



* Nourishment of Remembrance

Ritual Foodways during Mātām and the ‘Āshurā’ Feast at Sufi Orders in the Balkans

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While lodged in the hospice of a certain Akhī Shams al-Dīn, a leader of the *akhi*-dervish community¹ in the city of Bursa in northwestern Turkey in 1332, the famous fourteenth-century North African traveller, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (d. 1368-69 or 1377), witnessed their night-time celebration of the ancient sacred tradition of ‘Āshurā’ (Pers. *āšurā*; Turk. *aşûre*)² during the night of the tenth of of Muḥarram.³

1- On the dervish-like *akhi* associations, see TAESCHNER 2012. The hospices (Turk. *zāwīyes*) of the *akhīs* played an important role during the first period of Ottoman expansion and settlement (Bursa, for instance, had been conquered by the Ottoman army only years before Ibn Baṭṭūṭa’s visit).

2- The Aramaic term *ashura* originally denoted a day of fasting on the tenth of Muḥarram following the the ancient Jewish rite of Yom Kippūr (the ‘Day of Atonement’ or ‘Asor celebrated on the tenth of Tishrī, the first month of the Jewish calendar), a day of atonement for past transgressions, which the Prophet Muḥammad replaced in the second year of Hijra with the Ramaḍān fasting ceremonies. See AYOUB 1987; HAWTING, 2006; NAKASH 1993.

3- For most of the Umayyad period, Muḥarram rituals were probably held secretly. In 962 the Buyid ruler Mu‘izz al-Dawla officially established the Shī‘ī celebrations of ‘Āshurā’. Cf. AGHAIE 2007, p. 118.

After breaking their ten-day fast, the participants commemorated the unjust martyrdom of Ḥusayn, the son of ‘Alī, grandson of the Prophet Muḥammad and Third Imām, at the Battle of Karbalā in Iraq in 680 with Qur’ānic recitations, sermons, and ecstatic dance (Ar. *samā’*) performances. The fact that a remembrance of Ḥusayn’s martyrdom took place at the recently conquered Ottoman capital is noteworthy. Widely regarded as *the* signal event in the history of Islam after the death of the Prophet, it marks the primary historical and political cleavage between the Sunni and Shī‘a Muslim communities. The affect-laden ritual⁴ atmosphere of the annual commemoration of the day when Ḥusayn was slain was such that, towards the end of the night, one of the dervishes fainted in ecstasy and died.⁵ In his description of the great feast to which Ibn Baṭṭūṭa’s host, Akhī Shams al-Dīn, had also invited all the dignitaries of Bursa, the traveller however did not mention the sacred food⁶ which today is ritually consumed on this day of mourning by most Sufi communities in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Albania, and beyond and which constitutes one of the most important parts of the whole religious ritual. Sufi communal consumption of this central dish (known in Turkish as *aşûre merâsimi*)

4- I read the term ‘ritual’ in a broad manner as referring to as a religiously defined and prescribed set of repetitive symbolic bodily actions whose enactment symbolises the dervishes’ reverence for and engagement with the divine; cf. ZUESSE 1987, p. 405.

5- Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, *Rihlat Ibn-Baṭṭūṭa*, 2004, pp. 307-308, English transl. GIBB 2011, pp. 450-451.

6- In his research on fourteenth-century Anatolian foodways, Nicolas Trépanier likewise notes that he did not find any references in relation to food restrictions or prescriptions during the first ten days of Muḥarram in Bektashi-affiliated literature such as the *Vilayet-namas*, see TRÉPANIÉ 2015, p. 205, n. 7. It is of note that a sweet dish, consisting of boiled wheat, sugar, and pomegranates decorated with nuts, called *kollyba* (or *koliva*), which is similar to the Turkish *aşûre*, was offered and ritually consumed on the day of St Barbara (thus the other name of the wheat porridge as *barbāra*) in the Byzantine world; also, it still is consumed at funerals. See ANAGNOSTAKIS 2013, p. 101. For a comparison of Turkish *aşûre*, Armenian *anuṣabur*, and Greek *kollyba*, see SAUNER-LEROY 2008. A late nineteenth-century Christian observer of an ‘Āshurā’ Feast at an unnamed Bulgarian *tekke* associates it with the Turkish All-Saints-Day remarking that “it played the same role in the cult of the dead as the Boiled Wheat dish of the Eastern Orthodox people.” ZANI GINCHEV, *Povesti*, second edition, Sofia, 1955, cited after KANEVA-JOHNSON 1980, p. 69.

as ritual culmination of the Muḥarram cycle must have developed when institutionalised Sufi orders (Ar. *ṭuruq*, sing. *ṭarīqa*; 'mystical path') introduced 'Āshurā' ceremonies throughout Anatolia⁷ and into the newly-conquered Ottoman territories in southeastern Europe.

The zealotry with which 'Āshurā', the most significant year-cycle to observant Shī'a Muslims, was celebrated in the dervish circles at Bursa seems, at first glance, to indicate Shī'ite loyalties. While some contemporary antinomian Sufi communities openly professed a form of Shī'a Islam in which the martyrdom of Imām Ḥusayn takes centre stage, certain Shī'ite influences or tendencies could also be observed in the practices of the institutionalised Sufi orders.⁸ And, despite the policy of 'Sunнитisation' pursued in later centuries by the Ottoman authorities, heterodox Sufism continued to thrive in Anatolia and Rumelia (Turk. Rümeli), the territories in the Balkans, which were incorporated into the Ottoman Empire.

Sufi rituals that encompass both antinomian and orthodox expressions can still be observed in present-day Sufism in the Balkans. Even though most Sufi orders practise strictly within the framework of the *sharī'a* (Ar., literally 'revealed law'), individual Sufis have maintained a spiritual frame of reference wider than that of their *ṭarīqa* community. This is corroborated by the observance of the Mātām (Pers.; Turk. *matem*; literally, 'bereavement'), a time during which the suffering and tragic death of Imām Ḥusayn and other members of the Prophet's family are emotively retold, by extension, mourned, culminating in the 'Āshurā' feast. The observance of this important holiday in the fluid lived reality of Sufism, which infiltrated rural and urban Muslim life in the religiously plural and culturally diverse

7- On the ritual significance of the ritual dish 'Āshurā' and its preparation in dervish lodges in Turkey, see SMITH 1984; SMITH 1983, p. 403; ALGAR 1996, pp. 300-301. On Mātām and the 'Āshurā' Feast at Turkish Bektashi *tekkas*, see NOYAN 1984; and BIRGE 1937, pp. 169-170. For a recent description of the preparation of 'Āshurā' in the village of Elmalı Tekke, Antalya, see AYGÜN 1982, pp. 66-68.

8- Cf. MOLÉ 1961, p. 65.

environments of the Balkans, is characterised by both Sunnism and Shī'ism, in their dual aspects of intoxication and sobriety, meaning and form, spirit and letter. Out of this dynamic context developed a common language and conceptual framework which often bears a Shī'ī tinge, a 'text' shared and circulated by different Sufi communities in the Balkans and far beyond. It is this substrate, which continues to nourish the Sufi orders in the Balkan Peninsula today.⁹

Balkan Sufi ritual foodways during Mātam and the 'Āshurā' Feast with its eponymous blessed dish – a reflection of this Shī'ī colouring – have attracted little scholarly attention so far. In the first part of this contribution, I will give some background on the foodways during Mātam embedded in the social and religious traditions of Sufi orders in Bosnia-Herzegovina and in the second part, I will discuss the same in the Albanian context in Kosovo and Albania. In the last part, I will focus on Balkan Sufi conceptualisations of the 'Āshurā' Feast which, to this day, climaxes in the consumption of its wheat-based dish. I discuss these traditions in the context of the organically-interrelated discursive dimension between the visible (Ar. *ẓāhir*) and the hidden (Ar. *bāṭin*) in Sufi religious teachings which allow us to decipher some layers of the symbolic discourse apparent in Balkan Sufi ritual foodways. The sacred food is prepared according to an elaborate ritual at the Sufi orders and served along with suitable prayers at the end of the Muḥarram cycle, the first ten days of the first month of the Islamic calendar. Attention will be paid to the symbolic infusion of the dish not only with the remembrance of Ḥusayn's martyrism but with a nexus of fundamental sacred traditions such as the final grain-based meal

9- In his seminal study *Between Two Worlds*, KAFADAR (2010, p. 76) questions the adequacy of a strict Sunni/Shī'ī dichotomy, as well as the formulation of notions of orthodoxy and heterodoxy along sectarian lines, when dealing with the complex religious history of Sufi communities, especially in the frontier regions of Anatolia and the Balkans between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries. Instead he conceptualises the sectarian fluidity among these communities in terms of 'metadoxy.' As SOILEAU (2014: 423–459) points out, the oscillation between 'Orthopraxy' and 'Heteropraxy' of Bektashism continues to this day.

on Noah's Ark before it landed on dry ground and the Fall of the first couple who, when they left the Garden of Eden, took with them an ear of wheat – a grain of commemorative significance. I will argue that the fluid, cyclic, and transformative character of the consumption of this 'nourishment of remembrance' represents collective and individual redemptive suffering which has salvic potential. In my examination I draw on a series of ethnographic observations of 'Āshurā' customs and rituals in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo and Albania from 2011 to 2015. These studies are presented here alongside the fruits of archival research.

The first ten days of Muḥarram in the Bosnian-speaking world

Even among the Naqshbandī Sufi orders which have the reputation of being the most orthodox of the Sunni Sufi orders, such as the community guided by Šejh Husejn Hadžimejlic at the oldest Naqshbandī lodge (Turk. *tekke*; Bosn. *tekiya*) in Vukeljići in central Bosnia, the celebrations during the first third of Muḥarram (which derives its name from *ḥarām* 'forbidden' because it was prohibited to engage in conflict during this month) and the holy day of 'Āshurā' are among the most important religious days of the year. During this time, as memorial service for Imām Ḥusayn and his companions, the dervishes observe a continuous (voluntary) ritual fast (referred to as *matem orucu* in Turkish; 'fast of grief'), the casting off of the worldly life through self-denial of comforts to weaken attachments to material needs and sensual desires. This is embarked on to prepare the members of the community for challenging situations in which they may be tempted to commit a transgression for temporary worldly gains and to encourage reflection and repentance for past transgressions. In this way, the dervishes attempt to cast off the attributes of their humanity, that is to 'align' themselves with Imām Ḥusayn, the Prophet Muḥammad and to completely submit to God. Throughout the month of Muḥarram, the fasting dervishes retell the ideas and events surrounding Karbalā, recite special poems and

hymns (*ilahis*) sung to honour Imām Ḥusayn.¹⁰ The ascetic ritual ends on the day of ‘Āshurā’, the celebration of which is considered to be a religiously meritorious act. After reciting the Fātiḥa, the first chapter of the Qur’ān, in memory of all those who died during the last year, prayers are held which are followed by a *dhikr* (Ar.; Bosn. *zīkr*) performance to ritually remember God. The ceremony then culminates in the consumption of the sacred food, the special sweet dish ‘Āshurā’, offered and ritually consumed by all attendees on the day of ‘Āshurā’ (after which the wheat dish is named; locally known also as *hašure*), which will be discussed in the second part.

Yet more than at any other Sufi order in the Balkans, the celebration of ‘Āshurā’ is the high point in the sacred calendar of the Bektashi (Bektāṣī) Sufi order. Unlike other *sharī‘a*-abiding Sufi orders in the Balkans who practice a form of Shī‘ite-fermented Sunnism, Bektashi Sufi doctrine is overtly Shī‘ite. Only a small community of Bektashi without a *tekke* as central meeting place live in Bosnia today.¹¹ During Mātām they engage in a rigorous fast in mourning for Imām Ḥusayn. This entails asceticism in all aspects of life which includes that they do not shave, cut their hair or nails, bathe or shower; they do not laugh or talk, and they abstain from intimate relations.

The first ten days of Muḥarram in the Albanian-speaking world

An elaborate ritual is observed in Rifā‘ī gathering places or *teqe(ja)s* (Alb. for Turk. *tekkes*) such as at the Teqeja e Haxhi Šejh Iljazit, also known as Teqeja e Haxhi Šejh Lazes, in the small city of Rahovac in western Kosovo.¹² Like the Bosnian Sufi orders, the dervishes observe a strict fast which, unlike the obligatory annual fasting during the

10- Cf. NORRIS 1993, pp. 70, 170.

11- ŠAMIĆ 1995.

12- The *teqe(ja)* was founded by Haxhi Šejh Iliaz Zika (d. 1947) in 1902. His work has lived on through his main successors: first, his son Šejh Baki (d. 2002) and, today, his grandson Šejh Mehdi. The *lingua franca* at this *teqe(ja)* is Albanian but most members also speak Bosnian and some Turkish. While the liturgical language is of course Arabic, some religious hymns (*ilahis*) are included in Albanian, Bosnian and Turkish.

month of Ramaḍān practiced by Muslims worldwide,¹³ involves a continuous refraining from certain foods and drinks, culminating in the ‘Āshurā’ (Alb. Ashureja) festivities. From the first day of Muḥarram, the Rifā‘ī dervishes in Rahovac observe ‘Āshurā’ in daily ecstatic *dhikr* rituals without musical accompaniment that involve embodied expressions of the greatest sorrow. Both the Rifā‘ī and the Sa‘di orders, who are well represented in Kosovo, Macedonia, and Serbia, are known for their *dhikr* rituals which are distinctly ‘physical’. The spiritual goal of leaving behind the multiplicity of the world to achieve ecstatic union with God is reflected in the numerous ascetic practices of the dervishes in a shared ritual context which involves self-inflicted ritual violence. Differing from Twelver Shī‘a bloody Muḥarram rituals (which comprise ritual self-flagellations, Ar. *taṭbīr*), no blood may be spilled in these Sufi rituals and the piercing of the body with sharp instruments results in no visible wounds or pain.¹⁴ On the seventh day of the ten-day mourning period, Šejh Mehdi provides his disciples with some milk and honey, just as Ḥusayn, the Shāh (‘king’) of Karbalā, is said to have done for his seventy-two men before they were martyred. During the commemoration of the saintly martyrs, the Mātām mourning process, or collective rituals of “lamentation” (Pers. *nowhe*; Ar. *nawḥa*) in honour of Ḥusayn, which involves elegiac recitations (Turk. *mersiye*; Ar. *marthīya*; Pers. *mūya*; a poetry of lament and mourning of the Karbalā martyrs), the shaykh personifies Ḥusayn and on the tenth day, the Day of ‘Āshurā’, when Ḥusayn was raised to heaven, the shaykh himself consumes milk and honey.¹⁵ He, once again, alludes to layers of meaning which can only be deciphered by reference to esoteric teachings reserved for a

13- The importance of this day for the Muslim world is also reflected by the fact that the door of the Ka‘ba in Mecca, the most famous sanctuary of Islam, is opened on the Day of the ‘Āshurā’ to the public. For ‘Āshurā’ in Mecca, see HURGRONJE 2007, p. 49.

14- See KUEHN 2021.

15- Cf. BIEGMAN 2009, p. 92.

closed circle of initiates.¹⁶ The Imām's apotheosis is commemorated in a special *dhikr* for 'Āshurā' (lasting three to four hours) followed by the ceremonial feast which attracts many worshippers. Like other festive gatherings this feast includes propitiatory animal sacrifices (*kurban*, Ar. *qurbān*; usually consisting of a sheep), carried out to secure the well-being of the entire community,¹⁷ which culminates in the 'Āshurā' dish.

In the same manner as their Bosnian brethren, Albanian Bektashi initiates (Alb. *muhips*) perform Mātām,¹⁸ the annual mourning period of selective fasting that precedes 'Āshurā', at the World Headquarters (*Kryegjyshata*¹⁹) of the Albanian branch of the Bektashis in Tirana, Albania, and at all other Bektashi *teqes* in the Balkans. This fast, which lasts ten (the word 'āshurā' originally means the tenth day of the month of Muḥarram) or, in the case of the Bektashi order, sometimes twelve days (pointing to the Bektashi veneration of the Twelve Imāms, hereditary and divinely sanctioned successors of Muḥammad),²⁰ Conducted from dawn to dusk, it entails abstinence from certain foods and drinks, primarily the consumption of water (since Imām Ḥusayn and his men were left in the desert without access to water) and animal source food, because during the fast no blood can be shed, nor milk drawn, or butter churned. The liquid the dervishes drink is not pure

16- On the hermeneutic perspective central to Albanian Bektashi teachings, the distinction between exoteric and esoteric levels of thought, see KUEHN, forthcoming.

17- Analogous rituals of consecration take place also in the inauguration of sacred places, buildings, or in a Šejh's initiation.

18- The importance of this day for the Muslim world is also reflected by the fact that the door of the Ka'ba in Mecca, the most famous sanctuary of Islam, is opened on the day of the 'Āshurā' to the public. SNOUCK HURGRONJE 2007, p. 49.

19- Unless otherwise stated, transliterations and translations of non-English words in this chapter are provided from the modern Albanian.

20- The Bektashi community commemorate Ḥusayn's martyrdom by fasting the first ten or twelve days of Muḥarram depending (according to the Islamic lunar calendar) on the day of the week on which the first day of Muḥarram occurs in order to avoid two Fridays falling within the Mātām period (since Ḥusayn's martyrdom occurred on a Friday). Even during the Yugoslav period some Bektashi communities performed the Mātām for twelve days, see for example FILIPOVIĆ 1954, p. 11.

but diluted with drops of another substance such as juice, tea, or bitter yogurt (the only animal product allowed). The ensuing opaque colour of the beverage mnemonically recalls the dust from the sacred site of Karbalā, mimesis acting as reenactment of the agony of scorching heat, thirst and hunger experienced then by the wounded martyrs who died with lips parched from lack of water in the sweltering heat of a desert plain in modern-day Iraq. At the same time, by imbibing the liquid the believers partake in the ingestion of the sacred. Some members also keep a piece of rock salt known as Balim's salt (Turk. *Balum tuzu*; named after Bālm Sulṭān (1457-1517) of Dimetoka, the *pīr-i thānīsi*, or second spiritual leader of Bektashism, who is credited with beginning the process of the formal institutionalisation of the order). The dervishes would lick this piece of rock salt whenever they were thirsty. On the last night until the afternoon of 'Āshurā', when Imām Ḥusayn died, the Bektashi completely forgo the drinking of water.²¹ Some dervishes continue with the fast for the rest of the month even after the day of 'Āshurā'. For most of the Bektashi this fast replaces the Ramaḍān fast (regarded as one of the 'Five Pillars of Islam'). Bektashi supporters, too, show restraint and avoid luxuries during the Mātam period. As such, many of them also do not drink water or eat meat or dairy products during this period, and refrain from coffee for three days.

Throughout the collective fasting period of Mātam, the plight of the sacrificial victims at the Battle of Karbalā is evoked with much passion and sorrow through a plethora of dramatic depictions, creating an imaginary community of suffering and self-sacrifice. On the first night, however, the metahistorical importance of the event is mapped out. Linking the Karbalā tragedy with a number of important events throughout sacred history, the dervishes associate the tragedy

21- HASLUCK 1929, p. 559.

with prophets from the Islamic and Abrahamic traditions²² and recall Adam's and his descendants hardships after the Fall, Noah's sufferings during his mission, Abraham's agony as he was thrown into the fire, Joseph's torments as he was thrown into the well, the persecution of Moses by the Pharaoh, and the ordeals of Jesus at the hands of his adversaries. The sacred substrate of the Mātām, the Karbalā theme, is however made manifest when, at some *teqes*, soil from the Karbalā desert is mixed into a water vessel and drunk at the end of the ceremony by all present. From the second to the fifth night they remember the sufferings of the Prophet Muḥammad, the martyrdoms of Imām 'Alī, Imām Ḥasan, and Imām Ḥusayn. The sixth to the tenth nights focus on the events which lead up to the fateful events of Karbalā.²³ On the seventh night, sweetmeats or *helva* (Alb.; Turk. *helvā*; Ar. *ḥalwā*) made of semolina are served; the fine wheat semolina, once again, recalling the soil of Karbalā. Traditionally prepared for funerals or death anniversaries, the sweetmeats are blessed and distributed to guests and to the community. The bodily intake of this special *helva* serves as a reminder of the impending death anniversary of the martyrs.²⁴ Like the soil from the Karbalā plain, which can be interpreted in an exoteric and an esoteric manner, the *helva* similarly communicates the close interrelation between these two modes through its important meaning in Bektashi ritual contexts.

Throughout the Mātām, the wider Bektashi community gathers in the *teqes* to recite extracts from the 16th-century Ottoman Turkish text, *Ḥadiqat al-su'adā'* (Garden of the Blessed) (or from an Albanian adaptation called *Kopshti i të Përsosurvet*) written by the illustrious

22- KALLAJXHI 2016; see also NORRIS 1993, pp. 171-172. For detailed references of these early Islamic tradition, see BASHEAR, "Āšurā', An Early Muslim Fast," pp. 286-289.

23- At other Bektashi *teqes* the commemoration focusses on Ḥusayn, the Twelve Imāms, and Fāṭima.

24- For the Ottoman context of serving *helvā* in a funerary context, see FAROQHI 1995, pp. 236-237. On the ceremonial use of *helvā* in *Futuwwa-akhi* initiation rituals, see MÉLIKOFF 1964; YILDIRIM 2011, p. 172.

Ottoman mystic Muḥammad bin Sulaymān, known as Fuḏūlī (ca. 1483-1556).²⁵ The text recounts the tragedy of Karbalā in grand poetic detail evoking the combat during which Imām Ḥusayn's heavily outnumbered and under-equipped forces, including his infant son, eighteen men of his family and fifty-four male companions were encircled and placed under siege in the desert of Karbalā, close to Kufah in southern Iraq where, for three days, they were denied access to potable water (to al-Furāt (Euphrates) River, their only aqueous source). All but two of Ḥusayn's men were slain mercilessly on the battlefield at noon on Friday, the tenth of Muḥarram ('Āshurā') 61 AH/9 October 680 CE, a massive display of insult of a member of *ahl al-bayt* (Alb. *ehl-i beyt*; the sacrosanct family of the Prophet Muḥammad comprising the Prophet himself, his daughter Fāṭima, her husband 'Alī, and their two sons, Imām Ḥasan and Imām Ḥusayn). The Ḥusayn was decapitated, his body trampled by horses, and the women and children were taken prisoner. The indescribable sufferings and painful death of Ḥusayn, his family, and his companions symbolise his heroic struggle against religious tyranny and corruption. The mood of the community is sombre, accompanied by transformative collective lamentations²⁶ and semi-ritualised devotional weeping conveying a profound impression of personal suffering. The iconography of this mystical and religious symbolism (and its related ritual practices) allows the devotees to uncover hidden meanings which bear psychological and therapeutic significance. Since 2019 there is also a permanent transmission of these recitations via loudspeakers installed on the façade of the main *teqe* at the *Kryegjyshata* which runs continuously during the Mātām period.

At all Bektashi *teqes* the worshippers mournfully chant:²⁷

25- For a discussion on Fuḏūlī's influence on Bektashi literature, see NORRIS 1993, pp. 178-188.

26- Cf. TRIX 1995.

27- Cf. 'The Day of Ashura', a documentary film by Elizabeta KONESKA, 2005, marking the 'Āshurā' Day of the Bektashi Turks in the village of Kanatlarci in North Macedonia.

18000 people crave for water.
 Karbalā burnt with thirst, the grief wounded the soul.
 Shah Ḥusayn burnt with thirst.
 Karbalā burnt without water.
 May the traitors (*yazīda*) be cursed
 May the believers be blessed.
 Those who are in trouble.

They also recite the long poem *Qerbelaja* (Karbalā) of the nineteenth-century Bektashi poet Naim Frashëri (d. 1900), an adaptation from the last section of Fuḫūlī's 16th-century Ottoman Turkish text, *Ḥadīqat al-su'adā*²⁸ which describes the fateful day when the second Umayyad Caliph Yazīd ibn Mu'āwiya (r. 683-680) consolidated his authority by murdering Ḥusayn:

O brother Albanians!
 Come closer while crying
 And mourn this death
 So the light from the Lord comes [up]on you.
 Remember Karbalā!

The *Qerbelaja* goes on to offer visual knowledge of Ḥusayn's rebellion, the divinely pre-ordained nature of his final death and ultimate triumph being understood as an epic battle culminating in the triumph of Good over Evil. Many of the customs associated with 'Āshurā' attest to the firmly entrenched notion that this sacred day and its below-discussed eponymous dish has the potential to offer blessings and deliverance from suffering. There is no doubt that the socialist Yugoslav period (1943-1992) in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and the Hoxhaist regime in Albania (1944-1990), have affected Sufi life in the Balkans. Members of the Sufi order suffered from repression,

28- FRASHËRI 1898. On the historical background of the *Qerbelaja*, see NORRIS 1993, pp. 174-176.

loss of lives and substantial destruction during the war of 1992-1995 in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Kosovo conflict of 1998-1999, and the civil war in Albania (1996-1997). They connect Yazīd's oppression of Ḥusayn's with their own experiences of suffering and discrimination and their firm resolve to fight for justice. At all Sufi orders special importance is attached to the 'Āshurā' memorial service's common social ideals, which emphasise the spirit of brother- and sisterhood and the construction of unity and solidarity. This also allows for variegated expressions of grief and sorrow, striking deep chords in the different Sufi communities. By thereby tapping into the 'collective memory' and salvation history of the orders, the idea of martyrdom and the 'redemptive nature' of suffering creates community among the Sufis of the various orders by linking them with events across time and space.

The Feast of 'Āshurā': Symbolism and Significance

The ritual cycle culminates in the Feast of 'Āshurā' emblematised by the 'Āshurā' dish which symbolically links the tragic event of Karbalā with sacred time and space. The multifaceted significance of the feast signifies, as on the above-described first night of Muḥarram, not only the martyrdom of Imām Ḥusayn but also Adam and Eve's arrival on earth, Noah and the Ark landing on dry ground as well as a number of important events throughout sacred history.

Islamic tradition connects the main ingredient, wheat, of this ritual food with Man's Fall. It relates that the 'forbidden fruit' of the paradise tree, which the first couple was warned not to approach but from which they ate (Qur'ān 2:35), was an ear of grain (Ar. *sunbula*) or wheat (Ar. *burr*, *ḥiṭṭa*),²⁹ which played a central role in the Mesopotamian diet for several millennia. Extra-Qur'ānic Islamic sources relay that when

29- While wheat was the most prominent identification for the forbidden fruit, other designations include the vine (Ar. *karma*, *shajarat al-'inab*, or *shajarat al-khamr*) or a fig tree (Ar. *tina*, al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, vol. 1, pp. 231-233).

the first couple left the Garden of Eden, they took with them an ear of wheat,³⁰ associating the Fall with the beginning of cultivation of grains.³¹ Evliyā Çelebi (1611-ca. 1685), the celebrated Ottoman traveller of the seventeenth century, recorded a legend, according to which their first food on earth was a wheat dish:³²

When Eve and Adam met at ‘Arafat [Mecca] on the day of ‘Āshurā’, the twelfth day of the month of Muḥarram, they became hungry. They wandered aimlessly down the valley. Immediately God sent Gabriel with a plate of wheat ears and on the site of the mosque [Mosque of the Kitchen of Adam] he instructed Adam and Eve how to cook the wheat ears in a pot and they ate them. Once they had assuaged their hunger they gave thanks to God. In accordance with the word of the ‘Possessor of Gifts’ [God], they called the Lord Adam, Adam, because he appeared on the face of the earth and grazed herbs until he met Eve, and instructed by the Lord Gabriel they first ate soup.

The day of ‘Āshurā’ is also observed as the day when the waters of the great Flood subsided and the Noah and his family left the ark and made the first meal on dry land after the Flood.³³ The story likewise alludes to a Prophetic tradition which says:

My family is like Noah’s Ark: whoever embarks upon it reaches salvation.

30- The tradition that the paradise tree produced wheat is recorded, for example, by al-Nishābūrī, *Qiṣas al-anbiyā: dāstānḥā-i paiğambarān*, Tehran: Intiṣārāt-i Bungāh-i Tarğuma wa Naṣr-i kitāb, 1961, p. 17.

31- See the commentary of Ibn ‘Abbās (619-688) in WHEELER 2002, p. 29. For further references on these traditions, see WHEELER 2002, pp. 27-29. Cf. EVLIYĀ ÇELEBİ, *Seyahatnâme*, vol. 1, Istanbul: Kültür Bakanlıđı, 1896-1935, p. 230.

32- EVLIYĀ ÇELEBİ 1896-1935, vol. 9, p. 356.

33- Qur’ān 11:40 and 45-46; 21:76-77; 23:27; 37:76-77. Cf. Norris 1993, pp. 172-173.

According to a tradition current in Bektashi circles, Noah's Ark was three storeys high and when everybody, men and beasts, were aboard, it started sailing. It sailed for exactly five months and seventeen days until it reached dry land. However, there was waste land around them, everything was devastated and nothing was to be found, so for the first meal they gathered the last ten grains and cereals that remained in the Ark, ten being another symbolic number. They cooked it in honour of the moment when they saved themselves from the Flood, coming out of the Ark and stepping onto dry land. Observing the fast, men and beasts waited until sunset to eat this 'Āshurā'.

Coloured posters (Turk. *levhas*) featuring Noah's Ark, preserved in a number of *teqes*, highlight the close association between the successful journey of Noah's Ark and both the day and the meal of 'Āshurā' (Fig. 1):

(Surat Hūd (11:41-43) is inscribed in the cartouches that frame the Ark)

In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful.

He said, 'Embark in it.

In the name of God shall be its sailing and its anchorage.

Most surely my Lord is Forgiving, Merciful

And it moved on with them amid

waves like mountains;

And Noah called to his son, who had

kept away 'O my son! Embark with us, and do not

be with the disbelievers.' He said: I will take refuge

on a mountain—it will protect me from the water.

Written against the background of the blue sky is the remainder of verse 43

[Noah] said, 'There is no protector today from the decree of Allah, except for whom He gives mercy.' And the waves



Figure 1. Coloured Print with Noah's Ark. Teqë complex named after the late Dedebara Reshat Bardhi (1935-2011), the first *Kryeqjysh* after the fall of the Communist dictatorship, Sarandë (Saranda), southern Albania. Photograph © Sara Kuehn.

In Bosnia, many *tekke* complexes, such as the famous Hadži Sinan Tekke (Hadži Sinanova Tekija) of the Qādirī order, located in the Vrbanjusa district in the heart of the old city of Sarajevo, have a room which is specially reserved for preparing this sacred dish where it has been cooked since 1640 when the *tekke* was built. The ancient dish, a thick soup or pudding with wheat and berries, is cooked by Sufi orders and is not only distributed to everyone at the *tekke*, but shared with friends and family, and as pious charity served to the poor as auspicious climax of the ‘Āshurā’ Feast. Sharing food and partaking of the same sweet substance offers a way to spread the remembrance of God in the form of physical food and to reaffirm unity of the community. The distribution of this special food to others also has sacred significance arising from deep-rooted ideas of renewal and the believe that this food is imbued with a spiritual force, the consumption of which will bring renewed blessings and abundance (Ar. *baraka*) to the person who eats it. The vessel, in which the ‘Āshurā’ dish is served, acts as a temporal marker by materialising the ritualisation of the sacred day.

It is sometimes displayed in the *semahane* of *tekkes*, the hall in which prayer and the spiritual practice of the *dhikr* ritual are performed, throughout the rest of the year, as is the case at the Potok Tekke of the Naqshbandī order in the Kovaći *mahala* in Sarajevo where the large ritual earthenware and crystal vessel is prominently displayed (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. Earthenware and crystal ritual vessel reserved for the ‘Āshurā’ dish displayed in the *semahane* of the Potok Tekke of the Naqshbandī order in the Kovaći *mahala* in Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina. Photograph © Sara Kuehn.

As mentioned earlier, for the Bektashi the day of ‘Āshurā’ (Alb. *Dita e ashures*) and its dish possesses special sanctity. The potent symbolism and efficacy of the sacred food called ‘Āshurā’ is exemplified by a story recorded by Evliyā Çelebi. In his account on Hungary, where he spent six years, he relates that, in 1591, when Hasan Pasha, the Ottoman Wezir of Bosnia, was beleaguered by a large Christian army near Petrina in southern Slovenia, he received sudden help by the

Bektashi Idris Baba of Pecs (Turk. Pecuy), southern Hungary. The Baba's presence among the soldiers and his cries of encouragement boosted the soldiers' moral and were thus instrumental in defeating the enemy troops. After the victory a search was made for Idris Baba but he could not be found. It was later discovered that he had been cooking 'Āshurā' in Pecs and had been distributing the food to the populace to support the positive outcome of the battle. Since the city of Pecs was at a distance of around 400 km away from the battlefield, this was accounted as a saintly miracle (Turk. *keramet*) and his tomb in Pecs became a place of pilgrimage (Turk. *ziyaret*).³⁴

The miraculous nature of the dish is evoked when, at Bektashi *teqes*, the members of the community donne fresh clothing on the 9th of Muḥarram and begin with the preparations of the sacred dish. It is cooked in remembrance of the last edible scraps that remained of the Karbalā heroes' provisions, another example of the importance placed on understanding and implementing both esoteric and exoteric interpretations in ritual practice. The word 'āshūrā' means 'ten', so like Noah and his followers, some Sufi orders follow the custom of including ten ingredients in the dish, which are usually cooked separately and then combined in one huge kettle, used only for the cooking of the 'Āshurā' dish. Others, such as the Bektashi, ritually prepare it with twelve ingredients. At the *Kryegjyshata*, the food boiled in twelve huge cauldrons³⁵ as an offering to the Twelve

34- EVLIYĀ ÇELEBİ 1896-1935, vol. 6, pp. 119-120.

35- The mythical 'Black Kettle' (Turk. *kara kazan*) at the main Bektashi *tekke* is in the town of Hacibektaş in Central Anatolia, was gifted to the *tekke* by members of the Ottoman Janissary corps who regarded Hajji Bektash, the founding saint of the Bektashi Order, as patron saint; it was reserved exclusively for the ceremonial preparation of 'Āshurā' (Turk. *aşure*). This cauldron is inscribed with the name of Sersem Ali Baba (1551-1568/70), the first Dedebara of the Bektashi community after it re-opened its *tekkes* in the mid-sixteenth century; cf. TANMAN 2007, pp. 216, 218; FAROQHI 1995, p. 238; and FAROQHI 1976, p. 194. The significance of this dish in Turkish Sufi orders was such that when a charitable endowment (Ar. *waqf*) of a Sufi order became impoverished and had to cut back on its distribution of food to the poor, it always tried to ensure the distribution of the 'Āshurā' dish, see FAROQHI 1995, p. 238.

Imāms serves six hundred people (Fig. 3). Again others claim that the dish should consist of forty different ingredients. The dish usually contains grains, cereals, and nuts as well as fresh and dried fruits, and other ingredients necessary for the making of the special ritual food. According to Bektashi recipes, it includes wheat, water, starch, legumes, corn, dry figs, dry grapes, walnuts, sugar (or honey), cider, cinnamon.³⁶ Before being cooked, the grains are ritually ground by the dervishes with a large wooden pestle in a huge stone mortar.



Figure 3. Ancient cauldron used exclusively for the ritual cooking of the ‘Āshurā’ dish displayed throughout the year in the museum in the basement of the the Kryegjyshata in Tirana, Albania. It is taken out of the museum on the day before ‘Āshurā’ and used next to eleven other kettles to cook the dish. Photograph © Sara Kuehn.

36- Official website of the Headquarters of the Bektashi order in Tirana, Albania, <https://kryegjyshataboterorebektashiane.org/ashurja/>; accessed June 2021.



Figure 4. Salih Niyazi (1876-1941), the first Dedebara to establish the Kryegjyshata in Tirana, Albania, eating ‘Āshurā’ together with an Eastern Orthodox and a Muslim cleric. Kryegjyshata, Tirana, Albania. Photograph © Kryegjyshata, Tirana.

Overseen by the Dedebara Haxhi Edmond Brahimaj (b. 1959), World Leader (*Kryegjysh*) of the Albanian Bektashi since 2011, the Bektashi then cook these substances throughout the entire day over low fire at the *Kryegjyshata* in twelve enormous cauldrons.³⁷ In hierarchical order, beginning with the Dedebara, all partake in the stirring of the cauldron’s contents with long wooden paddles. While passing the implements through the paste in circular motions to mix the contents, the dervishes pronounce the Names of God. They thereby transform the preparation of the dish into a form of remembrance of God imbuing it with the most sacred hidden teachings and chant *mersiyes* which eulogise Imām Ḥusayn and curse the ‘Yazīdī’ that is

37- For a detailed account of the cooking of ‘Āshurā’ at a Bektashi tekke in 1925, see SAMANGİL, *Bektaşılık tarihi: aslı, doğuşu, özü, içyüzü, kolları, büyükleri, ihtilâlleri, edebiyatı, güzel sanatları*, İstanbul: Emniyet Kütüphanesi, 1945, pp. 89-90, cited after IŞIN 2013, p. 208.

the children of Mu‘āwiya (Alb. *Mavi*) who murdered Ḥusayn. When the dish is nearly completed, the Dede Baba, commonly referred to as Baba Mondi, adds some soil of the Karbalā slaying ground where Ḥusayn had been martyred,³⁸ thus stirring the quintessence of the sacred time and place of the Karbalā tragedy into the dish.

On the 10th and final day, the *muhibs* or initiated members have a private ceremony, after which those that are not initiated go into the Bektashi main ritual hall (Alb. *mejdan*) to be blessed by the *babas*. All Bektashi *teqes* invite local notables, foreign diplomats, and religious and political leaders at the respective *teqes* to partake in their ‘Āshurā’ Feast (Fig. 4). Traditionally not only dignitaries are invited to partake in this sacred ‘Āshurā’ Feast as Max Choublier (1873-1933; French vice-consul in Monastir (present-day Bitola), Macedonia, from about 1901 to 1911) recalls of the famous Harabati Baba Tekke (Alb. *Teqja e Baba Harabatit*) in Tetova, North Macedonia:³⁹

Invited to this feast were not only the members of the Order but the peasants of all the surrounding villages with whom they had contact. No distinction in religion was made.

He relays the important Bektashi tradition of inviting members of all religious communities to this feast, a tradition which is upheld until today. At the end of the Muḥarram ceremonies the fast is broken with the sunset on ‘Āshurā’ by drinking water mixed with Karbalā soil just like at the beginning of the Mātām period. Reading from the Qur’ān and reciting special prayers for health, safety, and spiritual nourishment, the community of surviving mourners and their visitors then partake in a communal meal which includes the sacrifice of

38- For an example of such a prayer, see NORRIS 1993, pp. 173-174.

39- CHOUBLIER 1927. Translated from the French by Robert ELSIE.

qurbān in commemoration of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son as well as the drinking of alcoholic beverages.⁴⁰

The meal ends with the consumption of the wheat-based 'Āshurā' dish, which is ceremonially eaten. The sacred dish is offered as nourishment of remembrance to all members of the Sufi community and their guests. As mentioned earlier, many events are associated with the consumption of this sacred food. Also called 'Noah's meal' in remembrance of the final meal on the Ark, the 'Āshurā' is above all inscribed with the Karbalā tragedy, honours and memorialises the Karbalā martyrs and is consumed in remembrance of the final meal of *ahl al-bayt* (family of the Prophet Muḥammad). Every kernel of the dish expresses a range of emotions from introspective personal grief to fervent communal mourning. Partaking in the intake of this blessed food serves as a reminder of the last meal of these descendants of the Prophet. Its consumption is also seen as a recompense for the fact that the martyrs died while they were hungry and thirsty. By swallowing the ritual food, the members of the community express their support of Ḥusayn's fight in Karbalā. His shining example will give them the strength to cope with sorrows suffered in their own lives and the challenges that lie ahead. The dish is also a symbol of gratitude that Ḥusayn's son Zayn al-Ābidīn (658-713) who survived the Karbalā massacre and became the Fourth Imām. While all male descendants of the Prophet, including the infants, were cruelly killed, Zayn al-Ābidīn was ill and thus overlooked, allowing the bloodline of the family of the Prophet to continue. The sweetness of the ritual food representing the historic and mythological events provide teachings on the righteous struggle (Ar. *jihād*) against both one's lower self (Ar. *nafs*) – that is, its taming and training and not its annihilation – as well as the timeless struggle against the injustices in the world. The synaesthetic

40- On Bektashi tradition of drinking alcohol as an integral part of the ritual ceremonies in Turkey, see Elias 2020.

experience of the dish recalls Imām Ḥusayn's quintessential example of selfless sacrifice, complete submission to God, and, finally, his mystical union with God. By communally ingesting these signs and symbols of 'Āshurā', the participants internalise the meta-historical events, overcome the pain of the collective traumas, and incorporate the religious teachings into their lives. Its consumption provides thus spiritual nourishment which facilitates a spiritual transformation helping the members of Sufi communities to get closer to the goal of self-transformation.

Conclusion

The 'Nourishment of Remembrance' discussed in this contribution symbolises both abstinence from foods and things which break the ten-day fast as well as the ingestion of those foods that are permitted during Mātām and the Feast of 'Āshurā'. It climaxes in the eponymous dish which goes back to very ancient mythical conceptualisations on cultivating wheat for consumption linked to a nexus of stories of prophets from the Islamic and Abrahamic traditions. The many ingredients of the dish represent not only infinite blessings but also all aspects and ideas associated with the holy day. Above all, the dish symbolises redemptive suffering recalling the moment in which oppression and salvation intertwine. While it stands for group cohesion and solidarity it also represents a sharing with the broader community and with multiple religious communities. Sharing the dish brings different religions together acting as prescient reminder of the possibilities presented by tolerance and understanding. Signifying a self-contained and cyclically closed tradition, the withholding as well as the bodily and spiritual ingestions of shared and circulated sacred nourishment at Sufi orders in the Balkans during Mātām and the 'Āshurā' Feast simultaneously bear exoteric and esoteric teachings with a powerful salvic potential.

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Preparing, serving, and consuming food can be political, as it was arranged in the royal banquet of the great kings. It could also be considered as a ritual, both in the frame of the greater ritual practices in the banquets for the gods, as well as according to a set of family costumes and gestures, which endures from one generation to the next. All these aspects have been one of the major human's activates during the history of the civilizations and have fascinated the scholars to investigate and decode the culinary customs of the peoples during the history. The contributions of this volume present a small collection of writings, which put focus on various aspects of culinary and dining practices in the Greater Iranian World from the ancient period to the contemporary religious feast of Sufi Orders in the Balkans. They aim to overview the recent developments in the field and discuss selected aspects of the rich variety of culinary practices.



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Edited by Shervin Farridnejad & Touraj Daryae

Food for Gods, Food for Mortals
Culinary and Dining Practices in the Greater Iranian World



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Cover Image: A School Scene, signed by Mīr Seyyed ‘Alī, Iran, Tabriz, ca. 1540; Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper; H x W: 37.2 x 23.9 cm. © Arthur M. Sackler Gallery

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Sultan Ġiyās ad-Dīn Khaljī (r.1469-1500) supervises his cooks preparing condensed pudding (*Ḥabīṣ*, lit. “mixed”) for him. *Ne‘matnāme-ye Nāṣeršāhī* (“Nāṣer Shah’s Book of Delights”), Mandu, ca. 1505, 14 × 13 cm; I.O Islamic 149, f.115v., detail © The British Library (after Muqarnas Online 36, 1, 2019).