The Foundations of the Hamzevi Order: Hamza-Dede’s Tekke and Islamisation in the Tuzla Region

The question of the inherent strength and influence of dervish orders and their ideology within the society which saw the rise of the Hamzevi movement brings the discussion back to the main subject of this study, namely the very establishment of this influence in Bosnian society in the first place. Although the appearance of the Melami-Bayrami order in the second half of the 16th century in the area of the sancak of Zvornik in north-eastern Bosnia may, at first sight, seem rather arbitrary, there is reason to believe that this was not the case, and that the foundations for the development of the Hamzevi movement in this area were laid some half a century earlier. This is because it was precisely in this same area, more specifically, in the village of Orlovići, on the road between Zvornik and Vlasenica, that the legendary Hamza-dede built his tekke in 1519.

The information about the building of Hamza-dede’s Tekke is contained in a note first written in the detailed defter of the sancak of Zvornik from 1519, and repeated, with minor changes, in the detailed defters of the same sancak from 1533, 1548 and 1600. The note in the 1533 defter reads:

It had been recorded in the old defter that the above mentioned Hamza-dede relinquished a timar of seven thousand akçe; in the above mentioned village he built a zaviye for the sake of God Most High; he is serving those who come and go from his own money; when our defter was brought to the Imperial presence, Imperial favour was shown to the above mentioned; it was ordered that sheep, bee-hives, must (şire), vineyards, gardens and other things in his possession and at his disposal should be exempt from all dues and taxes imposed by the shari̇a and the kanun in return for his service.

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1 Adem Handžić, “Jedan savremeni dokumenat o šejhu Hamzi iz Orlovića,” POF, XVIII-XIX/1968-69, Sarajevo, 1973, pp. 205–206. Only the summary version of the 1519 defter has been found, and it does not contain this note, but from the text in the 1533 defter it is obvious that the note was transferred from the previous detailed defter.
2 Namely, the 1519 detailed defter.
3 Only the word ‘hizmeti’ is in the original text but one can assume that ‘mukabilinde’ is implicit.
4 The text is published in Handžić, A, Jedan savremeni dokumenat, pp. 206–207.
The rest of the text tells us that in the meantime Hamza-dede had died, and also mentions all of the above properties as a vakıf for the tekke, which means that although Hamza-dede had initially financed his tekke with his own money, he later founded a vakıf for its maintenance.

The date of the building of Hamza-dede’s Tekke and the later founding of his vakıf are confirmed by the four preserved Imperial warrants (berats) – dating from 1597, 1640, 1793 and 1801 – which were issued in order to renew the rights and privileges of the tekke and its vakıf.\(^5\)

Unfortunately, these records about the building of the tekke and the maintenance of its vakıf are the only certain information available on Hamza-dede and his tekke: there are no sources providing information about its religious activities, either in the first period of its existence or after the appearance of the Hamzevis, and the information about Hamza-dede himself is scarce and mainly based on folk tradition. Similar to other traditions about famous dervish sheikhs on whose lives very little is known historically, the tradition about the person of Hamza-dede mainly consists of a number of stories illustrating his special powers as a veli (a dervish saint). Out of these, there seems to be only one which provides a clue, albeit a remote one, given its origin, about the religious orientation of Hamza-dede. In this story, Hamza-dede, who is always described as a man of mature age with long grey hair, was one day performing dhikr outside his tekke, and was seen by the villagers waving his pitchfork in the air, his long hair flowing behind him, which caused them to conclude that Hamza-dede had lost his mind and was a lunatic.\(^6\) This perception by the villagers of Hamza-dede as a lunatic clearly points in the direction of the tradition of melamet;\(^7\) for practicing melamet requires behaving in such a way as to conceal from the outside world one’s real character and activities and results in being perceived as blameworthy and reproachable. Since lunacy is at the extreme end of the spectrum of blameworthiness, namely, a state in which one is not even capable of engaging in pious and spiritual endeavour, being perceived as a lunatic thus indicates the most successful degree of concealment of one’s spiritual state. This aspect of melamet is closely related to and has its roots in the Sufi tradition of the hidden saints, at which Hamza-dede’s story

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5 Many more berats (some 12 in total) together with other documents relating to the tekke’s history were kept in the tekke itself until the Second World War, when the chest in which they were kept was among the tekke property destroyed in 1944; the four preserved berats survived because at the time they were on loan to Muhamed Hadžijahić (Muhamed Hadžijahić, “Tekija kraj Zvornika – postojbina bosanskih Hamzevija?”, pof, X-XI/1960-61, Sarajevo, 1961, p. 194).

6 Hadžijahić, Tekija kraj Zvornika, p. 197.

7 See footnote 2 in Chapter 10.