

JEMKA HAS RISEN: TEKKIAS, TARIKATS AND SHEIKS OF NIŠ ROMAS

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This study is one in the series of collaborations in the field of Romology of two sociologists of religion and romologists, Dragoljub B. Đorđević and Dragan Todorović. Having already dealt with Romani cemeteries, the culture of death and places of cult, now they have focused on tekkias, tarikats and sheiks of Niš Romas. In addition, being romologists, they have studied Islam among Serbian Muslim Romas on several occasions. The authors first presented documentary files on tekkias, tarikats and sheiks of Niš Romas at the 14th International Conference of the YASSR in 2007, entitled Islam in the Balkans in the Past, Present and Future. What sparked the research worker's interest in the matter was an evident expansion of tekkias to the north (not only the south) of Serbia. Moreover, what also gave the boost to the research team was the like perception of other experts in the field and their incentive to undertake the project (islamologist Darko Tanasković, Bulgarian ethnologist Margarita Karamihova and Boško Kovačević).

The distinctive trait of dervish orders, mostly located in Kosovo and Metohija, is the presence of certain elements of Shiite Islam. Romani tekkias, tarikats and sheiks were generated under its influence in the geographical region extending from Niš to the far south of Serbia.

Apart from the three interviews, this publication contains a supplementary exclusive two-hour footage about the main dervish rite (on DVD), which has a considerable visual and informative value. Moreover, in order to bridge the linguistic gap and facilitate regional collaboration among research workers the book has been published as a bilingual edition. However, since the book abounds in empirical data, scholars from other branches of social science can find it interesting for further analyses. Being sociologists, the authors did not cling to the theological interpretation of interviews and video footage, leaving it to research workers with the theological background instead.

In spite of the pronounced heterogenous confessional structure, there are many Muslim Romas confession-wise, including both the large majority, whose memories of its roots have faded, and the minority (which clings to its tradition). Among the latter ones, dervish orders are sociologically particularly interesting, which is precisely why this study deals with the three tekkias in Niš. The first one is on Cattle Square and belongs to Kadiri tarikat headed by sheik Muharem Ljatići. Another one is in Beograd Mala and it gathers around dervishes of the Rifa'iyyah order, headed by sheik Slobodan Emini. The third one, the same as the first one, belongs to Kadiri tarikat headed by

sheik Tosko Demiri and is located in the Beograd mala. All three of them are somehow connected to Kosovo and Metohija (Kosovska Mitrovica, Prizren, etc...) either through personal or parental lineage or their sheik-teachers or through continual membership in wider tarikat communities.

What comes through and what interviewees bring up as significant and general elements in these conversations is the status a sheik enjoys and the way it is achieved. This religious status is usually, although not necessarily, handed down in a routine and simple patriarchal way. Sheiks' fathers were sheiks themselves. However, the hereditary principle is not exclusive and decisive because such a status can be attained through personal merits: special religious education or other sheiks' approval. If this fails to materialize, a person retains his current hereditary status of shezade, a sheik's son. Similarly, husband's religious status is derived from the sheik's position itself. At least, according to sheik Slobodan Emini, a dervish's wife is dervishanka whereas a sheik's wife's role is to teach other wives.

The level of education in the official educational system is of no importance and these religious leaders almost do not have any. The leaders of the Kadiri tarikat (Mustafa Ljatifi and Demir Toska) have not completed even elementary education, which is typical of Romani minority, while there is no record of the educational status of the Rifa'iyyah tarikat's leader, who is of younger age. Nonetheless, it is obvious that their oral skills surpass their education, which testifies to their receiving religious education.

Tekkias are situated in private apartments and are owned by sheiks themselves. They are residential chambers turned into religious objects as the most adequate solution to the problem of praying location. In addition, a sheik enjoys the freedom to raise tekkias wherever he sees fit and in immediate vicinity of other sheiks and tekkias, which, according to the interviewees, is not considered competition and is not frowned at. Apart from tekkias in Niš, they open other tekkias all around Serbia (and beyond), most frequently in Belgrade. Despite enjoying a large autonomy, tarikat communities cannot be considered parallel institutions; rather, they are integrated into a wider shariat Islamic community, as testified by their collaboration with the institutions of the Islamic community in Niš. Moreover, although professing syncretic beliefs, they are still part of institutional and conventional Islam.

The interviewees exhibit openness and tolerance for all other confessions and prove it by having a circle of acquaintances and collaborating with people of different religious affiliation. Moreover, they reject religiously based stigmatization. In addition, they deny the existence of religiously based social distance from other Romas. Diverse confessional affiliation is not looked upon as a threat to Romas' national unity. The only conflict which might arise is between dervish orders (Kadiri and Rifa'iyyah ones, in this case). Although they maintain acceptable neighbour relationships and celebrate the most important holidays together (the 10th day of the month of Muharram and Hazreti Ali's birthday on March 21st), there are dissenting voices over the ritual which involves piercing with needles. Namely, sheiks of the Kadiri order, which is, by the way, less prone to this extreme practice, begrudge the Rifa'iyyah order immoderate practice of this ritual. In their book, it is nothing but a sensualist need for producing spectacles (in which children take part as well). Besides, it can create dangerous and unwanted consequences. Furthermore, Kadiri sheiks argue, that the ritual should be saved for

the most important religious holidays and special believers who deserve that honour. However, such a practice is slowly dying out and it seems it is bound to become extinct. Other differences between the Rifa'iyyah and Kadiri orders are noticeable too, especially regarding the practice of zhikrullah: the Rifa'iyyahs do it on Fridays, while the Kadiri do it on Thursdays and Sundays, which is good in some respects because it enables mutual visits and presence during the ritual. Various dervish orders rely one on another from other reasons as well, because in certain situations they are interdependent, which necessitates the initiation of couples into dervish tarikats. Since joining the same order leads to spiritual, brotherly-sisterly relations, it is necessary that the sheik has been awarded the title by at least two tarikats, which prevents the possibility of endangering the marital status of the spouses. However, in everyday practice there are examples of this rule being waived and couples being initiated into the same order.

The membership of tarikats in Niš usually does not exceed 50 dervishes. The membership is on the decline due to many people who seek asylum abroad «to make ends meet» (most notably in Germany, Italy, etc.). Age structure is varied: from 10-year old children to 70-year olds. Sheiks of the Kadiri order are extremely frustrated with the current state of religiosity and religious discipline of the believers. The quality of their piety is best illustrated by their motivation to turn to their religious leaders. Visits to tekkias are few and far between, selective and acquisitive. Their interest in religion lasts as long as their trouble, or, as one Serbian Saying goes, «without trouble no-one thinks about the church». Moreover, a large number of people from Niš, both non-Romas and Romas who live in this mahalas (the Beograd mala, Cattle Square) either know nothing of tekkias and dervishes in their neighbourhood or they have just heard of them. These religious leaders are not overly optimistic when it comes to nurturing their successors – few people are interested in that post.

This work is a significant contribution to the study of Islam in our immediate environment. Not often do domestic islamologists shed some light on Islam in our country. Therefore, Dragoljub Đorđević, together with his associate Dragan Todorović, decided to lighten the burden of those who are experts in that field instead of criticizing them. This is even more important given an ever-growing global interest in Islam.

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