

*Harid Fedai*

**MULLA OR HODJA NASREDDIN  
AS SEEN BY CYPRIOT TURKS AND  
GREEKS**

*This is a copy of the article from printed version of electronic journal*

***Folklore Vol. 16***

ISSN 1406-0957

*Editors Mare Kõiva & Andres Kuperjanov*

*Published by the Folk Belief and Media Group of ELM*

---

**Folklore**

**Electronic Journal of Folklore**

Electronic version ISSN 1406-0949 is available from

***<http://haldjas.folklore.eelfolklore>***

It's free but do give us credit when you cite!

© *Folk Belief and Media Group of ELM, Andres Kuperjanov*

---

**Tartu 2001**

# MULLA OR HODJA NASREDDIN AS SEEN BY CYPRIOT TURKS AND GREEKS

*Harid Fedai*

## THE IDENTITY OF HODJA NASREDDIN

Anecdotes credited to Hodja Nasreddin can be found in written sources from as early as the 16th century. However, there is no consensus among them as to who Hodja Nasreddin was. The Mufti of Sivrihisar, Hüseyin Effendi (d. 1880) writes in *Mecmua-ı Maarif* that our Hodja was born in the village of Hortu, Sivrihisar in 1208 (605 Hegira) and died in 1284 (683 Hegira) in Akşehir, the town he had immigrated to (Kabacalı 1991: 15). Some authors claim he was a contemporary of Timurleng, basing their claim upon the *Travelogue of Eviya Chelebi*:

*He was from Akshehir. He was in the world during the reign of Ghazi Hüdavendigâr (Murat the First, 1326–1389), and lived during the rule of Yıldırım Khan (1389–1402). He had great virtues; he was witty, he was a miracle worker, a philosopher, and he was straightforward and moderate in sacred and profane matters. He was present at sessions of the learned held by Timurleng. (Kabacalı 1991: 17)*

Ebu'l-Hayr-i Rûmî in *Saltuq-nâme* (1480) written in the name of Jem Sultan, considers Hodja Nasreddin a follower of the same spiritual guide or 'pir' as Sarı Saltuq who migrated to Roumelia in 1263–1264 with ten to twelve thousand Turkomans living in nomad tents (Akalm 1988; Kabacalı 1991: 11).

## THE SUBTLETIES

The circumstances that led to the emergence of the anecdotes has been described by different authors in the following way:

*The Anatolian people of the 13th century were an unhappy, unlucky community devoid of everything, who felt deeply the kind of hunger which could not be endured for too long, and who were so helpless as to quench their hunger by eating the flesh of the dead during the famine at the end of the century. (Kurgan 1968: 207; Kabacalı 1991: 23)*

*This kind of life, devoid of any hope resulted in the belief in happiness after death, and it is due to this belief that such mystical poets as Mewlana and Yunus Emre, who were Nasreddin's contemporaries, made their appearance. The period of time during which all three lived together falls between 1239 and 1273, that is a duration of 34 years. (Kurgan 1968: 226; Kabacalı 1991: 22)*

Despite the great number of hypotheses as to Hodja Nasreddin's historical personality, it must be noted that none of them is based on convincing documents or evidence. For instance, the Russian writer Leonidas Soloviof has claimed Hodja to be of Bukharan origin.

*Uigurs and Uzbegs do not believe that Hodja Nasreddin lived in Anatolia. According to the Uigurs, Hodja Nasreddin was from Eastern Turkistan; Uzbegs, on the other hand, think that he was born and lived in Bukhara. (Nasrettinoğlu 1996; Çotuksöken 1996: 16)*

It is even claimed that he is a figure of fiction altogether, that he is nothing but a Turkish conversion into Hodja (Khodja) from the famous Arabian joke-teller Juha (Djoha/Djuha) (Özkan 1983; Kabacalı 1991: 19). Bardavid (1996) begins his treatise on Hodja Nasreddin:

*Hodja Nasreddin; Nars-a-din Hodja, Nastrazzi Hotza, Hioha, Joha-Juha, Juhi, Ceha, Cahan, Goha, Gha, Guifa, Moha, Yukha, Yoha, Djha, Djufa, J'Ha, Jinfa, Jovani, Ch'Ha, Jeha [---] are only a couple of names our Hodja has. Humour will be with us as long as the world exists.*

*Each country has created its own Hodja. And the anecdotes of Hodja, the proverbs and folk poems have increased like an avalanche, multiplied, echoed around the world in innumerable examples, a model of a myth spread by word of mouth that has travelled around the world for nobody knows how many times!*

*Each country created its own Hodja, the anecdotes became common and were translated to all languages.*

The subject is consolidated by the following words: “As indicated by the types clustered hitherto, the anecdotes of Hodja Nasreddin is a common property of nations whose languages and cultures vary greatly.” (Boratav 1995: 68). The reason why these anecdotes spread along a wide geographical territory during a period of many centuries, is explained in the following way:

*While some considered these anecdotes entertaining stories, useful for making the simple common people laugh, others noticed in them moral lessons and criticisms of the society, or qualities of humour with positive effects. It is without doubt that the stories of Nasreddin derive their extraordinary liveliness and their great power to spread from their qualities which bear diverse values and have multifarious aspects. (Boratav 1995: 69)*

*Since his person as the hero of the anecdotes and the historical person have become separated in time and we have ended up with a Hodja Nasreddin who symbolises that person in both the anecdotes and as described by people, and since we do not have enough documentation in our hands, it is impossible to reconstruct Hodja as he really was. (Kabacalı 1991: 11)*

*It is not possible to save Hodja Nasreddin from the fate of being shaped by the views, sensations and cognition of the people. Such an attempt would amount to denying the very reason for his universality and centuries-long survival within many languages.*

*Since it is the people who created the current figure of Hodja, we should see and show him as people have seen him in his anecdotes and we shouldn't feel out of place when we understand that the transformation which has come about in his real anecdotes has been reflected in his image. (Kabacalı 1991: 25)*

## **THE VIEWPOINTS OF THE TWO COMMUNITIES**

The anecdotes of Hodja Nasreddin are quite widespread, not only among the Turkish but also the Greek Cypriots. However, the anecdotes have been to a large extent passed on from generation to generation as part of the oral tradition and have not been written

down. Still, what has been written down is mostly done by Greeks: in the 1930s, three books were published by two authors (Stavrinides 1937: 16; 1939: 8; Malta 1939: 17).

The first Turkish anecdotes were written down only in the early 1950s in verse form. Burdurlu first published them in a daily (Burdurlu 1951–1952), later he increased the number of anecdotes to 40 and compiled them in a book (Burdurlu 1965). His example was followed by Tekman (1954) and Hakeri (1956). However, due to conflicts between Hakeri and his publisher, only a few copies of his books were ever sold.

Greeks know Nasreddin also as Hodja Aslant (Fedai 1996: 135–137). Up to the early 1960s before the situation on Cyprus became complicated, Hodja's subtleties were related in humorous atmosphere. The Greeks would consent to the Hodja figure in order to belittle the Turks and Turks would reply by using the figure of the 'Priest'. After the strifes at the Christmas of 1963 the Greek and Turkish communities began to live on separate territories, and since the Peace Operation held by Turkey on July 20, 1974, Cyprus has been divided in two. Considering that the subtleties of Hodja Nasreddin aimed at making fun and belittling are still told in South Cyprus, we can assume that the stories of the 'Priest' are still in demand in North Cyprus. But it can also be claimed that in the aftermath of the strife, new types of anecdotes have emerged. An example to the point would be the booklet in verse by Kutlu Adalı (1971) that criticises the political activities of Makarios (the former Archbishop and President of the former Republic of Cyprus) in the form of the anecdotes of Hodja Nasreddin. Let us conclude by giving some examples of anecdotes from both communities:

## **Turkish**

### **i. Tekman (1954: 33–39)**

Hodja enters a contest of wisdom with three priests and wins. (Kabacalı 1991, No. 303).

### **ii. Adalı (1971)**

1. Hodja rides his donkey sitting facing the rear end, advising the Greek leader to ride like this, too, to be able to see what remains in

his trail (reference to terror, a divided Cyprus, etc.) (Kabacalı 1991, No. 181)

2. The anecdote titled “What if it takes?” (p. 12) criticises the Greek leader’s indulgence for things that would not take root (Kabacalı 1991, No. 124).

3. The subtlety “Let’s See When the Stick Hits” (pp. 50–51) explains that just as the kids who made fun of Hodja were brought to reason with the help of a stick, the Greek leader, too, would be brought to reason (Kabacalı 1991, No. 317).

## **Greek**

### **i. Malta (1939)**

The seven anecdotes found in the booklet describe Hodja as a person who would always be overcome by his opponent, belittled, helpless, the victim of funny situations.

1. When it is discussed in the coffee house whether a 100-year-old imam could have a child or not, Hodja intervenes and says: “Of course he can, especially if he has a young male neighbour!”

2. Hodja’s wife establishes a relation with a man through a matchmaker. This results in abundance in the kitchen, and Hodja is relieved from eating just olives and bread. He relishes eating all the delicious food. One day his wife wants to test him and again serves just olives and bread. Hodja retorts by saying: “You, wife, olives and bread is not the food of pimps!”

3. His neighbour consents to bringing Hodja a stuffed goose for which he has been hankering, so that Hodja may lend him the cauldron, an act Hodja has been reluctant to do. However, the neighbour then makes an excuse and breaches his promise, thus cheating Hodja.

4. Hodja visits a friend of his, the gullible Cadi Mehmed, who is swindled by a man. Then when the friend sees that Hodja is writing his name in the book of idiots and making a picture of his, he swears at Hodja.

5. Being unable to make a living by serving as an imam, Hodja becomes a boatman. One day a Pasha who wishes to have a delightful ride embarks on his boat. While the Pasha is trying to show off his wisdom, an unexpected storm breaks out. The boat sinks and the Pasha who, despite his pretentious wisdom doesn't even know how to swim, gets drowned.

6. Hodja has worked all day in the garden of his father and is completely exhausted, then he prays to God to send him a donkey so that he can ride home easily. Suddenly a donkey appears before him, but with a gunned bully riding it! He orders Hodja to pick up the foal and take it to the village. Poor Hodja, dreaming of riding the donkey ends up carrying the foal on his shoulders and getting whipped.

7. Hodja explains to the peasants how virtuous poverty is. The peasants, however, happen to be of the opposite opinion. One day a disaster hits the village and the peasants start looking for a place to shelter themselves from danger. In the end the disaster has made it clear that it is the peasants who are right, not the Hodja.

**ii. Corfiades** has a total of 52 anecdotes in his book. However, 25 of these have nothing to do with Hodja, 13 of the remaining subtleties mention 'Hodja', while 14 talk about 'Hodja Nasreddin'. Characteristics of the Hodja figure exposed in these 27 anecdotes are given below under different headings, with the numbers of the anecdotes indicated.

1. Hodja's wife is a lewd lying and disrespectful woman, cuckolds him all the time. Nos. 8, 27, 31, 40.

2. Hodja cannot get along with his wife and mother-in-law, and threatens them all the time. Nos. 5, 15, 18, 19, 23, 24, 28.

3. Hodja is foul-mouthed, crafty, licentious and a liar. Nos. 3, 9, 10, 17, 25–27, 44.

4. Hodja is interested in teaching lessons to others and leading them. Nos. 5, 15, 18, 19, 23, 24, 28.

5. Hodja tries to appear sincere. Nos. 7, 28, 44.

6. Hodja demonstrates stupidity. Nos. 4, 6, 8, 9, 14, 22, 28.

7. Hodja lays the blame on himself. Nos. 8, 10.

8. Bad identity and bad language ascribed to 'Hodja'. Nos. 9, 12, 22, 27, 28, 44.

Presented to the ISFNR 2000 Conference, Kenyatta University, July 17th–22nd, 2000.

## References

- Adalı, Kutlu 1971. *Hodja Nasreddin and Cyprus*. Nicosia.
- Akalın, Şükrü (ed.) 1988. *Saltuq-Name*. II. Istanbul.
- Bardavid, Beki 1996. Each Country Has Its 'Hodja'. *Cumhuriyet*, Dec. 17th. Istanbul.
- Boratav, Pertev Naili 1995. *Hodja Nasreddin*. Istanbul: Yapı Kredi Publications.
- Burdurlu, İbrahim Zeki 1951–1952. Hodja Nasreddin. *Bozkurt*, Nov. 18th – Oct. 20th. Nicosia.
- Burdurlu, İbrahim Zeki 1965. *Oh My Hodja Nasreddin, Aren't You Really Funny*. İzmir.
- Corfiades, Panos D. *O Nasradin Hocas*. Athens.
- Çotuksöken, Yusuf 1996. *Subtleties of Hodja Nasreddin: A Study and a Compilation*. Istanbul.
- Fedai, Harid 1996. *Hodja Nasreddin or Hodja Aslani of Cyprus*. In *Memory of Hodja Nasreddin*. Istanbul: Oğlak Memorial Books.
- Hakeri, Bener Hakkı 1956. *Hodja Nasreddin in Poems*. Nicosia.
- Kabacalı, Alpay 1991. *A Thorough Study of Hodja Nasreddin*. Istanbul.
- Kurgan, Şükrü 1968. Traces of the Subtleties of Hodja Nasreddin in Turkish Folk Living. *Türk Dili Dergisi* (Journal of Turkish Language), Dec. Ankara.
- Malta, Joanni Chr. 1939. *Emmetres Istories Nasr-el-din Hoca*. (Stories of Hodja Nasreddin.) Nicosia.
- Nasrettinoğlu, İrfan 1996. Twenty-Three Mulla Nasreddin. In *Memoriam of Hodja Nasreddin*. Istanbul: Oğlak Publications, pp. 327–336.
- Özkan, İsa 1983. The Historical Personality and Subtleites of Hodja Nasreddin. *Studies on Turkish Folklore*. Ankara.
- Soloviof, Leonidas. *O Nastredin Hocas*. (In Greek). Athens.
- Stavrínides, Chr. G. 1937. *Stories of Hodja Nasreddin Which Make One Laugh Out Loud*. Nicosia.
- Tekman, Mehmet Şinasi 1954. *Poems of Hodja Nasreddin*. Nicosia.