



Book Review

International Journal of Kurdish Studies
6 (2), pp. 305 – 309
<http://ijoks.com>

The Kizilbash/Alevis in Ottoman Anatolia: Sufism, Politics and Community

Aviva BUTT¹ 

Received: Apr 25, 2020

Reviewed: Jul 20, 2020

Accepted: Jul 31, 2020

Abstract

The academic monograph *The Kizilbash/Alevis in Ottoman Anatolia* recently published in the Edinburgh University Press series “Edinburgh Studies on the Ottoman Empire,” has all of 400 pages. The book’s Turkish-born author Ayfer Karakaya-Stump is at present a university professor at William and Mary University, Williamsburg Virginia, USA. It is apparent from her book that she has meantime visited Turkey in her quest to understand the current beliefs and ritual of the Alevi Turkish community in the now secularized state of Turkey. She attempts to trace the origins of the Alevis and why they are currently known as “Alevi” (followers of Ali, the Prophet’s cousin and son-in-law), but were earlier on known as “Kizilbash.” She ultimately describes the Kizilbash as “followers of Shah Ismail.”

Keywords: Alevis, Ottoman Anatolia, Sufism, Community, Kizilbash

Recommended citation:

Butt, A. (2020). *The Kizilbash/Alevis in Ottoman Anatolia: Sufism, Politics and Community*. *International Journal of Kurdish Studies* 6 (2), 305 – 309, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21600/ijoks.726603>

¹ Corresponding Author, Independent scholar, Tasmania, Australia: avivabutt@winshop.com.au,
ORCID ID: 0000-0003-4710-4475

THE KIZILBASH/ALEVIS IN OTTOMAN ANATOLIA: Sufism, Politics and Community

By Ayfer Karakaya-Stump

Published by the Edinburgh University Press (2020)

The academic monograph *The Kizilbash/Alevis in Ottoman Anatolia* recently published in the Edinburgh University Press series “Edinburgh Studies on the Ottoman Empire,” has all of 400 pages. The book’s Turkish-born author Ayfer Karakaya-Stump is at present a university professor at William and Mary University, Williamsburg Virginia, USA. It is apparent from her book that she has meantime visited Turkey in her quest to understand the current beliefs and ritual of the Alevi Turkish community in the now secularized state of Turkey. She attempts to trace the origins of the Alevis and why they are currently known as “Alevi” (followers of Ali, the Prophet’s cousin and son-in-law), but were earlier on known as “Kizilbash.” She ultimately describes the Kizilbash as “followers of Shah Ismail.” Here we are talking about Esmā’īl I Şafawī [Ismā’īl Safavī], Shah Abu’l-Moẓaffar b. Shaykh aydar b. Shaykh Junayd – born on 25 Rajab 892/17 July 1487 in Ardabīl died on 19 Rajab 930/23 May 1524 near Tabrīz. The Safaviyya (Safavid Sufi Order) was established by his direct ancestor, the Kurdish Shaykh Safī al-Dīn Ardabilī (1252-1334 CE). Turning to Kathryn Babayan, we learn that the Kizilbash tribes were the fighting force who venerated Shaykh Junayd of Ardabil (d. 1460), Shah Ismail’s grandfather, Shaykh of the Safavid Sufi Order. The Kizilbash were loyal to Shah Ismail’s father Haydar, and were likewise disciples and supporters of Shah Ismail. That is, the Kizilbash assisted Ismail (then Shaykh of the Safavid Sufi Order) to avenge his father’s death and conquer Azerbaijan (where he became Shah of Azerbaijan). They proved to be both military and political support.

Karakaya-Stump was fortunate in being able to view documentation of Sufi or Shi‘i lineages, as the case might be, in modern Turkey and has thus presented us with substantiation for the ongoing existence of a distinctly Turkish Sufism. Some inaccuracies in her book seem to have resulted from her struggle to cope with theorizing from within a Turkish academic framework of the study of a perceived Alevi “religion.” To a considerable extent she accepts the theories of the modern Turkish historian Fuat Köprülü subsequently developed by Irène Mélikoff and Ahmet Yaşar Ocak who describe their theorized Alevi religion as Turkish heterodoxy, resistance to what Rıza Yıldırım says is “an imagined normative Islam, i.e. Sunni orthodoxy. Yet, the second component of Köprülü’s paradigm, that is, considering medieval Sufi orders

as the fountainhead of Alevi tradition, remains central to the new scholarship.” Rather than challenging the Turkish account, Karakaya-Stump develops it – arguing against the loose appellation “syncretic” adopted by Vladimir Minorsky and others to refer to the many networks of beliefs established during the periods of the Persian Ottoman Empires. She refers to Alevi beliefs as heterodox and dissentient religion. She goes on to demonstrate the former presence of a Sufi ecumene chiefly in the regions of the Tigris River such as Wafa’i dervishes and the Bektashi Order and others, but it is only in the sixth and final chapter that she investigates the political situation at the time of Shah Ismail I and the Ottoman Sultan Selim I. Let us take as correct the assumption of the new scholarship above that there was no concept of Sunnism as a normative religion. Before proceeding further, let us describe Shi‘ism and Sufism in brief:

Shahram Pazouki an Iranian philosopher of religion defines Shi‘ism broadly by saying that in its true meaning it is “belief in the continuing spirituality and walayah of the Prophet in the person of ‘Ali, and belief that after the Prophet there is always a living guide (wali). . . Sufism as ‘the way of the heart (walayah) is the way of love, in which the wayfarer purifies his heart until he gains union with God’ (Pazouki 29).

The historian Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406) has affirmed that much of the esoteric concepts and beliefs upheld in Sufism find origination in Shi‘ism. Moreover, Sunnism has used Sufism “to decorate Sunnism with esoteric beliefs, of which it would have otherwise lacked.” Therefore, one could say that Sufi and Shi‘i beliefs founded on the concept of walayah (guidance) and baṭin (esoterism) are also present in Sunnism!

To return to Chapter Six and the political scene in the Ottoman Empire, Karakaya-Stump relates:

Yavuz Selim was also the one and only Ottoman sultan to force his father off the throne, a major transgression of Ottoman dynastic principles, before eliminating in a prolonged civil war his two brothers and several nephews to consolidate his grip on power. Later Ottoman sources tried hard to redeem Selim I’s dishonourable treatment of his father by depicting Bayezid II as an aged and feeble sultan who was unduly accommodating in his dealings with Shah Isma‘il, and by presenting Yavuz Selim as the only Ottoman prince who had the

foresight and courage to sense the imminence and gravity of the Safavid threat against Ottoman domains, and to take on the Kizilbash challenge decisively.

In 1514, two years after his accession to the throne, Sultan Selim declared war in a letter to Shah Ismail. He opens with a series of quotations from the Qur'an, the first being: "It is from Solomon: 'In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful. Do not exalt yourselves above me, but come to me in all submission' (Qur'an 27: 30-31)." He goes on to say: "This missive, which is stamped with the seal of victory and which – like inspiration descending from the heavens – is witness to the verse "We do not punish a nation until We have sent forth a messenger to forewarn them" (Qur'an 17: 15) has been graciously issued by our most glorious majesty . . . standard-bearer of justice and righteousness, Sultan Selim Shah son of Sultan Bāyezid, son of Sultan Mehmet Khan – and is addressed to the ruler of the kingdom of the Persians, the possessor of the land of tyranny and perversion, the captain of the vicious, the chief of the malicious, the usurping Darius of the time, the malevolent Zahhak of the age, the peer of Cain, Prince Isma'il." And, after spelling out the evil things he has heard about Shah Ismail, he composes a poem, as follows:

When I draw my keen-edged weapon from its sheath,
Then shall I raise up doomsday on the earth;
Then shall I roast the hearts of lion-hearted men,
And toast the morning with a goblet of their blood.
My crow-fledged shaft will fix the eagle in his flight;
And my bare blade will shake the orb of day.
Ask of the sun about the dazzle of my rein;
Inquire of Mars about the brilliance of my arms.
Although you wear a Sufi crown , I bear a trenchant sword,
And he who holds the sword will soon possess the crown.
O Mighty Fortune, pray grant this my single wish:
Please let me take both crown and power from the foe.

Shah Ismail did not wish for war, and so replied in a conciliatory tone, warning that

Bitter experience has taught that in this world of trial
He who falls upon the house of 'Ali always falls.

Kindly give our ambassador leave to travel unmolested for “No soul shall bear another’s burden.” (Qur’an 6: 164; 53: 38) When war becomes inevitable, hesitation and delay must be set aside, and one must think on that which is to come. Farewell.

In the same year, the Kizilbash tribes were badly defeated in the Battle of Chaldiran. That is to say, Shah Ismail suffered territorial losses, and his wife was abducted. His morale suffered and his control of his fighting forces was weakened. Sultan Selim had wanted to establish Sunnism as a norm in order to obviate the beliefs of the charismatic leader he viewed as his opponent. On the surface, it seemed that the Sultan succeeded in enforcing his new norm within the territories of the Ottoman Empire. However, as Karakaya-Stump and others have understood, the Sultan ultimately relegated Sufism to the out-of-sight. Neither he nor the abrupt modernization in the Republic of Turkey could obliterate it. On the other hand, in the short span of his life, Shah Ismail succeeded in establishing the first unified Iranian empire since the Arab conquest and a long-lasting dynasty that perpetuated the establishment of Imāmī Shi‘ism (Twelver Shi‘ism) in Iranian territories.