

Azadelik Vilayeti: The Sufi World of Rumelia

Amina Šiljak-Jesenković, PhD

University of Sarajevo - Oriental Institute

Summary

In this paper, we tried to point out the poets' territory of freedom in the verses of poets who lived and worked in early Ottoman Rumeli, from 15th to 17th centuries. This territory of freedom was presented through a new doctrine which is the result of an individual experience, i. e. personal cognition. From Yazıcıoğlu brothers – Ahmet Bican and Mehmed Yazıcıoğlu and Hayreti from the region now belonging to Greece, through the works of Albanian poets such as Suzi Çelebi and Taşlıcalı Yahya, to Bosniak poets Sulejman Mezaki and Zekerijja Sukkeri, we notice how Islam, or tasawwuf as a way of spiritual cognition, presents spiritual landmarks of these parts of the Empire.

Key words: Rumelia, the land of freedom, mystical space, slave of love, state of Love

*Forget about mosques and schools, build men!
Building men has the merits of rebuilding the Ka'ba.
Why think of stone blocks and timber, my king,*

To build people is what brings honour to kings.¹
Mekteb u mescidi ko, adem yap
Kabe yapmakçadur adem yapmak.
Taş ağaç kaydı ne lazüm şahum
Yaraşur şehlere alem yapmak.²

In Attar's *Mantiku't-Tayr*, in the story of Shaikh Sanan, the land of Rum (Byzantium), as a place outside the Islamic world, represents the area in which a "scholar of his own time" experiences conversion, leaves "his atavistic faiths" that is a product of reached knowledge and accepts a new doctrine which is the result of an individual experience, i. e. personal cognition. In this area – "non-place-place" - Adored is replaced by Beloved, achieved knowledge is replaced by experienced cognition.

There are similarities between Attar's land of Rum where one's inherited religion is being questioned, and the Early Ottoman Rumelia as depicted in the works of the Ottoman Sufis. The Early Ottoman experience in Rumelia, depicted for example in the works of Mehmed Yazıcıoğlu and his brother Ahmed Bican, is both a real place of real battles and a mystical space where one struggles to gain an insight into the inner world.

Mehmed Yazıcıoğlu's *Envaru'l-asikin*, as well as other works composed by him and his brother, have a clear purpose of guidance³ in not only preserving the faith of the Rumelian *gazis*, but also to assist the aforementioned struggle on the path of continuous conversion. The main target of the early Ottoman conquest, the Rumeli also becomes perceived and described as a place similar to Attar's Rum, i.e. a place where faith is not only defended and the Ottoman territory expanded, but where faith is also continuously regained and adopted anew.

It is well known that knowledge as well as military, legal, administrative and governmental positions became available to the new Muslims.

¹ Andreas Tietze, Mustafa Ali's Council for Sultans of 1581, Edition, Translation, Notes I, Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Wien 1979, p. 54.

² Ibidem, p. 146.

³ In his memoirs, Konstantin Mihajlović describes how the Ottoman soldiers always carried with them small books, ilm-hals.

Since other colleagues will focus on eventful history, the worldly aspects of conversion, and the history of institutions, cities and social, cultural and religious landscape, I will focus on the history of the Sufi Rumelia and the Rumelia of poetry.

Rumelia became a place with two histories: one of the conquest of the physical space and the other, parallel to the former, of the mapping of its Sufi world and the articulation of the Ottoman piety in general. What brings these two histories together are the people who were born or lived in early Rumelia, defining its political boundaries and articulating it as a place of learning and worshiping, thus turning it into a core region of the Empire.

Also, the said facts are approved by many writers of early Ottoman Rumelia who bore significant influence on further authors and scholars not only in the Ottoman areas, but also in the wider area of the Islamic world. For example, we can mention Sudi Bosnevi, a commentator of Persian classics. He was born in the village of Sudici near the *kasaba* of Čajniče in Eastern Bosnia, and his comments on Hafiz and Gami were the primary literature in reading and studying those Persian classics until the end of the 20th century.

An example of a dual world of actual military struggle and inner spiritual struggle can be found in the *mesnevi Gazavat name-i Mihal Oglu Ali Bey* written by Suzi Celebi, originally from Prizren (died in 1524).⁴ Throughout this poetic work, the author alternates verses which describe the real military struggle during the Valachian campaign and the inner, spiritual struggle.

*Girüp Erdel yolına düşdiler germ
Gaza şevkile her dil mum-veş nerm*

They set on the road to Erdel, enflamed
Every heart was softened like a candle by the passion for gaza.

*Bu yolda hanüman terk eylediler
Ne hanüman ki can terkeylediler*

On this path they abandoned hearths
What hearths! They abandoned themselves!

⁴ Büyük Türk Klasikleri, 3. cilt, page 235.

....*Hicabundur bu ten tefit hicabı*
Toga dersen ki devlet afitabı

This body is your veil, remove the veil,
 If you want the Sun of fortune to appear

Bu tenden tutdı pas ayine-i can
Gider pası görünsün nakş-i Canan

The bodily roust covered the mirror of the soul
 Remove the roust so that the picture of the Beloved appears.

Uçur canı bu cism-i pür hevesden
Halas et mürg-i lahuti kafesden

Let the soul fly from the body of passion
 Free the bird from the transitory cage.

Bu yolda yara kurban eylemek can
Yeğ andan kim içesin ab-i hayvan

To sacrifice the soul to the Beloved on this path
 is better than to drink the Water of life.

Bosnian poet Mezaki (d. 1676) unites and equalizes the two passions: one for love and the other for martyrdom. Behind these two passions there is one that includes the desire for self-annihilation.

Sende yog ise arzu-yi zevk-i shadet
Maydan-i mahabbetde tek utaz idemezsin

If you don't pose the desire for the passion of martyrdom
 You cannot advance on the battlefield of love.

A part of such dual history is offered in the poem by Mustafa Ali, where he returns to the place of early efforts of the Yazicioglu brothers, Gallipoli, his hometown. In this poem he both describes the place and its geographical setting and also reconstructs the poetic genealogy, listing his predecessors in the region where the Ottoman world began to appear on the map.

Vatanum kışver-i Gelibolı'dur
Rehğüzerdür Arab Acem yolidur

My homeland is the land of Gallipoli
The route of Arabs, the road of Persians.

*Evliyâsından ol diyârun hem
Nice zat-ı yegane var a'zam*

And among the men of God in my land
So many are greats of their own kind.

*Yazıcızade mürşid-i devran
Hem karındaşı Ahmed-i Bican*

Yazıcızade, *murshid* of the world and the times
And his brother Ahmed-i Bican.

*İki kamil veliyy-i vasıldur
Sözleri nazm u nesri şamildür*

Two perfect men of God, who achieved true Oneness
Their words are both poetry and prose.

*Birinin Muhammediye tamam
Biri Envar-ı Aşikin'e heman*

One of them has an entire *Muhammediye*
And the other "Lights of the Amorous" (Envar-ı Aşikin).

*Dü birader yahud dü peykerdür
Nur-ı ilm-i ledünne mazhardur*

Two brothers, or two faces
That show the light of knowledge of divine secrets.

*Oldı asude hem iki budala
Tekke Baba ile Ali Baba*

Two more *abdals* found their peace
Tekke-baba and Ali-baba.

*Her biri mazhar-ı kerametdür
Server-i kişver-i vilayetdür*

Each of them is the pillar of revelation of divine gifts (*keramat*)
A champion of the land of God.

*Ben fakir oldum evvela evlad
Mustafa oldı nam-ı mader-zad*
My child, I was born poor
At birth, Mustapha I was named.

*Ad-ı sani Muhammed oldı bana
Ehl-i dil hoş-nüvis ü hub eda*
And my second name was Muhammad
A *sufi*, a calligrapher, a man of manners.

The Rumelian homeland is in the centre of another famous author of the 16th century, the famous poet Taşlıcalı Yahya. He incorporates the pre-Ottoman history of Arnavutluk into the broader history of Islam, and brings forward the memory of his family – the Dukaginis, in the poem that describes his life. The short autobiographical account in this poem also praises the Ottoman path of learning, which in the offspring of an old Albanian family (to which he adds old Arab origins)⁵ unites the talents and upbringing with the “seas of knowledge” offered in the Ottoman lands.⁶

The Sufi world of Rumelia, which was – to use the words of Hayreti from Vardar Yeniçesi – another *âzâdelik vilayeti* (the land of freedom), can be best described through his biography and poems. An inhabitant of that world, Hayreti lived and wandered through many of its parts (Vardar Yeniçesi, Istanbul, Belgrade, frontier regions). That Sufi land of freedom, as described in one of his *gazels*, is neither defined by resistance to the worldly power nor by the lack of humility:

⁵ *Arnavudun hâsları vü begleri
Nesl-i kadîmüm Dukakin begleri*
Noblemen and champions Albanian
Are my ancestors, the beys of Dugakin.
*Mülk-i Arab'dan ki firâr etdiler
Taşlu vilâyetde karâr etdiler.*
Who left the lands of Arabia
And settled in the *Town of Stone* (today Pljevlja, Montenegro).

⁶ *Hemdem olup âlim ü dânâlara
Uğradı yolum nice deryalara*
Many wise and learned men I befriended
And crossed many oceans as I journeyed.

*Azâdelik vilâyetinün pâdişâhıyüz
Biz hanedan-ı Şah-ı Velayet esiriyüz*

We are the kings of the land of freedom
We are the slaves of the dynasty of the shah of the holiness.

*Baş eğmezüz ererse göğe başı cahilün
Ariflerüz efendi zarafet esiriyüz*

We will not bow our head to the head of the ignorant even he
reaches the sky

We are *arifs*, we are the slaves to gracefulness.

In Hayreti's land of freedom the worldly power is met with indif-
ference:

*Ne Süleyman'a esirüz ne Selim'ün kuluyuz
Kimse bilmez bizi bir şah-ı kerimün kuluyuz*

We are the slaves neither of Suleyman nor of Selim
Nobody knows us, we are the slaves of a Noble Shah.

Kul olan aşka cihan beglerine egmez baş

Başka sultan-ı cihanuz gör a kimün kuluyuz

The one who is the slave of love does not bow to the worldly lords
Look whose slaves we are, we are different sultans of this world.

Like other attributes of self, in Hayreti's world of freedom confes-
sional differences fade away:

Ehl-i aşka küfr ü iman bir olur

Vasl u hicran derd ü derman bir olur

For the people of Love blasphemy and belief become One
Meeting and farewell, pain and cure become One.

*Mülk-i aşk içre kamu bay u geda
Bende-i ferman u sultan bir olur*

In a state of Love all the rich and the poor
A servant (slave) of a *firman* (an imperial edict) and sultan become
One.

A poet from 17th century Sarajevo, Zekeriyya Sükkeri, expresses the same concept:

*Işkunla çü küfr ü din ser-ber-zededür
Hep Gebr ü Müselman arası 'arbededür
'Uşşak behişt ü duzehi fark itmez
Ol Ka'be ise n'ola bu ateş-gededür⁷*

With Your Love Non-belief and Belief are unified
There is always a conflict between non-Muslims and Muslims.
Lovers do not make difference between Paradise and Hell
So what if it is Ka'ba, the fire-worshiping temple it is.

⁷Erdoğan, Erol, *Sükkeri, Hayatı, Edebî Kişiliği ve Divanı*, Atatürk Kültür, Dil ve Tarih Yüksek Kurumu, Atatürk Kültür Merkezi yayını – sayı: 89, Divanlar dizisi: 2, Ankara 1994.