

THE SUFI (DERVISH) ORDER OF THE BEKTASHI AS A CONNECTION BETWEEN ISLAM AND CHRISTIANITY IN THE BALKANS

Naser FERRI

University of Prishtina –
Institute of Albanology Prishtina, Kosovo

Eva Katarina GLAZER

Centre for Croatian Studies –
University of Zagreb, Zagreb, Croatia

Introduction

The Balkans has always been a place of confrontation between different cultures and religions because of its geographical location. In the Balkans, Christianity was introduced and started spreading among Illyrians ever since St. Paul the Apostle¹ introduced the religion. Islam started spreading after the Battle of Kosovo Field in 1389.² It is possible that religious tolerance that the Ottoman Empire had toward Christianity influenced forbearance and coexistence of these two religions.

During the Ottoman Empire many noblemen and members of the social elite in the Balkans aspired to convert to Islam to become a part of the *Natio Militans*, that is the ruling class. There are plenty of examples of the converted people who have reached high political positions, such as Skender pasha, Hersezkade Ahmed Pasha, Balim Sultan, and many more.

During the 16th century in the south of the Balkans there appeared a new factor which in time developed into a connection between Islam and Christianity (Ortodox and Catholicism). It was the dervish order bektash (*Bektaşî Tarikati*) which was founded in XIIIth century by Hacı Bektash Veli (1209–1271)³ and which spread over Anatolia, Greece and Crete into Albania and after that across the entire Balkan area.

Features of Bektashi tariqat

The main feature of this order (arabic قيرطة [*Tariqat*]) is the fact that it was connected to Janissary units, who were professional soldiers taken as children from different nations⁴ subjugated to the Ottoman empire and converted to Islam, often bringing Christian elements to their new faith.⁵

¹ Mirdita 1998, p. 145.

² Rizaj 1982.

³ Bektash 2008, p. 17–22; Özcan 2011, p. 40–51.

⁴ Ibrahim 2008, p. 59.

⁵ Glassé 2006, p. 75.

Dervish (persian شیورد [Darvish]) is a person known for extreme poverty and austerity, who has dedicated his life to God treading a sufi ascetic path.⁶

Bektashi is a heterodox dervish order connected with Babism and similar mystic fractions such as Shiism⁷. The opponents of bektashi order condemn it as heretic.⁸ Because of its close connection to Christianity, it has been treated like similar dervish orders of Mawlaw'iyya and Nakshibendi.⁹

Besides many Christian elements, some scholars are considering other interesting elements in the bektashi order, for instance some preislamic elements and some other, such as buddhistic.¹⁰

History of the Bektashi tariqat

Bektashi tariqat was founded by Haji Bektash Veli (1248–1337) (Fig.1) during the reign of sultan Orhan I (1281–1362). Haji Bektash Veli was born in Nishapur in Khurasan in modern Iran and some authors claim that his lineage can be traced as far as the prophet Muhammad.¹¹ He was a well educated man and is considered the author of famous works such as: Makalat (Words of wisdom) and Fevaïdül Fukara (Benefits from the poverty).¹²

The bektashi doctrine is in fact shiite¹³ which is probably the reason why their ideology wasn't accepted in many areas of the Balkans.

At the head of the bektashi order there is a figure called Dede who is in charge of managing the three or four tekke (arabic هيكت teqe or takiyah)¹⁴. The head of each tekke is a Baba who is responsible for all the members of the order and the devotees. The bektashi order is initiatic having several rankings of members, starting with the ashiks (adherents), myhyb (a dervish candidate), dervish, muxered (monk), Baba and Dede.¹⁵

The influence and importance of Bektashism in the Ottoman empire has decreased after the Janissaries' rebellion and their abolition by sultan Mahmud II in 1242. by Hijra (or 1826 by Gregorian calendar).

The highest ranking authority of the order is the *World Baba of Bektashi Order of Dervishes* and the main headquarters is the *World Headquarters of the Bektashi Community in Tirana*. *Headquarters of the Bektashi Community* of Kosovo is in Gjakova and *Headquarters of the Bektashi Community* of Macedonia is in city of Tetovo.

In 1925, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk has banned all Sufi orders and the Bektashi leadership had to move to Albania where they have established their headquarters in the city of Tirana.¹⁶ After 1967, when Enver Hoxha declared a "Cultural and Ideological Revolution" it was a new offensive against religion and up to 1991, (the fall of communism) the bektashi order was active only in

⁶ Ibrahimî 2008, p. 29.; Đakovac/Bigović 2006, p. 50.

⁷ Metin 2004, p. 174.

⁸ Rexhepagiqi 2003, p. 68.

⁹ Rexhepagiqi 2003, p. 69.

¹⁰ Glassé 2006, p. 75; Đakovac/Bigović 2006, p. 50–51.

¹¹ Dobruna 2010/2011, p. 417.

¹² Rexhepagiqi 2003, p. 69.

¹³ Shia Islam is based on the teachings of the Quran and the message of the prophet Muhammed, but in contrast to other Islam branches the Shia believe that only God has the right to choose a representative to safeguard Islam, the Quran and the Sharia.

¹⁴ It is a building designed specifically for gatherings of a Sufi order, a place for spiritual retreat and character reformation. They often served as hospices for travelers.

¹⁵ Murtezai 2000, p. 57–58.

¹⁶ Glassé 2006, p. 62.; p. 286. www.cimec.ro / www.muzeul-caransebes.ro

Đakovica (Gjakova) in Kosovo and in the vicinity of Detroit in the USA.¹⁷ The leadership of the order has moved back to Tirana in 1991.

Bektashian tekke can also be found in Greece, Macedonia, Kosovo, Sandžak, Serbia, Bosnia and Bulgaria.¹⁸

Bektashi tariqat as a connection between Islam and Christianity

The Bektashi order has experienced many reforms. The most famous reform was introduced by Jusuf Bali, known also as Balim Sultan.¹⁹ (Fig. 2) He was a Serbian or Bulgarian²⁰ who introduced reforms of the Bektashi tariqat in the 16th century. It is interesting to note that his reforms introduced many Christian elements, and here we can see the connection between Islam and Christianity in the Balkans, because Bektashism was based as much on the teachings of the Quran as well as on the Bible.²¹ Balim Sultan was also responsible for introducing initiation, celibacy and monasticism to the Bektashi order, well known features of Christian orders.²² The Bektashi order is the only dervish order that supports monks called muxered, who live in celibacy and have an external feature of recognition, which is an earring in the right ear.

The Bektashi doctrine was based on four gates that must be traversed: the Sharia (Islamic religious law), tariqat (the mystic spiritual path, which is considered as the only true Islam in Sufism²³) marifet (knowledge of Allah) and haqiqat (truth about the world)²⁴, but what distinguishes Bektashi order from other Sufi orders was the fact that it managed to combine those four gates with the new elements that were obviously influenced by Christianity, such as the trinity Allah-Muhammad-Ali (parallels with the Holy Trinity), consumption of bread and wine in the process of acceptance of new members (parallels with the christian communion), confession to the Baba, celibacy and other elements.²⁵

The Bektashi order is also characterized by high tolerance in many aspects, for instance, the members of this order are allowed to consume alcohol (and there is even evidence of alcohol production in some of the tekke), they do not fast during the 30 days of Ramadan like other Muslims, but only during the so called “Matem” (10 days of the month Muharrem), and most interestingly, they allow women to attend the Zikr (arabic كثر), an islamic devotional act involving the recitation of the names of Allah²⁶ which is strictly forbidden and unthinkable in other Sufi orders and in Islam in general.

Members of the Bektashi order were in a sense liberal and considered a connection between all layers of Ottoman society and also between Islam (Suni, Shiism and Sufi) and Christianity.²⁷

However, no matter how liberal it may seem, the Bektashi order is still a closed dervish tariqat whose ceremonies can be attended only by the members of the order.²⁸

Unlike most of the other dervish orders where the leader (sheikh) is chosen by the system of the hereditary blood line (turkish evladi), that means, a deceased leader will be replaced by

¹⁷ Elsie 2001, p. 28.

¹⁸ Rexhepagiqi 2003, p. 67, p. 70–71.

¹⁹ Rexhebi 2006, p. 127.

²⁰ Šerif 2010, p. 51.

²¹ Elsie 2001, p. 30.

²² Rexhepi 2006, p. 127.

²³ Ibrahim 2008, p. 103.

²⁴ Rexhebi 2006, p. 70.

²⁵ Murtezai 2000, p. 58.

²⁶ Ibrahim 2008, p. 31.

²⁷ Aytaş 2005, p. 141.

²⁸ Čehajić 1986, p. 164–166.

his son or other close kin relative, the Bektashi order has a different tradition. Since the Baba is not married, and has no children or heir, they choose the new leader by voting (turkish erbabi). Baba usually wears a long dress called harqa and a white hat (taj) with a green scarf surrounding it. Baba rarely leaves the tekke because people are accustomed to come to him.²⁹

Bektashi tariqat in the Balkans once and today

Bektashi order came to the Balkans very early after its foundation. It was introduced from Greece into Bulgaria and then Macedonia, Albania, modern Kosovo, Sandžak and Serbia. Spreading of Bektashism is often connected with a legendary monk Sari Saltik whose cult adopted syncretic characteristics very early and who was identified with christian saints such as: St. Panteleimon, St. Simeon, St. George and St. Nicholas.³⁰

Penetration of Bektashism in the Balkans, especially in Greece, Bulgaria and Hungary is connected with the Sejjid Ali Sultan who is famous for establishing a large tekke in Kırça Ali in Bulgaria.³¹

Today the world centre of the Bektashi order (World Headquarters of the Bektashi Community) is located in Tirana. There are many small centres of the order located in Krujë, Elbasan, Berat, Peqin, Çermenikë, Martanesh, Mallakaster, Skrapar, Vlorë, Kaninë, Delvinë, Leskovik, Tepelenë and Tropojë.³² In Macedonia the Bektashi order is situated in Tetovo and in Kosovo the main tekke are situated in Đakovica (Gjakova) (Fig. 3 and Fig. 4), Priština and Prizren. Besides those there are traces of bektashi order in Kaçanik, Janjevo, Mitrovica and Zvečan.³³

Today the Bektashi tariqat has got a status of a formal religion in Albania. It is in the fourth place, after Sunni, Orthodox Church and Catholic Church.

Members of the Bektashi order are free to marry Muslims, Christians, Jews and members of any other confession or belief.

Concluding remarks

Bektashi tariqat played an important role in the homogenization of the turkish army during the Ottoman period. It is interesting to note how different elements of an opposing religious systems were applied and implemented in this order and what effect it had on the population in general.

There is also a crucial role that the Bektashi order played once again in the history of the Balkan area during the 19th century in Albania, during the Albanian National Awakening. Members of the Bektashi order from Albania, Turkey, Romania and other places were responsible for creating a lively culture and especially the development of literature.³⁴

The characteristics of the Bektashi order which point to the link between different classes of society and more importantly between Islam and Christianity should be observed and discussed more thoroughly and perhaps their liberal views shouldn't be considered as much as their great tolerance should be admired and learned from.

In conclusion let us remember the wise words from Haji Bektash Veli:

²⁹ Murtezai 2000, p. 52.

³⁰ Elsie 2001, p. 181–183.; Ferri 2012, p. 207–212.

³¹ Rexhebi 1995, p. 141–142; Rexhepagiqi 2003, p. 228.

³² Kordha 1996.; Rexhepagiqi 2003, p. 228.

³³ Rexhepagiqi 2003, p. 228.

³⁴ Aytaş 2005, p. 141–142.

“Find in yourself all that you seek
 Beauty of the man is in the charm of his words
 Honored are those casting light to the fountain of thought
 Blame no nations and humans
 Control your deeds, tongue and desires
 Educate all women
 Do not do to others what you do not want to be done to yourself
 Research is an open – ended exam
 Seek and find truth
 Do not forget that even your enemy is a human being
 Saints are the God’s gift to the humanity
 Patience is the tool for attaining the goal
 Ethics are the first vehicle of sage men
 End of the road not passing through science is dark
 Do not hurt even if you are hurt yourself”³⁵

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³⁵ Taken from <http://web.archive.org/web/20031222230145/http://www.wec-net.com.tr/belediye/hacibektas/beking.html> www.cimec.ro / www.muzeul-caransebes.ro

ORDINUL SUFI (DERVISH) AL BEKTASHI CA O LEGĂTURĂ ÎNTRE ISLAM ȘI CREȘTINISM ÎN BALCANI (Rezumat)

În Balcani creștinismul a fost introdus încă din timpul apostolului Sf. Pavel și s-a răspândit în rândul iliricilor, în timp ce islamismul a început a se răspândi după bătălia de la Kosovo din 1389. În timpul secolului XVI în sudul Balcaniilor a apărut un factor nou care între timp s-a transformat într-o legătură între islam și creștinism. A fost devish, ordinul Bektashi-lor care s-a fondat în secolul XIII de către Haji Bektash Veli. Principala caracteristică a acestui ordin (Tariqat) este faptul că a fost conectat cu unitățile de Janissary, care erau soldați profesioaniști, luați din timpul copilăriei din cadrul diferitelor națiuni subjugate de Imperiul otoman, care la rândul lor au adus elemente creștine noilor lor credințe. Cel mai faimos reformator al ordinului bektashi este caracterizat de o mare toleranță, membrii acestui ordin au libertatea de a consuma alcool, nu țin sărbătoare de Ramadan și le permit femeilor să participe la ceremoniale (Ziqr), fapt interzis în alte ordine Sufi. Membrii ordinului Bektashi sunt singurii care practică celibatul și au mănăstiri. Ca persoane cu viziuni liberale, aceștia au reprezentat încă de la origine legătura între intelectuali și clasele inferioare ale societății otomane și în același timp legătura între islam și creștinism.



Fig. 1. Haji Bektash Veli

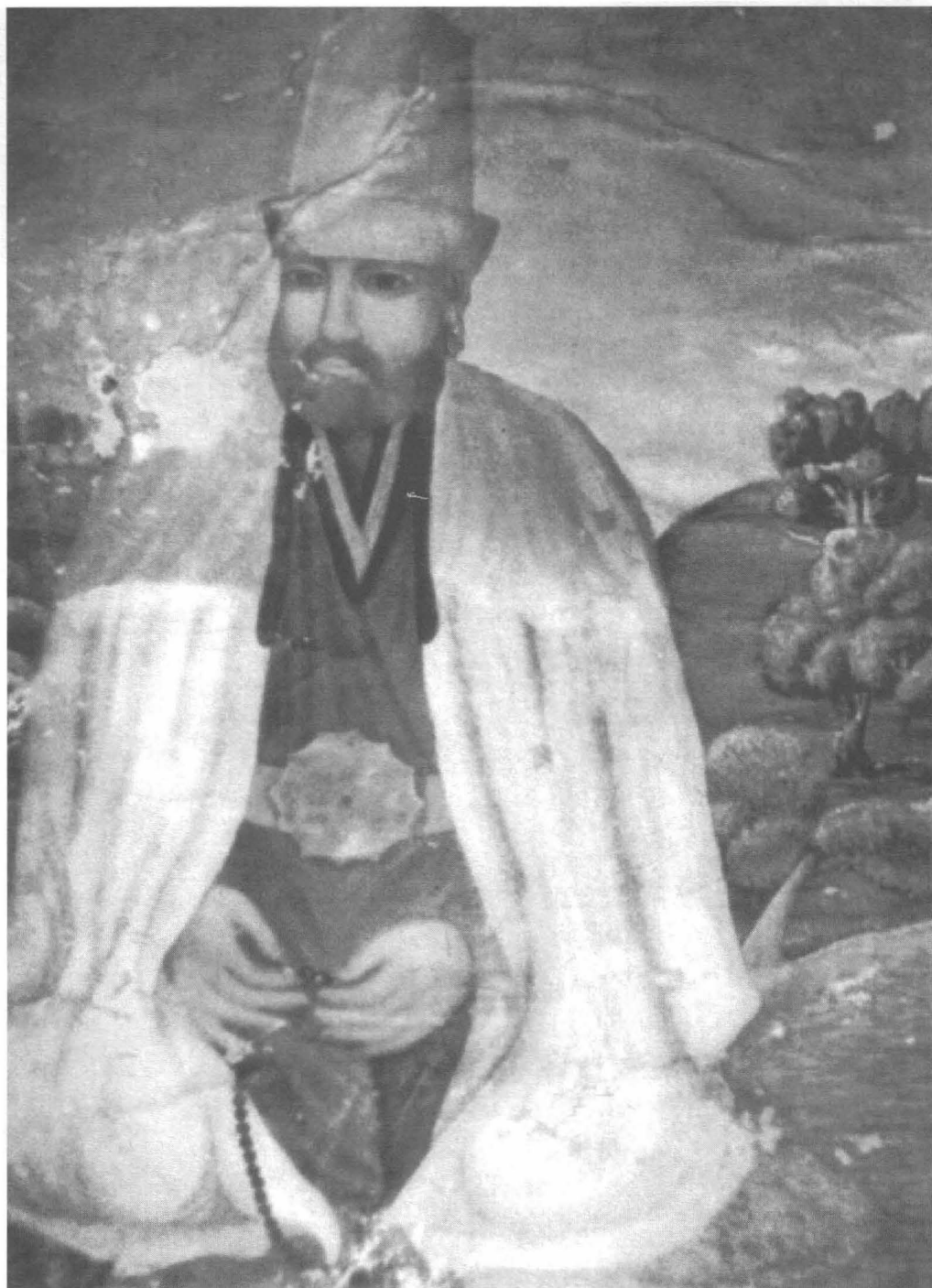


Fig. 2. Balim sultan



Fig. 3. Renewed tekke in Gjakova

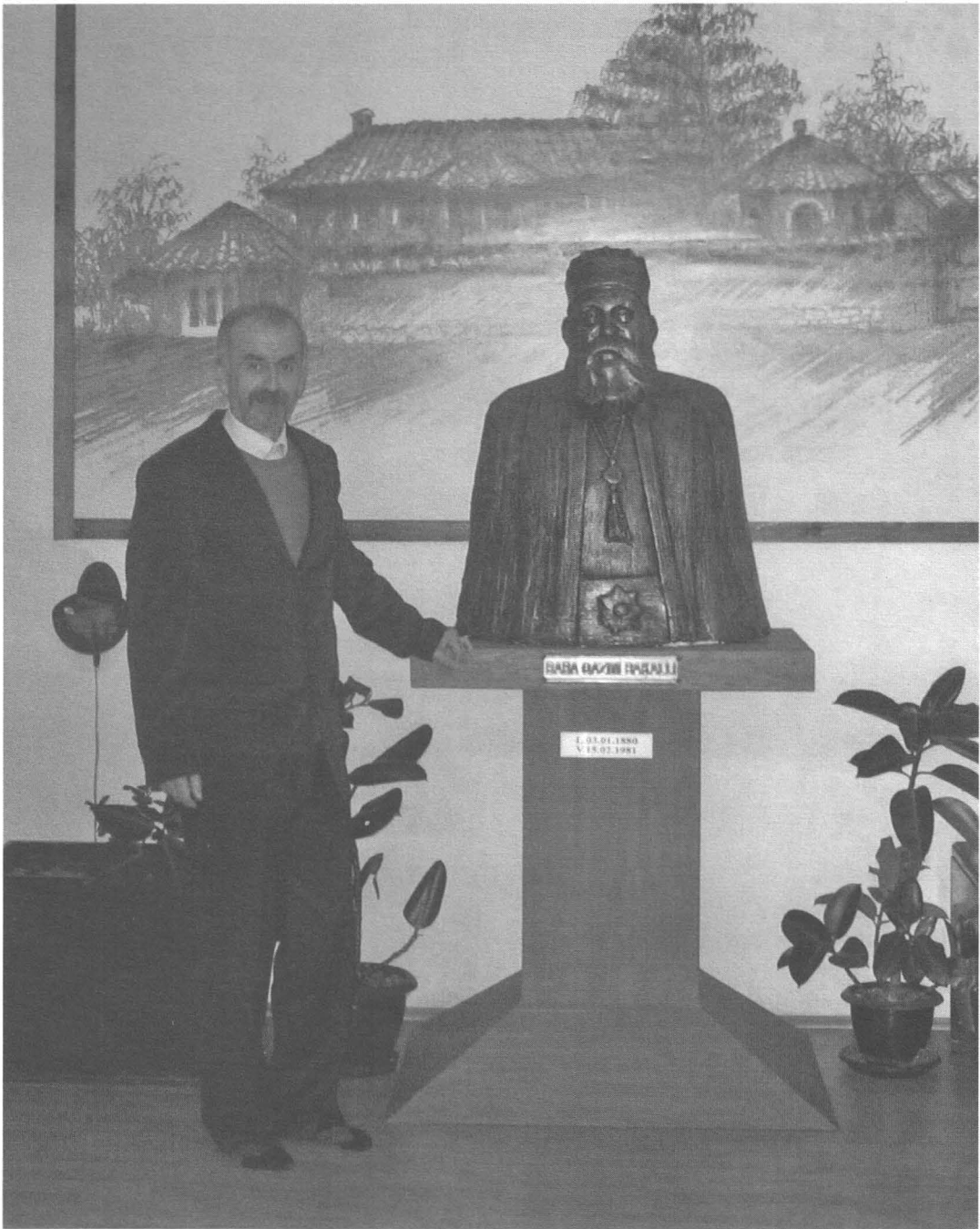


Fig. 4. Prof. Naser Ferri with the bust of one the founder of Gjakova tekke

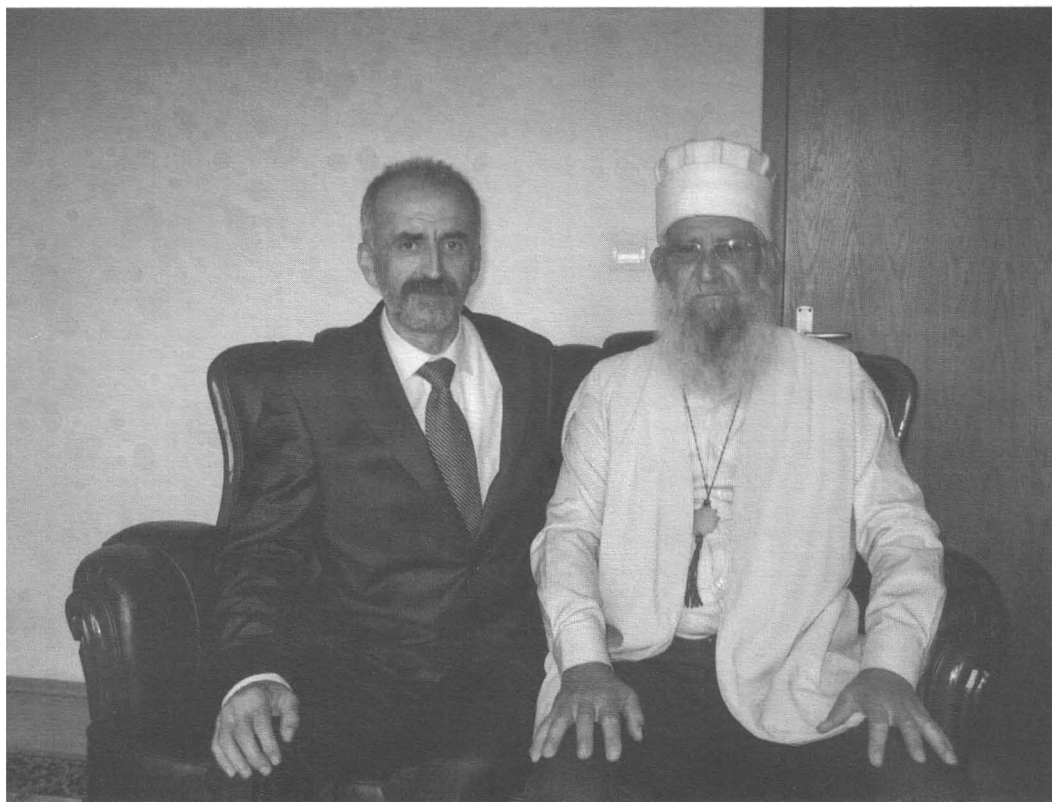


Fig. 5. Prof. Naser Ferri with Baba Munin Lama



Fig. 6. Part of tekke called Mejdan where Zikr is usually performed