

DEVIANCE OF SUFI ORDERS IN BOSNIA THROUGH THE LENS OF STATE POWER

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Introduction

In Ottoman Bosnia, especially along its frontier regions, Sufi lodges (tekkeler) played crucial and multifaceted roles. These lodges, known for their spiritual teachings and communal gatherings, often found themselves navigating complex relationships with the state and central authority. At times, they aligned with official policies and supported the ruling powers; at others, they resisted and challenged central authority, asserting their own autonomy and spiritual leadership.

The sheikhs (leaders) of these tekkes were pivotal figures, oscillating between being controlled by the central Ottoman administration and asserting authority over local affairs under regional rulers. Among them, figures like Hamza Bali and İlhami Baba stand out both met outrageous ends through execution by decapitation. Yet, far from being relegated to the margins of history, they remain central to Bosnian Sufi tradition. Their stories transcend mere acts of defiance; they symbolize steadfast resistance against erasure, embodying the enduring struggle for spiritual autonomy and cultural identity within the broader Ottoman framework.

This nuanced relationship between the tekkes and central authority not only shaped local religious practices but also influenced broader socio-political dynamics within Ottoman Bosnia. The legacy of these Sufi lodges, their sheikhs, and their enduring impact on Bosnian tasawwuf (Sufi mysticism) underscores a rich tapestry of spiritual devotion, political maneuvering, and cultural resilience amidst the ebb and flow of Ottoman rule.



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To begin with, it is essential to examine the identity of Hamza Bali. A prominent figure in Ottoman Bosnia, Bali was closely associated with the Hamzaviyya Order. He was born near Zvornik and received his education in Istanbul. Known also as Bâli Aga, he gained influence through his service to viziers before returning to Bosnia, where he faced persecution due to his activities. Accused of heresy by traditional scholars, Hamza Bali was eventually summoned to Istanbul and executed under a fatwa issued by Ebussuud Efendi. Despite these challenges, his teachings and spiritual legacy persisted, influencing followers known as Hamzevis, who integrated elements of Bogomilism and Shia beliefs into their practice, enduring as a cultural and spiritual presence in Bosnia.

Shifting focus to İlhami Baba, born Abdulvehhab İlhami in Žepče, Bosnia, in the late 18th century, he received his education both locally and within Sufi circles. Part of the Naqshbandi order, İlhami Baba authored numerous works, including poems and educational texts, focusing on Islamic principles and moral guidance. His outspoken nature and critical poetry against local authority figures like Celal Pasha led to his execution, reflecting tensions between religious dissent and state authority during the Ottoman Empire's reforms and territorial losses.

Comparatively, Hamza Bali and İlhami Baba represent distinct responses from the Ottoman state toward religious deviance. Hamza Bali's teachings, viewed as subversive due to their alignment with Shia and Hurufi doctrines, were harshly suppressed, culminating in his execution. In contrast, İlhami Baba's dissent against local governance brought him into conflict with Celal Pasha, illustrating shifts in Ottoman policy toward religious movements amid changing political landscapes. These contrasting fates highlight broader transformations in how the Ottoman state perceived and managed religious heterodoxy over time.

It could be inferred that while Hamza Bali's legacy endures through cultural memory and the resilience of his followers, İlhami Baba's works and teachings reflect a period where Sufi practices were more integrated into the state's religious framework, despite occasional tensions with local authorities. Their stories illuminate complex interactions between spiritual leadership, state authority, and societal norms in Ottoman Bosnia's religious landscape.

In the territory of Ottoman Bosnia, the Hamzaviyya Order was represented by Hamza Bali continued his activities in Istanbul for a while (Azamat, 1997:503-509). Upon his return to Bosnia, realizing that he was about to face persecution, he immersed himself in the activities of his order and in a short time, he gained several thousand followers, known as murids (Čehajić, 1986: 192). He also paved the way for the birth of the Hamzaviyya path.

The Bosnian sheikhs claimed that he was illiterate and not authorized to guide others, while some traditional scholars interpreted certain of his behaviors as heretical and reported him to the qadi (Ocak, 1998: 345-346). Upon the qadi's notification to Istanbul, a bailiff was sent to Bosnia, bringing Hamza Bali back to Istanbul for interrogation. Ebussuud Efendi issued a fatwa. The decree states: "Let the person named Hamza, who resides in Tuzla, in the Eskidžuma neighborhood, in the house of Sefer, son of Hasan Subaši, be arrested. If he cannot be found, his guarantors should find him and bring him to the Dergah-ı Mualla and hand him over to Officer Mustafa" (Bečiragić, 2013: 18). Consequently, Hamza Bali was executed by beheading in front of the Deveoğlu Fountain in Süleymaniye. There is a decree addressed to the bey and judge of Zvornik, dated 19 Dhu al-Hijjah 980 AH (April 22, 1573). It's likely that some of Hamza Bali's followers were executed alongside him. According to chronicler Nevizade Ata'i (Bečiragić, 2013: 18), one of his disciples, a halberdier in the janissary corps, was so distraught by witnessing his master's suffering that he took out his dagger and slit his own throat, described by Ata'i in a sarcastic verse as resembling slaughtering a cow. "Not even an animal would end its life in such a way" remarks Ata'i. Another group of Hamza Bali's followers managed to stay composed and bribed the executioners to release his body to them. The tomb of Sheikh Hamza Bali is located today in the cemetery near the Silivri Gate in Istanbul (Dervišević, 2013: 14). The tomb was renovated in 1864 by Mehmed Ali Pasha Rizvanbegović, the son of Ali Pasha Rizvanbegović (Čehajić, 1986: 193). Inscriptions on the tomb were placed during the last restoration in 1996 initiated by Ćazim Hadžimejlić (Ratković, 2015: 238).

Furthermore, Muniri Belgradi (Hadžimejlić, 2012: 189) states that Hamza Bali was secretly killed after being interrogated. It is claimed that Ebussuud Efendi, following his usual cautious approach, summoned the scholars and sheikhs to court, took their opinions, and after being convinced of Hamza Bali's heresy and apostasy, wrote his fatwa (Ocak, 1998: 97). However, it is unclear that the court records were not found obtained this information regarding Ebussuud Efendi's cautious approach. Muniri Belgradi (Hadžimejlić, 2012: 189) who claimed to have spoken with some of Hamza Bali's disciples and was a contemporary witness to the events, mentions that Hamza Bali had significant followers among palace officials, Janissaries, and state dignitaries. He had many disciples in Bosnia and encountered many people following his path, who referred to him as "Sultan." Additionally, Muniri Belgradi stated that he heard from witnesses and attendees of the assembly that Hamza Bali was not accused of anything necessitating accusations of heresy and apostasy. He was executed for insisting on saying, "If I

wanted, I could repel the plague from Istanbul,” which is not a crime warranting execution (Melamiyye TDVİA, 31). Nevertheless, in *fermans* sent to the region to closely monitor his followers, who were densely populated in Bosnia and its surroundings, Hamza Bali and his followers were referred to as “heretics” (Okıç, 1957: 279-286). Until the time of Hamza Bali, the members of the order identified themselves as Bayrami. From this period onward, they adopted the name Hamzavi and began to be known by this name (Gölpınarlı, 1985:191). Hamza Bali guided his followers not only in Bosnia but throughout the Balkans, leading them on the path of love.

There are also significant stories, corroborated by some historical events, about his ability to be in two different places at the same time. One such story recounts that while he was in his village, performing *dhikr* and working with a garden rake, he was also said to be fighting in the Battle of Mohács (1526) with the same rake. His presence at the battle was confirmed by his son Mustafa, who is historically documented to have been at the battle, while villagers witnessed Hamza Bali waving his rake in the air, thinking he had gone mad. Upon returning from the battle, his son stated that they would not have won without his father’s help. This was not the only miracle attributed to Hamza Bali; many similar tales have been passed down to the present day.

In similar vein, Abdullvehhab Žepčevi Ilhami Baba, more commonly known as Ilhamija, is among the most remarkable and well-known figures in Ottoman Bosnia from the late 18th and early 19th centuries. It has been established that he received his education in his hometown, as well as in Tešanj and Fojnica. Since these cities were not among the prominent scientific and intellectual centers of Bosnia at the time, it can be concluded that Ilhamija did not acquire extensive knowledge there, but rather compensated for his educational gaps through reading, contemplation, and interactions with learned individuals (Dizdarević, 2008: 220). He is also the most prolific Alhamijado poet and the most courageous Bosnian intellectual during the entire period of Ottoman rule in Bosnia. Although many have written about him, a complete picture of Ilhamija’s personality has yet to be drawn, and his worldview remains fully unknown. Different authors and researchers have focused on various dimensions of his personality, with most concentrating on his didactic and rebellious works. It is true that most authors have partially highlighted his mystical and *irfani* aspects (Dizdarević, 2008: 219). Thus, Abdulvehhab İlhami was deeply socially engaged, participating in the political events of his time, which led to his martyrdom.

Building upon in this context, Celal Pasha, appointed as the governor to Bosnia, was granted extensive powers to restore order in 1820. The instructions provided

to him stated that some individuals in Bosnia had been disregarding government orders, oppressing the people, and rebelling against the state for some time (Aksoy, 2018: 249). Surely, Celal Pasha took harsh measures to ensure public order, which disturbed some segments of the population who wrote complaint letters regarding this matter to Istanbul (BOA, Hattı Hümayun, No.21809). In his own poems, İlhami initially praised Celal Pasha and Sultan Mahmud II, but in one of his poems, but then he satirized Celal Pasha. In response, Celal Pasha had İlhami executed and punished those who shared similar rebellious thoughts. Despite considering İlhami as deviant due to a poem “Çudan zaman nastade” (Trans. Strange times have come), there exists a letter (BOA, HAT, 746/351232) to central administration from Celal Pasha where İlhami and those who rebelled against the state, with their misguided beliefs leading to animosity and hatred among the people, were discussed. This document indicates that Celal Pasha had the approval of Sultan Mahmud II. According to Aksoy, Sheikh İlhami’s head was brought to Istanbul (Aksoy, 2018: 254). Sheikh İlhami was characterized as one of the leaders of the rebellion, inciting the public to revolt, and being labeled as a heretical and deviant sheikh belonging to the same sect as other rebels (Aksoy, 2018: 254).

In addition to the aforementioned work, İlhamija authored a catechism for children in Bosnian. This work is known as “The Catechism of Hadži Abdulvehhab Efendi” In this text, İlhami Baba addresses fundamental religious beliefs, religious rules, principles, and moral issues. However, he presents these topics in an extremely simple, colloquial, and straightforward manner. Through this work, İlhamija demonstrates a strong understanding of basic pedagogical and methodological principles (Dizdarević, 2008: 223).

When the deviance and state authority are considered, there should be undertaken a comprehensive analysis of the classification of Hamza Bali and İlhami Baba as deviants, structured around three key aspects. The first aspect will delve into how their teachings and spiritual paths were represented and perceived within the public sphere. Islamic law, being the quintessential embodiment of the Islamic way of life and its regulatory framework, profoundly influenced societal norms and individual conduct. We will explore how these regulations directly impacted the followers of these spiritual leaders.

The second layer of the analysis, this paper will examine the shifts in the state’s perception of Hamza Bali and İlhami Baba, focusing on their interactions with state officials and their rivals. This examination will highlight the century-long difference in the Ottoman Empire’s stance towards Sufi orders, revealing a significant transformation in the official perspective on religious deviance. This shift

is particularly evident in the roles played in the execution orders: for Hamza Bali, during the zenith of centralized power in Istanbul, the orthodox Sunni authority Ebussuud Efendi was the central figure; in contrast, for İlhami Baba, Celal Pasha, a local agent acting as a centralization force on the frontier, took on this role.

Firstly, it could be said that in the 16th century, Hamza Bali founded a movement whose teachings bore similarities to Alevi Shia beliefs and those of the Huru-fis (Saeid Abedpour, 2018: 280). Central to their doctrine were the concepts of vahdet-i-vucud (unity of existence), a focus on social and political issues, and the assertion that the sultan's rule was illegitimate. From the perspective of the Ottoman government and orthodox Ulema, these teachings were perceived subversive. As a result, the movement faced suppression, leading to the execution of Hamza Bali and several of his disciples. Despite this crackdown, the Ottoman government continued to incorporate Hamzevi followers into the army. The Hamzevis remained active for at least two centuries following Hamza Bali's death, with their tekkes primarily located in Bosnia.

Hamza Bali's spiritual legacy has endured in oral culture, preserved in local stories that celebrate his greatness and significance, regardless of their authenticity. One such important story for Bosnians describes Hamza Bali as a person who valued everyone, even those who spent their time in taverns. Whenever he appeared at a tavern and began to speak, everyone would listen attentively. He would offer to exchange their wine for his own "wine of love." (Azamat, 1997: 503). Through this method, some left everything behind to follow his path, ultimately attracting numerous disciples around him. It is believed that the primary reason for the strong establishment of Melamism and the success of Hamza Bâlî was the influence of Bogomilism on the people in the region where these activities took place. Indeed, the existence of similar characteristics between the two movements, such as the doctrine of messianism, supports this view. Additionally, the regions where Bâlî operated were predominantly inhabited by followers of Bogomilism who had not yet converted to Islam, further substantiating this perspective (Okić in Vildic, 2018:24). The Hamzeviye thus serve as a connection between Bosnia before the advent of Islam. Džemal Cehajić extensively discussed a "balanced synthesis of Christianity and Islam characteristic of Bosnia" (Algar, 1997: 257).

Unlikely to Hamza Bali, İlhami Baba received his Sufi training from either Sheikh Hüseyin Zukiç or Abdurrahman Sırrî in Fojnica, and therefore belonged to the Naqshbandi order which was the most influential and distinguished tariqa in 19th century Ottoman Empire. Besides his Bosnian hymns, which are recited in

the tekkes of Bosnia, İlhamî's works include a Divan containing 60 poems written in Turkish, an İlmiḥal for children, and the aforementioned Turkish works Tuhfetü'l-musallin and Zübdetü'l-ḥaşı'în. These works address various subjects such as his life, different events, pluralism, and ethnic differences (Vildic, 2018: 11).

The work of İlhamî according to Vildic (2018: 124), written in the Turkish language used in Bosnia during his time, discusses topics such as prayer, the basic principles of Islam, and moral guidelines. The content and approach to these subjects set it apart from similar works. The topics are given a spiritual dimension, and when addressing human education, it draws on factors of human nature and psychology. The introduction begins with the explanation of the prayer ritual, its meaning, purpose, and particularly its spiritual aspect, which is further elaborated in subsequent sections. According to him, prayer is the mother of all worship, ummu'libâdât. The second part of the book discusses the benefits of prayer, while the third part addresses the sinfulness of abandoning prayer. The conclusion covers topics such as the moral gains of performing prayer, the essence of the soul, and the etiquette of reading the Quran. Abdulvehhâb İlhamî conveys the depths of his spiritual teachings in his poems expressed in simple language.

Hence, the comparison of Hamza Bali and İlhamî Baba provides a nuanced understanding of how their teachings and spiritual paths were represented and perceived within the public sphere. Both figures were influential in their times, yet their legacies and the responses they elicited from the Ottoman authorities diverged significantly. Hamza Bali's movement in the 16th century, characterized by its alignment with Alevi Shia beliefs and the Hurufî doctrine, faced severe suppression due to its subversive nature and challenge to the legitimacy of the sultan's rule. His teachings on vahdet-i-vucud and social-political issues, perceived as threats by the Ottoman government and orthodox Ulema, led to his execution and that of his followers. Despite this, the Hamzevî tradition persisted, particularly in Bosnia, blending Islamic and pre-Islamic elements into a unique spiritual synthesis. This endurance highlights the deep cultural impact and the resilient nature of his legacy.

Conversely, İlhamî Baba, trained within the Naqshbandî order in the 19th century, represents a more integrated and state-favored approach to Sufism. His works, written in Turkish and Bosnian, focused on fundamental Islamic practices and moral teachings, framed within a spiritual and psychological context. İlhamî's emphasis on the spiritual dimensions of prayer and human nature reflects a sophisticated understanding of religious practice that resonated with the Ottoman administration's perspectives during his time. Unlike Hamza Bali, İlhamî's

contributions were recognized and incorporated into the mainstream Islamic education of his region, highlighting a shift in the Ottoman Empire's handling of Sufi orders from suspicion and persecution to incorporation and endorsement when aligned with state interests.

The contrast between Hamza Bali's and İlhami Baba's experiences underscores a broader transformation within the Ottoman Empire regarding the perception and treatment of Sufi movements. While Hamza Bali faced the harsh realities of challenging the established order, İlhami Baba navigated a more accommodating landscape where his teachings could flourish within the bounds of the Ottoman state's expectations. This evolution reflects not only changes in the state's approach to religious heterodoxy but also the dynamic nature of Sufi practice and its ability to adapt to different political and social contexts.

In the second part of the analysis, it should be observed that Hamza Bali was directly targeted by the religious establishment, primarily because he was perceived as a direct threat to the centralized, stringent orthodox Islam represented by Ebussuud Efendi. Hamza Bali's teachings and practices were seen as antithetical to the orthodox Islamic doctrine, leading to his execution. Conversely, İlhami Baba faced opposition primarily due to his defiance against a local power agent, Celal Pasha. İlhami Baba was executed not only because of his oppositional poetry but also because he refused to abandon his dissenting stance.

Celal Pasha, representing the local power structure, even went so far as to threaten Abdurrahman Sırrî, İlhami Baba's counterpart within the Naqshbandi order. This demonstrates a significant shift in the nature of what was considered deviant behavior within the Ottoman Empire. While Hamza Bali was criticized and ultimately condemned within the framework of mainstream Islamic orthodoxy, İlhami Baba's deviance was situated within the context of the 19th century's territorial losses, administrative reforms, and structural changes. This period saw a transformation in how religious and political deviance were perceived and addressed by the state. The focus had shifted from purely religious orthodoxy to a broader concern with maintaining order and authority amidst the Empire's evolving political landscape.

"In an archival document, it should easily be seen that the aforementioned bandit leaders, including Sheikh İlhami, allegedly married an angelic maiden a few years ago by supposedly raising his hands to the sky. From this union of 4 years, they had 3 sons. Sheikh İlhami claims that these children periodically appear and bring him news from the unseen and the future. He propagates that in the rebellion initiated by bandit Haji Salih, they will prevail and that an invisible army

(the army of saints) is moving with Haji Salih. Former mufti of Travnik from the Islamic nation, Ataullah Efendi, accompanied by 5-10 men, went to aid the bandits one night, but upon approaching Haji Salih, he learned that he was under siege in the fortress. Ataullah dispersed his men and himself fled in disguise, his whereabouts unknown. If caught here, he will be imprisoned. Meanwhile, Süleyman Pasha's sons, subdued under our surveillance, have no means to escape like a sleeping snake. All rebellion attempts in the region have been suppressed, and all the people have submitted" (BOA, HAT, 746/351232 B, 1 (6Ra.1237-1 Dec. 1821) in Aksoy).

In the evaluation note written by Sultan Mahmud at the top of the first document, Sheikh İlhamî is mentioned as a heretic and deviant, with similar groups of corrupted beliefs increasing, not minding their own business and corrupting people's beliefs. Sultan Mahmud emphasizes the need to pay attention to such religious formations and to punish them immediately upon sighting. Additionally, Sultan Mahmud commends Celal Pasha with the phrase "well done to Celal Pasha" for cleaning up the bandits in Bosnia.

After Celal Pasha killed İlhamî Baba, he summoned Sheikh Sırrî from Bosnia, a Naqshbandî sheikh, and threatened, "Just as I killed İlhamî yesterday, I will kill you too." Sheikh Sırrî responded, "İlhamî's martyrdom was due to you, and it was carried out. However, I am a spring, and many people will drink from me. You cannot harm me; you do not have the power to do anything." Then he recited the verse "izâ zülzileti'l-ardu..." (Quran 99:1). The room began to shake. Celal Pasha clung to Sheikh Sırrî's hand and begged for mercy. It was later understood that around the time Sheikh Sırrî, who managed his lodge through farming in the Bosnian region, passed away, Muhammad Can Efendi from Mecca had sent Abdullah Ma'rûf Efendi to Bosnia for guidance (Vildiç, 2018: 50).

Following the execution of Hamza Bali, the Ottoman authorities pursued the Hamzavis throughout the empire, particularly in Bosnia. While those searching for his tangible legacy found little, others embraced his spiritual teachings, which deeply resonated in their hearts. Despite being minimal, his influence is still felt in Bosnia, especially in the areas he lived in, such as Tuzla, Zvornik, and Posavina. The legacy of the Hamzavis is evident in their reputation for honesty, interpersonal relations, and a distinct worldview. This heritage has endured among contemporary Bosnians, preserving the essence of their beliefs and practices, even if they do not fully adhere to religious doctrines. Besides, Hamzevis are portrayed as symbols of resistance and rebellion in the novels of Bosnian-Herzegovinian writers, particularly in Meša Selimović's 1970 novel "Tvrđava" and Derviš Sušić's 1973 novel "Hodža Strah" (Ratkovčić, 240).

Until recently, inscriptions and calligraphic texts in the Hamzavi and Melami styles could be found on the walls of some mosques in Tuzla. This demonstrates that, despite the passage of time and the challenges faced, the spiritual and cultural imprint of Hamza Bali and his followers has persisted, reflecting their enduring significance in Bosnian society. The activities of the Hamzevis have continued to the present day. Ćazim Hadžimejlić writes how until recently, texts and verses in Nasta'liq script resembling Hamzevi and Melami styles could be found on the walls of some mosques in Upper Tuzla (Hadžimejlić 1434/2013: 63). In the journal *Kelamu'l Šifa'*, in an issue dedicated to the Hamzevis titled "The Living Hamzevi Order" an interview conducted by Ćazim Hadžimejlić with Professor Baha Dogramandžija, a member of the Hamzevi order, was published (Ratkovčić, 2017: 240).

That is to say, in the socio-political tradition, these rebellions have been characterized by the terms "zendeka" and "ilhad." In the Ottoman Empire, individual and sometimes mass uprisings against the political and social order, and the official ideology of the period behind it, have been accused of heresy and deviance. The central administration perceived these widespread opposition movements and their religious rhetoric not as a result of significant societal change and the discomfort it caused, but rather as challenges to its authority and the belief and ideology on which that authority was based.

Therefore, labeling İlhamî and his affiliated Sufi understanding as heretical and deviant can be seen as an official designation that describes all rebellion movements initiated against the authority as a kind of official categorization. Another notable detail highlighted in the sections concerning İlhamî is his purported marriage to an angelic being, from which children were born who allegedly brought him news and insights from the unseen and future. One of these insights claimed that the rebellion movement would result in victory.

The experiences of Hamza Bali and İlhami Baba within the Ottoman Empire illustrate contrasting paradigms of religious and political deviance. Hamza Bali, a figure of the 16th century, challenged orthodox Sunni norms with teachings aligned to Alevi Shia and Hurufi doctrines, advocating for social justice and questioning the legitimacy of the sultan's rule. His defiance led to suppression and eventual execution, yet his legacy endured in Bosnia, where his followers persisted, blending Islamic and pre-Islamic influences into a unique spiritual tradition.

In contrast, İlhami Baba, trained in the Naqshbandi order during the 19th century, navigated a landscape where Sufi practices were increasingly integrated into Ottoman state policies. His writings and teachings, focusing on Islamic

fundamentals and moral teachings, were embraced by the state, reflecting a shift towards accommodating Sufi orders that aligned with state interests. Despite facing local opposition and eventual execution for his dissenting stance, İlhami Baba's spiritual legacy continued through his works and the enduring influence of his teachings.

These contrasting narratives highlight broader shifts in Ottoman policies towards religious heterodoxy over centuries. While Hamza Bali symbolizes resistance against centralized authority and orthodoxy, İlhami Baba exemplifies the complexities of navigating state-sanctioned Sufism within changing political landscapes. Their stories underscore the dynamic interplay between spiritual expression, political authority, and cultural resilience within the Ottoman Empire's diverse religious milieu.

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