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HURUFIYYA AS A TEACHING AND IDENTITY

HURÚFÍJA JAKO UČENÍ A IDENTITA

Prohlášení

Prohlašuji, že jsem předkládanou bakalářskou práci „Hurufiyya as a Teaching and Identity“ vypracoval samostatně. Dále prohlašuji, že všechny použité prameny a literatura byly řádně citovány a že tato práce nebyla využita k získání jiného nebo stejného titulu.

V Praze dne ... Martin Lednický

Abstract

Hurufiyya as a Teaching and Identity

The bachelor thesis will focus on the question of Hurufiyya as an identity throughout history, specifically from its emergence at the turn of the 14th and 15th centuries until the 20th century. Although at the time of its emergence, Hurufiyya was a distinct current, today we encounter its teachings only within certain groups belonging to the wider world of Islam, such as the Alevis or the Bektashis. With the use of Anderson's theory of Imagined Communities and a source-based historiographical approach the thesis will delve into the following questions: How did Hurufiyya from its inception until the 20th century manifest itself? Has it formed a distinct identity, was it a teaching or something else? How, if at all, have these modes of existence been exercised throughout history? By trying to answer these questions, the thesis seeks to contribute to the study of the Hurufiyya itself and to enter the debate on Islamic pluralism.

Keywords

Hurufiyya, Religious identity, Islamic plurality, Genealogies of religion

Abstrakt

Hurúfíja jako učení a identita

Bakalářská práce se zaměří na otázku Hurúfíje jako identity v průběhu dějin, konkrétně od jejího vzniku na přelomu 14. a 15. století až do století dvacátého. Přestože v době svého vzniku byla Hurúfíja samostatným proudem, dnes se s jejím učení setkáváme pouze v rámci některých skupin patřících do širšího světa islámu, jako jsou alevité nebo beктаšové. Práce se pokusí odpovědět na následující otázky kombinujíc teorii „Imagined Communities“ od Benedicta Andersona s historiografickým přístupem založeným na pramenech: Jak se Hurúfíja od svého vzniku až do 20. století projevovala? Vytvořila si jasně vymezenou identitu, byla učení, nebo něčím jiným? Jak se tyto možnosti v průběhu dějin uplatňovaly, pokud vůbec? Odpovědí na tyto otázky se práce snaží přispět ke studiu samotné Hurúfíje a vstoupit do debaty o Islámské pluralitě.

Klíčová slova

Hurúfíja, náboženská identita, Islámská pluralita, Genealogie náboženských směrů

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1. Introduction

In 1920 at the University of Cambridge, the famous scholar Edward G. Browne published his arguably most important work, *A History of Persian Literature under Tartar Domination*. In this book, Browne writes about circa three hundred years of history, ending with the advent of what we today call Safavid Iran. In this book, he presents a short chapter called “The Hurufi Heresy”. After spending some time among the Bektashis in Istanbul, he describes his surprise that the Hurufi teachings were still alive in the world.

The surprise of Browne stemmed from the fact that Hurufism was thought to be extinct as there were no Hurufis to be found. As we can see from the name Browne chose for his chapter, it was viewed as a heresy, one of many heresies that used to exist in the Islamic world. The use of the term “heresy” denotes the Christian-minded approach to Islam of the scholars at the time. Islam at that period of time had already been influenced by the reformist movement, which remains the chief formulator of the Islamic creed up until today.¹ Yet it had been different in the past.

Islamic history, just like the history of any religion is full of dissenting groups and alternative understandings of even the most basic rules and ideas of the religion. To better understand the broad world of this religion, it is crucial to think about Islam in ways to challenge the hierarchical positions assigned to the various streams.² It is important to keep in mind that already such phrases as “orthodox Islam”, “heterodox currents” or “folk traditions”, but also in certain contexts for example “survivals of Zoroastrian traditions”, indicate the position of the speaker. “Orthodox Islam” usually denotes the traditional Sunni Islam of the urban settlements of Arab areas. But what makes it orthodox? Why is this Islam orthodox but, for example, the tradition of the Alawites of the Syrian and Lebanese mountains no longer is? Who can determine this? Should scholars do it? Of course, this paper does not set out to answer all these questions, but the debate should be pointed to, as it is thanks to this debate that the modern study of long-overlooked Islamic groups has emerged. To approach them with the debate in mind allows us to see them using their own categories, acknowledging a substance of their own, without being deemed just heresies of a certain “orthodoxy”.

Coming back to Hurufiyya, which is exactly one of those long-overlooked Islamic groups, we see it as an example where this approach makes sense. Only by trying to understand the Hurufis

¹ For more on that see Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005), <https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/I/bo3534198.html>; Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), <https://doi.org/10.1353/book.16014>.

² Robert Langer and Udo Simon, “The Dynamics of Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy. Dealing with Divergence in Muslim Discourses and Islamic Studies”, *Die Welt Des Islams* 48, no. 3/4 (2008): 273–88.

from their emic perspective and as a legitimate form of Islam can we try to pinpoint the way they came to be part of the Bektashi order, as Browne found them. The Bektashis, being far from what is normally considered “orthodox”, were nevertheless legal in the Ottoman Empire. The Ottomans found them a place in the religious landscape of the otherwise rather strict Sunni establishment. And the Bektashis created space for many dissenting groups such as the Hurufis that were otherwise persecuted.³ The persecution, however, didn’t stop Hurufis from spreading their teachings even among the highest representatives of the establishment, as we can see in the case of their contact with the Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II. If they were able to approach the Sultan, we should ask how many other well-known as well as common people were familiar with their teachings. In this thesis, we shall try to describe the ways this “heresy” became part of a legal Sufi order of the Ottoman Empire. Is it not possible that we could find traces of this teaching among other Islamic groups, maybe even the ones that were so prone to judge and persecute the Hurufis? Answering this question is outside the scope of this thesis, but by answering the main questions of the thesis, we can hopefully offer some ideas about a possible answer to this one too.

As we write above, Browne found Hurufi teachings, but he found no Hurufis. It is exactly this dynamic that we shall try to understand in this thesis. We try to describe how Hurufiyya came from being a distinct group to today’s situation, where it can only be found as one of the teachings of the Bektashis and Alevis. The questions we try to answer are about the ways that Hurufiyya manifested itself throughout history from its inception until the 20th century, looking at whether it formed a distinct identity, a teaching, or something completely else. To be able to deal with these questions we combine the theory of Imagined Communities by the scholar Benedict Anderson with a historiographical approach surveying various primary and secondary sources about the history of the movement. We shall not deal with the current situation of these groups, stopping instead in the times around the creation of the modern Republic of Turkey, for we argue the current situation with new sources and available anthropological data would make for many theses on their own.

The sources for this thesis are two-fold. We work with a number of primary sources, mainly the poetry of the Hurufi poet Nesimi in the Persian original as well as a translation to Italian,⁴ a polemical treatise by an Ottoman scholar İshak Efendi,⁵ the study of the Hurufiyya by Edward G.

³ For more on this role see Butrus Abu-Manneh, ‘Between Heterodox and Sunni Orthodox Islam: The Bektashi Order in the Nineteenth Century and Its Opponents’, *Turkish Historical Review* 8, no. 2 (2017): 203–18, <https://doi.org/10.1163/18775462-00802004>.

⁴ Imaddudin Nesimi, *Divân* (Bâkû: Naşrijât-e douletî-je, 1972); Nasimi di Shirvan and Carlo Saccone, *Nel tuo volto è scritta la Parola di Dio* (Independently published, 2020).

⁵ We work with this treatise using the translation in Benjamin Weinek, ‘7. Fabricating the Great Mass: Heresy and Legitimate Plurality in Harputlu İshak Efendi’s Polemics against the Bektashi Order’, in *Ottoman Sunnism* (Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 146–65, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781474443333-010>.

Browne⁶ and a chapter about the Hurufiyya by the scholar John Kingsley Birge.⁷ The last two sources are at the same time important secondary sources. They fall into the category of the oldest academic texts dealing with the Hurufi movement, coming from around the beginning of the 20th century.⁸ They, together with other older and several newer scholars like Shahzad Bashir⁹ or Fatih Usluer¹⁰ form the current state of knowledge about the Hurufiyya.¹¹ Other secondary sources serve mostly as theoretical background. The most important one of these sources for my thesis would be the work of Benedict Anderson¹² and other thinkers dealing with the questions of identity¹³ as well as scholars concerning themselves with the theory and history of dissenting Islamic groups.¹⁴ Among these, the most important name would be that of Markus Dressler.¹⁵

Already in the title and this introduction, we have used certain words that require clarification. The most important word is the name of the group itself, *Hurufiyya*. Throughout the thesis this name appears in many forms, spanning from the Arabic form *Hurufiyya*, which in our understanding denotes both the teaching as well as the distinct group. The term *Hurufi* is an

⁶ For the most important ones see Edward Granville Browne, *A History of Persian Literature under Tartar Dominion (A.D. 1265-1502)* (Massachusetts: The University press, 1920), 365–75, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/inu.32000003218692>; Hellmut Ritter, ‘Studien Zur Geschichte Der Islamischen Frömmigkeit, II. Die Anfänge Der Hurufisekte’, *Oriens* 7, no. 1 (1954): 1–54, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1579053>; Clément Huart and Rıza Tevfik, *Textes persans relatifs à la secte des Hourouffis*, ‘E.J.W. Gibb memorial’ series ; v. 9 (Leyden : London: E.J. Brill; Luzac & Co., 1909); Irene Melikoff, *Sur Les Traces Du Soufisme Turc: Recherches Sur L’islam Populaire En Anatolie* (Gorgias Press, 2011).

⁷ Birge John Kingsley, *The Bektaşhi Order of Dervishes*, by John Kingsley Birge (England: Luzac & co.; Hartford seminary press, 1937, 1937), 60–65, 148–58.

⁸ E. J. W. Gibb, *A History of Ottoman Poetry Volume I: 1300 - 1450*, 1st edition (Warminster: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 336–89.

⁹ Shahzad Bashir, *Fazlallah Astarabadi and the Hurufis*, *Makers of the Muslim World* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2005); Shahzad Bashir, ‘Enshrining Divinity: The Death and Memorialization of Fazlallah Astarabadi in Hurufi Thought’, *The Muslim World (Hartford)* 90, no. 3–4 (2000): 289–, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1478-1913.2000.tb03692.x>; Shahzad Bashir, ‘Deciphering the Cosmos from Creation to Apocalypse: The Hurufiyya Movement and Medieval Islamic Esotericism’, in *Imagining the End: Visions of Apocalypse from the Ancient Middle East to Modern America*, by Abbas Amanat and Magnus Bernhardsson (London: I.B.Tauris, 2002).

¹⁰ Fatih Usluer, ‘Le Hourifisme : La Doctrine et Son Influence Dans La Littérature Persane et Ottomane’ (These de doctorat, Paris, EPHE, 2007), <https://www.theses.fr/2007EPHE5008>.

¹¹ Orkhan Mir-Kasimov, *Words of Power: Hurufi Teachings between Shi’ism and Sufism in Medieval Islam* (London ; New York: I. B. Tauris In Association With The Institute Of Ismaili Studies, 2015); Hamid Algar, ‘HORUFISM – Encyclopaedia Iranica’, in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, accessed 14 March 2023, <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/horufism>.

¹² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised edition (London New York: Verso, 2016).

¹³ Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay, *Questions of Cultural Identity* (London, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446221907>; Mary Searle-Chatterjee and Nile Green, eds., *Religion, Language, and Power* (New York: Routledge, 2008), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203926857>.

¹⁴ Matti Moosa, *Extremist Shiites: The Ghulat Sects* (Syracuse, N.Y: Syracuse Univ Pr, 1988); Ahmet T. Karamustafa, *God’s Unruly Friends: Dervish Groups in the Islamic Middle Period 1200-1550* (Salt Lake City: Univ of Utah Pr, 1999); Said Amir Arjomand, *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam: Religion, Political Order, and Societal Change in Shi’ite Iran from the Beginning to 1890*, Publications of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies ; No.17 (Chicago ; London: University of Chicago Press, 1984); Orkhan Mir-Kasimov, ed., *Unity in Diversity: Mysticism, Messianism and the Construction of Religious Authority in Islam* (Brill, 2013), <https://brill.com/display/title/24589>; Langer and Simon, ‘The Dynamics of Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy. Dealing with Divergence in Muslim Discourses and Islamic Studies’.

¹⁵ Markus Dressler, ‘How to Conceptualize Inner-Islamic Plurality/Difference: “Heterodoxy” and “Syncretism” in the Writings of Mehmet F. Köprülü (1890–1966)’, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 37, no. 3 (2010): 241–60.

adjective stemming from the word *Hurufiyya* as well as the demonym for members of the Hurufi community. The term *Hurufism* serves to describe the teachings of the group after its demise. The way we use the word *identity* is explained in Chapter 2. *Teachings* and *doctrine* are used interchangeably, both meaning a set of ideas and rules.

The thesis is first going to offer a short history of the Hurufis as well as their doctrines, focusing on the founding figure, Fazlallah Astarabadi. The teachings of the group are going to be presented in a rather basic way, focusing on the main points necessary for the subsequent analysis. Before that analysis, the theory of Imagined Communities will be explained, adjusting it for the purpose of this thesis. After that, the analysis itself will try to answer the above-posed questions about the ways Hurufiyya manifested itself in history. Answering the questions might provide a possibility to look at the religious identities of various groups and highlight the history of Islamic plurality.

2. Hurufism

Hurufism is a religious movement created in the turbulent times of the 8th century of the Hijri calendar, the 14th century of the Gregorian one. Those times of Timurid rule in much of the eastern Islamic realms gave rise to several popular uprisings, vassal infighting, and messianic movements.¹⁶ The chaos inflicted upon the eastern half of the Islamic world has proven fertile for many movements that we today consider to be part of the broader theological world of Islam.¹⁷

2.1 Fazlallah Astarabadi

One of these movements was the Hurufi one. Its founder Fazlallah Astarabadi (Fazlallah Shehabuddin Ibn Bahauddin) was born in 740/1339-40 in the Iranian city of Astarabad (today known as Gorgan). He was apparently a *seyyid*, a descendant of Ali ibn Abi Taleb through the Imam Musa Al-Kazim. His family seems to have been part of the local elite, his father was a local *qazī*¹⁸ and he inherited the post at a very young age.¹⁹ According to the traditional narrations, one day, coming from work, he received a sort of epiphany having heard a verse by the Persian poet Rumi.²⁰

¹⁶ For more on the period see Kate Fleet, ed., *The Cambridge History of Turkey: Volume 1: Byzantium to Turkey 1071–1453*, vol. 1, Cambridge History of Turkey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 51–138, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521620932>; Peter Jackson, ed., *The Cambridge History of Iran. 6: The Timurid and Safavid Periods / Ed. by Peter Jackson*, 6. print (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Pr, 1986), 1–148.

¹⁷ Jackson, *The Cambridge History of Iran. 6*, 610–98.

¹⁸ Judge of Islamic law

¹⁹ For the most recent bibliographies of Fazlallah see Bashir, ‘Enshrining Divinity’; Bashir, ‘Deciphering the Cosmos from Creation to Apocalypse: The Hurufiyya Movement and Medieval Islamic Esotericism’; Algar, ‘HORUFISM – Encyclopaedia Iranica’; Hamid Algar, ‘ASTARĀBĀDĪ, FAẒLALLĀH’, in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, accessed 17 April 2024, <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/astarabadi-fazlallah-sehab-al-din-b>; Usluer, ‘Le Hourifisme’.

²⁰ Algar, ‘HORUFISM – Encyclopaedia Iranica’.

That changed the way he thought about religion and from that moment on he would turn to Sufi techniques to inquire about the true meaning of the Qur'an. When he was around 18 years of age, he decided to take on the pilgrimage to Mecca. He gave up on all his worldly possessions and set out for Hijaz. He completed the pilgrimage twice before returning to Iran.²¹

Hamid Algar divides Fazlallah's religious activity into two stages.²² The first stage was the shari'a-leaning Sufi path.²³ In this stage after the two pilgrimages, he settled in the suburbs of Isfahan and acquired a certain amount of followers based on his ability to interpret dreams. This ability played an important role in his entire religious life for it was this that distinguished him from other religious figures. The region at the time was full of local religious authorities such as Fazlallah.²⁴ The interpretation of dreams gained him a favorable position on Jalayirid court in Tabriz where he moved to from Isfahan, most probably in 775/1373. The Jalayirid was a local Mongol but heavily Persianized dynasty that was fighting other post-Ilkhanid dynasties in what had been Mongol realms and trying to fight off the Timurid threat. The Jalayirids were a Shia-friendly dynasty for some time, judging by the names they chose for themselves. This lenience towards alternative understandings of the Islamic revelation allowed today's northern Iraq, Azerbaijan, eastern Anatolia, and northwestern Iran to become a haven for many groups that were at odds with the stricter approach to Islam, which was in place in many of the religious centers of the time such as Isfahan or Shiraz.²⁵

It was on the Jalayirid court that Fazlallah shifted towards the second stage of his religious career. The sources describe a revelatory experience that left him in a state of awe for three days wherein he came to be acquainted with all the mysteries of the Qur'an and the world. He skipped the Sufi path of spiritual stations (*maqamat*) and embraced the truth that is at the end of this path. It was this revelation that allowed him to understand the hidden meanings of the Arabic-Persian alphabet and the prominence of the letters in creation. He supposedly heard a voice that proclaimed him, as Ritter describes, "the Lord of the Age and Sultan of the Prophets".²⁶ This of course turned his life around. Shortly after that in 790/1388 he moved back to the suburbs of Isfahan and after

²¹ Bashir, 'Deciphering the Cosmos from Creation to Apocalypse: The Hurufiyya Movement and Medieval Islamic Esotericism', 172.

²² Algar, 'HORUFISM – Encyclopaedia Iranica'.

²³ The approach of Sufi orders to the rules of the shari'a as understood by the majority of Muslims has is generally divided among those Sufi orders that follow the traditional Sunni "five pillars of Islam" and those who do not follow them more on that in Karamustafa, *God's Unruly Friends*.

²⁴ Said Amir Arjomand, *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam: Religion, Political Order, and Societal Change in Shi'ite Iran from the Beginning to 1890*, Publications of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies; No.17 (Chicago ; London: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 66–85.

²⁵ Jackson, *The Cambridge History of Iran*. 6, 1–42 and 610–98.

²⁶ Ritter, 'Studien Zur Geschichte Der Islamischen Frömmigkeit, II. Die Anfänge Der Hurūfisekte', 20.

retiring for some time to a local cave, he began preaching this revelation he received. We will address the revelation in a thorough manner below.

He quickly attracted a large group of followers who made him famous. The reason why Fazlallah was successful compared to other preachers of this time is unclear. It might be due to the sustenance he received from the Jalayirid court and other elites of the time, the details of which are not known to us. The relative complexity of his ideas might have been attractive to a certain social class of higher education. The scale of his popularity remains unknown to us, but it must have been big enough for the Timurids to see it as a threat.²⁷ In 794/1394 he was imprisoned when on his way back to Baku, where he resided at that time, by a group of Timurid soldiers. Six days after his imprisonment he was executed on the orders of Timur's son Miranshah in the Alinjaq fortress in today's Nakhchivan. This execution, which he had supposedly foretold some ten years earlier, made his prophetic charisma only stronger.²⁸ The reasons for his execution have been subjected to debate among scientists and no consensus on the matter has not been found up to this day.²⁹ It seems plausible to assume that it was not the religious zeal of the Timurid establishment, which spared many other similar challengers to the stately sanctioned form of Islam. The political charisma of Fazlallah connected to the messianic moods of the time must have not been viewed favorably by Timur and his court. The concrete reasons used at the time to rationalize the executions have not been preserved to us, but they did not really matter for the events of the end of Fazlallah's life came to be a turning point in history not only for his followers.

Fazlallah left behind several writings that would occupy the minds of Hurufis and others for centuries to come. Arguably the most important of his these is the enigmatic *Javidannama*. This rather obscure book written in the Astarabadi dialect of Persian lays out the foundational beliefs of the Hurufis. This book remains to be a very challenging piece of literature for anyone willing to read it, let alone to research it. It has been translated partially into Turkish, Persian, French, and English, but in order for anyone to be able to properly work with it would mean learning the old Astarabadi dialect and patiently read through one of the manuscripts known to us.³⁰ The text itself is written in prose and remains central to the study of Hurufism. Other works such as the standard

²⁷ Jackson, *The Cambridge History of Iran*. 6, 610–98.

²⁸ Algar, 'HORUFISM – Encyclopaedia Iranica'; Bashir, 'Deciphering the Cosmos from Creation to Apocalypse: The Hurufiyya Movement and Medieval Islamic Esotericism', 171–75.

²⁹ For some of the views see Arjomand, *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam*, 82–84; Bashir, 'Deciphering the Cosmos from Creation to Apocalypse: The Hurufiyya Movement and Medieval Islamic Esotericism', 175; Jackson, *The Cambridge History of Iran*. 6, 623–24.

³⁰ To learn more about the *Javidannama* I suggest to start here Hamid Algar, 'JĀVDĀN-NĀMA', in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, accessed 17 April 2024, <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/javdan-nama>; For those interested in reading a part of the translation, it's recommended to look at Orkhan Mir-Kasimov, *Words of Power: Hurufi Teachings between Shi'ism and Sufism in Medieval Islam* (London; New York: I. B. Tauris In Association With The Institute Of Ismaili Studies, 2015).

Persian *masnavi Arshname* or Fazlallah's book of dreams called the *Nawmnama* have proven secondary to the *Javidannama*.³¹

2.2 Nesimi

Other Hurufi writings may serve as an introduction to the following stage of Hurufi history. Thanks to Nesimi's artistic skill and his prolific usage of both the Turkish and the Persian language, that won him a large audience, arguably the most important book or rather books after the *Javidannama* are the *divans* by Seyyid Imaduddin Nesimi. Nesimi was a pupil of Fazlallah, whose life is not very well known to us.³² We know for certain that he was executed in Aleppo, but we lack the knowledge of when exactly this happened. Some sources state the execution took place in 820/1417-18, some say 807/1404-5, the second date being the one universally accepted in Turkey today based on the work of the historian Mehmet Fuad Köprülü.³³ Given that we do not know Nesimi's date of birth, his age at the moment of his death remains a mystery. Both his death and his birth have however proven to be central to Hurufism. He was born somewhere in the region that we described before as a haven for alternative Islamic currents at the time. Some speculate he was born on the outskirts of Baghdad or in Diyarbakır. Other sources suggest Shirvan as his birthplace. His family is also unknown to us. His origins might have been in the family of the Prophet Muhammad, given his title *Sayyid*. He was however intimately well-versed in the Turkish language of the time, so much that he is thought of as being of Turkish origin.³⁴

He left behind a *divan* in Turkish, another one in Persian, and supposedly several poems in Arabic. This again shows the cultural cohesion of the region at that point in time. Nesimi's poetic skills made him arguably just as famous as Fazlallah himself, especially in the Turkish-speaking world. Based on what we know about Nesimi, we can describe the post-Fazlallah immediate development. Nesimi had traveled extensively in Anatolia and Asia Minor. He might have heard about Fazlallah from people coming from the East and decided to go see this man for himself. He seems to have met Fazlallah the year of the latter's execution and over some time became a devout follower. He met the main companions of Fazlallah such as 'Ali al-A'la and given his presence in the area at that period of time, he must have witnessed the creation of the alternative religious structure in Alinjaq, which became the most important place on earth for the Hurufis. It's hard to imagine that Nesimi would not be familiar with this development so central to his movement.

³¹ Algar, 'HORUFISM – Encyclopaedia Iranica'.

³² For the most complete biographies of Nesimi see Kathleen R. F. Burrill, *The Quatrains of Nesimi, Fourteenth-Century Turkic Hurufi* (Mouton, 1973); Shirvan and Saccone, *Nel tuo volto è scritta la Parola di Dio*.

³³ Burrill, *The Quatrains of Nesimi, Fourteenth-Century Turkic Hurufi*, 25–33.

³⁴ Burrill, 25–33.

After Fazlallah's death, which was interpreted by some as a similar kind of "not-death" as that of Jesus or Muhammad, the Hurufi movement transformed the fortress into a Ka'ba.³⁵ The indefinite article here is to indicate that the concept of the Ka'ba in Mecca was moved to Alinjaq and the Hurufis started to go there for the *Hajj* pilgrimage. They would imitate all of the rituals of the standard *Hajj* and they would consider Alinjaq to be the one true Mecca. We will address the theological intricacies of this development below. Nesimi might have taken part in this *Hajj*, although the sources are silent on this. Eventually, he settled in Aleppo and came to face the fate of many Hurufis. He was singled out by the local *ulema*,³⁶ judged for heresy, and skinned alive. This gruesome way of execution has been attested in Hurufi sources³⁷ and has become an important symbol of martyrdom. Together with Nesimi's poetry, it turned the man into a religious figure of utmost importance. His poetry spread quickly with other Hurufis to Anatolia and the Balkans, and he became well known. He was so famous that he remains an influential figure in Azerbaijan and Turkey up until today.³⁸

2.3 Hurufism after Fazlallah

Before we move to those regions that eventually became Hurufi centers, we need to stay for a bit longer in the Persian-speaking world to see how the Hurufi heartland became virtually devoid of Hurufis. The nature of their doctrines, which we will focus on in detail below, strike anyone with their apparent "heterodoxy", especially compared to today's Islam. Back in the day, however, ideas like the ones of Fazlallah were quite common, especially in that part of the Islamic world.³⁹ Many of the groups that are often regarded as being somewhere on the border of what is and what is not Islam, like the Druze, the Alevis, the Alawis, and the Ahl-e Haqq became prominent in those times. There was no clearly distinguished state-sanctioned form of Twelver Shi'ism that we know today from Iran and many of the things that we today regard as being distinctively orthodox Sunni did not exist or were different.⁴⁰ All in all, the times allowed for a broader definition of what it meant to be Muslim. It does not, however, mean that there was no significant infighting

³⁵ Bashir, 'Enshrining Divinity'.

³⁶ Islamic scholars

³⁷ Burrill, *The Quatrains of Nesimi, Fourteenth-Century Turkic Hurufi*, 25–33; Browne, *A History of Persian Literature under Tartar Dominion (A.D. 1265-1502)*, 365–75.

³⁸ Especially in Azerbaijan he is sometimes viewed as the national poet, there is a famous film (1973) about him and in 2018 there was a festival in his name. He plays a big part of the Azerbaijani nation-building narrative.

³⁹ For more on this period see Jackson, *The Cambridge History of Iran*. 6, 610–98; Orkhan Mir-Kasimov and Orkhan Mir-Kasimov, eds., *Unity in Diversity: Mysticism, Messianism and the Construction of Religious Authority in Islam* (Brill, 2013), <https://brill.com/display/title/24589>; Shahzad Bashir, *Sufi Bodies: Religion and Society in Medieval Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Arjomand, *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam*; and more specifically concerning the Isma'ilis see Shafique N. Virani, *The Ismailis in the Middle Ages: A History of Survival, a Search for Salvation* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁴⁰ For more on the history of Shia Islam in general see Farhad Daftary, *A History of Shi'i Islam* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2024), 57–89; for the history of Sunni orthodoxy see Jackson, *The Cambridge History of Iran*. 6, 610–98; Mir-Kasimov, *Unity in Diversity*.

among the different groups nor that there was not a sense, especially in urban centers, of a kind of “orthodoxy”. The Timurids needed a stately sanctioned doctrine and through forming a symbiotic relationship with the elite *ulema* they acquired just that in the form of what we today consider to be “normal” Sunni Islam.⁴¹ And since it seems like the urban elites were also the most fertile ground for Hurufi teaching, a conflict was imminent.

The Hurufis with their “messianic drive” did not always adhere to worldly authority or participate in outright rebellions. Two of the more famous cases are the attempted assassination of Timur’s son Shahrukh in 830/1427 and the rebellion in Isfahan in 835/1431. The former of the cases serves to describe the intricate relationship of the Timurid elites to Hurufism. On Friday 23rd Rabi’ II/21st February when on his way from the Friday Mosque in Herat, Shahrukh was assaulted by a Hurufi activist called Ahmad-e Lur. He survived the attack with severe wounds. The assailant was killed and later many others, including non-Hurufis, were executed. To be called a Hurufi at that point was paramount to being an enemy of the state.⁴² This has led researchers to believe that it was more of a tipping point for Shahrukh who was at odds with the urban intelligentsia of his realm, specifically antinomian Sufi-leaning elites.⁴³ The notion allowed him to purge this social class and to single out people he deemed dangerous, many of them Hurufis. We do not know the exact number of people who were persecuted by Shahrukh, but studies show that many who had not been previously known to be associated with the Hurufi movement were accused or even killed on the grounds of their presumed heretical leanings.⁴⁴ This shows that Hurufism served as a heresy *par excellence*, that could be always persecuted.⁴⁵ Together with the mass killings of Hurufis following their rebellion in Isfahan in 835/1431⁴⁶ and the killings of the Hurufi community in Tabriz after their falling out with the ruling Qaraqoyunlu dynasty seemed to have marked the end of the organized movement in Persian-speaking lands, except for among the Kurdish Ahl-e Haqq, where Fazlallah is present among important religious figures for the believers. We don’t however know whether his teachings ever became known to them.⁴⁷ For the needs of this thesis, we shall call this stage of Hurufi history that ended with the demise of Hurufis in the Persian land, the “Alinjq period”. We shall call the stages after this one the “post-Alinjq period”.

⁴¹ See in Jackson, *The Cambridge History of Iran*. 6, 610–98; for dissenting views see Mir-Kasimov, *Unity in Diversity*.

⁴² ILKER EVRIM Binbas, “The Anatomy of a Regicide Attempt: Shāhrukh, the Ḥurūfīs, and the Timurid Intellectuals in 830/1426–27”, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 23, no. 3 (2013): 391–428, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1356186313000278>.

⁴³ Binbas.

⁴⁴ For the most recent study on the regicide attempt and its aftermath see Binbas.

⁴⁵ Older literature still works with the term “heretical” very commonly. See an example in Browne, *A History of Persian Literature under Tartar Dominion (A.D. 1265-1502)*, 365–75.

⁴⁶ Bashir, *Fazlallah Astarabadi and the Hurufis*, 105–6.

⁴⁷ Bashir, 111.

We don't know the exact number of followers of Fazlallah before that, but we know from historical sources that the Hurufi community in Tabriz at that time was only about five hundred people strong.⁴⁸ Considering that Tabriz was one of the biggest centers of the community given its proximity to Alinjac, it seems logical to conclude that the Hurufis at that time were not by any means a mass movement, consisting instead of maybe lower thousands of members.

After these events, the Hurufis shifted their focus to Anatolia and further West. This transition was facilitated by a number of Fazlallah's disciples, who often composed verses in Turkish and were able to transmit Fazlallah's message. The most important of the Hurufis proved to be them was the aforementioned Nesimi, who became a teacher for another important Hurufi poet named Refi'i, the author of the earliest works about Hurufism in Turkish.⁴⁹ The dispersion of Hurufis in the lands of Rum (as Anatolia and more often the Balkans were called at the time) means that the group had to find new ways of existence.

No meeting place for the Hurufis from the 10th/16th century onward is known to us. The ways they let us know about their existence are rather anecdotal stories connected to them. One of them narrates of a group of Hurufis who supposedly tried to convert Mehmet II., the Ottoman sultan responsible for the conquest of Constantinople. This group was supposed to approach him in Edirne, get his trust, and eventually offer him to be initiated into the secrets of the group. The *şeyhülislam* of Edirne, at the time Fahrettin Acemi, however, ordered them to be burned to death following his inquiry about the Hurufi teaching.⁵⁰

Events like these only point out the unacceptability of the Hurufi creed for the establishment of the time. Important Hurufi writers of the time often faced diffidence from the elite circles, even though it didn't always mean persecution as we know from the case of Abdülmecid Firişteoğlu (died 864/1459-60), the translator of Fazlallah's works into Turkish. Firişteoğlu lived under the protection of his brother, a local ruler in his native Tire.⁵¹ Firişteoğlu's story highlights the fact that Hurufis often hailed from the upper circles of society for the teachings based on the mysteries of the alphabet required a certain level of education.

2.4 The Bektashi connection

By far the most important connection that Hurufis made in Anatolia was their infiltration into the Bektashi order. The use of the word infiltration here is not to indicate some kind of a secret plan of the Hurufis to control the order, but rather the subtle ways in which the process of

⁴⁸ Bashir, 106.

⁴⁹ Usluer, 'Le Hourifisme', 24; Gibb, *A History of Ottoman Poetry Volume I*, 370–71.

⁵⁰ Bashir, *Fazlallah Astarabadi and the Hurufis*, 106–7.

⁵¹ Usluer, 'Le Hourifisme', 65.

adoption of the Hurufi doctrine took place among the Bektashis.⁵² The Bektashi Sufi order, founded by the legendary figure of Haji Bektash Veli, a dervish from the Khorasan region who came to Anatolia in the 6th/13th century and acquired a huge following, is a Sufi order often considered to be on the far edge of what is Islam and what is not. Their adoption of local Anatolian and Balkan practices displays lenience toward alternative ways of understanding the Islamic revelation. Given their intimate connection to the Janissary Corps, they are considered to have been a legal way to expound these understandings in the Ottoman Empire.⁵³ Their legal status allowed the otherwise persecuted Hurufis to hide in their ranks. The Bektashis generally view Fazlallah's companion 'Ali Al-A'la as the one who introduced them to Hurufism.⁵⁴ The Bektashi order, together with other Sufi orders of the Ottoman Empire, where the Hurufi presence is not well documented, have allowed the Hurufis to not only survive but also to thrive under the Ottomans. The presence of their teachings in the order is well attested as late as in the 12th/19th and the 13th/20th century.⁵⁵ There are however almost no sources talking about Hurufis outside of the Bektashi order after the 9th/16th century, except for occasionally members of other Sufi orders or individuals interested in Hurufi teachings.⁵⁶ This is generally understood to be the proof that the Hurufis adopted the Bektashi order as their new principal way of existence. It needs to be pointed out however that as far as we know, Hurufism never became a mass movement among the Bektashis either.⁵⁷ The reasons for that are most probably to be found in the complexity of the teaching, which we will face now.

2.5 Hurufi teachings

It needs to be stated that Hurufism is an extremely complex system of thought and the detailed rendering of it lies outside the scope of this thesis. It has been dealt with extensively by other authors, who serve as a source for our writing and should be read by anyone interested in the Hurufi thought.⁵⁸ This thesis only aims to offer a very basic understanding of Fazlallah's thought and to outline the aspects of the teaching crucial to the main goal of the text. Having stated that we shall briefly dwell on the most important idea behind Fazlallah's doctrine.

⁵² This is a fascinating topic that and a lot has been written about it. It is recommended to consult the following: Melikoff, *Sur Les Traces Du Soufisme Turc*, 25–26; Hamid Algar, 'The Hurufi Influence on Bektashism', in *Bektachiyya: études sur l'ordre mystique des Bektachis et les groupes relevant de Hadji Bektach*, ed. Alexandre Popovic and Gilles Veinstein (Paris, France: Librairie orientaliste Paul Geuthner, 1993), 39–53; Birge, *The Bektashi Order of Dervishes*, by John Kingsley Birge, 148–59; Bashir, *Fazlallah Astarabadi and the Hurufis*, 115–22.

⁵³ The most complete opus on the Bektashi order is still Birge, *The Bektashi Order of Dervishes*, by John Kingsley Birge.

⁵⁴ Algar, 'The Hurufi Influence on Bektashism', 45.

⁵⁵ Birge, *The Bektashi Order of Dervishes*, by John Kingsley Birge, 148–59; Bashir, *Fazlallah Astarabadi and the Hurufis*, 122.

⁵⁶ Bashir, *Fazlallah Astarabadi and the Hurufis*, 114–21.

⁵⁷ Abu-Manneh, 'Between Heterodox and Sunni Orthodox Islam'.

⁵⁸ Most importantly these are Bashir, 'Enshrining Divinity'; Mir-Kasimov, *Words of Power*; Usler, 'Le Hourifisme'. The description of the teachings is however based mostly on Bashir's work and the terminology he coined in English.

The name itself, Hurufism, is of course a new term based on the way that writers critical of Hurufis would describe the group, which can be translated to English as “letterists” (in Arabic *huruf* means letter).⁵⁹ This derogatory nickname however offers a good idea of what the Hurufis did, and since we do not know about any name they would use for themselves, we opt for this one.. Their system of thought was based on “reading” the signs of the world and the universe. These signs presented themselves in the form of a metalanguage.⁶⁰

Metalanguage is a concept described by Fazlallah concerning the nature of creation. According to Fazlallah the metalanguage, containing thirty-two letters, is the language in which the true essence of things is equal to the words used to describe them. This doesn’t happen in standard human languages. The word “bird” for example is only a way the describe the phenomenon of what “bird” means using four letters of the English alphabet. However, neither the word nor the sound of the word is connected to the essence of the bird. In different languages the word for bird is different. This means that the word “bird” is only a representation of the concept.⁶¹ The only case in which this essence is identical to the word itself is when describing the letter itself. The letter “b” for example is a symbol and the essence at the same time, because “b” by itself does not mean anything else, it is the letter itself. In the metalanguage, everything works this way, meaning that the words describing created things are the things themselves. This means that, according to Fazlallah, having acquired the knowledge of the metalanguage be it only to a limited degree, one can know the true essences of things.⁶²

The details of this metalanguage are central to the Hurufi creed. The metalanguage is composed of 32 letters and was taught to Adam in Paradise. This number can be found again and again in nature proving the veracity of Fazlallah’s claim. The human face is the single most important space to observe the metalanguage “at work”. It is composed of seven (parallel to the seven verses of sura *Al-Fatiba*) *maternal lines*, these being: the hairline, two eyebrows, and four lines of eye brushes. Later in life, seven additional lines would grow on the male face. Those are the two

⁵⁹ The Arabic alphabet has always presented a challenge for many thinkers. They would search the hidden meanings of the letters and more importantly use the numerical values of the letters to construct “codes” of the Qur’an. At the time the most important example of this is Ibn Arabi’s *ilm al-huruf*, the science of letters. For more on that see Muhyi d din Ibn Arabi and Michel Chodkiewicz, *Les Illuminations de La Mecque* (ALBIN MICHEL, 2008); This approach has its exponents even today. For a contemporary example see Rashad Khalifa, *The Computer Speaks: God’s Message to the World* (Independently published, 2022).

⁶⁰ We do not know about any special name that Fazlallah used denote this concept. This term is used by Shahzad Bashir in Bashir, *Fazlallah Astarabadi and the Hurufis*, 64–84; Other scholars use different words to describe it. Omar Mir-Kasimov, who deals with this topic most thoroughly, calls it the “ontological language” or simply the “original language”. For anyone interested in the in-depth functioning of this language see Mir-Kasimov, *Words of Power*.

⁶¹ This thought stems from the work of the famous linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. For more on that see Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale (3e éd.) / Ferdinand de Saussure ; publié par Charles Bally... et Albert Sechehaye,.... avec la collaboration de Albert Riedlinger,....*, 1931, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k31484j>.

⁶² Bashir, ‘Deciphering the Cosmos from Creation to Apocalypse: The Hurufiyya Movement and Medieval Islamic Esotericism’, 176–79.

lines of the beard on each of the cheeks, the line on the end of the beard, one above the mustache, and one below the lips. The female face did not acquire these lines but acquired another seven maternal ones based on the ability to give birth, so to say, to create the new lines. Adding these seven to the maternal ones makes fourteen distinct lines. This again has a Qur'anic parallel. When one takes the enigmatic letters on the beginnings of certain suras, they add up to fourteen individual letters. This connectedness of the human face to the Qur'an is so important because it shows the intimate connection of the material book to the "human book", the human face. These lines were understood as "seals" by Fazlallah, sealing the places on which they were situated on the face. Adding these together, it makes the total number twenty-eight, the number of the letters of the Arabic alphabet *ergo* the letters of the Qur'an. Later in life when humans become civilized, they add two more lines, dividing their hair or beard into two and two more spots for which the lines are the seals. This makes thirty-two, which is equal to the number of letters of the metalanguage.⁶³

Thirty-two is also the number of the letters of the Persian alphabet, a sign according to Hurufis that Fazlallah is closest to the metalanguage having made himself known in the Persian language. Having looked at the intricacies of the Hurufi system, we come back to the metalanguage itself. The metalanguage, being known in its complete form only to God, is something that humans need to master in order to be close to Him and to look at the world "as it truly is". Fazlallah, who was closest to understanding the metalanguage showed humans the way to understand it as well. He opened the cycle of divinity in which every human being can according to his or her ability realize his or her own divinity. Fazlallah attests to this by offering alternative readings of the scriptures, he for example narrates a dream where he sees a man reading the Qur'an in Turkish, but not in the way of reading a translation but by mouthing the letters of the Qur'an and trying to understand the meanings of the letters in Turkish. In this way, he tries to demonstrate how one should try to look behind the traditional way of thinking and look for the metalanguage.⁶⁴

As we said, the only one possessing the knowledge of the metalanguage completely is God. Fazlallah, who was the chosen one according to the Hurufi views, is taking part in this knowledge of God to a degree never seen before. Thanks to this ability he enters the ranks of the most important prophets, Jesus and Mohammed. He is however not just a prophet, he is the last from the cycle of sainthood, the first one being Ali ibn Abi Talib and the first one in the cycle of divinity. The cycle of divinity was already a stage of the apocalypse and the only way one could take part in this and become saved, was by at least trying to understand the Metalanguage using Fazlallah's way.⁶⁵

⁶³ Bashir, *Fazlallah Astarabadi and the Hurufis*, 57–60; see also Mir-Kasimov, *Words of Power*.

⁶⁴ Bashir, 'Deciphering the Cosmos from Creation to Apocalypse: The Hurufiyya Movement and Medieval Islamic Esotericism', 178.

⁶⁵ Bashir, 178; see also Usluer, 'Le Hourifisme'.

The apocalypse became a divisive factor for the group after Fazlallah's demise. One of the groups led by 'Ali Al-A'la believed they needed to wait for the second coming of the Hurufi prophet and until then they were to follow Fazlallah's teachings and the *shari'a*. The other group forming a minority of all Hurufis believed Fazlallah's death had introduced them to paradise where they were now living. This meant that there was no need to continue to follow religious law.⁶⁶ Fazlallah's person was in this way absolutely central to the Hurufi system of thought and so his death was to become a major tragedy with theological consequences. He was buried as we said in Alinjq, where his tomb stands to this day. For some time after his death, Alinjq became the new Mecca, as the followers of Fazlallah would go on the Hajj and the Umra pilgrimages there and not to the Kaaba as other Muslims.

The use of words here is important. When we say Hurufis did something unlike "other Muslims" we are saying that they were Muslims. We have no evidence about Hurufis ever making a claim not to be Muslims. On the contrary, they understood Hurufism as the ultimate realization of the Islamic revelation and they maintained the *shari'a*, although there were exceptions. We can see that in the example of the new Kaaba in Alinjq. The Hurufis would undertake common Muslim practices, they would just understand them differently.

The theological rationale behind the development in Alinjq was the belief that just like in the case of the Scripture, where only thanks to Fazlallah did humanity have contact with the true hidden meaning of it, also the Kaaba was to be finally understood in the original sense. Surprisingly,⁶⁷ the original sense proved to indicate a different location, the one in Alinjq, where Fazlallah would lie once more in the primordial earth from which the whole world was created. As fascinating as this episode is, we do not know many details about the everyday functioning of the sanctuary.⁶⁸ We know however that with the demise of Hurufism in the Persian lands, this pilgrimage lost its significance and people would cease to come here.⁶⁹ The Hurufi teachings are of course way more elaborate and offer a much deeper understanding of creation than the one outlined in this text. What should be noted is that as we can see, what Fazlallah came with is rather a methodology to (quite literally) read the world, not a new theological system as such. This will prove important later.

⁶⁶ More on this in Usluer, 'Le Hourifisme', 123–30; Bashir, *Fazlallah Astarabadi and the Hurufis*, 90–97.

⁶⁷ The word "surprisingly" serves here to highlight that the idea of a different Kaaba was quite common at the time among other groups, it usually offered a more philosophical understanding of the Kaaba, not simply a different place on Earth. For more on such ideas consult Moosa, *Extremist Shiites*.

⁶⁸ Bashir, 'Enshrining Divinity', 293–302.

⁶⁹ Bashir, 302.

3. Hurufi Identity

After following the history of the Hurufi movement, in this next part, we shall focus on the main questions of the thesis. Applying Benedict Anderson's theory, we shall try to describe Hurufi forms of existence. Should Hurufiyya be understood as a distinct identity, a teaching, or something completely else? We have seen that they came from forming a distinct group to being "just" one of the teachings of the Bektashi order. The details of this shift are the focus of this chapter.

The study of identity has gained prominence in recent years and is a big topic in current social studies and humanities.⁷⁰ Given the complexity of the term that requires long definitions in order for anyone to be able to use it, it remains rather challenging to work with. Religious identity, which is the kind of identity relevant to this thesis, is undoubtedly one of the more complex concepts of modern humanities and social sciences. Where national, ethnic, or sexual identities have been dealt with extensively, the notion of religious identity has been somewhat left out.⁷¹ The ways to understand religious identity are usually intimately connected to the question of what religion is. The conceptions of identity vary significantly according to the conceptions of religion they are based on. For some it is mainly an allegiance to a totemic social structure, as is the case for Durkheim,⁷² others look for an anthropological "meaning", like Geertz.⁷³ There have been those, who understand religion and *ergo* religious identity as being formed discursively (among others Asad.)⁷⁴ These conceptions have been dealt with by many authors and need not be explained here. In this thesis they serve to offer a background of the ways of thinking about religious identity. It is in a somewhat different part of academia that we find a point of departure for an understanding of religious identity that we shall address here.

3.1 Imagined Communities

It is in political sciences, specifically in the study of nationalism that we encounter the work of Benedict Anderson. The famous American scholar known mostly for his prolific work on Indonesian politics published a book in 1984 that quickly became widely read and written about. This book called *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* deals

⁷⁰ For anyone interested in the notion of identity it is recommended to start in Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay, *Questions of Cultural Identity* (London, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446221907>; and Margaret Wetherell and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *The SAGE Handbook of Identities* (SAGE, 2010).

⁷¹ See Hall and Du Gay, *Questions of Cultural Identity*.

⁷² Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁷³ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation Of Cultures* (Basic Books, 1977).

⁷⁴ Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*.

extensively with, as the title suggests, nationalism.⁷⁵ Anderson offered a new understanding of the origins of nationalism that has proven stable enough to withstand the test of time remaining significant to this day. Anderson presents the following basic scheme of historical development leading to the creation of nationalism. The vernacular language is being used to print literature and newspapers (in Europe at first the Bible) thanks to the shift away from the idea of the superiority of the “high” language (in Europe Latin) creating something called “print capitalism”. Print capitalism meant that printer owners printed texts in the vernacular language aiming to sell to people from lower social classes who did not speak Latin. Hand in hand with this, people become literate thanks to state-modernizing processes in Europe including mass education. The literacy of the people allows them to adhere to ideas developed by bourgeois elites about the necessity of overthrowing dynastic rule. This leads to the creation of the so-called *imagined community*.⁷⁶

This is a concept meaning that people become part of a community consisting mostly of people they are never going to be able to physically meet. People simply *imagine* a national community (or in our case a religious one) to which they are intimately bound to the level that they are willing to sacrifice their own lives for it. To set an example, when Italians consider themselves to be part of the Italian nation, they imagine that there is such a thing as an Italian nation, even though the Italians they personally know are around a hundred people, a figure nowhere near the over 60 million Italians in Italy. And yet when asked, they would never doubt the existence of their nation. It is through this imagination they make the nation exist. The imagined community becomes their identity. Anderson is very adamant that to imagine the nation in no way means it is false or fabricated. He instead sees this imagination as a necessity for any kind of community except for maybe a very small village where everyone knows everyone.⁷⁷ This last thought is central to the analysis we present below.

We should say that we don’t go into much detail about Anderson’s theory. His work is after all focused mostly on nationalism. We use his theory because it allows us to work with a rather straightforward understanding of identity. We need a comprehensive way to write about the making of a community, which Anderson offers. A more in-depth approach would be redundant in our case because the goal of this text is to describe the transition from an identity to a teaching, not to present all the possible implications of the identity itself.

⁷⁵ In this text we use this revised edition: Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

⁷⁶ Anderson, 6–7.

⁷⁷ Anderson, 6.

3.2 Definition of a religious community

Even though Anderson's scheme is not primarily meant for religion, he presents a short subchapter in his book called "religious community". In this subchapter, the author theorizes the existence of a "sacred community" based on a "sacred language". These sacred communities are imagined communities based on the use of a shared sacred language and writing. The language here (Anderson gives the examples of Latin, Arabic, and Chinese) embodies the community.⁷⁸ To quote Anderson: "Take only the example of Islam: if Maguindanao met Berbers in Mecca, knowing nothing of each other's languages, incapable of communicating orally, they nonetheless understood each other's ideographs, because the sacred texts they shared existed only in classical Arabic. In this sense, written Arabic functioned like Chinese characters to create a community out of signs, not sounds."⁷⁹ The Maguindanao and Berbers in this case would also imagine a community that they were a part of, just like modern nations. In the subchapter Anderson goes on to describe the case of Marco Polo's travel account from the court of Kublai Khan, highlighting how Marco Polo uses the words "our" for Christian practices and "theirs" for local ones and how it implies the ideas of Christianity being one religion among other religions.⁸⁰ This part of Anderson's theory is crucial for this thesis. His thoughts have been a starting point for many others, who have developed them further.⁸¹ And so, we too are going to use Anderson's ideas not in the main field where he intended its use.

It is now important to state that Anderson's idea has its critics. Other scholars approach the study of identity completely differently, focusing on the situational nature of identity, sometimes going as far as discarding the use of this term completely.⁸² This last point can be seen as a valid one, but we should keep in mind that the basic underlying theory of an imagined community as understood by the author of this thesis, based on Anderson's statement,⁸³ is the technique for forming a community by imagining it, allowing for a rather basic use of the word "identity". More on that below.

As we stated above, Anderson sees the imagination of one's community as a necessity for any kind of community that does not consist of but a few members. Every bigger community

⁷⁸ For more on the connection between a religious community and its sacred language see Searle-Chatterjee and Green, *Religion, Language, and Power*, 1–20.

⁷⁹ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 13.

⁸⁰ Anderson, 16–17.

⁸¹ John Breuilly, 'Benedict Anderson's Imagined Communities: A Symposium', *Nations and Nationalism* 22, no. 4 (2016): 625–59, <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12236>; Breuilly; Craig Calhoun, 'The Importance of Imagined Communities – and Benedict Anderson', *Debats (Valencia, Spain)*, no. 1 (2016): 11–16.

⁸² For more on that see Searle-Chatterjee and Green, *Religion, Language, and Power*.

⁸³ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6.

inevitably faces the question of belonging in a situation where most of its members are not known to one another. They need to find a way to relate. The way to do that is, according to Anderson, to *imagine* the community. If we say it functions in close to all cases, we can undoubtedly apply this theory to religion, after all, as we have seen, Anderson does too. Now we come to the notion of sacred language. As Anderson states, the imagined communities of religious groups were formed with special regard to the use of one uniting sacred language. The language itself was not necessarily a spoken language, for as he shows in the case of the Berbers and Maguindanao, they did not actually speak Arabic. It was important more as a symbol of the community.⁸⁴ The sacred language also existed on its own, given the fact that other communities could adopt it, by for example converting to the religion. This means that the sacred language's existence was not bound just to its community.

Having stated this, we come back to the understanding that any kind of community is an imagined one, unless very small. We can look at a religious community and realize that it is being imagined by its members, simply following Anderson's train of thought: The religious community is bigger than very small, which means that not all members know each other, and yet the community exists, it exists in the imagination of the members. This technique allows us to think about the identity of groups in the past, even if we did not have many primary sources, as we do in the case of Hurufiyya. We can't of course describe the individual identities of its members, nor can we deal with multiplicities and situational identities, because Anderson's technique doesn't offer a way to do so, but it is not necessary for the purposes of this thesis. To research a multiplicity of identities is very challenging even among living communities, let alone dead ones. If we approach Anderson's thought keeping this in mind, it allows us to think about the identities of past groups in a rather straightforward and efficient way. It allows us to consider belonging to a certain community to be the identity of its members, simply because they imagine their own community and themselves as being part of it. When we combine this with his concept of a sacred language, we can create a definition of a religious group with a distinct identity: It is a community with a number of distinct practices and a sacred language, where its members imagine its existence, making it their identity.

⁸⁴ The interplay between language and religion and the ways they can be understood to work similarly has been approached by many scholars and the specific case of Hurufiyya, where the central idea of the religion is a language would make for highly interesting analysis on its own. More on that see for example Anita Maria Leopold and Jeppe Sinding Jensen, *Syncretism in Religion: A Reader* (Routledge, 2016), 381–82; Gustavo Benavides, 'Syncretism and Legitimacy in Latin American Religion', in *Syncretism in Religion: A Reader*, by Anita Maria Leopold and Jeppe Sinding Jensen (Routledge, 2016).

3.3 The analysis

We start with the first source, the poetry of Nesimi, most importantly his Persian *divan*.⁸⁵ Looking at his *divan* with the knowledge of the early Hurufi period we may see just how the Hurufi came to form a distinct religious movement. As we write above, we know from the sources that in the years following Fazlallah's death, his followers formed a community. Reading through the analysis, many parallels with other groups and teachings come to mind. They are not described in this thesis, nevertheless, following these parallels might lead us to one of the goals of this text, which is to offer a way to think about similar developments beyond the Hurufi context.

3.3.1 Hurufis as a distinct group

We know about the two-fold importance Fazlallah had for his followers. He was a charismatic leader, who came to form his community, but he was also theologically crucial to the Hurufi worldview. When we think about the way to salvation that Fazlallah came to create for humanity, we see that everyone was required to at least try to learn the metalanguage mentioned above. Learning the metalanguage would not have been possible had Fazlallah not shown the way. From this, we can logically deduce that without Fazlallah there was no salvation. Hardly can one think of a more central role than this one. With this we want to imply that being part of the group that we call Hurufiyya meant for one to be a follower of Fazlallah, using his methods to strive for salvation. Fazlallah remained the ultimate religious authority even after his death. His grave became the new Kaaba towards which one would pray and to which one would go on pilgrimage instead of Mecca. This means one could be picked out as a Hurufi rather easily, for one would pray the five daily prayers facing a different direction. These two factors alone make us think about the existence of a Hurufi identity.

After Fazlallah's death, we know about the split in the community, where one group would understand the tragic event as the end of the first phase of the apocalypse. They would believe that Fazlallah introduced them to paradise, where they now lived and therefore they could cease to follow the *shari'a*, for it had no meaning in paradise. The other group would expect more events before truly entering paradise.⁸⁶ In the case of this split, we can attest that at least a certain group of Fazlallah's followers would profess their faith very differently from the rest of the society, making themselves distinct.

⁸⁵ Nesimi's poetry used in this thesis comes from Imaddudin Nesimi, *Díván* (Bákú: Našriját-e douletí-je, 1972); and Shirvan and Saccone, *Nel tuo volto è scritta la Parola di Dio*.

⁸⁶ Usluer, 'Le Hourifisme', 123–30.

The most important point supporting the claim of the existence of an imagined Hurufi community is the initiation process described by Usluer.⁸⁷ The Hurufis would initiate new members to their group. This means that apart from the very initial period when it was just Fazlallah's closest associates who followed him, the Hurufis had to form an imagined community. We deduce that from the fact that their practices were distinct from the rest of the societies they lived in and that they saw themselves as distinct, using initiation to make foreigners enter their ranks. We can see this distinction-making worked quite well and the Hurufi label came to be used. It also came to be applied to non-Hurufis as we can see in the case of the aftermath of the attempted murder of Shahrukh.⁸⁸ The people persecuted were persecuted for their (real or fabricated) affiliation with the Hurufis, meaning there was a general idea at the time about the existence of such a group.

Coming back to Nesimi, we see he uses the words “we”, “ours” and “us” very often to talk about Hurufis.⁸⁹ He himself must have imagined the Hurufi community he was part of. To state an example, we may look at a verse from his Persian *divan*: “From **our** letters *‘ayn* and *lam* and *mim*, understand the mysteries of the divine *Bel*! Through **our** *fi* and *zad* and *lam*, in the creation the Eye of things become!”⁹⁰ In this way Nesimi as an insider of the community uses those words to denote belonging, leading to the conclusion that there clearly was a sense of group belonging among the early Hurufis and it makes sense to regard theirs as a distinct identity. Coming back to our definition from subchapter 3.2, we apply it to the case of the Hurufiyya at that time. We have said that to be a religious community in our understanding, means to have distinct practices and a sacred language. That allows for the imagining of a community of those adhering to these practices and the use, even if not in the standard meaning, of the sacred language. Both of these were present among the Hurufis at this time. The distinct practices, like praying in a different direction, going on pilgrimage to Alinjaq instead of Mecca, and undergoing initiation must have necessarily made the members of the group stand out among other Muslims. Together with the presence of the sacred language, the metalanguage in the Hurufi case, we argue that the Hurufis would constitute an imagined community.

3.3.2 The demise of the distinct identity

From here we move to the next source regarding the period after the demise of the Hurufi movement in the Persian lands and its introduction to the Ottoman world. We have described the development of the movement and its “symbiosis” with the Bektashi order. To see how the

⁸⁷ Usluer, 123–24.

⁸⁸ Binbas, ‘The Anatomy of a Regicide Attempt’.

⁸⁹ Nesimi, *Diván*.

⁹⁰ Nesimi, 281. The translation was done by the author of this thesis.

Hurufis, as we claim, ceased to be an imagined community by themselves and instead became part of a different one, we allow the sources, or rather the lack of them, to speak for themselves.

By far the most complete account of the sources in the post-Alinjq period is to be found in the work of the many-times cited Turkish scholar Fatih Usluer. He presents an encyclopaedical list of sorts of Hurufi sources.⁹¹ When we look at this list, we see that most of the Hurufi writers present are either from the Alinjq period, or they claim a chain of succession from a teacher figure from the Alinjq period. It is also notable that the list ends around the 11th/17th century. We have however many Hurufi manuscripts published after the 11th/17th century.⁹² This means that we have new Hurufi sources but no Hurufis to have written them, at least not in the original sense.

An emblematic figure of this development is the Bektashi dervish known as Gül Baba.⁹³ Gül Baba, who presumably died that year 948/1541 was part of Süleyman the Magnificent's army that lay siege to Budapest. He is thought to have died there and Süleyman ordered for a tomb to be built in his name. Gül Baba left several poetical works containing many references to Fazlallah and his teaching.⁹⁴ Not much is known about this enigmatic figure, but he serves to demonstrate how at one time, it must have been common to adhere to the Hurufi creed and yet be part of the Bektashi order. It is a question whether Gül Baba was part of a Hurufi imagined community, but given his alleged allegiance to the Bektashi order, he surely was part of *their* imagined community.

The Bektashis seem to have used the system created by Fazlallah without necessarily being Hurufis.⁹⁵ They developed their own understanding of how to read the metalanguage and more importantly, how to read the world using the metalanguage. They focused more on the visual occurrence of letters around them, creating a visual language of intriguing calligraphical drawings.⁹⁶ In other words, they would learn the language of Hurufism pursuing other goals, yet they would still consider it to be just that, a language of the Hurufis, for there was apparently a certain sense of the distinctiveness of the Hurufi teaching among the Bektashis.

To demonstrate that, we look at one of the Hurufi sources published by Bektashis, coming from long after the 11th/17th century. In 1291/1874, in response to a new publication of six Hurufi

⁹¹ Usluer, 'Le Hourifisme', 26–80.

⁹² Most of them in the form of manuscripts in various libraries around the world. More on that see Usluer, 'Le Hourifisme'.

⁹³ Usluer, 68–69; Bashir, *Fazlallah Astarabadi and the Hurufis*, 118.

⁹⁴ Usluer, 'Le Hourifisme', 68–69.

⁹⁵ Algar, 'The Hurufi Influence on Bektashism'; Birge, *The Bektashi Order of Dervishes, by John Kingsley Birge*, 58–62.

⁹⁶ For some of the drawings see Frederick De Jong, 'The Iconography of Bektashism a Survey of Themes and Symbolism in Clerical Costume, Liturgical Objects and Pictorial Art', in *Manuscripts of the Middle East 4* (Leiden: Ter Lugt Press, 1989), <https://dn790005.ca.archive.org/0/items/BEKTASHPDF/BEKTASH%C4%B0%20PDF.pdf>; for a more general theoretical approach see Bashir, *Fazlallah Astarabadi and the Hurufis*, 119.

books by a member of the Bektashi order,⁹⁷ the religious scholar İshak Efendi published his treatise called *Kaşifü'l-esrar ve dafî'u'l-eşrar*.⁹⁸ In this treatise he seeks to discredit and polemise against the Bektashi order, focusing among other things on the presence of Hurufi teachings among them. He disdains the Bektashis on the grounds of being morally corrupt and “part of the great mass of those who are saved”.⁹⁹ This rather common condemnation of the Bektashis on the grounds of being morally corrupt is strengthened here by the connection to Hurufism. Efendi goes on to narrate the story of Fazlallah and addresses the way Hurufism entered the Bektashi order. To him, it is a work of “diabolical” Hurufi preachers who tricked the “gullible” Bektashis into accepting their creed.¹⁰⁰ Apart from a fascinating rendering of what is sometimes called “Ottoman Sunni orthodoxy”,¹⁰¹ Efendi shows that even some three hundred or more years after entering the Bektashi world, Hurufi teachings were sometimes still seen as distinct, even if part of the order. One of the translators of this text who published parts of it in his article, Benjamin Weineck, goes so far as to say that it was the presence of Hurufi teachings among the Bektashis that was the most nefarious aspect of the Sufi order for Efendi.¹⁰² What is interesting about Efendi’s condemnation is that he talks about Bektashis adhering to the Hurufi creed, not about Hurufis.¹⁰³ This shows as was the case of Gül Baba that at this point, we don’t know about any kind of imagined community of Hurufis.

Efendi deems Hurufism to be a widespread phenomenon in the Bektashi order. This also means that not every Bektashi was familiar with Fazlallah’s teaching. Bashir for example presents the following statement concerning this topic: “Whatever the root of the contact, works by Fazlallah and his followers became a special advanced syllabus for Bektashi adepts starting in the fifteenth century. The movement’s ideas never became the order’s common intellectual currency; they were always deemed a special hermeneutical method learned by the order’s sophisticated followers who had already mastered the basic ideology.”¹⁰⁴ Similar claims can be found in other sources.¹⁰⁵

⁹⁷ Edward G. Browne, ‘XXII. Further Notes on the Literature of the Hurufis and Their Connection with the Bektashi Order of Dervishes’, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 39, no. 3 (July 1907): 535–36, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0035869X0003639X>.

⁹⁸ For the sake of this thesis we use this partial translation Weineck, ‘7. Fabricating the Great Mass’.

⁹⁹ Weineck, 1.

¹⁰⁰ Weineck, 149.

¹⁰¹ Abu-Manneh, ‘Between Heterodox and Sunni Orthodox Islam’.

¹⁰² Weineck, ‘7. Fabricating the Great Mass’, 158.

¹⁰³ Weineck, ‘7. Fabricating the Great Mass’.

¹⁰⁴ Bashir, *Fazlallah Astarabadi and the Hurufis*, 117.

¹⁰⁵ Birge, *The Bektashi Order of Dervishes*, by John Kingsley Birge, 58–62; Browne, ‘XXII. Further Notes on the Literature of the Hurufis and Their Connection with the Bektashi Order of Dervishes’, 535–36; Bashir, *Fazlallah Astarabadi and the Hurufis*, 117–22.

Two of these sources offer a look at the state of Hurufism at the beginning of the 20th century. It is here that we meet again with Edward G. Browne from the very beginning of our text, for the first of the sources are two of his articles published in 1907 and 1920 respectively. In these articles, Browne talks about the Bektashi-Hurufi connection stating that: "... it was amongst the members of this Order that the Hurufi doctrines flourish at the present day."¹⁰⁶ He goes on to describe the Bektashis as the "representatives and repositories of the Hurufi doctrines."¹⁰⁷

Building upon Browne's work some years later, John Kingsley Birge published his book "The Bektashi Order of Dervishes".¹⁰⁸ This book, which remains referential for anyone wishing to study the order, was the fruit of his rather lengthy period of staying with Bektashis in Istanbul and traveling around the Bektashi world. During this time, he encountered all kinds of Bektashi beliefs and documented them in a very thorough manner. In his book, he also described the Hurufi creed. Birge uses the word "system" when talking about the Hurufi teachings and never considers there could be exponents of just Hurufism.¹⁰⁹ This is an important point proving that when Birge met the Bektashis, Hurufism had been "mere" teaching for a long time. Yet even for him, there is a distinction between Bektashi and Hurufi beliefs and he writes that Bektashis never attribute Hurufi teachings to the founder of the order Haji Bektash Veli, not claiming them as their own inventions, being instead aware of the foreign provenience of Hurufism.¹¹⁰ Birge views the functioning of Hurufism among Bektashis as a system they use to describe to world, trying to read it like Fazlallah did, as if it was a methodology of sorts, a language used to describe the world, not so much an individual religious creed.¹¹¹ In the cases of both sources, we see once again that there is no imagined community of Hurufis known to us. We should rather understand Hurufi existence at this time as being a part of the "syllabus" of the Bektashi creed. To use our definition again, we look at the situation of Hurufiyya that we have described. We have shown that there were no Hurufis with distinct Hurufi practices at this time, there were instead Bektashis with distinct Bektashi practices, that would partially still use the sacred language of the past Hurufi imagined community. This was possible, we argue, due to the characteristics of the sacred language. As we write above, the sacred language exists also outside of the community that uses it.

¹⁰⁶ Browne, *A History of Persian Literature under Tartar Dominion (A.D, 1265-1502)*, 365.

¹⁰⁷ Browne, 370–71.

¹⁰⁸ Birge, *The Bektashi Order of Dervishes*, by John Kingsley Birge.

¹⁰⁹ Birge, 60–61.

¹¹⁰ Birge, 60.

¹¹¹ Birge, 148–58.

4. Conclusion

In the thesis, we have laid out the history of the Hurufi movement and we have presented the teachings of its founder Fazlallah Astarabadi. We have seen how the Hurufis created their community and what made them distinct. To illustrate the way their existence has shifted, we tried to show that at the beginning they would form a closed group, acquiring ways to initiate new members and presenting other distinct practices. To think about this, we have used the scheme of Benedict Anderson called “Imagined Communities”, which we adjusted for our purposes of making a definition of a religious imagined community applicable to the Hurufi case. By presenting this scheme, we offered an efficient way of thinking about the identities of past communities. To be part of a certain community bigger than a very small one, where everyone knows everyone, means to *imagine* this community. Anderson shows the ways in which this imagination works and just how these imagined communities can prove real, offering the members of the community a distinct identity based on their belonging to the group.

The poet Nesimi, an exponent of the early Hurufi community, showed us how the Hurufi identity at that time was, we argue, distinct. Just like one would be for example an Ismaili Shia Muslim, following the living Imam of the time and adhering to the rules of the group, one would see oneself and be seen by others as a Hurufi, a phenomenon we have identified in the sources. Having shown that, we have set out to look at the development of this identity in later centuries. We have witnessed how the Hurufis were wiped out of the Persian lands and how they acquired new ways to exist, “hiding” among the Bektashi Sufi order, an order with a dissenting understanding of the Islamic revelation to the rest of the Ottoman society. This hiding, as we can see, resulted in the demise of the distinct Hurufi identity, due to the disappearance of the imagined community of Hurufis. Instead, many of the followers of Fazlallah slowly became Bektashis. This we have described in the case of the Bektashi dervish Gül Baba, on the fact that most Hurufi manuscripts we have today are of Bektashi provenience and later on the polemical treatise by İshak Efendi.

We have seen that Efendi viewed Hurufism as initially foreign to the Bektashi order, but later becoming a part of the Bektashi teachings. He never mentions any Hurufis, talking instead only about their teachings. Here we can argue that the words “Hurufi teachings” take the place of the previously used word “Hurufis” because there were no more Hurufis, it was only their teachings, specifically their sacred language that would still exist. Here we should say that during the first periods of Hurufi history, there was of course a Hurufi teaching, but at that time, the majority of people adhering to these teachings would be Hurufis, as in they would imagine the Hurufi community with themselves belonging to it. When the Hurufi imagined community *ergo* the

Hurufi identity ceased to exist, the thing that survived was their teachings, more specifically their metalanguage. This we have demonstrated in the cases of two prominent scholars of Islam, Edward G. Browne and John Kingsley Birge. Both scholars, having spent some time with the Bektashis, come to similar conclusions. Browne describes how the Hurufi teachings at the time were alive only among the Bektashis and Birge points out that they serve as a system to describe the world for certain well-educated Bektashis.

To sum up this development and to finally answer the question posed at the beginning of the thesis, Hurufiyya came from starting as a distinct Islamic current, presenting an identity of its own, to slowly becoming a mere teaching, a language used by others with different identities. The case of the Hurufiyya shows how fluid religious identities can be and how a core teaching formative for the identity of one group can become part of a different group's religious system, without necessarily preserving the original identity. This may shed light on the development of Islamic plurality and offer ways to think about similar developments among other groups.

A set of questions arises that could be investigated by others. It would be highly interesting to subdue other groups to this way of analysis. In the specific case of Hurufiyya, it is the language, that survived. Still, it is not too hard to imagine it could be other teachings, other practices in the case of other groups that have proven strong enough to survive in initially foreign systems of thought. What such foreign systems make part of what other religious groups and what does that tell us? How many such languages are "inherent" parts of other religions? What does that tell us about those religions? Coming back to the question asked at the beginning, are maybe mainstream, "orthodox" variations of religions subject to this too? More specifically in the case of Islam, are there such "languages", such teachings of other, already extinct groups, "hiding" inside of what we consider "orthodox" Islam? Another point of view that could be elaborated on, is to look at existing identities we daily use treating them as monolithic blocks, such as Sunni or Shia, and think about whether they are distinct identities, teachings, or something else. Even though these identities might seem rather obviously distinct, applying the same method we have applied to the Hurufiyya might give us interesting answers.

It would also make sense to look closely at the primary sources used in this thesis with a better linguistic skill, allowing for a deeper understanding. The sources we found were mostly translated only partially and more importantly, were seldomly digitalized, being physically stored as manuscripts in libraries around the world. The study of Hurufiyya remains a largely open field with many opportunities for further research. It would be highly interesting to look out for other Hurufi traces to track the scope of their influence on the broader Islamic world, an endeavor to embark on in the future.

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