

The Janissary Corps and Bektashism in the Ottoman Empire: Military Identity and Spiritual Belonging, and Mutual Interaction

¹Fatma Aygün Erdem, ²Muhammed Yuşa Yaşar

¹Associate Professor, Department of Basic Islamic Sciences, Faculty of Islamic Sciences, Istanbul Sabahattin Zaim, University, Istanbul, Türkiye. Telephone number: +905059333791 E-mail: fatma.erdem@izu.edu.tr ORCID number: 0000-0001-8220-0046

²PhD, Faculty Member, Kalam Department, Faculty of Theology, Istanbul University, Istanbul, Türkiye. Telephone number: +905367107951. E-mail address: yusa@istanbul.edu.tr ORCID number: 0000-0002-8965-5710

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ABSTRACT:

This study examines the relationship between the Janissary Corps and the Bektashi Order in the Ottoman Empire through the interconnected perspectives of institutional history, military identity, and Sufi spirituality. Although previous scholarship has often interpreted the Janissary-Bektashi relationship either as a continuous spiritual connection dating back to the foundation of the corps or as a later institutional association that emerged with the consolidation of Bektashism, this study argues that the relationship should be understood as a dynamic process of mutual interaction and transformation. Drawing upon historical sources and qualitative analysis, this research investigates how Bektashi beliefs, rituals, and symbolic practices contributed to the formation of Janissary identity, while also examining how the institutional power of the Janissary Corps influenced the social position and organizational development of Bektashism within the Ottoman order. Particular attention is given to the Sufi concepts of unity (waḥda), sainthood (walāya), spiritual transformation (devran), martyrdom (shahāda), and the symbolic role of Hacı Bektaş-ı Velî and Hz. Ali in shaping the Janissaries' understanding of loyalty, sacrifice, and spiritual belonging. The study demonstrates that Bektashism functioned not merely as a religious affiliation for the Janissaries but also as a symbolic and moral framework that transformed military service and death in battle into a spiritually meaningful experience. At the same time, the Janissary Corps contributed to the institutional visibility, legitimacy, and social influence of the Bektashi tradition within the Ottoman Empire. Therefore, the Janissary-Bektashi relationship should be evaluated not as a one-sided influence but as a reciprocal process through which military and Sufi identities were mutually constructed under changing historical conditions.

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Introduction

The encounter between the Turks and Islam was far more than a simple process of religious conversion. It marked the beginning of a long and complex historical transformation that reshaped political institutions, cultural life, and social organization across the Turkic world. Contacts between the Turks and Muslims began with the expansion of Muslim rule into Transoxiana through Iran and Khurasan and gradually intensified through warfare, diplomacy, trade, and cultural exchange during the Umayyad and Abbasid periods. Before embracing Islam, Turkic communities largely adhered to the traditional Sky God (Tengri) belief while also coming into contact with religious traditions such as Buddhism, Manichaeism, and Christianity. Although these faiths influenced certain Turkic groups, none brought about a transformation as profound, enduring, or wide-ranging as that associated with Islam.

The Islamization of the Turks was shaped not only by political developments but also by the ways in which Islam reached different segments of society. While Umayyad policies at times created tensions in relations with Turkic communities, the more inclusive political and cultural climate of the Abbasid period facilitated closer integration into the Islamic world. The Battle of Talas (751), in particular, marked an important turning point by strengthening contacts between Turks and Muslims. Even so, the spread of Islam among the Turks cannot be explained solely in terms of military conquest or political authority. Sufis, dervishes, and various Sufi circles played a crucial role in introducing Islamic beliefs and practices to diverse communities, helping Islam take root within different cultural settings.¹

As Ahmet T. Karamustafa² has emphasized, early Sufi movements should not be viewed simply as institutionalized religious orders. Rather, they functioned as flexible religious, cultural, and

social networks that connected different communities across the Islamic world. In this sense, Sufism represented more than a particular form of religious devotion; it also fostered moral education, social cohesion, and new forms of collective identity. Its ability to accommodate local cultural traditions without losing its spiritual orientation, together with its emphasis on personal transformation, made it one of the principal channels through which Islam gained wider acceptance among Turkic populations.

The importance of these Sufi networks became even more evident during the Turkification and Islamization of Anatolia, where dervish movements laid the foundations for later Sufi traditions. Fuat Köprülü demonstrated that the Islamization of Anatolia cannot be understood solely through the activities of centralized religious institutions or state policies. Instead, he highlighted the decisive role played by Turkmen dervishes, popular Sufi movements, and heterodox religious communities in this process. Building on Köprülü's pioneering work, later scholars -including Ahmet Yaşar Ocak, Irene Melikoff, and Rıza Yıldırım- examined movements such as the Babais, Kalenders, Abdalan-ı Rûm, and Kızılbaş communities within the broader context of Anatolia's religious and social transformation. Their studies have shown that the emergence of Bektashism was not an isolated event or simply the foundation of a single Sufi order. Rather, it was the outcome of a much longer historical process shaped by the interaction of Sufi movements, religious diversity, and social change in medieval Anatolia.

Against this historical background, Bektashism emerged in Ottoman society not only as a mystical tradition but also as an institution that helped organize social life, transmit moral values, and foster a shared sense of belonging among diverse communities. Over time, it developed into one of the most influential Sufi traditions in the Ottoman world, attracting sustained scholarly

¹ Fuat Köprülü, *Türk Edebiyatında İlk Mutasavvıflar*, 12-26; Ahmet Yaşar Ocak, *Türkler, Türkiye ve İslam: Yaklaşım, Yöntem ve Yorum Denemeleri*, 13-95; Irene Melikoff, *Hacı Bektaş: Efsaneden Gerçeğe*, 31-92.

² Ahmet T. Karamustafa, "Kalenders, Abdâls, Hayderîs: The Formation of the Bektâşîye in the Sixteenth Century," *Süleymân the Second and His Time*, ed. Halil İnalçık ve Cemal Kafadar (Istanbul: The Isis Press, 1993), 121-129.

attention from historians of religion and Ottoman society alike.³

Among the earliest comprehensive studies, John Kingsley Birge's⁴ pioneering work established a foundation for understanding the historical development of Bektashism, its doctrinal features, and its ritual practices. Suraiya Faroqhi, by contrast, shifted attention to the social and institutional dimensions of the tradition, demonstrating the important economic, social, and religious functions performed by Bektashi lodges within Ottoman society. Irene Melikoff further broadened this perspective by examining Bektashism within the wider context of Anatolian religious culture, emphasizing the interaction between heterodox Islamic interpretations, pre-Islamic traditions, and Sufi thought. More recently, Markus Dressler⁵ and Mark Soileau⁶ have explored the historical formation of Bektashi identity, showing how it has been continually reconstructed, negotiated, and reinterpreted under changing political, religious, and social conditions. Together, these studies demonstrate that Bektashism was neither a fixed nor a monolithic tradition, but one that evolved through continuous interaction with the wider Ottoman religious and social landscape.

One of the most significant aspects of this historical development was the relationship between Bektashism and the Janissary Corps. The connection between the two has long remained one of the most debated subjects in Ottoman military and religious history. According to the traditional narrative, the Janissaries inherited the spiritual legacy of Hacı Bektaş-ı Velî and came to be known as the "children of Hacı Bektaş." Within this framework, Bektashism has often been regarded as a central element in shaping not only the religious identity of the Janissaries but

also their military ethos, discipline, and collective sense of belonging.

Recent scholarship, however, presents a more nuanced picture. Rather than treating the Janissary–Bektashi connection as a fixed historical reality, many scholars argue that it developed gradually and changed over time. Some trace its origins to the formative period of the Janissary Corps, suggesting that the symbolic authority associated with Hacı Bektaş-ı Velî contributed to the construction of Janissary identity from an early stage. Others maintain that the relationship became more visible and institutionally defined only from the sixteenth century onward, particularly with the consolidation of the Bektashi order and the reforms traditionally associated with Balım Sultan.

Recent scholarship on the Janissary Corps has likewise challenged earlier interpretations that treated the institution primarily as a military organization. While the Janissaries undoubtedly formed the backbone of the Ottoman military system, they also developed into a distinctive social institution that cultivated collective identities through shared rituals, symbols, values, and traditions. In this regard, Cemal Kafadar's work on the overlapping identities of warriors, dervishes, and gazis in the early Ottoman world has been particularly influential. His studies demonstrate that military and religious identities were not separate or competing spheres but intersected in ways that shaped both the political and cultural life of the empire.⁷ This perspective offers an important framework for understanding how spiritual ideals and military values could coexist within the Janissary institution.

Research on the Ottoman military system has further broadened this perspective. Gábor

³ Rıza Yıldırım, *Hacı Bektaş Velî'den Balım Sultan'a Bektaşiliğin Doğuşu*, 12.

⁴ John Kingsley Birge. *The Bektashi Order of Dervishes*. London: Luzac & Co.; Hartford, CT: Hartford Seminary Press, 1937.

⁵ Markus Dressler, *Writing Religion: The Making of Turkish Alevi Islam*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013; Markus Dressler, "Religio-Secular Metamorphoses: The Re-Making of Turkish Alevism,"

Journal of the American Academy of Religion 76/2 (2008), 280-331.

⁶ Mark Soileau, "Conforming Haji Bektash: A Saint and His Followers between Orthopraxy and Heteropraxy," *Die Welt des Islams* 54/3-4 (2014), 423-459.

⁷ Cemal Kafadar, *Between Two Worlds: The Construction of the Ottoman State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

Ágoston⁸ and Virginia Aksan⁹ have examined the organizational structure, military effectiveness, and political role of the Janissary Corps within the wider Ottoman state system, demonstrating that the institution cannot be understood solely through its military functions. Likewise, Baki Tezcan's studies on institutional transformation in the Ottoman Empire underline the dynamic nature of Ottoman political and military institutions, showing that organizations such as the Janissary Corps were continuously reshaped through changing political circumstances, social developments, and negotiations with different actors.

Seen in this broader historiographical context, the relationship between the Janissary Corps and Bektashism cannot be reduced to a simple connection between a military institution and a Sufi order. Bektashism undoubtedly provided the Janissaries with a spiritual vocabulary, a moral framework, and a symbolic universe that reinforced collective identity and solidarity. At the same time, the institutional prestige and political position of the Janissary Corps enhanced the visibility, legitimacy, and organizational development of Bektashism within the Ottoman world. Rather than a one-way process of religious influence, the relationship was characterized by continuous interaction, adaptation, and mutual transformation.

Despite the substantial body of scholarship devoted to this subject, the relationship between the Janissary Corps and Bektashism has generally been approached from two different perspectives. One group of studies focuses primarily on the influence of Bektashism on the spiritual life, military ethos, and collective identity of the Janissaries. Another examines the institutional position of Bektashism within the Ottoman political order, paying particular attention to its relationship with state authority and its process of institutionalization. Although

both approaches have made valuable contributions, they rarely consider the reciprocal character of this relationship in a systematic way. Questions concerning how these two institutions shaped one another, how Sufi values and military discipline interacted in the construction of a shared identity, and how this interaction functioned within the broader Ottoman state-society framework have not yet received sufficient attention.

The present study seeks to address this historiographical gap by examining the relationship between the Janissary Corps and Bektashism as a process of reciprocal interaction rather than one-sided influence. It explores the contribution of Bektashism to the formation of the Janissaries' spiritual outlook, moral values, and collective identity while also considering how the Janissary institution itself influenced the institutional development, symbolic authority, and social visibility of Bektashism within the Ottoman order.

Adopting this perspective makes it possible to move beyond reductionist interpretations that portray the Janissary–Bektashi relationship either as the dominance of a Sufi order over a military institution or merely as an instrument of Ottoman state policy. Instead, this study argues that the relationship evolved through a complex process of mutual exchange in which military discipline, Sufi education, moral ideals, ritual practices, and symbolic traditions combined to produce a distinctive form of institutional and collective identity.

Methodologically, the study adopts a historical and historiographical approach, drawing on both the existing scholarly literature and the broader historical development of Ottoman religious and military institutions. Rather than treating religious and military history as separate fields of inquiry, it examines their intersections in order to

⁸ Gábor Ágoston, "Janissaries", *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ed. Kate Fleet, Gudrun Krämer, Denis Matringe, John Nawas and Everett Rowson (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 146-150.

⁹ Virginia H. Aksan, "Janissaries", *The Encyclopedia of War*, ed. Gordon Martel (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell,

2012); Virginia H. Aksan, "Whatever Happened to the Janissaries? Mobilization for the 1768-1774 Russo-Ottoman War", *War in History* 5/1 (1998): 23-36. DOI: 10.1177/096834459800500102.

understand how institutional identities were constructed and continually reshaped over time.

Ultimately, this article argues that the relationship between the Ottoman state, military institutions, and Sufi organizations cannot be explained solely through concepts such as religious affiliation or political control. Instead, it should be understood within broader processes of social integration, institutional change, and collective identity formation. Viewed from this perspective, the relationship between the Janissary Corps and Bektashism offers an important case study for understanding how religious traditions and military institutions influenced one another and evolved together throughout Ottoman history.

1. Historical and Social Context

Understanding the emergence of the Bektashi Order and the Janissary Corps requires examining both the 'Turks' conversion to Islam and the Turkification of Anatolia as interconnected historical processes. Following the Battle of Manzikert, the acceleration of settlement in Anatolia was accompanied by the arrival of dervishes, shaykhs, and *alp-erens* from Khurasan. These religious figures played an active role in various parts of Anatolia, not only facilitating the spread of Islam but also contributing significantly to the formation of a new social order. Within this context, Sufi lodges (*tekkes*) emerged not merely as centers of religious life but also as important institutions for social solidarity and the transmission of cultural traditions.¹⁰

Within this historical process, two distinct religious orientations gradually emerged in Anatolia. On the one hand, there developed a scholarly tradition centered around the madrasa system, characterized by a more systematic and Sunni-oriented understanding of Islam. On the other hand, a more flexible and Sufi-oriented interpretation of religion became widespread among the broader population. Although this dual structure occasionally generated tensions, it generally evolved into a set of complementary

elements that shaped the religious diversity of Ottoman society.¹¹ Within this framework, the institutionalization of the Bektashi Order and its relationship with the Janissary Corps should not be regarded as a coincidental development; rather, it emerged as a natural outcome of the historical, social, and intellectual processes outlined above. Therefore, understanding the connection between Bektashism and the Janissary Corps requires taking into consideration this broader historical and social background.

Unlike approaches that explain the relationship between the Janissary Corps and Bektashism solely through the influence of the Bektashi Order on the military institution, this study focuses on the processes of mutual transformation and interaction between the two institutions. In this respect, while examining the contribution of Bektashism to the formation of Janissary identity, the study also evaluates the role played by the Janissary Corps in the institutional development of Bektashism and in shaping its position within Ottoman society. Thus, the subject is approached from the perspective of mutual interaction rather than through models based on one-sided influence.

1.1. The Encounter of the Turks with Islam and Sufi Interaction

The pre-Islamic Turkic belief system was based on a worldview centered around the Sky God (*Tengri*). Within this understanding, *Tengri* was regarded as the creator and supreme authority of the universe, while the political authority of the *kaghan* was explained through a form of divine legitimacy. In addition, shamanic practices conducted by *kams* constituted an important aspect of religious life, particularly in terms of establishing connections with the spiritual realm and performing various rituals. Reverence for ancestors and the sacred significance attributed to natural elements such as mountains, forests, and rivers also occupied an important place in the religious worldview of Turkic peoples.¹²

¹⁰ Fuat Köprülü, *Türk Edebiyatında İlk Mutasavvıflar*, 12-20, 183-217; İrfan Gündüz, *Osmanlılarda Devlet-Tekke Münasebetleri*, 85-98; Ahmet Yaşar Ocak, *Türkler, Türkiye ve İslam*, 64.

¹¹ Ocak, *Türkler, Türkiye ve İslam*, 57-76.

¹² İbrahim Kafesoğlu, *Eski Türk Dini*, 9-67; Surayia Faroqi, *Anadolu'da Bektaşilik*, 185; Hasan Aksoy,

Prior to their adoption of Islam, the Turks came into contact with various religious traditions, including Buddhism, Manichaeism, and Christianity. Although these religions exerted influence among certain Turkic communities, they did not develop into a shared belief system embraced by the majority of the Turkic peoples. Among the factors contributing to this situation were the limited compatibility of certain elements of these religions with the nomadic way of life and Turkic social structures, as well as the fact that they largely spread within specific political and cultural circles.

The Battle of Talas in 751 marked an important turning point in the intensification of relations between the Turks and Muslims. Although the battle itself did not directly lead to a mass conversion to Islam, the increasing interactions that followed significantly deepened cultural exchange. During the Abbasid period, the adoption of more inclusive policies and the growing involvement of Turks in military and administrative institutions greatly accelerated this process. As previously emphasized, Sufi circles played a decisive role in the spread of Islam. By conveying religious teachings in a more accessible and adaptable form, these circles contributed to the development of an interpretation of Islam that resonated with elements of the Turks' earlier religious worldview.¹³

Following the Battle of Manzikert (1071), the intensification of Turkic settlement in Anatolia played a significant role in reshaping not only the ethnic and demographic structure of the region but also its cultural and religious character. By carrying their existing beliefs and cultural traditions into the newly settled territories, nomadic Turkic communities laid the foundations for the development of a Sufi-oriented religious understanding. Indeed, the religious life of these communities was largely shaped around Sufi perspectives and practices.

During this process, dervishes, *abdals*, and *alperens* became important figures who not only provided religious guidance but also played a leading role in establishing social order within newly formed settlements. *Tekkēs* and *zāviyas*, meanwhile, developed into institutions that combined various functions, including worship, accommodation, education, and social solidarity. Particularly in rural and frontier regions, these institutions made significant contributions to social cohesion and integration.¹⁴

The Islamization of Anatolia appears to have developed not primarily as a classical "top-down" transformation, but rather as a process that was largely shaped from below and driven by popular religious dynamics. In other words, before formal religious institutions became fully established, Sufi circles and groups of dervishes played a decisive role in shaping religious life. This process later provided the foundation for the widespread acceptance of Sufi orders among the broader population and their lasting influence over large segments of society.

The influence of Sufi circles was not limited solely to religious propagation; it was also decisive in terms of cultural adaptation and interaction with local communities. Turkmen dervishes, *abdals*, and Sufi groups that would later be associated with the Bektashi tradition contributed to the spread of a more flexible and accessible interpretation of Islam throughout different regions of Anatolia. By providing both spiritual guidance and social counsel, these groups played an important role in the religious and social transformation of Anatolian communities. During this process, the Sufi discourse centered around love and devotion toward the Ahl al-Bayt found a particularly strong resonance among nomadic and semi-nomadic communities.¹⁵

Therefore, the Turkification of Anatolia should not be understood merely as a demographic transformation; rather, it represents a

"İslam Öncesi Dönem Türklerde Tanrı Anlayışı", 275-288.

¹³ Ocak, *Türkler, Türkiye ve İslam*, 36, 83, 174.

¹⁴ Halil İnalcık, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu: Klâsik Çağ (1300-1600)*, 194-96; Ocak, *Türkiye, Türkler ve İslam*, 63-65.

¹⁵ Irene Melikoff, *Hacı Bektaş: Efsaneden Gerçeğe*, 80-92.

multidimensional process shaped by the interaction of Sufi movements, dervish communities, and institutional religious structures. Within this framework, the emergence of Bektashism was not an accidental development but a natural outcome of the pluralistic religious environment that characterized Anatolia. This context enabled Bektashism to establish a strong presence in later periods, both at the societal level and, more specifically, within the Janissary Corps.

1.2. Sufi Circles and the Interaction with Madrasa Traditions after Manzikert

Following the Battle of Manzikert (1071), Anatolia became a dynamic environment in which diverse religious interpretations coexisted. During this period, the Sufi-oriented interpretations embraced by nomadic and semi-nomadic Turkic communities and the Sunni tradition based on the madrasa system that developed in urban centers constituted the two main axes of religious life. Although significant differences existed between these two forms of religious expression, their coexistence often functioned as a complementary element in shaping the multilayered religious fabric of Anatolia.

The dervishes active among nomadic communities transmitted religious knowledge not primarily through systematic written scholarship, but through oral culture, hagiographical narratives, and symbolic forms of expression. This method enabled Islam to be understood in a simpler, more practical manner that was compatible with everyday life, while also providing a basis for the preservation of certain cultural continuities with the pre-Islamic Turkic religious worldview.¹⁶ Thus, the process of Islamization in Anatolia did not occur through an abrupt rupture, but rather as a gradual process of cultural transformation.

Dervishes were not merely individuals who transmitted religious teachings; they also served

as social actors who strengthened communal solidarity and promoted moral values. In this context, *tekkes* developed into institutions that fulfilled both religious educational and social support functions. By contrast, madrasas functioned as institutional structures in which religious knowledge was taught in a systematic manner, ensuring the organized transmission of *fiqh*, *kalam*, and other Islamic sciences. This contributed particularly to the spread of a more normative and regulated understanding of religion among urban communities, while also playing an important role in the institutionalization of the state's religious and bureaucratic structures.¹⁷

These two religious traditions became influential in different social spheres: while dervishes were primarily active in rural areas and frontier regions, madrasa circles gained prominence in urban centers and administrative institutions. Nevertheless, this differentiation did not develop as a sharp separation; rather, it evolved within a framework that generated continuous interaction between the two. The flexible and inclusive interpretations of Sufi circles and the systematic and normative approach of the madrasa tradition gradually influenced and complemented one another. In this way, both popular culture and scholarly traditions played significant roles in shaping religious life.¹⁸

This mutual interaction contributed both to the institutionalization of the religious structure in Anatolia and to the preservation of its pluralistic character. Over time, Sufi circles became more organized around established Sufi orders. Within this process, the Bektashi tradition, which developed around Hacı Bektaş Veli, emerged as a distinctive religious formation that combined elements of pre-Islamic Turkic beliefs with the Sufi interpretation of Islam. This tradition was not merely an individual system of belief; it also assumed a broader social function by supporting communal solidarity and social integration.¹⁹

¹⁶ Yıldırım, *Hacı Bektaş Veli'den Balım Sultan'a Bektâşiliğin Doğuşu*, 38.

¹⁷ Ocak, *Türkler, Türkiye ve İslam*, 57-76; Metin İzeti, *Balkanlarda Tasavvuf*, 82-86.

¹⁸ İnalcık, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu: Klâsik Çağ (1300-1600)*, 175-176; Ocak, *Türkler, Türkiye ve İslam*, 60-63.

¹⁹ Ahmet Yaşar Ocak, "Bektaşîyye", *Türkiye'de Tarikatlar*, 454-462.

Thus, following the Battle of Manzikert, Sufi circles and the madrasa tradition in Anatolia continued to coexist for an extended period despite representing different religious orientations, developing as complementary rather than opposing structures. This multilayered religious environment laid the groundwork for the formation of the Ottoman religious order in later periods and contributed significantly to the institutionalization processes of Sufi formations, particularly traditions such as Bektashism.

2. Bektashism and the Process of Institutionalization

Beginning in the eleventh century, interpretations of Islam that differed from the dominant religious understanding developed among Turkic peoples in Central Asia through Sufi orders and were subsequently carried to Anatolia through Turkmen migrations. By the thirteenth century, this tradition had become increasingly visible in Anatolia through diverse Sufi formations such as the Qalandariyya, Yasawiyya, Haydariyya, and Wafa'iyya.²⁰ The religious understanding that developed within this context acquired a more distinct institutional identity under the name of Bektashism in the early sixteenth century. This process should not be understood as the outcome of a single event; rather, it should be viewed as the product of long-term historical and social interactions.

The formation of Bektashism was built upon the social and religious foundations that had emerged particularly through the Babai movement of the thirteenth century.²¹ Over time, Sufi circles that came to be characterized as heterodox began to show tendencies toward institutionalization during the early Ottoman period and were transformed into a more structured Sufi order through the reforms of Balım Sultan.²² Both social needs and the relationships established

with the state played a decisive role in this transformation.

Considering the role played by Sufi orders during the foundation and expansion periods of the Ottoman Empire, the institutionalization of Bektashism cannot be evaluated solely as a religious process. Through its relationship with the Janissary Corps in particular, this tradition extended its influence into military and administrative spheres, thereby transforming from a primarily social Sufi tradition into an institutionalized social actor. This development demonstrates that Bektashism possessed a dual character: it was both rooted in popular religious dynamics and shaped through interaction with the state.

2.1. Early Bektashism

Bektashism emerged within the historical development of Sufi movements in Anatolia and gradually acquired significant religious, social, and cultural dimensions. This process should not be understood merely as the formation of a Sufi order; rather, it can also be interpreted as the integration of various Sufi traditions in Anatolia within a particular framework and their transformation into a new identity shaped around popular Sufism. Indeed, early Bektashism in Anatolia appears to have developed as a flexible structure that incorporated diverse groups of dervishes and various cultural elements.²³

During this period, *tekkes* and *zâviyas* became important centers not only for religious activities but also for social life. These institutions, where guests were hosted, travelers were provided with accommodation, and assistance was offered to those in need, contributed significantly to the expansion of Islamization, particularly in frontier regions. At the same time, they functioned as institutions that supported social solidarity and

²⁰ Ahmet Yaşar Ocak, *Babailer İsyanı: Aleviliğin Tarihsel Altyapısı*, 45-76, 79, 183, 215-216.

²¹ İsmail Hakkı Uzunçarşılı, *Osmanlı Devlet Teşkilatından Kapıkulu Ocakları I*, 148.

²² Ocak, *Türkler, Türkiye ve İslam*, 54; Köprülü, *Türk Edebiyatında İlk Mutasavvıflar*, 205-209; Yıldırım, *Hacı Bektaş Veli'den Balım Sultan'a Bektaşiliğin Doğuşu*, 98.

²³ İnalcık, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu: Klâsik Çağ (1300-1600)*, 201; İsmail Kara, *Tasavvuf ve Tarikatlar Tarihi*, 223; Irene Melikoff, "Alevî-Bektaşiliğin Tarihi Kökenleri: Bektaşî-Kızılbaş (Alevî) Bölünmesi ve Neticeleri", 18; Melikoff, *Hacı Bektaş: Efsaneden Gerçeğe*, 93-98.

contributed to the establishment of local order in areas where state authority remained limited.²⁴

Bektashi dervishes were particularly influential among rural and nomadic communities, assuming important roles not only in providing religious guidance but also in regulating social relations. This indicates that pre-Ottoman Bektashism should be understood not yet as a fully institutionalized Sufi order, but rather as a broad religious and cultural milieu. Spread through dervish networks, this tradition was able to integrate with local customs and manifest itself in diverse forms across different regions.²⁵

The flexible character of Bektashi circles enabled the order to establish connections with different social groups in later periods and to develop a broader sphere of influence. In this context, Bektashism emerged not only as a Sufi path addressing individual spirituality, but also as a social formation that strengthened communal solidarity and fostered cultural connections among diverse communities.²⁶ Some scholars argue that the differences between Bektashis and Alevi-Qizilbash communities largely stem from variations in their social patterns of life. According to this view, Bektashis gradually acquired a more institutional character within urban and semi-urban environments, whereas Alevi communities maintained nomadic or semi-nomadic ways of life for a longer period and developed more limited connections with formal educational institutions.²⁷

Therefore, the institutionalization of Bektashism cannot be explained solely through religious motivations. While the order contributed to the formation of individual spirituality, it also assumed broader social functions, including the strengthening of communal solidarity, the construction of collective identity, and social integration. In this respect, Bektashism should be regarded as one of the significant formations that

influenced the religious and social history of Anatolia.²⁸

2.1. Hacı Bektaş Veli and Fundamental Teachings

In the pre-Ottoman period, Bektashism had not yet developed into a fully institutionalized structure; rather, it appeared primarily as a religious movement based on oral culture and hagiographical traditions. During this period, dervishes traveled across different regions of Anatolia and established direct contact with local communities. They transmitted religious knowledge not primarily through written texts, but through oral narratives, stories, and symbolic forms of expression.

This should be understood not merely as a matter of communication preference, but also as a model of religious transmission compatible with the social structures of nomadic and semi-nomadic communities. Indeed, this oral-based structure facilitated the acceptance of Bektashism among broader segments of society and contributed to the development of its flexible religious character.²⁹

Hacı Bektaş Veli was an important Sufi figure who came to Anatolia from the Khurasan region in the thirteenth century and was regarded among the *Khurasan Erenleri* (Saintly Figures of Khurasan). He is considered one of the principal figures who shaped the intellectual and spiritual foundations of Bektashism.

Although the teachings that developed around him were not formulated as a systematic doctrine in written form, they were transmitted to later generations through hagiographical narratives, *nefes* (Sufi hymns), and particularly through works such as the *Vilayetname*. This indicates that Bektashism was shaped not primarily through a written doctrinal system, but through an oral and symbolic tradition.³⁰

²⁴ İnalçık, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu: Klâsik Çağ (1300-1600)*, 155-156; Ocak, *Türkler, Türkiye ve İslam*, 63; Melikoff, *Hacı Bektaş: Efsaneden Gerçeğe*, 209-210.

²⁵ Melikoff, *Hacı Bektaş: Efsaneden Gerçeğe*, 50, 70, 85, 96-97, 102, 105, 198, 207, 210.

²⁶ İnalçık, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu: Klâsik Çağ (1300-1600)*, 206.

²⁷ Melikoff, *Hacı Bektaş: Efsaneden Gerçeğe*, 20-21.

²⁸ Kara, *Tasavvuf ve Tarikatlar Tarihi*, 278-280.

²⁹ Ocak, *Türkler, Türkiye ve İslam*, 83; Melikoff, *Hacı Bektaş: Efsaneden Gerçeğe*, 86.

³⁰ Irene Melikoff, *Uyur İdik Uyardılar*, 36.

At the center of the system of thought attributed to Hacı Bektaş Veli lies devotion to the Ahl al-Bayt. This understanding was regarded not merely as a form of religious attachment, but also as a moral model. The devotion centered around Ali and the Ahl al-Bayt encouraged the adoption of values such as justice, integrity, and self-sacrifice as guiding principles in both individual and communal life.

In this respect, Bektashism represents a distinctive tradition that partially differs from classical Sunni Sufi approaches through its more pronounced emphasis on the Ahl al-Bayt. Although the Bektashi order, which regards Hacı Bektaş Veli as its spiritual founder, developed a closer affinity with Shi'i thought over the course of history, it can be argued that there is no clear evidence of a Shi'i orientation in Hacı Bektaş Veli's own teachings.³¹ In addition, tolerance, equality, and a human-centered approach constitute fundamental elements of Bektashi teachings. The principle summarized as "to regard the seventy-two nations with the same perspective," which is considered the second station (*maqam*) of the Gate of Truth (*Bāb al-Ḥaqīqa*), represents an inclusive outlook that enabled different ethnic and religious groups to coexist. This approach was particularly influential in the spread and wider acceptance of Bektashism within the multicultural context of Anatolia.³²

The flexible and inclusive religious character of pre-Ottoman Bektashi practices allowed elements of pre-Islamic Turkic beliefs and Sufi teachings to coexist, thereby giving rise to a heterogeneous and multilayered religious formation. Unlike the classical Sunni understanding of religion, this approach contributed to the development of a more practical, experiential, and symbolic form of religious life.³³

The concept of *musabiplik*, which became more prominent in later periods, established a strong network of social solidarity within Bektashi communities. The spiritual bonds formed among members of the order supported not only their religious development but also their social and moral growth. In this respect, Bektashism should be regarded as one of the significant formations that influenced the religious and social history of Anatolia. Indeed, Bektashism developed a balanced structure that placed the individual at the center while not separating individual spirituality from social responsibilities.³⁴

Furthermore, the rituals and practices that developed during this period appear to have carried a largely symbolic and collective character. Gatherings similar to *cem* ceremonies, *nefes* (Sufi hymns), *dhikr* practices, and communal forms of worship emerged as important elements that strengthened the sense of belonging within the community. These rituals served not only religious functions but also played a significant role in the construction of collective identity.³⁵

Within this framework, the Bektashi practices that developed during the pre-Ottoman period constituted the foundational basis that enabled the order's later institutionalization. Oral tradition, dervish networks, and the *tekke* structure played a decisive role in the subsequent transformation of Bektashism into a more organized Sufi order. At the same time, these elements paved the way for the tradition to become influential both among popular communities and within military and political institutions. In this respect, the institutionalization of Bektashism should be understood not as an abrupt transformation, but rather as the outcome of a long-term and multilayered historical accumulation.

2.2. Branches of Bektashism: Babagans and Çelebis

³¹ Kara, *Tasavvuf ve Tarikatlar Tarihi*, 192.

³² Köprülü, *Türk Edebiyatında İlk Mutasavvıflar*, 303-304; Osman Eğri, "İslâm Tasavvufu ve Hoşgörü: Hoca Ahmet Yesevî, Hacı Bektaş Velî, Yunus Emre Örnekleri ve Diğer Dinlerdeki Paralelleri", 134-135.

³³ Melikoff, *Hacı Bektaş: Efsaneden Gerçeğe*, 147, 210, 215; Ocak, *Türkler, Türkiye ve İslam*, 2013, 52-53.

³⁴ İlyas Üzümlü, *Tarihsel ve Kültürel Boyutlarıyla Alevilik*, 195-199; Melikoff, *Hacı Bektaş: Efsaneden Gerçeğe*, 285-291.

³⁵ Ocak, *Türkler, Türkiye ve İslam*, 56; Melikoff, *Hacı Bektaş: Efsaneden Gerçeğe*, 198.

In fourteenth-century Ottoman society, religious life was largely represented by *abdals*, while groups distinguished by their warrior identity were known as *gazis*. Among both circles, a widespread devotion to Hacı Bektaş Veli can be observed. Nevertheless, it appears that Bektashism had not yet developed into a fully institutionalized Sufi order during this period. Therefore, it is difficult to speak of a fully organized and institutionalized order known specifically under the name “Bektashi” at this stage.

Within this context, it can be argued that the Sufi path formed around Hacı Bektaş Veli and the associated dervish circles became more clearly defined particularly during the fifteenth century, when communities of dervishes known as Bektashis began to emerge. Indeed, some sources indicate that from the beginning of this century onward, the term “Bektashi” began to be used to refer to a particular spiritual path and its followers.³⁶

As the institutionalization process of Bektashism advanced, certain internal differentiations also emerged within the order. In this context, the Babagan and Çelebi branches represent one of the most significant examples of the diversity and flexibility within the internal structure of Bektashism. This distinction was not merely an administrative difference; rather, it reflected two distinct models in terms of the source of authority, forms of representation, and social functions.³⁷

Within this framework, the Babagan branch represents an organizational model centered primarily around the *dergâh* and based on merit. In this structure, authority is not derived from lineage, but rather from processes of training, spiritual guidance, and service within the order, as well as from the concept of being a “child of the

path” (*yol evladi*). With Balım Sultan, the practice of *mücerred* -that is, celibate dervishhood- also emerged.³⁸ The Babagans established a structure through *dergâhs* that organized rituals, trained dervishes, and ensured the systematic transmission of Bektashi teachings. In this respect, the Babagan branch represented the institutional and disciplined dimension of Bektashism and became particularly influential among urban communities and within military structures. Existing research suggests that the Babagan branch developed relatively closer relations with the Ottoman state apparatus.

The relationship established especially with the Janissary Corps increased the influence of the Babagan branch, and Bektashi *dergâhs* became centers where military discipline and Sufi teachings were brought together. Through the reforms developed under the leadership of Balım Sultan, this structure gained greater visibility and a more institutional character in the eyes of the state.³⁹

In contrast, the Çelebi branch represented a more traditional understanding of authority, shaped around families believed to be descendants of Hacı Bektaş Veli. In this structure, legitimacy was based not on institutional hierarchy but rather on lineage and historical legacy. The Çelebis were particularly influential among local communities in Anatolia and derived their legitimacy from the belief that they descended from Hacı Bektaş Veli. In this way, they assumed a role in maintaining the continuity of Bektashism at the popular level.⁴⁰ However, within the Bektashi order that became institutionalized during the period of Balım Sultan, it appears that the Çelebis did not assume a decisive role in the organizational structure of the order.⁴¹

From this perspective, the Babagan–Çelebi distinction can be understood within a broader

³⁶ Rıza Yıldırım, “‘Bektaşî Kime Derler?’ Bektaşî Kavramının Kapsamı ve Sınırları Üzerine Tarihsel Bir Analiz Denemesi”, 75-77.

³⁷ Ethem Ruhi Fırlı, *Türkiye’de Alevilik, Bektaşilik*, 189-196; Melikoff, *Hacı Bektaş: Efsaneden Gerçeğe*, 222-223.

³⁸ Melikoff, *Hacı Bektaş: Efsaneden Gerçeğe*, 274.

³⁹ Yıldırım, “‘Bektaşî Kime Derler?’ Bektaşî Kavramının Kapsamı ve Sınırları Üzerine Tarihsel Bir Analiz

Denemesi”, 81-82; Abdülkadir Sezgin, *Sosyolojik Açısından Alevilik-Bektaşilik*, 48-50; Melikoff, *Hacı Bektaş: Efsaneden Gerçeğe*, 271.

⁴⁰ İnalcık, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu: Klâsik Çağ (1300-1600)*, 203; İlyas Üzüm, *Tarihsel ve Kültürel Boyutlarıyla Alevilik*, 53-54; Ali Yaman, *Alevilik & Kızılbaşlık Tarihi*, 108-109.

⁴¹ Yıldırım, “‘Bektaşî Kime Derler’”, 93.

framework as reflecting a balance between “centralization” and “localization.” In general terms, the Babagan branch represented a more centralized and institutional structure, whereas the Çelebi branch maintained stronger local and traditional ties. Through this dual structure, Bektashism was able to sustain both its relationship with the state and its legitimacy among popular communities. Indeed, while the Babagan branch provided connections with military and bureaucratic circles, the Çelebi branch maintained links with rural and traditional segments of society.⁴²

Thus, this differentiation led not to an absolute unity within the order, but rather to the emergence of a form of regulated diversity. Although this situation occasionally resulted in debates over authority, in the long term it facilitated the continuation of Bektashism across different geographical regions. In this respect, the Babagan–Çelebi distinction can be regarded as a structural element that supported the historical continuity of Bektashism.

2.3. The Period of Bayezid II and the Role of Balım Sultan

The *teke* tradition incorporated the profound interpretations of Sufi thought that developed in thirteenth-century Anatolia into the understanding of belief and social order shaped within the framework of Islamic theology (*kalām*) and jurisprudence (*fiqh*). During this period, the Sufi perspectives represented by figures such as Mevlânâ Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, Hacı Bektaş Veli, Yunus Emre, and Hacı Bayram Veli introduced a new dimension to religious thought.

In this way, the aspects of Islam that were primarily shaped around legal principles and external practices were complemented by Sufism’s more comprehensive and tolerance-based approach, which placed the inner world of the individual at the center. This interaction established a balance between these two

dimensions while simultaneously contributing to intellectual and spiritual enrichment.⁴³

As one of the concrete manifestations of this Sufi enrichment, Bektashism emerged in Anatolia and soon developed into an influential movement that reached broad segments of society. Becoming one of the most widespread Sufi formations among the people over time, Bektashism incorporated various dervish groups, including the Babais, Abdals, and Qalandaris, and became particularly influential among Turkmen communities. Both nomadic Turkmen groups and former Christian settlements played significant roles in the development of Bektashism. During the Ottoman period, the order first spread among Turkmen communities and later gained greater influence through its relationship with the Janissary Corps. Adopted by the Janissaries from the fifteenth century onward, Bektashism became influential among both military and civilian circles. The fact that Janissaries of *devshirme*⁴⁴ origin were inclined toward a religious understanding closer to popular beliefs also facilitated this acceptance. Over time, a strong relationship developed between Bektashism and the Janissary Corps, and leaders of the order assumed influential roles within the corps. Nevertheless, Bektashism continued to maintain its influence among nomadic and semi-nomadic Turkmen communities and gradually replaced Babaism, which had previously been influential among these groups.⁴⁵

The ability of Bektashism to establish such a broad social base made the functions performed by Sufi orders within Ottoman society more visible. In Ottoman society, Sufi orders functioned not merely as spaces of worship or mystical practice, but also as institutional structures where social norms were produced, moral education was provided, and individual orientations were shaped. In this sense, Sufi orders contributed to the continuity of the social fabric by offering spiritual guidance and models of ethical conduct to different segments of

⁴² Sezgin, *Sosyolojik Açıdan Alevilik-Bektaşilik*, 48-59; Krisztina Kehl-Bodrogi, *Kızılbaşlar/Aleviler*, 40-45.

⁴³ Ocak, *Türkler, Türkiye ve İslam*, 64.

⁴⁴ Orhan Sakin, *Yeniçeri Ocağı*, 163-181.

⁴⁵ İnalçık, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu: Klâsik Çağ (1300-1600)*, 201-202; Yıldırım, “Bektaşî Kime Derler?”, 75.

society.⁴⁶ In particular, the Bektashi order created a sphere in which individual moral formation and the production of social norms were carried out simultaneously through rituals, symbolic practices, hagiographical narratives, and forms of *dhikr*. This process not only supported individual spiritual development but also assumed a role in shaping the social codes of Ottoman society. Within this framework, Sufi orders interacted with state-generated normative discourses and contributed to the reproduction of social stability.⁴⁷

The social and spiritual functions of Sufi orders gradually transformed them into institutions with which the state also engaged. The recognition of Sufi leaders by the state and the provision of support through endowed foundations (*waqf*) demonstrate the institutional character of this relationship.⁴⁸ While the state provided Sufi orders with a certain degree of support and space for activity, these orders contributed to social cohesion, moral orientation, and the maintenance of institutional order. This situation demonstrates that the state-Sufi order relationship in the Ottoman context was not merely hierarchical, but also characterized by mutual interaction.⁴⁹

One of the periods in which this mutual interaction can be observed most clearly was the reign of Bayezid II (1481-1512). During this period, the Ottoman administration placed its relations with Sufi institutions on a more systematic basis in order to strengthen central authority and maintain social order.⁵⁰ Through its relations with Balım Sultan and the Hacı Bektaş Dergâh, Bektashism gained a more visible and legitimate position both socially and institutionally.⁵¹

This approach was not limited to a theoretical preference but was also reflected in various administrative and social practices. The

integration of Bektashi centers into state ceremonies, their support through *waqf* arrangements, and the strengthening of the order's institutional structure were among the significant indicators of this process. Furthermore, the state reinforced social and bureaucratic mechanisms of supervision in regions where Sufi orders were influential. This enabled Sufi orders to assume an intermediary role in the transmission of state policies at the local level.⁵²

Indeed, one of the most concrete outcomes of these policies can be observed in the institutionalization process of Bektashism. Ottoman sources and the Bektashi tradition indicate that the Janissary Corps was spiritually associated with Hacı Bektaş Veli. Within this framework, the reign of Bayezid II can be regarded as a critical phase during which Bektashism began to acquire an institutional identity and its relations with the state became more clearly defined.

Under the leadership of Balım Sultan, who was appointed as the head of the *dergâh* at the request of Bayezid II, Bektashism moved away from the dispersed and semi-nomadic dervish practices of the earlier period and developed into a more organized, hierarchical structure centered around the *dergâh*. This transformation was not merely organizational; it also represented a redefinition of the order's identity. Thus, Bektashism became an institutionalized Sufi order with established rules, ritual practices (*erkân*), and structures of authority.⁵³

Balım Sultan, regarded as the second spiritual master (*Pîr-i Sâni*) of Bektashism, introduced regulations to the order's ritual and *erkân* practices. The structure he systematized within a framework of discipline not only facilitated the expansion of the order but also ensured its

⁴⁶ Gündüz, *Osmanlılarda Devlet-Tekke İlişkileri*, 85-124.

⁴⁷ Hüseyin Özcan, *Hacı Bektaş Veli*, 71-92; Ocak, "Bektaşiyye", 471-473.

⁴⁸ Ocak, *Türkiye, Türkler ve İslam*, 84-87; Melikoff, *Uyur İdik Uyardılar*, 197-199, 208.

⁴⁹ Fahri Maden, "Yeniçerilik-Bektaşilik İlişkileri ve Yeniçeri İsyanlarında Bektaşiler", 235-244.

⁵⁰ Saim Savaş, *XVI. Asırda Anadolu'da Alevilik*, 147-151.

⁵¹ İnalçık, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu: Klâsik Çağ (1300-1600)*, 206; Fırlı, *Türkiye'de Alevilik, Bektaşilik*, 196-205.

⁵² Ocak, "Bektaşiyye", 475-477; İnalçık, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu: Klâsik Çağ (1300-1600)*, 205; Yıldırım, "Bektaş Kime Derler?", 79-81.

⁵³ Ocak, "Bektaşiyye", 461; Melikoff, *Hacı Bektaş: Efsaneden Gerçeğe*, 223.

internal cohesion and continuity. In this respect, Balım Sultan appears to have assumed a role not as the “founder” of Bektashism, but rather as its “institutionalizer”.⁵⁴ During this process, the relationship between Bektashism and the Ottoman state structure also acquired a more defined and institutional character. In particular, the connection established with the Janissary Corps was placed on a more systematic basis during the period of Balım Sultan. Bektashi *dergâhs* became not only places where Janissaries received religious instruction, but also centers where the spiritual dimension of their military identity was shaped. This development contributed to the recognition of Bektashism within the Ottoman military system and enabled it to become an institution acknowledged by the state.⁵⁵

Balım Sultan’s reforms also clarified the hierarchy and division of responsibilities within the order. Relations among *dergâhs* were regulated, and the functions of titles such as *şeyh*, *baba*, and *derviş* became more clearly defined. By incorporating the principle of *mücerredlik erkâm* (the practice of celibacy) into this structure, Balım Sultan enabled the order to be organized around a centralized authority and replaced its previously dispersed character with a more regulated system. In this context, Bektashism moved away from the flexible and locally oriented structure of the earlier period and acquired a more institutionalized and enduring identity.⁵⁶

Some researchers argue that the institutionalization process of Bektashism during the reign of Bayezid II was related to the policies developed by the central authority in response to increasing Safavid influence and Shi’i propaganda in Anatolia. Within this framework, the movement of Bektashism toward a more controlled and centralized structure can be understood as being connected to the state’s integrative policies. Therefore, the period of

Bayezid II and the leadership of Balım Sultan represent one of the most critical turning points in the historical development of Bektashism. During this process, the order transformed from a dispersed structure based on oral tradition into an institutional, hierarchical organization interacting with the state. This transformation enabled Bektashism to establish a lasting position both within Ottoman social structure and within the military system.

3. The Janissary Corps and Its Spiritual Identity

The interaction between the state, Sufi orders, and military institutions in the Ottoman Empire constituted one of the fundamental structural dynamics of the classical period. Within this framework, the relationship between the Bektashi order and the Janissary Corps represents a significant example illustrating the harmonious functioning of the Ottoman political and social system. This relationship was shaped not only as an element of military discipline, but also as part of the functions attributed by the state to Sufi orders, the construction of social norms, and institutional organization.⁵⁷

From the fifteenth century onward, Bektashism established a close relationship with the Janissary Corps, becoming influential within the military structure, and the connection between the Janissaries and the Bektashi order came to be officially recognized by the state. The fact that Janissaries of devshirme origin received Turkish language and Islamic education in Anatolia directed them toward a religious orientation that was more open to popular beliefs rather than exclusively shaped by the official Sunni framework. This situation facilitated the acceptance of Bektashism within the corps. From the late sixteenth century onward, this relationship gained an institutional character with the formal recognition of Hacı Bektaş Veli as the spiritual patron (*pîr*) of the Janissaries. The

⁵⁴ Ocak, “Bektaşîyye”, 461-462, 470; Sezgin, *Sosyolojik Açısından Alevilik-Bektaşîlik*, 49.

⁵⁵ Gündüz, *Osmanlılarda Devlet-Tekke İlişkileri*, 105-106; Ali Yaman, *Alevilik & Kızılbaşlık Tarihi*, 78-79, 126, 199; Ahmet Elibol, “Yeniçeriler ve İktidar Bağlamında Osmanlı Sisteminin Dönüşümü”, 28-30.

⁵⁶ Melikoff, *Hacı Bektaş: Efsaneden Gerçeğe*, 217-222; Ocak, “Bektaşîyye”, 470-471.

⁵⁷ Melikoff, *Hacı Bektaş: Efsaneden Gerçeğe*, 144, 154, 215-217, 224.

continuous presence of Bektashi *babas* within the corps and the direct relations established between the leaders of the order and the Janissary organization further strengthened the connection between the two structures. Indeed, the relationship between Bektashism and the Janissary Corps became so deeply integrated over time that the Janissary organization even assumed a decisive role in the appointment processes of Bektashi leaders.⁵⁸

The Ottoman Empire's policy, particularly during the sixteenth century, of preventing the spread of Safavid influence among Turkmen communities in Anatolia was one of the significant factors that accelerated the institutionalization process of Bektashism. With the aim of integrating Turkmen groups with heterodox tendencies into the central authority, the Ottoman administration sought to transform Bektashism into a more organized and controllable structure.

In this process, the appointment of Balım Sultan as the head of the order constituted a significant turning point; Bektashism acquired a more disciplined, hierarchical, and institutional character. Thus, Bektashism became not only a Sufi movement but also one of the mechanisms through which the Ottoman state pursued social integration and political regulation. The Janissary Corps, within the military structure of the Ottoman Empire, stood out not merely as a unit responsible for military duties but also as a comprehensive institution that shaped the individual and collective identities of its members. The members of the corps were trained not only in military discipline and technical skills but also within a particular system of beliefs and values. Through this process, both individual moral development and the construction of a collective identity were achieved. The spiritual identity of the Janissary Corps was shaped particularly under the guidance of the Bektashi order and the influence of Sufi

teachings. Within this framework, values such as loyalty, solidarity, and justice became prominent among its members.⁵⁹

3.1. The Institutional and Disciplinary Structure of the Janissary Corps

The Janissary Corps was organized within a hierarchical and disciplined structure as one of the most important components of the Ottoman Empire's central military organization. Through its rank system, division of duties, and training mechanisms, members of the corps were educated and prepared within a framework of established rules, thereby ensuring the continuity of military order. From its foundation onward, the corps was based on a strict understanding of discipline, aiming not only to improve the military skills of its members but also to strengthen their loyalty to state service. The training provided within this system contributed not only to the development of physical and technical competencies but also to the cultivation of a sense of moral responsibility.⁶⁰

The human resources of the Janissary Corps were largely provided through the *devshirme* system. Children recruited through the *devshirme* method were initially trained in the *Acemi Oğlanlar Ocağı* (Recruit Training Corps), where they received both military and cultural education before being assigned to various positions according to their abilities. This training process played an important role in enabling Janissaries to adapt to the Ottoman state order and internalize the culture of the corps. In this way, the corps functioned as an institutional training mechanism that provided its members with a shared identity.⁶¹

Within the organizational structure of the corps, soldiers were arranged into units known as *orta*. Each *orta* was administered within a specific hierarchy, and discipline was maintained through officials such as the *çorbacı*, *odabaşı*, and other

⁵⁸ İnalçık, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu: Klâsik Çağ (1300-1600)*, 202; Godfrey Goodwin, *Yeniçeriler*, 157.

⁵⁹ İnalçık, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu: Klâsik Çağ (1300-1600)*, 205; Kibar Bal, "Tarihsel Süreç İçerisinde Bektaşiliğin Yeniçeriler İçerisinde Aldığı Şekil", 182-183.

⁶⁰ Ahmet Yüksel, "Yeniçeri Ocağı, Bozulma ve Casusluk", 272; Eğri, "Yeniçeri Ocağı'nın Manevi Eğitimi ve Bektaşilik", 114-117.

⁶¹ Yusuf Halaçoğlu, *XIV-XVII. Yüzyıllarda Osmanlılarda Devlet teşkilatı ve Sosyal Yapı*, 36-44.

appointed officers. At the highest level stood the Janissary Agha (*Yeniçeri Ağası*), who exercised administrative authority over the corps. This organizational model enabled the chain of command to function effectively and contributed to the long-term stability of the Ottoman military system. Within the 94th *Cemaat Ortası* of the corps, one of the Bektashi *babas* served as the representative of Hacı Bektaş Veli.⁶²

Promotion and the distribution of responsibilities within the Janissary Corps were carried out according to established rules. Members of the corps could advance through various ranks based on their length of service, experience, and performance in their assigned duties. This system contributed to the preservation of the hierarchical order while also functioning as a factor that strengthened members' sense of institutional belonging. Through the promotion system, duties and responsibilities within the corps were allocated in an organized manner, thereby ensuring continuity in the functioning of the military organization.⁶³

The Janissary Corps became one of the most important pillars of the Ottoman central administration due to its position among the *Kapıkulu* troops, which were directly attached to the sultan. The fact that their salaries were paid from the state treasury and that they were administratively dependent on the central authority constituted some of the main characteristics distinguishing the Janissaries from provincial military forces. This arrangement contributed to the centralization of the Ottoman Empire's military power and functioned as a significant element supporting the authority of the sultan.⁶⁴

Within the Janissary Corps, discipline was not applied solely to maintain order on the battlefield; it also became a fundamental principle shaping the daily lives of the corps members. During the

early periods, restrictions on Janissaries' marriage, limitations on their involvement in trade, and their residence within the barracks system were intended to ensure their complete dedication to military duties. Members of the corps were required to comply with established regulations, and violations were met with various forms of disciplinary action. Through these practices, the Janissary Corps maintained its position for a long period as one of the most disciplined and organized components of the Ottoman military system.⁶⁵

The disciplinary and supervisory mechanisms implemented within the corps created a strong sense of belonging and loyalty among its members. While the regular performance of duties was supported by the hierarchical structure, a collective identity was constructed through communal living arrangements, training practices, and institutional traditions. The Janissaries viewed themselves not merely as members of a military unit, but also as part of a community united around shared values.

In this respect, the Janissary Corps functioned not only as an institution where military duties were carried out, but also as a structure that provided its members with a sense of belonging and supported institutional continuity.⁶⁶

3.2. The Janissary–Bektashi Interaction: Moral Education

The institutional and disciplinary structure established within the Janissary Corps was complemented by the spiritual and moral framework provided by Bektashism. Bektashism, which was associated with heterodox Turkmen dervish circles active in Anatolia during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and particularly with the tradition of the Abdals of Rum, gradually developed into an institutionalized Sufi tradition through the contributions of figures such as Abdal Musa and

⁶² Goodwin, *Yeniçeriler*, 41; Sakin, *Yeniçeri Ocağı*, 54.

⁶³ Goodwin, *Yeniçeriler*, 88-90; Sakin, *Yeniçeri Ocağı*, 38-44; 205-292.

⁶⁴ Hakan Akküz, "Yeniçağda Osmanlı Devleti'nde Yeniçerilerin Siyasal ve Sosyal Etkinliği (Fatih, Bayezid, Yavuz Sultan Selim, Kanuni Sultan Süleyman Dönemleri)", 665-666; Sakin, *Yeniçeri Ocağı*, 44-46.

⁶⁵ Akküz, "Yeniçağda Osmanlı Devleti'nde Yeniçerilerin Siyasal ve Sosyal Etkinliği", 671; Sakin, *Yeniçeri Ocağı*, 211-212.

⁶⁶ Eğri, "Yeniçeri Ocağı'nın Manevi Eğitimi ve Bektaşılık", 117-122.

Kaygusuz Abdal. During the Ottoman period, Bektashism gained an influential position in military and social life, particularly through its relationship with the Janissary Corps. The values promoted by the order shaped the religious life, social relations, and understanding of duty among members of the corps.

The establishment of the Janissary Corps is generally associated with the reign of Murad I. Young men recruited into the corps through the devshirme system underwent not only military training but also religious and cultural education. During this process, the respect shown toward Hacı Bektaş Veli and the spiritual framework provided by the Bektashi tradition contributed to the development of a strong sense of belonging among the Janissaries. Indeed, historical sources refer to the Janissary Corps by various names associated with Bektashism, such as *Ocağ-ı Bektaşîyan*, *Gürûh-ı Bektaşîye*, *Zümre-i Bektaşîyan*, and *taife-i Bektaşîyye*.⁶⁷

In its early period, the Janissary Corps was governed by strict rules and regulations. The Janissaries were recruited from children selected through the devshirme system; they devoted themselves exclusively to military service, lived in their own barracks, did not grow beards, and were not permitted to marry. Known for their strict obedience to their commanders, these soldiers constituted one of the most elite military formations within the *Hassa* army, namely the *Kapıkulu* infantry forces attached to the sultan's household. They held a privileged status as soldiers who received regular salaries, known as *ulûfe*, from the state treasury.⁶⁸ Although it is known that some members of the corps belonged to other Sufi orders, Bektashism represented an inclusive tradition through its tolerant and understanding approach toward different religious and spiritual affiliations, as well as through its emphasis on martial spirit and brotherhood. The Janissaries were distinguished

not only by their ability to perform religious practices and create a spiritual atmosphere through collective prayers, but also by their proficiency in the use of the sword.⁶⁹ Over time, developments such as the increasing permission for marriage among Janissaries, the introduction of the *kuloğlu* system, and the abandonment of the devshirme system weakened the traditional disciplinary structure of the corps. This process constituted one of the factors contributing to the institutional transformation of the Janissary Corps.⁷⁰

Bektashism gained an important position in military and social life during the Ottoman period, particularly through its close relationship with the Janissary Corps. The order provided members of the corps with a shared spiritual framework of belonging and contributed to the strengthening of values such as unity, solidarity, and loyalty. The Bektashi tradition, which became widespread among the Janissaries, did not remain merely a religious and Sufi formation; it also became one of the elements that shaped the culture of the corps. Therefore, the relationship between Bektashism and the Janissary Corps is regarded as one of the most remarkable examples of interaction between the Ottoman military organization and Sufi institutions.⁷¹

This normative structure played a decisive role in regulating social relations within the corps and in the internalization of discipline. The Janissaries' affiliation with the Bektashi order went beyond a superficial sense of belonging. Indeed, the *Janissary Code* (*Kavanin-i Yeniçeriyân*) clearly demonstrates that the rules governing the conduct of members within their chambers and other spaces were based on the practices followed by the dervishes of Hacı Bektaş Veli. Within this framework, fundamental principles such as maintaining a celibate (*mücerred*) way of life and refraining from growing a beard before reaching full spiritual maturity were emphasized.⁷² The

⁶⁷ Uzunçarşılı, *Osmanlı Devlet Teşkilatından Kapıkulu Ocakları I*, 150; Sakin, *Yeniçeri Ocağı*, 25, 54-56.

⁶⁸ Sermet Muhtar Alus, *Yeniçeriler ve Eski Türk Ordusu*, 8-10.

⁶⁹ Sakin, *Yeniçeri Ocağı*, 56-59.

⁷⁰ Sakin, *Yeniçeri Ocağı*, 60-130.

⁷¹ Maden, "Yeniçerilik-Bektaşîlik İlişkileri ve Yeniçeri İsyanlarında Bektaşîler", 173-202; Abdulkasım Gül, "Bir Efsanenin Gücü: Yeniçeri-Bektaşîlik Münasebetinin Tarihî Gelişiminin İncelenmesi", 107-163.

⁷² Erdal Küçükyalçın, *Turna'nın Kalbi: Yeniçeri Yoldaşlığı ve Bektaşîlik*, 100-101.

acceptance of Hacı Bektaş Veli as the “spiritual patron of the corps” (*ocak pîri*) among the Janissaries strengthened the symbolic dimension of the relationship between Bektashism and the military structure. The Janissaries regarded themselves as the “children of Hacı Bektaş,” while the *gûlbangs* (ritual prayers), invocations, and various ceremonies performed within the corps were shaped according to Bektashi traditions. This demonstrates that military discipline was reinforced not only through legal and administrative regulations but also through shared spiritual belonging and Sufi symbols.

In Bektashism, which is based on the tradition of Hacı Bektaş Veli, the concept of the “path” (*yol*) is defined within the framework of certain moral and Sufi principles. The work entitled *Sual ve Cevabnâme* (Book of Questions and Answers), as transmitted by John Kingsley Birge, provides insight into how this path was understood. In this text, the question-and-answer method functions as a criterion for determining whether an individual is truly a Bektashi. The initiates (*talips*) are expected to understand and internalize the concepts expressed through the answers to these questions. In this context, Bektashism is presented not merely as a system based on external acts of worship, but as a spiritual path that gains meaning through the purification of one’s morality, attachment to the spiritual guide (*mürşid*), and attainment of inner maturity.⁷³ At the center of this path lies the ceremony of *ikrar* (declaration of commitment). Through the *ikrar* given at the *erenler meydanı* (assembly place of the saints), the initiate symbolically leaves behind the former self and experiences a spiritual rebirth. In this process, the individual seeks to progress through the stages extending from *sharia* (*seriat*) toward ultimate truth (*hakikat*) and to reach the essence of existence. The understanding summarized in the expression “My father is the sky, my mother is the earth” (*Babam gök, anam toprak*) reflects the idea of human beings integrating with truth as universal beings. Thus, Bektashism developed as a Sufi path centered on

knowing one’s own essence and comprehending the unity of existence.

As understood from the questions and answers, the fundamental principles of this path include *irfan* (spiritual wisdom/*marifet*), generosity, loyalty, certainty of faith (*yakîn*), contemplation (*tefekküür*), and knowing the Divine (*Hakk*) within one’s own essence. The understanding of worship within this framework is symbolic: prayer (*namaz*) is interpreted as the process of human perfection; ablution (*abdest*) as purification from negative qualities; fasting (*oruç*) as protecting the tongue from harmful speech; pilgrimage (*hac*) as reaching the heart of the spiritual guide; and almsgiving (*zekât*) as abandoning attachment to worldly possessions. This approach places inner (*bâtınî*) purification at the center rather than focusing primarily on the external (*zâhirî*) forms of religious practice.

Bektashi teaching is explained through the system of the “Four Gates and Forty Stations” (*Dört Kapı Kırk Makam*). The Gate of *Sharia* (*Şeriat Kapısı*) involves adherence to religious principles and the fulfillment of basic acts of worship. The Gate of the *Tariqa* (*Tarikat Kapısı*) represents attachment to the spiritual guide, discipline of the ego (*nafs*), and advancement through service. The Gate of *Marifa* (*Marifet Kapısı*) encompasses inner stages of maturity, including proper conduct (*edep*), patience, knowledge, and self-knowledge. The Gate of *Truth* (*Hakikat Kapısı*) refers to the realization of unity with all existence, humility, love, and ultimately reaching the Divine (*Hakk*). The person who passes through these four gates gradually attains spiritual maturity and realizes the essence of the Bektashi path.⁷⁴

During the process of a Janissary’s initiation into Bektashism, the initiate (*talip*) was guided to a spiritual master (*mürşid*) through a mentor and entered the spiritual path by making a declaration of commitment (*ikrar*). During this process, the *mürşid* whispered expressions of repentance and forgiveness into the initiate’s ear, inviting him to purify himself from his past shortcomings. The initiate was then instructed to affirm belief in God (*Allah*), Prophet Muhammad, Ali, and the

⁷³ Küçükyağcı, *Turna’nın Kalbi*, 116-117.

⁷⁴ Küçükyağcı, *Turna’nın Kalbi*, 116-119.

Twelve Imams. It was emphasized that his true spiritual guide was Ali, while his guide in the worldly sense was Muhammad. In this way, the initiate became attached not only to a Sufi order but also to a particular system of belief and morality.

At the foundation of this path lies a strong ethical framework. The initiate was expected not to lie, to avoid forbidden acts, and to refrain from backbiting. He was required to control his desires, avoid excessive attachment to sensual pleasures, and conduct himself according to the principle of “mastering one’s hand, one’s loins, and one’s tongue” (*eline, beline, diline sahip olmak*). Avoiding arrogance, resentment, and envy; concealing the faults of others; and refraining from speaking about matters of which one has no knowledge were among the essential elements of this moral discipline. The initiate was advised not to pursue what did not rightfully belong to him, not to undertake matters beyond his capacity, and not to speak where his words carried no authority.

Furthermore, the initiate was expected to approach all circumstances with awareness and reflection, to speak with gentleness, and to show affection toward the young and respect toward elders. Beyond these principles, sincerity in one’s *ikrar*, knowing the Divine (*Hakk*) within one’s own essence, and striving to comprehend the mysteries of the saints (*erenler*) were considered essential. These principles demonstrate that the Bektashi path was not limited merely to ritual practices; rather, it represented a Sufi understanding aimed at disciplining the inner self and cultivating moral maturity.⁷⁵

Nevertheless, the influence of Bektashism on the Janissary Corps was not limited only to metaphysical and theological elements. The values promoted by the order -such as honesty, loyalty, brotherhood, generosity, humility, and the principle of “mastering one’s hand, one’s loins, and one’s tongue”- became fundamental moral norms regulating the daily conduct of Janissaries. Thus, Bektashism provided members

of the corps not only with a belief system that offered meaning and motivation on the battlefield, but also with a form of moral education that shaped individual character.

In this way, Bektashism shaped the military identity of the Janissaries within a moral and spiritual framework, creating a strong sense of belonging among members of the corps through rituals, symbols, and educational practices. However, with the abolition of the Janissary Corps in 1826, the institutional foundation of this relationship was largely eliminated, and Bektashism faced a prolonged process of suppression and dissolution. In this context, the system of beliefs and values adopted by the members of the corps requires an evaluation that considers both the rational (*kalam*) and intuitive (*Sıfı*) dimensions of Islamic thought.

3.3. Spiritual Identity: A Theological and Sufi Evaluation

The relationship between the Janissary Corps and Bektashism cannot be adequately explained solely through its historical and institutional dimensions. The spiritual identity adopted by the members of the corps was constructed upon a particular system of belief and moral understanding. Therefore, in order to better understand the Janissary–Bektashi relationship, it is necessary to consider both the theological assumptions (*kalam*) and Sufi interpretations found within the Bektashi tradition. In this section, the concept of “spiritual identity” will be examined within the framework of belief and morality.

The official affiliation of the Ottoman army with the Bektashi Lodge was not merely an institutional arrangement. When considering the influence of these lodges in Anatolia, their functions that corresponded with the ideology of *ghaza*, and their flexible and inclusive structures that facilitated the integration of devshirme-origin elements into Islam, this relationship appears to have been rooted in a multilayered socio-religious and ideological foundation.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Küçükyağcı, *Turna’nın Kalbi*, 126-127.

⁷⁶ Oktay Yıldırım, *Mehmetçik: Tarihsel ve İdeolojik Kökeni*, 59, 66, 114-115.

In this sense, the spiritual identity of the Janissary Corps was not limited to ritual practices and symbolic expressions; rather, it was shaped within a broader framework where theological beliefs and Sufi ethical principles intersected. Therefore, understanding the belief system and values embraced by the Janissaries requires an examination of both dimensions of Islamic thought: the rational framework represented by *kalām* and the experiential and inward-oriented perspective represented by Sufism.

In certain Bektashi interpretations, human existence is understood in relation to an eternal connection with the divine reality. Within this framework, human beings are viewed as manifestations of divine truth, and the spiritual journey is interpreted as a process of discovering this inner reality. Accordingly, the concept of *ikrar* should not be understood merely as a declaration of faith; rather, it represents a commitment to a spiritual path and a process of moral transformation. The concept of the *Assembly of Alast* (*Elest bezmi*) is interpreted as a symbolic expression of the primordial relationship between God and humanity, while the notion of *wahdat* (unity) provides a metaphysical framework for understanding the human being's relationship with existence and ultimate reality.⁷⁷ Within this interpretation, the idea that "everything returns to its origin" frames death as the completion of the cycle of existence. The soul, which has departed from the divine source through the process of descent (*kaws-i nuzûl*), is understood to return to that source through the process of ascent (*kaws-i urûş*). In this perspective, the body is regarded as a temporary

vehicle, while the individual self is interpreted as a limited state of consciousness that creates the perception of separation from God.⁷⁸ Such an understanding reflects an ontological view centered on the reunion of the human being with the divine essence and presents existence as a continuous journey from separation to unity.

Some interpretations within the Bektashi tradition concerning concepts such as *wahdat* (unity), *devran* (cosmic cycle), transmigration of souls (*tanasukh*), and the metaphysical intervention of the saints (*erenler*) have been regarded as controversial from the perspective of classical Sunni theology.⁷⁹ In Sunni *kalām*, the idea of the soul being reincarnated into another body after death is rejected; instead, it is maintained that human beings experience a single earthly life followed by the hereafter. By contrast, Bektashi interpretations have often approached such concepts through a symbolic and mystical framework rather than a literal theological understanding.

This distinction demonstrates that the spiritual identity developed within the Janissary Corps was not limited to military belonging alone; it was also shaped by a distinctive religious worldview influenced by diverse interpretations of Islam and Sufi thought. Concepts such as *wahdat*, *devran*, transformation of form (*don değıştirme*), and the culture of the saints (*erenler*) do not fully correspond with certain fundamental assumptions of classical Sunni theology. Nevertheless, within the Bektashi tradition, these concepts were frequently interpreted through symbolic and mystical categories, allowing questions of belief and existence to be expressed

⁷⁷ Melikoff, *Hacı Bektaş: Efsaneden Gerçeğe*, 166, 183, 281-282.

⁷⁸ Küçükyalçın, *Turna'nın Kalbi*, 214; Melikoff, *Uyur İdik Uyardılar*, 111, 120.

⁷⁹ "The Saints of Khorasan said: 'If you are truly the secret of the Shah, then there must be signs of him upon you. Show them to us so that we may see, confirm, and believe.' One of the signs of Hazrat Ali was this: in the center of his blessed palm, there was a beautiful green mark. Hacı Bektaş-ı Velî opened his blessed hand and showed it to them; they saw that there was indeed a beautiful green mark in the center of his palm. They said that the Commander of the Believers, Ali, also had a beautiful green mark upon his blessed forehead. Hacı Bektaş-ı Velî then uncovered

his forehead and showed it to them, and they saw a green, luminous mark there as well. All of them, the dervishes among dervishes, apologized for their doubt and said: 'A miracle can only be like this.' They submitted and accepted." See Abdülbaki Gölpınarlı (ed.), *Manâkıb-ı Hacı Bektaş-ı Velî: Vilâyetnâme*, 7; "Unable to object in the face of what they had witnessed, the saints understood that he was truly the secret of Hazrat Ali; that is, they realized that Hazrat Ali lived in the body of Hacı Bektaş-ı Velî, and they asked for forgiveness". See Ahmet Yaşar Ocak, *Alevî ve Bektaşî İnançlarının İslâm Öncesi Temelleri: Bektaşî Menâkıbnâmelerinde İslâm Öncesi İnanç Motifleri*, 185; Hatice Mut, Süleyman Akkuş, "Bir Bektaşî Dedebabası Bedri Noyan'a Göre Zâhir Bâtın İlişkisi", 133-158.

through the language of spiritual experience rather than solely through theological debate.

Within certain Bektashi interpretations, the concept of *dem* (*an-ı dāim*, the eternal present) refers to a cyclical understanding of time in which past and future lose their absolute distinction and all existence is perceived within a single continuous moment. According to this perspective, time is not understood as a linear progression but as a circular movement expressed through the concept of *devran*. This metaphysical framework has been associated with ideas such as the reappearance of saints, the transformation of forms (*don değıştirme*), and interpretations related to transmigration (*tanasukub*). Within this symbolic worldview, death is understood not as an absolute disappearance but as a transformation of the physical form (*kalp*).⁸⁰

Although some scholars have associated these interpretations with transmigration (*tanasukub*), it should also be noted that within Bektashi circles they were often understood in a symbolic and mystical framework rather than as a literal doctrine. On the other hand, the Janissaries invoked the *erenler* (saints) and the *rijāl al-ghayb* (the unseen spiritual beings) in their *gūlbang* prayers, viewing them as sources of metaphysical assistance and spiritual support. Sacred groups such as the Three, Five, Seven, and Forty, together with the saints (*awliyā*), were imagined as an unseen but potentially intervening spiritual force. Rather than being structured as a strict hierarchy, this understanding was based on a

functional and collective conception of sacred power.⁸¹ In this respect, such beliefs played an important role in shaping the Janissaries' perception of the metaphysical world and contributed to the formation of a spiritual framework through which they interpreted protection, authority, and collective identity. The concept of the "Forty" (*Kırklar*),⁸² which occupies an important place within the Bektashi tradition, refers to a group of saints whose identities are not fully known and who are believed to belong to the unseen realm (*ghayb*). Centered around the figure of 'Alī, this spiritual assembly represents the principle of unity and collective sacredness.

In the narrative of the Assembly of the Forty (*Kırklar Meclisi*), the acceptance of the Prophet Muhammad only after demonstrating humility is interpreted as an expression of the spiritual values underlying this tradition. The symbolic account in which an injury suffered by 'Alī is experienced collectively by the others reflects the idea of an ontological bond and spiritual unity among the members of this assembly. The statement "We are forty, yet our forty are one" expresses the principle of unity within multiplicity (*wahdat*), positioning 'Alī as the central and encompassing figure within this spiritual framework.⁸³ Thus, the narrative of the Forty can be understood as a symbolic expression of the Bektashi conception of unity, emphasizing the interconnectedness of existence and the spiritual meaning attributed to collective identity.

⁸⁰ Ocak, *Alevî ve Bektaşî İnançlarının İslâm Öncesi Temelleri: Bektaşî Menâkıbnâmelerinde İslâm Öncesi İnanç Motifleri*, 191-224; "Dem" (Persian: "breath," "moment," or "time"). In Bektashism, the term is also used to refer to rakı. Expressions such as *demlenmek*, *dem görmek*, or *dem çekmek* mean "to drink rakı". "Devir" means "turning", "cycle", or "period". The "Cycle of Existence" refers to the journey of the soul from its descent into the earthly realm until its return to divine reality. "Don" means "form," "appearance," or "garment." In the context of Bektashism, it refers to the different bodily forms through which the soul passes during its earthly journey. For example: "*Hudâ entered the form of Adam*" (meaning that God appeared in the form of Adam). Likewise, the expression "*Murtezâ entered a thousand forms and wandered through them*" refers to Ali Murtazâ, who is believed to have passed

through countless forms and completed the cycle of existence and return. In Bektashi lodges, alcoholic beverages are not consumed during the *Ayîn-i Cem* ceremony. Alcoholic drinks, such as rakı or wine, are consumed only at the communal feasts held after the ceremonies. See Melikoff, *Hacı Bektaş: Efsaneden Gerçeğe*, 272, 284.

⁸¹ Küçükyağcı, *Turna'nın Kalbi*, 216-218; Rıza Yıldırım, *Geleneksel Alevilik: İnanç, İbadet, Kurumlar, Toplumsal Yapı, Kolektif Bellek*, İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2018, 293.

⁸² Yıldırım, *Geleneksel Alevilik*, 147, 213, 325-336; Melikoff, *Hacı Bektaş: Efsaneden Gerçeğe*, 166, 199-200, 282.

⁸³ Küçükyağcı, *Turna'nın Kalbi*, 218-219; M. Tevfik Oytan, *Bektaşiliğin İçyüzü: Dibi, Köşesi, Yüzü ve Astarı Nedir?*, 105-106.

The mention of sacred groups such as the Three, Seven, and Forty in the Janissary *gülbang* prayers demonstrates the close relationship between the warrior identity of the Janissaries and the Bektashi metaphysical worldview. Within this framework, ‘Alī emerged as a central symbolic figure and was associated with the ideal of spiritual brotherhood represented through the Assembly of the Forty. Such beliefs contributed to the development of a spiritual identity in which the Janissaries perceived themselves as connected to ‘Alī and other sacred figures within the Bektashi tradition. This identification is also reflected in poetic expressions, where ‘Alī is portrayed as accompanying warriors and *ghāzīs* on the battlefield, symbolizing courage, loyalty, and divine support.⁸⁴ In this way, the military identity of the Janissaries became intertwined with the symbolic and spiritual framework of Bektashi tradition, providing their warrior ethos with a deeper religious and moral meaning.

Through the *gülbang* prayers recited before battle, the Janissaries came to perceive themselves not merely as soldiers, but as members of a spiritual community with a dervish-like identity. Facing the possibility of death, they understood themselves as individuals seeking divine approval and interpreted their struggle as being carried out in the name of God, the Prophet Muhammad, ‘Alī, the Twelve Imams, and Hacı Bektaş Veli. This understanding was closely associated with the Bektashi principle of *tawallā wa tabarrā*⁸⁵ (devotion to those regarded as righteous and rejection of those considered opposed to them), reflecting a clear sense of religious affiliation and spiritual commitment.⁸⁶

Within this worldview, death was not perceived as an absolute end, but rather as a threshold leading toward a higher state of existence. The Janissaries were believed to have regarded ‘Alī, symbolized by his sword *Zülfikār*, and the spiritual assemblies of the saints (*Üçler, Beşler, Yediler, Kırklar*) as sources of metaphysical

assistance during battle. If they died in combat, they were understood to attain divine vision, pass through the stages of the “Four Gates and Forty Stations” (*Dört Kapı Kırk Makam*), and reach the highest spiritual state of contemplation (*müşahade*).⁸⁷ In this framework, death was interpreted not as annihilation, but as a transition toward union with the divine reality and the attainment of eternal spiritual existence.

In some Bektashi interpretations, martyrdom (*shahāda*) was attributed a particularly elevated spiritual significance and was regarded as one of the highest stages of moral and mystical perfection. For the Janissaries, dying in battle was understood not merely as a physical end, but as a sacred transition through which the soul could be liberated from worldly attachments and attain closeness to God, reaching the spiritual state of *müşahade* (contemplation or direct witnessing of divine reality). The concepts of *shahāda* (martyrdom/witnessing) and *müşahade* (spiritual witnessing) were symbolically connected within this religious worldview, sharing a common linguistic root and becoming intertwined in mystical interpretation. Accordingly, the battlefield was imagined not only as a place of combat, but also as a “field of witnessing” where divine manifestation could be experienced. Within this framework, martyrdom was understood as one of the most direct and decisive forms of completing the spiritual journey that began with the *ikerar* (the commitment made upon entering the path). Therefore, martyrdom occupied a distinctive spiritual position within Bektashi thought, representing both sacrifice and the ultimate realization of religious devotion.⁸⁸

Within Bektashi thought, death is not understood as annihilation, but rather as the abandonment of the physical form (*kāhı*) and the return of the soul to its original source. This process is expressed through concepts such as *sır olmak* (becoming a mystery), *göçmek* (departing), or *kāhı dinlendirmek* (resting the physical form).

⁸⁴ Küçükyağcı, *Turna'nın Kalbi*, 220; Oytan, *Bektaşiliğin İç Yüzü*, 160.

⁸⁵ Melikoff, *Hacı Bektaş: Efsaneden Gerçeğe*, 161, 246, 270, 342.

⁸⁶ Küçükyağcı, *Turna'nın Kalbi*, 204; Oytan, *Bektaşiliğin İç Yüzü*, 46.

⁸⁷ Küçükyağcı, *Turna'nın Kalbi*, 205.

⁸⁸ Küçükyağcı, *Turna'nın Kalbi*, 206-207; Goodwin, *Yeniçeriler*, 90.

According to this spiritual framework, when an individual passes through the “Four Gates and Forty Stations” (*Dört Kapı Kırk Makam*) and reaches the stage of *müşabede* (spiritual witnessing), the soul attains perfection and the person may be regarded as an *eren* (spiritual saint). Although these saints are no longer physically alive, they continue to be perceived as existing on a metaphysical level and are often imagined as sources of spiritual assistance when needed. In some Bektashi interpretations, concepts such as *devran* (cyclical movement) and *don değıştirme* (transformation of form) are used to explain the continuity of the soul. While some scholars have associated these ideas with notions of transmigration (*tanasukh*), within Bektashi circles they have frequently been interpreted through a symbolic and mystical framework.⁸⁹ In this sense, death is understood as part of a continuous process of existence rather than as a final termination.

The Bektashi *gölbang* prayers demonstrate that the Janissaries were not perceived merely as soldiers fighting in defense of Islam; they were also understood as individuals pursuing spiritual perfection through martyrdom and seeking to attain the state of *müşabede*, the ultimate realization of the spiritual path. For Janissaries of devshirme origin, the Corps functioned as a space of belonging and collective identity, while Bektashism provided a spiritual bond connecting the individual with the wider community. Through initiation rituals (*ikrar*), the Janissaries entered a shared spiritual journey in which they regarded one another as brothers. This collective identity, reinforced through religious symbols, rituals, and moral values, became one of the important foundations of their historical cohesion and collective action.⁹⁰

In this context, Bektashism functioned within the Janissary corps not merely as a religious reference system, but also as an integrative social and spiritual structure that addressed the need for belonging and identity among individuals of

devshirme origin. Through this framework, military unity was reinforced not only by a sense of shared destiny but also by the understanding of a spiritual companionship based on a common mystical path.

The spiritual bond between the Janissary Corps and Bektashism was also reflected in the texts of the period. Indeed, traces of this relationship can be clearly observed in a sofa certificate issued to those who were accepted into the Janissary corps in the nineteenth century.

We are believers; since the covenant of “Qalu Bala,”

we have affirmed the oneness of God and pledged our devotion to Him.

We have devoted our heads to this path;

our Prophet is the Noble Ahmad, the Chosen One.

Since eternity, we have been intoxicated lovers;

we are moths drawn to the Divine Light.

We are a group of those considered mad in this world;

we cannot be counted on fingers, nor can we be exhausted by being broken apart.

Do not seek to understand us merely from outward appearances;

no one knows the true state of our inner being.

To the Twelve Imams and the twelve paths,

we have all given our assent and said “yes.”

The Three, the Seven, the Forty;

the Light of the Prophet and the Grace of Ali;

our spiritual guide is Sultan Hacı Bektaş-ı Veli...⁹¹

The institutional and disciplinary structure of the Janissary Corps was not based solely on military hierarchy and a system of command and obedience; it also acquired a moral and symbolic dimension through its spiritual connection with

⁸⁹ Küçükyağın, *Turna'nın Kalbi*, 211-212; Melikoff, *Uyur İdik Uyardılar*, 39-40, 43-44, 109, 169, 178, 217.

⁹⁰ Küçükyağın, *Turna'nın Kalbi*, 223; Melikoff, *Uyur İdik Uyardılar*, 56-57, 108, 216.

⁹¹ Uzunçarşılı, *Osmanlı Devlet Teşkilatından Kapıkulu Ocakları I*, 154; Küçükyağın, *Turna'nın Kalbi*, 209.

Bektashism. This relationship created an organizational model in which military discipline was reinforced by Sufi values, and in which members of the corps were shaped within an integrated identity that combined a sense of duty with social and moral responsibility.

In conclusion, the spiritual identity of the Janissary Corps was shaped around the ethical principles, Sufi symbols, and metaphysical beliefs provided by Bektashism. This framework did not merely instill a sense of military duty among the members of the corps; it also enabled them to interpret concepts such as death, sacrifice, brotherhood, and belonging within a transcendent framework of meaning. Thus, the Janissary Corps developed into a unique institution within the Ottoman military system, where material power was supported by spiritual motivation.

From this perspective, Bektashism offered a framework of meaning that went beyond the purely military function of the Janissary Corps. It became one of the fundamental elements shaping both the religious affiliation and the collective identity of the corps members.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the relationship between the Janissary Corps and Bektashism cannot be adequately explained through a one-sided model of influence, as is often suggested in the literature. Rather, it should be understood as a dynamic field of interaction that developed through mutual influence and transformation over the course of history. The findings indicate that this relationship was neither an unchanged structure that existed from the earliest period onward nor an artificial construction created entirely at a later stage. Instead, it was a process that was continuously redefined, transformed, and institutionalized within different historical contexts.

One of the significant findings of this study is that Bektashism was not merely a passive element that shaped the spiritual world of the Janissary Corps; it was also an active tradition that was reinterpreted within the institutional framework of the corps. This demonstrates the reciprocal

interaction between military discipline and Sufi teachings. While Bektashi rituals and symbolic practices played a decisive role in the formation of Janissary identity, the needs and structure of the corps also influenced the ways in which Bektashism became institutionalized. Within this framework, the central question of this study—whether the relationship was one-sided or reciprocal—has been addressed, and it has been argued that a model of mutual interaction provides a more comprehensive explanation. Thus, this study seeks to move beyond reductionist approaches in the literature by offering a more holistic perspective.

Furthermore, the findings reveal that state–Sufi order relations in the Ottoman Empire should not be examined solely within an ideological or religious framework; they must also be evaluated in terms of institutional functioning, social regulation, and processes of identity formation. In this regard, the relationship between the Janissary Corps and Bektashism represents a significant example of how the Ottoman state integrated different social groups and established a balance among diverse communities. Bektashism functioned not only as a Sufi tradition but also as a social and political mechanism that facilitated the integration of Turkmen communities into the state structure. Particularly through the spiritual bond established with the Janissary Corps, Bektashism contributed to the formation of a comprehensive relationship between military discipline and collective belonging.

Another important conclusion of this study is that such relationships should not be viewed as static structures but rather as dynamic formations shaped by changing historical conditions. Therefore, analyses of similar relationships should avoid generalizations based on a single period or fixed model and instead adopt a process-oriented and multidimensional approach.

At this point, several suggestions can be offered for future research. First, micro-historical studies examining the relationship between the Janissary Corps and Bektashism through concrete

individual and local examples would make the practical dimensions of this relationship more visible. In addition, comparative studies focusing on the relationships between other Sufi orders and military institutions would contribute to a broader understanding of the interaction between religion, state, and society in the Ottoman context. Furthermore, archival-based research would help place existing interpretations within a more solid historical framework.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that the relationship between the Janissary Corps and Bektashism was a multidimensional, reciprocal, and historically dynamic process of interaction. This finding suggests that relations between Ottoman military institutions and Sufi structures should not be interpreted solely through religious or ideological explanations; rather, they should be examined through a holistic approach that considers institutional, social, and historical contexts together.

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