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Loving God in Macedonia

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The first time I stumbled upon a Sufi ritual, some forty years ago in Cairo, I did not realize I had discovered the tip of an iceberg. It was unclear to me what was happening, in any case. My studies of Arabic, Turkish, and Islam at the University of Leiden had not prepared me for popular mysticism.

There may have been a dozen men in that alley moving to music with a pulsating rhythm. They gave me tea and some explanation. I was taken by the music, and hoped I would be lucky enough to hear it again.

Over time, I found Sufis all over the country, all around the year. The mystical orders, the *turuq* (sing. *tariqa*), boast a membership of some six million, and they manifest themselves at hundreds of saints' festivals (mawlid) great and small.¹ When there is no such festival, the "dervishes" still perform their rituals once or twice a week at their *saha*, called *tekke* or *semahane* in the Balkans, or at someone's home. Most Sufi orders function at a modest social level. This may be the reason why they are unknown to most foreign residents and ignored or despised by the Egyptian elites. The Islamists hate both their doctrine and their practices. The *turuq*, which are proportionally as numerous in a

The Rifa'i tariqa in Macedonia was founded in the early nineteenth century as a predominantly Turkish order. Following waves of emigration, the brotherhood only continued to exist because of the massive interest of the Roma, who now dominate its ranks. In word and image, this article aims to capture the tumultuous history and dynamic rituals that characterize Sufism in Macedonia.

Loving in

NIEK BIEGMAN

PHOTO BY NIEK BIEGMAN, 31 MAY 2003



number of other Islamic countries as they are in Egypt, form an often under-estimated barrier against fundamentalism.

The broad current of Sufism presents a large variety in ritual from region to region and from order to order, but there are a number of common characteristics. Apart from the ubiquitous cult of the saints, and whether in Macedonia, Egypt, or elsewhere, Sufis share one main objective: the love of God, the supreme Friend or Beloved, and ultimately, union with Him. The principal technique for establishing a closer relationship with God is *dhikr* (generally pronounced as *zikr*), or "remembrance." It consists of repeating some of God's "most beautiful names" and related formulas (called *esma*, i.e., "names," in the Balkans) with sincerity and concentration. This can be done either alone or in a group and, depending on each order's custom, sitting, standing, or dancing, with or without music. This is the basis of the Sufi ritual, which can be augmented with litanies (*awrad*) and hymns (*ilahis*) and carried out with varying degrees of visible passion.

In the course of a prolonged stay in Skopje, Macedonia, between 2002 and 2004, I befriended Erol Baba, a Rifa'i shaykh of Turkish origin and his dervishes. The Rifa'i tariqa in Macedonia had experienced a tumultuous history. Established around 1820 as a predominantly Turkish order, its numbers declined substantially during the Turkish emigration that started in 1912 and peaked

in the 1950s. Had it not been for the Roma's sudden, massive interest in the tariqa, the Macedonian Rifa'iyya might have disappeared altogether. By the time I arrived Erol Baba's dervishes were mostly Roma, and their numbers were steadily increasing. The Skopje region counted no less than thirteen or fourteen *semahanas*, notably in the Roma township of Shutka, and ten in other parts of the country. Erol Baba authorized their establishment and remained their shaykh, but rarely intruded upon their daily activities. According to his estimate, each *semahana* could count up to fifty dervishes. This means there might be over a thousand Rifa'is in Macedonia, possibly as many as there ever were.

In the Balkans and Egypt, and no doubt elsewhere as well, the followers of the Rifa'iyya have always been drawn from the lower and lower middle classes. The tariqa's unbridled practices hold little appeal for the Muslim bourgeoisie. Even so, the Rifa'is are respected by the other *turuq* including the very disciplined Halvetis of Struga, who follow Sunni doctrine but pursue the same objective as diligently as the Rifa'is. Erol Baba was deeply aware of his status as one of the few prominent ethnic Turks remaining in the capital. He too had



PHOTO BY NIEK BIEGMAN, 21 JUNE 2003

God

Macedonia

Notes

1. About popular Sufism in Egypt, see Nicolaas Biegman, *Egypt: Moulids, Saints, Sufis* (SDU / Kegan Paul, 1990).
2. A CD with zikr and ilahis of the Skopje Rifa'is has been released by Pan Records, Leiden.

Nicolaas (Niek) Biegman is a former Dutch diplomat and author of a number of photo books, latest among which is *God's Lovers, a Sufi community in Macedonia* (London: Kegan Paul, 2007). The photos on these pages are among more than fifty contained in this book. Email: nbiegman@lycos.com

considered leaving for Turkey, but had decided not to do so. He appeared not to mind that the vast majority of his dervishes were Roma now. Ethnicity is not an issue in the tariqa, he used to say.

The Skopje dervishes sing their hymns in Turkish, Serbian/Bosnian, and Romany. The *esma* are recited in Arabic.² The Rifa'iyya is one of the rare Sufi orders that include groups practicing *ijrah* or *darb silah*: the piercing of the body with iron pins of various sizes "when (God's) love seizes them." In Skopje this is done from time to time. But even without the piercing these zikrs are impressive and often deafening, brimming with movement and feeling. The *esma* and *ilahis* are recited, sung, and shouted at full voice, accompanied on hand-held percussion instruments. At the end the dervishes stand up for a special prayer directed towards the tomb of Haznadar Baba, the founder of the tekke.

The pictures I include here could never have been taken without the full support of Shaykh Erol, who imposed no restrictions on me during dozens of sessions and gave me valuable information, during the last year of his life in particular. Since his death in 2005 his son Murtezen has been in charge of the tekke and its dervishes. Erol Baba has now joined the ranks of the saints. He has a tomb in the tekke and appears to the dervishes in their dreams. He tells them that he is doing fine, and that he can see them though they cannot see him. His help is solicited by visitors.



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