

Yunus Emre

Yunus Emre is probably the best-loved poet in Turkey, loved for his simple humanity as well as sublime wisdom. The information on his life is fragmentary, based on what he writes in his *Diwan* and on stories told within the Bektashi tradition.

According to Bektashi tradition, when Hajji Bektash arrived in Anatolia (Rūm), he summoned all the great shaykhs to a meeting, but a man called Emre who "possessed great holiness" refused. When asked why, Emre explained that when he was called to the Sufi path, a hand, appearing from behind a curtain, had granted him permission, and that he had never seen anyone called Bektash at the banquet of the *erenler* (saints or spiritual guides) he had attended. When Hajji Bektash asked if the hand had a mark on it, Emre replied that it had a green mole on the palm – at which point Bektash revealed his own hand, with the same mark, and the astonished Emre cried out three times "*Tapduk padishahım*" (At your service my Padishah) – from then on he was called Tapduk Emre.

In one of the villages nearby there was a very poor man called Yunus who worked as a farmhand. During a severe famine, Yunus decided to visit Hajji Bektash, news of whose miracles had spread far and wide, and ask for help. He went to the *dergah* (dervish lodge) and prostrated before the *pīr* Hajji Bektash, giving him a gift of some medlars and asking for wheat in return. Hajji Bektash treated him kindly and he stayed at the *dergah* for several days. Then he wished to leave, at which Bektash said: 'does he want wheat or the miraculous power (*himma*) of the saints (*erenler*)?' Yunus again asked for his wheat. When Bektash heard of his response, he said 'If he wishes, I will blow on each medlar fruit'. Again Yunus wanted his wheat. Bektash then offered to exert his spiritual power on the seed of each medlar. But Yunus insisted on his wheat and was given it.

A short while down the road Yunus began to regret his decision – he returned to Hajji Bektash who told him he had given Yunus' 'lock' to Tapduk Emre, and if he wished to open it, he would have to go there. Immediately Yunus went to Tapduk Emre, told him what had happened and was appointed to gather firewood for the *dergah* – it is said that he never brought in a bent or damp piece of wood in the forty years he served him.

One day an assembly of *erens* was held. The woodcutter Yunus was present with his shaykh Tapduk Emre, who went into a state of ecstasy and called out to another Yunus (the singer) to sing – but this Yunus couldn't speak at all. So Tapduk turned to Yunus and said: 'The time has come, your lock has been opened. Don't just stand there – sing!' At that the veil was removed from Yunus, and the lock was opened – he immediately began to compose beautiful hymns and orations.

This Bektashi tradition places Yunus Emre as a Turkmen peasant living in the second half of the 7th/13th century in one of the villages near Bolu, by the Sakarya river (the third largest in Turkey

which runs into the Black Sea in the northwest of the country). His Sufi lineage seems to have come through Tapduk Emre from a Central Asian Turkish tradition, based on the teachings of Ahmed Yesevi, with whom he has much in common.

His relations with Tapduk Emre are much remarked on in popular tradition: for example, when Yunus brought back wood, Tapduk asked him (tongue in cheek): 'Is there no bent wood in the mountains?' To which Yunus replied 'There is a lot of crooked wood in the mountains, but at your gate it is not proper for anything to be bent, even the wood.' He is the model of the dervish able to reach the highest levels of spirituality through absolute devotion to his spiritual guide.

It seems from his *Diwan* that both Rumi and his shaykh Tapduk died before he did, that he went to Damascus for a while on Tapduk's orders, stopped in Antep en route and may even have visited Mecca to visit the Ka'ba (i.e. do the pilgrimage). He is reputed to have lived a long time and after his shaykh's death to have had many dervishes around him. He died in 720/1320.

He is reported to have been illiterate: although this does not necessarily mean literally, it does show that he did not have the college (*madrassa*) education of many contemporaries such as Rumi. Spiritually it means being able to receive knowledge from the divine directly: it is said that the people of Sharia are the people of words (*ahl-i qāl*), while the people of true knowledge and realisation (*ahl-i ḥaqīqa*) are people of mystical states (*ahl-i ḥāl*).

He is the author of a *Diwan* and a 600-verse mathnawi (*Risālet el-nuṣṣiyye*). The current critical edition of the *Diwan* contains 417 poems, all of which bar one are ghazals. He mostly used the Turkic system of versifying, based on the number of syllables and stress position rather than the elaborate rules of Arab-Persian prosody. He used the Old Anatolian Turkish language, which was understood by everyone, with very few Arabic or Persian words, and he contributed greatly to the establishment of a Turkish mystical vocabulary based on classic Sufi terms.

The most recurrent themes in Yunus Emre's *Diwan* are mystic love (*aşk*), the Friend (*dost*), and how to be a dervish. Yet he is no recluse and the conditions of everyday life are reflected in his poems. His easily understandable religious and moral advice is couched in a lyrical language that is heartfelt, sincere and often highly passionate. His poetry, set to music, was of central importance in the dissemination of Sufi teachings in Anatolia, and influenced the *tekke* poetry of the following centuries. The intense religious and humane feeling in his poetry has not lost its appeal today.

As one modern scholar has written,

"It can be said that Turkish reached its zenith in this field [of Anatolian Turkish literature and Sufi poetry] in the 14th century with the great Turkmen (Turcoman) poet Yunus Emre (d. 1320). Yunus succeeded in speaking and writing Turkish with a skill that has been unrivalled by anyone throughout history for its ease and simplicity. He brought Turkish Sufi literature, which he never

ceased to refine, to an incomparable level of maturity, and channeled sincerity, rapture and ecstasy, like a powerful river, towards a future of endless centuries. On the one hand, his poetry became a source for troubadour (*'āshiq*) literature, and on the other, became a source for the famous classical school (*dīwān* literature) of the Ottoman period. Yunus consequently had a distinct influence on these two genres of Turkish literature. Anatolia, which the Seljuk sultans and commanders and Turkish *begs* took by the sword, was in fact conquered and became a real Turkish homeland thanks to the great representatives of the Turkish cultural struggle."¹

¹ Ibrahim Kafesoğlu, *A History of the Seljuks*, trans. Gary Leiser, 1988