

## Article

# Bektaşî Female Leadership in a Transnational Context: The Spiritual Career of a Contemporary Female Dervish in Germany

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**Abstract:** In this article, I bring premodern and contemporary Bektaşî perspectives to the current ethical debate on gender equality in the Bektaşî Sufi order. While there is tremendous potential in the historical legacy of Kadıncık Ana, the spiritual successor of Hacı Bektaş-ı Veli (d. ca. 1271), and her peers who served as female spiritual leaders in the proto-Bektaşîyye, the institutionalization of the Bektaşî order resulted in the marginalization of women and their exclusion from certain opportunities and positions in religious practice and leadership. This article explores the spiritual journey of Güllizar Cengiz (today also known as Neriman Aşki Derviş after becoming a Bektaşî “dervish”), including her foundation of an Alevi-Bektaşî cultural institute in Cologne, Germany, in 1997 and the opening of a Bektaşî Sufi lodge (*dergah*) in the Westerwald near Bonn in 2006. I explore the impact of Hacı Bektaş’s teaching that both men and women have the same spiritual potential to become the ultimately ungendered *insan-ı kamil*, or spiritually and ethically completed human being. I also discuss the time-honored Bektaşî principle of “moving with the times and staying one step ahead of the times” and how it can inform contemporary understandings of ethical and spiritual prerogatives within Bektaşism.

**Keywords:** gender equality; female spiritual leadership; mysticism; Sufism; Bektashism; gender and Sufi ethics



**Citation:** Kuehn, Sara. 2023. Bektaşî Female Leadership in a Transnational Context: The Spiritual Career of a Contemporary Female Dervish in Germany. *Religions* 14: 970. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14080970>

Academic Editor: Saeed Zarrabi-Zadeh

Received: 13 April 2023

Revised: 19 June 2023

Accepted: 22 June 2023

Published: 27 July 2023



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Among the women who lived in Rum was one called Kutlu Melek, Fatıma or Kadıncık Ana. One day, in those hopeless times, she had a dream. She saw the sky transformed into a skirt. She was wearing it, and the moon was swallowed by it. (The Institute of Alevi-Bektashi Culture 2021)

## 1. Introduction

When it comes to gender relations, the Bektaşîs (Bektashis) proudly maintain that women are considered to possess equal spiritual potential and are treated equally in all matters of belief and practice (Birge 1937, p. 164). Since the founding of the Bektaşî Sufi order (*tarikât*, literally “path”),<sup>1</sup> which remains an important representative of Islamic mysticism (*tasavvuf*), female members of the order participate in Bektaşî ritual practice together with men. During the rituals that are open only to the initiated, no distinction is made between the sexes. According to Bektaşî belief, all human beings bear within themselves the spirit of God/the Truth (*Hakk*), a tenet mentioned in Islamic revelation (Q 15:29 and 38:72). Bektaşî men and women are collectively addressed as *canlar* or “pure souls” (individually, men are referred to as *can*, and women as *bacı*). The soul (*can*) is thought to reside within the body, which in turn is described as “skin”, the outer garment of the *can*. Where the body has a “sexual appearance”, the soul is devoid of sexuality (Bahadır 2021).<sup>2</sup> As such, the Bektaşîs are thought to be freed from their sexuality during worship, their bodies desexualized. They stand before *Hakk* not as men or women but as *canlar*, a state that transcends gender polarity. This article seeks to explore the extent to which this spiritual elimination of boundaries within ritual practice also neutralizes gender identity in social contexts.

Despite the traditional emphasis on gendered human prerogatives at the heart of its teachings, Bektāşism's historical development has been underpinned by a tension between patriarchal and gender-egalitarian tendencies. Today's Bektāşis continue to eschew a simplistic binary formulation of gender and sexuality and a division of gender roles. In examining aspects of the gender imaginary, as reflected in Bektāşī spiritual practice, I draw upon the writings of Sa'diyya Shaikh. She applies a mystical lens to Judith Butler's theoretical reflections on gender which contribute to the problematization of prevailing gender regimes (Butler 1990). Shaikh's studies promote a fluid understanding of the gender and sexuality systems that disrupt and suspend the social reification of these concepts Shaikh (2009, pp. 781–822; 2012; 2022, pp. 475–97; 2023, pp. 217–33). Access to Sufi life for women has traditionally varied depending on the specific Sufi order and the cultural context in which it operates, which is often extremely patriarchal (Fuller 1988; Murata 1992; Al-Sulami 1999; Buturovic 2001, pp. 135–60; Abbas 2002; Raudvere 2002; Helminski 2003; Dakake 2006, pp. 131–51; Silvers 2007, pp. 541–43; 2014, pp. 24–52; Küçük 2018, pp. 107–31; Cornell 2019). Yet, some Sufi orders have a long history of gender egalitarianism, welcoming women as equal members and even promoting female spiritual leadership/authority (Pemberton 2004, pp. 1–23; Hill 2010, pp. 375–412; Birchok 2016, pp. 583–99; Hill 2018; Xavier 2021, pp. 163–79; 2023, pp. 182–222). Others have been more restrictive, with women at times being excluded from the spiritual practices and rituals of the mystical path. This has begun to change in recent years, as more and more women play an active role in Sufi communities (for emic approaches, see Trix 1993; Özelsel 1996; Reinhertz 2001; Koca 2003; Evanson 2021; also, Nurbakhsh 2004),<sup>3</sup> and some Sufi *tarikats* have made efforts to be more inclusive of women and to promote female spiritual leadership (Tweedie 1979; Tweedie 1986; Sargut 2017; Dorst 2018; Kuehn 2018, pp. 53–114; Kuehn and Buturovic Forthcoming; Kuehn Forthcoming).

We know that at least in the foundational period of Bektāşī Sufism, women could assume leadership roles and attain high spiritual rank. In modern times, the tradition of high-ranking female Bektāşī dervishes (*dervişler*, sg. *derviş*) within the Bektāşī *tarikat* has greatly declined. While the Bektāşī tradition as a whole is no longer widespread today, the Bektāşī *tarikat* was officially recognized and accepted by the Ottomans. It formed an important part of the religious and cultural landscape of their empire, especially in the Rumelia region, which included parts of present-day Turkey and the Balkans. Despite its relative decline, in recent decades the order has transformed itself into a transnational organization<sup>4</sup> with offshoots in the United States and Europe. As far as I am aware, there is currently only one high-ranking initiated female Bektāşī dervish: Güllizar Cengiz, today also known as Neriman Aşki Derviş, who has been living in Germany since 1978.

This article is divided into two parts. First, it examines the enduring legacy of Kadıncık Ana, a Turkmen woman who not only played a prominent role in the early history of Bektāşism in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, but whose pregnancy also precipitated broader social and religious tensions that led to a schism in the Bektāşīyye in the late Ottoman period (Soyyer 2012, pp. 95–106, cited after Kara 2019, p. 61, n. 36). This part also provides glimpses into other female spiritual leaders in the early Bektāşī context. Second, the bulk of the article explores Güllizar Cengiz's spiritual path, charting her rise in the spiritual hierarchy of the Bektāşī Sufi order, focusing on her time both before and after her initiation, after which she was also known as Neriman Aşki Bacı and, after she became a dervish, as Neriman Aşki Derviş.<sup>5</sup>

## 2. The Legacy of Kadıncık Ana

It is significant that the *dergah* which Güllizar Cengiz opened is today named after Kadıncık Ana, the prototypical female role model of Bektāşism. The high status accorded to her can be gauged from Bektāşī<sup>6</sup> and Alevi<sup>7</sup> traditions about the arrival of the Bektāşī patron saint (*veli*)<sup>8</sup> Hacı Bektaş-ı Veli (or Hacı Bektash Veli; d. ca. 1271 in Anatolia, present-day Turkey) during the nascent period of Bektāşism within Turko-Iranian Sufism (Mélisoff 1998; Algar 1990, pp. 117–18).

The fifteenth-century *Vilayetname*, the main hagiography of Hacı Bektaş-ı Veli<sup>9</sup> (Vilayetname 1995, pp. xxiv–xxv; Ocak 1996b, p. 471)—sacred to both the Bektaşis and the Alevi—tells us that the first person to foretell Hacı Bektaş's coming to Anatolia was a saintly unmarried Turkmen girl named Fatma Bacı: “standing up and putting her hand on her chest, she bowed three times” (Vilayetname 1995, p. 18). He arrived while she was preparing food for a gathering of Anatolian holy men, the so-called Abdals of Rum (Abdalan-ı Rum, referring to non-conformist “dervishes” from “Rum” or the Byzantine [“Roman”] empire which encompassed Anatolia; Ocak 1996a, pp. 217–26; Karamustafa 1993, pp. 128–29; Kafadar 1995, pp. 60–117). Fatma Bacı was thus the first to return Hacı Bektaş's spiritual greeting. Kadıncık Ana, also known as Kutlu Melek, was also the first to offer him hospitality upon his arrival in the village of Sulucakarahöyük, by preparing bread and butter for him (Vilayetname 1995, p. 21; Karakaya-Stump 2020, p. 155). Sulucakarahöyük is now known as Hacıbektaş and was home to the headquarters of Bektaşism until it was moved to Tirana, Albania, in the early twentieth century. The *Vilayetname* tells us that even before Hacı Bektaş reached Sulucakarahöyük, Kadıncık Ana, a married woman, dreamed that a moon had entered and left her body (Vilayetname 1995, pp. 26–27; cf. The Institute of Alevi-Bektashi Culture 2021). Later, Kadıncık Ana miraculously becomes pregnant after drinking the water which Hacı Bektaş had used for his ablution. The saint's nose had started bleeding, and some drops had fallen into the water (Gross 1927, pp. 46, 115–16). Kadıncık Ana gave birth to two boys, regarded as Hacı Bektaş's (spiritual) sons: Habib and Hızir Lale (Mélisoff 2002, p. 6).

An acrimonious dispute as to whether they were in fact Hacı Bektaş's sons or merely his followers split the order into two branches, the Babagan and Çelebi Bektaşis (Karakaya-Stump 2020, pp. 66–67; Kara 2019, p. 61, n. 36). The Babagan Bektaşis<sup>10</sup> believe in the exclusively spiritual transmission of the teachings and the “spirit” of Hacı Bektaş (*yol evladları*), claiming that the saint was never married and had no children. The Çelebis, on the other hand, claim to be the descendants of Hacı Bektaş. They accept the biological transmission of the spiritual heritage (*bel evladları*)—the patrilineal *ocak* (literally “hearth”) system and, as Güllizar Cengiz explains, “maintain that he [Hacı Bektaş] was married in the spirit of the Zahirî school [i.e., it was only outwardly a marriage]” (Neriman Aşki Derviş, email to author on 16 February 2022).

The story of Kadıncık Ana's miraculous pregnancies, as Cengiz points out, has been perpetuated by the Babagan Bektaşis to this day. It is an expression of the new definition of Bektaşism, which in the sixteenth century under Balım Sultan (d. 1519), the “second spiritual leader” (*pir-i sani*) of the Bektaşî order, began to take the form of an institutionalized order in which the individual is defined by the religious hierarchy. According to the Babagan Bektaşis, being a Bektaşî is not a right acquired by birth. Therefore, any soul (*can*) who travels down the Bektaşî path, also called *Tarik-i Nazenin* (literally “gentle path”), may enter the order (Neriman Aşki Derviş, email to author on 16 February 2022). The account of these unusual births is also said to have been the cause of differences between the Babagan Bektaşis and the heterogeneous Alevi socio-religious communities, even though both trace their spiritual lineage (*silsile*) through Hacı Bektaş back to Imam Cafer (Arabic Ja'far), Imam Ali, and the Prophet Muhammad, and even though both honor Hacı Bektaş as their second most important saint after Imam Ali, cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad.

Furthermore, although there are significant similarities between Bektaşis and Alevi in terms of beliefs and practices, they also differ in another major respect: the former is an initiatic Sufi order, in principle open to everyone, whereas the latter is a heterogeneous socio-religious community, traditionally tied to family lineage and so closed to outsiders. It was not until the twentieth century that Alevism (Alevilik) began to take on a more formal and organized transregional identity, as Alevi from different regions and backgrounds came together through transnational networks to share their practices and beliefs (Erol 2010, pp. 375–87; 2012, pp. 833–49; Langer 2010, pp. 88–123; Klapp 2015).

The worldview of both Bektaşis and Alevi is based on *batini*, the esoteric, interpretation of Islam that concentrates on the inner meaning of religion. As such, they generally

abstain from institutionalized Islamic practices such as daily prayer and fasting during the month of Ramadan. Bektaşî and Alevî men and (unveiled) women worship together in sacred spaces, rather than in mosques. Alevî gathering places are referred to as *cemevis* (literally “houses of gathering”), while the ceremonial space in which most Bektaşîs meet is known as *meydan*, located in *dergahs*. Both permit the consumption of alcohol, contrary to Islamic “orthopraxy”.

But to return to our discussion on Kadıncık Ana and her peers: the *Vilayetname* informs us that it was Kadıncık who ensured the transmission of Hacı Bektaş’s spiritual teachings, and also that she initiated men (Zarcone 2010, p. 87). Both Kadıncık Ana and Fatma Bacı recognized Hacı Bektaş’s sainthood before any man did. Yet history demonstrates that the great spiritual leaders of the Bektaşî order have all been men, while women’s access to Sufi life in the past is difficult to evaluate due to scarce and inconsistent source material. Nevertheless, records do exist. In his article on the colonizing dervishes and their lodges (*zaviyes* or small *dergahs*) at the time of the Ottoman conquest of Thrace and the Balkans, Ömer Lütfi Barkan confirmed the existence of female spiritual leaders at Sufi *zaviyes* (Barkan 1942, pp. 302–3, 323). Ottoman archives indicate that, like Kadıncık Ana, these women bore the title of *ana* (“mother”), alongside *bacı* (“sister”). Such titles are still widely used among Alevî-Bektaşî groups as terms of respect for spiritual leaders.<sup>11</sup> Several dervish *zaviyes* also bore female names such as Kız Bacı, Ahi Ana, Sıgır Hatun, Hacı Fatma, Hacı Bacı, Hundi Hacı Hatun, and Sume Bacı, and some of these communities were led by women (Beldiceanu-Steinherr 2005, pp. 262, 271; cf. Barkan 1942, pp. 302–3). We also find that in 1485 a *zaviye* in the town of Kırşehir, fifty kilometers west of Sulucakarahöyük, was headed by a female spiritual leader of Greek origin named Afendra (Barkan 1942, pp. 302–3). These women may have had male disciples, as seems to have been the case with Abdal Musa, a leader of the Abdals of Rum (“Abdalan-ı Rum”, see Kaygusuz Abdal 1999, p. 130), who was the disciple of Kadıncık Ana. The evidence demonstrates that women played a leading role in various Sufi communities, many of which were later subsumed into the Bektaşî order during the formative sixteenth century.

These archival records support the testimony of the late fifteenth-century Ottoman chronicler Aşıkpaşazade (1400–1484), who also provides some details about the social role of female spiritual leaders in Ottoman society (Flemming 2018, pp. 352–74). According to Aşıkpaşazade, whose work is considered one of the most important primary sources for the history of the early Ottoman Empire, women held important spiritual and religious positions. He notes that the order that bears Hacı Bektaş’s name was founded after his death by a woman: a certain Hatun Ana. She is said to have been a prominent member or “mother” (*ana*) of the mystical itinerant association of women known as the “Sisters of Rum” (Bacıyan-ı Rum; see Karakaya-Stump 2020, p. 155; Kafadar 1993, p. 195; Bayram 1987; Flemming 2002, p. 70). Aside from Aşıkpaşazade’s account, there is only limited information about the Bacıyan-ı Rum, most of which comes from oral tradition (*sözlü gelenek*) (cf. Hoffman 2006, pp. 365–80). The Bacıyan-ı Rum were one of the four dominant social groups in fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century Anatolia: Aşıkpaşazade names them alongside the frontier warriors (Gaziyan-ı Rum), the above-mentioned wandering dervishes (Abdalan-ı Rum), and the guild-like *ahi* associations (Ahiyan-ı Rum). The latter were members of *fütüvvet*-based communities composed of groups of young urban men connected with the burgeoning *tarik*at-based Sufism (Ohlander 2008, pp. 271–91). All four associations contributed to the rich and diverse tapestry of Islamic mysticism during the formative years of the Ottoman empire (Aşıkpaşazade 2013, pp. 63–64, 279, 307–8, 315; Karamustafa 1994, pp. 65–84; Ocak 1999, pp. 103–20). Even though Anatolian *ahi* groups specifically excluded women from participation, contemporary sources indicate that in medieval Anatolia *fütüvvet* could sometimes be practiced by women. As noted above, there were women with the title of *ahi* (a version of the term *aki*, “brave man”, used in *fütüvvet* groups for “master” members), suggesting that women may have been associated with this chivalric group (Bayram 1987; recently, Selçuk 2017, pp. 96–97; Goshgarian 2017, pp. 118, 120).<sup>12</sup> Aşıkpaşazade also records that Hacı Bektaş revealed his miraculous powers and



hidden knowledge to Hatun Ana, that she was his designated spiritual successor, and that she built a shrine (*türbe*) over his tomb (Zarcone 2010, p. 113).

Kadıncık Ana and Hatun Ana are in all probability the same person: the venerated Bektaşî woman who was given the surname “mother of holy men [dervishes]” (*erenlerin anası/annesi*) because of the key role she played in the history of the order (Vilayetname 1995, pp. 26–28, 64–65; Zarcone 2010, pp. 113–14; Mélikoff 2002, p. 4; Birge 1937, p. 46). According to Aşıkpaşazade, she was the saint’s adoptive daughter, whereas according to the *Vilayetname*, she was his spiritual wife. Irène Mélikoff (1917–2009), the Russian-born French Turkologist with Azerbaijani ancestry, a friend and advisor to Güllizar Cengiz (Figure 1), argues that Hacı Bektaş passed his spiritual powers onto Kadıncık Ana, and Kadıncık Ana transmitted the knowledge she received from Hacı Bektaş to her disciple Abdal Musa, with whose help she founded the Bektaşî community (Arca 2011; Mélikoff 2002, p. 6). On this interpretation, at the very summit of the nascent Bektaşî community there was a woman.



**Figure 1.** Güllizar Cengiz and Irène Mélikoff in Cologne, western Germany. © Private archive Güllizar Cengiz.

Yet, even today, Mélikoff’s voice is one of the few that emphasizes the centrality of Kadıncık Ana in the early Bektaşîyye. Most believe that Bektaşî spiritual leadership is a male prerogative and attribute this outlook to her disciple Abdal Musa. It is likewise telling that premodern male Sufis used to refer to exemplary Sufi women as (honorary) “men” (Shaikh 2009, p. 17; 2023, p. 224; cf. Xavier 2023, pp. 164–65; Hoffman-Ladd 1992, p. 83; Sharify-Funk et al. 2018, pp. 185–212). A notable example is provided by the great twelfth-century mystic Feriduddin Attar (d. 1221), who praised the archetypal woman Sufi Rabia el-Adeviyya (d. 801 in Basra, Iraq) as a “man”, who lived a legendary life as a celibate among the male Sufis (Lawrence 1994, p. 156; Flemming 2018, p. 387; cf. Kugle 2007, p. 113; cf. Cornell 2019). “Maleness” on the spiritual path is typically associated with an active engagement in service to the world, while spiritual growth also requires a receptive “feminine” approach to the divine. Even though the cultivation of such “feminine” principles is crucial for the spiritual path, accomplished Sufis, both male and female, were nevertheless described in terms of “manliness”, a spiritual state also emphasized by *fütüvvet* writings that focused on spiritual chivalry (Shaikh 2012, p. 13).

In his spiritual teachings, Attar further explains, “[I]t is not the outward form that counts, but the intention of the heart . . . . When a woman becomes a *man* in the path of God, she is a man and one cannot any more call her a woman. . . . [T]he first *man* to enter paradise will be Mary, the mother of Jesus” (Attar 1966, p. 40, emphasis added; Shaikh

2023, p. 224; Hoffman-Ladd 1992, p. 83; Chodkiewicz 1994; Chodkiewicz 1995, p. 107; Elias 1988, p. 211). This reflects the contemporary idea that a “good and pious woman” could, through asceticism and the active “self-effacement” of her female nature, overcome the physical body in general and sexuality in particular and become “like a man”, transcending what was seen by the normative social ideology of the time as the inherent weakness of femininity (Flemming 2018, p. 387; cf. Elias 1988, p. 211), a process Arezou Azad has called “reverse genderization” (Azad 2013, p. 81).

As Özgen Felek notes, the *Vilayetname* of Hacı Bektaş similarly uses the Turkish words *er* and *eren* (plural) for saint(s). While originally denoting a human (whether male or female), over time *er* came to be used for “man” and “male warrior”, and from the thirteenth century, it was applied to male saints (Felek 2021, p. 172). Even though the term was also used for female saints, throughout the *Vilayetname* sainthood is predominantly associated with manliness. Thus, while *eren* is the common term for both male and female saints, the language of the *Vilayetname* is articulated through gendered language embedded in hierarchical binaries that valorize masculinity (Felek 2021, p. 172; Shaikh 2023, p. 224).

However, the Babagan Bektaşî *dedebaba* Bedri Noyan (d. 1997) emphasizes that in the context of Bektaşî practices, rituals, and discourses, the term *er* does not serve as a gender indicator, but primarily as an implication of “the distance traveled in the faith that makes a spiritually perfected man or woman an *er* . . . a person who has attained the knowledge of *Hakk*” (Bahadır 2021; Noyan 1987, pp. 105–26). To express this state, Bektaşîs continue to use such paradoxical gendered language when speaking respectfully of an accomplished female savant, “There is an *er* person in her Bacî pants” (Menemencioğlu Temren 1999).

It can thus be argued that Attar’s quote reflects his belief in the equality of men and women in the path of God. In this context, the term “man” does not refer to gender but rather denotes a spiritual state of being. It suggests that on the spiritual path, outward appearances such as gender do not matter, and what counts is the sincerity of the “heart”. This idea of a genderless spirituality is not unique to Attar, as many Sufi mystics believe in the transcendence of gender in the realm of spirituality. Similarly, while Attar’s perspective highlights the importance of recognizing the spiritual potential and achievements of both men and women and the breaking down of gender-based barriers to spiritual attainment, his reference to Mary being the first *man* to enter paradise sacralizes the mother of Jesus and “disembodies” her at the same time (parallels for which can be found in the Christian tradition, see Möbius 1996, pp. 21–38). Yet, it also suggests that Mary, as a woman, was able to attain a high level of spiritual realization and was rewarded with the highest level of spiritual attainment, entry into paradise. This reinforces the idea that spiritual realization transcends gender binaries and that women have the same spiritual potential as men. As such, it is a powerful statement that challenges patriarchal norms and stereotypes and reinforces the words of Bedri Noyan Dede Baba, who emphasizes the importance of spiritual realization above all else.

This potential is evidenced by the ability of women known as *anas* and *bacıs* to occupy saintly and leadership positions in Anatolia during the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries (Arca 2011). Yet, this does not seem to have been maintained beyond the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century, when increasing state control in the Ottoman empire left little room for the less regimented, almost anarchic male and female dervish communities, such as the Abdals and the Bacıyan-ı Rum (Karakaya-Stump 2011, pp. 1–24; Mélikoff 2002, pp. 33–34). Gradually, most of these antinomian movements ended up taking refuge in the Bektaşîyye and were submerged within it. The ongoing presence of women in the order was a major cause for censure among certain mystics and religious scholars. The Turkish mystic Lami’i, a Sufi *şeyh* (Arabic *shaykh*) under Selim I (r. 1512–1520), for example, criticized the Bektaşîs because they “have thrown off the yoke of Islamic law from their necks and were grazing in the meadow of lawlessness” (Flemming 2018, p. 408). The presence of women became increasingly undesirable in this environment, in the Bektaşî as well in other institutionalized dervish orders. Nevertheless, female membership in the Bektaşîyye has continued to the present day.<sup>13</sup>

### 3. The Spiritual Path of a Contemporary Female Bektaşî Dervish

This part focuses on Güllizar Cengiz's spiritual path by charting her rise in the spiritual hierarchy of the Bektaşî Sufi order. It concentrates first on the time before and second on the time after she chose the Bektaşî path. After choosing this path, she first became an *aşık* or sympathizer of the order. Then, she was initiated into Bektaşism as a *muhib* (literally "intimate friend", one who has taken the vow and entered the Bektaşî order), following which she was also known as Neriman Aşki Bacı. Subsequent to her attainment of dervishhood, she became known as Neriman Aşki Derviş.

After becoming a Bektaşî, Neriman Aşki Bacı opened a Bektaşî Sufi lodge (*dergah*) in the Westerwald near Bonn. During their visit to the *dergah* on the occasion of Güllizar Cengiz achieving dervishhood in 2009, Haydar Ercan Dedebaba (b. 1936) and the other *babas* made the important decision to rename the *dergah*, formerly known as "Sarı Saltuk Dergah", as "Kadıncık Ana Dergah" (Neriman Aşki Derviş, interview with the author on 23 March 2019).

#### 3.1. Dervish Karabulut, Güllizar Cengiz's First Spiritual Guide

Güllizar Cengiz was born in 1957 into a "layman" Alevi family in Kangal near Sivas in central Anatolia. Cengiz was greatly influenced by her father, Dervish Karabulut (1924–1976), who, even though he was not born into one of the Alevi spiritual lineages (*ocak*),<sup>14</sup> was accepted by the people as a "real" dervish because of his extraordinary abilities. From an early age, Cengiz accompanied her father when he led communal Sufi gatherings and rituals (*muhabbets*) attended by Alevis, Bektaşîs, and other non-affiliated dervishes. The *muhabbets* also served to instruct and guide those present, with central texts being recited and interpreted and poetry sung to musical accompaniment to impart knowledge. She also joined her father's nocturnal spiritual conversations (*sohbets*, which are closely related to *muhabbets*). By listening to the *sohbets* of the elders, her introduction to religious knowledge came at an early age. This was highly unusual, as normally she would not have been allowed access to ritual events until after her initiation and the completion of the central socio-religious institution of *musahiplik* (see Melikoff 1995, pp. 75–84; Kehl-Bodrogi 1997, pp. 119–37); a ritualized lifelong relationship in which two married couples take their initiation vows together and have a special bond as brothers and sisters in both the Alevi community<sup>15</sup> and in the Bektaşî order. Since she exhibited qualities considered suitable for the Sufi path, she also accompanied her father to gatherings outside the parental home. During these meetings, the collective prayer (*ayin-ı cem*, literally "rite of gathering", also known as '*ayn-ı cem*', "essence of union"; cf. Karolewski 2005, pp. 109–31) took place. As it was held in the evening/night, it was a rare opportunity for a young girl at that time. She recalls that the inner circle that remained late into the night spoke from the heart to cultivate their spiritual development (*irşad muhabbet*). Some of those present were in a *hal ehli* state (a state of ecstasy in which they have the power to make "the absent saints" appear to them, also known as *irşad makamı*, or "station of guidance")—that is, they became conscious of divine manifestations within themselves, a state usually achieved only after a long period of service to the community. They are referred to as "people of spiritual realization" (Birge 1937, p. 260) (Neriman Aşki Derviş, telephone interview with the author on 19 May 2020).

It is said that, once seekers reach the spiritual state of *irşad makamı* (which conceptualizes a universal, genderless, ethical self), they will be thought to have cultivated the qualities of the "spiritually perfected human being" (*insan-ı kamil*) (Shaikh 2022, pp. 480–88; 2009, p. 36), seen as the pinnacle of spiritual development in Bektaşism. In this state of being, the seekers integrate divine qualities that are associated with gender. These may be considered "feminine" as well as "masculine" in equal measure, such as the immanent or *cemal* ("beauty") qualities, the manifestation of divine grace and mercy, as well as the transcendent or *celal* ("majesty") qualities, the manifesting of divine power. They attain a high degree of spiritual development involving complete detachment from the material

world, together with a profound understanding of the nature of the self and the ability to see the divine in everything.

At the darkest time of night at about 4 a.m., they prayed to *Rahman*, the Merciful, as well as to the *gayb erenler* (literally “absent saints”, known as “those who attain”, also referred to as *abdals*), who are seen as sources of wisdom and inspiration in reference to the unnamed *gayb erenler*, who by means of their powerful influence participate in the preservation of the order of the universe (*kainat*) (see Moosa 1988, pp. 110–19). Cengiz recalls that, during an *ayin-ı cem* gathering (generally referred to simply as *cem*), some people asked for a sign or divine proof that there was a saint among them who is touched by divine grace—that is, a “friend of God” (*veli*) who could perform a miracle (*keramet*) as proof of his spiritual progress and closeness to God. It is believed that, through their spiritual practices and devotion to God, Sufis can achieve a state of proximity to the divine that enables them to perform *keramet*.

So, the presiding *dede* (literally “grandfather”, the leader of the social and ritual community) asked the charismatic Dervish Karabulut to perform a *keramet* (Gril 1995, pp. 69–81). Cengiz’s father asked for a *saj*, the flat iron pan on which flat bread is made. He asked for it to be made red-hot and brought to the center of the room. He then whirled around the red-hot pan three times in a *semah* (literally “listening”, a ritual dance),<sup>16</sup> resulting in a trance (*vecd*), before stepping onto the pan with both feet.<sup>17</sup> The experience of such “sacred pain”—his ability to undergo intense physical torment without feeling pain or suffering physical injury—demonstrated Dervish Karabulut’s spiritual strength and miraculous power. Feats such these were also seen by some as a form of spiritual testing or purification that brought one closer to God.

In many ways, then, Cengiz’s father can be seen as her first spiritual guide (*mürşid*). When one of her sisters died at the age of 17, her father fell very ill. He died at the age of 52. Yet, even after his death, her father continued to transmit to her his own mystical experiences through dreams and visions. Cengiz continued to communicate with him in this way, seeking his spiritual guidance. Whenever she had inner difficulties, she sought her father’s guidance for her spiritual practice and development through these visions.

### 3.2. Migration to Germany

After Cengiz married on 4 July 1978, at the age of 21, two years after her father’s death, and moved to Germany, she lost this intimate connection to her father and “met” him only at important transitions in her life. After she gave birth to her first child, a daughter, she did not have a dream vision of her father. However, after the birth of her second child, a son, she did have a such a vision. In this dream, her father gave her the customary gift of a purse (*kese*), a traditional symbol of wealth and abundance, with a piece of gold inside representing the prosperity and good fortune he wished for his daughter and her new baby. While patrilineal thought and “traditional” gender roles may have influenced Cengiz’s dream, it is questionable whether these determined the content of the dream itself, which was likely shaped by a range of factors including her personal experiences and emotional states.

A few months after her arrival in Germany, Cengiz started working with the Alevi community in Germany. Soon she was on the board of the Alevi Association in Cologne, at a time when women mainly had subordinate roles. In her early years, she was supported by Mahmut Gülcicek from Cologne and Haydar Kök from Ankara, both of whom were well-connected in the transnational Alevi networks (Keleş 2021, p. 39).

Migration and exposure to a foreign country may have positively affected her understanding of gender roles, for Cengiz’s husband helped out by taking care of their three children, a support that was unusual at the time. He also gave her moral and financial support by letting her use a substantial portion of their finances to provide services to the Alevi community at large. This philanthropy was considered a form of spiritual practice, thought to bring blessings and spiritual benefits to the donor. In doing so, Cengiz sought to follow the example of Kadıncık Ana. According to the *Vilayetname*, she was a wealthy



woman owing to a bequest from her father. But she exhausted her wealth by helping the dervishes and soon had only a single shirt to her name. One day, Hacı Bektaş asked her to receive a group of Kalender dervishes from Khorasan. With nothing left, Kadıncık gave away her last shirt to prepare food for them, taking refuge in the bread oven (*tandır*) to hide her nakedness. Through a miracle of Hacı Bektaş, she received a bundle of clothes, so that she could come out to greet her visitors (Melikoff 2002, p. 5; Menemencioglu Temren 2010).

Cengiz's work for the Alevi Federation was accelerated in response to the Sivas massacre of 2 July 1993, in which 33 festival-goers (including Alevi intellectuals, poets, artists, children and youths in a *semah* troupe, two of the hotel employees, and two people from outside the hotel who were apparently part of the attacking mob) were killed and over 30 people were injured. They had gathered in a hotel for an annual cultural festival celebrating the life of the 16th-century Kızılbaş poet, Pir Sultan Abdal, in the city of Sivas in central Turkey, when a mob of ultranationalist Islamist extremists set fire to the building. The horrific massacre, universally condemned as a hate crime, targeted the Alevi community, a minority religious group in Turkey that has historically faced discrimination and violence. The attack was also seen as a turning point in Alevi political activism, with the Alevi community becoming more vocal in demanding their rights and representation in society. While developing her and her husband's construction company, Cengiz became the second chairperson of the steadily growing European Alevi Federation Germany, which was set up between 1993 and 1996. Through her professional efforts, she was able to continue to provide significant financial support for the Federation's endeavors.

### 3.3. Güllizar Cengiz's Advisors, Teachers, and Her Second Spiritual Guide

Early on, Cengiz met Melikoff, herself a member of the Bektaşî order (Arca 2011), who became an important advisor and helped her build up an archive on Alevi-Bektaşî culture (see Figure 1). Through the Alevi intellectual Cemal Şener, she met the eminent Bektaşî *baba* Teoman Güre Halifebaba (d. 2009), also known as İlhami Baba, in the winter of 1994.<sup>18</sup> Deeply impressed by İlhami Baba's charisma and what she saw as his modern approach to Bektaşism, as well as the competence of his *muhibs*, Cengiz entered the Bektaşî path by becoming an *aşık*; a sympathizer of the order who is bound by loyalty but cannot participate in Bektaşî ritual ceremonies. It is the lowest position in the religious hierarchy of Babagan Bektaşism prior to formally entering the order.<sup>19</sup> In doing so, she agreed to follow İlhami Baba's guidance. Following his instruction—"you can't carry two watermelons under one arm"—she left the Alevi Federation to devote herself fully to her Bektaşî discipleship (Neriman Aşki Derviş, telephone interview with the author on 19 May 2020). She had committed herself to becoming fully initiated into this order.

### 3.4. Initiation into the Bektaşî Order as Neriman Aşki Bacı

Two and a half years after she was accepted as an *aşık* by İlhami Baba, her (second) *mürşid*, she underwent the initiation ritual (*nasip töreni*) on 15 February 1996. During the ceremony, Cengiz was given a new name by her *mürşid*, the "name of the path" (*yol ismi*) "Neriman Aşki Bacı". This symbolized the death of her old life and her symbolic rebirth as a member of the Bektaşî community. The idea of being "reborn" through the *nasip* articulates the spiritual transformation of the initiand, who emerges from the ceremony as a "new person" with a deeper understanding and connection to the divine. This rebirth involves entry into a spiritual (and thus genderless) state of being, and the corresponding death of one's former spiritual state. This process of dying before death is based on a saying attributed to the Prophet Muhammed: "Die [to this world] before you die!" (Arabic *mutu qabla an tamutu*). This farewell to one's former life implies not only submission to God, but also surrender of body and soul to the *mürşid*, symbolically becoming a corpse in the hands of the undertaker. In this way, the *can* ("inspired soul"), after undergoing the *nasip*, is reborn from the hands of a *pir*, or *dede* (spiritual master). After the ritual, the initiands are referred to as *canlar*. No difference is made between the sexes.<sup>20</sup> In this way, Bektaşism implements a concept of "religious anthropology" as (to use the words of Sa'diyya

Shaikh) “a term that addresses questions of what it means to be a human being from a religious perspective” (Shaikh 2015, p. 106). Shaikh asserts that Islamic androcentric and patriarchal constructions of what it means to be human can be deconstructed by embarking on a spiritual path grounded in Sufi conceptions of self and personhood.

Being initiated is called *nasip almak*, “taking one’s share” or “portion”, which refers to the idea that each person has a spiritual share or portion that they can receive through initiation into the Bektaşî order. With this, Cengiz, now Neriman Aşki Bacı, was accepted into the Bektaşî order as a *muhib* (literally “lover”) and received a ritual headdress, a green scarf symbolizing the color of the sky, reserved for female initiates,<sup>21</sup> a twelve-sided *teslim taşı* (“stone of surrender”) to be worn around the neck symbolizing devotion to Allah, and a *tığbend*, a finger-thick cord woven from twelve strands of wool from the sheep sacrificed during the initiate’s initiation ceremony (Menemencioğlu Temren 2010). With the introduction into the Bektaşî tradition of initiatory teaching, Neriman Aşki Bacı was allowed to participate in Bektaşî ritual ceremonies. The initiation ceremony included the Bektaşî ritual practice of the *ayin-ı cem* (“rite of union”), also called *ayin-ı ikrar* (or *ikrar erkamı*, “rite of affirmation”), which began at twilight. This involved the ritual lighting of candles and contained a reenactment of the time when Ali, cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad, transmitted the secrets of the Qur’an to his companions (*kırklar*, held to be the spiritual directors of the world), which is why he is known as the “speaking Qur’an” (*Kuran-ı natık*). At the end of his nocturnal ascent to heaven (*miraç*), Muhammad encountered Ali’s assembly with the other eleven imams and a number of mostly unnamed prophets and saints, consisting of women and men (the assembly or “banquet” of the Forty [*Kırklar meclisi*]; Schubel 2010, pp. 330–43; Mélikoff 1975, p. 64; Kehl-Bodrogi 1988, pp. 123–25; De Jong 1989, p. 8; Birge 1937, pp. 137–38). He gained access to the spiritual feast only by announcing himself as a *fakir* (“poor”) in the manner of a Sufi aspirant, denoting a state of spiritual poverty bereft of God’s grace. In the *Kırklar meclisi*, it is said that “everything comes out of secrecy and becomes real”. No distinction is made, all participants, including the Prophet Muhammad, are considered equal—they are all brothers and sisters. Of the Forty, twenty-three are men and seventeen are women, including Fatıma, Muhammad’s daughter and Ali’s wife, who is referred to as Fatma Ana (Bahadır 2021; Yörükân and Yörükân 1998, p. 119). The meeting was held in no other place than the house of Fatıma, who is revered by the Bektaşîs (and the Alevis) as divine perfection and is considered the repository of the esoteric reading of the Qur’an transmitted by her father.

As Thierry Zarcone has pointed out, Kadıncık Ana was early associated with, or even identified as, Fatıma (Zarcone 2010, p. 115; cf. Hendrich 2013, pp. 308–9). In the *Vilayetname*, Kadıncık Ana is also known as Kutlu Melek, although in later traditions her name was merged with the names Fat[ı]ma Ana or Fat[ı]ma Bacı. In this way, Kadıncık Ana, the spiritual wife of the eponymous founder of the Bektaşî order, acquired the qualities of the daughter of the Prophet. Two traditions (Arabic *hadith*) attributed to Muhammad are often referred to in order to convey the exceptional spiritual function that his daughter fulfils: “He who knows Fatıma knows himself” and “He who knows himself knows God” (Elias 1988, p. 218). Kadıncık Ana thereby also acquired the qualities of the wife of Ali, the most important saint of Bektaşîsm.

Shortly after the *nasip*, Neriman Aşki Bacı had another dream vision in which she encountered her father, her first *mürşid*, which she took as a sign that he supported her decision to follow the Bektaşî path (Neriman Aşki Derviş, telephone interview with the author on 19 May 2020). The details of this and other dreams cannot be revealed because Neriman Aşki Bacı, like all initiates, is only allowed to share the experiences of her spiritual path as well as her innermost thoughts and feelings with her *mürşid*. She thereby follows the principle of “preferring to die than to reveal the secret” (*ser verip sır vermemek*), considered a central commandment. The practice of keeping things hidden also reflects the Bektaşî belief that spiritual knowledge cannot be easily communicated or understood. As a result, many things remain concealed from those who have not been initiated or who are not part of the Bektaşî community.

### Neriman Aşki Bacı's Poetry

Conversely, Bektaşî poetry, a literary genre known as *nefes* (literally “breath [of the spirit]”), is regarded as a powerful tool for conveying messages to society. Typically composed in a highly symbolic and metaphorical language, the poems describe the spiritual journey of the poet and can serve as inspiration for others on the spiritual path. Because the poems were frequently recited in ritual contexts and passed down orally, female Bektaşî poets are not as well-known, as their poems have not been recorded as extensively as those of their male counterparts. Nevertheless, female Bektaşî poets played a significant role in this Bektaşî tradition, and their poetry forms an important strand of the rich Bektaşî literary tradition (Zarcone 2010). Since there are few written sources in Bektaşism, Mélikoff emphasizes how valuable these poetries are: “*Nefes* are extremely rich and informative sources. You can learn everything from *nefes*”. In fact, it is often said that in *nefes* “accomplished mystics” (*eren*) solve problems through divine wisdom (*hikmetler*). Following this time-honored tradition, Neriman Aşki Bacı describes the beginning of her spiritual journey in the following *nefes* (Neriman Aşki Derviş, email to author on 16 February 2022):

*Ben gönümü bir sevdaya kaptırdım  
İkrar-ı bend oldum bir pire bağlandım  
Üryan püryan oldum girdim irfana  
İkilikten geçtim birliğe bağlandım  
Bir kaşı kemana açtım razımı  
Dostun cemaline döndüm yüzüümü  
Bir ulu bazara koydum özüümü  
Ene'l-Hakk Mansur'u dara bağlandım  
Dostun cemaline döndüm yüzüümü  
Darda gözüüm açtım piri gördüm  
Meyl-ı muhabbette irfana erdim  
Erenler Şahuna gönümü verdim  
Beni benden alan ere bağlandım  
Seyit Nesimi'nin talibi oldum  
Dolular taşırdı boşlara doldum  
Erenler bağında Neriman oldum  
Yandım alev alev kora bağlandım.*

I've lost my heart to a love,  
I have made a vow and tied myself to a *pir* [*mürşid*],  
I have become stark naked and entered wisdom,  
I passed through duality and connected to unity.  
I opened my secret to the one whose eyebrow is [as beautiful] as a bow,  
I turned my face to my friend's beauty,  
I put my self [*can*] in a great bazar,  
I am tightly bound to Mansur's *Ene'l-Hakk* ["I am the Truth/Allah"].  
I turned my face to my friend's beauty,  
I tied myself to the gallows (*dar*) [that Hallac-ı Mansur was hanged on] and saw my *pir*,  
I have attained wisdom in love,  
I gave my heart to the Shah of the *erenler* [Hacı Bektaş-ı Veli].  
I am tied to the father who took me from me,

I have become the seeker of Seyyid Nesimi,  
 I was filled to overflowing and filled to emptiness,  
 I became Neriman in the vineyard of the *erenler*,  
 I was burned in flames, I am bound to the embers.

(Translation by the author with adaptations by Neriman Aşki Derviş)

Among the rich symbolism that Neriman Aşki Bacı evokes in her *nefes* is her “initiatory death”, the consensual submission of her self (*can*) to the path, metaphorically implied by her remark that she has become “stark naked”. The symbolic value of this nudity is also tied to the desexualization of the human body. This is followed by her symbolic rebirth, often described as a “second birth”, which was accomplished by the hands of her *mürşid* and to which she refers by saying that she has “entered wisdom”, an ultimately genderless state (cf. [Zarcone 2016](#), pp. 781–98). Symbolic rebirth is also implicit when she speaks of the tenth-century mystic Hallac-ı Mansur (Mansur al-Hallaj), who first spoke the Arabic words *Ana al-haqq* (Turkish *Ene'l-Hakk*) and was martyred in Baghdad in 922, in part for uttering them. By mentioning him, Neriman Aşki Bacı alludes to a specific place in the *meydan*, the ceremonial space where the initiatory *cem* ritual takes place, marked by a sheepskin (*post*), known as *dar-ı Mansur* (“gallows of Mansur”), where the initiate is symbolically executed.

Neriman Aşki Bacı probably stood at this spot in the center of the *meydan* during her initiation, facing İlhami Baba, who performed the ritual. She would have crossed one or two arms over her chest, her hands pointing toward her shoulders, her right big toe placed on her left (to “seal” her feet), and her head slightly inclined, in the Bektaşî position of humility and respect, a ritual posture also performed in some other Sufi orders. At the same time, this scene represents the climax of the Bektaşî ceremony, alluding to Mansur’s execution and Neriman Aşki Bacı’s willingness to make sacrifices on the path to Allah/the Truth (*Hakk yolu*), as well as her symbolic death and rebirth, in accordance with the aforementioned saying attributed to the Prophet—“Die before you die”. This central moment of the rite of passage is also evoked by the Bektaşî poetess Remzi Bacı (1883–?), who similarly refers to the voluntary sacrifice of her own person: “The secret of ‘dying before [dying]’ was revealed to me . . . The night I was taken to the gallows (*dar*) of [Hallac-ı] Mansur . . . At that moment, my master took my hand and girded my loins with the sword belt” (translation adapted from [Özmen 1995](#), p. 147; cited after [Zarcone 2010](#), p. 106, 57). In this context, Remzi Bacı also describes how, as a new initiate, she was girded with a special woolen belt known as the “sword belt” (*tığbend*).

Neriman Aşki Bacı next refers to another emblematic figure of voluntary death in the Bektaşî ritual, Seyyid Nesimi (d. ca. 1404–5), who was flayed alive for his ideas and whom she “sought out” from then on, she tells us. In Nurdan Arca’s 2011 documentary *Canlar on Bektaşî and Alevi rituals* ([Arca 2011](#)), this part of the ritual is explained as follows: “The sheepskin spread in the *meydan* represents our skin. This is how we give up our existence, just as Nesimi was skinned. Thus we are skinned, we are ready to be judged, we place ourselves in the hands of the mystics, bound hand and foot (in the manner of a *kurban* [the propitiatory animal sacrifice, usually a sheep])”. The *Evrâd-ı Abdalan*, accessed by Menemencioğlu Temren in Bedri Noyan Dede Baba’s library, provides further insights into the symbolism of the above-mentioned *teslim taşı* (“stone of surrender”):

Its string is made from the leather of the sacrificial lamb of Ismail. It refers to the skin of Nesimi Sultan. The strap is the gallows rope of Mansur. The upper half [of the stone] symbolizes Hz. Hasan, the lower half symbolizes our Lord Hz. İmam Hüseyin-ı Karbala, and the twelve indentations (in the shape of a crescent moon) represent the twelve Imams. The outer side points to Hatice-tül-Kübra, and the inner side to Fatma-tüz-Zehra. ([Menemencioğlu Temren 2010](#))

By symbolizing two male (Hasan and Hüseyin, the sons of Ali and Fatıma) and two female saints (Hatice [Arabic Khadija], the first wife of the Prophet Muhammad, and Fatıma), the central emblem of Bektaşîsm, the *teslim taşı* itself thus reflects the aforementioned Bektaşî principle of gender equality. Neriman Aşki Bacı ends her *nefes* by saying that she



has been “burned”, a sensation that the poet Sıtkı Baba (1865–1928) also associates with this rite: “Initiation is difficult. It is like wearing shirts of fire, eating nuts of iron”, and he calls on the initiates: “Submit yourselves to the holy ones”. At the same time, Neriman Aşki Bacı concludes that she was burned by ardent love (*aşk*), a feeling that did not cease from then on because she is “bound to the burning embers”.

### 3.5. Neriman Aşki Bacı as Muhib

In 1997, Neriman Aşki Bacı founded the Alevi-Bektashi Cultural Institute in Cologne to research and promote awareness of Alevi-Bektaşî teaching in the broader context of the transnational Bektaşî and Alevi circuits.<sup>22</sup> She was advised by Mélikoff (see Figure 1) and the anthropologist and initiated member of the Bektaşîyye Belkıs Menemencioğlu Temren, both of whom emphasized the importance of a scholarly approach, and the archiving of source materials of the Bektaşî and Alevi literary and musical tradition. They organized conferences in cooperation with the University of Bonn and the University of Cologne, published scholarly articles in the *Journal of Alevi-Bektashi Studies* since 2009,<sup>23</sup> and produced teaching material such as the recent short animated film “Hünkâr [“Sovereign”] Bektaş” (The Institute of Alevi-Bektashi Culture 2021).

Over the next two years (2007 and 2008), Neriman Aşki Bacı regularly visited İlhami Baba’s Gaziler Dergah in Ankara, strengthening the transnational bonds between *mürşid* and *mürîd* (novice). She says that each time she “went there with empty arms and came back richly endowed”. İlhami Baba invited her to the ritual gathering called *sofra* (the cloth spread in the *meydan*), a ritual “meal”, which is open to non-initiates, the set table whose food, drink, and music are imbued with symbolism (Soileau 2012, pp. 1–30). As noted earlier, women participate fully with men in this and other rituals. During the *sofra*, wine or spirits are served—the Bektaşîs (and Alevis) being perhaps the only Islamic group that condones and sanctifies the consumption of alcohol (Elias 2020, pp. 33–44). Neriman Aşki Bacı considered it a great honor and privilege to attend the *sofra*, as it was an opportunity to receive guidance and inspiration from her *mürşid*.

She also received guidance from Belkıs Menemencioğlu Temren and her husband, Adni Halifebaba (Mehmet Temren, see Figure 5). They were closely connected with İlhami Baba’s *mürşid*, the well-known Turgut Koca Halifebaba (d. 1997), one of the leading Bektaşî *babas* of the second half of the twentieth century, and his equally renowned wife Adviye Ana Bacı (d. 1996) (Koca 2003, pp. 280–84), whom Neriman Aşki Bacı met twice. She was especially impressed by the exceptionally harmonious relationship between these *babas* and their wives. It is interesting to note that, when the Bektaşî order unofficially resumed its activities in Turkey in 1960, some of the leading *babas* representing the Bektaşî hierarchy in Turkey, Bedri Noyan Dede Baba and Turgut Koca Halifebaba, as well as the present *dedebaba* Haydar Ercan<sup>24</sup>, were all married *babas*, despite being representatives of the celibate line of the Bektaşî order (cf. Küçük 2002, pp. 24–25; Yaman and Erdemir 2006, p. 26). Was this possible because of the Bektaşî principle of “moving with the times and staying one step ahead of the times”?

### 3.6. The Opening of the Kadıncık Ana Dergah in Western Germany

In 2006, Neriman Aşki Bacı purchased a former guesthouse in Hausen on a hill in the Westerwald near Bonn and converted it “in accordance with the needs of a traditional Bektaşî *dergah*” (Figure 2) (Neriman Aşki Derviş, telephone interview with the author on 2 July 2020).<sup>25</sup> With this ritual transfer to the transnational community in western Germany, a (re)contextualization and adaptation to the local context, she created a sacred space where both the Babagan Bektaşîs and the members of the Alevi community of the Turkish diaspora in Germany can gather for religious ceremonies and rituals, as well as for the study and practice of Bektaşî and Alevi teachings (Sökefeld 2005, pp. 203–26; also Gal 2003, pp. 93–120). The *dergah* thereby also serves as a place of refuge where people can seek spiritual guidance.

On the first floor of the main building is a *meydanevi* with a ceremonial room (*meydan odası*), the central place of the *dergah* where the Babagan Bektaşis perform their ritual ceremonies (Figure 3). The reception of the guests takes place on the ground floor of the main building, which consists of a reception room, a dining room, a library, a kitchen (*aşevi*), a pantry, and a laundry room. On the second and third floors are the guest (*mihman*) rooms. Across the courtyard from the main building, there is a small separate building, an Alevi *cemevi*, built in the traditional *cemevi* style (Figure 4). While the Bektaşî *meydanevi* is reserved for initiated Bektaşis only (their ritual activities taking place discreetly), the Alevi *cemevi* is open to all invited guests.



**Figure 2.** Kadıncık Ana Dergah in Hausen near Bonn. © Sara Kuehn, 2021.



**Figure 3.** Neriman Aşki Derviş, Haydar Soylu Baba, and Kutsi Halifebaba (from right to left) in the Babagan Bektaşî *meydan odası* at the Kadıncık Ana Dergah in Hausen. After the *nevruz* ritual, there was an exceptional opportunity to enter this sacred space for a brief moment and take a photo. © Sara Kuehn, 2019.



**Figure 4.** Alevi *cemevi* in the garden of the Kadıncık Ana Dergah in Hausen. © Sara Kuehn, 2019.

In 2007, Haydar Ercan Dede Baba, the spiritual leader of the Babagan Bektaşis, along with *halifebabas*, *babas*, dervishes, and *muhibs* (Bektaşis with different ranks within the order's hierarchy), and *dedes* from twelve Alevi *ocaks* attended the inauguration ceremony of the *dergah*. From then on, a *baba* came every month to perform a ritual ceremony in the *meydan* of the *dergah* (Figure 5). From 2007 to 2012, Ali Naki Baba (Faysal İlhan) (d. 2016) from Duisburg was the acting *baba* in the *dergah*, followed by Kutsi Halifebaba (Yücel Top) from Brussels from 2012 to 2016. Since 2016, Haydar Soylu Baba from Wuppertal has been the acting *baba* in the *dergah*.



**Figure 5.** Neriman Aşki Derviş and Adni Halifebaba in the *meydan odası* at the Kadıncık Ana Dergah in Hausen. © Private archive Güllizar Cengiz.

Neriman Aşki Bacı herself divides her time between living in the Kadıncık Ana Dergah in the Westerwald and working in Cologne. Neither her professional nor her family life appears to impede her progress on the mystical path. She continues to pour her heart and soul into all the activities at the *dergah*, which receives a steady stream of guests throughout the year, especially during Alevi-Bektaşî holidays, such as *muharrem*, *nevrüz*, or *hidirellez*. These celebrations are attended by transnational Alevi and Bektaşî communities. Hospitality is also extended to individual guests as well as German and



Turkish delegations (for instance, from DİTİB, the Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs). Everyone, regardless of their background, is invited to come to the *dergah*.

The food brought into the *dergah* is blessed by Neriman Aşki Derviş or, if present, by a *baba* in the company of Bektaşî initiates and visitors, and then eaten by the participants at the end of the ritual (Figure 6). Assisted by both male and female *mürids*, she oversees the preparation of the *lokma* food (literally “bites, morsels” served in a ritual context). During the *cem*, the latter is distributed by both men and women, which again points to an adaptation to new social realities in a transnational context. Traditionally, women only assist, and it is the men who take on the task of distributing the *lokmas*.

Field observations of the rituals at the Kadıncık Ana Dergah could only be conducted in the Alevi *cemevi* and not in the Bektaşî *meydanevi*, which is reserved for the initiated. There, unlike in a traditional setting where men are placed to the right and women to the left of the *cem* area (*meydan*)—symbolizing a hierarchy between the sexes (Arslan 2017, pp. 3–4, 94)—I did not observe a male-female division of space.<sup>26</sup> Gender segregation does not exist, and women and men participate together in ritual dances<sup>27</sup> (Figure 7). They are likewise both present in ritual ceremonies, such as in the *cem* when the twelve ritual services (*On İki Hizmet*) are performed, which structure both Bektaşî and Alevi assemblies. Both men and women carry out the ritual functions in the *On İki Hizmet* and other spiritual practices, although the majority of functions are still performed by men. Thus, even within the framework of the *cem*, traditional gender distinctions have not been completely eliminated. Moreover, while women can play an active role in the performance of the ritual ceremonies, it is still wholly exceptional for women to preside over the ritual.<sup>28</sup> The service of the *çırağcı* (candle keeper), by contrast, is usually reserved for women. This is related to the fact that Fatıma Ana is regarded as the head of the hearth (Bahadır 2021). It is also connected with the idea that Fatıma Ana (the namesake of Kadıncık Ana), whose epithet is “Resplendent” (Zehra), was present “at the origin of the transmission of the divine light” (Zarcone 2010, p. 119).



**Figure 6.** Haydar Soylu Baba blessing food with Neriman Aşki Derviş, Bektaşî initiates, and guests in the kitchen (*aşevi*) at the Kadıncık Ana Dergah in Hausen. © Sara Kuehn, 2019.





**Figure 7.** Neriman Aşki Derviş performing the dance of the crane bird (*turna*) at the Alevi *cemevi*, Kadıncık Ana Dergah in Hausen. © Sara Kuehn, 2019.

Despite this potential and the historical legacy of Kadıncık Ana and her peers, who served as female spiritual leaders that performed religious ceremonies and rituals and transmitted spiritual teachings, women did not have a place in the Bektaşî order in its institutionalized form. Women were and are mostly confined to the lower ranks of the order, as *aşiks* or *muhibs*. They are denied advancement within the order's hierarchy. Only male dervishes are deemed fit to guide disciples through another rite to receive *icazet* ("certification") to become a *baba*. Beyond this, there is also the rank of the *halifebaba* and, at the top of the hierarchy, the *dedebaba*.

### 3.7. Becoming Dervish as a Woman: Neriman Aşki Derviş

In 2008, after receiving the necessary instructions and making progress on the inner path, İlhami Baba said, "It is time for Neriman Aşki Bacı to wear the dervish *taç* [literally "crown"]". Neriman Aşki Derviş recalls that "he was so pleased to put the dervish *taç* onto a woman" (Neriman Aşki Derviş, telephone interview with the author on 2 July 2020). İlhami Baba prepared for her to take her next vow, during which she would be initiated as a dervish, often referred to as "taking the hand [of the baba]" ceremony, which took place both in Ankara and in Cologne. Her measurements were taken to tailor her ritual garments and entered into the book at the Gaziler Dergah in Ankara. İlhami Baba prepared the ritual garments that she would wear during the initiation rite. This included a tall conical felt *taç* symbolizing mystical realization (*marifet*)<sup>29</sup>—women receive a special *taç* similar in shape to an *elifi taç*<sup>30</sup>—and the *kisve* (or *kıyafet*, "clothing"). The *kisve* includes a white dress (*tennure*), representing a "garment of the hereafter", a waistcoat (*haydariye*), symbolizing the fight with the self or *nefs* (*cihad-ı ekber*, or the greater *cihad* [Arabic *jiḥād*], that is, the struggle against the lower self) through complete submission to God and purification of the heart, a cloak (*hurka*), a symbol of service, and various accoutrements (Menemencioglu Temren 2010; cf. De Jong 1989, pp. 7–29).<sup>31</sup> The symbolism of the *haydariye* implicitly recognizes the equal autonomy, agency, value, and spiritual capacity of women and men, as the patriarchal nature of gender relations inherent in the Islamic interpretive tradition is seen as a manifestation of *nefs-i emmare* (the lower soul) (Shaikh 2009, pp. 14–16). These ritual regalia, especially the *tennure*, symbolize her detachment from worldly concerns and her spiritual rebirth as she enters upon the path of the cosmological triad "Allah (or *Hakk*), Muhammad, Ali". *Hakk* is the ultimate truth and the transcendent essence of the divine,

Muhammad is the spiritual guide and model for human conduct, and Ali is the gatekeeper of the divine mysteries and the guide to the path of truth.

In 2009, İlhami Baba started having heart problems. He nonetheless went to the German embassy in Ankara to apply for a visa. Before receiving it, however, he died. On that day, Neriman Aşki Bacı had the feeling of being with him, and kept calling him. When she went to İlhami Baba's funeral in Ankara, the other *babas* bestowed upon her the *taç* and *kisve* in accordance with İlhami Baba's wish. Afterwards, Haydar Ercan Dede, Kutsi Halifebaba and all the other *babas* came to the *dergah* near Cologne, where the main ceremony was held, during which Neriman Aşki Bacı donned both *taç* and *kisve* (Figure 8). With the attainment of dervishhood, Neriman Aşki Bacı became known as Neriman Aşki Derviş.



**Figure 8.** Sebadin Jusufoska Halifebaba (North Macedonia), Haydar Soylu Baba (Wuppertal), Neriman Aşki Derviş, Haydar Ercan Dede (Izmir), Kutsi Halifebaba (Brussels), Hüseyin Durak Baba (Istanbul), Isa Vatansever Baba (Istanbul), and Elif Adigüzel Bacı (Wuppertal) (from right to left) in the *meydan odası* at the Kadıncık Ana Dergah in Hausen. © Private archive Güllizar Cengiz.

During their visit, the *babas* took the significant decision to rename the *dergah* “Kadıncık Ana” (formerly known as “Sarı Saltuk Dergah”) (Neriman Aşki Derviş, interview with the author on 23 March 2019). Did the *babas* make this decision to rename the *dergah* after the prototypical female role model of Bektashism because the Bektashis around Neriman Aşki Derviş named her Kadıncık Ana for her efforts and merits on the path? Or should it be seen as a recognition that Neriman Aşki Derviş has a certain family resemblance to her namesake Kadıncık Ana and will follow in her footsteps?

To date, seventeen *miirids* have taken *nasip* at the Kadıncık Ana Dergah, with an almost equal proportion of women and men, most of whom have an Alevi background.<sup>32</sup> While the initiates contribute to the financial expenses for the services of the *dergah* in the Westerwald and the Alevi-Bektashi Cultural Institute in Cologne, these two institutions continue to be financed mainly by Neriman Aşki Derviş through her professional activities. Neither of these institutions receives any additional funding (Neriman Aşki Derviş, interview with the author on 23 March 2019). This is possible because—unlike the Albanian Bektashis, for whom serving as a dervish or *baba* is the sole activity—Turkish Bektashis maintain that everyone must have a profession in society in addition to serving as a dervish or *baba*.

Neriman Aşki Derviş herself acknowledges that her transnational position and the fact that she founded a *dergah* in Germany made it easier for her to be initiated as a dervish (Neriman Aşki Derviş, interview with the author on 16 February 2019). Had she continued to live in Turkey, this might have been more difficult. Be that as it may, the fact that Neriman Aşki Derviş, as a woman, was initiated as a Bektashi dervish is a striking testimony to her exceptional abilities.

#### 4. Women Dervishes

In the past, only a few women attained the rank of fully initiated Bektaşî dervishes. Only the names of a few female dervishes have survived, and little is known about their lives. Even less is known about women leading a Bektaşî lodge in modern times. The seventeenth-century Ottoman traveler Evliya Çelebi mentions a Bektaşî lodge established in Niš (in southern Serbia) in the second quarter of the sixteenth century, which was led by “a reputable woman” known as Zahide Bacî ([Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi n.d.](#), pp. 126–27; [Katić 2021](#), p. 90). The eighteenth-century women poets Gülsüm Bacî and Münire Bacî were both dervishes of Nuri Baba (d. 1801), the *tekke* incumbent (*postnişin*) of the Çamlıca Bektaşî Tekke in Istanbul (see also [Keleş 2020](#), pp. 117–18, 129–30, respectively).<sup>33</sup> The names of several nineteenth- and early twentieth-century women dervishes were likewise noted down when their *nefes* were recorded.<sup>34</sup> Less direct evidence also points to the existence of female Bektaşî dervishes, such as the tombstone of Derviş Fatma Hanım (d. 1812), which is inscribed with a *nefes* surmounted by her *teslim taşı* and is crowned by her *taç* ([Laqueur 1992](#), pp. 291–93, Figure 15.8). A certain Derviş Hanım in Thessaloniki is mentioned in a nineteenth-century travelogue ([Buturovic 2005](#), p. 761). We know of an unnamed woman who replaced her deceased husband as *postnişin* of the “sisters of Rum” (Bacıyan-ı Rum) lodge in Kavala, Greece ([Buturovic 2005](#), p. 761). Another woman Bektaşî dervish, known only as the mother of Ahmed Idris, was part of a small “independent” Bektaşî community in Sarajevo, Bosnia, several decades ago ([Šamić 1995](#), pp. 381–91). In addition, Menemencioğlu Temren describes the institution of the Atasagun Bacılık, which was established as one of the important functions of Bektaşism. The Atasagun *bacıs* were a group of dervish *bacıs* who were well-versed in healing techniques and treated both male and female patients without discrimination. As a sign of their devotion to this path, they shaved their heads completely. Menemencioğlu Temren suggests that this institution can thus be seen as a survival of the healing role of women in ancient Turkish traditions ([Menemencioğlu Temren 1999](#)).<sup>35</sup>

In the context of Alevi belief and practice (Alevilik), some women have held significant religious leadership positions. Anşa (Ayşe) Bacı (1817–1890?), for example, is celebrated in the oral culture of the Babacı-Hubyar Alevis for her courageous resistance against the Ottoman administration, her leadership role in the community, and her miraculous work. After her husband Veli Baba’s death in 1864, Anşa Bacı took over the leadership of this Alevi community and began to lead the *cem* ritual ([Okan 2018](#), pp. 69–89).<sup>36</sup> She later became the subject of an official investigation by the Ottoman administration, which feared that she might incite an uprising, as she was said to have gathered more than thirty thousand Hubyar Alevis around her. In 1894, she was exiled to Damascus along with her children and son-in-law, where she spent three years before returning to her village of Acısu in Zile, Tokat. Upon her return, she remained the religious leader of her community in Acısu for the rest of her life, which became a place of pilgrimage after her death ([Okan 2018](#), pp. 69–89). To this day, her followers are known as the Anşabacılıs (“followers of Sister Anşa”), which in a contemporary context, as Nimet Okan concludes, “refers to the equality of women and men, and even to women’s privileged positions in society”. Anşa Bacı, as a symbol of the equality between women and men, helps to reinforce the rhetoric of equality, and for the male members of the community, as Okan reports, being an Anşabacılı has indeed become a source of “pride” ([Okan 2018](#), pp. 69–89).

Bridging the transcultural gap also requires cultivating relationships in the home milieu, which is why Neriman Aşki Derviş regularly visits Alevi and Bektaşî holy sites in Turkey, such as the annual August pilgrimage to the *dergah* in Hacıbektaş and the sacred site of Kadıncık Ana’s disciple, Abdal Musa, in the Alevi village of Tekke Köyü in southwestern Turkey. She also visits the Balkans. During her visit to Albanian Bektaşî sites, she met with Edmond Brahimaj (b. 1959), popularly known as Baba Mondi, the current leader of the Albanian Bektaşî at the World Headquarters (*Kryegjyshata*) of the Albanian Bektaşis. Baba Mondi told her personally at their meeting on 7 September 2015—seven years after she had received the dervish *taç*—that he does not accept female dervishes in the (Albanian)



Bektaşî fold (Neriman Aşki Derviş, interview with the author on 23 March 2019).<sup>37</sup> This view was confirmed in the interviews I conducted with Baba Mondi in Tirana in 2012 and 2019, in which he similarly said that he does not envisage any female leadership roles within the (Albanian) Bektaşîyye. He said that this also applies to post-menopausal women. Even though they are often considered “no longer female” in the sense that they are no longer able to reproduce and thus transcend sexuality, for Baba Mondi their gender remains constant (Baba Mondi, interview with the author on 31 August 2019 at the Kryegjyshata, Tirana). Thus, in the Albanian Bektaşî order, women were and are to be found only in the lower ranks, as *aşiks* or *muhibs*.

Baba Mondi’s perspective contrasts with that of Haydar Ercan, whom the Babagan Bektaşî consider to be the only elected Bektaşî *dedebaba*. When I interviewed him in İzmir, Turkey, on 14 December 2019 (Figure 9), I asked him if he could imagine a woman holding a hierarchical rank similar to that of a Bektaşî *baba* (I avoided using the term *ana* because it does not [currently] seem to denote the same hierarchical level as *baba*).<sup>38</sup> He responded:

The sisters (*bacılar*) have very important services on the path of the Bektaşî Order. The best example of this is Kadıncık Ana and her services on the path. It seems unlikely that a *bacı* can become a *baba*, *halifebaba* or *dedebaba* in today’s conditions. But only the elders who have completed the path know what will happen in the future. We see no obstacle for the female *muhibs* who are serving today to become dervishes. In our opinion, the highest position of service is that of dervish.

Haydar Ercan Dedebaba means by this that everyone who lives in a Bektaşî *dergah*, past and present, is a dervish. Duties such as Babalık, Halifebabalık, and Dedebabalık are also performed through the office of the dervish. The Dedebaba used a story which is said to have taken place at the time of Hacı Bektaş to support this claim. He said that Mevlana Rumi (d. 1273) wanted a *baba* from the Bektaşîs to join his ranks—a *baba* like Şems-ı Tebrizi, who is said to have held the de facto position of “*baba*” in the nascent Mevlevi community. “If he had wished for a dervish instead of a *baba*”, said Haydar Ercan Dedebaba, “I would have had to go to him myself”. By this he is implying that, according to the Bektaşî teachings, the most advanced degree in terms of the spiritual path taken is that of a dervish, because this position requires constant service.



**Figure 9.** Neriman Aşki Derviş with Haydar Ercan Dedebaba and his wife, Gülümser Anabacı, İzmir, Turkey. © Sara Kuehn, 2019.

In the life of Neriman Aşki Derviş and her peers, everything is handled according to Bektaşî *edeb*, which refers to the prescribed rules of etiquette and the ethical behavior of the order. On many matters, she regularly consults Haydar Ercan Dedebaba by telephone.<sup>39</sup> Everything must be done with his permission, and many activities require his approval (for example, in order for me to interview Neriman Aşki Derviş for this article—which would inevitably make her better known internationally and would undoubtedly stimulate



discussion about the leadership role of women in the Bektāṣiyye—she needed to receive the blessing of the Dede Baba).

It was with the permission of Haydar Ercan Dede Baba and other leading Bektāṣi *babas* that Neriman Aṣki Derviş got divorced on 7 July 2020. While divorce is rare among Bektāṣis and Alevis (Arslan 2017, p. 83), the parameters of the social institution of marriage are changing in their communities as well. When I asked her if it was alright for me to mention the fact of her divorce in the article, she emphatically said yes. Here is how she explains her decision:

We are people of faith. We accept and think about everything that comes from God. The door to marriage is also a service. We do everything for our spouses, our children and to keep the family together. However, if one of the parties in the relationship does not behave according to the rules of the path, we inform our *mürşid* about the situation and do what is necessary. This case is the same. We live as we have to live. It is our duty to accept everything. (Neriman Aṣki Derviş, email to the author on 16 February 2022)

On the day of her divorce, she had a dream vision in which she met her father-in-law, who died in 2005. She had a very close relationship with him—more like a daughter–father relationship. Despite the serious decision she had made, her father-in-law was very supportive and loving in this vision (Neriman Aṣki Derviş, telephone interview with the author on 2 July 2020). Her family, including her children and her ex-husband’s family, fully support her decision. During my visit in 2021, I met her (ex-)brother-in-law at the institute and at the *dergah*, who told me that he would continue to support her (Figure 10). The day after the divorce, Neriman Aṣki Derviş immediately made a pilgrimage to the *dergah* in Hacıbektaş, where the Kadıncık Ana Evi (“Kadıncık Ana House”) and her tomb (*türbe*) are also located.<sup>40</sup>



**Figure 10.** Neriman Aṣki Derviş at the Institute of Alevi-Bektashi Culture in Cologne. © Sara Kuehn, 2021.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

In the early period of Bektaşism, there were instances where women held positions of authority and played pivotal roles in the nascent Sufi community. Kadıncık Ana was clearly a spiritual leader. Apart from her, no other woman seems ever to have become the spiritual leader of the Bektaşis, a hierarchical rank usually referred to as *baba*, or father, roughly equivalent to *ana*, or mother. However, the view that Kadıncık Ana held a rank equivalent to that of a *baba* is not widely accepted. Most sources assign Kadıncık Ana only the rank of a dervish. My own view is that her importance within the proto-Bektaşiiyye cannot be translated into a “rank” of the later Bektaş community. Perhaps her position was even more influential than that of a Bektaş *baba*—but that is a conjecture that only future scholarship can verify or refute.

The deep affection for Kadıncık Ana continues to this day. She is venerated, praised, and celebrated in song by men and women Bektaş poets. Advıye Ana Bacı, well-known for her *nefes*, refers to herself as a “slave” of Kadıncık Ana:

*Gelincek baş açık Kadıncık ana  
Adviye Bacı'yım mecburum sana  
Birlikte batınan eyledik semah  
Hünkâr Hacı Bektaş Horasan eri.*

When Kadıncık Ana comes with a bare head,  
I am Advıye Bacı, I am bound to you,  
We did *semah* together in secret,  
Sovereign Hacı Bektaş, perfect man of Khurasan.  
(Translation adapted from [Zarcone 2010](#), pp. 70–1)

It is also important to remember that, as Neriman Aşki Derviş points out, women make up slightly less than half of the group of the Forty [saints] (*kırklar*) revered by the Bektaşis (Neriman Aşki Derviş, interview with the author on 23 March 2019). This implies that women can also ascend to the rank of *abdal* (or *er*, a rank of the *kırklar* referring to the “men of the invisible spiritual realm”, Arabic *rijal al-ghayb*) (Neriman Aşki Derviş, interview with the author on 23 March 2019), as is also depicted in the cartoon (film) *Hünkâr Bektaş* ([The Institute of Alevi-Bektaşhi Culture 2021](#)). In this context, she also reminds us that according to tradition, Hacı Bektaş said:

*Erkek dişi sorulmaz muhabbetin dilinde  
Hakk'ın yarattığı her şey yerli yerinde  
Bizim nazarıımızda kadın–erkek farkı yok  
Noksanlık eksiklik senin görüşlerinde.*

In the language of divine love, there is no question of male or female,  
Everything created by God is in its place,  
There is no difference between men and women in our eyes,  
The deficiency is in your views.<sup>41</sup>

(Neriman Aşki Derviş, email to the author on 16 February 2022)

With this, Hacı Bektaş implies a Sufi religious anthropology according to which both men and women possess the same spiritual potential to become the ultimately ungendered *insan-ı kamil*, or spiritually and ethically completed human being, to which all women and men should aspire. In this state of being, seekers have integrated all the divine qualities associated with gender ([Shaikh 2022](#), pp. 480–88; [2009](#), p. 36). Hacı Bektaş thus demands that the inner spiritual state of a human being is the central criterion of his or her worth, irrespective of his or her gender or biological makeup (cf. [Shaikh 2015](#), p. 185). In this way, he connects the metaphysical and ontological equality of the sexes with its natural and logical corollary, namely the notion that men and women have equal abilities, rights, and

obligations (cf. [Shaikh 2009](#), p. 37). His teaching thus postulates a discernment of gender ethics that deals equally with gender hierarchies in the physical and metaphysical world. In spite of this pathbreaking teaching, the spiritual accomplishments of woman Bektaşis earned them only “honorary male” status, indicating (at least theoretical) gender fluidity. As this article has shown, Bektaşî thought nevertheless resists static notions of gender, allowing for ways of imagining humanity beyond binary formulations. At the same time, the desexualization of the body in Bektaşism did not lead to a fundamental abolition of social sex and gender, which was confirmed by field observations.

This has resulted in women occupying a marginal position compared to men, and their exclusion from certain opportunities and positions in religious practice and leadership (cf. [Kafadar 1993](#); [Havlioğlu 2017](#), p. 6). This imbalance was exacerbated with the institutionalization of Bektaşism, when women’s opportunities to participate in Bektaşî leadership became increasingly limited and women were barred from advancing in the Bektaşî hierarchy beyond the rank of dervish, a position reiterated by Haydar Ercan Dedeababa in 2019 (see above).

In 2011, eight years before I asked Haydar Ercan Dedeababa a very similar question, Menemencioğlu Temren had published an interview with Bedri Noyan and Turgut Koca about the inclusion of women in leadership roles within the Bektaşîyye. She asked them how the understanding of the full and equal spiritual potential of human beings in the Bektaşî teachings can be reconciled with the perpetuation of the “gender distinction that is still maintained in positions such as Babalık, Halifebabalık, Dedeabalık?” It is noteworthy that she was told that this was due to the Bektaşî principle of “moving with the times and staying one step ahead of the times”. Bedri Noyan and Turgut Koca further explained, “At the time of the institutionalization of Bektaşism, society lived in a patriarchal environment. Although women were crowned with the *taç* [initiated as dervishes] and were equal to men in internal ritual practices, as women, they could not appear in public, and these [leadership roles] continued to be performed by men”. According to Menemencioğlu Temren, the conversation ended with the two Bektaşî spiritual leaders stating that “if society is willing, there is no obstacle [to women holding “*baba*” positions] and that these tasks could be taken on by women if necessary” ([Menemencioğlu Temren 2010](#), pp. 129–40).

We have seen that this time-honored Bektaşî principle eventually allowed three leading *babas* in Turkey—Bedri Noyan, Turgut Koca, and Haydar Ercan—to be married (*müteahhil*),<sup>42</sup> even though they represent the celibate line of the Bektaşî order. Following this principle, a contemporary understanding of gender is also urgently required in the Bektaşîyye today. In the wake of this, steps have been taken in the Alevis ritual context at the Kadıncık Ana Dergah to ensure that there is no separation of male and female spaces and that both men and women perform the ritual functions in the *On İki Hizmet* and other spiritual practices. However, most functions are still performed by men, and women are not allowed to preside over the *cem*. If the Bektaşîs (and Alevis) do not want to remain a step *behind* the times, a change in mentality must ultimately take place, one that challenges gender essentialism and paves the way for a renegotiation of gender roles. Perhaps the fact that Haydar Ercan Dedeababa (together with other *babas*) renamed the *dergah* “Kadıncık Ana” after Neriman Aşki Derviş was initiated into dervishhood, and that he supports the publication of this article on Neriman Aşki Derviş/Güllizar Cengiz, should be taken as an implicit and auspicious sign of such a change in outlook. This awareness is of great significance because, as Shaikh succinctly states, “[t]he realm of spirituality is in fact intimately linked to and must promote social and legal equality” ([Shaikh 2023](#), p. 231). For it is only when the Bektaşîs are committed to empowering women’s leadership potential that Hacı Bektaş’s vision of “there being no difference between men and women” can become a reality.

**Funding:** This article is part of the research project SufiVisual conducted from 2018 to 2020 in the framework of the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Individual Fellowship, funded by Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) under Horizon 2020–EU.1.3.2.—Nurturing excellence by means of cross-border and cross-sector mobility/European Commission [Project ID: 794958].

**Acknowledgments:** I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their comments and helpful suggestions. Most of all, I am indebted to Güllizar Cengiz and the other Bektaşî *canlar* for their commitment to this project and their generous input throughout the writing process.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all words in italics are Turkish terms.

<sup>2</sup> “Unlike sex”, argues David Halperin, “sexuality is a cultural production” (Halperin 1989, p. 257) whereas “gender” is performative (Butler 1990, p. 185), referring to practice and social recognition (cf. Hendrich 2013, pp. 303–4). At the same time, Sara Haq Hussaini (2012) reflects on the conceptual pair of gender and sexuality as in-between states that transcend binaries.

<sup>3</sup> Videos of the 2020 conference presentations by Güllizar Cengiz, Fawzia Al-Rawi Al-Rifai, H. Nur Artiran, Amina Teslima al-Jerrahi, Cemâlnur Sargut, and Fariha Fatima al-Jerrahi at “Female Visions: The Religious Visual Culture of Contemporary Female Islamic Mysticism” (as part of Sara Kuehn’s project “SufiVisual”) can be found on the conference website. See *Female Visions* (2020).

<sup>4</sup> Following Ralph Grillo, in this article “transnationalism” refers to “social, cultural, economic and political relations which are between, above or beyond the nation-state, interconnecting, transcending, perhaps even superseding, what has been for the past two hundred years their primary locus. Specially, within anthropology, transnational used in a migration context refers to people, trans-national migrants (‘transmigrants’) who in the simplest formula ‘live lives across borders’” (Grillo 2004, p. 864) (cf. Spivak 1996, pp. 245–69).

<sup>5</sup> The study is based on ethnographic research conducted between 2018 and 2021, in both the Cologne and Bonn regions and in Izmir, including interviews with Güllizar Cengiz, combined with an analysis of documentary sources.

<sup>6</sup> For helpful introductions to Bektaşîsm, see Kara (2019); Küçük (2002); Popovic and Veinstein (1995); Faroqhi (1981); Birge (1937).

<sup>7</sup> Useful contributions from the growing body of research in Alevi studies include Aksünger-Kizil and Kahraman (2018); Weineck and Zimmermann (2018); Issa (2017); Shankland (2003); Dressler (2002); Şahin (2001); Olsson et al. (1998); Vorhoff (1995); Kehl-Bodrogi (1988).

<sup>8</sup> Common English translations have been used for Sufi terms, such as “saint” (for *veli*; literally “friend of God”) or, in the following, “miracle of the saints” (for *keramet*), although the concepts behind these terms are clearly different from the Christian ones. On the concept of holiness in Sufism, see also McGregor (2000, pp. 33–49).

<sup>9</sup> The full title is *Manâkıb-ı Hacı Bektaş-ı Velî* (“Legends of Saint Hacı Bektaş”).

<sup>10</sup> The term “Babagan” is not normally used by the Bektaşîs themselves in reference to their tradition.

<sup>11</sup> Over the course of the twentieth century, the problematic modern term “Alevi-Bektaşî” was often used to reflect a single identity of the two communities. The Bektaşî Sufi order and the Alevi communities are, in the words of Thierry Zarcone, “two syncretic Turkish religious traditions that are close to each other and originate from the same matrix that emerged around the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in Anatolia” (Zarcone 2017, p. 203). The self-designation “Alevi” (historically referred to as Kızılbaş, “redhead”, probably from the wearing of crimson headgear, *taç-ı haydari*) derives from the Arabic term “‘Alawi”, referring to the descendants and followers of Ali b. Abi Talib. As the term indicates, “Alevi communities are spiritually bound to Imam Ali” (Erol 2012, p. 837; Engin 2016, pp. 145–46).

<sup>12</sup> İklil Selçuk recently pointed out that it remains difficult to assess the status of these women and how they received their epithets, as well as the extent to which women were systematically involved in *ahi* activities or in the study of *fütüvvet* ethics. She also notes that it is possible that the women simply received their titles as daughters or wives of prominent *ahis* (Selçuk 2017, pp. 96–97).

<sup>13</sup> Women’s membership in Sufi orders seems to have continued to be an important factor despite their exclusion from higher positions within each order. Interestingly, the 1882 general census revealed that in Istanbul alone, the 260 dervish lodges (Bektaşî and other Sufi orders) had a total of 2375 members, of whom 1184 were women (Ergin 1977, p. 240).

<sup>14</sup> Birth into one of the *ocak* lineages was a prerequisite to becoming a (male) spiritual leader, referred to as *dede*. For a detailed discussion of the Alevi religious institutions of *ocak* and *Dedelik*, see Langer (2013).

<sup>15</sup> Alevilik developed as an endogamous social group, and thus as a kind of ethnic group in which children of Alevi parents were considered Alevi. However, the initiation into ritual life occurred after marriage through a ceremony in which couples were united in a bond of spiritual siblinghood (*musahiplik*), in which the husband of one couple was considered the brother of the wife of the other spouse, and vice versa, to ensure the protection of the women in case something happened to their husbands.

<sup>16</sup> On the Alevi-Bektaşî *sema*, see Arnaud-Demir (2004, pp. 143–58).

<sup>17</sup> For similar *keramet* involving heat and fire, see Greve (2020, pp. 109–10).

<sup>18</sup> On İlhamî Baba, see Küçük (2002, pp. 270, 375).

<sup>19</sup> The religious hierarchy of Babagan Bektaşîsm is as follows: *aşık* (sympathizers of the order), *muhîb*, *dervîş*, *baba*, *halife* (representative) *baba*, and *dedebaba* at the top.

<sup>20</sup> On the Bektaşî initiation ritual, see Soileau (2019); Zarcone (2016, pp. 781–98); Ringgren (1965, pp. 202–8).



- 21 Male initiates are given a white headdress symbolizing purity, known as *arakiye* (pl. *arakiyeler*). There is evidence that women also wore white and red *arakiyeler* in the past (Noyan 1977). Over time, however, the headscarf, which was the customary head covering for women, prevailed. See Menemencioğlu Temren (2010).
- 22 See <https://alevibektasikulturenstitusu.de/>. Accessed online on 25 February 2023.
- 23 See <https://www.abked.de/index.php/abked>. Accessed online on 25 February 2023.
- 24 Since the death of Bedri Noyan in 1997, there has been an ongoing dispute in Turkey over the appointment of the *dedebaba*.
- 25 The question of what kind of specific transnational transformations and adaptations have been made to create an appropriate “spiritual milieu” in which this transplanted Bektaşî community in diaspora can thrive will have to be the subject of a separate investigation. For a general discussion on the engagements of Sufism with modernity in the Western spiritual milieu, see Zarrabi-Zadeh (2019).
- 26 The fact that women participate in Bektaşî ritual ceremonies alongside men has, in the public imagination, often associated the Bektaşî order with the mysterious, the immoral, and the heretical. This is reflected, for example, in the best-selling novel *Nur Baba* (1921) by the Turkish writer Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu (1889–1974). The novel has been translated widely, including a German translation by Annemarie Schimmel in 1986 and an English translation by M. Brett Wilson in 2023. See Karaosmanoğlu (1921, 1986, 2023).
- 27 A useful insight into Alevi dance is given in the short documentary film *Heavenly Journeys—Insights into Alevi Ritual Dance* (Klapp 2015).
- 28 For historical and contemporary examples of women leading the *cem*, see Bahadır (2004, pp. 13–28). Knowledge about women leading the *cem* does not appear to be widespread though. According to Arslan (2017, p. 4), tradition suggests that there were only one or two *cem* assemblies that were led by an *ana*.
- 29 In the past, a female dervish was therefore known as *Taçlı Bacı* (“crowned sister”). See Menemencioğlu Temren (2010).
- 30 On the *elifi taç*, see Birge (1937, pp. 37–38, n. 3, 46–47, 50, 104, 217, illustration no. 26).
- 31 For further information on the *haydariye*, which is also worn by other Sufi orders, see Kuehn (2019, pp. 164–66).
- 32 In early December 2021, four members who had been waiting for years were at last admitted to the *dergah* as *muhibs*.
- 33 As Cemal Kafadar notes, Bektaşî women poets do not appear in the written sources before the late eighteenth century, and thus there is also no trace of their position in the Bektaşî hierarchy (Kafadar 1993, p. 194); see Yenisey 1946, but also Ergun’s (1956) anthology, which goes back to the seventeenth century but does not list any women poets from that century.
- 34 For instance, Arife Bacı (b. 1868), who was one of the dervishes of Hafız Baba, the *postnişin* of the Istanbul Karyağdı Dergah (Keleş 2020, p. 116); Hatice Bacı (d. 1936), one of the dervishes of Ahmet Burhaneddin Baba, *postnişin* of the Istanbul Merdivenköy Dervish Lodge (Keleş 2020, p. 118); likewise, Naciye Bacı (b. 1872) and her friend Zehra Bacı, both dervishes of the Istanbul Merdivenköy Dervish Lodge (Keleş 2020, p. 131); İkbâl Bacı and Şeref Bacı (d. 1908), dervishes of the Çamlıca Bektaşî Tekke (Keleş 2020, pp. 129–30); Arife Bacı (b. 1868), a dervish of Hafız Baba, the *postnişin* of the Eyüb Karyağdı Dervish Lodge; and Emine Beyza Bacı (d. 1934), a dervish of Abdullah Nur Baba, the *postnişin* of the Topkapı Bektaşî Lodge (Alvan 2021).
- 35 Mention must be made of the wives of *babas*, who were also elevated in the religious hierarchy with the title of *ana bacı* (Menemencioğlu Temren 1998, pp. 128–31), a title associated with the husband’s socio-religious advancement in the order.
- 36 Hıdır Temel (2017, p. 227) has recently questioned whether Anşa Bacı, as a woman, could have actually led the *cem*, or whether one of her three sons did not lead the ritual. That Anşa Bacı’s example would not have been such an exception has been shown by İbrahim Bahadır, who lists examples of female *cem* leaders (Bahadır 2004, pp. 13–28).
- 37 As Neriman Aşki Derviş explains, Baba Mondi is not recognized by the Bektaşîs in Turkey because, according to the canon (*erkan*) of the Babagan Bektaşî, a *baba* must renew his vows annually with the officiating *dedebaba* in Turkey, as Baba Mondi’s predecessor Reshat Bardhi (d. 2011) did. Baba Mondi reportedly did not renew his vows, so his claim to the office of *dedebaba* is not recognized by the Babagan Bektaşîs (Neriman Aşki Derviş, interview with the author on 23 March 2019).
- 38 On the complexities of the terminology of such ranks held by women in the Bektaşî and Alevi contexts, see Hendrich (2013, pp. 311–12).
- 39 It is interesting to note that, while cyberspace has been instrumental in transforming most international Sufi orders into transnational phenomena, this is not the case with the Bektaşîs. “Traditional” means of contact, such as the telephone, are still common forms of communication. Audio-visual media, multimedia representations of ritual practices led by a Sufi *şeyh*, as practiced by other transnational Sufi movements, are incompatible with the Bektaşî practice of conducting their ritual activities discreetly. According to John Kingsley Birge, the “Bektaşî secret” includes political, ritual, moral, and social teachings known and transmitted only by the Bektaşîs (Birge 1937, pp. 159–61).
- 40 Significantly, Kadıncık Ana’s *türbe* is said to be in the Çilehane, a cell for ascetic retreat (*çile*). For ritual activities at the Kadıncık Ana Evi, see Hendrich (2005, p. 240).
- 41 This is reiterated by Edip Harabi (d. 1917), one of the greatest Bektaşî poets of the last century, who reminds us, for example, that men and women, though different, are both creatures and servants of God: “Is it not the Praised One who created us? Is not the female lion a lion?” See Zarcione (2010, p. 107).
- 42 In fact, most of the *babas* in Turkey today are married (cf. Küçük 2002, p. 375).

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