

## Islamic Mystical Poetry 7: session 1

### Introduction

Welcome to the seventh course of Islamic Mystical Poetry: in this course we shall be looking at poets from the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries, three from the Ottoman Turkish tradition, one from the Ottoman Arab tradition, and two from the Indian sub-continent. As you may be aware, this is the final short course devoted to Islamic Mystical Poetry, and we hope that this and previous courses will give you a deeper appreciation of the extraordinary cultural flowering which these poets give voice to, a heritage which must rank, alongside sacred buildings, as one of the greatest gifts of Islam to humanity.

On the last course we ended with one of the rare examples of female poets, A'ishah Ba'undiyyah, whose life more or less coincided with the end of the Mamluk era, the time when a Turkic slave dynasty in Egypt came to rule vast swathes of the Arab world, from Cairo to Damascus, forming a bulwark against the predations of Mongol invaders. Now we are moving into a time when the Ottomans came to dominate the whole of the Middle East, when the Ottoman sultans conquered Syria, Egypt and the Hijaz (including Mecca and Medina) and proclaimed themselves as *khalifa*, the representative of God on earth. In English this period, which follows the conquest of Constantinople in 1453, is usually referred to as the Ottoman Empire, but in the Muslim consciousness it was an empire authorized by the divine and with all the trappings of religious (Sunni) orthodoxy, a caliphate. At its peak, the empire covered a vast expanse, from Algeria to the Caspian Sea and from Crimea to Yemen, bringing together Turks, Arabs, Greeks, Jews, Armenians, Berbers, Slavs and many other peoples and uniting them as first and foremost Ottoman.

The Ottoman language itself became a proof of this international melting pot: from the 10th century when the Turks converted to Islam, Turkish became enriched with Farsi words from Persia and words from Arabic, notably Quranic Arabic. By the 13th century, the time of Jalaluddin Rumi, Turkish was becoming Ottoman: a new, complex, melodic language which provided a huge lexicon for poets.

The early 16th century is the time of Sultan Selim I, known as the 'Grim' (rather than 'Cruel' which is the more common translation of the Turkish 'Yavuz') (1512-1520), who expanded the eastern and southern frontiers by firstly defeating the Safavid Shah of Persia, Shah Ismail (putting an end to Shi'i expansionism), and then by establishing Ottoman rule instead of the Mamluks in Syria and Egypt, and of his son Suleyman the Magnificent (known in Turkish as Kanuni, 'the Law-giver', 1520-1566).

But more than this: many of the sultans were themselves artists and patrons of the arts, so much so that the city of Istanbul became the epicentre of a cultural renaissance. The enormous

repertoire of Turkish classical music and poetry was composed almost entirely by the Ottoman sultans and the artists they directly supported. Sultan Suleyman, for example, was a highly cultured intellectual, musician and poet (writing under the name Muhibbi, ‘the lover’). The sultans were principally rulers and warriors, but at the same time they also considered themselves humble disciples of various Sufi orders. For instance, the conqueror of Istanbul, Mehmed Fatih, had a close advisor and shaykh called Aq Shamsuddin, who was steeped in Ibn ‘Arabi’s teachings and had been a student of Haci Bayram (who we studied in course 5); Sultan Selim I established the mosque and shrine complex at Ibn ‘Arabi’s tomb in Damascus as one of his first acts when taking the city.<sup>1</sup>

If we briefly mention this historical background, it is only to give us some context for the poet we are looking at this week: Uftade, who like many spiritual masters had connections to the court and even accepted Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent as his student.

### **Ottoman Divan poetry**

Before we look at Uftade’s life, a brief word about Ottoman Divan poetry: the word Divan (Arabic and Persian *Dīwān*) basically means a collection of poems by a single author, or even a poet’s whole body of work. There are various forms of Divan, the vast majority of which are gazels (love poetry) and kasîdes (panegyric odes). It worked side by side with music, and Turkish classical music is built on a modal system using untempered intervals<sup>2</sup> (53 microtones to an octave and 952 different modalities employing various rhythmic cycles known as Makam). Ottoman Divan was a highly stylized and symbolic art form, inheriting a wealth of symbols from Persian poetry. These symbols often came in rhyming opposing pairs: for example, the nightingale (*bûlbûl*) and the rose (*gûl*), the world (*cihân*) and the rose-garden (*gûlistân*) – or in polarities drawn from Sufism, the ascetic (*zâhid*) and the dervish (*dervîş*).

Thus the nightingale symbolises the fervent lover, especially the Sufi, who is often situated in the world, yearning for his beloved, the rose, who is situated in the rose-garden, i.e. the garden of Paradise – but the rose has thorns that cause pain and suffering... The world may thus be both a rose-garden and a place of suffering. We will be looking at this nightingale motif today and in the next session: as you may be aware, the rather drab-looking nightingale, with its astounding musicality, has had a very long history as a symbolic bird. As Luis Borges put it in his poem “To the Nightingale”,

Out of what secret English summer evening

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<sup>1</sup> See *The Nightingale in the Garden of Love*, introduction by Paul Ballanfat, for examples of this complex interrelationship between Sultan and Sufi.

<sup>2</sup> Once a musician has learned these by ear, he is free to express his own understanding of the Makam through improvisation called Taksim.

or night on the incalculable Rhine,  
lost among all the nights of my long night,  
could there have come to my unknowing ear  
your song, encrusted with mythology,  
nightingale of Virgil and the Persians?

I will give you, to read at home, a copy of an interesting article on the origins of the nightingale symbolism in the work of the great Spanish mystic, St John of the Cross. For as Borges alludes, there are two quite different kinds of nightingale in human consciousness: the sorrowful bird of Homer and Virgil adopted by later western authors, mourning her lost young, a violated virgin or dispossessed mother, associated with grief and weeping; and the bird of intoxicated love, the soul longing for eternal beauty.

**Uftade** is the name by which one of the greatest masters of Ottoman Sufism is known: his proper name was Mehmed (= Muhammad), and like many of that time, he was given the sobriquet Muhyiddin ('Reviver of the Religion') because of his spiritual companionship to Ibn 'Arabi (who was generally known as Muhyiddin). He adopted the name Uftade ('the fallen') as a result of a vision he had when young: he used to perform the call to prayer in the Great Mosque of Bursa, the Ulucami, and in another mosque. His call to prayer was so beautiful that people gathered to hear it and some fell into ecstasy. One day he was offered a sum of money to compensate him for his service. But the same night he had a vision, during which he was told: "You have fallen (*üftāde*) from your station". He immediately returned the money, keeping the name Uftade as a reminder.

The sources for Uftade's life and writings are various: he himself composed a *divan*, a collection of poems suitable for singing in Sufi gatherings – some of these we will look at today – and a series of sermons who do not appear to have survived. His followers wrote several works on his life. For example, his most important disciple, Aziz Mahmud Hudayi, kept a daily diary of his training with Uftade, written in Arabic: this describes the teaching sessions that he had with him, and is one of the most remarkable documents of Sufi education in terms of actual experience. We get glimpses of a very different type of Sufism from the one usually depicted in books: this is the Sufism of oral teaching, of a true master painstakingly taking aspirants into deeper and deeper understanding, into clearer and clearer realisation of what it means to be a human being. It is a notebook recording an encounter between a man in his late thirties, who had given up his position as a judge (*qadi*) to follow the spiritual path, and a master of realisation in his late eighties, passing on the fruits of a lifetime's experience.

**Uftade's life:** Born 895/1490 in the town of Bursa, Uftade grew up in a working family. When he was about 8, his father entrusted him to a silk merchant, for whom he worked for 8 years.

When his father and the merchant died, Uftade was left to look after his brother, sister and mother – soon after his brother died, and his sister married, and his mother left to join her. Thus Uftade was alone and able to follow his spiritual master, Hizir Dede (d. 913/1507), a member of the Bayrami order. When he was 18, his master died, leaving him bereft. He became a muezzin, well known in Bursa for the beauty of his voice, and eventually a spiritual master or shaykh with students whom he taught in his house on the mountainside in a small district above the centre of Bursa.

Uftade says: “I was a young man of eighteen years old when my master went to the mercy of God. I fell into an immense affliction and great hardship on this path, and God did not open a single door for me until the day that I had a vision in which two drops or more fell on my heart from the universe of Meaning, after which it opened. I saw what I saw while I was travelling in the world of immersion for six or seven days, such that I no longer perceived myself nor other than me.”<sup>3</sup>. It is this direct instruction by God, uniting the spiritual teachings of Ibn ‘Arabi and Rumi, that establishes and characterises what he called the Jalwati (Celveti) way, which he says is no other than ‘the way of the Prophet and his Companions’. It was this Jalwati way that Uftade trained his students in, thus bringing about a new *tariqa*, of which Hudayi would become the first master.

Uftade died at the age of ninety and was buried next to a mosque – his tomb is much visited even today for his spiritual blessing. His house, which served as a dervish lodge for his students, was built some way up the mountainside, with a mosque next door – it included a special cell for retreat. Both tomb and house have recently been renovated by the city council (see [www.youtube.com/watch?v=tg0AyOjIFXw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tg0AyOjIFXw))

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*Bibliography:*

\*\*Uftade, *The Nightingale in the Garden of Love*, translated with excellent introduction by Paul Ballanfath (Oxford, 2005) [available at special price of £10 direct from SH]

Luce Lopez-Baralt, *Islam in Spanish Literature, from the Middle Ages to the present* (Leiden, 1992), chapter 3: on the genesis of the solitary bird of St John of the Cross

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Edward Hirsch (ed.), *To a Nightingale: Sonnets and Poems from Sappho to Borges* (2007)

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<sup>3</sup> *NGL*, 15.