

M. Brett Wilson

THE TWILIGHT OF OTTOMAN SUFISM: ANTIQUITY, IMMORALITY, AND NATION IN YAKUP KADRI KARAOSMANOĞLU'S *NUR BABA*

Abstract

This article examines modernist-nationalist thought on Sufi lodges during the late Ottoman Empire and early Turkish Republic via the controversial novel *Nur Baba* (1922) by Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu. Widely translated and the basis of the first-ever Turkish motion picture, *Nur Baba* depicts a debauched Sufi lodge in turn-of-the-century Istanbul where drug use, alcoholism, and illicit amorous liaisons run amok. The novel played an important role in shaping public perceptions of Sufi lodges in the twilight years of the Ottoman Empire. This piece explores the novel's place among early 20th-century critiques of Sufism, its approach to national history, its historical setting (during the reign of Sultan Abdülhamid II), and its close relationship to the intellectual concerns of the Second Constitutional Period (1908–18). It argues for a revised understanding of the novel's historical setting and contends that the novel employs a combination of moralistic critique and romantic nostalgia that is central to modernist-nationalist treatments of Sufism that instrumentalize Sufi culture for nation-building purposes.

Keywords: modernist-nationalist thought; Ottoman Sufism; Second Constitutional Period; Sufi lodges

Nur Baba is a microcosm of Turkey, Turkey is a Bektashi lodge.
Edebiyat Dersleri (Literature Lessons), Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar

In 1922, a group of Bektashi dervishes stormed and destroyed the set of a motion picture being filmed in Istanbul. The film, *Boğaziçi Esrarları* (Enigmas of the Bosphorus), depicted a lust-driven Sufi master seducing his female disciples and milking their financial resources. It was based on the late Ottoman novel *Nur Baba* (1922) by Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu (1889–1974), a popular and controversial work that had a lasting impact on the perception of Sufism in modern Turkey. It was the first novel in Turkish that criticized Sufi practices and institutions, presenting an unflattering yet complex portrait of a Bektashi lodge on the Asian shore of the Bosphorus. In addition to being a popular book, the novel was the basis for the first ever Turkish motion picture. Mustafa Kemal

M. Brett Wilson is an Associate Professor in the Department of History and the School of Public Policy, Central European University, Budapest, Hungary, and an Associate Professor in the Department of Religious Studies, Macalester College, Saint Paul, Minn.; e-mail: wilsonb@ceu.edu

© Cambridge University Press 2017 0020-7438/17

Atatürk (1881–1938), the first president of the Turkish Republic, took a personal interest in the novel and invited the author for a visit to discuss it.

Under his leadership in 1925, the Grand National Assembly moved to prohibit the Sufi orders (*tarikāt*) and close Sufi lodges in the Turkish Republic. Several scholars have suggested that the novel played a role in convincing Mustafa Kemal to take these steps.¹ While a causal relationship between the novel and the policy is difficult if not impossible to assess, it is certain that *Nur Baba* gave literary expression to a way of thinking about Sufism that pervaded the zeitgeist of modernists and nationalists in Turkey and around the globe. *Nur Baba* epitomizes an approach to Sufism that criticizes its practices and institutions while simultaneously appreciating it as a disembodied philosophy or set of ideas. To date the novel has been translated widely, including a German translation by the prominent scholar of Sufism Annemarie Schimmel, and on a number of occasions *Nur Baba* has been cited as a paradigmatic example of anti-Sufi literature or, alternately, as a rationale for banning Sufism.² A prevalent trend in interpreting the novel is to view it as an ethnographic work that accurately describes a Bektashi Sufi lodge and its ceremonies.³

With the aim of providing fresh perspective on the novel and connecting it to broader conversations about Sufism and late Ottoman history, this article makes two interventions. First, I argue that the novel directs a combination of moralistic critique and romantic fascination toward a Sufi lodge and that it is this tension between critique and fascination that animated modernist-nationalist thinking on Sufism during the 1910s and 1920s. This combination allows the novel (and modernist critics more broadly) to level harsh criticisms of Sufi practices and practitioners, while nostalgically exploring Sufi lodges as repositories of cultural artifacts that illustrate the history of the Turkish nation, linking it to Central Asia and recording its encounters with Persian, Arabic, Greek, and Roman civilizations. Second, I argue that the historical setting of the novel has been neglected and is essential to understanding its relationship to the intellectual concerns of the Second Constitutional Period (1908–18) about class, gender, and sexual morality. These issues are prominent, and it would not be misplaced to say that these ethical and social concerns are of equal importance to Sufi critique in the novel.

In brief, *Nur Baba* tells the story of an elite woman—Nigar—and her involvement with a Bektashi Sufi lodge. The plot centers on the Bektashi Shaykh Nur Baba's seduction of Nigar, who is young, beautiful, and married with children. Residing in a large mansion on the Bosphorus, she is the wife of an Ottoman diplomat who is away on assignment in Madrid. Nigar is recruited to the lodge by her aunt Ziba and other disciples. As Nigar participates in lodge activities, she observes that several women, including her aunt, had become Nur Baba's lovers and lost their fortunes and families as a result of the affairs. Over the course of the novel, we meet several such women who have become aging, destitute widows. Nevertheless, Nigar—a reserved, well-mannered, aristocratic lady—is drawn to Nur Baba and his community by its exotic allure. Bored by her husband's absence and the monotonous family life of her waterfront mansion, she chooses to join the lodge and becomes Nur Baba's lover. Gradually, she becomes obsessed with her shaykh and comes unhinged, developing a drug addiction and a habit of heavy drinking. Nigar's cousin Majid narrates much of the story. He is stunned by her attraction to a dubious spiritual teacher and attempts to rescue her from the lodge that is corrupting

her. The story hinges on the tension of whether Nigar will escape the shaykh's orbit and regain her life and family or continue her downward spiral. With this tale of a Sufi master corrupting an elite woman, Karaosmanoğlu uses a modern literary form—the novel—to adopt certain forms of religious slander (more to follow) for the modernist-nationalist public sphere of the 1920s.

SUFISM UNDER FIRE: THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

Nur Baba was written after decades of debate among Muslim reformers around the globe about the role of Sufi orders in modern societies. In the late 19th and early 20th century, an important contingent of Muslim intellectuals—including Rashid Rida, Muhammad Abduh, and Musa Bigiyev—argued that Sufi institutions and practices that did not comply with the shari'a were detrimental to society and at odds with modern notions of progress, justice, and equality.⁴ In their view, Sufi institutions—particularly the lodges, master–disciple relationships, and non-shari'a rituals—were part of the structure of traditional society that impeded modernization and, additionally, prevented fresh interpretation of the Qur'an and hadith, which was viewed by most modernists as the lynchpin of religious renewal. As Nile Green writes, “Sufism was the sacrifice required for this direct reformist return to the sources.”⁵ Meanwhile, a number of liberal Victorian and Edwardian intellectuals developed a discourse about Sufism as a kind of mysticism comparable to Yoga and Buddhism. They highlighted universal principles of “mysticism” espoused by the Sufi orders and deemphasized their specific ritual, social, and institutional structures.⁶ Both critical modernist as well as romantic perspectives on Sufism play an important role in the novel.

Modernist intellectuals and Muslim reformers of various stripes had divergent views of Sufism in the late 19th and early 20th century. The Wahhabi movement based in the Arabian Peninsula deemed Sufism a perversion of true Islam and advocated its abolishment, while modernist Muslim thinkers around the globe argued over the role that Sufism would play in a reformed and modernized society. Among modernizers, positions varied widely, from advocating for abolition of the orders to purging and purifying the practices of Sufis so as to bring them in line with mainstream Islamic praxis.

Their critiques of Sufism were eclectic. The Indian modernist Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817–98), for instance, composed a defense of the Naqshbandi practice of envisioning the shaykh (*tasawwur-i shaykh*) while, at the same time, condemning Sufi rituals that deviated from the sunna.⁷ The Syrian Salafi writer Jamal al-Din al-Qasimi (1866–1914) railed against tomb visitation and other popular practices⁸ but, meanwhile, refused to condemn Ibn 'Arabi and considered shari'a-compliant Sufism as the moral basis of Islam.⁹ In 1896, the Albanian intellectual Naim Frashëri (1846–1900) presented a nationalist vision of Bektashi Sufism that aimed to mobilize Sufis to support the cause of Albanian nationalism.¹⁰ At the other end of the spectrum, the late Ottoman writer Kılıçzade Hakkı (1872–1960) proposed an outright abolition of the Sufi orders and lodges in 1913 in order to make way for modernization. As these examples indicate, there was no consensus among reformers about the role that Sufism should play in modern Muslim societies. *Nur Baba* should be seen as part and parcel of these conversations. It contains a variety of perspectives about Sufism and reflects the eclectic mix of ideas

circulating among intellectuals during the Second Constitutional Period, the period in which Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu came of age as a writer.

A WRITER AND HIS TIMES

Karaosmanoğlu's early novels wrestled with the tensions and crises of late Ottoman society. Born in Cairo, his early schooling was in the Western Anatolian town of Manisa—the ancestral homeland of the Karaosmans, one of the most powerful families of the Ottoman Empire until the 19th century. He continued his education in İzmir before returning to Egypt in 1905, where he studied at the French Catholic Collège de Frères and then a Swiss high school. In 1908, at the age of eighteen, he moved to Istanbul where he entered law school and became involved in the literary scene of the capital. He abandoned law school and devoted his time to writing plays, poems, and short stories that were published in various newspapers and journals. Karaosmanoğlu was a part of the *Fecr-i Âtî* (Dawn of the Future), a literary circle of young writers founded in 1909 that advocated for literature devoted to art and aesthetics and was open to modern European, especially French, forms and genres. The group's slogan "Art is personal and revered" (*sanat şahsi ve muhterem*) reflects its tendency toward individualism and the moral seriousness with which it approached literature. Writers associated with the *Fecr-i Âtî* include Ahmed Hâşim (1887–1933), Refik Halit Karay (1888–1965), and Mehmed Fuad Köprülü (1890–1966). Karaosmanoğlu's name appears among the signatories of the society's manifesto published in 1910.¹¹ Additionally, he was a close friend of the poet and author Yahya Kemal (1884–1958), who played a major role in sparking the Neo-Hellenism trend (*Nev-Yunanilik*) in late Ottoman literature upon his return from Paris in 1912. The sociologist and theoretician of Turkish nationalism Ziya Gökalp (1876–1924), who supported the use of Latin and Greek sources—elements of what he considered a common Mediterranean civilization—for the construction of national literature, praised Yahya Kemal and Yakup Kadri for their explorations in antiquity.¹² Despite viewing Gökalp's Turkism as dry and overly intellectual, Karaosmanoğlu was influenced by Turkish intellectual currents. And, like Gökalp, he also had a nonracial vision of nationalism, viewing the Turkish nation as a compilation of experiences and crises.¹³

Circa 1913, Karaosmanoğlu began to frequent Bektashi circles and was initiated into the Kısıklı lodge in Çamlıca on the Asian side of the Bosphorus, the same location of the fictional lodge in the novel. His entrance into the lodge coincided with a period in which he suffered from tuberculosis. There are reports that his friends insisted that he spend time at the lodge as a way of lifting his spirits after struggling with the illness.¹⁴ In his study of Karaosmanoğlu's life and oeuvre, Niyazi Akı argues that he entered the order not as an earnest spiritual seeker but as a curious writer in search of material for a controversial and popular novel. Additionally, he notes that Bektashism was rather fashionable in literary and intellectual circles in this period (more to follow).¹⁵ Given the bombastic and scandalous style of the novel, Akı's interpretation of Karaosmanoğlu's interest in the lodge seems apt. Both Akı and the literary scholar and novelist Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar (1901–62) write that his time at the lodge coincided with a period of infatuation with Greek and Roman literature, which is reflected in the novel's numerous references to literature and historical figures from antiquity.¹⁶ In their monograph on the novel, Cafer

Gariper and Yasemin Küçükcoşkun emphasize the influence of Friedrich Nietzsche on Karaosmanoğlu during this period, but their evidence for this is subjective.¹⁷

In 1916, Karaosmanoğlu went to a sanatorium in Switzerland for tuberculosis treatment. He returned to Istanbul in 1919 and began to cover the national independence struggle for the newspaper *İkdam* (Struggle). His first novel, *Kiralık Konak* (Mansion for Rent), appeared in serialized form in 1920, followed shortly thereafter by *Nur Baba*. The latter was serialized in 1921 but left incomplete due to public outcry, and published in book form in 1922. In 1923, Karaosmanoğlu became a member of the Grand National Assembly representing the southeastern city of Mardin. In 1932, he cofounded and led the magazine *Kadro* (Cadre) that championed a communitarian, communist-inflected strain of Turkish nationalism. As a result of opposition to his ideas within the ruling party, beginning in 1934 he was administratively exiled to a series of diplomatic posts in Albania, Czechoslovakia, Switzerland, and Iran. After the 1960 coup in Turkey, Karaosmanoğlu reentered domestic politics as a member of parliament, a position he held until 1965. By the time he passed away in 1974, he had composed eleven novels, five memoirs, as well as plays, translations, short stories, poetry, and sundry essays. In Turkey, his most famous work is the novel *Yaban* (The Stranger, 1932). However it was *Nur Baba* that made Yakup Kadri famous both in Turkey and in Europe.¹⁸

In his memoir *Anamın Kitabı* (My Mother's Book, 1957), Karaosmanoğlu discusses his childhood impressions of Bektashis: "The people of Manisa considered it [Bektashism] worse than murder, theft, and being non-Muslim, and I knew that in our house it was forbidden to even say the word."¹⁹ Because of this passage, some have suggested that Karaosmanoğlu had deep-seated biases against Alevi-Bektashis.²⁰ While bias is possible, his memoir also discusses a Bektashi dervish of which he was rather fond, so it cannot be said that his childhood experiences were exclusively negative. Moreover, accusations of bias cannot be easily reconciled with his political activism and intellectual positions over the course of his life. His work *Erenlerin Bağından* (From the Orchard of Saints) (1922) reveals his enthusiasm for the spirit of Anatolian and Bektashi mysticism.²¹ It also cannot be said that he was a critic of Sufism more broadly. Tanpınar thought that if Karaosmanoğlu had been born in earlier centuries, he would have been a Sufi master in one of the lodges.²² During his youth, he attended the ceremonies of several Sufi lodges in Manisa and had a strong attachment to the Mevlevi Sufi order. He was deeply impressed by its dervishes and ceremonies. Conversely, he was disturbed by the raucous meetings of the Rufai lodge, where the participants pierced themselves.²³ Toward the end of his political career, in the 1960s, he advocated for Alevi representation in the Directorate of Religious Affairs which was (and is) a Sunni institution.²⁴

THE BEKTASHI ORDER AND ITS DETRACTORS

The Bektashi order takes its name from the shaykh Hacı Bektaş (d. ca. 1271), whose tomb complex is in the central Anatolian district of Nevşehir. The order was a key institution in the early Ottoman Empire closely linked to the Janissary corps. When the Janissary corps was abolished in 1826, the order was suppressed and went underground. Yet it maintained itself and reemerged later in the 19th century when the political climate permitted, particularly during the reigns of Abdülmecid (r. 1839–61) and Abdülaziz (r. 1861–76). This period of covert operation cultivated the popular idea of a "Bektashi

secret” preserved zealously by members of the order. This secret was thought to be some type of mystical knowledge limited to initiates. Due to its reverence for the Shi‘i imams and divergences from Sunni ritual practice, the Bektashi order has been subject to a number of stereotypes and slander since Ottoman times. In the introduction to *Nur Baba*, Karaosmanoğlu writes, “there is no legend that the ignorant populace has not fabricated, and no lie or insult that they have not believed about Bektashis.”²⁵ The most famous of these is the idea that Bektashi ceremonies involve ritualized orgies, known in Turkish metonymically as “putting out the candle” (*mum söndürmek*). This phrase conjures a scene in which the candles illuminating a ritual space are put out and the participants engage in sexual acts with whomever they encounter in the dark. In the introduction to the novel, Karaosmanoğlu mentions that some Muslims consider Bektashis ritually impure and equal to apostates or atheists.²⁶ While he attempts to distinguish his novel from popular heresiography and gossip, he plays upon such themes and, as we shall see, portrays the lodge as a venue of illicit sensuality.

The “putting out the candle” myth is an ancient slander that can be observed in Roman descriptions of secretive religious groups. Roman observers close to the state considered the Bacchantes and the early Christians as mystery cults that degraded morality and held scandalous, subversive meetings at night.²⁷ Describing early Christians, Octavius writes:

On a special day they gather for a feast with all their children, sisters, mothers—all sexes and all ages. There, flushed with the banquet after such feasting and drinking, they begin to burn with incestuous passions. They provoke a dog tied to the lampstand to leap and bound towards a scrap of food which they have tossed aside outside the reach of his chain. By this means the light is overturned and extinguished, and with it common knowledge of their actions; in the shameless dark with unspeakable lust they copulate in random unions, all equally being guilty of incest, some by deed, but everyone by complicity.²⁸

Versions of this ancient myth circulated in the Muslim world as well. During the Ottoman period, opponents of the Bektashis used it to defame the order and other communities such as Jews that had converted to Islam and were accused of crypto-Judaism.²⁹ The 17th-century traveler Evliya Çelebi (d. ca. 1684) discusses this slander in his *Book of Travels*, explaining that it was used against the Persians, the Kızılbaş, and the Bektashis in certain regions of Anatolia. However, having traveled widely in these areas, he writes, “I have never observed anything like that.”³⁰

Playing on these themes, the novel *Nur Baba* connects Bektashi ceremonies to the mystery cults of antiquity through a number of references and allusions. In particular, commentators and scholars have focused on themes related to the cult of Dionysius and its Roman iteration, the Bacchanalia.³¹ Tanilli, for instance, argues that the novel portrays *Nur Baba* as a satyr and his young beloved Süleyha as a nymph.³² The feasts in *Nur Baba* are depicted in Dionysian fashion with excessive drinking, ecstatic music, and sexual impropriety. Like the Maenads who follow the god Dionysius, the female disciples of *Nur Baba* enter a trancelike infatuation and lose themselves. Karaosmanoğlu criticizes the wayward Bektashis for some of the same acts that Romans criticized the Bacchae—illicit sexuality, drunkenness, depravity, undermining the family, and secretive nocturnal meetings that potentially threaten the public order.³³

In 186 BCE the Roman Senate decided to persecute the followers of the god Bacchus, an episode known as the Bacchanalia Affair. The disciples were accused of committing sexual indecencies, holding subversive nocturnal meetings, and posing a political threat to the state. Some 7,000 Bacchantes were executed and the Bacchanalia was forced underground.³⁴ After five years of persecution, the Senate allowed for a deinstitutionalized form of Bacchanalia to be practiced by those for whom it was religious tradition and a duty that could not, in good conscience, be neglected.³⁵ Matthias Riedl writes that Livy's (59 or 64 BCE–17 CE) account of the Bacchanalia Affair argues that the Bacchanalia “destroy the moral personality” and therefore the cult “must be destroyed immediately.”³⁶

In framing the Bektashi ceremonies in the mold of the Bacchanalia, Karaosmanoğlu draws parallels between these two persecuted religious groups. In 1826, Ottoman sultan Mahmut II suppressed the Bektashi order and abolished the Janissaries, with which the order was closely linked. On 15 June 1826, some 6,000 Janissaries and Bektashis were killed.³⁷ Ottoman official historiography refers to the event as the Auspicious Incident (Vaka-i Hayriye), and it is often discussed by historians as a turning point for Ottoman modernization and reform. After the purge, the Bektashis, like the Bacchanalia, were forced underground and conducted secret meetings. Considering *Nur Baba* side by side with Livy's account, one can make a speculative argument that Karaosmanoğlu, like Livy, is arguing that the institution of the Bektashi lodge should be “destroyed immediately.” Even without reference to Livy's account, scholars have interpreted the novel in political fashion. For instance, Erdağ Gökner writes, “The novel implies that such characters will persist in exploiting members of society unless they are stopped.”³⁸ Given the political and intellectual debates of the period, there is reasonable cause for this political interpretation of the novel, a point to which we shall return shortly.

On a number of occasions in Ottoman history, particular Sufi orders were banned from the capital or suppressed, the case of the Bektashis in 1826 being the most famous instance. However, the idea of banning all the Sufi lodges first appeared during the Second Constitutional Period which began in 1908. The 1908 revolution opened the way to a freer press which made it possible to engage in scathing attacks on religious institutions and, moreover, to propose radical ideas for reforming society. In 1913, as part of his revolutionary manifesto—“Pek Uyanık bir Uyku” (A Very Vigilant Sleep)—Kılıçzade Hakkı proposed an outright abolition of the Sufi lodges:

The tekkes and zaviyes [dervish lodges] which are a source of idleness and hangouts for the indolent will be totally abolished and their revenues and stipends that have not been spent for the people there but given to the families of the sheikhs for free, will be cut and added to the budget of education.

Those who are learned and erudite among the sheikhs will be given a house and stipend for life on the condition of teaching at a school. The others, that is to say, those who are ignorant, whose only capital is a couple of endurable phrases and expressions that they inherited from their fathers . . . and who have caused harm to the people ideologically and scientifically, will not be given anything and will be forced to earn a living by working. Those who dupe people by the dirty trick of casting a spell will be punished.³⁹

In 1913, in his reformist treatise *İstikbale Doğru* (Toward the Future), Hüseyin Kâzım Kadri (1870–1934) also proposed closing the lodges. Calling for an “abolition of all

the orders,” he argued that contemporary Sufism divides Muslims and causes them to have conflicting and incoherent ideas.⁴⁰ Furthermore, he described dervishhood as a “societal catastrophe” and referred to Sufi practices as “habitual actions” (*itiyad*) that achieve nothing for worshippers.⁴¹ According to Kadri, imitators—those who follow blindly—have taken the place of the true Sufis, and contemporary Sufism is a hollow shell of its former glory. Meanwhile, he expressed his respect for Sufism as a “religious philosophy” and stated his deep affection for Ibn ‘Arabi.⁴²

Written at the same time, *Nur Baba* clearly reflects these ideas, using almost identical language and tropes to describe the life of the lodge and the fall of Sufism from enlightened spirituality to benighted and intellectually stunted charlatanism. This does not necessarily mean that Karaosmanoğlu supported the abolition of the Sufi orders, which remains unclear, but it does highlight the extent to which *Nur Baba* is in conversation with a particular set of post-1908 conversations about Sufism.

IN SEARCH OF PHILOSOPHY

Karaosmanoğlu’s personal participation in the Bektashi order, whatever it truly consisted of, ended in 1916 when he went to Switzerland for medical treatment of his tuberculosis. The bookish, idealistic character Majid in the novel is designed to represent a young Yakup Kadri. Majid, an intelligent young man from an elite family, is a spiritual seeker who attempts to learn the ways of the lodge. A voracious reader and member of the Westernized elite, Majid learned about Sufism through books about “mysticism” and philosophy with scant connection to actual practitioners. He approaches the Bektashi order using generic categories to structure his ideas. As the narrator describes it, “To him, Sufism was a type of ‘mysticism’ and Bektashism was a primitive, roughly conceived form of ‘pantheism.’”⁴³ Majid also has expectations of finding certain principles, behaviors, and attitudes that aligned with descriptions obtained from a scholarly friend who provided him some basic information about Islamic philosophy. Karaosmanoğlu presents Majid as having vague and incorrect ideas about Bektashis in particular and Sufism in general: “In his view, the Bektashi dervishes had departed from Islam and were nothing more than a few ‘Diogeneses.’”⁴⁴ The Greek Cynic Diogenes of Sinope is known to have led an ascetic lifestyle—for example, choosing to live in a tub in Athens rather than a house—and to have flaunted a variety of social conventions by performing shameful acts in public, for which he was given the epithet “Diogenes the Dog.” In Greek, the term *cynic* literally means “doglike” and, according to some explanations, the term traces back to Diogenes himself. Additionally, the story of Diogenes walking around with a lantern during the daytime in search of a true human being was a common trope in Sufi writings.⁴⁵ Invoking the antinomian sage, Majid describes Bektashi dervishes as debauched, cynical, and doglike.⁴⁶

While Majid hoped to find enlightenment or esoteric knowledge from the order, he also sought intellectual edification. In this regard, his experience in the lodge was a consistent disappointment. When Majid meets the Sufi master (*mürşit*) Nur Baba for the first time, his expectations of encountering a philosopher-sage are dashed. He finds the shaykh to be superficially charming but utterly bereft of the kind of information about the Bektashi order that he seeks. On his first visit to the lodge, Majid sees several unusual paintings hanging on the walls that depict saints and scenes from Bektashi mythology.

“These pictures must have been drawn by a child and painted by a lunatic,” he writes in his diary. When he asks Nur Baba to explain their symbolism, the shaykh simply tells him the names of the saints in the pictures and has nothing informative to say about the meaning of the bizarre images.⁴⁷ Throughout the story, Nur Baba appears ignorant and uneducated, a far cry from the knowledgeable guru that Majid had hoped to find. Time and again, his preconceived notions about Sufi orders conflict with his experience of living dervishes in Istanbul. The Sufism of his imagining is enlightened, informative, and ethereal whereas the actual dervishes he meets are emotional, unintellectual, and sensual. The character Nur Baba is not a philosopher or even a spiritual teacher but a manipulative womanizer with sensual cravings and unpredictable mood swings. Likewise, the rituals in which he participates are bodily, raucous, and disorderly.

The final disappointment comes when Majid is initiated and hopes to learn the “Bektashi secret”—a subject of immense public interest and gossip in the 1910s and 1920s. During his initiation ceremony, Nur Baba whispers in his ear, bestowing upon him the mysteries of the Bektashi path:

When I arose from the master’s presence after this secret transmission of knowledge that lasted just five minutes, there was only a thick cone-shaped hat on my head. Other than this I felt nothing weighty. I was not the recipient of any wisdom, just one or two vague sentences rang in my ears.⁴⁸

Despite his disillusionment with the intellectual calibre of the lodge, Majid continues to search for its “philosophy.” Toward the end of the novel, he has an epiphany that perhaps this philosophy is not a set of ideas but rather an attitude toward life and its exigencies.

Eyvallah! Isn’t this the philosophy of Bektashism? Doesn’t it all stem from what this word expresses? Laying your hand over your heart, bowing your head, leaving yourself to the spiritual pleasure of humility and modesty; to say “*Eyvallah! Eyvallah!*” to insult, to cruelty, to oppression, to offense and enemies! What else besides realizing this lofty goal could be the secret of this order?⁴⁹

Regardless of whether this reflects Karaosmanoğlu’s personal views or merely those of the character, the passage is indicative of a mindset that places primacy on the search for philosophy and ideas at the heart of Sufism. Karaosmanoğlu depicts a seeker who cannot quench his spiritual and philosophical thirst in the context of the lodge. In contrast, he finds the lodge to be a place that caters to physical and emotional needs with little regard to the mind.

European scholars of Sufism such as A. J. Arberry (1905–69) as well as the early members of the Salafiyya movement of Islamic reform such as Jamal al-Din Qasimi and Muhammad Abduh converged in their disapproval of popular Sufism and its attendant practices. For Arberry, the early period of Sufism was one of true mysticism that then declined over time into saint worship and popular superstition. For this reason, he deemed modern Sufis unworthy of study.⁵⁰ It is notable though not surprising that Yakup Kadri and his contemporaries echoed this decline narrative. Whereas al-Qasimi and Abduh viewed popular Sufism as an obstacle to true Islam, Karaosmanoğlu viewed it as an obsolete institution that was rich in folkloric content and material for Turkish national history.

SOCIAL CLASS AND LODGES IN THE HAMIDIAN ERA

Class dynamics play a key role in Karaosmanoğlu's critical portrait of Nur Baba's lodge. For Kadri and others in his social class, entering a Bektashi lodge would have been something of a walk on the wild side, and this comes through clearly in the novel. The heroine Nigar—the wife of an ambassador who lives in a large mansion on the Bosphorus—is mortified when she learns that her aunt Ziba has been frequenting a Bektashi lodge. It was difficult for Nigar to imagine that her aunt could involve herself with the order because of its heretical connotations as well as a sense that the Bektashi order was for the rabble and unsuitable for the Istanbul elite. For an upper-class woman to attend such a lodge meant crossing a rather stark class divide, lowering oneself to the level of the unrefined.

However, the novel portrays a particular era in the Bektashi lodges of Istanbul. By the 1860s, elites—particularly elite women—began to frequent the lodges, patronizing them and gaining immense influence due to their financial contributions and social standing. For instance, the mother of Sultan Abdülaziz (1830–76), Pertevniyal Sultan (1812–83), built a lodge for the Bektashi shaykh Laz Emin Baba and made it possible—despite the illegal status of the order—for Bektashis to publish books.⁵¹ This trend is thought to have accelerated during the reign of Sultan Abdülhamid II (1876–1909) when elite Istanbulites entered Bektashi lodges in search of a freer social environment. The novel is set during the reign of Abdülhamid II. It describes the boisterous, music-filled nights of the Abdülaziz period, then intoning that, “since Abdülaziz's reign had come to an end in Istanbul, a completely different era had begun.”⁵² This is a clear reference to the oppressive political and intellectual climate of Istanbul under Abdülhamid II who amplified censorship and surveillance and closely monitored potentially suspicious activities.

It is surprising that literary scholars have not discussed the importance of this historical setting because the Hamidian context of the novel is essential to interpreting it. The novel was composed during the Second Constitutional Period, following the deposition of Abdülhamid II, a time in which everything associated with his reign was harshly criticized. Post-1908 intellectuals defined his era as one of stifling despotism, Oriental backwardness, and wayward cosmopolitanism. This setting raises the question of whether *Nur Baba* should be read as a criticism of the reign of Abdülhamid II and as an exploration of how some Istanbulites coped with its oppressive aspects.

In the novel, the attendees of the lodge ceremonies embody a trend of elite escapism and debauchery. The Bektashi lodge is their refuge from Hamidian despotism. For instance, the gentleman Necati Bey, described as “a man saturated with the literature of Tavukpazarı”—a neighborhood in Istanbul famous for drinking houses and escapism during the Hamidian era—is a powerful official in the Ministry of Justice.⁵³ He is joined by Nesimi, a high-ranking official from the Ministry of Pious Foundations, Hamdi, a colonel, and Rauf, who is described as a “palace gentleman of the new generation” with a “satin collared overcoat and thin curled mustache.”⁵⁴ The protagonist, Nigar, is the wife of an ambassador and her aunt, Madame Ziba, is the daughter of one of “the wine-imbibing, open-hearted, elegant men of the palace” from Abdülaziz's reign.⁵⁵ Additionally, the novel mentions the presence of an actual historical figure in the lodge, the writer Muallim Naci (1849–93), who was an important poet and literary critic in the late 19th century.⁵⁶ The date of his death, 1893, allows us to locate the novel in the

period before 1893, a period in which the Ottoman state was investigating the activities of Bektashi lodges.

Word of elite women attending Bektashi lodges attracted the attention of the Ottoman government. Documents in the Ottoman Archives of the Prime Ministry indicate that, in the 1890s, the state investigated rumors that women were attending seven or eight different Bektashi lodges where, allegedly, alcohol was being consumed. The documents describe the attendees as a motley crew of the “employed and unemployed,” women, and unmarried ascetic dervishes.⁵⁷ The novel reflects these rumors: Nur Baba’s lodge is a place where elites and commoners come together and intermingle. The contrast in class comes through vividly in the interactions between elite disciples and Nur Baba himself, an orphan from central Anatolia who was adopted by a wandering dervish and brought to the capital. Lacking any formal education or social status beyond his position in the lodge, the former orphan from the provinces is master to a group of wealthy, well-bred disciples from Istanbul’s leading families. In the eyes of the author, a scandalous role reversal has occurred. Refined women submitting themselves to the guidance of an ignorant, coarse spiritual master is the cause of disgust for the character Majid, who writes in his diary:

What kind of thing is Bektashism, and what kind of woman is Nigar? Isn’t all of this contrary to her education, to her mind, to the knowledge she has obtained, to her way of living, thinking, and dressing? . . .

. . . I felt as if I had fallen by chance among the creatures of another world. If nothing else, Nigar should have felt that she was associating with persons far below her.⁵⁸

Yet the novel does not blame the lower classes or the Bektashis’ lack of refinement for the predicament of the lodges. On the contrary, it places much of the responsibility on the pleasure-seeking elites who change the atmosphere and distort the power structure. In the case of Nur Baba’s lodge, wealthy female disciples not only join the lodges but also govern them by virtue of their status as patrons. Yakup Kadri suggests that the entrance of elite *bon vivants* and capricious female patrons into the lodges had a corrupting influence on the order, transforming once serious houses of devotion into venues for lust and debauchery. The character of the wealthy and married Nasib Hanım, for example, uses the lodge as a place to meet with her lover, and encourages other women to pursue intimate relations with Nur Baba: “If one were to rely completely on Nasib’s description, it would seem that a Bektashi ceremony resembled the debauched banquets of Nero, Petronius or Trimalchio.”⁵⁹ Such examples abound. The dervishes from less august social backgrounds are not paragons of virtue either. Dervish Çinari, a celibate ascetic who lives in the lodge, distributes drugs and is profoundly alcoholic: “The only time he separated from his bottle of wine was when he slept.”⁶⁰

Social hierarchies are replicated inside the lodge, both in the interactions among the disciples and in the ritual spaces themselves. The poor disciples, for instance, behave like the servants of Nigar and Ziba but they also violate boundaries:

Though these women respected the preservation of the distance between themselves and women like Aunt Ziba or Nigar, and wandered in the rooms and halls of the lodge with the demeanor of servants or spoiled parasites, it did not prevent them from sitting beside Nigar or whispering something in her ear and chuckling, or making excessive demonstrations of friendship.⁶¹

Majid is perturbed by hierarchy within the lodge, but paradoxically, he is equally disgusted by the transgression of class boundaries. As the attendees of a ceremony gather around small circular tables to eat, he observes that the seating arrangements are completely organized by wealth and status. Those from humble backgrounds wait hand and foot on the elites. Majid concludes, “It is certainly appropriate to hang calligraphic panels on the doors of Bektashi lodges with slogans like ‘Honor people according to their rank.’” This regard for class structure goes against Majid’s sense that Sufi orders should embody and encourage an egalitarian ethos.

In addition to the dynamics between rich and poor, the power structure within the order disturbs Majid. Reminiscent of traditional critiques of Sufism, the elevated status of the shaykh seems idolatrous and un-Islamic to Majid. He notices that the shaykh and his wife sit upon several layers of ornate cushions in the ceremonial space (*meydan*) and concludes that the leaders are a “self-worshipping class.”⁶² Moreover, he finds the etiquette required of the disciples toward the shaykh to be demeaning. For instance, Nur Baba eats from fine plates and drinks from elegant glassware, while the others are denied this luxury. When greeting him, they say, “I offer supplication, Master,” and similar acts of submission and abasement are required in virtually all interactions. All this pomp and circumstance appears even more inappropriate to Majid given the dubious morality of the shaykh himself. The pinnacle of role reversal and debasement occur when Nigar and Majid participate in the initiation ritual in which they are led by a “shepherd” with a rope tied around their neck into the ceremonial space where they—as metaphoric sheep—have to perform a number of subservient actions before Nur Baba.⁶³

WOMEN IN *NUR BABA*

Since men and women worship together in Bektashi ceremonies, Majid had imagined that Bektashi lodges were exemplars of gender equality. This idea was popular during the 1910s, a time when other Turkish writers such as Baha Sait were describing Alevi rituals as democratic, gender inclusive, and, therefore, good models for modern Turkish culture.⁶⁴ The idea of liberal, progressive Bektashism, particularly in regard to women, was also championed by Orientalist scholars such as William Hasluck, who was influenced by Naim Frashëri’s treatise that discussed how Bektashi women did not cover their heads.⁶⁵ During his initiation ritual, Majid sees Nur Baba’s wife enter before all the male disciples, concluding, “At first glance, I thought that if nothing else, this order I joined clearly gave women equal rights.”⁶⁶ However, he begins to doubt this when he observes that the rest of the women had to sit in the back row behind the men, regardless of their age or status.

Additionally, the seemingly powerful position of women in the lodge is proven to be illusory. The case of Madame Ziba is instructive. In the beginning of the novel, she is the key patron, the center of power, and the target of Nur Baba’s affections. However, with the arrival of younger female disciples, Ziba loses her position and becomes increasingly desperate. References to Nur Baba’s discarded lovers confirm that the pattern has repeated itself on many occasions. In one instance, a former lover jumped off of a balcony out of despair that she had ceased to be the apple of his eye. What appears to be female power in the lodge is a mirage. Nur Baba manipulates rich women, playing on their emotions in order to obtain their wealth. He is enraptured by

the lover of the moment, but he remains fully in control and succeeds in governing the patronesses. It is for this reason that Karaosmanoğlu calls him “the master of love” (*muhabbet murşidi*), the subtitle of the novel.

Unrestrained sexuality—particularly the myth of orgies during Ayin-i Cem ceremonies—has been a traditional slander against the Bektashi order and Alevis. Karaosmanoğlu does not depict the ceremonies as orgies, but he plays upon the theme of “putting out the candles” and depicts Nur Baba’s lodge as a haven of illicit sexuality. For instance, the title of the first chapter is “How are the Candles Put out in a Bektashi Lodge?” Nur Baba, a married man, has affairs with numerous female disciples. Additionally, other attendees have flirtations, affairs, and romances in the lodge. All things considered, the novel continues the spirit of the libel, despite that it does not describe the Ayin-i Cem ceremony itself as an orgy. Outside of the ceremony, Akı argues that the scenes depicting feasting and drinking are “nothing other than an orgy” and, given the Bacchanalian framing of the novel, it is difficult to disagree with him.⁶⁷

The author directs his critique of promiscuity away from the ceremony itself and toward the manipulative character of the shaykh and the libertine activities of the elite disciples. Nur Baba himself is the axis of sexual misconduct. We learn that he became the head of the order because he began to sleep with the wife of the previous shaykh, finally marrying her, and that to maintain control and funding, he seduced scores of patronesses. On one hand, he is presented as sensual and dissolute, seducing and sleeping with his preferred female disciples out of sheer carnal pleasure. On the other, his sexual relationships are designed to cultivate donors and ensure the flow of funds for the maintenance of the lodge.

In addition to Nur Baba’s behavior, the atmosphere of the lodge is colored by a lack of restraint and improper amorous advances. Old men flirt with young girls, married women have rendezvous with lovers, and all social conventions are flouted. The narrator describes Hamdi Bey as follows: “more than a person, this man looked like a satyr from Greek mythology chasing after newly matured virgins.”⁶⁸ Viewing this behavior, the morally indignant Majid proclaims, “I’m gradually coming to better understand the meaning of Bektashi lodges: they are most certainly institutions established in opposition to family life.”⁶⁹ Here again the novel links Bektashis with Diogenes, who is known to have rejected conventional family structures as unnatural, and the Bacchanalia, which were accused of undermining the family.⁷⁰

Karaosmanoğlu’s novels in this period, *Kiralık Konak* and *Nur Baba*, both deal with the erosion of the institution of the family in the late Ottoman period. In the context of familial and societal erosion, Karaosmanoğlu placed a great deal of emphasis on women as markers of social and political values.⁷¹ In post-1908 urbane society, women became increasingly visible in public. Some upper-class women donned transparent veils, a small number appeared in public unveiled, and, breaking with custom, husbands and wives began to appear together outside of the home. Discussions about women’s education also stirred debate.⁷²

In *Nur Baba*, the female characters and their virtue are rotting alongside the empire. Thus, Madame Ziba’s “face has turned into a rotten peach.”⁷³ Nigar has become an alcoholic and drug addict. A character named Nasib Hanım leaves her sick children at home to meet with her lover in the lodge.⁷⁴ There is no strong or positive female character in the novel. All have lost their bodies, virtue, and will in Nur Baba’s orbit.

Critics have observed that Karaosmanoğlu's female characters are unconvincing and that the author seems to have an inability to identify with them.⁷⁵ The prominent novelist Halide Edip Adıvar penned an early feminist critique of *Nur Baba* asking why Karaosmanoğlu felt the need to degrade his heroines, with particular reference to the protagonist Nigar. Karaosmanoğlu denied the accusation and wrote that in *Nigar* he combined the self-flagellating character of St. Teresa of Avila with the Bacchantes.⁷⁶ The decision to shape a character in this way perhaps confirms Adıvar's suspicion and sheds light on the author's approach to the place of women outside the novel during this period.

In 1915, Karaosmanoğlu composed a work titled *Kadınlık ve Kadınlarımız* (Womanhood and Our Women),⁷⁷ which gives us a window into his thinking about women in society around the same time that he was working on the novel. He expresses disapproval for women abandoning the home and, in the spirit of contemporary Muslim modernists such as Qasim Amin (1863–1908) in Egypt, defines women as the “only reservoir of traditions” and the “only keepers of the homes which are the cradle of civilization.”⁷⁸ The agenda for women's advancement among Muslim modernists such as Amin was often paternalistic and envisioned educating women, not to encourage their participation in various professions, but rather so that they could be better mothers and wives for the improvement of society.⁷⁹ In another article, Karaosmanoğlu proclaimed that women's progress in Turkey was superficial and ornamental. Despite advances in education and the workplace, he asks, “Are they better mothers than before? Are they better spouses than before? Are they better women than before?”⁸⁰ Karaosmanoğlu was a skeptic in general, and, between 1913 and 1922, he questioned some of the progressive ideas about women's advancement that were circulating among the intelligentsia.

These views are in harmony with the female characters in *Nur Baba* who, because they depart from their homes, find themselves losing control of their lives, forfeiting their personal dignity, and being corrupted by lewd Sufi shaykhs. The main character, Nigar, is initially presented as an innocent “white moth” who falls into *Nur Baba*'s trap like “a bird with clipped wings.” Observing her transformation into a “flirtatious, impassioned woman, intoxicated in every sense,” Majid asks whether every woman contains a “seed of prostitution” hidden inside.⁸¹ She begins the story naive and innocent, but in the context of the lodge all of her worst instincts and urges are unleashed. The implicit thesis seems to be that women's departure from the home places them in danger.

Tanpınar comments that in *Nur Baba* “we see the corruption of woman.”⁸² More generally, he observes that although Karaosmanoğlu fought for the advancement of women in his actual life, his female characters do not resemble European women. Instead, they are “degenerate and debased.”⁸³ In *Nur Baba*, one can witness the combination of traditional sexual slander against Bektashis with concerns about the increasing participation of women in the public sphere. The novel's emphasis on sexuality and the corruption of women expresses anxieties about shifting gender roles that extend far beyond the confines of Sufi lodges. The lodge is a microcosm of problems in the decaying Ottoman Empire: Karaosmanoğlu writes, “the institutions that represent this Sufi order—like many institutions in our country,” have broken down. “Just as today's Turkish family is not the Turkish family of yesterday,” writes Karaosmanoğlu, “today's Bektashi lodge is not the Bektashi lodge of yesterday.”⁸⁴ In this sense, the novel is a literary representation

not only of institutional decline, but also of the decline of late Ottoman patriarchal values and morality.

Karaosmanoğlu's novels in the early years of the Turkish Republic continue the theme of moral decay with special attention to women. Of particular note is *Sodom ve Gomore* (1928), a novel set in Istanbul during the British occupation in which the protagonists pursue bodily pleasures and self-gratification with little regard for the national struggle unfolding in Anatolia.⁸⁵ As in *Nur Baba*, the cornerstone of depravity is upperclass women, who have romantic affairs with British officers and drink excessively. Gökner argues that the immorality is meant to be symbolic of the bankruptcy of Ottoman cosmopolitanism, which can only be remedied by the success of the national movement.⁸⁶ Whereas nationalist authors such as Halide Edip Adıvar tended to portray strong women as essential to the national cause, Karaosmanoğlu's early works evince a deep pessimism about dominant narratives of progress and women's advancement.

LITERARY SUFISM AND TURKISH NATIONALISM

Nur Baba takes on contemporary concerns related to national identity and imagining a Turkish past. Turkist intellectuals of Karaosmanoğlu's generation were constructing a national history, literature, and culture, and drew upon the literature and traditions of Sufi orders and saints as a major source. These thinkers—chief among them Ziya Gökalp and Mehmed Fuat Köprülü (1890–1966)—used the logic that certain Sufi orders retained elements of pre-Islamic Turkic culture that had been lost in the larger population. These survivals were understood to link modern Turks with a distant Central Asian history and were among the few authentic traces of Turkish culture that remained after centuries of contact with Persian, Arabic, Byzantine, and Islamicate civilizations. The Bektashi Sufi order figured prominently in such projects because it had retained Turkish as a ritual and literary language and amassed a sizeable corpus of poetry and hymns, much of which fell outside of the parameters of Ottoman, Arabic, or Persian literary styles. Therefore, in agreement with the romantic linguistic nationalisms prevalent in Europe, Turkist thinkers argued that something of the “soul” of the Turkish nation could be found in the literature of this order.

Köprülü's early article “Türk Edebiyatı'nın Menşei” (The Origins of Turkish Literature, 1915) argued that the lyrics of shamanistic rituals—uttered during a state of ecstasy—were the oldest form of Turkish poetry.⁸⁷ His book *Türk Edebiyatında İlk Mutasavvıflar* (The First Mystics in Turkish Literature, 1919) further developed a theory of continuity between Central Asian and Anatolian religious culture via shamanism. The “shamanism thesis” was decisive for writers such as Baha Said and Yusuf Ziya Yörükân to define the Bektashis and Kızılbaş-Alevi as “carriers of Turkish culture” due to the survival of shamanistic elements in their rituals, beliefs, and literature.⁸⁸ Important for *Nur Baba*, in the *First Mystics* Köprülü viewed Central Asian Turks as Sunni Muslims, some of whom diverged from Sunnism when they came to Anatolia due to the presence of Greco-Roman, Christian, Shi'i, Batini, and antinomian traditions.⁸⁹ Within this context, the allusions to the Bacchanalia rites and Diogenes in *Nur Baba* might be interpreted as not only literary references but also as bits of speculative history.

Köprülü concluded that the study and appreciation of popular literature, such as the poetry of Anatolian mystics, was key to the recovery of “national personality” which

had been lost due to the influence of first Persian and later European literature.⁹⁰ Popular religious literature and music—the culture of popular “Turkish Islam”—was the primary focus of this research. The influence of this Turkist current of thought is evident in *Nur Baba*. The novel presents the Bektashi order as a window onto the Turkish past and the accumulated cultural layers which the nation has amassed during its migration from east to west. It is imbued with a deep sense of nostalgia. The most striking example is Majid’s description of the Bektashi hymns called *nefes*,

The verses resemble the dreams of an insane spirituality that has passed through a number of intellectual and emotional episodes and crises, from a number of different geographical regions. With all its sorrow, intoxication, with all that awful weightiness, it is the most distinctive Turkish music that exists . . . One by one, they passed before my eyes: the pagan Turk riding bareback on mares with stiff manes; the raider Turk, whose splendor is the stuff of legends, twirling his lance at the edge of city walls; the Muslim Turk listening to the life story of Muhammad in an Arabian tent and hearing the atrocity of Karbala in a Persian palace; and finally the urbane, debauched Turk immersed in mirth and dancing around the overturned banquets of Caesars. I, and all those beside me, were the mixed product of these varied adventures. Nur Baba’s face, in all its nuances, channeled the hedonist Turk. As for me, I represented with all the sincerity of my soul, the sentimental Turk. I don’t know why, but Nigar almost looked like the favorite woman of a prince. As for Aunt Ziba, there was no difference between her and the ostentatious madams of old that strolled around in three-layered robes through the sheltered audience halls of rulers, and who had long-haired servants rub their knees on the wide, eastern-style sofas. It was as if a veil fell from the faces of all those sitting around: what a specimen of an Eastern prostitute Nasib Hanım was! What a distinctive Istanbulite womanizer was Rauf Bey! How much did Bajı’s two nieces, who just took the cymbals off their fingers, remind one of two young dancing girls! Colonel Hamdi Bey had the mug of an undistinguished Janissary! How beautifully did Alhotoz Afife Hanım embody the old hag of our fables!⁹¹

The character experiences a kind of historical flashback by viewing the lodge and its music through a nationalist prism that was popular in the 1910s. This vision includes not only the Central Asian and Middle Eastern layers but also the Greco-Roman. Majid expresses both profound nostalgia and homesickness for these historical epochs and past lives of the Turks. Additionally, the novel touches upon the exotic, Asian characteristics in the order’s traditions:

The *murshid* sat . . . still as a dead man with his eyes closed, his hands stuck into the sleeves of his cloak, squatting on top of his own rug, wearing a black turban and a folded conical hat on his head and a wide white cloak on his back. In this attire, he resembled an icon of an Asian god.⁹²

The lodge is an eclectic reservoir of Turkish history bearing the imprint of various phases of the life of the nation. In *Nur Baba*, the lodge is a cultural artifact of the Turkish nation and, simultaneously, a crucible of behaviors and relationships that signify moral and social collapse.

Nur Baba approaches Sufism as a set of ideas and relics that can serve the needs of nationalist projects, providing literature, dance, and symbols of national importance. This nostalgic-nationalist approach to Sufism would become standard in the subsequent historiography and cultural politics of modern Turkey as well as other emerging nation-states. Prominent Sufi figures such as Hacı Bektaş, Mevlana Celaleddin Rumi, and Yunus Emre were presented as national heroes, their tombs were made into museums,

and they were appreciated as poets and “philosophers” rather than dervishes or ascetics. Sufi ceremonies such as the *sema* of the Whirling Dervishes and the *cem* of the Alevi were prohibited as religious ceremonies due to the general ban on Sufi orders, but reconstrued as folkloric numbers for dance troupes and audiences abroad to promote national identity and tourism.

These Sufi cultural products have origins in the zeitgeist of the early 20th-century romantic-nationalist approach to Sufism that informed Karaosmanoğlu’s controversial novel. Elsewhere, Sufi heritage has been put to similar uses, notably in Albania, mentioned above, as well as Uzbekistan where Soviet projects to indigenize nationalism resulted in a “pantheon of great thinkers, artists and heroes.”⁹³ The Egyptian novelist and heiress of the Demirdashiyya order, Qut al-Qulub (1899–1968), portrayed Sufi ceremonies as the essence of Egyptian culture, at a time when Egyptian nationalists had seized Sufi properties and were harkening back to pre-Islamic Egyptian symbols.⁹⁴ In Kazakhstan, the government promoted the Sufi leader Ahmet Yesevi as a national hero who brought Islam to the steppe and as an example of an indigenous “free thinker.” In Uzbekistan, nationalist discourse presents Sufi master Bahauddin Naqshband, the eponym of the Naqshbandi order, as an Uzbek hero who is celebrated in lavish jubilees for his contributions to human knowledge.⁹⁵ Sufi figures held social and symbolic power, and it is unsurprising that modern states have appropriated them for the cause of nationalism.

CONCLUSION

Nur Baba was the most popular cultural product in Turkey—first as novel, then as film—to caricature Sufism and portray it via a modernist-nationalist lens. Many other works have followed in *Nur Baba*’s path—novels such as *Ali Nizami Beyin Alafrangalığı ve Şeyhliği* (Ali Nizami Bey’s Westernized Life and His Career as a Shaykh, 1952) and *Kadımlar Tekkesi* (The Lodge of Women, 1956) portrayed Bektashi shaykhs as womanizers.⁹⁶ It is unsurprising that Bektashis dervishes in the 1920s took offense to the novel and film that caricatured their order and used it as a metaphor of all that was wrong in late Ottoman Istanbul. Their attempt to prevent the film’s completion by destroying the set and attacking the actors failed, and the scandal surrounding the event only accentuated public interest. The novel became a classic of Turkish literature and the image of the manipulative, sex-crazed Bektashi shaykh became a fixture in popular and literary culture in Turkey.

Karaosmanoğlu’s erudite references to antiquity and nationalist gaze at the order were appreciated by a few literary critics, while the vast majority of readers took the novel as an anthropological description of what transpires inside a Bektashi lodge. Bektashi writers condemned the inaccuracies of this description and questioned Karaosmanoğlu’s motives in writing such a book, but their protests had little impact on popular perceptions of the order.⁹⁷ The President of Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, invited the shaykh who was rumored to be the basis for the character Nur Baba to visit him in Ankara. Karaosmanoğlu recounted that the president was disappointed when he realized that the shaykh bore little resemblance to the fictional character.⁹⁸ The author was frustrated that readers interpreted the novel as an eyewitness account rather than an imaginative work of literature, and complained that only a couple of serious reviews were composed.

Beyond the issue of slander and negative press, the larger issue for Bektashis and other Sufi orders concerns the instrumentalization of Sufism for nation-building purposes during the early 20th century at a time when the actual Sufi lodges were suppressed. This process occurred in a number of post-Ottoman and post-Soviet contexts under various forms. In Turkey, intellectuals (and statesmen) defined Sufi orders as an important but outdated part of national history, not an integral part of the present. The poems, dances, and hagiographies of Sufis from centuries ago became cherished national culture, while actual living practitioners were considered benighted survivals of a different era and their lodges deemed antithetical to modernization projects.⁹⁹ With the legal suppression of the lodges in 1925, Sufi culture could be tapped to serve the needs of national culture and folklore. As this process progressed and deepened over the decades, Sufism as cultural artifact could be appreciated in concert halls, transliterated poetry, and cultural festivals in all its disembodied glory.

It is unclear whether Karaosmanoğlu composed the novel with the intention of encouraging the abolition of the Sufi orders. *Nur Baba* demonstrates repulsion as well as fascination towards the Sufi lodge. The novel is set during the reign of Sultan Abdülhamid II in the period prior to 1893, and the wayward lodge of Nur Baba is described as an anomaly, not as the norm. Nevertheless, Karaosmanoğlu's novel certainly contributed to a way of thinking about Sufi lodges in the 1910s and 1920s that persisted into the Turkish Republic. A combination of moral critique and nostalgic nationalism disparaged the practitioners while cherishing the content of their literature and ceremonies for national culture. Existing biases about Bektashis, namely the "putting out the candle" slander, were less changed by the novel than directed toward new purposes via a modern literary form. All things considered, *Nur Baba* uses romantic nationalism and the genre of the novel to transform an ancient slander, popular in Ottoman times, into moralist critique during the post-1908 era and national literature in the Turkish Republic.

NOTES

Author's note: I thank William Coker, Ayşe Çelikkol, Markus Dressler, Erdağ Gökna, Bruce Lawrence, Gregory Lipton, Laurent Mignon, and Peter Wright for their contributions to this piece. Additionally, I express my gratitude to the anonymous *IJMES* reviewers for their invaluable suggestions and comments. Central European University and Macalester College provided research funding for this project.

¹Server Tanilli, "Le Roman *Nur Baba* de Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu (1921–1922) et la réalité du Bektashisme," in *Bektachiyya: Études sur l'ordre mystique des bektachis et les groupes relevant de Hadji Bektach*, ed. Aleksandar Popović and Gilles Veinstein (Istanbul: Ed. Isis, 1995), 190; Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 341.

²The novel has been translated into a number of languages, including Serbo-Croatian: *Nur Baba*, trans. Fetah Sulejmanpašić (Sarajevo: n.p., 1957); German: *Flamme Und Falter Ein Derwisch-Roman*, trans. Annemarie Schimmel (Gummersbach: Florestan, 1947); Italian: *Nur Baba*, trans. Giampiero Bellingeri Fabula (Milano: Adelphi, 1995); Spanish: *Nur Babá*, trans. Alín Salom (Barcelona: Destino, 2000); and Greek: *Ο τεκές του Νουρ Μπαμπά ή Κατήχηση στον έρωτα: μυθιστόρημα*, trans. Giorgos Salakidis (Thessalonikē: Stamoulēs Ant., 2009).

³Niyazi Akı, *Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu* (İstanbul: İletişim, 2001), 101; İsmail Kara, *Cumhuriyet Türkiyesi'nde bir Mesele olarak İslam* (İstanbul: Dergâh Yayınları, 2010), 250.

⁴See Elizabeth Sirriyeh, *Sufis and Anti-Sufis: The Defense, Rethinking and Rejection of Sufism in the Modern World* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 1999); Carl Ernst, *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism* (Boston, Mass.: Shambhala, 1997), chap. 8; Frederick de Jong and Bernd Radke, eds., *Islamic Mysticism Contested* (Leiden: Brill, 1999); and Charles Kurzman, *Modernist Islam, 1840–1940: A Sourcebook* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 255.

- ⁵Nile Green, *Sufism: A Global History* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 190.
- ⁶Ibid., 189.
- ⁷Itzhak Weissman, *The Naqshbandiyya: Orthodoxy and Activism in a Worldwide Sufi Tradition* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 140–41.
- ⁸Sirriyeh, *Sufis*, 104–5.
- ⁹Weissman, *Nashbandiyya*, 143.
- ¹⁰Nathalie Clayer, “Sufi Printed Matter and Knowledge about the Bektashi Order in the Late Ottoman Period,” in *Sufism, Literary Production, and Printing in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Rachida Chic et al. (Würzburg: Ergon-Verlag, 2015), 363–64.
- ¹¹“Fecr-i Âti Encümen-i Edebîsi Beyannâmesi,” *Servet-i Fünûn*, no. 977, 24 Şubat 1325 (10 March 1910), 227.
- ¹²Akı, *Yakup Kadri*, 54–55.
- ¹³Ibid., 195.
- ¹⁴Cafer Gariper and Yasemin Küçükcoşkun, “II. Meşrutiyet Döneminde Yayımlanan Nur Baba Romanı ve Yarattığı Akışlar,” *Bilig*, no. 47 (2008): 66.
- ¹⁵Akı, *Yakup Kadri*, 100.
- ¹⁶Ibid.; Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar, *Edebiyat Dersleri* (İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2002), 255.
- ¹⁷Cafer Gariper and Yasemin Küçükcoşkun, *Dionizyak Coşkunun İhtişam ve Sefaleti: Yakup Kadri'nin Nur Baba Romanına Psikanalitik bir Yaklaşım* (İstanbul: Akademik Kitaplar, 2009).
- ¹⁸Server Tanilli, “Le Roman,” 186.
- ¹⁹Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu, *Anamın Kitabı* (İstanbul: İletişim, 2012), 123.
- ²⁰Abbas Karakaya, *Yakup Kadri'nin Nur Baba Romanında Alevi-Bektaşiler ve 1980 Sonrası Akademik Eleştirinin Körlüğü*, Bogaziçi Gösteri Sanatları Topluluğu, 21 June 2014, accessed 26 September 2015, <http://www.bgst.org/ulke-gundem/yakup-kadrinin-nur-baba-romaninda-alevi-bektasiler-ve-1980-sonrasi-akademik-elistirinin-korlugu>.
- ²¹Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu, *Erenlerin Bağından* (İstanbul: Orhaniye Matbaası, 1922).
- ²²Tanpınar, *Edebiyat Dersleri*, 254.
- ²³Karaosmanoğlu, *Anamın*, 120–25.
- ²⁴Umut Azak, *Islam and Secularism in Turkey: Kemalism, Religion and the Nation State* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2010), 152.
- ²⁵Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu, *Nur Baba* (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2001), 13.
- ²⁶Ibid.
- ²⁷Matthias Riedl, “The Containment of Dionysos: Religion and Politics in the Bacchanalia Affair,” *International Political Anthropology* 5, no. 2 (2012): 14.
- ²⁸Octavius, 9.6–7, quoted in Riedl, *The Containment of Dionysius*, 127.
- ²⁹Marc Baer, *The Dönme: Jewish Converts, Muslim Revolutionaries, and Secular Turks* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2010), 167–69. In modern Syria, a similar story about orgies is used to defame Isma‘ilis.
- ³⁰Evliya Çelebi, *An Ottoman Traveller: Selections from the Book of Travels of Evliya Çelebi*, trans and ed. Robert Dankoff and Sooyong Kim (London: Eland, 2011), 136–37.
- ³¹In fact, the classical references in the novel are much more varied. More examples follow; Niyazi Akı, *Yakup Kadri*, 100.
- ³²Server Tanilli, “Le Roman *Nur Baba*,” 188. See also Tanpınar, *Edebiyat Dersleri*, 255.
- ³³Livy, *Rome and the Mediterranean: Books XXXI–XLV of the History of Rome from Its Foundation* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), 39:8–19.
- ³⁴Riedl, *The Containment*, 113.
- ³⁵Ibid., 116.
- ³⁶Ibid., 117.
- ³⁷Butrus Abu Manneh, “The Naqshbandiyya-Mujaddidiyya and the Bektashi Order in 1826,” in *Studies on Islam and the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century, 1826-1876* (İstanbul: Isis, 2001), 59–71; Kahraman Şahkul, *Encyclopedia of the Ottoman Empire*, ed. Gábor Ágoston and Bruce Alan Masters (New York: Facts On File, 2009), 60.
- ³⁸Erdağ Gökner, “The Novel in Turkish: Narrative Tradition to Nobel Prize,” in *The Cambridge Companion to History*, vol. 4, *Turkey in the Modern World*, ed. Reşat Kasaba (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 486.

³⁹Translation by Şükürü Hanioglu: "Pek Uyanık Bir Uyku," *İctihad*, no. 55 [11 March 1913], in Hanioglu, "Garbcılar: Their Attitudes toward Religion and Their Impact on the Official Ideology of the Turkish Republic," 153–54.

⁴⁰Şeyh Mushin-i Fani, *İstikbale Doğru* (İstanbul: Ahmed İhsan ve Şürekası Matbaacılık Osmanlı Şirketi, 1331/1329 [1913]), 5.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 41.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 42.

⁴³Karaosmanoğlu, *Nur Baba*, 74.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 74.

⁴⁵Annemarie Schimmel, *Rumi's World: The Life and Work of the Great Sufi Poet* (Boston: Shambhala, 2001), 102.

⁴⁶Karaosmanoğlu, *Nur Baba*, 74.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 86.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 95.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 157.

⁵⁰Green, *Sufism: A Global History*, 1.

⁵¹Ali Akyıldız, "Pertevniyal Valide Sultan," *İslam Ansiklopedisi*, v. 34, 240; John Kingsley Birge, *The Bektashi Order of Dervishes* (London: Luzac and Co., 1965), 80–81.

⁵²Karaosmanoğlu, *Nur Baba*, 41.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 100.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 90.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 39.

⁵⁶His real name was Ömer Hulusi. He was best known for his poetry and represented the traditional school of Ottoman poetry against new literary currents.

⁵⁷Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi DH.MKT 1975/31 (25 Z 1309) 21 June 1892; Y.A. HUS 263/6 (1 M 1310) 26 June 1892.

⁵⁸Karaosmanoğlu, *Nur Baba*, 84.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 57. Nero was Roman emperor from 50 to 54 CE. Trimalchio is a character in *Satyricon*, a first century CE Roman work of fiction thought to be composed by Petronius (c. 27–66 CE). The character Trimalchio has strong resemblances to the character Nur Baba. Trimalchio was a freedman who rose to great power and held sumptuous banquets, while Nur Baba was an orphan who established himself as the shaykh of the lodge and held rather similar banquets. In the *Great Gatsby* (1925), an important novel from the same period in American literature, the bon vivant Jay Gatsby is referred to as having a "career as Trimalchio."

⁶⁰Karaosmanoğlu, *Nur Baba*, 78.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, 87–88.

⁶²*Ibid.*, 86.

⁶³*Ibid.*, 91–96.

⁶⁴Markus Dressler, *Writing Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 146.

⁶⁵Clayer, *Sufi*, 363–64.

⁶⁶Karaosmanoğlu, *Nur Baba*, 92.

⁶⁷Akı, *Yakup Kadri*, 101.

⁶⁸Karaosmanoğlu, *Nur Baba*, 100.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 91.

⁷⁰"Diogenes," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, accessed 6 January 2017, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Diogenes-Greek-philosopher>, last updated 8 May 2012.

⁷¹Gökner, "The Novel in Turkish," 486.

⁷²Hale Yılmaz, *Becoming Turkish: Nationalist Reforms and Cultural Negotiations in Early Republican Turkey, 1923–1945* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2013), 83.

⁷³Karaosmanoğlu, *Nur Baba*, 67.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, 90.

⁷⁵Tanpınar, *Edebiyat Dersleri*, 254. Halide Edip, "Nur Baba," *İkdam*, nr. 9096, 13 Temmuz 1922: 3.

⁷⁶Karaosmanoğlu, *Nur Baba*, 18.

⁷⁷Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu, *Kadınlık ve Kadınlarımız* (İstanbul: Orhaniye Matbaası, 1923).

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 5.

⁷⁹Kurzman, *Modernist*, 69.

⁸⁰ Akı, *Yakup Kadri*, 190.

⁸¹ Karaosmanoğlu, *Nur Baba* (İstanbul: Orhaniye, 1923), 130.

⁸² Tanpınar, *Edebiyat Dersleri*, 45.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 254.

⁸⁴ Karaosmanoğlu, *Nur Baba*, 13.

⁸⁵ Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu, *Sodom ve Gomore* (İstanbul: Hamit Matbaası, 1928).

⁸⁶ Erdağ Gökner, "Reading Allied Istanbul: Turkish Subject-Formation from Historical Trauma to Literary Trope," *Culture, Theory and Critique* 55 (2014), 15–16.

⁸⁷ Dressler, *Writing Religion*, 188.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 190.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 191.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 191–92.

⁹¹ Karaosmanoğlu, *Nur Baba*, 101.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 101.

⁹³ Adeeb Khalid, "A Secular Islam: Nation, State, and Religion in Uzbekistan," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 35 (2003): 579. On Albania, see Nathalie Clayer, *Religion et nation chez les Albanais: Xixe - Xxe Siècles* (Istanbul: Isis, 2002).

⁹⁴ Green, *Sufism*, 199.

⁹⁵ Adeeb Khalid, *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2014), 132.

⁹⁶ Abdülhak Şinasi Hisar, *Ali Nizami Beyin Alafrangalığı ve Şeyhliği* (Istanbul: Hilmi Kitabevi, 1952); Refik Halit Karay, *Kadınlar Tekkesi* (Istanbul: Çağlayan Yayınevi, 1956).

⁹⁷ B. N., *Nur Baba Masali*, İzmir, Ahenk Matbaası (12 Temmuz 1338), 15–19.

⁹⁸ Gariper, "II. Meşrutiyet," 72–73.

⁹⁹ Erdağ Gökner shows the importance of Sufi tropes in the evolution of Turkish literature and, in particular, how central "secular Sufism" is in the work of Orhan Pamuk; Erdağ Gökner, *Orhan Pamuk, Secularism, and Blasphemy: The Politics of the Turkish Novel* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 210–42.