



Tinsmithing: A Vanishing Craft - the Case of Iskenderun

(Kaybolmaya Yüz Tutmuş Bir Meslek Kalaycılık: İskenderun Örneği)

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ABSTRACT

Since their existence, people have dedicated themselves to altering and transforming available materials to ease their lives and ensure survival with this initiative. Throughout historical eras, these materials ranged from stone to bronze, the latter blending tin and copper. Consequently, the significance of tin, a metal, in human history warrants attention. With the evolution of ages and technological advancements, the local usage of tin, like many other metals, has declined. Consequently, tinsmithing, a craft, has also faded into obscurity. Traditional handicrafts are among the phenomena reflecting a nation's culture and lifestyle. Traditional handicrafts, evaluated within the category of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), are struggling to hold on today, as being doomed to extinction. Among these is tinsmithing, as mentioned. At this point, it is known that tinsmithing, an old craft, exists in very few regions in Turkey. The place called "the Last Tinsmith" located in the İskenderun district of Hatay is trying to keep the tradition alive as the only tinsmith in the region. In this context, this study focused on the survival efforts of tinsmithing, which is a significant value, under challenging conditions, practical stages of the craft have been followed, and the master's views and recommendations on the future of tinsmithing have been gathered. The place of a profession striving to survive in the age of ready consumption in the current order was discussed. The interview technique was used in the research and the recorded data was supported by literature review.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Handicrafts; tin; İskenderun; culture; practices

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Özet

İnsanlar var oluşlarından bu yana eldeki malzemeyi değiştirip dönüştürmeye ve bu girişimle hayatını kolaylaştırmaya, hayatta kalmaya adanmıştır kendini. Tarihsel çağlara bakıldığında bu malzeme bir taş olabildiği gibi kalay ve bakırın karışımıyla elde edilen tunç da olmuştur. Dolayısıyla bir maden olan kalayın insanlık tarihi açısından önemine dikkat çekmek gerekmektedir. Çağın değişmesi, teknolojinin var olması ve gelişmesiyle birlikte kalayın da birçok madende olduğu gibi yerel düzeyde kullanımı azalmıştır. Akabinde bir zanaat alanı olan kalaycılık mesleği de kaybolmaya yüz tutmuştur. Geleneksel el sanatları bir milletin kültürünü ve yaşam tarzını da yansıtan olgulardan biridir. Somut Olmayan Kültürel Miras (SOKÜM) kategorisinde değerlendirilen geleneksel el sanatları günümüzde yok olmaya mahkûm edilmiş olarak tutunmaya çalışmaktadır. Bunlardan biri de belirtildiği gibi kalaycılıktır. Bu noktada eski bir zanaat olan kalaycılığın Türkiye’de çok az yörede var olduğu bilinmektedir. Hatay’ın İskenderun ilçesinde bulunan “Son Kalaycı” isimli yer, yörenin tek kalay ustası olarak geleneği yaşatmaya çalışmaktadır. Bu bağlamda araştırmada önemli bir değer olan kalaycılığın zor şartlarda var olma çabasına odaklanılmış, mesleğin uygulama aşamaları takip edilmiş ve ustasından kalaycılığın gelecekteki konumu üzerine görüşleri ve tavsiyeleri sorulmuştur. Hazır tüketim çağında ayakta kalmaya çalışan bir mesleğin mevcut düzendeki yeri tartışılmıştır. Araştırmada görüşme tekniği kullanılmış ve kayıt altına alınan veriler literatür tarama ile desteklenmiştir.

Keywords: El sanatları; kalay; İskenderun; kültür; uygulamalar

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Introduction

In Türkiye, the executive unit responsible for the tasks and policies related to Intangible Cultural Heritage is the Ministry of Culture and Tourism's General Directorate of Research and Education. This General Directorate conducts tasks and procedures related to ICH through regulations and guidelines based on the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, collaborating with institutions such as provincial Directorates of Culture and Tourism, the Turkish National Commission for UNESCO, the Ministry of National Education, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and universities (Arioğlu & Atasoy, 2015: 109). The UNESCO convention, which evaluates handicrafts within the ICH framework, was officially published in the Official Gazette on January 25, 2006. A year prior, the General Directorate of Revolving Funds within the Ministry of Culture and Tourism established the Directorate of Traditional Handicrafts and Stores Operations in 2005, aimed at researching, developing, supporting, promoting, and marketing traditional handicrafts. However, despite these developments and similar efforts by many municipalities, there is insufficient determination to save and carry forward our handicrafts from extinction (Ünver, 2013: 305).

Traditional handicrafts are elements of cultural memory formed by the codes of cultural heritage, which manifest themselves through features such as common identity, emotion, and a sense of belonging (Arioğlu & Atasoy, 2015: 112). The material products of Turkish culture, reflecting our identity carried from the past to the present, began to be known as handicrafts in the early years of the Republic (1930s). In Turkey, particularly after 1960, population movements both reduced traditional handmade production and led to the emergence of a different lifestyle formed by people in squatter settlements who could not integrate into urban life. Handicraft products, which were parts of traditional life in villages, were either not produced during this period or transformed into degenerated products. From the 1980s onwards, while the rural population decreased and the urban population increased, many functional handicraft examples were no longer produced as they lost their functional roles in traditional life. Consequently, many handicraft products, once used by a large part of our society and now forgotten by contemporary people, have disappeared, though they should have held a place in our cultural history (Öztürk, 2013: 156). Like any product, handicrafts, part of the folk economy, must continue to be beneficial areas of engagement for producers and consumers to sustain their existence. Therefore, it is important to carefully determine consumer behavior, needs, and expectations for traditional handicraft producers and market them using the correct methods (Çalış, 2013: 150). The prevalence of numerous massive factories producing in series undoubtedly complicates this situation. As a result, the ease and lower cost of accessing products for consumers have reduced the demand for handmade products. Hence, traditional arts centered on handicraft cannot achieve a balance of supply and demand and eventually close down.

One of the traditional handicrafts that has come close to being abandoned is tinsmithing, crucial for copper products. “Tinsmithing is the process of coating the exterior of copper-made items with tin to protect them from rust and external factors and to prevent copper from becoming toxic over time” (Çoban, 2022: 78). The earliest evidence of tin used as an alloy material in Anatolia was found in the excavations at Yumuktepe, located 3 km northwest of Mersin. This material, an alloy of copper and tin containing 2.6% tin, dates back to approximately 4300 BC. The tin ratio in this material is very low for making true bronze, so it is considered as a primitive example. However, it is currently known as the oldest processed copper and tin find in Anatolia (Kaptan, 1981: 164). Today, tinsmithing, which can be considered one of the lost professions, was seen as a necessity of daily life in the past. This is because Turkish culture and one of its operational elements, food and beverage practices, are largely associated with tin and copper metals. Therefore, the art of tinsmithing holds significant importance in Turkish culture (Yavuz, 2006: 38). The rich food and beverage culture and the importance placed on hospitality in Turkish society have paved the way for the enrichment of utensils. The most preferred utensil material, copper, has certain characteristics. Copper, due to use and other reasons, wears out over time and becomes unusable. Therefore, copper products need to be tinned periodically and made ready for use again. However, due to the various reasons mentioned above, copper usage has decreased, and consequently, the profession of tinsmithing has come to the brink of extinction.

Looking at the history of the copper craft in Hatay, it can be identified that the first copper masters were Armenians. The art of copper processing was also learned by Muslims who had close relations with Armenians. Today, copper craftsmanship continues to exist in Hatay primarily for touristic reasons (Çoruh & Çaparlar, 2012: 24). Although different materials/metals have replaced copper in daily use today, certain practices of the regional culture continue to necessitate the use of copper. For instance, large copper cauldrons and trays are used to prepare “hırise” a special dish made during the festivals of the Nusayris (Arab Alawites), who form a significant part of Iskenderun. There is only one center in the Iskenderun district where these copper items can be tinned. İlker Akalın, who continues his father’s profession, learned tinsmithing from his father. As a child, he attended both school and his father’s tinsmith shop. İlker Akalın, who learned all the intricacies of tinning from his father at a young age, was trained within the master-apprentice discipline. Although he currently works in a different field, he has not completely abandoned tinsmithing, which he considers his father’s legacy. The shop’s sign even reads “The Last Tinsmith Orhan Akalın” in memory of his father, who passed away in 2018. İlker Akalın believes that changing the sign and writing his name would also erase traces of his past, memories, and childhood. Master İlker accepts this profession as an ancestral craft. He learned the intricacies of the work from his father. “My father trained an apprentice in Hacıahmetli Village. My father started tinsmithing at a young age, so his apprentice

was 30 years older than him. Our craft is ancestral. We have been tinsmiths for four generations, going back to my father's grandfather... My father trusted me; he would watch me tin, but he wouldn't look when I was at the fire, fearing I would panic and burn it. This is how I learned. My father used to travel to nearby villages at times. He would tin on a wood fire on the ground. He used to take me with him" (KK1). Master İlker is also engaged in another job due to the low demand for tinsmithing. His father's words, "Learn this trade but don't rely on it; it won't feed you" (KK1), also suggest that tinsmithing gave a similar impression to previous generations. Master İlker attributes the danger of tinsmithing's extinction to the reduced widespread use of copper. "In the past, even spoons were made of copper. Now, no one says 'let's buy copper,' they don't care" (KK1). According to the master, tinsmithing also has health benefits. "Those who deal with tinning don't easily catch colds (due to sal ammoniac), and they don't suffer from joint pain and calcification" (KK1).

The number of people bringing copper items for tinning increases during festival periods because large cauldrons are used for cooking and distributing food during festivals. "There is a rush during festivals. Many people bring their cauldrons before the festival to avoid the rush. Large cauldrons used in cooking hirise during festivals are brought in" (KK1). These festivals are special to the Arab Alawites, who are predominant in the region. The diversity of this cultural belief positively impacts the tinsmithing profession.

1. Materials Used in Tinsmithing

1.1. Sal Ammoniac: Also known as ammonium chloride, this chemical compound is a white crystalline salt that is highly soluble in water (URL-1). During the tinning process, it is sprinkled over the copper to facilitate the annealing of the product. As stated, "Without sal ammoniac, the tin won't adhere" (KK1).



Image 1: Container of Ammonium Chloride

1.2. Tin: Tin is silvery-gray in color, does not oxidize easily in the air, and is resistant to corrosion. Due to these properties, it is used to coat other metals to protect them from corrosion. Its history dates back to 3000 BC. Tin was used in bronze alloys in Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia (URL-2). *Tin is sold by weight. I buy it from Maraş. Sometimes customers bring their own tin, trusting its quality more and finding it more economical. Both tinsmiths and solderers purchase tin for their use in soldering. Since it is bought from the bank, the name of the manufacturer is written on the tin* (KK1).



Image 2: Tin Rods Purchased from the Bank

1.3. Tongs and Shears: These are used to hold and cut heated copper.



Image 3: Tongs Holding the Tinned Product.

1.4. Brush: It is used for brushing to smooth the surface of the product before tinning.



Image 4: Cleaning Brush

1.5. Coal/Gas/Propane Stove: The stove section where the fire is ignited to melt the tin, heat the product, and carry out the tinning process. *“Previously, gas stoves were used for tinning. Then it switched to coal. I turned to propane. The original is a gas stove”* (KK1).



Image 5: Lower Part of the Propane Stove



Image 6: Upper Part of the Propane Stove

1.6. Caustic Soda: Also known as sodium hydroxide, caustic soda is an inorganic compound. Prolonged skin contact can cause chemical burns (URL-3). It is used to clean the copper product of dirt before tinning, ensuring better adhesion of the tin. For this process, caustic soda is prepared by boiling it with certain mixtures.²

² Ilker Usta considers the recipe for this mixture a trade secret and did not want to disclose it.



Image 7: Container with Boiled and Ready-to-Use Caustic

1.7. Cotton: Used during the leveling of the tin, it must be a special heat-resistant cotton specific to tinsmithing.



Image 8: Tinsmith's Cotton Used During Tinning

1.8. Leçe Stone: A special stone that the tinsmith cleans by rubbing her cotton occasionally during tinning. “The leçe stone needs to be ridged to clean the cotton. It becomes unusable when worn out” (KK1).



Image 9: Leçe Stone for Rubbing the Cotton

1.9. Cooling Pool: The area where the product is immersed in water to solidify after the tinning process is completely finished. “If we don’t immerse the copper in the cooling pool at the end, it bends because it softens” (KK1).



Image 10: Process of Immersing the Copper Tray in the Cooling Pool

2. Tinning Stages

2.1. Cleaning the Product to be Tinned

To prepare a copper product for tinning, it must undergo several processes. The first of these processes is cleaning the product. The cleaning process is determined by the tinsmith based on the current condition of the copper product (such as a pot, tray, plate, cauldron, cezve, teapot, etc.). The copper product is “initially cleaned with diluted acid. We first wash stained ones with sand” (KK1). Diluted acid refers to the material known as “caustic.” The craftsman carefully immerses the product in caustic using tongs and waits for it to dry. The sand-cleaning process involves rubbing sand onto the product to remove surface stains and dirt, revealing the copper beneath. “A well-cleaned container means the tin will adhere well” (KK1).



Image 11: Copper Tray Cleaned with Caustic



Image 12: Copper Tray Washed with Sand

2.2. Annealing the Copper Product to be Tinned

The annealing process involves heating previously tinned items in the intense flame of the tinning furnace for a period to warm them up. Annealing also cleanses any residual oils from the product. This is crucial for ensuring the tin adheres properly. “The type of furnace can vary among tinsmiths. Some use wood fires, others use coal, and some use propane” (KK1). To anneal the copper, sal ammoniac is sprinkled over the heated copper on the furnace.



Image 13: Heating the Copper Cauldron



Image 14: Sprinkling Ammonium Chloride on the Copper Tray

2.3. Tinning the Copper Product

After annealing the copper product, the next step is tinning. If there are any deformations in the product (such as cracks, breaks, bends, etc.), the tinsmith repairs these before proceeding with tinning.

“If there are holes or cracks, tin won’t cover them. We use a tin-lead solder to fill them. The amount of tin used depends on the product’s needs. You can’t use gloves, your hands will get burned” (KK1). Each product has a unique tinning method. “For cauldrons, we do the base first and then the sides to avoid burning our arms when bending over” (KK1). During the tinning process, a tin rod is moved over the product, and the heat from the product melts the tin. The melted tin is then quickly spread over the product using a special heat-resistant cotton specific to tinsmithing. This process continues until the surface of the product is completely covered with tin. The tinsmith’s cotton is rubbed on the leçe stone after each use to clean it. “Tinned products last longer if they are cleaned with ashes after use” (KK1).



Image 15: Applying the Tin Rod to the Product

2.4. Cooling the Tinned Product

This is the final stage of the tinning process. After tinning, the product is cooled in a “cooling pool” to shock it. This step can be thought of as washing the tinned product with cold water. The washed products are then set aside to dry.



Image 16: Cooling the Tinned Tray



Image 17: Cooling the Tinned Cauldron

Conclusion

Traditional handicrafts are phenomena that reflect a nation's culture and lifestyle. Classified under the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) category, traditional handicrafts struggle to survive in contemporary times despite facing extinction. One such craft is tinsmithing. At this point, it is known that tinsmithing, an ancient craft, exists in very few regions of Turkey today. In Hatay's Iskenderun district, the "*Last Tinsmith*" strives to keep this tradition alive as the only tinsmith in the area. As a result of the fieldwork, the tinsmith was visited, and an interview was conducted focusing on his perspective on the profession, his views about the craft, and his methods of practicing it.

Unfortunately, copper, which has a long-standing usage has reached a discouraging state. As mentioned at the beginning of the study, copper usage is no longer preferred due to various reasons. Tinsmith Master İlker is aware of the gravity of the situation and holds little hope for the future of the craft. However, it can be said that copper usage in Iskenderun is relatively higher than in many other regions due to cultural factors. The region's religious diversity plays a significant role in this. Mainly, the Arab Alawites conduct many festive celebrations involving food, which require the use of copper utensils. As a result, especially during festival times, more copper trays and cauldrons are brought to the tinsmith for tinning. This cultural belief system contributes to the craft's survival.

The study has determined that tinsmithing is being kept alive in the Iskenderun region by İlker Usta and that the sustainability of the profession should be supported. The study also aimed to address existing problems and find ways to resolve them, focusing on preserving the craft in this context.

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