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Hagiography As A Source For Women’s History In The Ottoman Empire: The Curious Case Of Ünsî Hasan

John Curry

As a general rule, the literary sources that focus on religious figures in Ottoman society usually looks at the lives of famous figures from either the perspective of a respected member of the religious establishment or a member of the elite classes. Such records often fail to address difficult questions about how religious interaction took place among the early modern Ottomans. How did Sufi masters and their disciples relate to each other? What qualities distinguished a great shaykh, and guaranteed his longevity as a focus for the religiosity of future generations? Perhaps one of the most problematic questions about Ottoman religiosity is the way in which women interacted with the noted religious figures of the period. In the course of a research project dealing with the noted saints of the Halveti order of dervishes in the early modern Ottoman period, I discovered a hagiography of a little known saint, Ünsî Hasan, that hints at some of the popular expectations and attitudes toward women’s participation in a Sufi lodge. What makes this work even more interesting is the fact that Ünsî Hasan seems to have failed to stimulate the imagination of most of his contemporaries, making him a rare example of a failed saint.

Several studies of Sufism in Islam have noted the hostile attitude of the Muslim religious elite towards manifestations of “popular religion” during the medieval period, such as the trope of the popular preacher who caters to the needs of hordes of undiscerning women. None other than the well-known Jamal al-Din al-Suyuti of Egypt was once menaced by a mob of Cairo’s citizenry, made up primarily of angry women, for ordering the public whipping of a popular preacher whom he felt had strayed into error. J.S. Trimingham, despite recognizing the existence of some female saints, conveniently divided the gender of Muslim spirituality as males going to the Friday mosque for communal prayer while their womenfolk headed for the tombs of the saints. Nevertheless, the complaints of medieval scholars about mixed-gender participation in religious gatherings are proof that this type of gender division should not be accepted without extreme caution, especially when dealing with subsequent periods in Ottoman history.

Before embarking on this case study of Ünsî Hasan’s relations with his female followers, and the reasons for his eventual failure as a saint, I feel obliged first to offer some clarification about just what the term “sainthood” meant in the Muslim context of this particular period. When discussing the idea of Muslim saints, known in Turkish as evliya, we are not talking about a canonized set of holy personages that characterize the historical development of a Christian institution like the Catholic Church. In the Islamic tradition, the Turkish term evliya, derived from Arabic, does not exactly correspond to the meaning of the English term “saints.” The word itself literally refers to the “friends”

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of God on earth. While time constraints do not allow me the luxury of describing the development of the concept of Islamic sainthood in full, it is important to recognize that throughout Islamic history, the cult of saints has often generated controversy. The strict monotheism inherent in the Qur’anic ethos implies that to recognize any partners to God is to commit a grave sin, and it forms part of the polemical criticism leveled at Christianity. In addition, the idea of an individual able to establish such a powerful link with God could and was sometimes seen as challenging the pre-eminence of the prophets as the primary focus of religious devotion, a basic tenet of Islamic belief. Thus, activities centering around a cult of saints, especially in more recent periods, have often been criticized as deviations from Islamic orthodoxy. Nevertheless, since Islam has tended toward a decentralized approach to religious hierarchy that is not so dependent on institutional control, there is no supreme authority that can perform a function of canonization. If such a thing occurs in the Islamic context, it came about largely through the consensus of the community, rather than any form of religious authority.

The development of Islamic mysticism, generally known as Sufism, and its practitioners, broadly known by the term Sufis, may have begun as early as the late 8th century, and both were firmly established as a more-or-less accepted component of many Muslim societies by the 10th century. By the time we reach the heyday of the Ottoman Empire after its conquest of Constantinople in 1453, Sufi groups and movements had become an essential feature of religious life in all parts of the Empire. One of the most widespread and influential of these groups was the Halveti order. Originating in the area of what are today Azerbaijan and northwestern Iran toward the end of the 14th century, their representatives spread westward throughout the Ottoman Empire, especially after the rise of the Shi’ite Safavid Empire in Iran in 1501, whose leaders persecuted many of the members of the Sunni mystical groups. Some of their representatives even managed to secure the direct patronage of the Ottoman Sultan himself, or members of his royal household. However, the controversies that had always followed Sufism and its practitioners from the time of its origins began to gather new strength by the end of the 16th century, and groups with an increasing amount of intolerance for Sufi ritual and practice appeared on the religio-political scene that directly attacked the Halvetis and others as guilty of deviation from proper Islamic belief and practice. Their power and influence reached a crescendo in the latter half of the 17th century, and it was in this historical context that our failed saint, Ünsi Hasan, began his career.

In 1645, in a small town near the provincial center of Kastamonu in north-central Turkey, a son was born to Recep Efendi, a shaykh of the Bayrami order. The young man, known as A’rec Hasan Efendi (his poetic pen-name, Ünsi, would come later), acquired a knowledge of Islamic religious law very quickly, and was soon teaching Qur’anic exegesis and lessons in mystical philosophy at the great Ayasofya mosque in the Ottoman capital of Istanbul while still a teenager. However, after meeting one of the great religious leaders of his time, Karabas Ali Efendi, he left his position as a teacher at the mosque to become a full-time mystic in Uskudar, on the Asian side of the Bosphorus, in the Mihrimah Sultan Halveti tekke near the Atik Valide mosque. By the time he was twenty years old, Karabas Ali had appointed him as one of his successors, and given him permission to teach independently in the capital. He even sent Ünsi Hasan in his place to the Sultan, Mehmed IV, to read prayers and bring about a divine cure for one of his favored attendants. It would seem at this point that despite the turbulent times, Ünsi Hasan was destined for a distinguished career as one of the greatest mystics of his era. Yet he died in relative obscurity some six decades later, having alienated or lost many of his followers, and was known only as a local saint tied
to the mosque of the Aydınoğlu Tekke in the area of Tophane, a district of northern Istanbul.⁹

Complicating the matter is the fact that we draw almost all of our information about Ünsî Hasan’s life and character from a single source, the Risale-i Menakib-i Ünsî, of which only a few copies exist.¹⁰ Its author, Ibrahim el-Hâs, is a very mysterious figure. I have found no mention of him in any biographical dictionary or historical chronicle to date, and most of what we know about him comes from allusions or remarks he made in his own hand in this hagiographical work. We do know that when he finally wrote the work, his shaykh had been dead for at least twenty years, and in the intervening period, he had, “by reason of his scribal skills (kitabet),” left the order and taken up some kind of a chancery position. The fact that he was offered a house, a slave girl, and other things as compensation for his work implies that the position was not without status and power in his society, and Ibrahim laments the political intrigues that came with the job at one point in his writing. He claims he did not again achieve happiness until he finally was able to return to Sufism as a way of life.¹¹ His stated aim in writing the work was to stimulate interest in his shaykh, by creating a simple work that could be read aloud at the tomb of his master as a remembrance of the shaykh’s life and deeds, and as a stimulus to visitation of the tomb.¹² He compiled anecdotes about the shaykh and those associated with him from various oral accounts provided by various members of the order, some of whom eventually left the shaykh’s service. Some of them, however, were also women who had established a working relationship with the shaykh on various levels.

It is especially noteworthy that one of these informants was Ibrahim’s own mother, a devotee of the shaykh who was instrumental in bringing her son into Ünsî Hasan’s service. About her, Ibrahim remarks:

My mother was a female initiate of the shaykh...She was a master of ascetic exercises. She never used to get undressed, and never used to stretch out and lie down. She always used to sit up day and night. She used to sleep in the place where she sat during the day. She never slept at night, nor did she light a candle. She always abstained from forbidden things. Her tongue was always offering prayers, and she passed 60 years in this fashion. She was among the noted female Sufis of the shaykh, and she manifested acts of grace; in fact, even after her death her acts of grace manifested themselves. Alas and alack for me that I was not able to be that which she was!¹³

Such a description locates Ibrahim’s mother squarely within the model of female sainthood the Ottomans had inherited from previous generations. But despite his mother’s influence and his own labors on Ünsî Hasan’s behalf, Ibrahim’s relationship with his shaykh was somewhat troubled, even by his own admission. He was repeatedly admonished for his preference for fine clothes, and Ibrahim presents as miraculous his shaykh’s ability to catch him in a lie or an attempt at deception. He even attributes his twenty-year “exile” in a worldly position after his shaykh’s death to his disobedience to the codes of the order on wearing fine clothing instead of the ascetic garb of the Halveti order. Interestingly enough, the shaykh’s most powerful reproach of Ibrahim on this matter was initially directed to his mother, and not to her son. Ibrahim was aware of his transgression only after she called him inside to explain it, and only then did he come to the shaykh and repent of his action.¹⁴

Ibrahim el-Hâs clearly revered his shaykh, and sought to affirm his sainthood. In addition to his hagiography, he also compiled a manuscript of remarks that his shaykh
made to guide his adepts during their meetings. Nevertheless, one cannot help but feel that a certain level of impropriety attached itself to this particular hagiographical project. At times, the reader senses that Ibrahim is trying to explain away or spin some potentially negative aspects of his shaykh’s life. Perhaps the most gripping anecdote in the entire text is an account of the birth of Ünsi Hasan’s daughter and first child, Fatima. When the shaykh moved to Tophanе at the age of around 40, his followers and supporters wanted him to marry, as he had been single for many years as a result of ascetic exercises tied to the Halveti path. They found a pious woman, and in short order the two were married and Ünsi Hasan’s wife became pregnant. The women Sufis were excited by this development, especially as the pregnancy became more and more advanced, until one day one of the women could restrain her exuberance no longer. Perhaps narrating on the authority of his mother, Ibrahim describes the result of this encounter:

[She] entered upon the shaykh, out her own great joy, and said “Your wife’s pregnancy became visible, praise be to God. All of us rejoiced!” The shaykh replied, “How would it have been had she not come forth? How would it have been had I not married? Does one praise a calamity?” and made an angry face. That woman regretted that she had spoken...and went back inside.

When word of this began to spread amongst the dervishes, men and women alike, a great sense of unease developed amongst the community. This was not helped by the fact that the shaykh withdrew from public view, and often looked sad and angry. When a baby girl was born, a woman came to the shaykh to try and give him the glad tidings. She said:

“My Lord, you have a daughter.” The shaykh replied, in turn, “Would that she had given birth to a stone in place of her, it would have been more auspicious. Look at this, her life is also a long one.” That woman was troubled, and said, “My Lord, what name shall you give her?” He replied, “That kind of child is no good to me, whatever name you give her, so be it.” The male and female Sufis were astonished at these words of the shaykh. They used to say amongst themselves, “The shaykh spoke these kinds of words to a little angel of paradise, what kind of talk is this?”

The problems only got worse. The shaykh would not acknowledge the presence of his daughter, and as she grew older they would always fight if they were brought together. Despite the best attempts of the women of the order to advise her on how to become a pious Muslim, she rejected all advice, and upon reaching maturity promptly left the shaykh’s household. What happened next would have been shocking to any pious Muslim.

...[S]he left the shaykh and went to become a masseuse in a bathhouse. The shaykh publically disowned her. She worked as an attendant in the Yamanlu bathhouse in Tophanе; they called her “Fatima Usta.” When the shaykh departed for the afterlife, she put in an appearance and sought her inheritance. After taking that which was her legal right, she started major fights and harassed and annoyed the Sufis greatly. She lived until the year 1154 (1741); to a ripe old age.

Such an account would have been difficult to reconcile with model portraits of saints and their family members that Ottoman listeners received from earlier generations. It is clear from Ibrahim’s own narrative that these events caused a great deal of discomfort amongst his followers. Ibrahim seems to be stretching credibility by
setting up the narrative as an example of the shaykh’s power to predict the future—one can hear the potential objections lurking in the background even centuries later. After all, a more successful saint would have been able to save his daughter from such a fate, would he not?

One wonders how this traumatic event would have affected the shaykh’s wife, but unfortunately, the hagiography does not dwell on that issue. However, it is clear from other parts of the narrative that Ünsî Hasan was a very stern authority figure, who quickly disciplined his followers for offenses—male and female alike. A Halvetî dervish by the name of Ömer related a story about his mother to Ibrahim that suggested the short temper of their spiritual guide. Some relatives were visiting their home, and there was an infant among them who became sick. Dervish Ömer’s mother suggested that they bring it to Ünsî Hasan to receive his prayer, and when they arrived at the lodge, Ünsî Hasan agreed to help. After reading a prayer for the infant, he puffed up his cheeks and blew air on the child. The child was cured shortly thereafter. Later on, while having fun with her relatives, Ömer’s mother made fun of the shaykh by puffing up his cheeks and blowing air at everyone, which drew a lot of laughs. But this proved to be an ill-advised bit of humor. After everyone went to sleep in the evening, the family was awakened in the middle of the night by a commotion. Lighting a candle, they realized it was Ömer’s mother. She had turned purple in the face and was thrashing around in apparent agony on the floor. The family didn’t know what to do, and only after several hours did her condition improve, and she came to her senses. In response to their worried questions, she replied:

...I still had not closed my eyes when I saw that the shaykh who had read to the child yesterday had come forth. He immediately grabbed my neck forcefully and said, “Why did you make fun of me? Am I your fool?” He squeezed my throat so firmly that I wanted to cry out, but I couldn’t; I wanted to be saved, but I couldn’t be saved, until I passed out and knew no more.

The following morning, the terrified woman brought a gift to the shaykh in an attempt to make amends. Before she could even make a proper entry to greet him, the shaykh asked her whether or not she had come to make fun of him again. After a promise to repent and much embarrassment on her part, the shaykh let her go with a firm warning: “Watch it, and beware! Don’t make fun of anyone. Even if it is an unbeliever, it is a reason for regret.”

Yet in comparison with some of the shaykh’s other male followers, Dervish Ömer’s mother got off comparatively easy. After a warning, the shaykh threw one of his followers, Tavşan Dervish Mustafa, out of the lodge for missing morning prayers. When his colleagues tried to intercede on his belief, the shaykh said, “Three days he has not come to morning prayers. We warned him; he was not attentive. Tomorrow it will spread to all of you. A man who prefers his own comfort over the command of God most high is not appropriate for our lodge; let him come no more.” Some 30 years after this incident, Ibrahim once again ran into Tavşan Dervish Mustafa at the gate of a garden in Istanbul, and found that he was a homeless vagrant. Another follower, Siddî Abdullah Efendi, also managed to get himself thrown out of the order. After the shaykh warned him about following the longings of his carnal soul, he made him one of his successors and sent him to Kefe in the Crimea to act as his deputy there. Abdullah was fairly successful there, and attracted a number of followers, but after a year he longed to return to Istanbul, so he appointed one of his Crimean followers in his place and returned to the capital. However, after he was seen by one of the Sufis in Ünsî Hasan’s lodge, it became known that he had returned without permission. When he tried to pay a
visit, the shaykh rejected him and refused to accept his excuses. He subsequently became a judge, and lamented his failure to Ibrahim some years later. A second disciple who refused to travel to the Black Sea coastal city of Sinop to spread the order, largely at the instigation of his mother, died shortly after his refusal. These stories suggest that in the early 18th century, Halveti shaykhs were finding it increasingly difficult to recruit followers who were willing to spread the order’s teachings to far-flung locales, in accordance with the order’s early pattern of development. However, when compared with the case of Dervish Ömer’s mother, they also suggest that female indiscretions were treated less sternly than those of the male members of the order.

Based on these narratives, the question lingers whether or not Ünsi Hasan and his hagiographer Ibrahim were complete failures. After all, the Islamic world is full of tombs about whose occupants we know far less than Ünsi Hasan, even though most of our sources for the period do not mention him. In addition, unlike many of the young Sufis of his generation, he managed to survive the attacks of groups opposed to the practices of the Sufis in the latter half of the 17th century relatively unscathed, despite attempts to assassinate or banish him. His hagiographer did feel there was already an audience for his material in the form of visitors to the tomb, and also felt that there was potential scope for a revival of his saint’s cult, perhaps under his own guidance. In addition, there are hints that his brand of spirituality may have resonated more with female followers than with the men attached to the order. With this document, then, might we be witnessing a subsequent revival of a saint, rather than textual proof of his failure?

The level of this saint’s posthumous fame in our historiography might signal a lack of interest among the men who generally produced and perpetuated such written materials. We can see that Ünsi Hasan’s overly perfectionist attitude towards the realization of the Sufi path drove many of his male followers away. When measured against a male-oriented yardstick, Ünsi Hasan had clearly failed, as Ibrahim’s hagiography never really seemed to take flight among the wider Ottoman public of his era. Even Ibrahim himself was forced to admit that few of Ünsi Hasan’s male followers succeeded in propagating the order after his death. One can compare him with another contemporary successor of Karamaz Ali Velî, Nasuhi Efendi (d. 1718), who was far more successful at winning a following and whose legacy was far better known. It may be telling that Ibrahim’s hagiography tells of an argument that broke out between the two saints shortly before Nasuhi Efendi’s death, when Ünsi Hasan criticized his fellow shaykh for permitting his followers to drink coffee and smoke tobacco, practices that Ünsi Hasan personally detested. While Ibrahim feels compelled to look for an esoteric meaning hidden in the unfriendly words between the two, it is hard for the audience to miss the potential for professional jealousy between two competing personalities who had been declared successors of the same noted saintly figure. In sum, this manuscript suggests that we have been left a rare source describing the anatomy of a failed candidate for sainthood among the early modern Ottomans—at least from a male perspective.

This suggests that popular opinion played a powerful role in the creation of branches of the Halveti order based on Sufi figures. In the case of Ünsi Hasan, austere piety and miraculous events were not enough. This biographical work suggests that to cement his cult among subsequent generations, a saint had to have a certain degree of “people skills,” and be able to establish personal bonds both with and among his followers. Ünsi Hasan comes across in this work as a stern and unforgiving personality who, perhaps intentionally, managed to alienate both respected members of Ottoman society and the rank-and-file of the lodge’s own members. Even his own daughter
rejected him, in a most spectacular manner that clearly tarnished his reputation. Among the early 18th century Ottomans of Ünsi Hasan’s time, believers may have ultimately favored the friendlier, more accommodating form of piety that figures like Nasuhi Efendi represented. The characters in Ibrahim’s narrative, in contrast, often found their saint’s behavior strange and inappropriate, and clearly clashed with him on the inflexibility of his spiritual path. The situation suggests that Ottoman religious life, at least in this time and place, was fairly relaxed, and that the more successful Halveti saints were those who were able to come to terms with the culture around them, and some the less pious aspects of their followers’ existence.

Nevertheless, the question still remains as to whether or not the shaykh’s female followers might not have responded to these issues more successfully than the men did. Perhaps because of Ünsi Hasan’s failure as a saint amongst his male followers, and the limitations this placed on the composition of Ibrahim’s work, we have been left with an unusually vivid depiction of a saint told from the perspective of the women whose lives were intertwined with his order. Through the intermediary of his mother and others, he was able, if not required, to exploit these narrative reports to construct his hagiography. This would have translated into a greater receptiveness among female followers who were probably the majority of the constituency that continued to visit the tomb. It has also made his short manuscript a unique source for the social and cultural history of the Ottoman period, and it remains to be seen whether further research into other Ottoman hagiographies may find that they are an unusually rich source for the history of gender in Ottoman life during its pre-modern periods.

1. This article comes out of a presentation first given on May 10, 2003, at the 38th International Congress on Medieval Studies, in Kalamazoo, Michigan. The paper was originally entitled “The Curious Case of Ünsi Hasan: An Unsuccessful Muslim Saint in the Ottoman Empire,” as part of a panel dealing with “false, failed, or would-be saints.” The author would like to extend his gratitude to the participants of that panel, and also to Professor James Grehan for evaluating and offering insightful comments on this piece during its evolution.


7. Mustafa Tâche and Cemâl Kurnaz, *Tasavvuf Gelenekte Mi'yarlar ve Karaba - Velî'nin Mi'yar* (Ankara:визнi_BRANCH_230;мв�n м в м в м layui tн, 2001), p. 8. It should not escape the reader's attention that the tekke was founded by one of the daughters of the Süleyman I's royal household.


9. The great work cataloguing the mosques and other religious structures of the Ottoman capital of Istanbul, the *Hadikatü'l-Cevâmi*, mentions Ünsi Hasan in conjunction with its entry on the Aydî no Lu Tekke where he is buried. See Ayyansarayî Hüseyn Efendi et al., *Hadikatü'l-Cevâmi*; *istanbul Câmieleri ve Di' er Dini-Sivil Mi'mârî Yap lâr*, ed. Ahmed Nezîh Galitekin (Istanbul: arct Yarlar, 2001), p. 71. It mentions him only as being a contemporary of the better-known Nâşîh Efendi, however.

10. For this source, I refer to the original text of the manuscript written by its author during the 1740s, *Brahîm el-Has (d. 1175/1761-2)*, *Risâled-i Menâk b- Ünsî* (Istanbul: Sûleymaniye Kûp. MS Haci Mahmud Efendi #4607), hereafter referred to as *Menâk b- Ünsî*.


12. Ibid., fol. 4b.

13. Ibid., fol. 94b-95a.


15. This manuscript survives in several copies, including one in the Atatürk Library in Istanbul, *Brahîm el-Has (d. 1175/1761-2)*, *Kâlâm-ı Azîz* (Istanbul: Atatürk Kitâpl. MS Osman Ersân #413).


17. Ibid., p. 33a-b.

18. This term implies that she became one of the primary people responsible for the functioning of the bathhouse. The narrative perhaps implies, by naming the actual bathhouse itself, that her place of employment had a sketchy reputation.

19. *Menâk b- Ünsî*, fol. 33b-34a. Dates in the narrative would imply that Fatima was born sometime around the year 1685, meaning she was well into her 50s when she died—a fairly long lifetime in a pre-modern society.

20. See, for example, the description of the female members of the family of the noted Egyptian shaykh *Brahîm-i Gül enî* and his son Ahmed el-Hiâyî in Muhyî-yi Gül enî (d. 1014/1606), *Menâk b- Brahîm-i Gül enî ve emleleziade Ahmed Efendi ives-i Tarikat-i Gül enî*, ed. Tâhsîn Yâzîcî (Ankara: Türk Tarih Bas mevi, 1982), pp. 15-16.


22. Ibid., fol. 51b-52a.

23. Ibid., fol. 56a-58b. The position of kad , or Islamic judge, is often presented in Ottoman literature as being a fount of corruption and an impediment to spiritual progression in Sufi circles, thus Abdullah's fate was a serious one.

24. Yahya-yi irvani, one of the critical founders of the Ottoman branches of the Halveti order, was said to have trained thousands of successors and sent them all over the Islamic world. B.G. Martin, "A Short History of the Khalwati Order of Dervishes," *Scholars, Saints and Sufis: Muslim Institutions Since 1500*, ed. Nikki R. Keddie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), pp. 276-278. This pattern continued to replicate itself, particularly in the Balkans, well-documented in Nathalie Clayer, *Mystiques, état et société: Les Halvetis dans l'âge balkanique de la fin du XVVe siècle à nos jours* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994).
25. For anecdotes revolving around Ünsi Hasan’s conflicts with the Kadizadelis and their supporters, many of whom had formerly been his followers, see Menak, Ünsi, fol. 22b-25b and 27a-29b.

26. For more on the life, career, and literary works of Muhammad Nasıhi Efendi, see Kemal Edib Kürkçüoğlu, Kayı Mohammed Nasıhi: Hayat, Eserleri, Dıvân, Mektuplar (Istanbul: Alem Ticaret Yayınları, n.d.).

27. Menak, Ünsi, fol. 46a-48b. For more on Ünsi Hasan’s attacks on smoking and drinking coffee, including his prohibition against spending time at the barber shop, see Ibrahim’s Kelâm-ı Aziz, fols. 54a-b and 59a-b.