

International Conference
“Sufi Saints, Poets and Heretic Dervishes in Anatolia and Beyond”



Source

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/898273>

"Two Nightingales in a Rose Bush", Double-Sided Illustrated Leaf from an Ottoman Album;
['Abdullah Bukhari](#) Turkish, ca. 1725–45

**Organized by the Beyond Sharia Research Team Utrecht University
Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies Wednesday 15 April 2026
Janskerkhof 13, Room 006 (Stijlkamer)**

With pain in our hearts for the atrocities carried out against the people in Iran on 8 and 9 January this year, followed by flames of war, we remain committed to our goal of safeguarding Iran's intellectual heritage.

You are cordially invited to the next international conference by the ERC Advanced Grant project, *Beyond Sharia: the Role of Sufism in Shaping Islam*. This scholarly gathering is focused on bringing together researchers working on a range of topics from Sufism in present-day Turkey to areas in the Balkans. Topics we would like to cover at this conference include the role of Persian as a lingua franca, saints and sainthood in this cultural zone, and the role of antinomian or non-conformist Sufis in shaping a new type of Islamic piety.

Participation is free but registration is compulsory

Programme Wednesday 15 April 2026

13.00 Welcome and opening by Asghar Seyed-Gohrab

13.15 **Gökçen B. Dinç** (Utrecht University)

“A Joy in the Heart, a Lingering Memory”: Malami-Hamzavis from the Late Ottoman Empire to Republican Turkey

13.45 **Leila Rahimi Bahmany** (Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich)

Miracles and the Making of a Sufi Saint: Kaygusuz Abdal in the Menâkıbnâme

14.15 **Kourosh Beigpour** (Independent Scholar)

Reframing the Encounter: Shams and Rūmī through the Narrative of Hājī Bektāsh Velī

15:15 Coffee break

15.45 **Zhinia Noorian** (Utrecht University)

A Dirty Means to a “Pure” End: Slandering the Antinomian Sufis in Anatolia

16.15 **Zeynep Oktay** (Boğaziçi University)

The Secret of ‘Ali: The Perfect Man and the Word of God in Alevism and Bektashism

16:45 **Gianfranco Bria** (Roma Tre University)

Antinomian Sufism and Nation-Building: Naim Frashëri and the Renewal of Bektashiyya in the Late Ottoman Balkans

17:15 **Ufuk Erol** (Leibniz Institute of European History)

Narrating Sainthood and Translating Authority: Persianate Sufism and Vernacular Piety in Fifteenth-Century Anatolia

17.45 Wrapping Up **Asghar Seyed-Gohrab & Zhinia Noorian**

18:00 Conference dinner

“A Joy in the Heart, a Lingering Memory”: Malami-Hamzavis from the Late Ottoman Empire to Republican Turkey

Abstract

Malamati movement, which emerged in ninth-century Khorasan as a reaction to the institutionalization of Sufism, continued in the Ottoman period as Malami-Hamzavi Sufi order through the branch led by Ömer Dede following Hacı Bayram-ı Veli (d. 1429), the founder of the Bayrami order. Persecuted by Ottoman authorities for their antinomian tendencies, Malami-Hamzavis experienced a relatively more permissive environment after the Young Turk Revolution of 1908 and gathered around Shaykh Abdülkadir-i Belhi (1839–1923) at the Şeyh Murad Buhari Lodge in Eyüp, Istanbul. Belhi, who was also affiliated with the Khalidi-Naqshbandi order, played a central role in sustaining the Malami-Hamzavi tradition during this period. Following his death and the closure of Sufi lodges and the prohibition of Sufi orders in 1925, Malami-Hamzavi order survived into the Republican era, albeit in more discreet and informal forms. This presentation will first provide a brief history of the order and then examine Belhi’s life and the transformation of the Malami-Hamzavi tradition from the Ottoman Empire to the Republic.

Gökçen B. Dinç is a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Utrecht University’s Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies. She previously worked as a TÜBİTAK and Gerda Henkel postdoctoral fellow at the University of Hamburg, Department of Turcology. She earned her PhD in history at Humboldt University-Berlin and is the author of two books and several articles on the gender and religious history of modern Turkey.

Miracles and the Making of a Sufi Saint: Kaygusuz Abdal in the *Menâkıbnâme*

Abstract

This study investigates how the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Anatolian Sufi poet Kaygusuz Abdal was constructed as a lasting spiritual authority through hagiographical storytelling and accounts of miracles. In the prose-poetic, single-saint hagiography *Menâkıbnâme*, composed several decades after his death by an anonymous author, narrative strategies, literary techniques, and miraculous episodes are employed to establish Kaygusuz Abdal's sanctity. Consistent with practices common to hagiographical traditions, the author also incorporates elements from various mystical and hagiographical sources. This analysis contends that such narratives positioned Kaygusuz Abdal as a foundational figure of the Alevi-Bektashi order and ensured his enduring legacy within Anatolian Sufi literary culture.

Leila Rahimi Bahmany is a Guest Professor of Iranian Studies at the Institute for Near and Middle Eastern Studies at Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich (LMU). From July 2023 to September 2025, she held a postdoctoral research position at Utrecht University in the ERC-funded project *Beyond Sharia: The Role of Sufism in Shaping Islam*. She is the author of two monographs, *Mirrors of Entrapment and Emancipation: Forugh Farrokhzad and Sylvia Plath* (Leiden University Press, 2015) and *Azeri Turkish Narratives in Twentieth-Century Iran: Resisting Monolingualism* (Edinburgh University Press, 2025).

Reframing the Encounter: Shams and Rūmī through the Narrative of Hājī Bektāsh Velī

Abstract

This talk examines the encounter between Shams al-Dīn Tabrīzī and Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī through the later narrative associated with Hājī Bektāsh Velī. Focusing on the *Vilāyat-nāma* tradition, it explores how the meeting is reshaped around shared motifs such as anonymity and recognition, miracle and transformation, the hidden saint and the manifest saint, and the tension between inner state (*hāl*) and outward knowledge (*qāl*). By comparing this version with other accounts, the talk shows how the memory of the encounter moves beyond historical reporting to become part of a wider symbolic language, shaped by oral transmission, regional belief systems, and hagiographic aims. Through this lens, the meeting of Shams and Rūmī appears not only as a biographical event but also as a narrative structure through which sainthood, authority, and spiritual transformation are reimagined.

Kourosh Beigpour is an independent scholar and artist whose research focuses on Persian Sufism, Iranian intellectual history, and the role of orality, memory, and textual transmission in medieval mystical traditions. He is currently developing this research as part of his Ph.D. work, with a primary focus on Shams al-Dīn Tabrīzī and the Maqālāt, and with close attention to textual history, oral discourse, and later narrative traditions surrounding Shams. Alongside his research, his background in art, design, and visual culture informs his interdisciplinary perspective, especially in relation to symbolism, material culture, and Iranian visual traditions. He has presented his work at institutions including Stanford University, UCLA, and UCI. His areas of expertise lie at the intersection of Persian literature, Sufi studies, cultural memory, and visual culture.

A Dirty Means to a “Pure” End: Slandering the Antinomian Sufis in Anatolia

Abstract

Non-conformist Sufis had gained an influential standing over a vast geographical-cultural zone extending to Anatolia after their appearance in the thirteenth century. A major group of these non-conformist Sufis came to be known as *qalandars*. *Fuṣṭāṭ al-‘Adāla fī Qawā‘id al-Salṭana* by Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. Maḥmūd al-Khaṭīb and the *Qalandarnāma* of Sāvī by Khaṭīb-i Fārisī, both written in the thirteenth century, are rare Persian texts that give information about these Sufi figures. In their approach, however, they differ from each other drastically. Elsewhere, I have examined Khaṭīb-i Fārisī’s representation of Sāvī’s codification of the antinomian spiritual movement, later known as *qalandariyya*. Khaṭīb-i Fārisī, a disciple of Sāvī’s movement, gave an account of Sāvī as a revered Sufi master. In my current working paper, I shall focus on the representation of the antinomian Sufis in the *Fuṣṭāṭ al-‘Adāla*, written for an audience with religious and political power in Anatolia. My goal is to investigate slander as the process used by Maḥmūd al-Khaṭīb to convince authorities to protect Islam by eliminating the antinomian Sufis.

Zhinia Noorian is a postdoc researcher for the ERC Advanced Grant, *Beyond Sharia: The Role of Sufism in Shaping Islam* in the department of Philosophy and Religious Studies. In her new project, she investigates the role of Persian as a language of non-conformist Sufism in Anatolia from the thirteenth century onwards. In her previous postdoc project for *Beyond Sharia*, she worked on the poetry of a Jahān-Malik Khātūn (d. after 1382). The only Persian woman from the pre-modern times with a substantial collection of poetry. Her research findings echo this poet’s lost voice and her ignored role in Persian literature and Sufism. It will soon be published as a book by De Gruyter. Zhinia started her PhD

in Persian and Iranian Studies in 2020 at Leiden University and completed it at Utrecht University in 2022. Her PhD dissertation was published as a book by LUP under the title, *Parvīn I'tiṣāmī in the Literary and Religious Context of Twentieth-Century Iran*.

The secret of 'Ali: The Perfect Man and the Word of God in Alevism and Bektashism

Abstract

The modern term “Alevi” refers to the descendants of the *kızılbaş* tribes who were the followers of the Safavids. These groups, found mainly in Anatolia and the Balkans, also had close links with the Bektashis and *abdāls* of *Rūm*, as well as other dervish groups. They shared a collective repertoire of texts used in ritual, religious education, and daily life. “Alevi-Bektashi literature,” as this corpus is currently named, consisted primarily of mystical poetry named *nefes* or *deyiş*, which was often in quatrain form with syllabic meter. This paper surveys Alevi literary sources to illustrate how various groups now identified as “Alevi” have historically defined—and continue to define—their relationship to the Quran through poetry.

The Alevi-Bektashi understanding of the Quran brings together aspects of Shi‘i, Sufi, and Hurufi doctrine. According to the poetic corpus of the *kızılbaş*, *bektāşīs* and *abdāls*, the Perfect Man (*insān-ı kāmīl*) is the locus of the Quran, its hidden meaning. The saint is identical to ‘Ali b. Abi Talib, who is the saint’s true identity, their esoteric being. The saint’s words are ontologically equivalent to the Quran, relegated to its esoteric dimension.

In oral lore, as well as in written texts, Hacı Bektaş (d. 669/1271 [?], the eponym of the Bektashi order as well as the most important saint in present-day Alevism) is the secret of ‘Ali. Shedding light on the understanding of ‘Ali as the esoteric aspect of reality also allows us to grasp the centrality of the concept of *sırr* (secret) in Alevism and Bektashism. The *deyiş* and *nefes* belong to God’s elect, the friends of God who have abandoned their own agency to act with the agency of Allah. Such an understanding obliterates the ontological difference between revelation and inspiration.

Zeynep Oktay is assistant professor at the Department of Turkish Language and Literature at Boğaziçi University in Turkey, where she teaches courses on Sufism, Alevism, folklore, and the emergence of Turkish literature. Oktay studied Comparative Literature at Dartmouth College (USA) and completed her PhD in Islamic Civilization at École Pratique des Hautes Études in Paris. Between 2014-2016, Oktay worked as a research fellow on the research project “The Islamisation of Anatolia, c. 1100-1500” based at the University of St. Andrews in the UK. She is the author of *Mesnevî-i Baba Kaygusuz* (Harvard University Department of Near Eastern Languages and Literatures, 2013), as well as a poetry book named *Birlerken* (Epona 2024). Oktay has also translated Henry Corbin’s *L’Imagination créatrice dans le soufisme d’Ibn Arabi* (Birle Bir Olmak: İbn Arabi Tasavvufunda Yaratıcı Muhayyile, Pinhan Yayınevi, 2013). Her journal articles and book chapters are set to appear in a collected volume under the name *Yol Benem Menzil Benem: Tasavvuf ve Alevilik Yazıları* (Alfa Kitap, 2026). Oktay’s forthcoming monograph, titled *I am the Essence of God: Kaygusuz Abdal and Dervish Poetry* (Brill, 2026) focuses on the literature produced by antinomian Sufi groups (abdals) in Anatolia and the Balkans.

Antinomian Sufism and Nation-Building: Naim Frashëri and the Renewal of Bektashiyya in the Late Ottoman Balkans

Abstract

How can a Sufi tradition often perceived as antinomian and transgressive of the sharia be *renewed* and reinterpreted as a foundation for modern political community?

This paper addresses this question through the figure of the Albanian poet and intellectual Naim Frashëri (1846–1900), one of the central voices of the Albanian National Awakening (*Rilindja*). While Frashëri is widely remembered for his nationalist poetry and literary contributions to the formation of Albanian cultural identity, far less attention has been devoted to his engagement with Islamic thought and with the Bektashi Sufi tradition.

Drawing primarily on *Fletore e Bektashinjet* (“The Booklet of Bektashism”, 1896), a text addressed to members of the Bektashi order, the paper examines how Frashëri reinterpreted Bektashi doctrines, rituals, and symbols within the political and intellectual context of the late Ottoman Balkans. Rather than proposing a radical theological reform, Frashëri rearticulated established elements of Bektashi devotional life - such as the veneration of the Twelve Imams, the ritual mourning of *matem*, the celebration of Nevruz, and the metaphysical legacy of Ibn al-‘Arabi - as markers of religious distinction, or rather transgression from Sunni Islam, which he increasingly associated with Ottoman imperial authority. Practices often interpreted by contemporaries as signs of non-conformism, heteropraxy or antinomianism beyond the normative boundaries of the sharia, thus became, in his writings, expressions of a distinctive spiritual path capable of becoming an engine of nation-building.

Frashëri linked therefore Bektashi antinomianism to the Albanian language and to the emerging project of Albanian nationhood. In doing so, he envisioned the Bektashi path as a form of Islam compatible with Western ideals of progress and freedom, while presenting it as a transgression to the Sunni orthodoxy promoted by the Ottoman state. By situating *Fletore e Bektashinjet* within broader debates on Islamic reform, late Ottoman modernization, and the reinterpretation of Sufi traditions in the nineteenth century, the paper argues that Frashëri’s project should not be understood as a radical theological rupture. Rather, it represents a process of renewal through which an antinomian Sufi tradition was rearticulated and integrated into the ideological and cultural framework of emerging Albanian nationhood.

Gianfranco Bria is a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Global Fellow and incoming Assistant Professor of Islamic Studies at Roma Tre University. He has been Adjunct Professor of Islamic Law at Sapienza University of Rome and is an Associate Member of the Centre d’Études Turques, Ottomanes, Balkaniques et Centrasiatiques (CETOBaC) at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS), Paris. His research focuses on Islamic authority, sainthood, and charisma in the Balkans, Sufi networks, and the history of Sufism in Southeastern Europe from the late Ottoman period to the present.

As part of his MSCA fellowship, he is currently a visiting researcher at Columbia University, New York University, and Boğaziçi University in Istanbul. His MSCA project, *Reshaping Sufi Path in Late Modern Southeastern Europe: The Teachings and Networks of the Melâmîyya-nûriyya (ReSuSEE)*, offers an analytical and comparative study of the doctrines and networks of the *Melâmîyya-nûriyya*, a Sufi path that emerged in Southeastern Europe during the late Ottoman period.

Narrating Sainthood and Translating Authority: Persianate Sufism and Vernacular Piety in Fifteenth-Century Anatolia

Abstract

This article examines the fifteenth-century Anatolian Turkish translation of the fourth chapter of *Şafvat al-şafā*, a foundational Persian hagiography of Shaykh Safi al-Din, as a site of linguistic, religious, and cultural transformation within the Persianate world. It contends that this text represents a purposeful interpretive intervention that transformed Sufi knowledge for a Turkish-speaking audience while maintaining its Persianate intellectual framework. The analysis foregrounds three interconnected themes. First, it highlights the role of Persian as a lingua franca of Sufi learning across Anatolia and Iran. The translation demonstrates a layered multilingualism in which Persian retained authority in metaphysical and doctrinal discourse, while Turkish functioned as a medium of transmission and accessibility. Second, the article explores how the text constructs sainthood as a hierarchical and transregional system of authority. Through hagiographical narrative, doctrinal exposition, and networks of named Sufi figures, the translation embeds Shaykh Safi within a broader landscape of spiritual legitimacy that linked Anatolia to Iranian centers of Sufism. Third, the study situates the translation within the milieu of non-conformist Sufi groups in Anatolia, often associated with Abdal, Bektashi, and early Alevi traditions. The translation's emphasis on inward knowledge (*bāṭin*), critique of legalistic authority, and promotion of practices such as vocal dhikr reflects broader Sufi contestations over religious authority and ritual practice. By bringing these elements together, the article argues that the Turkish *Şafvat al-şafā* exemplifies how Sufi texts mediated between languages, social milieus, and competing forms of authority.

Ufuk Erol is a postdoctoral research associate at the Leibniz Institute of European History in Mainz, Germany. He holds a PhD in history from Indiana University Bloomington. His research examines the early modern history of Qizilbash-Alevi communities in eastern Anatolia, focusing on both the local histories of communities and their interactions with the Ottoman and Safavid Empires. It combines socio-economic, political, and religious history to offer a nuanced approach to the study of Alevism in the Ottoman and Safavid Empires.