

FROM MINIATURE TO YOUTUBE: NASREDDIN HODJA'S ENDURING FIGURE. A FOLK HERO'S MEDIUM TRANSMUTATIONS THROUGHOUT HISTORY IN TURKEY

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Abstract: This paper aims to showcase contemporary manifestations of traditional folklore hero Nasreddin Hodja, a figure that has withstood the passage of time and remained relevant in the Turkish culture, partly assisted by media and technology. As we enter the digital era, I believe that we stand witnesses to a new cultural revolution, drawing on Marshall McLuhan's description of the paradigm change that dawned with the invention of the printing press. I will use the adaptation theory to exemplify how the figure of Nasreddin Hodja has remained broadly the same throughout the past centuries, but how the context and media used for storytelling his tales have changed.

Keywords: Nasreddin Hodja, storytelling, intertextuality, hybridity, adaptation, children literature.

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Introduction

How does a story become adaptive? Before the advent of the digital era in recent history, though knowledge about oral traditions of past civilizations had been passed on by history lessons, tales have remained for the latter half of the second millennium embedded in fixed texts as the art of storytelling faded into the background, replaced by the reliable medium of the print. Stories still experienced various grades of transformation, especially during the 20th century through movie and TV adaptation, but there existed certain canons with established boundaries regarding the degree of story alteration. The internet, however, has led to a strong revival of storytelling, facilitated by digital instruments and social media, which also enabled a certain freedom, previously not allowed, of taking and adapting a narrative. To exemplify, this paper aims to show some of the ways through which Nasreddin Hodja, a very popular Turkish folklore character, is depicted on different digital platforms and how the narrative is adapted by artists, content creators and regular social media users alike. The adaptation process, as described by Canadian academic Linda Hutcheon (2006), draws on the concept of intertextuality as in texts seen as mosaics of visible and invisible quotes and references that make the reader link the 'original' to the adaptation and find pleasure in their comparison. This process plays at different levels, not only at discourse level where parts of the story are being 'upgraded' to fit current societal dilemmas (in *Nasreddin Hodja The Time Traveler*, for example), but also at the level of the medium that transports the story (such as Asli Jackson's fashion show); in the latter case the transformation is so radical that, in my opinion, a form of hybridization occurs. The method used for this paper is a short discourse analysis of various storytellers of Nasreddin Hodja in mainstream culture, to see how they adapt the text and use storytelling to engage with the audience. By reviewing

audiovisual and other non-written material content about Nasreddin Hodja I hope to showcase the ways in which this folklore figure has been kept relevant in Turkish culture through adaptation and hybridization.

Many, or dare I say almost everybody, will have heard at least once throughout their lifetime of Nasreddin Hodja, especially those from the Balkans. A much beloved, popular figure in Turkish folklore, whose anecdotes go back in written sources as far as the 14th century (Gurkas, 2008), *Nasr-ed-Din* ('Helper of the Faith', *ar.*) *Hodja* (a type of Islamic teacher) is believed by some Turkish folklorists to have originated in Central Asia during the 6th century and migrated towards Anatolia together with the Turkic tribes (Boratav, 1996). Other scholars hold that his identity is uncertain, that he may be of Arab or Persian origins (Downing, 1965). His appearance, however, hasn't changed much since a depiction¹ in a 17th century Ottoman miniature: long white beard, large turban, riding a donkey; the narrative, however, has been transformed at times to fit the latest sociocultural demands, morphed throughout history, from trickster or fool to wise elder, saint or figure of justice (Başgöz, 1999). With his presence known from the Mediterranean Coast all the way to Siberia, Nasreddin Hodja is an exemplifying character of how a folk hero is circled back into mainstream culture and kept relevant for the newer generations in Turkey.

The latest sociocultural demands require the comfort of a familiar figure but propagated in different formats. One of the most prevalent complaints in the social media era is that people don't have the patience to sit through a book reading, be it due to lack of time or diminished attention spans. Desire to be informed or entertained obviously hasn't disappeared, so digital methods that circumvent classical text reading have been devised in form of audiobooks or videos; here is where the power of the Hodja's versatility is interposed: as part of the oral tradition long before Gutenberg's invention, re-adapting Hodja tales to storytelling comes naturally.

But there is a twist in the storytelling of the digital era. Looking at the theory of lecture, as much as the text medium has changed throughout different phases of civilization, from papyrus to hand written scrolls, to printed paper, to now electronic screens, the practice of decoding the meaning of a text within these established forms has always been unilateral, from author to reader. Liliana Moldovan argues that, due to the unilateral trajectory of a text from author to reader, the content in this lecturing format only leaves traces at the level of the reader's own interpretation, while the text is left "unaltered of the signs of the [reader's] subjective reception. The reader cannot change the content of the text

1 <https://www.kulturportali.gov.tr/medya/fotograf/fotodetay/9087>

but can only bring it into their own subjective selves and interpret it to their liking” (2009). So far this has been the established canon, but now we stand witness to a new turn in the way we propagate culture: through digital means enabled by social media and other audio/video sharing platforms, we now have the reader facing a different, interactive medium which leaves the text open to more than one ways to flow; thus the reader can choose to become the bearer of the story themselves, and contextualize or personalize it to their liking and share it with their audience who in turn may continue to do the same. This practice is not very different from the pre-era of the printing press, when stories would travel orally across communities, but the twist is that nowadays anyone can be a storyteller and the communities aggregate according to internet algorithms. Engaging in this online sharing behavior, the reader-turned digital storyteller employs adaptation, and thus breaks the pattern of the so far unchallenged sanctity of the author of printed text (*ibid.*), revealing the increasingly more acceptable practice of altering the story so that it fits a certain context as simple as an online trend or as complicated as a corporate agenda.

In his groundbreaking research on mass-media and the cultural shift, Marshall McLuhan argues that, at the dawn of civilization, assimilating the technology of the phonetic alphabet transposed Man “from the magical world of hearing to the neutral world of seeing” (1997). Drawing on psychological studies, he concludes that this phenomenon led to a separation of thought from action, thus emphasizing one sense over the other; and, once made aware of the situation, one can observe how these cultural mutations are triggered by technology. Those who experience for the first time a new technology have the most intense reaction because the new interplay between senses appears immediately and offers a new and surprising world that asks for a new interaction model. Soon, however, the initial shock fades away and, as people start getting used to the new model, it just gets absorbed in the perceptive habits within all areas that man works and lives (*ibid.*).

McLuhan is referring, of course, to the pre-Gutenberg era, stating that it takes many generations for the revolution to truly take place; in my opinion we are now witnessing the next wave and experiencing the initial shock of this new shift that takes place in culture due to the new technologies and social media platforms. So now we once again turn away from the canon and from enhancing the visual sense through reading, and move towards the hearing sense, with the added bonus of the digital video, which allows for both the eyes and ears to encompass a story. 21st century technology enables molding the text into different shapes and transferring it to other mediums; and we, as receptors of a text, can also choose to be part of a chain through which the story travels forward.

As we move away from the practice of reading, the story doesn't play inside our heads anymore, as stated by Moldovan (2009), while following the text with our eyes on a printed form. Skeptics are perhaps right to worry that personal imagination may be on the losing side as we choose to receive the text through digital storytelling, but we get to see the story reenacted in many ways on all various digital forms, and if we share it, we also become extensions to a never-ending narrative, taking turns in being on the giving, or receiving, or the performing end. We may watch on YouTube a video that we like and then may repost short snips of it on Instagram, and add a different context through a caption, and thus reframe and reshape and share it until its digital lifespan wanes.

This process of altering parts of a narrative or transposing new items in a familiar context within a well-established one is known as adaptation. This is a field derived from Translation Studies, which aims to explain the changes a source text goes through in lieu of the trend of adapting stories into movies that gained traction with the advent of the cinema (Stam, 2005) and attempts to describe all these mechanisms in which a narrative shakes off the canon of rigorously following translation proper when transposed into a different language and moves towards a more forgiving and inclusive one. Linda Hutcheon (2006) draws concepts from fields such as anthropology and illustrates the shifts that occur when a piece of work is adapted; she maintains that adaptations require a consideration of "an acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other work or works", "a creative and an interpretative act of appropriation/salvaging", and "an extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work." The author of the adaptation seeks the 'right' resetting or contextualizing that would best fit his/her objective in the name of relevance. At times the adaptation goes beyond any recognizable 'original' story with only some essential items kept, such as some ideas or characters, while completely new plots or settings are employed, resulting in hybridization:

When stories travel - as they do when they are adapted in this way across media, time, and place - they end up bringing together what Edward Said called different "processes of representation and institutionalization" [...] Adaptations too constitute transformations of previous works in new contexts. Local particularities become transplanted to new ground, and something new and hybrid results. (Hutcheons, 2006, p. 125)

Released from the shackles of authorship, the new digital bards find themselves in a desire to captivate audiences, and folk and fairy tale heroes present an appealing material to resurrect, as they are subjects with whom the audience is familiar. Turkey has kept alive the image Nasreddin Hodja even before social media, as it has a strong tradition of cherishing its cultural heritage.

From 15th century *Saltukname* manuscripts (Boratav, 1995) followed by the 17th century miniature, then 19th century printed books all the way to 20th century films, animations, graphic novels, caricatures, and now even – with their short-lived excitement – NFTs², the Hodja carried on mirroring follies or wisdom of the folk through word of mouth, paper and now electronic screens. Besides the original stories that aim to entertain or teach the reader, all these media tell their own story about those who imagined a different Hodja and wanted to leave their mark imprinted in the hidden folds of the creating process.

One good example of adaptive storytelling is a YouTube³ video sponsored by government owned tourism platform *Go Türkiye*, showcasing Judith Liberman narrating a Nasreddin Hodja tale nearby the ruins of a castle, in a very picturesque part of Turkey. The storyteller is performative in narrating this tale and in getting the audience's attention, and uses broad body movements and gestures to depict some of the actions going on in the tale. The story is about how the Hodja tries to save the moon from the well, and as any oral story usually goes, while the main narrative remains more or less the same, there is a lot of improvisation going on and some additions are added on the spot, through which the storyteller creates a certain context. In this tale Nasreddin goes one night to draw water from a well and sees the reflection of the moon on the water surface and, thinking it has fallen inside, tries to pull it back up. This particular narration is framed here as if the Hodja is making a great favor to the humanity by saving the moon from peril: „What will the poets write about, what will the lovers look up to in the beautiful light, who will light the way to the lost travelers?“ asks Liberman in front of her audience, coming up in the end with her own moral of the story, which is that all people are being very helpful in Turkey, so much so that they will stop and try to help one if they think one is in need of anything, even if the help offered is unsolicited, just like the Hodja tried to be of help with the moon, when there was no real necessity for him to do so.

This take comes forth in great contrast with the ‘classical version’ of the moon tale; one of the much earlier versions of this story. Found in a collection of anecdotes published in 1888 in London by W. A. Clouston, called *The book of Noodles: Stories of simpletons; or Common Fools and their Follies* goes as follows:

One evening the Hodja went to the well to draw water, and seeing the moon reflected in the water, exclaimed, “The moon has fallen into the well! I must pull it out.” So he let down the rope and hook, and the hook became fastened into a stone, whereupon he exerted all his strength, and the rope broke, and he

2 <https://mintable.app/TEMPLATES/item/Nasreddin-Hodja-Nasrettin-Hoca/q9wGiCJQWTRnSef>

3 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FdjfJLRCPM>

fell upon his back. Looking into the sky he saw the moon and cried out joyfully “praise be to Allah! I am sorely bruised, but the moon has got into its place again.” (p. 92).

Here *Khoja Nasr-‘d-din*, ‘the typical noodle of the Turks’, is seen in action employing some ‘witless devices’ (84). This is the take of the Hodja as a folk figure in the role of the simpleton, quite different from Liberman’s adaptation; while the ‘noodle’ Hodja is ascribed to the archetypal folklore hero as jester and the butt of the joke, in line with other European heroes such as Till Eulenspiegel (Oppenheimer, 1972), the ‘savior of the moon’ is ascribed in the saint-like tradition that Nasreddin Hodja carries in some parts of Turkey, where he is believed to have actually lived and died (Borataş, 1995).

Another instance of adaptive storytelling is when a Hodja anecdote is narrated by stand-up comedian and actor Cem Yılmaz⁴, who tells one of the most well-known Hodja tales within the Turkish space; he tells it in English to a Turkish audience during the TV show contest *Var Mısın Yok Musun* from Show TV. This anecdote is about how Nasreddin went one day to the lake with a pot of yoghurt and started pouring it spoon by spoon into the lake. A passer-by asks what he is up to, and upon Hodja’s reply that he is turning the lake into yoghurt (fermenting, as in *mayalamak*, *tr.*), the former asks perplexed, “How can the lake be fermented into yoghurt?”, to which the Hodja replies, “But what if this holds (*Ya tutarsa*, *tr.*)?” In telling this story Yılmaz uses body language to entertain, and also, because he is known to having poked fun in his stand-up comedies at the way Turks speak English, he is sort of reenacting this trope and the way Turkish people use the English language when speaking to foreigners, using phrases like “What are you doing?” and “Come on!” in certain intonations, as seen in the video. At one point he gets stuck with translating the fermentation part, and improvises by using the word ‘mayaling’, another nod at the way one can jokingly transform any word into an English one by adding *-ing* at the end. Then, just like the previous storyteller, he also proceeds to point to the punch line, the concluding phrase *Ya tutarsa*, which goes something like, well what if [something very improbable] happens [after all]?

The third video⁵ example entails what seems to be a home assignment during the pandemic, where one child and his family are reenacting with homemade props the anecdote with the rope, where a neighbor comes to Nasreddin and asks for a string of rope, to which the latter replies that he cannot lend his rope, for he has used it to sprinkle flour on it. The storyteller gives at the

4 <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x8ewbz>

5 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_7PUWYqeuGw

end the moral of the story, which is that one will find any excuse to not lend their things if their heart isn't into it.

In another instance of the Hodja's versatility, popular Turkish vlogger Aykut Elmas gets his take⁶ on Nasreddin Hodja tales with 'alternative answers', an online trend to come up with plot twists to well-known stories. Among some mash-ups of the more popular tales he also invents one from scratch, where the Hodja goes to the villagers with the request of being asked some clever questions in front of his date so that he can impress her, but instead the villagers end up embarrassing him in front of his date by asking if he has managed to ferment the lake into yoghurt (the implication being that he hasn't, hence the embarrassment). This is a relevant example, I would argue, of a hybridization process mentioned in Linda Hutcheon's research (2006:150): content creator Aykut Elmas 'transplants' the local particularity of the way certain youth circles joke about courtship into the form of a classic Hodja anecdote, with an introduction formula ('One day Nasreddin Hodja...'), the village setting, the dialogue, resulting a hybrid tale that preserves little from an 'original' story

Nasreddin Hoca Zaman Yolcusu (*Nasreddin Hodja The Time Traveler*) can be considered a more traditional approach on Nasreddin Hodja's transposal into a different medium, that is, screen adaptation; this is a cartoon series created for Turkish TV children's channel *TRT Çocuk*, released in 2017. The creators have Nasreddin Hodja travel through time into the future (a theme that had been used in a 1951 cartoon as well), and encounter 21st century human habits such as playing games on the tablet or using social media platforms (Yılar & Kakşa, 2020). In the episode chosen for this paper⁷, the main characters Cemil, Zehra, Ayşe and Kerim are worried about global warming, and when presented with solutions such as reducing gas emission, the Hodja comes up with whimsical methods to reduce car usage, such as stealing people's car keys or presenting town dwellers with the option of riding a donkey. What makes this series different from previous adaptations - at least seven other animations in Turkish TV and film industry (*ibid.*) - is, besides approaching with the help of a beloved folk hero stringent contemporary issues, such as pollution or improper use of technology which particularly affect younger generations, also the audience reach through YouTube streaming: the episode about global warming has, for example, 1,5 M views as of date on their official channel. The adaptive process in this case is two-fold, once through the 21st century upgraded narrative, and second through the switch from TV broadcasting to internet streaming platforms.

6 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N2j4sFVGQ3A>

7 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fxdkWX2r9qg>

A traditional approach on storytelling is also the one chosen by the Story Museum from the UK, which recorded storyteller Peter Chand in the summer of 2020 telling his audience inside the museum's courtyard, as per Nasreddin Hodja storytelling tradition, not one, but seven stories⁸, as part of their 1001 Stories Collection project. The recording is available on SoundCloud. This museum is a great example of adaptive storytelling through the works it showcases, which range from oral tradition to theater, ballet and performative poetry to comics, graphic novels and games. And our beloved Hodja rightly takes his place in this digital collective memory.

As the Story Museum documents on their platform, the story can take many forms of expression; the next example is another hybrid result, this time through the juxtaposition of Nasreddin Hodja with the world of fashion. The Hodja's Ya Tutarsa one-liner becomes a clothes collection⁹ created by fashion designer Aslı Jackson, showcased at Istanbul Fashion Week in 2015. Using the beloved folk hero as source of inspiration, Jackson believes that 'transposing Hodja's figure into patterns and textile was quite exciting, adapting it into fashion with a contemporary dynamic'. She takes inspiration from the Hodja's caustic but didactic features, his agile wit and humor. She uses handmade knits, yarn and leather blends and imprints of the famous Hodja outline. 'Here I tell these stories with my clothes', she concludes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, people took to storytelling as the skill or the art that makes the transition from printed text to new audiovisual forms, and stories old as time are adapted and reenacted on platforms like YouTube, SoundCloud or Instagram by artists and regular people alike. A storyteller can use numerous forms of expression that range from creating high-end fashion shows to the humble and ubiquitous meme. In this way the rift between the ear and the eye, that happened once upon a time when Gutenberg invented the printing press, is reconciled with the help of digital media. A different type of cultural heritage arises online, seemingly fragile and ephemeral, but which is already finding a way to shape, perhaps irremediably, humanity.

8 <https://soundcloud.app.goo.gl/QEoVMwqFRf8rgnTc6>

9 <http://www.seffafgazete.com/haberler/manset/24715/nasrettin-hoca-felsefesi-moda-dunyasinda?puan=2>

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