

Turkish Oral Tradition in Texas: The Archive of Turkish Oral Narrative

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Located at Texas Tech University, the Archive of Turkish Oral Narrative is a research facility devoted primarily to the study of the oral tradition. It was opened to the public in 1970, at which time it was a privately owned collection that served as an adjunct to the Department of English. Rapid growth both in size and function required larger quarters, and in 1980 it was moved to the central library building. In that same year it was formally donated to Texas Tech University by its three founders: Ahmet Edip Uysal, Barbara K. Walker, and Warren S. Walker.

Its more than 3,000 folktales and related forms make it one of the largest collections of Turkish oral narrative in the world. Almost all of its holdings were collected by the donors between 1961 and the present. An exception to this is the set of valuable recordings donated by Wolfram Eberhard from the 1951 fieldwork that formed the basis of his important study *Minstrel Tales from Southeastern Turkey* (Berkeley, 1955). Other exceptions are the materials contributed by Saim Sakaoğlu (Erzurum), Tuncer Gülensoy (Elazığ), Ahmet Ali Arslan (Kars), and Mehmet Yalvaç (Malatya).

From the outset two criteria were set for all narratives to be included in the Archive: (1) they were to be told in a Turkic language, and (2) they were to be derived not only from the oral tradition but also from an oral tradition demonstrably alive today. The first criterion may well seem too restrictive, but it provided a consistent linguistic framework in a complex polyglot culture. As far as we can determine, this control has not caused the exclusion of any sizable amount of oral material, for all of the larger ethnic minority groups in Turkey (Arabs, Armenians, Greeks, Jews, Kurds, Lazes) have long been bilingual. The second criterion prohibited the use of tales merely said to be of oral derivation. More than 90% of all Archive holdings were recorded on magnetic tape, and most of these recordings have been well preserved and are available for listening at the Archive. It should be noted at once, however, that these are not stereophonic or even studio-

quality recordings. Inasmuch as the great bulk of them were made in rural Turkey at a time when most villages had no source of electricity, the fieldwork was done using portable battery-powered equipment. If not acoustically gratifying, the results are, nevertheless, adequately clear and amply audible.

Because Turkish is not a commonly known language in the West, optimal utilization of the Archive will be realized only when its recordings are translated into a major Western European language. Accordingly, the staff has given priority to its efforts to provide English translations for all holdings. More than a third of them have been translated to date and bound (along with annotations) in easy-to-use typescript volumes. *Preliminary Catalogue II: The First Thousand Tales* (1988) provides basic data (including Aarne-Thompson and Eberhard-Boratav type numbers when applicable) for all entries. Resources permitting, *Preliminary Catalogue III: The First Fifteen Hundred Narratives* should be ready by 1993.

That Turkey was a vast and largely untapped reservoir of oral tradition began to be apparent soon after World War II, and the four international congresses on Turkish folklore held during the past seventeen years have left little doubt about that fact. Uncertain about how many oral narratives might eventually be collected, we divided the Archive (partly for the purpose of logistical manageability) into eight major sections. These divisions are by no means mutually exclusive, and anyone so minded might well quarrel with our taxonomy.

I. *The Supernatural*

This section includes the *märchen* and other stories set in the world of fantasy and make-believe. Tales that contain the impossible (from a scientific point of view), magic, marvels, monsters, witches, giants, demons, jinns, speaking animals, and nonreligious miracles are found in this category. So too are tales about the vagaries of Fate, just so long as these mysterious ways are not directly attributed to the Deity. Accounts of religious miracles, saints' legends, and tales based on religious belief appear in Section VIII.

II. *Perplexities and Ingenious Deductions*

Many Turkish tales challenge the wits of both their characters and their audiences. These narratives may involve riddling dialogue, puzzles, conundrums, sign language, symbolic language, or other forms of disguised communication. They may also include seemingly unaccountable behavior for which rational explanation is sought.

III. *Humor*

Regardless of how rigorously one might define the nature of humor, one would probably have to concede that ultimately humor relies largely upon the response of the listener or reader. Turks find the tales catalogued beneath this heading funny. Here are placed slapstick, pratfall, situational comedy, verbal squelch, and tall tale. Here too are placed the clever achievements of tricksters. However exploitative—at times even vicious—the activities of the trickster may be, we usually accord to this archetypal figure a chuckle for his ingenuity and at least a grudging admiration for his success.

IV. *Moralizing*

It could be argued that a high percentage of oral narrative is, in one way or another, at least partially moralistic. This section of the Archive, however, is restricted to those tales that are overtly and unabashedly preachy or didactic. Because most animal fables make clear-cut distinctions between right and wrong, they could logically appear here rather than in Section I.

V. *Romance—Heroic and/or Amatory*

Here are accounts of the valiant deeds of warriors, both male and female. Whether the protagonists are historical or fictional, their prowess is usually exaggerated almost to the point of fantasy. The love stories often emphasize the spiritual aspects of the male/female relationship. The Most Beautiful Girl in the World in such tales may remind one of Dante's Beatrice, though the spiritualized love affair of the Middle East predated the Florentine by at least three centuries.

Narratives in this section are set apart by their form. *Cante fable* in mode, most of them are partly prose, partly poetry, and to one degree or another they are sung tales. They are created and performed by a folk poet-minstrel who in Turkey is called an *âşık*—literally *lover* but in this context *lover poet*. The *âşık* accompanies his singing with a lutelike instrument known as a *bağlama* or, more often now, *saz*. (The career of the *âşık*—his selection for the role, his initiation and training, his image and social status, and the many conventions of the minstrel tradition are too complex and detailed to be described here.)

VI. *Anticlerical Satire*

Tales that comprise this section should not be construed as

being antireligious. Quite the contrary, they reveal and criticize the human failings and moral lapses of members of the Moslem religious establishment. The offenders range from the poor dervish through the mosque personnel to the Caliph himself. Included among the clerical culprits who betray their faith is the *kadı*, the pre-Republic Moslem judge of canonical law, who was all too often vulnerable to bribery. Audiences furtively relish the naughty capers of such backsliders and (even less admirably) enjoy the exposure that humiliates dignity.

VII. *Anecdotal Wit and Wisdom*

Very short comic tales, usually told in less than four minutes, are legion in Turkey. They are placed in this separate section (rather than in III) because of (1) their extreme brevity and (2) their predominantly typed characters. However much historicity may be claimed for such favorites as Nasreddin Hoca, the daringly witty Janissary Incili Çavuş, or the madcap holy fool Behlül Dane, their typicality is patent.

Seemingly every land has villages or towns whose citizens are allegedly very shrewd or very stupid. Kayseri produces the sharpers of Turkey, and such villages as Çemişgezek and Karatepe consistently generate dummies. Anyone, of course, may appear to be stupid when removed suddenly from his or her native habitat, and rustics in an urban setting play the fool in many an anecdote (*fıkra* in Turkish). Ethnic humor, employing appropriate dialect, is the basis for countless anecdotes burlesquing Albanians, Armenians, Greeks, Gypsies, Jews, Kurds, Lazes, Persians, and other minority groups.

VIII. *Miscellaneous*

Within this catch-all category is a wide variety of narratives that have in common only their claim to be true. Some are sufficiently historical to qualify as legends. Others are utterly fanciful, however seriously they may be taken by tellers and listeners. Very few begin with the standard formulaic opening of the Turkish *märchen* or *masal*: “Once there was and once there wasn’t...”

One group of narratives in this section is made up of what seems to be folk history. Another contains wish-fulfillment fantasies: stories of buried treasure and accounts of real-life peasant boys and girls who marry into rich, noble, or even royal families. Saints’ lives and tales derived from religious sources form another component of

VIII. Among these last a number feature Hızır, who in the modern era is usually pictured either as a saint or as a special agent of God but who in early times was viewed as a water deity.

Finally, there are in this unit a few non-narrative items. They are included because of their relevance, in one way or another, to tales in the other sections. There are, for instance, examples of the *tekerleme*, the long, formulaic nonsense jingle used at the beginning of some tales. There are also songs that seem clearly to be related to the minstrel tales of Section V.

Because Turkey is a land bridge between Europe and Asia, it has been a crossroads of empire for more than 6,000 years, and the peoples of many civilizations and cultures have left their imprints not only upon the landscape but also upon the folk memory. To a far greater extent in Turkey than in most other countries of the world, any seemingly recent item of folklore may in fact be ancient. Pre-Islamic, pre-Christian, even pre-Classical themes and motifs often surface in Turkish folktales. In order to be able to identify and interpret such materials, a greater reliance must be placed on secondary sources than is common in many other folkloric studies. Besides the readily available resources of the Texas Tech University Library, the researcher will find in the Archive a small but highly selective collection of reference works and specialized studies. Fewer than 10% of these titles are listed in the OCLC computer network. Other support mechanisms for research include audio equipment for listening to and reproducing tapes; low-cost copy service; and electronic typewriters with Turkish letters and diacritical marks. Perhaps the most useful tools are the several indexes to Archive holdings, including a subject index that presently runs to several thousand headings and subheadings.

Among ancillary activities of the Archive are the publication and distribution of books and filmstrips on Turkish culture to schools throughout the United States and Canada. See the Archive entry in *Educators Guide to Free Social Studies Materials*.

Archive hours on weekdays during fall and spring semesters are 8:00 to 3:30; during most of the summer they are 8:00 to 2:00.

Queries and other communications should be sent to:

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