

# WHO IS MULLA NASRUDDIN?

*an exploration by Pete Castle*

This article started life as a little snippet in the 'Media' section. I wrote:  
THE MUSEUM OF CURIOSITIES (Radio 4. 10 Nov) finished with a story – or they would have probably called it a joke. It was the old one, well known in storytelling circles, about Nasruddin and his donkey repeatedly visiting the city. The guards knew he was smuggling something and, time after time, they searched the baggage but never managed to find anything illegal. Years later, when he had retired, he was asked by an ex-guard what it was he had been smuggling. The answer was... donkeys! So obvious they didn't see them!



After I'd written that I continued to think about Nasruddin. About thirty years ago, when the storytelling revival was in its infancy, everyone did Nasruddin stories, so much so that they stopped doing them because everyone else was doing them! But, although I've heard the stories and had a vague idea about where they come from I didn't know any details... so I set out to find out.

Nasruddin is a mythical figure—he might have existed but he has taken on an identity far wider than the reality. He's become a sort of Aesop/Brer Rabbit/Anansi character—a vehicle for some funny stories which conceal a universal truth.

Nasruddin (the name can be spelled in a myriad of different ways) has been claimed by many peoples. Nasreddin Hoca in Turkey; Nasrudin Hodža in Bosnia; Nastradin Hoxha in Albania and so on. The name is often accompanied by an honorific such as Hodja, Hoja, Hodža, Hoca, or Mulla, Mula, etc. The best 'expert opinion' seems to be that his full name was Nasir ud-din Mahmud al-Khoyi and that he was born in the city of Khoy in the West Azerbaijan province of Iran in the 13th century CE. He was sent to Konya, in Anatolia by the Khalif in Baghdad to organize resistance and uprising against the Mongol invasion. He served as an Islamic judge and ombudsman and became a political opponent of Rumi, another great figure of the time, who also lived in Konya. What is accepted as his tomb is in Akşehir in present day Turkey, where they hold the 'International Nasreddin Hodja Festival' every year in July.

Nasruddin stories are known right across the Muslim world and some have crossed into mainstream Western culture.

Here is one I particularly like:

One Friday Nasruddin was invited to deliver a sermon. He started by asking; "Do you know what I am going to say?" and the congregation answered "Yes".

"In that case I don't need to say it" said Nasruddin and left.

The following week the same conversation took place but the congregation answered "No."

"I can't be bothered to talk to people who don't even know what I am going to talk about" said Nasruddin and, again, left.

The third week the congregation was prepared and half said 'Yes' and half said 'No'.

But Nasruddin could not be caught out.

"In that case those of you who know can tell those who don't" he said and left again.

That reminds me of folk singer Roy Harris' regular comment to an audience who joined in particularly well with a chorus song: "I won't bother to come next time, I'll just send you a postcard with the list of songs I would have sung!"