

Articulating Collective Memory: Âşık Veysel's Songs and Poets as Intangible Cultural Heritage

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the poetry and music of Âşık Veysel through the lens of social indicators and intangible cultural heritage, revealing that these works serve a social function beyond their aesthetic value. The central thesis of the study is that Veysel's oeuvre, far from being merely the expression of an individual artist, embodies multi-layered social indicators that represent the collective memory, value system, and cultural codes of the Anatolian people. The research is grounded in a qualitative textual analysis and shaped by theoretical frameworks drawn from thinkers such as Clifford Geertz, Stuart Hall, Roland Barthes, and Thomas Turino. From this theoretical perspective, iconic lines such as "I am on a long and narrow road" are interpreted as expressions of existential quest. At the same time, "My true beloved is the black earth" is seen as a cultural representation and reproduction of the human-soil relationship. The study demonstrates that Veysel's legacy operates on three levels: (1) poetry and music function as a social institution by fostering shared affect; (2) themes such as earth, journey, and friendship encode the core values of Anatolian culture; and (3) this legacy continues dynamically through its transition from traditional oral culture to digital circulation. While contributing to the field of cultural sociology through qualitative methodology, the study also positions poetry and music as valuable sources of data for understanding social structures. By highlighting how Veysel's emphasis on "black earth" may resonate with ecological awareness and how his theme of "friendship" may gain renewed relevance amid contemporary social polarization, the study underscores the enduring value of his legacy as an ethical and cultural resource for addressing current societal challenges.

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Introduction

The construction of societies is shaped not only by concrete institutions, laws, or statistical data but also by cultural practices woven through words, sound, rhythm, and silence. Poetry and music, beyond being aesthetic forms that resonate within the individual's inner world, function as powerful social indicators that carry collective memory, shape cultural identity, and transmit societal values across generations (Barthes, 1977; 145-146; Hall, 1997: 45). Particularly within the oral culture tradition, folk poetry and music have historically served as some of the most direct and effective means of expressing a society's everyday experiences, moral choices, relationships with nature, and modes of coexistence (Bauman, 1986: 9; Dağtaşoğlu, 2013). In this context, folk poetry and music are not merely aesthetic objects but also anthropological documents, sociological narratives, moral appeals, and repositories of cultural memory (Assmann, 2011: 50).

In the Turkish context, Âşık Veysel Şatıroğlu (1894–1973), one of the most prominent representatives of the *âşıklık* tradition in the oral culture geography of 20th-century Anatolia, exemplifies this function of social signification in the most profound and multilayered way (Ataş, 1998: 20). Despite having lost his physical sight, he emerged as a “wise bard” who, through poetic intuition and his *söz*, could perceive and reveal the collective conscience of the Anatolian people (Kaya, 2001: 24; Öz, 1994: 15). The recurring themes in his verses, such as earth, journey, longing, friendship, love, and patience, can be read not merely as elements of a personal worldview but also as sociological data that reflect the shared value universe and cultural codes of the Anatolian people (Geertz, 1973: 5).

A significant portion of the existing academic literature on Âşık Veysel focuses on his life story (Kaya, 2001: 22), the literary language and imagery in his poems (Büyükkaya, 2024: 55), or technical analyses of his musical repertoire. While broader studies on Turkish folk music and the *âşıklık* tradition (Arvas, 2012; Artun, 2016: 310) illuminate the sociocultural context of this tradition, comprehensive works that examine the oeuvre of a specific figure like Veysel in the inseparable unity of poetry and music and that systematically analyze this unity within the frameworks of social indicators theory and intangible cultural heritage remain relatively limited (Arioğlu & Aydoğdu-Atasoy, 2003: 27). This study aims to address that evident gap in the literature.

This article seeks to approach Âşık Veysel's poems and musical narratives, which are often presented in the form of folk songs, not only as literary and musical texts but also as multilayered social indicators and living

cultural heritage objects that represent a community's ethical, cultural, and sociological worlds. Rather than relying on experimental or statistical data, the study adopts a qualitative textual analysis method, shaped by the theoretical frameworks of thinkers such as Clifford Geertz, Stuart Hall, Roland Barthes, and Thomas Turino. It aims to reveal how the imagery circulating within Veysel's poetic universe, the ontological relationship established with nature, the perception of time, human fragility, and the pursuit of social justice are represented (Yenen Avcı, 2024: 2).

The article will first elaborate on the theoretical framework on which the study is based, then analyze the sociological functions of Âşık Veysel's poetry and music through concrete examples, and finally discuss the significance of this heritage for contemporary cultural studies and the social sciences, along with the contributions of the study to the field.

Research Aim And Significance

The primary aim of this research is to systematically analyze the poetry and music of Âşık Veysel Şatıroğlu through the frameworks of social indicators and intangible cultural heritage, in order to demonstrate how these works, beyond their aesthetic value, represent a society's collective consciousness, value system, and cultural codes. The study particularly aims to investigate how Veysel's poetic language and musical practice reflect and structure the everyday experiences, moral choices, and relationships with nature and society of 20th-century Anatolian people. In this direction, the themes that frequently appear in his Works, such as earth, journey, friendship, patience, and justice, will be examined in terms of their sociological layers of meaning that go beyond personal expression.

The selection of Âşık Veysel as the central figure in this study stems from his unique position within the oral cultural geography of Anatolia. Veysel was not only a folk poet but also a living witness and bearer of the social transformations, rural realities, and collective memory experienced during the early years of the Turkish Republic (Pehlivan, 1984). Despite losing his physical sight, his poetic intuition and the expressive power of his *saz* elevated him as a "seer," making him an exceptional cultural agent. In this sense, his works offer a unique laboratory for understanding the oral cultural heritage of Anatolia, its struggles with modernization, and its ethical points of resistance.

The significance of this study can be discussed on several levels. First, it offers an innovative approach that goes beyond the biographical or literary analyses that dominate most existing studies on Âşık Veysel, instead

positioning his legacy at the intersection of cultural sociology, semiotics, and heritage studies through an interdisciplinary perspective. Second, it contributes to the literature on social indicators in Turkey through a non-empirical, qualitative case study framed within the context of intangible cultural heritage. Third, it demonstrates how artistic forms such as poetry and music can be productive sources of data for understanding social structures. Lastly, it provides a contemporary basis for observing how a traditional heritage is transformed and acquires new meanings in a globalized and digitized world.

Therefore, this study does not merely offer a nostalgic reading of the past; it also offers insights into how Veysel's emphasis on "black earth" can be reinterpreted in light of ecological awareness, and how the themes of "friendship" and "brotherhood" can gain renewed meaning in the context of today's polarized social climate. In this regard, the research aims to explore the potential of reevaluating the legacy of a folk bard as an ethical and cultural resource that can shed light on today's and tomorrow's social challenges.

Poetry And Music as Social Signs

The conceptual foundation of this study is based on a series of approaches that treat poetry and music not merely as aesthetic expressions, but as cultural practices where social meaning is actively produced, negotiated, and transformed. This section presents a synthesis of five fundamental conceptual axes that form a functional framework for analyzing the works of Âşık Veysel.

Clifford Geertz's (1973: 6) idea of culture as "a web of significance [man] himself has spun," within which social actions can be seen as "symbolic structures," is our fundamental starting point. His "thick description" method seeks to transcend the superficial meaning of a cultural product, revealing the contextual, historical, and social layers of meaning embedded within it. Within this framework, Âşık Veysel's statement "Uzun ince bir yoldayım" (I am on a long, thin road) can be read not only as a physical journey but as a multi-layered metaphor symbolizing life, death, humanity's existential quest, and the migration/forced displacement experiences of the Anatolian people. A Geertzian perspective allows us to interpret Veysel's poetic language as a rich ethnographic text concerning the value system of the society from which he emerged.

Stuart Hall's (1997) theory of representation emphasizes that linguistic and other signs do not simply reflect reality but actively construct it. Representation is a practice where meaning is produced, and these meanings

are intertwined with social power dynamics. In this context, Âşık Veysel's line "Benim sadık yârim kara topraktır" (My faithful beloved is the black earth) does not merely represent a pastoral love. A Hallian reading reveals that this line represents labor, productivity, the organic connection with death, and a sense of belonging shaped around the earth in an agrarian society dependent on the land, while simultaneously legitimizing and reproducing these very values. Here, Veysel is not a passive transmitter but a cultural agent producing directive symbols that shape how social reality is perceived and felt.

UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage defines oral traditions, such as the minstrel tradition, as carriers of community identity, historical continuity, and the transmission of ethical values. This framework allows us to position Veysel's legacy not as a frozen archaeological relic but as a dynamic process constantly reinterpreted and kept alive. From this perspective, Veysel's works are not merely products of individual creativity but also the products of a "living human treasure" that sustains the common values, local knowledge, and forms of social relations characteristic of Anatolia (Arıoğlu & Aydoğdu-Atasoy, 2023; Lixinski, 2013).

Roland Barthes' (1977: 145) theory of mythology analyzes the power of cultural images and discourses to present historically and ideologically conditioned meanings as "natural," "universal," and "inevitable." This concept provides a tool for a critical reading of themes such as "patience" (sabr), "humility" (tevazu), "contentment" (kanaat), and "fate" (kader), which frequently appear in Veysel's discourse. For instance, an expression like "Küsmeyin kaderinize, gelin gülün yüzünüze" (Do not resent your fate, come smile) can serve, beyond individual consolation, an ideological function of legitimizing "submission" in the face of social inequalities and class domination. A Barthesian analysis reveals how the simplicity and naturalness in Veysel's language render a specific worldview invisible, thereby demonstrating its power.

Thomas Turino (2008: 28) treats music not only as a representation but as a "praxis," i.e., an action that actually forms social bonds and collective identities. His concept of "participatory music" is critically important for understanding Âşık Veysel's performances. The folk songs (türkü) Veysel sang in a village room or a radio studio positioned listeners not as passive recipients but as active participants in a shared experience of emotion, remembrance, and belonging. Here, music serves as a sociological adhesive,

transforming individuals into a temporary yet powerful “community of sentiment.”

This framework allows us to move beyond a one-dimensional reading of Âşık Veysel's works. Geertz and Hall enable us to delve into the deep layers of meaning; the UNESCO framework helps us understand the place of this heritage within cultural continuity; Barthes exposes the ideological dimension of these meanings; and Turino allows us to see how the combination of poetry and music creates a concrete sociality. The next section will operationalize this conceptual framework through concrete examples of Veysel's poetry and music.

To concretize this theoretical framework, one can turn to the verses of Âşık Veysel himself, where these social signs become vividly audible and visible. His poetry is not merely a personal diary but a resonant chamber for the collective soul of Anatolia.

In his poem “Uzun İnce Bir Yoldayım” (I Am on a Long, Thin Road), the path is a profound metaphor for the human condition:

“Uzun ince bir yoldayım / Gidiyorum gündüz gece...”

(“I am on a long, thin road / I walk day and night...”)

From a Geertzian perspective, this “road” is a thick description. It is not a physical path but a symbolic structure encapsulating the existential journey of life itself—its uncertainties, its relentless passage (time), and the shared fate of mortality (death). Furthermore, it resonates with the historical and social experience of the Anatolian people: the “road” of the migrant, the laborer, the seeker, embodying a collective sense of movement, displacement, and quest. The line “Dünyaya geldiğim anda / Yürüdüm aynı zamanda” (“The moment I came into the world / I started walking at the same time”) universalizes this experience, constructing a social reality where life is an inevitable, shared journey.

Similarly, his seminal work “Kara Toprak” (Black Earth) elevates soil into a multi-layered social signifier:

“Dost dost diye nicesine sarıldım / Benim sâdık yârim kara topraktır”
(“I embraced many, calling them friend / My faithful beloved is the black earth”)

Through a Hallian lens, this is not a simple romanticization of nature. This representation actively constructs a specific cultural reality. In an agrarian society, the “black earth” is the source of labor, sustenance, and survival (“Şu fani dünyaya geldim geçtim / Bir kazma bir kürek yetti ömrüme”- “I

came and passed through this fleeting world / A pickaxe and a shovel were enough for my life”). It symbolizes rootedness, belonging, and an organic connection to a place. It also represents a profound equality in the face of mortality, as the earth is the final destination for all. By positioning the soil as the “faithful beloved,” Veysel creates a guiding symbol that directs his community to value productivity, humility, and their intrinsic connection to the land, thereby legitimizing and reproducing a core cultural value system.

Thus, Veysel’s words are not just art; they are the very texture of a shared social world. The “road” and the “soil” cease to be mere objects and become active, constitutive elements of a collective consciousness, perfectly illustrating how poetry functions as a powerful social sign.

The Sociological Function Of Poetry And Music: Âşık Veysel

Poetry and music are cultural practices that regulate not only the aesthetic dimension of social life but also regimes of feeling, community belonging, historical continuity, and the circulation of ethical values (DeNora, 2000: 20; Straw, 1991: 369). In this context, Âşık Veysel’s poetic and musical production not only reflects the inner world of an individual artist but also functions as a social institution that establishes shared states of mind, relationships with life, and memories of the Anatolian people.

One of the sociological functions of poetry is to rearticulate collective experience through individual intuition. Veysel’s line “Güzelliğin on para etmez / Bu bendeki aşk olmasa” (Beauty isn’t worth a dime / Without this love inside me) defines love not as a merely individual passion, but as a bond whose meaning is constructed internally, within a social context, rather than being derived externally. This approach indicates how the internalization of social values by the individual is made visible through poetry. Here, the poet is not only one who feels but also a social figure who regulates and directs feeling (Adorno, 1991: 41). In this sense, Veysel’s poetry serves as an instrument of symbolic production, shaping the emotional economy of society.

Music, on the other hand, is a form of sonic memory in which this emotional structure finds embodiment on a collective plane. As Thomas Turino (2008) emphasizes, music is not only a representation but a social action (praxis). Âşık Veysel’s performances in the folk song (türkü) form are not merely vocal interpretations of poems; they transform into a social stage where emotion is co-constructed with the audience. The folk song “Uzun ince bir yoldayım” (I am on a long, thin road), sung with Veysel’s simple bağlama and poignant voice, not only creates an aesthetic appreciation in the

listeners; it also triggers feelings of belonging, consolation, and familiarity by sharing a state of existence, estrangement, loneliness, and journey. In this aspect, music serves as a social adhesive, drawing individuals out of solitude and binding them to a sense of community.

The articulation of themes present in Veysel's Works, death, patience, justice, and nature, through both poetry and music, allows these themes to be experienced not only intellectually but also somatically and affectively. For example, the lines "Beni hor görme kardeşim / Sen altınsın ben tunç muyum? / Aynı vardan var olmuşuz / Sen gümüşsün ben saç mıyım?" (Do not despise me, my brother / Are you gold and I bronze? / We are created from the same Source / Are you silver and I scrap metal?) are not merely a verbal call for equality. These words constitute a powerful defense of dignity and a quest for social justice against the oppression of the people and class distinctions, supported by religious references ("We are created from the same Source") (Arl, 2015: 270; Özdemir, 2018: 155). This discourse, through its poetic and musical form, not only produces meaning; it also creates a social sensitivity and an ethical response in the listener. In this context, Veysel's art is not a form of knowledge but a form of moral praxis.

Furthermore, Veysel's poetry and music also carry the contemporary correspondences of values learned and shared within the oral culture tradition. His works are calls that address not only the past but also the present and the future. The transcription of poetry, the archiving of music, and their sharing on digital platforms (such as YouTube, Spotify) not only sustain Veysel's legacy but also make it an active actor in modern and global cultural transformation processes (Alay, 2019: 8). A traditional "soil" metaphor takes on new meanings in the context of ecological awareness; the emphasis on "friendship" and "brotherhood" gains renewed importance in an increasingly polarized world. In this respect, the legacy of Âşık Veysel represents a unique intersection point between the oral tradition and modern cultural circulation.

The enduring power of Veysel's legacy as a social sign is perhaps best demonstrated by how his other poems continue to articulate fundamental human and social conditions. In his poem "Güzelliğin On Para Etmez," the line "Âlemde güzel çok, ben yine alıştım / Bir taneme, bir çiçeğe, bir toprağa, bir dağa" (There are many beauties in the world, yet I've grown accustomed / To my one and only, to a flower, to a soil, to a mountain) transcends a simple romantic attachment (Ataş, 1998: 77) It symbolizes a deep-seated cultural value of loyalty, humility, and finding profound meaning not in excess, but

in a committed relationship to the local, the familiar, and the essential, a poignant social commentary in an age of consumerism and rootlessness.

Similarly, his poem “Dostlar Beni Hatırlasın” (Let Friends Remember Me) serves as a powerful meta-commentary on his own social function. The very title and the closing lines, “Dostlar beni hatırlasın / Sözlerim, türkülerim yâdigâr kalsın” (Let friends remember me / Let my words and my folk songs remain as a legacy), are not a plea for personal fame. Instead, they are an active construction of a collective memory Project Veysel positions his art as the very medium through which the community (“dostlar”) should remember, sustain its identity, and feel the continuity of their shared bonds beyond an individual’s lifetime. This self-aware curation of his legacy perfectly embodies the role of the folk artist as a creator and custodian of social signs meant to outlive him.

In conclusion, Âşık Veysel’s poetry and music are social signs that carry the ethical sensitivity, social consciousness, and cultural continuity of the people, far beyond being aesthetic forms. When the word of poetry combines with the sound of music, not only is art produced, but also forms of social existence, value, and relationship. For this reason, Veysel’s legacy is an inexhaustible resource and field of interpretation for both sociology and cultural anthropology.

Conclusion

This study has systematically examined the poetic and musical legacy of Âşık Veysel, one of the most important cultural figures of 20th-century Anatolia, through the lens of social signs and intangible cultural heritage, revealing that he was not only a folk bard but also a carrier of collective memory, an ethical sensibility, and cultural identity. The main argument of the study is that Veysel’s works constitute a multi-layered system of signs that goes beyond individual aesthetic expression, structuring and reflecting the universe of values, historical experiences, and perception of social reality of the society from which he emerged.

The conceptual framework on which the research is based was woven from complementary theories that support this argument. Clifford Geertz’s interpretative approach enabled the analysis of the cultural layers of meaning behind Veysel’s images, such as “soil” and “road”; Stuart Hall’s theory of representation showed how these images actively construct social reality. Roland Barthes’ analysis of mythology revealed the ideological dimension of values naturalized in Veysel’s discourse, such as patience and contentment. UNESCO’s perspective on intangible cultural heritage emphasizes the living

and transforming nature of this legacy. At the same time, Thomas Turino's treatment of music as praxis uncovered the sociological power of Veysel's folk songs in creating a sense of community.

The analysis built upon this theoretical groundwork has reached three main conclusions:

1. Poetry and Music are a Social Institution: Âşık Veysel's works functioned to bring individuals together around a common affect and values, strengthening social bonds and reinforcing collective identity.
2. It is a Carrier of Cultural Codes: The themes processed in the poems and folk songs carry the cultural codes of the Anatolian people's relationship with nature, death, justice, and belonging, beyond being individual stories.
3. It is a Dynamic Legacy: Veysel's legacy exhibits a dynamic continuity, moving from traditional oral culture to modern digital circulation, reinterpreting the values of the past in the context of the present and transmitting them to the future.

It is evaluated that this study offers several important contributions to the fields of social sciences and cultural studies. Firstly, it has demonstrated how a non-experimental, qualitative, and interpretative methodology can provide a profound and rich analysis in the field of cultural sociology. Secondly, it has been argued that folk bards and oral culture products should be re-evaluated in academic inquiry not merely as literary or musical objects, but as social actors and cultural intermediaries playing a key role in understanding social structure and collective psychology. Finally, it has been revealed that cultural heritage studies are directly relevant to current and urgent issues such as social ethics, solidarity, belonging, and identity construction, beyond being a nostalgic search for the past.

The "faithful beloved" that Âşık Veysel called "Kara toprak" (Black earth) is now not only a physical entity but also a site of cultural memory. His verses offer us a unique guide for mapping the sociology of these lands. Therefore, his legacy maintains its value for the social sciences not only as an object of study from the past but also as a continuous source of inspiration and reflection for understanding the social fabric of today and building a more humane future. This study, as a step taken to delve into the depths of this resource, hopes to open a door for the application of similar methodologies to other cultural figures and art forms.

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