ile Karşılaştığında: İmam Birgivi Örneği

Abstract

The beliefs and practices which can be seen around the tombs of walis in Islamic societies are generally taken as the indicators of peasant or women's religiosity in the tension between orthodoxy and folk religion by numerous scholars. These beliefs play a significant role in Turkish culture. Thus this paper is based on the investigation of the validity of the aforementioned assumptions. For, this paper focuses on the practices and beliefs occur around the tomb of a 16th century Ottoman Sunni scholar Mehmed b. Pir Ali (Mehmed Birgivi or Imam Birgivi) which attract people from various social levels and classes. This paper consists on the data obtained from the observations on the field and people performing around the tomb. When the data gathered from the field combined with the data obtained from the related literature, the outcome is likely to be that there is not a discontinuity between folk religious practices (such as offering vows, sacrificing animals and etc.) and orthodox Islamic values and practices.

Özet

İslam toplumlarında velilerin türbe ve mezarları etrafında gözlenen inanç ve uygulamalar birçok bilim insanı tarafından ortodoksi ile halk dini arasındaki karşıtlığa uygun olarak köylü ya da kadın dindarlığı olarak ele alınır. Bu inançlar Türk kültüründe çok önemli bir rol oynar. Bu çalışma yukarıda zikredilen iddiaların incelenmesi ve geçerliklerinin değerlendirilmesini konu alır. Zira 16. yüzyıl Osmanlı ilim adamı Mehmed b. Pir Ali (Mehmed Birgivî ya da İmam Birgivî)'nin mezarı etrafında vuku bulan ve her sosyal sınıf ve zümreden insanları kendine çeken uygulama ve inançlara odaklanır. Çalışma, alanda mezar etrafındaki uygulamalara dair gözlemlere dayalı olarak yapılandırılmıştır. Alandan elde edilen bilgi, literatürle karşılaştırıldığında sonuç; halkın (adak adama, hayvan kurban etme vb. gibi) dini etkinlikleriyle ortodoks İslami inanç ve uygulamalar arasında bir süreksizlik olmadığı yönündedir.

Key Words: Orthodoxy, Folk Religion, Official Religion, Mediation

Anahtar Kelimeler: Ortodoksi, Halk Dini, Resmi Din, Dolayım

1. Introduction

Birgi is a small town within the administrative borders of Izmir which is the third largest city of modern-day Turkey and in western Anatolia. Although its current state does not reveal its former significance, as understood from historical sources, it was an important centre in the past. Birgi witnessed Turkish raids from the 12th century onwards, and entered Ottoman rule at the second half of the 15th century. By that time, Birgi, along with Tire, was the most important centre of the Aegean region. As a result of this, as well as having one madrasah which is an endowment of

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Aydınoğlu Mehmed Bey, Birgi was turned into a judiciary centre, and at the first half of the 16th century, a second madrasah was built there (Baltacı, 1976, p. 584). Birgi kept its status as an important religious and also bureaucratic centre of the region until the end of the 16th century, and after that, its progression slowed down and it lost its importance. (Darkot, 1964, p. 633)

What makes Birgi important about the topic is the madrasah mentioned above which was built in the second half of the 16th century. The constructor of this madrasah is Ataullah Efendi from Birgi who was also a tutor to the reigning Ottoman Sultan Selim II. Ataullah Efendi assigned Mehmed b. Pir Ali who was a famous intellectual of the era, as the chief scholar to the madrasah. (Gül, 1997, p. 182-183) Mehmed b. Pir Ali who was later to be famously known as Mehmed Birgivi or Imam Birgivi, was born in 1523 in Balıkesir as the son to a chief scholar, and received his tutelage in Arabic, logic, and other disciplines from his father. Having studied in Istanbul, Mehmed was assigned to the post of chief scholar, and after serving in bureaucratical offices, assumed his post in Birgi (1564). He lost his life while still incumbent during the plague outbreak of 1573-74, and was buried in Birgi (Yüksel, 1992, p. 192).

Mehmed was interested in religious learning all his life, and has written in this field. Many of these works are about religious teaching and grammar. Besides these, some of his works contain judgments about some practices in the folk spirituality (Mehmed Tahir Efendi, 1972, p. 285-286). He first defines the concept of religious innovations and distinguishes between the passable and wrongful innovations. He emphasizes that those which are missing in the Sunnah, but results of the necessities of the age and location are passable ones (Birgivi, 1969, p. 38) He claims that some of the other practices other than these are wrongful innovations, and that those who follow them are sinners. He regards some of the widely-accepted traditions, and folk beliefs and practices as wrongful deeds and as sins, and censures those who participate in them. Such practices are: reciting and teaching the Koran for a price, intonating the Koran, sacrificing an animal near a grave, lighting votive candles near graves, saints' tombs and shrines, roofing graves and building domes and buildings on them, manning such buildings, giving feasts after someone's death, believing in intermediary powers of saints between God and the person who prays for them, going on pilgrimages to the tombs of prophets and other holy figures. According to Birgivi, some Sufis who act contrary to the laws of sharia are also wrongdoers.

Albeit the historical records and personality of Mehmed b. Pir Ali, in modern day Turkey people regard him as a Muslim saint. In some prominent dates such as Fridays and other Islamic holy days like mawlid al-nabi, Islamic charter night or the qadr night and etc. people from several places gather at the Birgi cemetery in which Imam Birgivi is buried, in order to wow, pray and to request for their spiritual or material needs for the sake of him. The situation of Imam Birgivi resembles a major characteristic in Islam and Turkish Islam in particular, saint veneration.

Saint veneration has been a very prominent element of folk life in Anatolia dating back to antiquity. Regardless of antique polytheism, before the Islamic-Turkish conquest of Anatolia and the

Balkans, Orthodox Christian saint veneration lasted a very long period of time. Albeit the effects of modernity and secularization, nowadays this situation is yet can be seen in rural and urban areas in modern day Turkey with a quite common prevalence. Beliefs and practices of saint veneration tradition occur mainly on a popular level in Turkey. Reviving Sufi orders (tariqa) such as Nakshibendiyya, Khadiriyya and etc. embody these sort of beliefs and practices around their living and dead sheiks[1]. On a more widespread scope, common people regardless of their tariqa and/or sect affiliation embodies saint veneration tradition with the beliefs and practices around shrines which is combined with -historical or mythical- dead saints.

Turkish folk imagery has converted the abovementioned historical or mythological figures into mediative elements, and through their memory and shrines has formed a saint cult which is based on a relationship on the material level with what is holy, with God. People gather in places associated with these saints on certain days and engage in some activities in order to gain divine well-being (baraka). These activities usually involve offerings and vows. Such offerings can be observed in forms of prayers and invocations, lighting votive candles, scribbling, distributing candies or other foods, sticking stones onto walls, unwinding spindles and etc. (Tanyu, 2007, p. 93-95)

Saint-shrine veneration bears a very important role in the rich folk life of Anatolia. In terms of folklore, Anatolian saints (regardless of differences of sects such as Alevit or Sunnite) bear ultimate significance on the rites de passage practices. For example if an Anatolian villager has some problem on getting pregnant then the local saint-shrine is the key. Miniature cradles made of fabric signifying the yearning for a baby accompanied by a wow in case of a pregnancy which is generally named as selling the baby to the shrine's saint. In situations of this kind, the common name of "Satılmış" or its female counterpart "Satı" meaning "the person who is sold" is the outcome (Erginer, 1997, p. 148). Sometimes the names can vary according to the saint's own name also. In circumcision festivities again, the local saint of the neighborhood or the village and etc. is the key location for ritual visitation, praying and wows. These abovementioned traditional folk religious aspects in rural places and cities appear to be reinvented in the modern era. In major cities such as İstanbul, İzmir, Ankara and etc. these sorts of practices can be seen in a modern framework. For example in order to pass the central university entrance exam, parents, especially women, gather around the shrine of a saint and rub their sons' or daughters' pencils to the walls of the shrine. For another instance, people yearning for a house, rub their keys to the walls of a shrine, sometimes their wallets in order to earn more money and etc. Another common cause for the practices occurred around shrines is about the marital affairs or would be brides' wishes and wows concerning a wealthy, caring and maybe a handsome partner to marry.

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[1] For a closer look to the worldwide known British example of the famous Nakshibendiyya movement Sheikh Nazım Kıbrısi see Tayfun Atay, *Batı'da Bir Nakşi Cemaati. Şeyh Nazım Kıbrısî Örneği*, İletişim Yayınları, İstanbul, 1996 and Sean Foley, "The Naqshbandiyya-Khalidiyya, Islamic Sainthood, and Religion in Modern Times", *Journal of World History*, Vol. 19, No. 4, University of Hawai'i Press, 2008, pp. 521-545.

These practices are rooted in the deep belief in the Islamic sainthood in Anatolia. A saint (wali) in Islam as a mediator between the divine, the holy and man is a sacred being (dead or alive). Since the places and objects associated with the saints are seen as mediators between the holy and the worldly. So such rituals are accompanied by some anecdotes regarding the wonders of the saints.

Although more apparent in the past, anecdotes regarding the wonders of the saints still prevail almost in a popular way. Mishaps occurring during the removal of a saint's tomb, supernatural events which haunt the residents of a home which was built over the location of a saint's burial place, punishments inflicted on those who disrespect a shrine or a tomb all point to the acknowledgement of the existence of wondrous, supernatural personalities among the people. (Çobanoğlu, 2003, p. 180-181, 183)

Qualities called as wonders (keramat) associated with the saints are sometimes integrated into contemporary events which are important for the folk imagination. For instance, as different versions of the same vein, stories and anecdotes about the Korean War and the Turkish landing on Cyprus have appeared following those related to those about the Battle of the Dardanelles, and the Turkish War of Independence. These anecdotes usually involve testimonies about white bearded, green turbaned person(s) help Turkish soldiers against the enemy during the war as a helpful, holy personality. (Çobanoğlu, 2003, p. 174-176; Walker & Uysal, 1973, p. 286)

Beliefs about the wonders of the saints are widespread and diverse in Anatolian folk culture. For instance, Boratav has identified thirty-five different varieties of the wonders attributed to saints by the people. (Boratav, 1973, p. 52-55) At the base of all these folkloric qualities, lies the tendency to mythicize, and through socialization, combine the ordinary, worldly with the divine cosmology. Masses mystify historical personalities and events by isolating them from their contexts, therefore anonymizing and integrating them into folk imagination. The case of Birgi poses the same characteristics with that of the Turkish shrine veneration tradition. This religious quality reigning in Anatolia has a historical background. In the following section this religious-cultural background is being held.

2. The Historical Roots of Anatolian Saint-Shrine Veneration

Beginning with the 12th century AD the cultural synthesis of Islamic civilization began to emerge. The major sources of Islam appeared throughout in this period such as Islamic orthodoxy (Sunnite law schools and fiqh which can be translated as Islamic law) and Sufism. In this period, Islamic civilization reached its peak including North Africa, Spain, Iran, Egypt and some parts of Central Asia and India and also the inhabitants of these regions began to enter Islam. Their conversion to Islam didn't happen easily. But at the end Islam's strong religious body attracted them through a mutual compatibility. In this context some scholars assert that Sufism gave Islam the influence it lacks, an emotive, sincere and charismatic way of embracing Islam. Again for some scholars this quality of Sufism seemed to contradict with Sunnite orthodoxy in Islam.

In academic and intellectual contexts there are two major approaches regarding Sufism. First approach takes it as an alien formation (which is mostly combined with non Islamic traditions of the conquered lands such as Iran and India) when compared to the formalistic body of Sunnite Islamic Law (fiqh) (Güngör, 1984, p. 68; Turner, 1998, p. 144). The other one conceptualizes it as an essential outcome of Islam from the beginning as can be seen in the behaviors of the Prophet Muhammad such as his seclusion and abstinence (Rahman, 1999, p. 194). It is possible to state that Sufism is not a pure Islamic fact nor it is alien to Islam. Sufism and Sufi orders are intrinsic to Islam but also bear similarities and influences of other mystical traditions of the Middle East. (Trimingham, 1971, p. 2; Waardenburg, 2002, p. 92) In this respect Sufism as mediation brings Islamic and non Islamic influences together in a brand new and unique way. This mediation also brings formalistic and emotional qualities of religious phenomena in Islam together. Sufism's uniqueness helps us to recognize it as Islamic as other major sources of Islam. The significance of Sufism's mediating practice lies in the concept of sainthood. Sainthood as a major component and founding concept of Sufism can be understood as beliefs and practices around charismatic leadership of the living and/or the dead saints (walis).

The Islamization of the Turks was also possible within the same context, for such characteristics of Sufism overlapped with the mystic, naturalist religious tendencies of the nomadic Turks in Central Asia. This reciprocality has functioned as a catalyst and eased Islam's spread in these areas. The main facilitating factor in the Islamization of the Turks is the wandering dervishes who are familiar both to the religious character of the steppe peoples, their spirituality which centers around the charismatic and material processes, and to the pantheist ideas in Sufis. (Ocak, 2001, p. 27, 30-31) Such personalities as Arslan Ata, Ahmet Yesevi, who are more in line with popular Sufism rather than the orthodox interpretation of Islam, are dervish poet-singers who replaced the shaman poets mediating with the divine. (Köprülü, 2003, p. 49)

At the time of Turkish conquest, the dominant folk culture in Anatolia did not have pure, absolute Christian qualities. (Ocak, 1998, p. 293) Generally speaking, a colorful and in appearance a Christian religious culture was in existence. The religious-cultural setting in question is a direct outcome of the thousands of years old interaction and fusion of the traditions and societies. Saint worshipping is another result of this context, for it is known that in saint cults and practices, Christianization of certain important pre-Christian cult centers was an applied method. It can be argued that there exists a similarity between the native religious condition of the Turks and the one they came across in Anatolia. That made it possible for a symbiosis to occur in Anatolia in relatively short time, between Islam, and the local folk culture, through cultural interaction, population exchange, and religious conversion. (Su, 2009)

This new religious vista has caused a new form of colorful folk religion to emerge, which was predominated by mythological personalities, places, objects, and their related rituals. The mythological stories of the saints have merged with the miracle anecdotes of such dervish-saints as Hacı Bektaş Veli, Baba İlyas, Baba İshak, Seyyid Hüseyin Gazi, Sarı Saltık, Kızıl Deli Sultan, Geyikli Baba and etc. Furthermore, until the end of the 19th century, that formed a base for people from various

religions to practice different rituals together in common places. (Hasluck, 2000) This merging has also eased the Islamization of heterodox Christian elements in the Balkans.

Sainthood (velayet) includes the consecration of the people and objects as agents of well-being and abundance (baraka) generating from the otherworldly powers. In addition to these, it is necessary and also possible to regard natural landforms, some objects and other elements as part of the saint veneration. What makes it possible to handle all of these elements together is Hızır, or the Hızır cult, which has openly or latently been a model for all mediative practices. (Wensinck, 1964, p. 458; Walker & Uysal, 1973, p. 287) Hızır or Hızır-ilyas themed beliefs and practices have been combined with these elements, keeping alive the memory of the anonymous, impersonal, and mythological rather than historical saint typology, and providing material suitable for this standing. (Schuon, 1999, p. 103-104) For that reason, it is not misleading to say that it is Hızır who represents Turkish folk variant of Islam.

The mythological character of Turkish saint-shrine veneration beliefs and practices often combined with superstition. These belief and practices generally thought of as inappropriate and non-Islamic by the Islamic orthodoxy and some Islamic scholars from west who thought of Islamic orthodoxy as a practice oriented formalistic body. So in the following section the conceptualization of Islam by the western scholars is being held.

3. The Conceptualization of Orthodoxy and Folk Religion in Islamic Scholarship

The concept of saint veneration which is related to Sufism often conceptualized as a superstition or inappropriate when compared to Islamic orthodoxy. For many Islamic scholars, Islamic orthodoxy is based on the Sunnite fiqh schools' formalistic religious manner. According to this approach, Islam is mainly a formal and non-ritualistic religion. In 1951 Von Grunebaum remarked that Islam and its prayer marked by "peculiar formalism", left the believer satisfied with an arid, if physically exacting liturgy". (Powers, 2004, p. 427) According to Denny Islamic "belief, interestingly, is perfected and proved in service to God, service that includes worship acts performed according to rules and procedures and according to Reinhart "Islamic morality is a morality of action" (Powers, 2004, p. 426).

The main reason for that quality in Islamic belief is "the central principle of rigorous monotheism." In addition to this, according to Graham, Islamic monotheism rejects both sacramentalism and "condensed" symbols (Katz, 2004, p. 98). In this regard in Islam the formal procedures of action come into prominence. For ordinary Muslim the major theme is the orthopraxy, not the spiritual qualities. Islam is not concerned about the intentions or the spiritual situation of the self. In Islamic orthodoxy the major concern is the lawful deeds that can be observed through correct action. Apart from ordinary people, Islamic scholars' deeds focus on the law which "suffers from obsessive-compulsive worry over the infinite potential forms of action, ironically so focused on praxis as to be impractical" (Powers, 2004, p. 427)

Insomuch as Turner writes "it is sometimes argued, as a qualification, that Islam is 'orthoprax' not orthodox." (1998, p. 62) Also W. Cantwell Smith pointed out that "in no Islamic language is there a word meaning 'orthodox'. The word usually translated 'orthodox', *sunni,* actually means rather 'orthoprax', if we may use the term. A good Muslim is ... one whose commitment may be expressed in practical terms that conform to an accepted code." (Turner, 1998, p. 62) Although being a good Muslim is strictly dependent on some rituals such as prayer, hajj and etc. its manner is far away from ritualism. The ritualism in Islam is lacking mythical re-enactment. (Katz, 2004, p. 98)

The formalism of Islamic belief shows itself in the "certain normative discourses, which are themselves assumed to be adequately represented by certain representative texts." (Katz, 2004, p. 97) In this regard the true action is manifested in Koran, hadith and finally in the judgments of the Islamic law (fiqh).

The comprehension of the subject matter in this way, originates from Western religious-social scientific scholarship regarding religion and Islam in particular. The abovementioned views on religion include some basic academic judgments mostly originating from historical experiences of the Christianity and Western Christianity in particular. According to this approach, religion of those who are in religious organizations or namely the elite must have bear spiritual tendencies which in Islam it is lacking. This approach locates this quality in the religiousness of Sufi oriented Islam.

The case of Imam Birgivi and numerous other historical figures exemplify this situation. But this cannot be the final judgment regarding Islam. For there is no clergy in Islam and the positions of the persons in question in relation to that fact can only be an exception when compared the overall picture in Islam and Turkish Islam in particular

There is another conceptualization among the matter in question in western scholarship complementary of the abovementioned ideas, the role of Sufism against the formalism of Islamic orthodoxy. According to some scholars Sufism and Sufism related concepts of saint veneration or folk Islam as an alternative religious tendency. This tendency is apart from and sometimes against the orthodox Islam. In this regard Sufism and its folk variations (saint-shrine veneration) often combined with emotive, spiritual and ritualistic qualities against the Islamic scholars' (ulama) formalist interpretation of Islam. This evaluation rooted in the twofold conceptualization regarding Islam as orthodoxy, the religion of the elite, and the religion of the illiterate masses. This mode of interpretation of Islam is designed to comprehend Islam as a discontinuity between two rival sets of knowledge. From this standpoint the practices involved by the masses are seen as opposed to the Islamic orthodoxy. These beliefs and practices such as searching unity with God through charismatic personages or mediative figures often labeled as magical, superstitious and unlawful.

According to Tapper and Tapper "this dichotomy too easily slips into other dubious dichotomies favored by writers on the Middle East: Great is to Little as literate elite is to illiterate masses, urban is to rural, intellectual to emotional, public to private, male to female, and so on. The religious 'Great Tradition', guarded by the urban, literate elite, is seen as a sober, intellectual matter,

everywhere the concern of men; the religions of the 'Little Tradition' are emotional if not ecstatic, common among illiterate rural communities, and particularly the concern of women." (1987, p. 70)

The problem with the conceptualization of grand and little traditions comes from the quality of the dominant position of elites that determining what is grand tradition and what is not. From this standpoint this labeling practice reflects the inequalities between advantageous groups and disadvantageous groups accessing to power and the resources. The academic reflection of this approach also resembles this situation. For disadvantageous groups lacking the ability and the means of expressing their identity means that they are identified by some other group as little tradition or etc. According to Holy "the Little tradition is thus constituted as passive, non-autonomous and above all non-sovereign, not only with regard to the Great Tradition but also with regard to itself. As it is the Great Tradition that defines and the Little one that is defined, the former becomes inevitably the source of knowledge about the latter. The relationship between the two is thus radically a matter of power. The Little Tradition, being passive, only accepts from the Great Tradition." (1991, p. 3)

Saint and shrine veneration in Islamic societies, regardless of the differences between them, is taken by some scholars in that fashion. Some scholars tend to refer Baraka, the major component of saint veneration to "as pre-Islamic elements incorporated into local Sufi doctrines. Yet Gibb and Kramers classify Sufism oriented sainthood beliefs against Islam's main resources by stating the worship of saints is not Koranic and is even 'contrary to its spirit'. Also they note that the diverse origins of saints throughout the world, among which some saints 'are transformations or survivals of ancient cults, heroes of old days, gods of woods and springs' completely apart from Islam. (Gibb, 1999, p. 97)

The other major assertion about saint and shrine veneration is the idea that they serve as alternate sites for the otherwise marginalized and dispossessed generally, women and poor men. According to Edward Reeves, this type of equation has similarly led researchers to assume that in urban locales, urban sophisticates have little use for Muslim saints, for whom this Little Tradition is tainted by its rustic, thaumaturgical. But as Gibb has shown that in an Ethiopian Muslim town of Harar, shrines both attract and reflect the diversity of the city's population. This perspective has resulted from an analytical persistence similar to that in studies of the Middle East where influential scholars have theorized a typological, two-tiered existence in which a Great Tradition of formal or orthodox Islam centered around the mosque, presides over a Little Tradition, often referred to as 'popular Islam' into which saint worship fall. (Gibb, 1999, p. 97-98) Also Hoffman showed that many educated Egyptian women although some of them see these kinds of beliefs and practices as superstition committing saint veneration related practices (1995, p. 101).

From this standpoint it is possible to assert that beliefs and practices related to saint and shrine veneration tradition is a very important aspect of living Islam. Although they are linked to

the some non-Islamic or magical-superstitious elements, in the end they merge these elements in an Islamic manner. Generally speaking, the people who identify themselves as strictly Muslim, bears no hesitation on practicing those traditions, adversely they see these traditions as a part of their Islamic heritage. They think of saints as benefactors and protectors of the land they inhabit, or the order of things that they are bound to. People take shrines as sacred spaces as that of mosques maybe even more sacred than the mosques. In the following section, I will evaluate the current situation regarding saint-shrine veneration in Turkey on the particular example of Birgi and Imam Birgivi as a consecrated Muslim saint.

4. The Mediating Quality of Imam Birgivi

Mehmed b. Pir Ali's (i.e Imam Birgivi) formerly mentioned ideas and acts are in line with the notion of official religion or the elite Islam. He dismisses the folk aspect of religious beliefs and practices and grounds them on the Koran and the Sunnah. Some of the rituals he particularly opposed are generally practices and beliefs which are usually considered within the concept of Sufism and of folk religion. However, despite all these historical background and hard-line attitude, he has been brought to the status of a saint in folk imagination thanks to his state as a religious figure. Although he asked his grave not to be converted into a shrine after his death, he could not help being sanctified in the public eye (image 1.).

The sainthood occurs around Imam Birgivi or Birgi Dedeh can be observed in three phases; first the mythological and historical narratives that surround his personage, second the functions that have emerged from these narratives, third and the last the practices correspond to those functions. In this context in this section those three phases will be discussed.

The modus of conversion of a historical person into some sort of mythical figure follows the rules of folk imagery which depends on the mediation of otherworldly and the material. He is known as a "holy person", "important person" and "a great scholar" (*büyük alim*) in the public eye. This confronts not only the exoteric meaning of the term but the esoteric meanings of the Arabic term "ilm" related to the spiritual and/or supernatural. Although the current impression of Imam Birgivi on people is interwoven with myths, his quality of being a great *alim* (scholar) on Islamic themes cannot be ignored by the public. For his quality of being a great scholar is known at least by the most ignorant people visiting his tomb. In this context it is possible to state that his mythological and historical personalities mutually reproduce each other and his position as a saint. Numerous interviews with the visitors of the tomb reveal the fact that he is defined as a saint because of his historical personage. But the historical qualities of his personage don't prevent him being defined as a wondrous saint thank to the Islamic-religious repertory of the common man in Turkey.

There are numerous mythological narratives regarding Imam Birgivi attributing him sainthood such as moving very fast between great distances, fighting against the magicians of his time who disrespected Koran and wondrously helping others that ran into difficulty, to warn people in case of danger and to inform the will be martyrs by appearing in their dreams and etc. These wondrous

qualities attributed to Imam Birgivi are known in Birgi as well as in other places. People know him as Imam Birgivi but also the phrase "Birgi Dedeh" (*dedeh* literally means grandfather but in Turkish Islam the terms *baba* or *ata* -father- and *dedeh* -grandfather- are common for saints ar walis formerly referred as Arslan Ata, Baba Ishak, Baba ilyas and Geyikli Baba) is a common name for the visitation tradition around Imam Birgivi.

The common mythological narrative describing Imam Birgivi as an Islamic figure fighting witch-magicians reflect the main structure of sainthood of Imam Birgivi among people. Witchcraft or black magic is prohibited in Islam. Although magic is accepted in Koran, it is forbidden for a Muslim to expect benefit from magical means instead of God's will. This mythological cycle is especially important because it unites his historical and attributed mythological aspects in one structure. As an orthdodox scholar the thoughts of Mehmed Birgivi enforcing Koran and hadith in Muslim's life was transformed into a mythological narrative which place him as a super hero by the populace. His deeds against the wrongdoers according to his own orthodox agenda, represented through the struggle with the magicians who are disrespectful to Koran. This kind of narratives which constitutes a major source of the popularity of Imam Birgivi also establishes a common ground for people to unite some traditional values regarding sainthood and the orthodoxy. This quality can be observed in the practices of visitors.

The abovementioned point in the case of Imam Birgivi apart from his unusual historical records with contrast to the practices committed around his personality in modern times is that he is a kind of compromise between what can be labeled as orthodoxy and folk Islam. Because his tomb and the cemetery in general is subjected to the practices of the religiously uneducated common people as well as religiously educated or modern people that refer to these sort of practices as unlawful. For example his tomb is subject to visitation both for materialistic needs (for a baby, for a house) which are materialized by miniature models and also for historical commemoration and spiritual needs.

The representations of these beliefs and/or practices can be seen mainly as praying, scribbling some words and binding rags around the graves related to some wishes to come true. According to the interviews, the wishes concentrate on the well being, wealth, and children. Visitors pray around the tomb in order to have children (images 2.-3.), to be spared of spiritual and financial difficulties, to get healed (image 4.) and for similar purposes; and in order to benefit from his baraka, they wipe their hands and faces on the graves of his students (his own grave is surrounded with an iron fence as a protection) (image 5.), and the cypress tree behind his grave; write their wishes and requests down on the gravestones (images 6.). The most distinctive feature of the practices is that some visitors lean on the graves in order to hear the voices coming from below (images 7.-8.). This superstitious act resembles the beliefs of the people regarding Imam Birgivi as a spiritual figure. Abovementioned practices are remarkable because it is not an odd thing to be warned because of performing those sorts of religiously unwelcomed practices around or in cemeteries in Turkey. Apart from that, Birgi Municipality has installed turnstiles and turned the grave-

yard into a touristic area which finances the town. Shopkeepers sell their goods at the graveyard's entrance and a family which is responsible from the maintenance of the surroundings inside the cemetery operates a religious souvenirs shop along with a slaughterhouse for sacrificing animals.

Although the sacred day for visiting holy places or in Islamic nomenclature "ziyarah" is Friday, the holidays Saturday and Sunday attracts more people. In those days, people from neighboring cities, towns and villages visit the grave with tour buses or by personal means in order to perform some practices. In addition to this there is a masjid in the cemetery built for the sake of Imam Birgivi where people visiting the cemetery can perform prayer. On the important dates such as *qadr* night, *mawlid* night (the birth of Prophet Muhammad) and etc. people gathering from various places visit the cemetery. In those days of orthodox calendar the crowd exceeds the masjid spreading all over the cemetery and performs night prayers amidst the graves of ordinary people and of Imam Birgivi and his disciples'. Those days and nights are great events for a little town like Birgi. Particularly on the *qadr* night, Birgivi's grave and its surroundings are turned into a festival area (images 9.-10.-11.). On that night people from various places gather around the grave of Imam Birgivi and occupy the whole cemetery and the surrounding picnic areas in order to feast (image 12.) and to pray (image 13.). Because of being in the month of Ramadan everyone gathered there first break their fasts with the evening call to prayer and then perform the night prayer with *teravih* (prayer) which is a relatively longer than usual prayers and regarded as a sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad and linked with the month of Ramadan (images 14.-15.). The prayer ritual performed around the tomb of Imam Birgivi also can be taken as a sign of his intermediary position between folk beliefs and orthodox Islam.

Although there is a common judgment regarding the beliefs and practices around shrines that attract women in folk religious places. With special reference to the formerly mentioned quality of folk religiosity as the feminine counterpart of the masculine quality of official religious life and practices, in such dates men as well as women visit and perform religious practices.

People committing the prayers around the cemetery give no inappropriate meaning to their practices. Because they think that it is a benevolence to be in that kind of a place. One visitor tells *he is not dead* when asked later about his acts were inappropriate or not while praying. One man among the visitors (an off duty police officer) stated "*He is among one of our ancestors, a great scholar and a holy man of God, I came here to pray for myself before him and also to commemorate his deeds and efforts for our religion*" when his cause of visitation asked. When the statements of the people coming to visit the cemetery and the tomb of Imam Birgivi summed up, regardless of their true reason of visiting, the common reaction resemble the one already mentioned above. Most of the interviews stress the deeds of Imam Birgivi as a historical and religious person, a great scholar and in addition to that and as an outcome of his great deeds concerning Islam, he is also a great wali (saint). Another common motive apart from material requests is to believe that he is a friend of God (wali) so it would be more prestigious to pray to God by getting the intercession of this great Islamic scholar.

Another fact that is observed around Imam Birgivi's tomb is the reflection of the current situation in Turkey in relation to the political developments. In fact these developments reflect the growing conservationism in modern Turkey based on nationalistic and Islamic values as well. For an important amount of visitors stated their motives of visitation as touristic. The touristic qualities of Birgi bear less significance apart from being the burial place of Imam Birgivi or Birgi Dedeh. People come here because they have had heard something about a place that is subject to visitation. This quality may be called as religious tourism as well...

Mehmed b. Pir Ali, Imam Birgivi or Birgi Dedeh, it doesn't matter which one but finally it can be asserted that as a historical person Mehmed b. Pir Ali became a Muslim saint in the sense of even orthodox Islam and also of folk religious beliefs and practices. That kind of consecration of a historical person by mythologizing him but at the same time making a major religious figure out of him is an example of Islam's pervasive theology apart from intellectual sources. This particular incident also exemplifies the elasticity and at the same time the strength of living Islam that incorporates every single phenomenon into its own body. This fact also exemplifies the strong link between orthodoxy and folk beliefs and practices for there is no doubt that the concept of intercession which is fully accepted by orthodoxy is a loose one that can include any belief or practice around saints and shrines regardless of the inappropriateness of excessive behaviors. This principle covers all beliefs and practices regarding saint-shrine veneration and normalizes them in the Islamic context as well.

5. Conclusion

Some of the western scholars referring the term Islamic orthodoxy take it as an unhistorical, frozen entity instead of taking it as a living process. This attitude causes them to ignore some beliefs and practices, or to take them as alien qualities to Islam. For instance, Sufism related terms of sainthood and the saint-shrine veneration tradition can be held in this context. These qualities widely observed in Islamic cultures can be identified as the search for divine blessing or Baraka through the intercession of the saint, or saint's shrine that immersed by the Baraka. People all over the Muslim world, traditionally accept this sort of beliefs and perform practices such as visitation, sacrifice, praying, vows and etc.

This kind of Islamic saint-shrine veneration takes place in a tiny western Anatolian town Birgi, around the tomb of a 16th century Ottoman scholar Mehmed Birgivi or Mehmed b. Pir Ali. Unlike a familiar saint, Mehmed Birgivi is exactly a historical person with scholarly published books and leaflets uncovering his thoughts. Amazingly his thoughts were focusing on the classification of popular beliefs and practices of his time as good and bad innovations in religion (bid'ah) and to ban the bad ones especially ones affiliated with Sufism (such as mystical union with god, intercession of saints and etc.). Although his thoughts targeting folk religious aspects, he, after his death couldn't manage to escape this quality of the public. After his death there some mythological narratives occurred around his personality thank to his official and religious services. In this context

it is possible to assert that he, as an orthodox scholar makes an example of Islamic sainthood which compromises folk religious-mythological aspects with the orthodox ones. In this regard in Birgi people from various places and social strata visiting his tomb, and participating some practices in order to obtain his Baraka materially or to benefit from his intercession in spiritual means. Especially in some prominent dates of the Islamic calendar such as qadr night the cemetery surrounding his tomb become an open mosque and a festival area as well.

Consequently this mediating role of Imam Birgivi or Birgi Dedeh in the eyes of ordinary people shows that saint veneration in modern day Turkey cannot be identified as a battle ground between the dualistic sets of terms such as Grand Tradition vs Little Tradition, orthodoxy vs folk religion, mosque vs shrine and etc. This incident displays that the current situation regarding popular religious beliefs and practices in Islam cannot be classified in clear cut academic compartments. Adversely it is possible to assert that living Islam in Turkey is interwoven with orthodox and unorthodox religious qualities and in this context maybe the term Islamic orthodoxy requires a revision.

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Images

Image 1. Mehmed Birgivi's (right) and his son's graves under the cypresses. The graves covered with bars in order to protect them from the visitors.

Image 2. An old lady making a miniature cradle between the trees near the grave of Imam Birgivi for her daughter to have a baby.

Image 3. Daughter (a nurse) praying infront of the cradle for a baby.

Image 4. A handicapped lady praying for recovery along with others who are praying solemnly for their wishes.

Image 5. A woman rubbing her face to the tombstone of Imam Birgivi's entombed students in order to benefit from his baraka.

Image 6. The reverse side of one of the gravestones. "Please God grant me a favourable child, peace and happiness at home, workplace and a house amen".

Image 7. A woman leaning on one of the graves in order listen to the sounds coming from below.

Image 8. Other women leaning on one of the graves in order listen to the sounds coming from below.

Image 9. Gathering around Imam Birgivi's tomb on the qadr night.

Image 10. Cemetery turns into a fairground on the qadr night.

Image 11. Another scene from the qadr night

Image 12. Feast with the charity meal

Image 13. Evening prayer beside the grave of Imam Birgivi

Image 14. Night prayer near the grave of Imam Birgivi.

Image 15. Another scene from the night prayer in the cemetery on the qadr night.