

# From Sufism to Universal Vision: Murat Yagan and the Teaching of Kebzeh

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## Abstract

This article examines aspects of cultural exchange between the Middle East and the West in which Sufism, Christianity, the traditions of the Circassians and New Age concepts played a central role. It focuses on the teaching of Murat Yagan, of Abkhaz-Circassian origin who grew up in Turkey and immigrated to Canada in the 1960s, where he developed his philosophy, *Ahmsta Kebzeh* (“the knowledge of the art of living”). The Kebzeh way of life emphasizes modesty, mutual responsibility and compassion. Yagan linked these values to the ancient ethos of the Caucasus Mountains which he sought to revive as the basis of a universal vision. The nature of Kebzeh was influenced by the cosmopolitan environment in which Yagan was educated in Turkey; by his enrollment with Sufi circles in North America; and by the multicultural Canadian atmosphere. These diverse influences enabled him to devise an ecumenical model of dialogue between cultures. The article provides a first-time survey and analysis of Kebzeh ideological and communal features. It sheds new light on the role of ethnicity and cultural heritage in immigrant societies in the context of the evolution of spirituality in Canada, a relatively unexplored milieu in comparison to the United States and Europe.

## Résumé

Cet article examine les aspects de l'échange culturel entre le Moyen-Orient et de l'Occident dans lequel le soufisme, le christianisme, les traditions des circassiens et les

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concepts de la « new age » occupent une place centrale. Il se concentre sur les enseignements de Murat Yagan, un homme d'origine abkhaze-circassien qui a grandi en Turquie et a immigré au Canada dans les années 1960 où il a développé une philosophie appelée le *ahmsta kebze* (« la connaissance de l'art de vivre »). L'art de vivre de *kebze* insiste sur la modestie, la responsabilité mutuelle, et la compassion. Yagan a lié ces valeurs à l'ancienne philosophie des montagnes du Caucase où il cherchait à faire revivre en tant que fondement d'une vision universelle. La nature de *kebze* a été influencée par l'environnement cosmopolite dans laquelle Yagan a fait ses études en Turquie, par sa participation à des cercles soufis en Amérique du Nord, ainsi que par l'ambiance multiculturelle canadienne. Ces diverses influences lui ont permis de créer un modèle œcuménique de dialogue entre les cultures. Cet article fournit la première enquête et l'analyse des caractéristiques idéologiques et communautaires de *kebze*. Ce faisant, il fournit de nouvelles recherches sur le rôle de l'ethnicité et du patrimoine culturel dans les sociétés immigrées dans le contexte de l'évolution de la spiritualité au Canada, un milieu relativement inexploré en comparaison avec les États-Unis et l'Europe.

### Keywords

Abkhazia – Canada – Christianity – Circassians – ethnicity – Kebze – multiculturalism – migration – Murat Yagan – New Age philosophies – spirituality – Sufism

### Introduction

This study examines aspects of cultural creativity and exchange between the Middle East and the West as reflected in the teaching of a spiritual philosophy in which Sufism, Christianity, and New Age spiritual concepts play a central role alongside Circassian-Abkhazian cultural elements. It focuses on Murat Yagan, originator, teacher and disseminator of this philosophy, and the interaction between religions, cultures and identities which he molded.

Murat Yagan (b. 1915), of Circassian-Abkhazian origin,<sup>1</sup> grew up in Turkey and emigrated to Canada in 1963. He called his spiritual method *Ahmsta Kebze*

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1 The term “Circassian” in its narrowest sense refers to the original inhabitants of northwest Caucasus, who call themselves *Adighe* and speak several dialects of Adighe-Circassian. In its broader sense the term also encompasses the Abkhaz people who originated in Abkhazia in southwest Caucasus and speak Abkhaz—a different, though related language. Most of the Adighe are Sunni Muslims, while the Abkhaz are Sunni Muslims and Orthodox Christians.

(“the knowledge of the art of living”),<sup>2</sup> a term taken from the traditions of the Circassians, and especially the Abkhazians, of the Caucasus. Kebzeh is a combination of philosophy and practice, aimed at awakening latent human faculties that are ignored in the attainment of modern enlightenment. Yagan and his followers in Canada founded the Kebzeh society, which was made up of a group of followers living in Yagan’s vicinity in the town of Vernon in the Okanagan region of British Columbia, as well as additional followers in North America.<sup>3</sup> While the first circle of Yagan’s disciples seemed to number a few hundred, many more were exposed to his ideas and have spread out in various parts of the world. The final version of this article comes at a time when the teaching of Kebzeh and the Kebzeh followers are entering a new stage, following Yagan’s death in December, 2013 at the age of ninety-eight.<sup>4</sup>

Three interrelated elements in the emergence of Yagan’s ethos will be discussed: (1) Cultural connections between Turkey, the Caucasus, and Canada; (2) The impact of multiculturalism, ethnicity and cultural heritage on the formation of a new type of spiritualism in immigrant societies as manifested in the evolution of Kebzeh; (3) Kebzeh as a component of the mysticism of Sufi circles in Canada, a relatively unexplored milieu in this context in comparison to the U.S. and Europe.<sup>5</sup>

Yagan perceived Kebzeh as a New Age spirituality aimed at purifying the human body and soul and nurturing qualities of love. He often discussed the

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2 Literally, “the ethos (or spirit) of the nobles.” For an impression of Yagan and his teaching, see A. Viacheslav Chirikba, “Abkhazian Wiseman From Vernon,” *Respublika Abkhazia*, Sukhum, Abkhazia, 21–22 April 2001. For an English translation, see Lucy Feldman at: [http://chirikba.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=87%3Aabkhazian-wiseman-from-vernon&catid=37%3A2011-02-27-08-28-58&Itemid=55&lang=ru](http://chirikba.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=87%3Aabkhazian-wiseman-from-vernon&catid=37%3A2011-02-27-08-28-58&Itemid=55&lang=ru) (accessed 27 November, 2011). Chirikba, a well-known Abkhazian linguistic authority, was invited to Vernon by the Kebzeh Society. He became minister of foreign affairs of Abkhazia in 2011.

3 This figure is based on the estimation of different active members of the Kebzeh society. About seventy-eighty people came to the gathering that we documented, with few more from the area who came to specific activities. Most of them were middle class white North Americans, from the U.S. and Canada, men and women alike. The majority came from a Christian background, but some came from a Jewish background. However, there were also people with different backgrounds: an Iranian immigrant, new members from Europe and South America who came to live in Vernon for different periods of time, et cetera.

4 <http://www.kebzeh.org/MYaganObit.htm> (accessed 16 February, 2014).

5 For a brief description of Sufism in Canada, see Marcia Hermansen, “Hybrid Identity Formations in Muslim America: The Case of American Sufi Movements,” *Muslim World* 90.1–2 (2000): 175–6.

significance and the opportunities ushered in by the New Age.<sup>6</sup> However, unlike many New Age ideas that focus on the individual, Kebzeh teaching emphasizes the importance of belonging to a group or community, and of modesty and humility in relation to communal interests. Yagan linked these ideas to Sufi philosophy and practices, as well as to the ancient traditions of the Caucasus. Moreover, he also accorded a central place in his teaching to Jesus, whom he called “the greatest Sufi ever.”

In the authors' view, the teaching of Kebzeh is closely connected to the history of the dissemination of Sufism in North America during the latter twentieth century, but at the same time it is a new phenomenon in that it relates to other traditions as well. Yagan's ability to intertwine Sufi, Abkhazian/Circassian and Christian ideas enabled him to mold his teaching into a cosmopolitan and universal vision. The study of Kebzeh and its evolution thereby offers insights into the complexity of New Age spirituality in the West in the context of immigration and multiculturalism.

Our approach combines anthropological and historical perspectives. The methodology draws upon field work conducted in Vernon, British Columbia (summer 2009), Jerusalem (summer 2010) and Abkhazia (summer 2011), and textual analyses of Yagan's teaching found in his books and other publications. The main field work, conducted in Vernon, included interviews with Yagan and his students and attendance at the annual gathering of the Kebzeh Foundation.<sup>7</sup>

### Murat Yagan: Biographical Background

Yagan, born into the Abkhazian-Abaza aristocracy of the Ashkhara region in northern Caucasus in 1915,<sup>8</sup> emigrated to Turkey with his family in 1918 under the leadership of his grandfather, accompanied by his tribesmen, and settled in southeastern Anatolia. Later, Yagan's family moved to Istanbul, where he

6 Yagan defined the “New Age” as “the age of the marriage of new positive science and mysticism” (Yagan, *The Essence of Sufism in the Light of Kebzeh* [Vernon, B.C.: Kebzeh Publications, 2009], 354).

7 The field work in Abkhazia focused on the teaching of Kebzeh in relation to the interactions between Abkhaz and Adyghe cultures in the Caucasus and in the Circassian diaspora, and interviews with Abkhazian scholars and intellectuals. Field work in Jerusalem concentrated on the activity of students of Yagan who are active there.

8 On Abkhaz and Abaza (or Abazin), see John Colarusso, “Abkhazia,” *Central Asian Survey* 14.1 (1995): 75–97; and H. Krag and L. Funch, *The North Caucasus: Minority at a Crossroads* (London: International Minority Rights Group, 1994).

grew up during the rise of the Kemalist regime and its nationalist ideology. During this period he acquired a strong awareness of the collective tragedy of the Circassian people. Circassians were the last ethnic group to carry on a brave struggle against the Russian conquest of the Caucasus after the fall of Imam Shamil, the leader of the resistance in Dagestan and Chechnya in 1859. In 1864, after long and bitter resistance, the much larger Russian forces, armed with superior weaponry, surrounded the remaining Circassian forces. Over a million and a half Circassians were forced to emigrate and resettled in Ottoman territory.<sup>9</sup> Many died or suffered disease and hunger during this ethnic cleansing and mass migration.<sup>10</sup> Murat Yagan's grandfather eventually joined the leaders of the Circassian Communities in Turkey.

After the formation of the Turkish Republic in 1923, Murat's father served in the Turkish parliament, but resigned in 1926 in protest against the official campaign to Turkicize the country at the expense of its cultural and ethnic minorities, including the Caucasians.<sup>11</sup> Yagan's mother was Turkish, from an aristocratic Ottoman family. In interviews he described her as a devout Muslim who was responsible for his first encounters with Turkish Sufism, especially with the Naqshbandiyya order.<sup>12</sup> Yagan grew up in the multicultural milieu of Istanbul and in its aristocratic sector. He was surrounded by relatives and others who had varied cultural orientations. His family provided him with both a traditional upbringing in accordance with the Abkhaz-Abaza ethos, and a modern, Western-oriented education.<sup>13</sup> However, from early adolescence, his

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- 9 P.B. Henze, "Circassia in the Nineteenth Century: The Futile Fight for Freedom," in *Passé turco-tatar, présent soviétique: études offertes à Alexandre Benningsen*, ed. Ch. Lamerrier-Quellejay, G. Veinstein, and S.E. Peeters (Louvain and Paris: EHESS, 1986), 243–73.
- 10 Kemal Karpat, "The Hijra from Russia and the Caucasus: The Process of Self-definition in the Late Ottoman State," in *Muslim Travels*, ed. Dale F. Eickelman and J. Piscatory (London: Routledge, 1990), 131–52.
- 11 Murat Yagan, *I Come from Behind Kaf Mountain: The Spiritual Autobiography of Murat Yagan* (Putney, Vt.: Threshold Books, 1984), 10; also Ryan Gingeras, "Notorious Subjects, Invisible Citizens: North Caucasian Resistance to the Turkish National Movement in the South Marmara, 1919–1923," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 40. 1 (2008): 89–108.
- 12 On the Naqshbandiyya in Turkey historically and in modern times, see Itzhak Weismann, *The Naqshbandiyya: Orthodoxy and Activism in a Worldwide Sufi Tradition* (London: Routledge, 2007), 90–4, 151–60.
- 13 In an interview with one of the authors, 9–11 July, 2009, Yagan described an open atmosphere with varied cultural orientations and approaches. He mentioned, for example, the influence of his aunts who studied in the Sorbonne, his Mother's Turkish and Islamic background, and various Circassian and other Caucasian acquaintances.

life was mainly influenced by the political vicissitudes of the era, which had profound repercussions for his people as a minority in Turkey.<sup>14</sup>

He was raised first and foremost as a Circassian. In his autobiography he described how at the age of ten he began his intellectual and spiritual education under the instruction of the Abkhazian elders, designed to prepare him to succeed his father as the community's leader. However, he turned away from his Circassian-Abkhazian training during his adolescence, and eventually from establishment Islam. As a young medical student, he began a spiritual quest by joining the Bektashi Sufi order,<sup>15</sup> although he had no previous contact with the Bektashiyya but was drawn to them by a vision in a dream that led him to study at the order's famed Shah Kulu Dergahi Center in Istanbul.<sup>16</sup> There he took instruction from Shaykh Hasan Tahsin Baba, who also guided him intellectually in deconstructing previously held assumptions about religion and God. During the same period, Yagan also experienced a spiritual attraction to Jesus, which was to play a significant role in his philosophy. He recounts that while praying to Jesus, he sank into a dream in which he became aware of his own true humanity and his inevitable sin, from which he was then saved by Jesus.<sup>17</sup>

His understanding of Christianity, combined with his continued spiritual discontent, led him to turn to Jesus for help in resolving existential questions. Yagan declared himself a follower of Jesus and a Christian, although he formally converted to Christianity only years later. His Sufi instructor encouraged his connection with Jesus, but eventually this isolated him from the rest of the followers of the Bektashi order, since he had defied the Sufi concept which accepts other prophets only through the teachings of the Qur'an and the one true prophet—Muhammad. Hence, three and a half years after joining it, Yagan left the Bektashi order. He eventually left medical school as well to work on the family's land in Turkey. At age twenty-seven he married an Abkhazian woman and they had four children. During the next twenty years Yagan started farming enterprises in various parts of Turkey.<sup>18</sup>

14 Yagan, *The Essence of Sufism*. On the formation of the Circassian community in Ottoman Turkey, see A. Uner Turgey, "Circassian Immigration into the Ottoman Empire, 1856–1878," in *Islamic Studies Presented to Charles J. Adams*, ed. W.B. Hallaq and D.P. Little (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 194–216.

15 Yagan, *I Come from Behind Kaf Mountain*, 16, 61. Historically, the Bektashiyya was perceived as an unorthodox, marginal order, partly because of its affinity with Shiite Islam. This unorthodox quality apparently attracted Yagan.

16 Hereafter the article uses the Turkish Sufi terms which are relevant to Yagan's discourse.

17 Yagan, *I Come from Behind Kaf Mountain*, 63, 67–8.

18 *Ibid.*, 66, 69, 71, 106, 112–13.

In his autobiography and in interviews Yagan described several conflicts in which he was involved in Turkey, essentially revolving around discrimination due to his minority status. This was also a factor in his decision to emigrate in 1963. After weighing various destinations, he chose Canada, in the hope that in Canada's multicultural population his background would not be an impediment.

Arriving there, Yagan worked on a farm in Quebec; as a carpenter in Vernon and in Prince Robert, British Columbia; at remodeling houses when the family moved to Vancouver in the 1970s; and at one point, together with his wife, as owner of a Turkish restaurant. He chose to describe himself, above all, as a carpenter, evidence of his affinity with Jesus in this self-designation.

The encounter with Christian surroundings in Canada was both surprising and frustrating for him. He attended church regularly, and in Prince Robert joined the United Church once his certificate of baptism was sent from Istanbul. Upon moving to Vancouver, he joined the Anglican St. Margaret's Church. However, he was soon disappointed. "Christian churches seem to be in complete disagreement with each other," he wrote, and he was keenly aware of "the confusion among professed Christians." Yagan stated that at that point he was disenchanted with the absence of love and humanity among Christians, and resorted to meditation so as to have unmediated contact with Jesus. He reported that he experienced an intimate affinity with Jesus, "something that could be described as visitations."<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, he began to differentiate between institutionalized churches and the spiritual, universal message of Christianity.

Although by his own admission he was plagued by spiritual doubts, others began coming to him for religious guidance and advice, among them a priest he had met soon after his arrival in Vancouver. During this period, Yagan began to act as a spiritual teacher in Vancouver's multicultural environment, a process that began when he established contacts with emerging Sufi circles in the city and elsewhere in North America.

### Encounters with Sufism in the West

The emergence of the Kebzeh community was closely intertwined with the spread of Islamic Sufi ideas to non-Muslims in the West during the last decades of the twentieth century, a process in which Sufism underwent

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 139–40.

re-interpretation and became a universal mystical trend, closely related to—and essentially a part of—the broad New Age spiritualism.<sup>20</sup>

The Kebzeh community began to coalesce gradually in Vancouver in the late 1970s, eventually flourishing in Vernon during the 1990s and early 2000s. In Vancouver, Yagan met young people involved in Western Sufi circles, along with unaffiliated “seekers” who were part of the New Age trend in Western Canada. They would become his first students. Many belonged to the Vancouver Turning Society, a Sufi association that reflected the growing interest in Sufism in Western societies.<sup>21</sup> Sufism in North America, and especially in Canada, was still in a formative period and Sufi masters from the Mevlevi order<sup>22</sup> frequently came from Turkey to visit followers and disciples. Yagan, who at the time ran a Turkish restaurant in Vancouver, developed a strong relationship with the Melvevi group there, who requested his assistance with Turkish translation during visits by the Sufi masters. These occasions brought him close to Shaykh Suleyman Dede of Konya, leader of the Mevlevi order.<sup>23</sup>

Yagan, in his autobiography, pointed out that the Mevleviyya differs from other Sufi practices in that it accepts anyone unconditionally, regardless of gender, race or religion. Moreover, according to Yagan, his self-designation as a Christian was not regarded as a problem in the growing Western Sufi movements, as it had been for the Bektashis in Turkey. It might have even been an advantage. Notably, Yagan reported that Dede was particularly pleased at hearing Yagan say, during their encounter, that there was a need “to free Sufism from the husks put on it by orthodox scholars.”<sup>24</sup> This detail is significant in

20 Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); idem, “European Neo-Sufi Movements in the Interwar Period,” in *Islam in Inter-war Europe*, ed. Nathalie Clayer and Eric Germain (London: Hurst 2008), 183–215; Jamal Malik, and John Hinnells, eds., *Sufism in the West* (London: Routledge, 2006); Elizabeth Sirriyeh, “Sufi Thought and its Reconstruction,” in *Islamic Thought in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Suha Taji-Farouki and Bashir M. Nafi (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), 104–127; Hermansen, “Hybrid Identity Formations in Muslim America,” 158–97; and idem, “In the Garden of American Sufi Movements: Hybrids and Perennials,” in *New Trends and Developments in the World of Islam*, ed. P. Clarke (London: Luzac Oriental Press, 1997), 157–78.

21 Yagan, *I Come from Behind Kaf Mountain*, 166.

22 Followers of *Mevlana* (Jalal al-Din al-Rumi), an order whose center is in Konya, Anatolia.

23 Dede’s son later headed the Mevlevi order of America, an organization that was active in the San Francisco Bay area. Hermansen, “Hybrid Identity Formations in Muslim America,” 171.

24 Yagan pointed out that Mevlevis and Bektashis are alike in that their teachings are based on love rather than knowledge, and on pragmatic experiences rather than intellectual teaching. However, the Mevlevis alone are open to everyone, including non-Muslims, and



light of Yagan's conversion to Christianity, attesting to the inclusive character of the Mevlevi branch in Canada and its aim to enhance its public appeal.

Yagan's role as a teacher and leader became salient when in the late 1970s the group of young people involved in the Turning Society in Vancouver found itself without formal leadership. The founders of the society regarded Shaykh Reshad Field,<sup>25</sup> who was based in Boulder, Colorado, as their spiritual leader. However, the distance, together with personal difficulties experienced by Field, created an acute need for leadership. By then, Yagan was regarded by this group of seekers, as well as by the Sufi leaders in Konya, Turkey, who were affiliated with this movement, as the natural leader to step in and fill this need. In 1978 the Mevlevi Shaykh Dede contacted Yagan with the intention that he function as "his heart" in Canada in advancing Mevlevi teaching there.<sup>26</sup> However, rather than becoming a Sufi shaykh, Yagan began to develop his own philosophy—the *Ahmsta Kebzeh*.

Yagan's activity as a spiritual teacher had brought him in contact with various figures who played important roles in the emerging Sufi movements in North America. They included Reshad Field, who was connected at first to Vilayat Inayat Khan and established the Beshara Centre at Swyre Farm in Aldsworth, England, in 1970, and later to the Mevlevi order. Field founded a Mevlevi center in Boulder, and had connections with groups in the "Fourth Way" tradition of G.I. Gurdjieff. Other figures were Kabir Helminski of the Threshold Society,<sup>27</sup> and E.J. Gold, who visited Vancouver in that period. Gold, an artist, writer, and jazz musician, was also affiliated with Gurdjieff's "Fourth Way" tradition. These figures, and their connections with Yagan, embodied a link between "Western Sufism" and broader New Age spirituality. As an immigrant from Turkey who became involved in "New Spirituality" circles in Vancouver, Yagan's role in these developments can be understood as a bridge between two phases, as posited in Gisela Webb's chronological analysis of the development of Sufism in America: the 1960s counter-cultural movement, and

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in this their philosophy differs from other Sufi orders (Yagan, *I Come from Behind Kaf Mountain*, 147, 159).

25 Ibid.; also Reshad Field's spiritual autobiography, *The Last Barrier: A Journey into the Essence of Sufi Teaching* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996).

26 Yagan, *I Come from Behind Kaf Mountain*, 154.

27 Yagan's autobiography, *I Come from Behind Kaf Mountain*, was published in Vermont by the Threshold Society. Current literature by this society refers to Yagan as a source of inspiration along with other spiritual teachers. Hermansen, "Hybrid Identity Formations in Muslim America," 171–2; see also, e.g., "What is Spirituality?" <http://sufism.org/sufi-lodge/what-is-spirituality> (accessed 14 September, 2012).

the influence of growing immigration from Muslim societies in the latter part of the century.<sup>28</sup>

Yet, Yagan's position as an immigrant from a minority group (Circassian-Abkhaz) had further consequences that eventually led him to a different and distinctive path. During his development as a spiritual leader, his encounters with Sufism in the West prompted him to revisit the meaning of Sufism for himself personally. This process of re-examination of past knowledge and experiences in the context of immigration also led him to a spiritual re-interpretation of his own cultural traditions, rooted in the Caucasus.

### Rediscovering Kebzeh: Authenticity, Identity and Legitimation

In multicultural Canada, Yagan's origins counted as an asset. His first-hand, in-depth acquaintance with Turkish Sufism made him an authentic representative of that spiritual milieu. The advantage of authenticity was especially important to local Canadian spiritual seekers. Yagan's biography, therefore, was a valuable vehicle for his recognition as a leader in the evolving Sufi circles in Vancouver of the 1970s. The recognition he gained from leading Sufi figures in North America<sup>29</sup> and from the Mevlevi leadership in Turkey singled him out as a potential mentor for even wider Western Sufi circles in North America. Why then did he turn away from this status and choose the road of creating, or re-creating, the teaching of Kebzeh?

In his autobiography he linked his decision to a pursuit of his own spiritual route to reconnecting with Jesus as a practicing Christian in Canada. He had been surprised by the desire of Canadians he met to seek answers from him, but, "after meditation and communication with Jesus," he realized that his ability to teach others had been imparted to him by his Abkhazian training, rather than by Sufism. His Abkhazian upbringing was the primary source of his inspi-

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28 Gisela Webb, "Sufism in America," in *America's Alternative Religions*, ed. Timothy Miller (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 107–8. These developments were also followed by a more "Islamic-oriented" approach to Sufism in North America. Yagan, at this stage, stressed the independence of Kebzeh from Sufi Islam. Moreover, he was critical of the Islamic tradition (see text below) and resented the Islamic notion of the supremacy of Arabic, viewing this claim as a form of cultural imperialism. His resentment was also connected to his own cultural roots and his emphasis on the uniqueness and antiquity of the Caucasian languages.

29 For example, Kabir Helminski of the Threshold Society.

ration and the “very essence of the teaching of everything,” he wrote.<sup>30</sup> With this, he did not end his interest in Sufism; rather, as will be shown, he linked it to the cultural traditions of the Caucasus.

Yagan’s rediscovery of his native tradition appears to be closely related to the Western quest for authenticity, an important component of New Age and, more broadly, new spiritual movements.<sup>31</sup> Such a re-discovery of an ancient tradition may be viewed as an effective way of securing legitimization for the doctrine and the leader.<sup>32</sup> The unknown Caucasus and Circassian traditions held an appeal for some of the students. Learning the Circassian dances added another level to the authentic character of Kebzeh and made it attractive to people who felt ambiguous about Islam.

However, for Yagan, authenticity was not merely a tool to gain followers. There were additional levels that went beyond legitimization and the presentation of a new or renewed spiritual doctrine being linked to an ancient one. Yagan’s progression from an affinity with various Sufi circles to an immersion in the teaching of the ancient Kebzeh traditions, and applying them to the Western milieu, was a distinctive example of re-working religious ideas involving cultural exchange in the context of immigration and multiculturalism.

An analysis of Yagan’s spiritual autobiography and other published materials during an in-depth interview with him<sup>33</sup> suggests that his acknowledgment of authenticity as an advantage caused him to revalue his own heritage not only as a former Turkish citizen and a member of Sufi orders but also as an Abkhazian of the Caucasus. While his former Turkish official identity and his command of the Turkish language facilitated his first steps as a leader in the Sufi circles in Vancouver, later on his experiences as an immigrant led him to reinterpret his cultural heritage in a way that related this heritage to the world of Western seekers.

Moreover, he reappraised his personal tradition not only as an instrumental resource but as a vital source of values and concepts that enhanced his

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30 Yagan, *I Come from Behind Kaf Mountain*, 143.

31 Paul Heelas, *The New Age Movement* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996); and Charles Lindholm, *Culture and Authenticity* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2008).

32 See, e.g., Mark Sedgwick’s analysis of how the followers of Gurdjieff and Meher Baba connected them to Sufism (Sedgwick, “European Neo-Sufi Movements,” 210–12). Those cases, however, differ from the case of Kebzeh, in which the connection to Sufism is much more pronounced.

33 Yagan’s interview with one of the authors, 9–11 July, 2009.

own inner strength, a process of self-understanding described in his autobiography.<sup>34</sup> In essence, only a small part of what Yagan called a “spiritual autobiography” falls into the category of typical spiritual biographies of mentors of the New Age in the West. Large parts of the book tell the story of a Circassian whose character, and no less importantly his origin, brought him into conflict with his surroundings and with the Kemalist regime in Turkey. Only in the last chapter does Yagan introduce a wider discussion of his spiritual ideas. Although at that stage (the early 1980s), they were mainly Sufi ideas, the book clearly reflects his re-examination of his personal identity and the potential to re-mold this identity in the context of democratic, multicultural Canada. Yagan pointedly disparaged prevailing Turkish stereotypes of Circassian mountaineers as “bandits” and “horse thieves,” revealing a depth of introspection regarding his native traditions. “I came to realize that the ancient tradition of the Abkhazian . . . which I have spurned as too primitive, was the very essence of the teaching of everything [else].”<sup>35</sup>

This recognition led Yagan to develop the teaching of Kebzeh as a new concept relevant to modern spirituality in North America, blended with aspects of Circassian culture. This combination was to influence the spread of his ideas two decades later along three different channels: building up a local Canadian community committed to Kebzeh principles; reaching out to Circassian followers both in the diaspora and in the Caucasus (Abkhazia); and addressing audiences throughout the world interested in Sufism and a new spirituality. These developments, too, reinforced his legitimization. Yagan had the advantage of native Abkhazian authenticity, and his leadership position was anchored in his status as “the last known living spiritual elder of the tradition.”<sup>36</sup>

Yagan’s teaching was in some ways a new doctrine, similar to other New Age spirituality, while also containing aspects of continuity and reconnection with his personal cultural heritage, together with an amalgamation of Sufi ideas and practices (see below). Based on his personal experiences and his perspectives as a migrant, Yagan sought to bind modernity with what he referred to as the ancient spiritual tradition of the Caucasus Mountains.<sup>37</sup>

Yagan’s knowledge of mysticism, combined with his affinity with Jesus and his Circassian-Abkhazian lineage, endowed him with “spiritual capital.” Bradford Verter has suggested that “forms of spiritual capital [exist] that are

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34 Yagan, *I Come from Behind Kaf Mountain*.

35 *Ibid.*, 143.

36 Yagan, *Ahmsta Kebzeh: The Science of Universal Awe*, new ed. (Vernon, B.C.: Kebzeh Publications, 2005).

37 *Ibid.*, xxvii–xxix.

valued specifically because they are perceived as extra-institutional—the many forms of New Age religion, for instance.”<sup>38</sup> In Yagan’s case, his personal charisma and the knowledge he had acquired were extra-institutional, and not only in comparison with traditional religion: they also went beyond the new structures of esoteric knowledge that emerged in the West in the latter twentieth century. His “spiritual capital” thus paved the way for the development and spread of *Kebzeh* teaching.

### Kebzeh, Esoteric Knowledge and Sufism: Intertwined Worlds

Yagan’s philosophy and teaching centered on the *Ahmsta Kebzeh*, is described as:

An ancient spiritual tradition which has been preserved in the Caucasus Mountains. It is an applied science of processing the human being. The process is that of awakening and developing latent human faculties under divine grace and guidance. [Its founder, Murat Yagan, is] one of the rare Circassian elders . . . who is thought to be the last known living light-holder of this particular tradition.<sup>39</sup>

In the *Ahmsta Kebzeh* vision, human aspiration is aimed at attaining the level of “completed human.”<sup>40</sup> From the outset, *Kebzeh* teachers held that this goal could be achieved in various ways, and that there is no preference for a specific religion or spiritual discipline; all are equal. In this sense, Yagan’s ideas continue the concept of religious pluralism that characterized theosophy as well as various Sufi groups who were active in the West as early as the first part of the twentieth century.<sup>41</sup> Yet, Yagan’s discourse eventually shows that *Kebzeh* teaching is ranked by him as the superior, ultimate approach. Moreover, only those students or seekers who are actively engaged in *Kebzeh* can fully understand its meaning and develop their higher faculties. Introducing the concept

38 Bradford Verter, “Spiritual Capital: Theorizing Religion with Bourdieu and against Bourdieu,” *Sociological Theory* 21.2 (June 2003): 150–74.

39 The *Kebzeh* Foundation’s Internet site: [www.kebzech.org/shop/shopcontent.asp?type=Aboutus](http://www.kebzech.org/shop/shopcontent.asp?type=Aboutus).

40 Yagan, *Ahmsta Kebzeh*, xix–xxi.

41 Sedgwick, “European Neo-Sufi Movements”; also Meir Hatina, “Where East Meets West: Sufism, Cultural Rapprochement and Politics,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 39 (August 2007): 398–404.

of the West and the entire universe being one with *Ahmsta Kebzeh* can turn the planet into a peaceful, harmonious and loving place.<sup>42</sup>

The description of the remote Caucasus as the ancient birthplace of Kebzeh teaching undoubtedly had a legitimating aspect, but, more significantly, it served as a way to distance Yagan's ideas from Islam generally, though not from Sufism.<sup>43</sup> It correlates with Yagan's claim that "what the Kebzeh offers is not a religion, and it does not interfere with existing religion; it is an applied science, the art of living as a human."<sup>44</sup> It also correlates with his view that Kebzeh can adapt to its cultural surroundings, namely Christianity in Canada. At the same time these ideas allow for a recognition of Circassian culture, which is much older than Islam, as the true source of the teaching.

Yagan applied Kebzeh, first, to restoring the balance between body and soul, so as to awaken the latent human conscience and put it in contact with the source, or the creative energy commonly called God, from which all that exists in the universe emanates. Secondly, he sought to revive human attributes that had been lost along the way, such as courage, compassion, love, altruism and hope.

### From Ancient Tradition to Modern Esoteric Knowledge

Yagan praised Kebzeh as an ancient tradition, authentic and unique to the Caucasus Mountains, one of the three places in the world (the other two are the Hindu Kush, at the western edge of the Himalayas, and the Andes in South America) where people survived the great "flood of Noah" and from whence the spiritual development of the world began. This descriptive style echoes various claims of authenticity by other new religions and manifestations of "new age" spiritualism. However, Yagan's description of Kebzeh goes beyond such mythological descriptions, using a terminology and cultural ideas drawn from the Abkhazian and Circassian tradition.

In Abkhazian the term *a-kJabz* refers to the ethos at the heart of Abkhazian culture, and *Ahmsta* refers to "nobles," hence: the ethos of the nobles. *Kebzeh*, as Yagan uses the term, also resembles the traditional usage of a similar term in

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42 Yagan, *The Essence of Sufism in the Light of Kebzeh*, xxi–xxviii.

43 Similarly, Gurdjieff described the Sarmoung Sufi order as founded in Babylon in 2120 BC, a description which may have inspired Yagan, who drew from Gurdjieff's teaching.

44 Yagan, *Ahmsta Kebzeh*, xxvii.

Adighe (Western Circassian and Kabardinian): *khabze*, or *Adighe Khabze*—the Khabze of the Adighe people.<sup>45</sup>

Yagan also made use of another key term in the Abkhaz language: *aleishweh* (civility), an Abkhaz code name for a set of rules and behavior. These include good citizenship, politeness, chivalry, dignity, honesty, humility and hospitality.<sup>46</sup> Yagan stressed that throughout history, *aleishweh* has attracted and impressed visitors, explorers and merchants from neighboring countries and from Europe. It was even adopted by Islamic Sufism in establishing fraternities, or *tekkes*, in the twelfth century, using the term *adab*. *Aleishweh*, Yagan explained, is the all-encompassing Circassian way of showing love at all levels: respect, homage and service to the elderly, compassion, responsibility for children, care for the needy, sex education and edification, and confronting the complexities of life with courage, patience and humor. Yagan thus described the very essence of “*Adhyge-khabze*”: an ethos of everyday behavior, moral codes and education in traditional Circassian communities.<sup>47</sup>

Yagan drew on the traditions of both Abkhaz and Adighe Khabze as the basis for the facets of his teaching that referred to social and moral behavior, while reworking them in the context of modern Western societies and connecting them to New Age ideas. Notably, Yagan claimed that his teaching was based on the “*Ahmsta Kebzeh*”—an esoteric body of knowledge that in the past was conveyed only to the noble classes of Abkhazian society. Moreover, his description of this spiritual knowledge refers to specific spiritual traditions that are not part of the current usage of the term “khabze” among Abkhaz or Adighe in the Caucasus or in the diaspora. The question of the extent that these descriptions refer to a spiritual tradition that indeed existed in the past is beyond the scope of this article and requires separate research. Such research will have to evaluate various recent influences on Abkhazian society such as the Russian invasion, the Caucasian wars, the Soviet regime, and post-Soviet conflicts and turmoil. Hence, at this stage, we are left with Yagan’s testimony of himself as “the last carrier of an ancient tradition.”

For Yagan, the core of *Kebzeh* is gnosis, or esoteric knowledge. *Kebzeh* views life as a single continuum, without differentiating between this world and the hereafter, heaven and hell, and reward and punishment. *Kebzeh*, in Yagan’s terminology, is “Caucasus yoga,” a term that seems to be borrowed from an earlier

45 John Colarusso in email correspondence with the authors, 15 June, 2010.

46 Yagan, *Ahmsta Kebzeh*, 116–17, 128–32; Murat Papsu, in email correspondence with the authors, 15 June, 2010.

47 See above, n. 2.

book by Count Stephan Colonna Walewski, who focused on various breathing practices which appear to be connected to early- and mid-twentieth-century spiritualism.<sup>48</sup> Descriptions of Abkhazian Kebzeh by current scholars in Abkhazia coincide with some of Yagan's ideas, namely an emphasis on Kebzeh as consisting of social aspects alongside a spiritual level.<sup>49</sup> Yagan emphasized that Kebzeh is not related to any specific religion or belief system. It was not a pagan tradition, either. There was never any image of God, or object of worship, in the history of Kebzeh, but rather *mdges*, which may be translated as a "manifestation of nature" in the form of a power, force or energy.<sup>50</sup> Certain elements in this description resemble an important aspect of the ancient Abkhazian religion which exists to this day: the "*Anyha*"—sacred places or shrines in the mountains. The power of these places is connected to nature and to energy, but not to a specific god.<sup>51</sup>

Yagan thus seemed to present concepts that existed in ancient Abkhazian traditions, expressed in New Age terminology, or, perhaps, vice versa: connecting New Age spiritual ideas to his cultural background. He constructed a new philosophy in the Kebzeh format, but this teaching stemmed from earlier sources, namely ancient Caucasian traditions and Sufism. In both cases Yagan took only certain aspects from each system: he highlighted the ethical and social features of the Abkhazian/Circassian Kebzeh, but left out other aspects, such as the animistic/polytheistic pantheon, as well as aspects of Shamanism, especially the role of female shamans.<sup>52</sup>

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48 The introduction to Walewski's book noted that "His outer life was that of a well-known collector and dealer in oriental art and antiquities and in anthropological curios. His shop, Esoterica, was not only a famous New York connoisseurs' landmark but the gateway of another world" (Count Stefan Colonna Walewski, *A System of Caucasian Yoga as Orally Received* [Indian Hills, Colo.: n.p. 1955]).

49 Interviews with Professors Oleg Duminiya and Valery Baksva, and Dr. Viacheslav Chirikba in Shukhum (Shukhumi), Abkhazia. September, 2011.

50 Yagan, *Ahmsta Kebzeh*, xxvi–xxvii, 148–9, 158–60.

51 Viacheslav Chirikba, "Between Christianity and Islam: Heathen Heritage in the Caucasus," paper presented at the conference "Ethnic and Religious Communities in the Caucasus" (27–8 March, 2006) organized by The Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland (Warburg Institute), London. Sh.D. Inal-IPA, *Voprosy etnokul'turnoj istorii abkhazov* [*Questions of the Ethnic and Cultural History of the Abkhazians*] (Sukhum: Alashara, 1976). During visits to Abkhazia (2008, 2011) one of the authors learned that these sites are still visited. Moreover, it seems that this tradition has been revived since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the secession of Abkhazia from Georgia.

52 Chirikba, "*Between Christianity and Islam*"; Inal-IPA, *Voprosy etnokul'turnoj istorii abkhazov*; and A. Johansons, "The Shamaness of the Abkhazians," *History of Religions* 11.3 (1972):



### Established Religions, Jesus, and Sufism

Yagan, as other New Age proponents, was sharply critical of institutionalized religions and of aspects of enlightenment as well. He held up the attractiveness of the Kebzeh as a contrast to the ruin and impotence of these two systems, which failed to make the universe a happier place.

He argued that most interpreters of the prophetic books of scripture were mediocre, although they claimed a monopoly over transmitting religious knowledge, becoming teachers and administrators living at the expense of the populace who supported them faithfully by strict observance of the rules set by the clergy. The result was religious dogmatism and pompous institutions such as churches, mosques and other grandiose sites of worship to impress the public for the purpose of material gain. Divine knowledge became the province of a privileged elite, Yagan charged, largely inaccessible to the believers, while religion turned into a social system without a soul. This was not only true of the Catholic Church, but also of Islam and Judaism.<sup>53</sup>

Yagan held a particularly critical view of the development and interpretations of Islam, arguing that if the Qur'an given by the prophet Muhammad had been correctly understood and wisely interpreted, "there would be no room in Islam for fundamentalism, fanaticism or bigotry."<sup>54</sup> He attested that early on, while in Turkey, he became disappointed after fruitlessly searching for the truth through the two major religions that were accessible to him at the time, Islam and Christianity. The only proof they offered of God's existence was a belief in God.<sup>55</sup>

He did, however, display a positive attitude toward Christianity and Islam in two specific contexts: first, in his feeling for Jesus, whom he regarded as a symbol of love and compassion "who never meant to found a religion."<sup>56</sup> Second, in his affinity to Sufism, in which he traced two positive elements

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251–6; also Julian Baldick, *Animal and Shaman: Ancient Religions of Central Asia* (New York: New York University Press, 2000).

53 Yagan, *The Essence of Sufism*, 50–6.

54 See also n. 28 above.

55 Yagan, *The Essence of Sufism*, 68–75.

56 Yagan, *Ahmsta Kebzeh*, 10–14. Notably, a picture showing Jesus and bearing this title hangs in the main hall of the Kebzeh community church in Vernon. Yagan's affinity to Jesus can be understood not only in connection with the important place of Jesus in some Sufi traditions, but also in relation to Yagan's Abkhazian background, as most Abkhazians view themselves as Christians. Ancient Abkhazian and Christian traditions coexisted and exerted mutual influences ever since Christianity reached Abkhazia—according to tradition, in the first century CE (Chirikba, "Abkhazian Wiseman from Vernon").

found in the Kebzeh tradition as well: awakening “the dormant mental forces under divine grace,” and social altruism.<sup>57</sup> Yagan himself often used Sufi terminology, such as *maqamat* (stages or stations in reaching the source of light) and *suhba* (master-disciple companionship). *Suhba* was given special emphasis in light of the importance attached to the mentor/ leader and the submissiveness of the disciple.<sup>58</sup>

In Kebzeh, as in Sufism, Yagan argued, the acquisition of formal knowledge through books or any other written materials, or by long-distance communication with a teacher, is insufficient; it amounts to merely acquiring theoretical knowledge without really understanding it or practicing it in daily life. Rather, there is a need for intensive personal experience by living in communal conditions and following a teacher or spiritual guide. Total submission to his authority, Yagan explained, is not tantamount to blind obedience; rather, it is meant to achieve the suppression of the ego in an eagerness to gain some of the inner knowledge possessed by that teacher.<sup>59</sup>

Despite the Sufi impact on Kebzeh, Yagan noted that Sufism is neither a lifestyle nor a religion, thereby seeking to detach Sufism from its specific Islamic context and tracing its roots to well before the emergence of Islam and the appearance of the prophet Muhammad. Sufism, he held, is “the story of Abraham, Moses, David, Solomon, Elijah, Jesus, Mohammad, and all the other saints. It is the story of Buddha and Zoroaster.”<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, Yagan contended that the Caucasus mystical tradition impacted the establishment of Sufi orders and helped formulate the mystical mindset of Jalal al-Din al-Rumi (d. 1273) through his master Shams-i Tabrizi (d. 1247) of Tabriz, a town in northwestern Iran in the foothills of the Caucasus Mountains. By creating a spiritual genealogy in which Kebzeh preceded and inspired Sufism, Yagan aimed to highlight Kebzeh as the most valid oriental tradition for the West. Toward that end he pointed to Sufism’s limited role historically in mainstream Islamic dogma. Moreover, he noted that modern versions of Sufism are vague and often confusing to seekers of truth.<sup>61</sup>

57 Yagan, *Ahmsta Kebzeh*, 6; idem, *The Essence of Sufism*, xxi, 45–9, 173–8, 186–201, 229.

58 Yagan, *The Essence of Sufism*, 186–201, 229. On these Sufi concepts, see e.g., Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975), mainly 98–147, 228–31; Julian Baldick, *Mystical Islam* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1989), 13–87; and Mark J. Sedgwick, *Sufism: The Essentials* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2001).

59 Yagan, *Ahmsta Kebzeh*, 114–15; and idem, *The Essence of Sufism*, 95–8.

60 Yagan, *Ahmsta Kebzeh*, 114–15.

61 Ibid.; and idem, *The Essence of Sufism*, xx–xxi, 95–8, 186–7, 188–201.

### Communal Vision and Practice

The spiritual development of the individual requires him to be a member of a community of brotherhood, Yagan stipulated. Community, for Yagan, was the single most important element of Kebzeh, a theme to which he dedicated an entire book.<sup>62</sup> Only like-minded people doing things together can establish a true community. Thereby, they cease to be a crowd and turn into a collective unit with a common interest. The “living community,” Yagan asserted, is the core of Kebzeh teaching, and only within it can the individual attain a meaningful existence that can advance humanity to a better state.<sup>63</sup>

Yagan’s communal vision highlights the differences between Kebzeh and certain New Age approaches which intensify the privatization of religion, turning it from a communal framework with clear rules and institutions into a more private, personal, and at times even eclectic experience.<sup>64</sup> By contrast, Kebzeh teaching regards membership in a Kebzeh community as mandatory. The spiritual journey is both individual and collective, closely supervised by the chosen leadership.

The most important component of the Kebzeh communal leadership is the role of elders. There is no such thing as retirement, Yagan ruled. Every elder (*tamatah*) continues to be an active member in community life. In fact, the elder is put in a position of responsibility, and in case of dispute is authorized to assemble a meeting of councilors or hold a public discussion. The elder has the final word, with no veto allowed. He is the link between the distant past and the present, introducing order and harmony. The head elder is elected by community consensus. This essentially oligarchical and conservative regime is nonetheless firmly founded on the moral duty of its officers to act for the public good in cooperation with the people. The privileged status of the elder also extends to the family: the grandfather is the head of the family and its source of spiritual inspiration, symbolizing security, trust, compassion and love.<sup>65</sup>

Yagan’s communal ideas were not theoretical only. They were developed and implemented during the creation of the Kebzeh society, a process that began in Vancouver in the early 1980s and also included influencing students

62 Yagan, *Building up a Kebzeh Community* (Vernon, B.C.: Kebzeh Publications, 1998).

63 Ibid.; and idem, *Ahmsta Kebzeh*, 31–9, 113–17, 128–32.

64 Steve Bruce, *Religion in the Modern World: From Cathedrals to Cults* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 25–68, 169–95.

65 Yagan, *Ahmsta Kebzeh*, 133–4; and idem, *The Essence of Sufism in the Light of Kebzeh*, 186–201.

who lived elsewhere to become involved in a communal experience as part of their spiritual development. At first, Yagan and a group of disciples lived for a time on an island in the Vancouver area. Some of the students who joined him worked with him on housing reconstruction and carpentry projects to earn a living. At the same time, they continued as a community to develop the teaching and practice of Kebzeh. Yagan referred to this mode of learning and living together in his autobiography thus: “[a] sheikh who has a responsibility for a *tekke* [order] has to be a full time sheikh...24 hours a day and seven days a week. This doesn’t mean that the sheikh shouldn’t be a carpenter or own a restaurant.”<sup>66</sup> His disciples described this first period as a difficult but fertile stage in their personal development and in the coalescence of the Kebzeh community. Moreover, their descriptions demonstrate that Yagan achieved his position not only by virtue of being “the last elder of an ancient tradition,” but also due to his ability to lead them effectively during the time they worked together. The descriptions reflect the emphases on mutual responsibility, hard work, and being a role model, while also showing respect to others—values that derive from the social aspects of the traditional Circassian model of Kebzeh,<sup>67</sup> as well as Sufi values. Yagan’s description of the shaykh who at the same time is a carpenter and a restaurant owner also demonstrates his notion of spiritual leadership: unlike other New Age spiritual leaders, or even contemporary Sufi shaykhs, Yagan earned his living from his work and not from his leadership position.

The most important community-building phase, however, took place when Yagan and some of his followers moved to the more remote Vernon location in 1986, where the teaching practices as well as the organizational patterns of the group became more clearly defined. Yagan nominated a group leader to organize various activities and take responsibility for such practices as meditation and spiritual training. This leader was responsible for an “inner” circle of learning and practice, which involved meditation exercises and studying various aspects of Kebzeh teaching together. Yagan himself would hold *sohbet* meetings with this group. *Sohbet* (in Turkish; *suhba* in Arabic) is a Sufi term for a spiritual conversation between master and disciples.<sup>68</sup> This is a central

66 Yagan, *I Come from Behind Kaf Mountain*, 172.

67 These are practical ways by which Circassian people understood and expressed Kebzeh, as documented in field work by one of the authors in Circassian communities. See also A. Jaimoukha, *The Circassians: A Handbook* (Richmond: Curzon 2001), 173–89.

68 See e.g., Khaliq Ahmad Nizami, “Suhbah,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed., 15 vols. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), 13:123–4; and Laury Silvers-Alario, “The Teaching Relationship in Early Sufism: A Reassessment of Fritz Meier’s Definition of the

practice in the Kebzeh community. Several of Yagan's publications are based on recordings of these conversations, during which components of the teaching content are discussed and analyzed. The style of these meetings exemplifies how a traditional Sufi practice is modified in a new context. As in traditional Sufi *sohbet*, the practice highlights the undisputed position of the teacher as a main source of spiritual guidance. At the same time, the individual needs of the students are discussed in connection with their spiritual path. Through these discussions the students become part of a process of producing knowledge—hence their names are mentioned in the published materials based on these conversations.<sup>69</sup>

Some of Yagan's disciples went on to establish similar groups in other locations (for example, in Winnipeg in the mid-1990s), although Vernon remained the hub of activity. In 1990 the group founded the Kebzeh Foundation in Vernon, a federally registered Canadian non-profit organization designed to develop and spread Yagan's teaching. While the core community lived in Vernon, some of Yagan's students lived elsewhere. These included disciples who did not move to Vernon, and new students who joined the Kebzeh society over time. The broad conception of a Kebzeh community was demonstrated in annual gatherings in Vernon. At the same time, some Kebzeh disciples who were living and working in and around various North American cities sought additional ways to fulfill the communal aspects of Yagan's teaching in their everyday lives. An example is a description of a Kebzeh disciple who lives and works as an attorney on the east coast of the U.S., who connects by conference call with other disciples in various places at least weekly for a spiritual conversation.<sup>70</sup>

An important stage in the process of shaping Kebzeh as a base for a spiritual as well as an actual community was the establishment in 1988 of a church, the Essential Church of Christ,<sup>71</sup> designed as a meeting place for the Kebzeh community on Sundays but welcoming the public at large in the area. Yagan's

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*shaykh al-tarbiyya* and the *shaykh al-ta'lim*," *Muslim World* 93 (January 2003): 88–90; also Daphna Ephrat, *Spiritual Wayfarers, Leaders in Piety, Sufis and the Dissemination of Islam in Medieval Palestine* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), 56, 101–4; and Sara Sviri, *The Sufis: An Anthology* (Tel Aviv: TAU Press, 2008), 99–118 (Hebrew).

69 Yagan, *The Essence of Sufism*; idem, *The Teachings of Kebzeh: Essentials of Sufism from the Caucasus Mountains* (Vernon B.C.: Kebzeh Publications, 1995). See also Silvers-Alario, "The Teaching Relationship in Early Sufism."

70 Based on a conversation with this follower, who attended the annual meeting in Vernon.

71 While 1988 is the year cited on the Kebzeh web site, some community members noted that "the actual construction of the church took place years later" (Fieldwork in Vernon, 2009).

decision to establish a church surprised his students. Most of them came from a Christian background, but, as they stated in interviews, their interest in New Age thinking and Sufism was part of a rebellion against their religious upbringing. One of the present chaplains of the church said that when he first joined the group, he never imagined himself in such a role. However, Yagan explained that the church had strayed from its original purpose, and the idea was to construct a new church. While the Sunday mass held in the church has Christian symbols such as wine and bread, it also features alternative rites with a special focus on community solidarity. At the end of every gathering all participants join hands in a circle that symbolizes the communal identity of “one for all, all for one.” The concept of the church reflected Yagan’s conviction that Kebzeh should operate within the local culture, wherever its practitioners may be.<sup>72</sup> The church thus serves as a link to the local community, allowing the Kebzeh society to be fully engaged in the essentially Christian environment of the Canadian town.

### From Local to Global: New Modes of Cultural Exchange

An additional stage in the development of the Kebzeh society was the launching of an Internet site with an emphasis on disseminating Kebzeh teaching to new audiences, including by means of online courses. Since then, Yagan’s ideas have spread to New Age and Sufi circles in Canada and elsewhere. This is manifested not necessarily in the number of people who became members of the Kebzeh association, but in the dynamic of the dissemination of Yagan’s books, the activities of some of his students in other parts of the world, and further Internet activity.

Some of his books have been translated into other languages, including Turkish, Abkhaz and Russian.<sup>73</sup> Additional levels of cultural exchange are apparent in Yagan’s English translations of two important Sufi poets, Yunus Emre (d. 1320) and Sun’ullah Gaibi (d. 1655).<sup>74</sup> These translations reflect Yagan’s

72 Interview with Yagan, Summer, 2009.

73 During field work in Abkhazia (October, 2008; September–October, 2011) and a visit to Turkey (September, 2011), one of the authors met several people who had read Yagan’s autobiography and some of his short articles translated into Turkish, Abkhaz and Russian (Yagan, *Kaf Dağı’nın ardından geliyorum*, trans. Senol Zaman and Bahri Kazbek [Istanbul: Tley Yayınları, 1997 [1984]).

74 Namely, *I Wrapped Myself in Flesh and Bones and I Appeared as Yunus*, trans. Murat Yagan (Vernon, B.C.: Kebzeh Publications, 1998), and *Gaibi, The Gathering: The Mystical Poetry of*

approach to Sufism, in that their subject matter differentiates Sufi thought from mainstream Islam.<sup>75</sup> This approach is also reflected in Yagan's trips with his students to Turkey and other countries in the Middle East, focusing mainly on visits to Circassian communities<sup>76</sup>—another indication of the foundation of Kebzeh as an independent spiritual tradition which distances itself from Islam. Yagan was welcomed by Circassian activists in Turkey and Jordan, although there were also criticisms of his departure from Islam. In Abkhazia, where currently the majority of Abkhazians are officially Christians but mostly stress their ethnic and cultural heritage, which is shared by Christian and Muslim Abkhazians, Yagan's ideas were welcomed enthusiastically. He was an official guest of the first president of Abkhazia, Vladislav Ardzinba. Still, some Circassian activists and intellectuals criticized Yagan's description of Kebzeh. One Abkhazian philologist wrote: "There was indeed a concept of *Ahmeste Kebzeh* . . . and it is true that it included both physical and spiritual dimensions. However, in Yagan's book there is also a lot of fantasy."<sup>77</sup>

Two of Yagan's close disciples have been especially active in disseminating his teaching: Dr. Ralph Maddess, a psychologist who was the leader of the Vernon group for many years, and Yaqub ibn Yusuf, a Jew who immigrated from the U.S. to Israel (but also lived in Canada), adopted an Arabic name, and is active in Sufi circles in Jerusalem, interfaith dialogue, and the study of Jewish Hasidism.<sup>78</sup> Although Ibn Yusuf views himself as a student of Yagan, he advocates a different narrative, a development which illuminates the issue of cultural exchange as demonstrated by ideas passing from Canada to the Middle East and elsewhere.

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*a Sufi Master of Melâmet*, trans. idem and Diane Wilson (Vernon, B.C.: Kebzeh Publications, 1994).

- 75 In this respect, Yagan does not easily fit into existing classifications of Sufi-influenced movements, such as Marcia Hermansen's "hybrids" and "perennials" distinction. Yagan's general approach is closer to what Hermansen called the "perennials"—a "movement in which the specifically Islamic identification and content . . . have been de-emphasized in favour of a 'perennialist' outlook." Yet, Yagan's own teaching content remains close to basic Sufi ideas, and the role of the immigrant as a leader shows a greater similarity to "hybrid" movements (Hermansen, "In the Garden of American Sufi Movements," 157).
- 76 Idem, "Hybrid Identity Formations in Muslim America," 180.
- 77 Interview with Zurab Dzhapua at a conference in Ankara, 24 September, 2011. The attitude towards Yagan's teaching among Circassians is complex and merits a separate discussion.
- 78 Ibn Yusuf owns a bookstore specializing in spiritualism and leads spiritual groups. See his website [www.olamqatan.com](http://www.olamqatan.com). Alongside studying with Yagan, he was also a student of several Sufi masters in Jerusalem. (See also Chen Bram, "Spirituality under the Shadow of the Conflict: Sufi Circles in Israel," *Israel Studies Review* forthcoming.)

An expanded edition of Yagan's book, *The Essence of Sufism in the Light of Kebzeh* (2009),<sup>79</sup> edited by Ibn Yusuf, identifies Kebzeh as a Sufi discipline and Yagan as "one of the most valuable and original exponents of Sufism in our day."<sup>80</sup> This new edition reflects Ibn Yusuf's tendency to highlight the Sufi aspects (and hence to represent Kebzeh teaching as developing from Sufi ideas, rather than as a distinct spiritual teaching), while also reaffirming the close affinity of Sufism to the Islamic religion.<sup>81</sup>

From interviews it is clear that Yagan was aware of these differences, yet despite differences and even tensions between Yagan and Ibn Yusuf, their collaboration was fruitful and reveals important features of Kebzeh teaching. First, it reflects the cosmopolitan and relatively tolerant features of Kebzeh. Yagan's vision of Kebzeh as a spiritual teaching that can take different forms in different cultural contexts, is part of this cosmopolitan approach. Another example of this openness can be seen in the case of former students who turned to the practice of Buddhism as a spiritual path, but are still welcome in the annual gathering.<sup>82</sup> Second, Yagan's collaboration with Ibn Yusuf manifests the complex position of Kebzeh vis-à-vis the spread of Sufism in the West. Although Yagan's teaching positions Kebzeh as an independent stream, distinctive and separate from Sufi circles, his approach enables the continuation of an affinity with Sufism. Moreover, it seems that Yagan was also aware that Sufi circles were important in the effort to disseminate Kebzeh teaching. Many potential students who heard about Kebzeh had already formed some connection with other Sufi groups. Furthermore, other Sufi circles, for example the Canadian Threshold Society,<sup>83</sup> cited and referred to Yagan. Thus, although Kebzeh was formed as an independent spiritual doctrine, it was still linked to the development of Western Sufism. In this respect the Kebzeh phenomenon demonstrates the blurred boundaries of Sufism in the West.

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79 The original book is entitled *The Teachings of Kebzeh: Essentials of Sufism from the Caucasus Mountains* (Vernon, B.C.: Kebzeh Publications, 1995).

80 Yagan, *The Essence of Sufism in the Light of Kebzeh*, editor's introduction by Yaqub ibn Yusuf, "What Kind of Teaching is This?," xxxi–xlix.

81 See also *ibid.*, 115–24.

82 One student related that Yagan asked him, rhetorically, "why he needs to turn to Buddhism, when what he seeks can be found in Kebzeh," but at the same time he accepted and welcomed him.

83 See n. 23.



## Conclusion

The evolution of Yagan's ideas and their dissemination in the context of cultural exchange can be understood in light of two related issues that are usually dealt with in separate research approaches: the new Western spirituality, affected *inter alia* by the spread of Sufism in North America; and the role of ethnic and cultural roots in immigrant societies.

Yagan immigrated to Canada with the goal of becoming Canadian. His ideas, and the teaching of Kebzeh in a modern form, developed as part of a cultural exchange that took place between the Middle East and Canada in the context of a multicultural immigrant society, juxtaposed with the widespread quest for a new spirituality that would come to be known as New Age.

While Yagan's teaching was based on a reinterpretation of core Sufi traditions and basic Christian elements, combining New Age ideas, it derived its unique characteristics from his specific ethnic and cultural background: the Circassian-Abkhazian heritage of his upbringing. This background was also the source of his emphasis on community, which dovetailed with the Sufi concept of being part of an order, or *terikat*. Kebzeh teaching thus went further than most New Age philosophies in stressing a communal orientation, offering its followers an additional level of personal development.

However, Yagan parted from existing Sufi circles and moved a step further, beyond serving as a mediator and ecumenical agent. He molded a new spiritual system which competed for public recognition and legitimacy. Facilitating factors were his personal charisma, life experience, prestigious lineage, and organizational skills, but no less importantly his unique position as a spiritual wayfarer.

Yagan's background allowed him to mediate knowledge and world views in the West. By the time of his arrival in Canada he had already distanced himself from traditional Muslim views. His Western-oriented education and multicultural background enabled him to form a close connection with local young people interested in Sufi ideas and to attract them to his own teaching. Moreover, although Yagan was not part of the 1960s "questing" culture, he was, nonetheless, in many ways a "seeker" with a spiritual quest. He was much older than most of the young people who were part of the new spirituality and Sufi circles in Vancouver, and they instinctively identified him as a potential master. He came from Turkey, and had a first-hand acquaintance with Sufism. In this regard his position differed from that of Westerners who brought Sufi ideas to the West but who lacked authenticity. At the same time, Yagan differed from Eastern spiritual leaders who came to the West bent on disseminating a

fixed religious philosophy to new audiences. Rather, he arrived as an immigrant who had been a member of a minority group himself in Turkey, and who sought a life in an open, multicultural society. These distinctive features are relevant in understanding the emergence of the new Kebzeh concept.

The transformation of the Kebzeh heritage into a core universal vision exemplifies the potential of a multicultural environment. While critics of multiculturalism warn that it may lead to divisive cultural enclaves, or become a superficial celebration of differences, the case study presented here shows how, in the context of the new spirituality, a multicultural environment can provide fertile ground for cultural creativity that stresses universalism yet recognizes the role of particular local identities.