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FOLKLORE STUDIES IN THE SCHOLARLY LEGACY OF ABDURRAHMAN GÜZEL

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Abstract: This article examines the place of folklore research within the academic output of Abdurrahman Güzel, one of the foremost representatives of the modern Turkish school of folk-literature studies. Building upon the foundations laid by Mehmed Fuad Köprülü and Şükrü Elçin, Güzel devoted several decades to clarifying the relationship between folklore understood as a discipline and folk literature understood as its verbal-artistic core. The study reviews his conceptual contributions, his sustained attention to religious-mystical (tekke) literature, and his critical work on hagiographic narratives such as the velâyetnâme tradition. It is argued that Güzel's principal achievement lies in reshaping a largely descriptive field into a systematically organised body of knowledge grounded in primary sources, classification schemes, and a coherent methodology suited to university instruction.

Keywords: folklore, Turkish folk literature, Abdurrahman Güzel, tekke poetry, velâyetnâme, oral tradition, religious-mystical literature.

1. Introduction

Folklore occupies a central position in the study of any nation's cultural memory, since it preserves the collective imagination, beliefs, and aesthetic sensibilities transmitted across generations. Within Turkish scholarship, the academic treatment of this material matured gradually throughout the twentieth century, moving from the early collecting efforts of pioneering figures toward a discipline equipped with its own theoretical vocabulary. Among the scholars who shaped this transition, Abdurrahman Güzel holds a distinctive place, both for the breadth of his publications and for his insistence on methodological precision.

Born in 1942 in the Antalya region of southern Turkey, Güzel built a long career that combined teaching, administration, and prolific research. He is most widely recognised for his comprehensive surveys of Turkish folk literature, yet the foundation of this work rests on an attentive engagement with folklore as a living oral phenomenon. His writings repeatedly return to a single guiding question: how can the abundant and often fragmentary heritage of the people be described, classified, and interpreted without distorting its original character?

This article surveys the folklore dimension of Güzel's scholarship. Rather than cataloguing every title he produced, it concentrates on three interlocking strands: his conceptual distinction between folklore and folk literature, his investigation of religious-mystical poetry associated with the dervish lodges, and his editorial recovery of hagiographic prose narratives. Taken together, these strands reveal a scholar who treated folklore not as a storehouse of curiosities but as an ordered system worthy of rigorous analysis.

2. Academic Formation and Scholarly Environment

Güzel's scholarly identity was forged in the intellectual climate established by the founders of Turkish literary history. The work of Mehmed Fuad Köprülü, who first demonstrated that folk and mystical literature could be studied with the same seriousness as court poetry, provided an indispensable starting point. Şükrü Elçin further consolidated this orientation by assembling the materials and frameworks that later researchers would refine. Güzel positioned himself as an heir to

this lineage, explicitly acknowledging these predecessors while extending their insights into new domains.

His professional path reinforced this commitment. Over the course of his career he served as a professor and department head at Gazi University, as dean of the faculty of letters at Trakya University, as a member of the Ministry of Education's Board of Education, and as rector of Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University. He also contributed to the founding of programmes devoted to the teaching of Turkish, including instruction aimed at foreign and bilingual learners. Membership in bodies such as the Turkish Folklore Institution and the Institute for the Study of Turkish Culture kept him in continuous contact with the practical side of collecting and preserving oral material.

This combination of administrative responsibility and field-oriented research left a clear imprint on his publications. Güzel wrote not only for fellow specialists but also for students who required clear definitions, reliable classifications, and accessible examples. The pedagogical motive that runs through his work explains its systematic character and its enduring use as reference material in Turkish universities.

3. Folklore and Folk Literature: A Conceptual Distinction

One of Güzel's most consequential contributions concerns the relationship between folklore and folk literature, two notions that earlier writers frequently treated as interchangeable. He maintained that folklore, in its broadest sense, embraces the entire spectrum of popular culture: customs, beliefs, rituals, material life, music, dance, and verbal art alike. Folk literature, by contrast, designates the specifically verbal and artistic portion of this larger whole, comprising the anonymous and individually authored texts that a community produces and transmits.

Drawing this boundary was not a matter of mere terminology. By separating the verbal-artistic field from the wider ethnographic domain, Güzel was able to apply literary categories such as genre, form, and poetic structure to material that had often been gathered without analytical order. At the same time, he insisted that folk literature could not be understood in isolation from the cultural environment that gave rise to it, since its imagery, values, and conventions remain inseparable from communal belief and practice.

On this basis he organised Turkish folk literature into coherent branches, distinguishing anonymous oral production from the named tradition of minstrel poets and from the religious-mystical strand cultivated in the dervish lodges. Each branch was characterised by its own themes, performers, and stylistic norms. This tripartite mapping gave subsequent researchers a stable framework within which individual texts and figures could be located and compared.

4. Religious-Mystical (Tekke) Folk Literature

The strand of folklore to which Güzel devoted the most sustained attention is the religious-mystical literature associated with the tekke, the dervish lodge that served for centuries as a centre of spiritual and cultural life. This poetry, composed to be sung or recited within communal devotional gatherings, fuses popular speech with the symbolic vocabulary of Sufism. Güzel approached it as a bridge between the oral world of the people and the learned tradition of the mystical orders, a meeting point where doctrine was rendered in language that ordinary listeners could absorb.

In his studies of this material he traced the genres through which mystical experience was expressed, from hymns of praise and devotional songs to didactic verses intended to instruct novices. He emphasised that such compositions cannot be read solely as literary artefacts, for their meaning depends on the ritual context in which they were performed and on the spiritual aims they served. By reconstructing this context, he showed how aesthetic form and religious function reinforced one another.

Figures from the tekke tradition occupy a prominent place in his work. The legacy of Yunus Emre, whose verses gave Anatolian Turkish a lasting devotional voice, and the irreverent yet profound poetry of Kaygusuz Abdal both received careful treatment in his analyses. Through these case studies Güzel demonstrated that the boundary between folk and elite literature is porous, and that the most influential poets of the people often drew on sophisticated mystical thought while remaining accessible to a wide audience.

5. Textual Recovery and the Velâyetnâme Tradition

Alongside his thematic studies, Güzel made a durable contribution to the editing of primary sources, particularly the hagiographic narratives known as velâyetnâme. These prose accounts relate the lives, miracles, and spiritual feats of revered saintly figures, blending historical memory with legend in a manner characteristic of folk belief. As manuscripts that circulated in numerous variant copies, they present formidable editorial challenges, and their reliable publication is a precondition for any serious analysis.

Güzel's critical edition of the velâyetnâme devoted to Abdal Musa exemplifies this side of his work. By collating variant readings, establishing a dependable text, and supplying interpretive commentary, he made an important monument of the Bektashi-Alevi tradition available to scholarship. His treatment of such narratives illustrates a conviction that runs throughout his career: that interpretation must rest on philologically sound foundations rather than on convenient summaries.

This editorial labour also enlarged the source base of Turkish folklore studies. Hagiographic narratives preserve motifs, beliefs, and narrative patterns that link the written tradition to oral storytelling, and they document the religious imagination of communities whose voices rarely survive in official records. By recovering these texts, Güzel widened the field's understanding of how sacred biography and popular legend intertwine.

6. Methodological Contribution

What unites the various facets of Güzel's scholarship is a consistent methodological outlook. He combined the historical perspective inherited from Köprülü with a classificatory rigour that sought to give every genre and figure a defined place within a larger structure. His surveys characteristically proceed from definition to classification and from classification to illustrative analysis, a sequence that mirrors the needs of teaching while satisfying the demands of research.

A second feature of his method is the priority he assigned to primary sources. Whether dealing with the verses of a mystical poet or the manuscript of a saintly biography, he preferred to work from the texts themselves rather than from secondary paraphrase. This orientation lent his conclusions a documentary solidity and encouraged later scholars to return to the originals with renewed care.

Finally, Güzel approached folklore as an integrated cultural system rather than a collection of detached items. He read individual works against the background of belief, ritual, and social function, insisting that meaning emerges from context. This holistic stance allowed him to connect literary form with spiritual purpose and to treat the folk heritage as a coherent expression of communal identity.

7. Conclusion

The folklore research of Abdurrahman Güzel represents a decisive stage in the maturation of Turkish folk-literature studies. By distinguishing folklore from folk literature while preserving the bond between them, he furnished the discipline with a clear conceptual map. By devoting himself to the religious-mystical tradition of the dervish lodges, he illuminated a body of poetry in which

popular voice and spiritual depth converge. And by editing hagiographic narratives such as the velâyetnâme of Abdal Musa, he secured reliable foundations for further inquiry.

His legacy is therefore twofold. On one level it consists of specific findings about genres, poets, and texts; on another, and more lastingly, it consists of a model of how folklore should be studied — systematically, on the basis of primary sources, and with full attention to cultural context. For students and researchers of Turkic oral heritage, his work remains both a reference and an example, demonstrating that the literature of the people repays the most disciplined scholarly attention.

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