

## MATHNAWÎ SOHBETS<sup>1</sup> FROM THE OTTOMANS TO PRESENT DAY

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### ABSTRACT

In its unique didactic style, Mathnawî investigates every detail of Islamic mysticism and sets a standard for the 'annotation tradition' that followed. The above mentioned aspects have deemed it necessary to have a 'guide' to read and interpret the Mathnawî and in this way a new profession called 'Masnawîkhân' came into being which denotes: reading, translating, commenting on the meaning of Mathnawî and (occasionally) chanting it.

After Mawlânâ passed away or in his own words 're-united with his Beloved', Husameddin Chalabi, his devoted friend, follower and scribe, began to read and explain the Mathnawî to the people in public platforms. This is why, Husameddin Chalabi has been regarded as the original expert of the Mathnawî and the first Masnawîkhân. In the following era the Masnawîkhân profession became an institution. Chalabi's of Konya allowed non-khalifs to wrap the 'white destar around their 'sikke' which signified that permission was granted to the holder, to instruct the Mathnawî as Masnawîkhân.

Although in the Mawlawî tradition it was (and still is) mandatory to be trained and to be given authorization by the Masnawîkhân of the day, there has been exceptions to this rule. Certain spiritual personalities who were in sufficient command of Persian to comprehend the Mathnawî, were also given special permission.

During the Ottoman Era, Masnawîkhân profession established itself within the protocol and the code (of conduct) of the Mawlawî Order and Mawlawî Society. Mathnawî was taught primarily in Mawlawî tekkes (lodges) but also in Selatin mosques, Dâr al-Masnavîs and Sultan's Palace.

In XIX. century a new institution named Dâr al-Masnavî or Masnawîkhâne was established with the purpose of teaching Mathnawî to non-Mawlawîs i.e the ordinary public. By attending these institutions, ordinary people had the opportunity to learn and benefit from the Mawlawî culture. Interest for the Mathnawî had become so widespread that a new institution was needed.

**Key Words:** Mathnawî, Mathnawî Lessons, Mathnawî Sohbets, Masnawîkhân, Dâr al-Mathnawî

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<sup>1</sup> Sohbet: Mystical conversation in which there is no duality; sometimes with words sometimes in silence but always in total harmony.

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## OSMANLIDAN GÜNÜMÜZE MESNEVÎ SOHBETLERİ

### ÖZET

Tasavvufî düşüncenin bütün inceliklerini didaktik üslûpta ele alan Mesnevî aynı zamanda zengin bir şerh geleneğine de zemin hazırlamıştır. Mesnevî'nin bu özellikleri, eserin okunması ve açıklanmasını temel bir eğitim şekline dönüştürerek "Mesnevîhânlık" diye ifadelendirilen bir mesleği ön plana çıkartmıştır.

H. Mevlâna'nın vuslatından sonra ilk defa Hüsameddin Çelebi'nin halka açık kürsülerde Mesnevî tahrir etmeye başladığı bilinmektedir. Böylece Mesnevî'nin kâtibi ve ilk muhatabı olan Çelebi Hüsameddin, ilk Mesnevîhân ve Mesnevîhânlık müessesesinin de bânisi kabul edilmiştir. Daha sonraki dönemlerde ise mesnevîhânlık bir kurum halini almış, Konya Çelebileri halife olmayan bazı kimselere Mesnevî okutmak üzere beyaz destâr sarmaya izin verip Mesnevîhânlık icâzetnâmeleri göndermişlerdir.

Mevlevîlik geleneğinde Mesnevî'yi bir Mesnevîhândan okuyarak Mesnevîhânlık icâzeti almak şart olsa da; zaman zaman böyle bir icâzete zorunlu tutulmayarak Mesnevî dilini anlayacak kadar Farsçaya vakıf olan gönül ehli kimseler de bir Mesnevîhânın kendisine verdiği icâzete Mesnevîhânlık görevi yapabilmişlerdir.

Osmanlı döneminde mesnevîhânlık, zamanla Mevlevîlik âdâbı ve erkânı içinde kendisine mahsus bir protokole sahip olmuştur. Mesnevîhânlığın icrâ edildiği yerler başta Mevlevî tekkeleri olmak üzere, selâtin camileri, Dârü'l-Mesnevîler ve padişah sarayıdır. Mesnevî okutulması için vakfiyeler de düzenlenmiştir.

XIX. asırda Dârü'l-Mesnevî veya Mesnevîhâne adıyla Mevlevî olmayanlara da Mesnevî okutmaya yönelik müesseseler açılmış, Mevlevîhanelere gelemeyenler bu müesseselerde Mesnevî kültüründen istifade etmişlerdir. Mesnevî okumanın yaygınlığı böyle bir kurumu gerektirmiştir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Mesnevî, Mesnevî Dersleri, Mesnevî Sohbetleri, Mesnevîhân, Dârü'l-Mesnevî

Based on historical evidence, Mawlânâ Jalâl al-Dîn Rûmî's<sup>2</sup> \_ was written between 1260–1267 and since then it has been read with much interest and admiration by millions of people from all denominations all over the world. Mathnawî informs mainly on Religion, Islamic Mysticism (better known throughout the world as Sufism) and Social affairs, relying frequently on verses from the Quran, ' \_ and folk tales. It covers almost every topic; sociology, psychology, history, mysticism, as well as science – including its most recent discoveries.

Although Mathnawî is generally accepted as didactic work addressing to 'Reason', it also possesses passionate and exuberant poems appealing to the 'Heart', similar to the ones in Divan-i Shams-e Tabriz or Divan-ı Kabir as otherwise called.

The wisdom of Mathnawî is no different to the revelations of the Prophets who came one after another to enlighten and guide Humanity. Prophets Jesus, Moses, Joseph and David are frequently mentioned. At times a reference is made from an Islamic Philosopher and at other times from a Christian Saint, all in accordance with Mawlânâ's general view that Humanity is like a single body and different nations are like the different organs of this body. Religions may differ due to their unique ways of devotion but the spiritual eye only sees them as 'one'. Nationalities may be many, but their spirit is 'one' and the *raison d'être* of all human beings is the same. In all his works Mawlânâ has held Brotherhood of Mankind, Peace, Love and Unity above all.

In a research conducted by the Nobel Institute in 2002, Mathnawî was included in the Masterpieces of Humanity and has been accepted by all religions and nations as part of World's 'Common Heritage'.

For the \_ however, Mathnawî is all important because it is regarded as the 'initiating book' for those who are on the Path.

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<sup>2</sup> Mawlânâ (or Mevlana in Turkish): Meaning ' Our Master', a name and attribute given to Jalâl al-Dîn Rûmî (Celâleddîn in Turkish) (1207–1273).

<sup>3</sup> Mathnawî: Mesnevî in Turkish

<sup>4</sup> Hadith: Oral traditions relating to the words and deeds of prophet Muhammed.

<sup>5</sup> Mawlawî (Mevlevî in Turkish). A name given to the followers of Mawlânâ or members of the sect founded by his Son.

In its unique didactic style, Mathnawî investigates every detail of Islamic mysticism and sets a standard for the 'annotation tradition' that followed.

In fact it could be said that, Muhyiddin Ibnu'l-Arabi's *Fususul-Hikem* and Mawlânâ's *Mathnawî* –both regarded as the two major works of Islamic mysticism– are responsible for the introduction of the 'annotation tradition'. To answer the question of how widely these two important books were read in the Ottoman Society, one could say that whilst the *Fusus* was read only by the 'elite', *Mathnawî* was read more widely, not only by those on the spiritual path but also by the general public.

The above mentioned aspects, has deemed it necessary to have a 'guide' to read and interpret the *Mathnawî* and in this way a new profession called 'Masnawîkhân' came into being which denotes: reading, translating, commenting on the meaning of *Mathnawî* and (occasionally) chanting it.

In Persian, the suffix 'han' (as in 'Masnawîkhân') meaning 'reader' or 'instructor' was also widely used in the Ottoman language e.g 'Duahan' or 'Mevluthan' for prayers and 'Gazelhan' for Ghazals.

After Mawlânâ passed away or in his own words 're-united with his Beloved', Husameddin Chalabi, his devoted friend, follower and scribe, began to read and explain the *Mathnawî* to the people in public platforms. This is why, Husameddin Chalabi has been regarded as the original expert of the *Mathnawî* and the first Masnawîkhân. This tradition continued through Mawlânâ's Son, Sultan Veled.

It is known that Husameddin Chalabi personally trained a handful of special students to succeed him, Masnawîkhân Siraceddin being one of them. Other important figures during this time were Sultan Veled's son Ulu Arif Chalabi and Mahmut Dede who translated *Manâkıbu'l-Ârifîn* into Turkish. When Arif Chalabi was assigned to the more important task of spreading the Mawlawî Order throughout the Empire, Masnawîkhâns Siraceddin and Mahmud Dede took over in the Konya Asitane to read and interpret the *Mathnawî*.

In the following era the Masnawîkhân profession became an institution. Chalabi's of Konya allowed non- to wrap the 'white \_ around

<sup>6</sup> Non-khalif: Persons who were not trained by the Mawlawî's, however as competent.

<sup>7</sup> Destar: A white cloth wrapped around the sikke.

their ' \_ which signified that permission was granted to the holder, to instruct the Mathnawî as Masnawîkhân.

As the Mawlawî \_ expanded and the Mawlawî Lodges started to emerge all over the country, it became the custom to place two pedestals in the Mawlawî \_ during the Mathnawî Sohbet's. The first was occupied by the Senior Masnawîkhân who recited the Mathnawî from memory and the other was for a second Masnawîkhân whose job it was to interfere in case there was a mistake or an omission. Senior Masnawîkhân was called Hafiz-i Mesnevi and his assistant, Kari-i Mesnevi.

Although in the Mawlawî tradition it was (and still is) mandatory to be trained and to be given authorization by the Masnawîkhân of the day, there has been exceptions to this rule. Certain spiritual personalities who were in sufficient command of Persian to comprehend the Mathnawî, were also given special permission.

In the Ottoman Empire, the authorization of the Masnawîkhân profession was given with the precondition to conform to what was called the 'Ankaravî (annotation) Interpretation'. In the final stage of the Ottoman Empire, Sıdkı Dede (d.1933) in Konya, Hoca Husameddin Efendi in Eyup Hatuniyye , Osman Selahaddin Dede in Yenikapı Mevlevihane, Mehmed Celaleddin Efendi (d.1908) and Sheikh Abdalbaki Efendi were major Masnawîkhâns. Esad Dede of Thessaloniki who taught Mathnawî to Mehmet Akif Ersoy,<sup>12</sup> was the Mathnawî instructor in the Fatih Mosque for almost half a century.

Also, during this time Ahmed Celaleddin Dede in Galata Mawlavîkhâne, Ahmed Remzi Dede in Beyazıt and Uskudar Yeni Cami were famous Mathnawî instructors.

It is interesting to note that in the XIX. Century, not only the Mawlawî s but also some of the outstanding major Nakshibendi Sheikhs of Istanbul, acted as Masnawîkhâns. Upon the merging of the Mawlawî and \_ lodges,

<sup>8</sup> Sikke: A hat that Mawlawî dervishes wear.

<sup>9</sup> Tariqa: 'path' or in this case a Religious Sect.

<sup>10</sup> Dargah: A place of gathering for the Sufi brotherhood, a Sufi Lodge.

<sup>11</sup> Tekke: Places for gatherings of a Sufi brotherhood.

<sup>12</sup> Mehmet Akif Ersoy: A famous Turkish poet and writer of the words to the National Anthem.

<sup>13</sup> Nakshibend: "Naqshbandi": One of the major Sufi orders of Islam.

Hoca Husameddin Efendi (also known as “Masnawîkhân-ı suheyr”<sup>14</sup>), Hoca Nes’et (d.1807), Mehmed Murad Efendi (d.1848) (founder of Dâr al-Masnavî) taught the Mathnawî, although they were Nakshibendi sheikhs. They were allowed to wear Mawlawî sikke with destar and were able to instill in the hearts of the followers the so-called ‘Mawlawî joy and essence’.

During the Ottoman Era, Masnawîkhân profession established itself within the protocol and the code (of conduct) of the Mawlawî Order and Mawlawî Society. Mathnawî was taught primarily in Mawlawî tekkes (lodges) but also in \_ mosques, Dâr al- \_ and Sultan’s Palace. Furthermore, according to Feridun Nafiz \_ , new foundations were formed for the sole purpose of teaching Mathnawî. Later on, Damat Ibrahim \_ , decreed Islamic mysticism and Readings of the Mathnawî to become compulsory in the \_ that was built in his name. From then on Mathnawî would be included in every madrasah’s curriculum.

In XIX. century a new institution named Dâr al-Masnavî or Masnawîkhâne was established with the purpose of teaching Mathnawî to non- Mawlawîs i.e the ordinary public. By attending these institutions, ordinary people had the opportunity to learn and benefit from the Mawlawî culture. Interest for the Mathnawî had become so widespread that a new institution was needed.

Dâr al-Masnavî was established by the Nakshibendi sheikh Mehmed Murad Efendi in Fatih Carsamba, near Murad Molla Dergâh which was a Nakshi tekke (lodge). Sultan Abdulmecid was present in the opening ceremony. According to Cevdet Pasha who was taught Persian and Mathnawî by Sheikh Murad Efendi, there were two \_ in Istanbul. These were Hoca Husameddin Efendi’s Masnawîkhâne in Kucuk Mustafapasa

<sup>14</sup> Masnawîkhân-ı suheyr: Master Masnawîkhân.

<sup>15</sup> Selatin: Mosques that are designated for the Sultans.

<sup>16</sup> Dâr al-Masnavî: Traditional name for an education center dedicated to studying Mathnawî.

<sup>17</sup> Feridun Nafiz Uzluk: A descendant of Rûmî who did translations and annotations of Mathnawî.

<sup>18</sup> Damat Ibrahim Pasha: Grand Vizier during two periods under the reign of last Ottoman Sultan Mehmed IV.

<sup>19</sup> Madrasah: Religious school of the day.

<sup>20</sup> Masnawîkhâne: Local places where Mathnawî was taught exclusively.

and Dâr al-Masnavî in Carsamba. Sheikh Yahya Galip Efendi of Cerrahi tekke (lodge) and Midhat Pasha were the two prominent personalities taught by Sheikh Murad Efendi in Dâr al-Masnavî during this time.

By the end of XIX. Century, Masnawîkhân profession had extended to mosques and became part of regular preaching to the public. Esad Dede was the first Masnawîkhân at Fatih Mosque, teaching Mathnawî once a week. He was followed by Karahisarli Ahmed Efendi and following his death, Tâhiru'l-Mevlevî succeeded him.

The last in the long lineage of Masnawîkhâns from the Ottomans to date were Tâhiru'l-Mevlevî and his successor Şefik Can. Tâhiru'l-Mevlevî adopted "Olgun" surname following the Surname Act. He was the Kâri-i Mathnawî of his teacher Mehmed Esad as well as Celaleddin Dede (Sheikh of Yenikapi Mevlevihane) before he started his Mathnawî lessons in Fatih Mosque (1923- 1925).

The period between 1925 and 1948 has been silent for Masnawîkhâns for political reasons during the transition from the Otoman Empire to Turkish Republic. Then in 1948 the political situation of Turkey changed and Mathnawî teaching was again possible. Consequently, Tâhiru'l-Mevlevî was able to perform his Masnawîkhân profession at the Suleymaniye Mosque and Laleli Mosque until his death in 1951.

With his many talents as poet, author, Mawlawî Master, Journalist, Masnawîkhân and literary Historian, Tâhiru'l-Mevlevî has been a very important figure keeping alive the Masnawîkhân Tradition during the transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic.

Following Tâhiru'l-Mevlevî, his student Şefik Can took over the spiritual mission. His training by Tâhiru'l-Mevlevî started in 1935 and Şefik Can served his teacher with great love and respect until his teacher's death in 1951 and then continued to serve as Masnawîkhân with unending passion from 1960 until the end of his life.

In the Sixties, Şefik Can started Mathnawî teaching in a house that belonged to Mrs. Seniha Bedri Goknil. Later on he continued his lessons in numerous venues; Munevver Ayaslı's house, the conference hall of a private school in Erenkoy called Gunes College (Now Isik High School), the library of Mustafa Nazmi Ersin Mosque, Nezahat Nurettin Ege's house, conference hall of Maltepe elderly rest home, various locations provided by God lovers who loved Mawlânâ and his Mathnawî, an education center in

Uskudar, Yunus House in Kiziltoprak and finally Kazim Karabekir Cultural Center.

Until the year 1998 Şefik Can annotated the Mathnawî in the classical way that is, page by page, sometimes reading it in original Persian and sometimes in Turkish.

In 1999 due to the deterioration of his eye-sight, Şefik Can could not continue and so he relied on the assistance of the author of this article to prepare topics from the Mathnawî, under his supervision. During his last years he continued his lectures with his assistant reading the chosen topics and he commenting on the religious, scientific and literary aspects of what was read.

**It is an ironic fact that whereas in the past new Masnawîkhânes were being opened everywhere, Şefik Can had difficulty in finding venues to teach during the last period.**

This is how Şefik Can recalls those days in his own words and with humour:

“The first venue was no more, when its owner Seniha Bedri Goknil passed away. The second venue which was Munevver Ayashî’s house came to an end when the maid was exhausted after carrying endless number of chairs from the neighbours!

At Gunes College some of the neighbours complained that religious practice was taking place. At Mustafa Nazmi Ersin Mosque, some worshippers didn’t approve men and women sitting together during the classes. In the Home for the Elderly, the elderly could not get any rest... In Yunus House it was time for renovation. In the Uskudar cultural center, the administration changed. Consequently time after time because some people got disturbed we were moved. Now here at Kazim Karabekir Cultural Center, we shall stay- that is until, it is time for my removal! ”

Indeed, time proved him right and he did give his last Mathnawî lecture at Kazim Karabekir Cultural Center.

Şefik Can, who was the last of the lineage of the Masnawîkhân Tradition from Chalabi Husameddin to present time, handed over the spiritual responsibility to H. Nur Artiran (who is the author of this article), before he united with his Beloved in 2005.

Thereby making her the first female Masnawîkhân since Mrs. Kamile (who was the daughter of Kucuk Arif Celebi of Konya) and her daughter



Mrs. Fatma (who took over the mission from her mother in the early 17th century).

Shortly after the demise or 'reunion with the Beloved' as who puts it, of her teacher Şefik Can, the author of this article has started reading and teaching the Mathnawî at the Sisli Mosque Foundation in Istanbul. She has also started lecturing at the "Self Transcendence Psychology Association" in Uskudar and in the "Tark Zafer Tunaya Cultural Center" situated within the Galata Mevlevihanesi -a place which has become almost synonymous with Sheikh Galib.<sup>21</sup>

In the recent past, when there was an insufficient number of Masnawîkhâns trained in the Masnawîkhân tradition, various institutes and foundations in Istanbul, Ankara, Konya, Bursa, Urfa and Sakarya flourished and certain spiritual men (or men of the Heart as they are often called) volunteered to fill the gap.

In Mathnawî, Mawlânâ says " *So long as the World exists and life goes on, the poetry of Mathnawî will last and give pleasure to everyone who reads it*" Indeed, his predictions have come true, as today we see around the World and in Turkey, an immense interest in Mawlânâ and his Mathnawî.

God All Mighty says: " *There are such holy people under my Heavenly Dome that no one knows but me*". Who knows how many souls, Men of the Heart over the centuries have silently and patiently devoted a lifetime with Mawlânâ and the Mathnawî?

Here, I tried to mention in the time and space allowed, the invaluable services of just a few venerable men during the course of history. However, with deepest respect and gratitude I would like to pay a tribute to all those great men and women of the past who are not mentioned here but who have made their notable contributions.

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<sup>21</sup> Sheikh Galib: One of the most important Sufi poets of 18th century. Author of "Husn u Ask".

