



**A Visual Introduction to
Anatolian Sufism**
Presenting the Art of Bezem

Sample

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Contents

- 1 Foreward
- 11 The Splitting of the Moon | Şakk-ul Kamer
- 15 Cranes..Did You Not See Ali? | Turnular Aliye görmediniz mi?
- 17 Gaybi's Arrow | Gaybi'nin oku
- 21 Kaygusuz Abdal | Kaygusuz Abdal
- 25 A Falcon Is Not Without Its Feathers | Şahin pençemiz olmaz
- 29 Die Before You Die | Ölmeden evvel ölmek
- 31 References and Recommended Readings
- 34 About



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*Insanında Cok keramet var
O cihanda bu cihanda
Ali'ye saydılar bizi*

There is great power within humanity
In this world and the next
They regarded us as Ali

This art booklet serves as an English language introduction to the dazzling world of Anatolian Sufism; it's mythic progenitors and the legacy they've left behind. The reader may be familiar with the Persian speaking poet Jalaladin Rumi al Bulkh, more commonly known by his epilet, Rumi. A towering figure in Anatolian Sufism in his own right, Rumi nevertheless represents but one facet of this diverse milieu; the tradition of Persian Sufi poetry. This was the prestige language of the Islamic East and the literary lingua franca by which Islamic civilisation norms were expressed. Less known in the West were his many contemporaries who, despite their immediate proximity in distance and time, chose to express their religiosity in pre-modern Turkish, the mother tongue of the Turkic tribes who had settled the Anatolian hinterland. This is not an incidental detail. The expression of a mystical, often confrontational and internalised mystical philosophy in Old Anatolian Turkish directly ushered in the development of a vernacular Islamic culture. It is a culture that still exists today, primarily among today's Alevis as well as followers of the Bektashi Order of Dervishes.

Unlike the literary heritage of the Mevlevis, the Sufi Order that coalesced around the

legacy of Rumi, which introduces spiritual lessons via the medium of classical Persian poetry, the "Anatolian" tradition is conveyed very differently. Characteristic of this tradition are the *nefes* (breaths), the corpus of poetry which is always set to notation and sung, and the *vilayetnames* (Book of Saints) and *menakibs* (exploits) of it's various *erenler* (hero-saints), that is, hagiographies detailing the colourful life and adventures of these individuals.

Rebel Mystics

The character of these *erenler* may differ radically. Kaygusuz Abdal conjurs the image of the carefree dervish exhibiting almost anarchist sensibilities in his principled disavowal of both legalistic Islam and organised, conformist Sufism as it existed at the time.

*Bu dünya saltı aña delü dirler
Kimi inkar ider kim veli dirler
Kimi eydür ki bu abdal olupdur
Bilür tanrı ki bu ne sal olupdur*

The people of this world call him crazy
Some reject him; some say he is a saint
Some say: "This is an abdal;
Only God knows what state he is in!

And yet, his biography transcended any crude archetypes of the uncooth dervish by proving himself as one of the most erudite and intellectually stimulating characters in Anatolian, and indeed Islamic mysticism more generally. Others may be wonderworkers, sages, holy warriors or all the above collapsed into one. Characteristic of many but certainly not all *menakibs*, is the martial and almost chivalric dimension to the laudatory acts celebrated in these narratives. This is infact a fairly consistent feature of medieval Muslim spirituality, the internal struggle against the lowly base *nafs* (self) and features as the fundamental basis for spiritual wayfaring. Of course this is also externalised in the *gazi*, frontier ethos from which these narratives emerged.

*Evvel eşiğine koydum başımı
İçeri aldılar döktüm yaşımı
Erenler yolunda gör savaşımı
Cân ü baş koyarak kurbana geldim*

First I place my head upon the threshold
They then let me enter and my tears are shed
See my struggle on the path of heroes
With my soul, I arrived to the sacrifice

The Cosmic Man: The Importance of Ali

The saintly archetype from which most Muslim, and certainly all Anatolian Sufi notions of Sainthood are informed are found in veneration of Ali Ibn Abu Talib, the son in law and cousin of the Prophet Muhammad. In the person of Ali, we find the romantic source from which all exemplary Sufi behaviour is derived. As a warrior par excellence, Ali serves as the chivalric fountain from which later *ahis* (trade guilds) and Sufi Orders including that of the Bektashis were formed. Fundamentally, Ali's role is in his spiritual authority; a kind of primordial initiator into the esoteric. In understanding the place of Ali in Anatolian Sufism, we may benefit from reflecting on a common symbolic attribution which associates the Sun with Muhammed, and the Moon to Ali:

*Ay Ali dir gün Muhammet
Okunan seksen bin ayet
Balıklar deryaya da hasret
Çarka döner göl içinde*

The Moon is Ali, the day Muhammed.
One thousand verses are read
The fish also long to return
To the water wheel, within the lake..

Muhammed as the Sun acts the source of light, while Ali allows for said light to manifest. Muhammed reveals the prophetic law, while Ali interprets and brings wayfarers into closer harmony with God. As two sides of the same spiritual coin, they are rarely thought of as different in Bektashi cosmology, often referred to with a appellation: Muhammed-Ali. It is worth noting that in concordance with the symbolic systems of neighboring traditions, the Sun and the Moon are afforded masculine and feminine attributes in the Bektashi tradition. Muhammed is the authoritative *baba* (father) who occupies a position of respect while Ali is the *rehber* (guide) and coded as mother. As a nurturer, the mother is closer to the child which is typically how the Bektashis approach the person of Ali relative to Muhammed. Crucially however, the Moon is closer in proximity to the Earth and acts as the means by which the light of the Sun may be received. This is most clearly demonstrated in the elaborate initiation ceremony

whereby the seeker is "birthed" from these two persons.

Haji Bektash Veli

The centrality of Ali reveals a great deal about the cosmology that sustains the Sufic imagination. Via the Prophet, Ali begets a spiritual chain of succession from which all Sufi Orders trace their origins. Each Order has a spiritual founder who in turn traces their origins back via these chains of succession. This founder acts as a kind of pole, an axis mundi by which a spiritual wayfarer can reorient their focus towards the divine. Traditions arising from these masters can differ radically in appearance and practice. Some are essentially ethnic communities expressed in the local language and customs of a particular group, others are noted for the particularities of their practices. Rumi is of course one such a figure, being the *pir* (old man/master) of the Mevlevi. The Bektashis by contrast have the enigmatic figure of Haji Bektash Veli. Like Rumi, Haji Bektash also travelled west from Khorasan before settling in Anatolia where they began their respective works. Rumi's legacy is of course his outstanding poetic legacy. Haji Bektash by contrast left us no such work. Instead we have his hagiography which details his epic exploits. This single point of difference reveals a great deal about Haji Bektash's appeal to the populace of Anatolia and the tradition which emerged from his example.

Unlike the fairly sombre accounts we have of some Sufi masters, these tales are firmly in the world of dreams, visions and extraordinary happenings. Shapershifters, seven headed dragons and underwater cities are but some of the many features one can reasonably expect from such narratives. And yet for all their mythological grandeur, they provide the reader a fairly consistent framework as to how we should receive these tales, how these cosmic phenomena may indeed enter our lives, and most importantly, how to apply the lessons contained within. Fundamentally it can be said that, rather than abstract questions of jurisprudence or theology, the stories deal with the very immediate spiritual needs of ordinary people. The characters who interact with the Saints need to see, they need to understand; and it is the Saints who, by their proximity to God unveil what was always there, but hidden. In other words, the most common motif in these stories takes place, the proving of their *keramet*.

What then is *keramet*, and how do they function in the imagination of Anatolian Sufism? One may reasonably think of it as wonder-working or miracles, perhaps even thurmaturgy and yet it needs some context in order to fully appreciate.

Keramet

Hararet nârdadır, sacda değildir,
Keramet sendedir, tâcda değildir.
Her ne arar isen, kendinde ara,
Kudüs'te, Mekke'de, Hâc'da değildir.

The heat is in the fire, not the cooking pot.
The *keramet* is in you, not the dervish crown.
Wherever you may look, look within yourself,
Not in Jerusalem, Mecca or on the Haj.

What then is *keramet*, and how do they function in the imagination of Anatolian Sufism? One may reasonably think of it as wonder-working or miracles, perhaps even thurmaturgy and yet it needs some context in order to fully appreciate.

keramet, meaning generosity is to be differentiated from the types of miracles performed by Prophets often known as *mucize* (the means by which one overwhelms) or *ayet* (signs). Prophetic miracles have the primary intention of demonstrating Prophetic legitimacy and authority. They are, as the name suggests overwhelming cosmic phenomena which confound and dazzle would be opponents. *keramet* are, on the otherhand, extraordinary manifestations revealed by non-prophets. Miracles themselves, whether prophetic or saintly are rarely a mere dry list of happenings confirming the aptitude of the individual for the role in question. Instead they form an integral component of the poetic and mystical language that surrounds pious literature on the topic.

One of the most famous miracles performed by the Prophet was the "Splitting of the Moon" illustrated here, where the Prophet Muhammad gestures in the company of disbelieving Quraish tribesmen and appears to cleave the moon in two. The Persian poet Sana'i who symbolically equates Muhammad with the Sun (as is common in mystical literature) remarked that it was appropriate that the Sun should split the Moon. *keramet* on the otherhand run the gambit of extraordinary manifestations from heroic abilities (heightened senses, incredible strength) to more clearly supernatural abilities (transformation into animals, traversing large distances in an instance and manifesting objects and creatures). An important point to make here is that the Saints and Prophets mentioned here do not makes miracles per say; they make miracles manifest. Through their proximity to God, the luminosity of the imaginal, occluded from the sensible world in most instances can seep through and shine brilliantly, if but for a moment. In these narratives, the manifestation of *keramet* serves many purposes but nearly always suspends the flow of everyday reality. Its witnesses are shocked, compelled into "seeing" the event being manifested. Fundementally, this effects a change



Haji Bektash Casts His Robe
Into the Fire
By Yashar Bezem

حاجی بکتاش



غیبی ناکش اوق و



غیبی ناکش اوقی

Gaybi's Arrow
Gaybi'nin oku
By Yashar Bezem

Here we find a quintessential example of a *keramet* manifesting from an *erenler* known as Abdal Musa. A halife (successor) of Haji Bektash Veli, the Abdal settles

in Elmalı province and founds a Dervish lodge after an itinerant lifestyle on the Ottoman frontier.

The son of the local *bey* (feudal lord), Alaeddin Gabi is hunting in the area and wounds a deer which he proceeds to follow into the lodge. Upon entering he confronts the dervishes with the intent to claim the spoils of his hunt. To his annoyance, the dervishes deny seeing such an animal on the premises and a long dispute follows. Finally, exasperated with the whole affair, Gabyi is brought to the lodge leader who hears Gaybi's complaints.