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SUFI ORDERS AND POPULAR CULTURE

Despite the enormous power and influence of official Islam, Ottoman culture and civilization was not a linear projection of Quranic scripture. Throughout the long reign of the Ottoman dynasty, religious orthodoxy had to wage a constant battle for primacy against the heterodox interpretations of faith as articulated and preached by numerous Sufi mystical orders and brotherhoods, which enjoyed enormous popularity among the ruling elite and the masses. Each brotherhood was dedicated to its own unique mystical path, called *tarikat*, and “had its own form of ecstatic worship, called *zikr*.”¹ The heterodox beliefs and practices of the Sufis left a profound impact on the popular culture and the everyday life of the masses. The “Sufi brotherhoods and lodges” played “a central role in Ottoman social life” and “provided an important space for socialization outside the home.”² The “space was exclusively Muslim” and contained within it sections for men and women, active members, and curious visitors.³

The privileged position of the ulema, their close alliance with the Ottoman ruling family, the rigidity of their Islam, and “the cold legalism of their doctrine, failed to satisfy” the “spiritual and social needs of many Muslims, who turned for sustenance and guidance” to mysticism and Sufi brotherhoods.⁴ The diverse and heterodox beliefs and practices of various Sufi orders provided men and

women with unique spiritual experiences, which transcended the unbending and impersonal rules and practices that a Muslim was obligated to follow at home and at a mosque.

Greatly influenced by Zoroastrian, Manichean, Buddhist, Gnostic, and Neoplatonist ideas, Sufism, or Islamic mysticism, emerged in the first century of Muslim rule as a protest against the rigid, intolerant, and politicized interpretations of Islam. The ulema, who acted as the representatives of official Islam, defended the Islamic law as the essence of Islamic thought and emphasized *tawhid* (monotheism), or the oneness of God. In sharp contrast, the Sufis preached an ascetic lifestyle that rejected the distinction between the Creator (God) and the created by teaching that the creation was a manifestation of the Creator.⁵ For Sufi masters, removing the distinction between the Creator and the created allowed man to attain perfection and unity with God and the divine truth.⁶ By God, the Sufis did not mean an anthropomorphic entity that possessed human qualities and was man-made. For them, God was the absolute being, and the whole universe was a manifestation of that Being. As everything was a manifestation of God, to love God was to love God's creatures and His entire creation.

In their journey to reach union with God, Sufis sought out knowledge and interpretation related to the inner and esoteric (*batini*) aspects of Islam. This was in sharp contrast with the ulema and the *medreses*, or religious schools, where the outer and exoteric (*zahiri*) knowledge of Islam was emphasized. The Sufis did not, however, view mysticism as an intellectual activity confined to elaborating esoteric concepts such as detachment from the world. For them, such concepts could be understood only when one embarked on the spiritual journey towards union with God. In this context, Sufism was essentially a human enterprise, one that combated and neutralized the dry, and, at times, harsh aspects of official Islam by allowing the seeker to design and initiate his own unique journey to spiritual peace and salvation.

In contrast to the ulema, who asserted the absolute and unasailable superiority of Islam over other religions and religious traditions, many Sufis viewed all religions and religious leaders as fellow travelers on the same mystic path, seeking Gnostic wisdom (*maarifet*) by submitting themselves to the way of Truth (*tarik-i hak*). Thus, in the poetry of many Sufi masters, Moses and Jesus were praised as great men of knowledge, humanity, spirituality, and integrity, whose lives and actions provided exemplary models for Muslims and all of humanity. The teachings and practices of some

Sufi orders, therefore, contained a strong element of respect, appreciation, and tolerance toward non-Muslims and stood in sharp contrast to the rigid interpretations of Islam by the ulema, who viewed Christians and Jews as dirty, inferior, and unequal to Muslims.

Even in their public appearance, the ulema and Sufi masters stood at diametrically opposite poles. The ulema appeared in public with pomp and ceremony, dressed in beautiful and expensive clothing, and surrounded by followers, servants, and attendants, ranging from menial domestics and bodyguards to companions and agents. In sharp contrast, the Sufi leaders adhered to the principles of simplicity and humility. They generally wore a simple white tunic made of wool or, less commonly, linen, and refused to adorn themselves with precious stones. Some "wandering mendicant" *derwişes* "deliberately flouted Muslim opinion by shaving their beards, hair, and eyebrows and by throwing off the restraints of the Holy Law and most others."⁷ Turning their backs to the vanities of this world, they renounced all human obsessions and small satisfactions of riches and empty honors. Instead, they chose a solitary life of contemplation, meditation, humility, and silence. In choosing solitude and silence, they emphasized the limitations of language to express inner experience and attributed a peripheral significance to religious piety. They ridiculed the pretentious religiosity of the ulema and their pompous public postures and sermons, which for the Sufis were another sad manifestation of man's ego. Sufi masters considered the ulema's religious dogmatism, narrow-mindedness, and intolerance, the cause of most calamities, including that of fanaticism and oppression.

The Sufis demonstrated their tolerant attitude by absorbing Islamic heresies, as well as Shia and Christian beliefs and practices.⁸ It is not surprising, therefore, that the Sunni ulema viewed the activities of Sufi teachers with apprehension and trepidation, and frequently denounced them as hypocrites, innovators, and heretics. In particular, the Sunni religious establishment detested the pantheistic beliefs and doctrines of various Sufi orders, "which seemed to impugn the transcendental unity of God," as well as "their idolatrous worship of saints and holy places; their thaumaturgic practices and suspect methods of inducing ecstasy," and "their laxness in observing the divine law."⁹

Throughout the long history of the Ottoman Empire, the philosophical and doctrinal conflict between the ulema and the Sufi orders ignited rivalries and jealousies between prominent religious leaders and influential Sufi masters. The antagonism between the

two camps was also reflected in unrelenting battles over consumption of coffee and tobacco, which the religious establishment condemned and the Sufi orders defended.¹⁰

Each Sufi brotherhood was founded around loyalty, devotion, and belief in the teachings of a particular Sufi master (*şeyh/sheikh*), who was at times revered as a saint. During their life on earth, each *şeyh* had, through his teachings and practices, established a distinct pathway to attainment of spiritual truth and union with God. His followers, who had adopted him as their guide (*murşid*), gathered in a Sufi lodge (*tekke*) for communal prayer and ecstatic worship (*zikr*), as well as a set of distinct practices prescribed by their spiritual leader. These lodges served as spiritual retreats and hospices for travelers. Financed by contributions from their members, they usually had a mausoleum (*türbe*), where the veneration of the saints and founders of the order took place, a "hall for prayers and rituals (*tevhidhane, semahane, or meydan*)" and a "kitchen (*matbah, aş evi, mutfak*)."¹¹ Because serving food to travelers and the poor constituted one of the principal functions of the Sufi orders, the kitchen occupied a central role in *derviş* lodges. Among some orders, such as those of the Mevlevi and Bektâşî, the kitchen was used as a space "for training and initiation" of new recruits.¹²

In the 17th century when coffee drinking spread among the masses, many Sufi establishments, "particularly in the Balkans, incorporated a special room for the preparation of coffee, known as the *kahve ocağı*."¹³ Many large *tekkes* also had baths, libraries, "reception and meeting halls (*mosafer odası, meydan odası*), cells or chambers for the *şeyh* and dervishes (*hüccerat*), and often one or several small spaces, generally without windows, for spiritual seclusion (*halvet odası, halvethane, çilehane*)."¹⁴ Large Sufi lodges and hospices contained homes and apartments for the family of the *şeyh*, and some were attached to a mosque and a garden that they kept immaculate. Thus, *derviş* lodges "were not only places of worship, but also housing complexes where people lived and carried out the routines of everyday life."¹⁵ As late as 1885, 1,091 men and 1,184 women lived in 260 *tekkes* in Istanbul.¹⁶

In earlier Ottoman times, lodges and hospices established and run by *ahis*, or semireligious/semimystical fraternities in Anatolia, provided food, shelter, and hospitality to all travelers regardless of social background. As the North African traveler Ibn Battuta described, the *ahis* built hospices and guesthouses and furnished them with rugs, lamps, and other equipments they required.¹⁷ The members of the brotherhood worked "during the day to gain their

livelihood, and after the afternoon prayer," gathered "their collective earnings"; with this they bought "fruit, food, and the other things needed for consumption in the hospice."¹⁸ Whenever a traveler arrived at the hospice, they served him food and lodging, while Quran readers recited the holy book, and if no newcomer arrived, the members of the brotherhood assembled, ate, and, after eating, sang and danced.¹⁹ In the later Ottoman period, many Sufi convents followed the same traditions and practices, providing food, lodging, and hospitality to travelers from far and near. Devout *dervişes*—barefoot and bareheaded, and dressed in rough, patched woolen cloaks—pursued a life of poverty, withdrawal, isolation, and quiet meditation. As they "were expected to provide a bowl of soup" for the visiting guests, "the cauldron, on the boil day and night, became a symbol of hospitality."²⁰

Some of the early Ottoman sultans were followers of Sufi masters who participated in various Ottoman military campaigns and provided the ruler and his troops with spiritual support and guidance. It was their alliance with the Ottoman state that allowed Sufi brotherhoods to establish themselves in the Balkans. Given their close interaction and association with various Sufi orders, it is not surprising that the Islam of the early Ottomans, and the *gazis* who supported them, lacked the theological sophistication of the Muslim ulema who dominated the mosques and seminaries of Anatolia's urban centers. The religious beliefs of these Ottoman rulers were simple, personal, unorthodox, eclectic, and mystical.²¹ One of the earliest accounts of the rise of Osman, the founder of the Ottoman state, describes how he received a blessing from Şeyh Edebali, a prominent Sufi leader, who handed him the sword of a *gazi* and prophesized that his descendants would rule the world.²² When Osman died, the ceremony that decided the succession of his son, Orhan, to the throne took place at a *zaviye*, a hospice run and managed by *dervişes* for travelers.²³

With the rise of the empire and the establishment of Ottoman power in the urban centers of Anatolia where Sunni Islam dominated the social and cultural life of the Muslim community, the state became increasingly identified with the official Islam of the ulema. Sufi traditions and practices were never abandoned, however, and mystical orders continued to enjoy great popularity and respect, allowing them to play a prominent role in the daily life of many Muslims in the empire.

This popularity and mass appeal may explain why Sufi mystics and *derviş* leaders led several major uprisings against the Ottoman

state. For example, the revolt of Şeyh Bedreddin in 1416 against the authority of the Ottoman sultan, Mehmed I (1413–1421), brought the empire to the verge of extinction. Influenced by the mystical writings of such prominent philosophers and Sufi writers as Ibn Arabi (1165–1240), Bedreddin believed that the world was ancient, without a beginning, without an end, and not created in time.²⁴ If the physical world disappeared, the spiritual world would disappear as well; “creation and destruction” was “an eternal process,” and “this world and the next, in their entirety” were “imaginary fantasies.”²⁵ The revolutionary Sufi *şeyh* rejected heaven and hell, as well as the Day of Judgment, and the resurrection of the body.²⁶ He also dismissed any difference between Muslims and non-Muslims, allowed his followers to drink wine, and advocated distribution of land among his followers, who included landless peasants. The ulema accused him of ignoring the Islamic law and denounced him as a heretic. Şeyh Bedreddin’s revolt was crushed by Ottoman troops, and he was executed by order of Mehmed I in 1416.

Bedreddin’s followers, however, continued to preach, and one of his disciples, Börklüce Mustafa, organized a revolt against the Ottoman government by instigating an uprising among Turcoman tribal groups in a region near Izmir in western Anatolia. Börklüce “preached that all things, except for women, were common property.”²⁷ As with Bedreddin, he also rejected the inequality between Muslims and Christians and declared that any Muslim who called a Christian an infidel was himself an infidel.²⁸ Once again, the Ottoman government sent its forces against the rebellious Sufi *şeyh*, who was captured and executed together with hundreds of his followers.

BEKTAŞIS

The first major Sufi brotherhood in the Ottoman state, that of the Bektaşî Sufi order, emerged as a powerful social and political force in Anatolia during the 14th century. The order continued to play a prominent role in the daily life of the empire until the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923. The leaders (*babas/dedes*) of the order acted as the chaplains to the janissary corps, and the brotherhood recruited heavily from manufacturing guilds in Istanbul and other large urban centers of the Ottoman Empire. The alliance between the Bektaşî order and the janissaries was symbolized in various public events and parades as the chaplains of the

brotherhood marched near the commander of the infantry corps reciting prayers and incantations with their daggers drawn from their sheaths.²⁹ It is not surprising, therefore, that the power of the Bektaşî order diminished after Sultan Mahmud II disbanded the janissary corps in 1826 and closed down many of the brotherhood's centers.

The Bektaşîs traced the origins of their order to the Persian Sufi master Hacı Bektaş Veli (Hacı Baktash Vali), who is believed to have lived in the 13th century. His teachings, which were given a definite form by Balim Sultan, the leader of the order in the 16th century, were greatly influenced by the beliefs, customs, and practices prevalent in Shia Islam, as well as in certain Sufi doctrines of the Hurufî movement that had spread from northeastern Iran to Azerbaijan and Anatolia in the 14th and 15th centuries.

The Bektaşîs acknowledged the 12 Shia imams and venerated the first Shia imam, Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the prophet Muhammad, whom they believed to be one with God (Allah) and Muhammad in a single united entity. Though denied by the Bektaşîs, many observers referred to this unity as a form of belief in trinity.³⁰ As with the Twelver Shia (*Ithna Asharis*) in Iran and elsewhere, the Bektaşîs also mourned the death of Husayn, the third Shia Imam and the son of Ali and Fatima (the daughter of the prophet Muhammad), whose martyrdom was commemorated every year on the tenth of *Muharram*, the first month in the Islamic calendar. To share in the suffering of Husayn and his family, mourners beat their chests with fists and chains, and cut and repeatedly struck their foreheads with swords and knives. From the first to the tenth of *Muharram*, the Bektaşîs also celebrated the nights of mourning for the Shia martyrs and especially those Shia figures who had perished in infancy.³¹ In their daily rituals, the Bektaşîs showed a general disregard for Muslim rituals such as the daily prayers. They believed that the holy Quran contained two levels of knowledge and meaning: the first was the outer and exoteric (*zahir*), and the second was the inner and esoteric (*batin*), which constituted the eternal meaning of the holy book.³² This inner meaning was only available to a very few and was the meaning and instruction sought by Sufis. The Bektaşîs were led by their leader (*çelebi*) who lived in the monastery (*tekke*) of Pir Evi (The Tomb of the Founder) at Hacı Bektaş in central Anatolia. The head of each Bektaşî *tekke* was called *baba* (father).

The Bektaşîs absorbed certain pre-Islamic and Christian practices and rituals, which explains their acceptance, popularity, and

success among many urban and rural communities of the Balkans, particularly in Albania. Using Holy Communion as a model, they served wine, bread, and cheese when new members joined the order. The members of the order also confessed to their sins and sought absolution from their *mursid* (spiritual guide). In sharp contrast to Muslims who prescribed strict separation between the two sexes, Bektaşî women participated in the order's rituals without covering their faces. A small group within the order swore to celibacy and wore earrings as a distinctive mark. Under Ottoman rule, Bektaşî leaders introduced the teachings of their order to various regions of the Balkans, Anatolia, and the Arab Middle East, including Egypt. As the convents of the order spread throughout the Balkan region, many Christians in Albania, Kosovo, and Macedonia converted to Islam through Bektaşî teachings and activities. Evliya Çelebi wrote that the Muslims of Gjirokaster in southern Albania were so devoted to the first Shia imam, Ali, that, when sitting down or standing up, they uttered "*Ya Ali*" ("Oh Ali"). According to Evliya Çelebi, these Albanians studied and read Persian and, in sharp contrast to Muslims who shunned alcohol consumption and public demonstrations of physical intimacy with the opposite sex, they "were very fond of pleasure and carousing" as well as "shamelessly" drinking wine and other intoxicating beverages.³³ The Bektaşîs also celebrated weddings and the two Muslim feasts of *bayrams*, as well as Persian Zoroastrian and various Christian festivals, such as *Nevruz* (Persian New Year) and the days of St. George, St. Nicholas, and St. Demetrius, by dancing and drinking, a behavior that was denounced by the devout traveler and writer as "shameless" and "characteristic of the infidels."³⁴

In his *Book of Travels*, Çelebi left his readers with a vivid description of a "love intoxicated" Bektaşî *derviş*:

Meanwhile I took a close look at this dervish. He was barefooted and bareheaded and raggedy. But his face and his eyes gleamed with light, and his speech sparkled with pearls of wit. He was extremely eloquent and quick witted. On his head perched a "water pot" headgear, with the turban awry and adorned with twelve ruby-colored brands, like appliqué roses, standing for the twelve leaders of the *Bektaşî* order, and signifying his love for the dynasty (of Ali) and his devotion to the twelve *imams*. . . . On his shirtless and guileless pure and saintly chest were marks of flagellation he had received in Tabriz [a city in northwestern Iran] during the *Aşura* ceremonies marking the martyrdom of el-Huseyn. . . . He removed the "water pot" from

his head revealing, just above his forehead, a “brand of submission” the size of a piaster [a coin]. His purpose in displaying it to us was to demonstrate that he was an adept in the holy law (*şeriat*), in the mystic path (*tarikāt*), in the mystic truth (*hakikat*), and in Gnostic wisdom (*marifet*), and that he had submitted to the way of Truth (*tarik-i hak*). On both arms were wounds and gashes of the four companions of the Prophet, and on his left arm were brands and lashes of the plain of Kerbela. He was mad, pure, wild, and radiant, but not exactly naked. He was shaven in the saintly “four strokes” manner to indicate that he was free of all forbidden things—thus there was no trace of hair, whether on his head, mustache, beard, brow, or eyelashes. But his face was shining. In short, the apron round his waist, the staff in his hand, the words “Oh Beloved of hearts” on his tongue, the sling of David in his waistband, the *paheng*-stone (“a carved stone the size of a hand with twelve flutings worn at the waist”) of Moses, pomp of Ali, the decorative plumes, bells, and other ornaments [all these indicated that he was] a companion of the foot-travelers, they were the outfittings and instruments of poverty of the noble dervishes, and he himself was the perfect mystic.³⁵

MEVLEVIS

The greatest rival of the Bektāşis was the Mevlevi order, which enjoyed immense popularity among the members of the Ottoman ruling elite. The founder of the order, and one of the most beloved Persian poets, was Mevlana Celaleddin Rumi (Persian: Mowlana Jalaludin Mohammad Balkhi, also known as Mowlavi), born in 1207 in Balkh in today’s northern Afghanistan. His father, Bahauddin Walad, a renowned scholar, theologian, and mystic, fled his home before the arrival of the Mongols in 1215 and took his family to Konya, the capital of the Rum Seljuk state in central Anatolia. Rumi lived, wrote, and taught in Konya until his death in 1273. His body was buried beside his father under a green tomb, which was constructed soon after his death. The mausoleum has served as a shrine for pilgrims from the four corners of the Islamic world, as well as those of other faiths who revere his teachings and mystical poetry.

Rumi would have been an ordinary mystic and poet had it not been for an accidental encounter in 1244 with the wandering Persian Sufi master Shams-i Tabrizi, who hailed from Tabriz, a city in northwestern Iran. Shams inspired Rumi to compose one of the masterpieces of Persian poetry, *Divan-i Shams-i Tabrizi* (The Divan of Shams of Tabriz), in which Rumi expresses his deep love, admiration,

and devotion for Shams, who had transformed his life. This was followed by the *Masnavi* (Turkish: *Mesnevi*), a multivolume book of poetical genius and fantastic tales, fables, and personal reflections that Rumi completed after the disappearance of Shams. Rumi's poetry transcends national, ethnic, and even religious boundaries, and focuses primarily on the spiritual journey to seek union with God. Love for fellow human beings is presented in his poems as the essence of the mystical journey.

The mystical order that was established during Rumi's lifetime (which came to be known as Mevleviyya) was distinguished from other Sufi orders by the significance it gave to *sema*, a music and whirling/dancing ritual performed in a circular hall called *sema hane*. Imitating their master's love for the musical ceremony that inspired singing and dancing, Mevlana's followers employed spinning and whirling to reach a trance-like state. While the majority of Muslims shunned singing and dancing, the Mevlevi *derwishes* made music and dancing the hallmark and central tenet of their order.

Because of its popularity, power, and influence, the Mevlevi order was subjected to frequent attacks and persecution from the ulema, who denounced their use of music and dancing as un-Islamic. Thus,



Derwisch hoükechän, Derwishes Fourmans.

Dancing dervishes. Anonymous, c. 1810. (Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz / Art Resource, NY)

in 1516, when Selim I was moving against the Safavid dynasty in Iran, the *şeyhülislam* persuaded the sultan to order the destruction of Rumi's mausoleum in Konya, which served as the physical heart of the order. Fortunately for the Mevlevi, the order was repealed and the mausoleum and center were spared.³⁶

Despite numerous campaigns of harassment by the members of the religious establishment, Ottoman sultans and government officials continued to show their respect and reverence for the Mevlevi order by showering its leaders with gifts and favors. For example, in 1634, Murad IV assigned the poll tax paid by non-Muslims of Konya to the head of the Mevlevi order.³⁷ In 1648, the chief of the Mevlevi order "officiated, for the first time, at the ceremony of the girding on of the sword of Osman, which marked the accession of a new sultan," a privilege that remained with the order until the end of the Ottoman dynasty.³⁸ The close relationship between Ottoman sultans and the leaders of the Mevlevi order continued into the 19th century. The reform-minded Selim III (1789–1807) visited the Mevlevi *tekkes* so frequently that the musical ceremony, which had been performed only on Tuesdays and Fridays, was performed daily in a different *tekke* on each day of the week. Outside Istanbul, however, the ceremony continued to be performed only on Fridays.³⁹ This visible support allowed the order not only to survive against attacks from the ulema but also grow and expand into the four corners of the Ottoman Empire.

NAKŞBANDIS

A latecomer among the Sufi orders in Istanbul was the *Nakşbandiyya* (*Naqshbandiyya*) Sufi order, which arrived in the Ottoman Empire from Central Asia in the late 15th century. The order traced its origins to the Persian mystic and teacher Khawjah Bahauddin Naqshband (d.1389), who lived and taught in Central Asia in the 14th century. The order immediately attracted a large following because, more than any other mystical brotherhood, its teachings and practices corresponded with the established rules and practices of Sunni Islam. Greatly influenced by the writings of the Persian theologian, mystic, philosopher, and jurist Ghazali (1058–1111), the Nakşbandis believed that mysticism could not negate anything that was taught by the Quran and the examples, deeds, sayings, and customary practices (*sunnah*) of the prophet Muhammad.⁴⁰ The members of the order closely observed the daily prayers, fasts, and other observances prescribed by the Islamic law.⁴¹

In sharp contrast to other Sufi orders, the Nakşbandis did not “engage in any outward performance” of their *zikir*, “the act by which” Sufis meditated and sought “a union with God.”⁴² Instead, they engaged in what they called, the silent *zikir*, as they believed that “the sort of physical exercise characteristic of other order’s practice” of *zikir* was “theatrical diversion from the true purpose of the act.”⁴³ Also unlike other Sufi orders, the Nakşbandis did not “have a long process of spiritual internship that required those seeking to join the order to pursue a series of stages under the guidance of a master before being judged worthy of admittance.”⁴⁴ They believed that a person only approached the order for admittance if he had already reached a sufficient level of religious enlightenment internally and thus knew that he was ready.⁴⁵

At times, the enormous power and popularity of the Nakşbandiyya order ignited the jealousy and insecurity of Ottoman sultans. For example, in 1639, Murad IV “executed a şeyh of the *Nakşbandi* order of dervishes, called Mahmud, who had grown too influential.”⁴⁶ Despite the sporadic persecution of the order, the Nakşbandis continued with their missionary activities and spread the teachings of the order to the four corners of the Ottoman Empire. The order “received a major boost from the teachings of Sheikh Ziya al-Din Khalid (d. 1827),” who “was a Kurd from the Shahrizor district in present-day Iraq.”⁴⁷ He “rejected the anti-Sufi stance” of radical Muslim reformers such as Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703–1791), the founder of the Wahhabi movement in Arabia, who “condemned all Sufis as heretics,” but the sheikh also criticized “what he believed to be the divergence from ‘true’ Islam that most Sufi orders of his day represented.”⁴⁸ Sheikh Khaled “saw his mission as nothing short of the revival of Sunni Islam in the Ottoman Empire through strict adherence to Islamic law, grounded in a certainty of purpose that could only come to the believer through the mystical experience.”⁴⁹ His movement gained popular support among the masses. In particular, the order played an important role in shaping the culture of the Kurdish-populated region in south-eastern Anatolia, northern Iraq, and northern Syria.

Many among the elite and the subject classes viewed the Sufi masters as holy men who possessed miraculous powers.⁵⁰ When a Sufi master of great standing appeared in a town, townspeople rushed to touch or kiss the hem of his mantle or skirt, or even his feet.⁵¹ The tombs of Sufi masters were places of pilgrimage. When a Sufi *şeyh* passed away, the tomb would be enclosed and a dome was built over it, attracting pilgrims from near and far away lands. Cults and myths often arose around the tomb of a Sufi master

who was venerated for his spiritual purity and power. In order to attract the attention and blessings of a saint or Sufi master buried in a tomb, pious visitors, the sick, the ailing, impotent men, women unable to bear children, pregnant women fearful of complications in childbirth, and mothers pleading for a cure for their children's infirmity offered prayers and supplications by tying scraps of material, "shreds of cotton, woolen, and silk morsels of ribbon and tape" to the railings of the mausoleum or the nearby bushes and trees.⁵² Many lit candles as they pleaded for a cure, while others donated metal candelabra or carpets for the floor of the mausoleum as a sign of their humility and devotion. Some who could not find a remedy to their illness slept near or on a tomb for a few hours or up to forty days if their ailment was serious.⁵³ At times, even trees, rocks, or fountains in the garden of the shrine became holy objects with magical power.

The inside of mausoleum was covered with embroidered shawls and handkerchiefs, and the turban worn by the Sufi teacher in life "was affixed to the head of the coffin."⁵⁴ The relics of the deceased *şeyhs* were "suspended against the walls—their walking sticks, their rosaries and beads, and portions of their garments," and pilgrims kissed and touched these with devotion and reverence.⁵⁵ Many Sufi shrines were built on sites that already served as places of pilgrimage and worship before the arrival of the Turks and Islam. While some of the sites were important during the Christian era, the sacredness of others dated back further to pre-Christian times, when pagan cults, centered on the worship of a sun god or another natural deity, prevailed.

STORYTELLING

The overwhelming majority of the population in the Ottoman Empire could not read or write. Formal knowledge was the monopoly of a few who had received their education and training either at the palace or at the *mekteps* and *medreses*, which prepared their students for a career in the religious establishment. The same situation prevailed among the Christian and Jewish communities of the empire. Until the arrival of modern education and schooling in the 19th century, the majority of Christians and Jews who could read and write received their education at religious schools, at times attached to a church or a synagogue.

In this environment, storytelling was not merely a form of popular entertainment but also one of the most popular forms of transmitting historical knowledge and popular culture among the masses.

Ordinary people from diverse social backgrounds gathered in coffeehouses to listen to storytellers read fables, recite poetry, and use a variety of provocative methods to create and sustain suspense. In these public performances, skilled storytellers inserted pauses, switched from normal speech to chanting, moved arms and head in sweeping gestures, whispered, shouted, clapped hands, and pounded feet, as they impersonated a variety of characters and, in this way, "imparted to the audience the whole gamut of feelings and passions experienced by them."⁵⁶ Instead of relying exclusively on describing characters, the storyteller "would give an impersonation, sometimes changing headdress to suit, and using two props—a cudgel and a kerchief wrapped around his neck—to produce appropriate audible and visible effects."⁵⁷ Sometimes *dervişes* acted as "oral narrators (*meddah*) and drew on their knowledge of written culture in their stories."⁵⁸ Because of this highly specialized knowledge and their unique ability to perform in a dramatic fashion, these *derviş* storytellers were greatly esteemed among the members of the ruling elite.⁵⁹ Storytellers were divided into several categories according to their style and repertoire. Some specialized in popular romances, others in national legends, pseudo-historical romances, epic tales, individual exploits, or religious narrations.⁶⁰

The numerous anecdotes, jokes, and stories attributed to Nassredin Hoca (Wise or Learned Nassredin), and told daily by storytellers in coffeehouses, or in gatherings with family and friends, reflected the witty and subversive nature of a culture that viewed the claims and actions of those in power with humor and skepticism. In tale after tale, Nassredin appears as a man of small means, living with his wife, or as a travelling wise man, without a regular job, wandering from one town or village to the next. He has a biting tongue and a fearless character, and cannot be easily impressed or intimidated by men of power, wealth, and influence. On one occasion he arrives in a town without a penny in his pocket and desperate to make a quick gain before he can continue his journey. Using his turban and robe to impress the people with his knowledge and education, he agrees to deliver a lecture in return for a handsome honorarium, although he does not know what he will be talking about. When he appears in front of a large crowd that is waiting enthusiastically for his presentation, he asks the audience if they know what he will be talking about. The answer from the crowd is a resounding "No," to which Nassredin responds, "Since you are so ignorant that you do not know anything about what I will talk about, I refuse to speak to you," and he walks out. He cannot,

however, receive his pay unless he returns and delivers a lecture. Thus, he appears for a second time and since he still does not have anything to say, he merely repeats the same question he had asked the audience the day before: "Do you know what I will be talking to you about today?" To ensure that he does not use their negative response as an excuse to walk out again, the audience answer with a resounding, "Yes, we do," to which Nassredin responds, "Since you all know what I will be talking about there will be no need for me to waste your time," and he walks out again. Frustrated and suspicious, the townspeople decide to preempt Nassredin's shenanigans by discussing a possible strategy that would prevent him from leaving without delivering a lecture. The decision is made that if he asks the same question, "Do you know what I will be talking to you about today?" half of the people present will say, "Yes" and the other half will say, "No." Thus, when Nassredin appears for the third time and asks the question, the crowd is ready with one group shouting, "Yes," and the second crying out, "No," to which the Hoca responds, "There is no need for me to waste your time with a lecture since those of you who know what I will talk about can tell those of you who don't."

On another occasion, Nassredin is awakened in the middle of a cold and snowy night by the sound of commotion and loud argument outside his house. He tries to ignore the fight outside his window and goes back to sleep, but his wife, who has also been awakened by the noise, insists that he should get up and investigate the cause of the fight. Despite his best efforts to convince his wife that he should not become involved in the fight, Nassredin is finally forced to wrap himself in his quilt and go out of the house. Shivering from the freezing cold, he steps out of his house and asks the two groups arguing and fighting in front of his house what is causing the big commotion. His question ends the argument among the men who were fighting until then. They look at Nassredin for a moment, then suddenly jump on him and tear the quilt he is using to cover his body. After ripping the quilt into two halves, they run away and disappear into the darkness of the night. Having lost his quilt, Nassredin returns to his bedroom. His wife looks at the baffled, perplexed, and shivering Nassredin and asks him the reason for the loud argument on the street. Nassredin responds: "the fight was over my quilt."

The popular Ottoman shadow theater Karagöz and Hacivat was another means through which the society "created its world of laughter," allowing the ordinary subjects of the sultan to criticize

the government and the clerical establishment “before rapturous audiences” who crowded the cafés.⁶¹ There are many different legends and claims about the origins of shadow theater in the Ottoman Empire. Regardless of how it arrived in Istanbul, Karagöz quickly emerged as the epitome of Ottoman wit and humor and a central cultural personage in the daily life of ordinary Ottomans.⁶² He was a “roughly colored diminutive figure cut out of camel’s hide,” who played “its merry part behind a sheet” so that “its comic outline and gorgeous coloring” would stand out against the white background.⁶³ Members of all social classes in the Ottoman Empire watched Karagöz, some of which “originated in the palace” and found its “way to the street,” while others “conceived in local coffeehouses, were performed in the sultan’s harem, transmitting the norms and wishes of the populace and poking fun at the state and its servants.”⁶⁴ Removed from reality, “once through the stage, then through the puppets, and finally through their projection on a flat screen,” the shadow play served “as a safety valve for venting popular dissatisfaction,” ridiculing the hypocrisies of power and morality and voicing “a truth about society that hides within fiction.”⁶⁵ The plays portrayed a reality that “stood in marked opposition” to the rites and rituals of the palace and the Islamic religious hierarchy, and they represented a world opposed to the one suggested by the ruling class.⁶⁶

Not surprisingly, the sultans and their officials did not view shadow-theater as “harmless entertainment.”⁶⁷ The uneasiness of the ruling elite was intensified by the fact that the majority of shadow plays were performed in coffeehouses, which served as the meeting place for the members of the lower classes.⁶⁸ It is true that shadow plays were also performed “at family celebrations like circumcisions, births and marriages,” but their “greatest success came during Ramadan, when on the evening before breaking their fast, people would crowd into the coffeehouses to watch a show and shorten the time before the next meal.”⁶⁹ When the performance was held after breaking the fast, “tiny cups of aromatic coffee were constantly handed round” by young men “wearing the good old costume: baggy trousers and little coils of colored linen” with “turbans heaped up on their shaven heads.”⁷⁰ Once the play had ended, the spectators applauded and “bestowed doles of small coin on the two lads who came round with a platter to collect their offerings.”⁷¹ Then, “the light behind the screen disappeared as suddenly as it had shone out,” and the musicians played a final crescendo as the crowd had a parting coffee before it poured out into the street.⁷²

Aside from the sultan and his officials, the members of the religious class viewed the shadow play with suspicion and disgust because they dealt openly with "immoral subjects" and portrayed "female characters whose behavior left a great deal to be desired."⁷³ To make matters worse, Islamic law forbade the depiction of all living beings.⁷⁴ However, "with just one or two holes in the brightly painted leather puppets, it was possible to kill two birds with one stone: the actors could fit the sticks into them in order to move them, but because of the hole (which was generally in the region of the heart), the characters could not be deemed capable of life, and so they could not be considered to depict living beings."⁷⁵

In the shadow play, the principal characters were Karagöz (literally the Black Eye), the kind, honest, straightforward, illiterate man on the street who cannot find permanent employment, and his friend and opposite, Hacivat, an intelligent, refined, and cultured man, who displayed his knowledge and education by speaking Ottoman Turkish and using traditional poetry. Karagöz was usually "eight inches high" and was "always shown in profile" with "a parrot-like nose, and a beady, glittering eye, screened by a thick projecting eyebrow."⁷⁶ He wore a huge turban, "which on the slightest provocation" was "removed by a wire, to display his cocoa-nut of a head, an exhibition always greeted with shouts of laughter."⁷⁷ Dressed in "a colored waistcoat, a short jacket, and a pair of baggy trousers, with striped stockings," his "legs and arms" were "flexible" and "moved by skillfully concealed wires," while his gestures were "clumsy but vigorous."⁷⁸ In sharp contrast, his friend and confidant, Hacivat, was "more alert in his movements."⁷⁹

Karagöz and Hacivat were joined by a large cast of characters who caricatured "a variety of races, professions and religions."⁸⁰ Besides moving the puppets from the back by rods that he held between his fingers, the puppeteer "spoke all their parts in various voices, sang songs, made a variety of sound-effects, and into the old, familiar and well-loved plots he introduced a number of improvised comic scenes, sometimes of current or legal interest, which included a great deal of ribaldry and a number of coarse jokes."⁸¹ Usually as the play unfolded, keen to make mischief, Karagöz grew "bolder with impunity and approbation," becoming increasingly more daring, outspoken, and intrepid "in his impropriety."⁸² Special and "sedater performances" were often organized for women and children "in rich private homes."⁸³ Occasionally Karagöz paid a visit to the imperial palace, where he was extremely careful "not

to say or do anything" that would offend the Shadow of God.⁸⁴ But Karagöz was not the only theatrical performance popular among the urban population. There was another form of theater called *orta oyunu*, "which involved improvising without a stage or set text" and "depended almost entirely on the skill of the main comic."⁸⁵

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