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Putting Folklore to Use: Reflections on Masal Evi, Halıdere-Türkiye, 1999-2000

Folklorun Kullanımı: Masal Evi Üzerine Değerlendirmeler, Halıdere-Türkiye, 1999-2000

Hande Birkalan-Gedik*

Abstract

The focus of this article is on Masal Evi (Story House) in Halıdere, Türkiye and my reflections on storytelling as a therapeutic tool in the aftermath of the 1999 Marmara earthquake. In this initiative, inspired by applied folklore theories, I employed traditional folktales as a means to help children overcome their traumatic experiences. Grounded in approaches by scholars such as Donald Haase and Jack Zipes, the storytelling activities leveraged the healing potential of fairy tales to create a safe and culturally relevant environment for children to explore their emotions and begin to heal. In the storytelling sessions, traditional narratives became tools for expressing complex emotions, allowing children to engage with narratives that mirrored their own experiences of loss and displacement. This approach also resonates with practices like *cuento* therapy, where folktales can help children navigate their psychological landscape, offering both hope and a sense

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of belonging. This article presents my reflections on storytelling sessions that I conducted in Halıdere, which encouraged self-expression and community support. It ultimately highlights how culturally sensitive approaches to storytelling and folklore can facilitate community-driven healing in trauma-affected populations. Türkiye's seismic landscape, marked by significant earthquakes, has left profound psychological scars, especially among young survivors. Addressing this, the experience in Masal Evi highlights how folktales can offer comfort and foster resilience, allowing children to process trauma and rebuild their sense of stability. In Masal Evi, the collective effort from volunteers, local families, and children not only established a safe space for healing but also rekindled a sense of community attuned to gender equity and democracy.

Keywords: *folk and fairy tales, folktale therapy, 1999 Marmara earthquake, children's folklore, applied folklore, community building*

Öz

1999 Marmara depremi sonrasında Halıdere-Türkiye'de gerçekleştirmiş olduğum Masal Evi'ndeki anlatılara odaklanan bu makale, terapötik bir araç olarak hikâye anlatımının rolü üzerine öz düşünümlerimi sunmaktadır. Uygulamalı halkbilimi teorilerinden esinlenen bu girişimde, çocukların travmatik deneyimlerinin üstesinden gelmelerine yardımcı olmak için geleneksel halk masallarını kullandım. Donald Haase ve Jack Zipes gibi halkbilimcilerin yaklaşımlarını temel alan hikâye anlatımı etkinlikleri, çocukların duygularını keşfetmeleri ve iyileşmeye başlamaları için güvenli ve kültürel açıdan uygun bir ortam yaratmak amacıyla masalların iyileştirici potansiyelinden yararlanmıştı. Hikâye anlatımı seansları, geleneksel anlatıların karmaşık duyguları ifade etmek için araçlar haline gelmiş ve çocukların kendi kayıp ve yerinden edilme deneyimlerini yansıtan anlatılarla etkileşime girmelerine olanak tanıyan kültürel açıdan hassas bir terapötik ortam sağlamıştır. Bu yaklaşım aynı zamanda, çocuklara masalların psikolojik manzaralarında gezinmelerine yardımcı olabilecek hem umut hem de aidiyet duygusu sunabilecek "*cuento* terapisi" gibi tekniklerle de uyumluydu. Bu makale, kendini ifade etmeyi ve topluluk desteğini teşvik eden hikâye anlatımı oturumlarına ait bilgiler vermekte ve nihayetinde hikâye anlatımı ve masallara yönelik kültürel açıdan hassas yaklaşımların travmadan etkilenen nüfuslarda topluluk odaklı iyileşmeyi nasıl kolaylaştırabileceğini ortaya koymaktadır. Türkiye'nin önemli depremlerle şekillenmiş olan sismik coğrafyası, özellikle depremden kurtulan genç nüfus üzerinde derin psikolojik yaralar bırakmıştır. Bu bağlamda ortaya çıkan anlatı seansları halk masallarının nasıl rahatlık sağlayabildiğini ve dayanıklılığı teşvik ederek çocukların travmayı işlemelerine ve istikrar duygusunu yeniden inşa etmelerine olanak tanıdığını göstermişti. Anlatılar gönüllüleri, aileleri ve çocukları bir araya getirerek sadece iyileşme için güvenli bir alan oluşturmakla kalmadı, aynı zamanda cinsiyet eşitliği ve demokrasi değerlerine duyarlı bir topluluk duygusunu da yeniden canlandırmaya yardımcı oldu.

Anahtar sözcükler: *halk masalları, masal terapisi, 1999 Marmara depremi, çocuk folkloru, uygulamalı halkbilim, cemaat yaratma*

Introduction

Türkiye, a land traversed by seismic fault lines, has a long and painful history of earthquakes: the recent earthquakes of 2023, which impacted a large population dispersed in an area from Kahramanmaraş to Adıyaman, from Hatay to Gaziantep and beyond, killed several thousand people and left several thousand others homeless. Other painful events are the devastating Marmara earthquake of 1999, which remains in the collective memory of people in the country even to this day. Based on the magnitude, the area it affected, and the material losses it caused, it was thought to be the largest earthquake of the last century until the recent one in 2023. The 1946 and 1966 Varto earthquakes should not be forgotten (Gedik, 2008; 2011, this issue), nor the great Erzincan earthquake in 1939 (Karancı and Rüstemli, 1995), which serve as stark reminders of the immense human cost and the enduring psychological impact of these natural catastrophes.

There are several countries in the world that have critical fault lines, such as Japan, but the death toll after the earthquakes in those countries is much lower than in Türkiye. Many experts relate the high number of deaths and casualties in the earthquakes referred to above to predictable reasons, but which have so far not been avoided-illegal construction and buildings that do not comply with the earthquake standards; constructions on unsuitable ground; and contractors who skimp on materials in order to make the building cost cheaper. These issues were at stake in the recent 2023 earthquake and 1999 Marmara earthquake as well, which magnified the human and material losses.

What is important is that, after the great Marmara earthquake, some regulations such as compulsory earthquake insurance were introduced but the lessons for damage prevention and people's and buildings' durability were not learnt well, as the 2023 earthquake revealed. It is also important to note that most of the post-traumatic experiences of survivors of these earthquakes were not properly addressed at the time of the huge tremors and some of them emerged years after the earthquakes, haunting various people.

Decades after the 1999 Marmara earthquake, the recent 2023 earthquake, with its widespread publicity, demonstrated that government's role in disaster response has become even more crucial in coordinating rescue efforts, providing immediate relief, and ensuring the safety and rehabilitation of affected communities. The importance of effective disaster management, including the implementation of robust building codes, the conducting of regular emergency drills, and allocation of resources for rapid recovery and rebuilding efforts, was again discussed. The need for the government to work with local and international agencies to improve the resilience of infrastructure and preparedness for future seismic events received more attention. Furthermore, community education, which plays a vital role in disaster preparedness by equipping residents with the knowledge and skills needed to respond effectively during an earthquake, was highlighted. Clearly, educating the public about emergency procedures, safe evacuation routes, and basic first aid can significantly reduce casualties and enhance community resilience. Furthermore, fostering a culture of preparedness through workshops and awareness campaigns empowers individuals to take proactive steps in safeguarding their homes and families. The earthquake of 2023 also

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showed, once again, the prominence of physical rescue and rebuilding and the need to heal the invisible wounds of trauma, particularly among child survivors.

With these important points in mind, in this article the lens is turned towards one of the past earthquakes in Türkiye–to the 1999 Marmara earthquake–with a focus on immediate community reactions to help earthquake survivors, most of whom were children in the particular example of Masal Evi (Story House) in Halıdere. In the following, I will present my reflections on a community-centred initiative that emerged in the aftermath of the 1999 earthquake to help heal the children's wounds through the storytelling sessions I led as a volunteer. Here, I used traditional folktales as therapeutic tools for children grappling with the aftermath of the devastating earthquake that struck the region on August 17 and another one on 12 November 1999.

My initiative for using folk and fairy tales for therapeutic purposes owes much to the conceptualisation of US folklorist David Hufford, who defined applied folklore as "…simply the application of concepts, methods and materials from academic folklore studies to the solution of practical problems." He likened it to fields like engineering with its theoretical as well as applied sides, underlining "such an application of academic folklore knowledge to practical problems provides an excellent setting for the empirical testing of folklore hypotheses and generates by necessity a richly interdisciplinary approach" (Hufford, op cit. in Jones, 1994: 13).

Certainly, the idea of applied folklore has a greater compass that goes beyond what is discuss in the present article. However, I should underline that the idea of using folk and fairy tales emerged from previous applications of fairy tales helping overcome the post-traumatic experiences of children, in alignment with the ideas of betterment of people. Particularly significant here are the works by Bruno Bettelheim (1989), Jack Zipes (1988 [1983]) and Donald Haase (2000) on using folktales in storytelling sessions. The child psychologist and a survivor of the concentration camps of Dachau (near Munich) and Buchenwald (near Weimar), Bruno Bettelheim argued that, by presenting children with archetypal characters and situations, fairy tales provide a symbolic language for understanding and coping with difficult emotions (Bettelheim, 1989).

Moreover, both Jack Zipes' and Donald Haase's work became crucial for my using traditional tales therapeutically, as storytelling sessions revealed that the tales have relational, explanatory and creative effects. Of prime importance is that Zipes articulated a theory about fairy tales' appeal in their recurring pattern involving "the reconstitution of home on a new plane" (Zipes, 1988 [1983]: 176) and accentuated the subversive and transformative power of fairy tales. Driven by the longing for home, "which is discomforting and comforting" at once (1988 [1983]: 177), he underlined that fairy tales are important tools for children to articulate their sense of (non)-belonging and further suggested that tales can challenge societal norms and offer alternative perspectives on reality.

Likewise, Donald Haase explored how children use fairy tales to interpret their landscapes and experiences. Haase's work on the imaginative space of fairy tales was aimed

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at building on Zipes' theory of the "liberating potential of the fantastic" (1988 [1983]) and Sigmund Freud's notion of the *unheimlich*[1] (uncanny) (1919). Haase used fairy tales to make sense of those who lived through wars and later, as adults, for reflecting on their violent childhoods and traumatic physical and emotional experiences. As Haase showed, children may use fairy tale spaces to represent and map their wartime experiences-or traumatic experiences-particularly the disfigurement of familiar places and dislocations like exile. As a result, fairy tale spaces often evoke a sense of "home" and can provide children with a sense of comfort, security, and a return to a meaningful life, even amidst distressing circumstances. The imaginative and utopian elements of fairy tales allow children to project hope onto their traumatic environments, potentially contributing to psychological survival.

In the story sessions, similar to Haase's assertions, I realized that folk and fairy tales turned out to be useful vehicles for children to express their feelings and sentiments for different reasons. First, since adults sometimes struggle to understand children's perspectives and experiences, especially in the aftermath of traumatic events like earthquakes or wars, folktales allow talking *to* and *with* children. Second, children lack the sophisticated social and analytical tools for grasping complexities of their surroundings fully and express what happens to them, so folktales can enable them to rely on familiar imaginary landscapes to make sense of their world. In this framework, tales became stories "to think and live with," offering a lens through which children can interpret and even predict the world around them.

I should also mention that studies on the cultural aspects of storytelling as a cross-cultural activity, particularly as seen in "*cuento* therapy" (CT) (Constantino et al. 1985), influenced the story sessions I conducted for nearly nine months. CT involves retelling old stories for a new generation of engaged listeners, typically children or troubled adolescents, with the aim of helping them make sense of adverse psychological conditions or traumatic events, such as rape, sexual assault, and domestic violence as a culturally sensitive modality, specifically designed for Puerto Rican children. Inspired by his own migrant background, the Italian-American psychologist Giuseppe Constantino developed the initial research into CT and tested whether using folktales as a form of psychotherapy would help improve issues with anxiety among Puerto Rican children in 1979. In essence, CT is about the creative use of *cuentos* (mythological folktales) to model an adaptive behaviour and address issues related to bicultural conflict. His basic hypothesis was that if a Puerto Rican mother reads her children folktales from their culture, it could improve the child's overall sense of well-being.

Earlier works on folktales and their connection to reality, which are now considered classics-especially those by Max Lüthi (1947) and Lutz Röhrich (1956)-on different aspects of "reality" have also shaped my approach. Crucial for the storytelling sessions was the perspective provided on the fairy tale by Swiss folklorist Max Lüthi, who underlined five basic features of a fairy tale: one-dimensionality[2] depthless-ness,[3] abstract style,[4] isolation and universal connectedness[5] and world containment.[6] Fairy tales enabled both the listeners and the tellers to travel to and from here to there and from our world to the world of the marvellous. This identification with fairy tale landscapes can be particularly illuminating for children who faced displacement, violence or trauma. In this light, for instance, a child who might have

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experienced the destruction of her home could find solace in the idea of a magical castle or a secret annex, because they can draw parallels between their own reality and the fantastic. The familiar narratives and archetypes found in fairy tales, such as heroes, villains, and quests, can help children understand complex social dynamics and moral conflicts. In other words, stories function like bridges between the world of reality and the "world of fantasy."

Certainly, German folklorist Lutz Röhrich's *Märchen und Wirklichkeit: Eine volkskundliche Untersuchung* [Fairy tales and reality: a folkloristic examination] (1956)-translated into English as *Folktales and Reality* (1991)-provided me with the frameworks to see folktales more analytically. Röhrich opposed the notion that the legend is realistic and the folktale unrealistic, showing that the underlying elements in folktales are, in different ways and scales, connected to reality. I found Röhrich's identification of folktales as a partnership between fantasy and reality particularly useful in conceptualizing my approach, which counters the often-repeated accusation that folktales are complex systems of lies and highlights their usefulness for understanding real-world dynamics.

Other significant works offer cross-cultural and interdisciplinary approaches to the use of traditional narratives, particularly folktales, which are "marvellously hopeful" (Verena, 1995, p. x). Brun et al. (1993) demonstrated that fairy tales could be utilized in therapy and counselling in various ways and on multiple levels. They also highlighted other therapeutic methods, such as music therapy and art therapy as empowering strategies that can be applied effectively in post-earthquake contexts. Coming from psychiatry, Roberts and Holmes (1999) showed that at the heart of any therapeutic encounter there is always a story. Their starting point was how people define and think of themselves and of others; in relationships; and in medicine, particularly in psychiatry and psychiatric treatment.

Reflecting on storytelling, using stories for therapeutic purposes now, I can trace other seminal works that appeared after my involvement in the folktale sessions. Zipes' *Speaking out: storytelling and creative drama for children* (2004) takes the stories to another, familiar genre: theatre and uses of storytelling techniques in inner-city schools as a rich and powerful tool for self-expression and for building children's imaginations. Since children often struggle to articulate their experiences and emotions through direct language, the storytelling sessions aimed to create a safe and culturally sensitive space, where Turkish-and other-folktales showed the power of storytelling in providing a safe and culturally sensitive space for children.

1. Observations and reflections from Halıdere

When the terrible shaking happened in the Marmara region on August 17, 2000, it was 3:02 a.m., and it caught people asleep, causing the most devastating damage in the seashore towns such as Değirmendere, Halıdere, Ulaşlı and Gölcük, which were located nearly 100 m above sea level. These towns, which have been historical centres for the Turkish populations migrating from the Soviet Union, are known for their unique compositions and characteristics. For example, Değirmendere played an important role in cultural and artistic activities in the region, while Ereğli and Halıdere became important nodes for agricultural activities. Ulaşlı

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was a fishing community, and Hereke, on the other side of the bay, was an important centre for carpet weaving, known around the world for its trademark carpets.

Since the 1950s, these towns, like most of the districts in Kocaeli, have pulled migrant populations from different parts of Türkiye. Starting with 1960s, the region, particularly Gölcük, became a site of heavy industry, including the Gölcük shipyard, which is known for its shipbuilding and maintenance activities. Gölcük was designated as the main base of the Turkish Navy as it hosted one of Türkiye's most important military shipyards, where nearly 3,000 people worked for producing battleships and submarines; the İPRAŞ (İstanbul Petrol Rafinerisi A.Ş./İstanbul Petrol Refinery Joint Stock Corporation) should also be mentioned. Today known as TÜPRAŞ Oil Refinery, it was founded by the American Caltex company in 1961 and became an important industry that provided job opportunities to a large number of people. At the earthquake, the human loss and damage at the Gölcük Shipyard were immense. At the TÜPRAŞ oil refinery, a large fire occurred and a toxic leak at the AKSA chemical plant in the district of Yalova was also detected.

At the time of the earthquake, I was still a graduate student at Indiana University Folklore Institute, living in Bloomington, Indiana. Having defended and passed my doctoral thesis, I was at the stage of polishing it and getting ready to go back to Turkey. A few weeks after the earthquake, I found an e-mail message in my inbox from the H-Net's Network on for Ottoman and Turkish Studies. This was a call from the list server of which I was a member, sent by Prof. Dr Semih Vaner of AFEMOTI (Association française pour l'étude de la Méditerranée orientale et du monde monde turco-iranien). The message was about the request for supporting children who survived the earthquake (also see, Chaoul, 2000). To me, this message sounded unique in the sense that it did not ask for any particular financial contribution but aimed at eliciting ideas for helping the children achieve and maintain better mental health. Since I was going to be in Türkiye soon, I responded to the message saying that I hoped I could put my expertise in folklore to use in the earthquake region. In a few days, I was communicating with Prof. Dr Semih Vaner, the president of AFEMOTI, who lent support for the materials and other items related to Masal Evi in Halıdere.[7]

Recognising the need for psychological support for these children, AFEMOTI initiated a campaign to aid the young victims of the disaster. An exploratory mission visited the earthquake zone in Türkiye from 28 October to 3 November 1999. In the mission, where I was also present, Ms Bathilde Dopffer, delegated by the board of AFEMOTI, took part as an observer. Dr Moncef Bennour, a delegate from the *m*édecins du monde was specifically responsible for assessing the medical situation and needs of the population. Dr Michel Chaoul, a psychiatrist in Saint-Denis, and Prof. Dr Semih Vaner also took part in the mission (Birkalan, 2001: 365). Dr Chaoul prepared an initial report about the children and indicated the symptoms as nervousness and severe anxiety; fear of separation from the parents, family, and home; violent interaction with other children, illusions, and pseudo-hallucinations (Birkalan, 2001).

After a series of meetings with several NGOs in Istanbul and in the region, AFEMOTI decided to take up joint work in Istanbul with an NGO specializing in human health and education. Our contact person was Necdet Kutlucan, an artist and art specialist, who

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came to the region on the fourth day of the earthquake and had the children involved with painting activities. In the meantime, I joined the group of volunteers as a representative of AFEMOTI and worked together with him. In the following months and with the aid of other volunteers, classes and meetings on English, art, ecology and environment were launched in Masal Evi, and teachings and discussions were promoted for "better living" with an emphasis on democratic governing and gender equity. The presence of academic concerns and professionalism in our work was highlighted with AFEMOTI's support, while the work was largely amateur in spirit.

Figure 1: A sample from the children's drawings. (From the archive of the author).

Starting from December 1999, the storytelling events took place in Halıdere, where children demonstrated various symptoms of trauma, including nervousness, anxiety, fear of separation, and sleep disturbances. Every Sunday, a group of approximately 35 children of ages varying between 6 and 15 years old regrouped in the tent, where I employed a range of storytelling tools, which I myself developed.

Activities in the region primarily included therapeutic story sessions, which were born from the need to provide support that went beyond the traditional methods of psychological intervention, which some survivors found intrusive and insensitive. Fairy tales, with their inherent capacity to address complex human experiences through symbolism and metaphor, on the other hand, offered a potentially powerful tool for healing and recovery. These included familiar stories with therapeutic themes, emphasizing fairy tales with happy endings, collaborative storytelling, reading tales together, and using written and illustrated stories. Besides storytelling, I used creative activities such as drawing and telling, which provided channels for the children to express themselves through art. This was realized thanks to the help of Necdet Kutlucan, who was mainly responsible for the children's artistic activities.

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Figure 2: Pictures that children made and displayed in the tent at the beginning of storytelling sessions. As can be seen from the picture, this was the time when I met with children in the temporary tent, which the volunteers and the locals made together. Later on, our activities took place in the pre-fabricated container (From the archive of the author).

At the beginning, the children of Halıdere were behaving the way described by Dr Chaoul. Slowly but surely, we could observe that the children's well-being increased considerably. Masal Evi was established around other tents, surrounded by the collapsed houses, where people tried to find shelter on cold days. Our tent was barely larger than the other tent-homes, where I had to work with 35 children each Sunday for a couple of hours. Ideally, we wanted to divide the children into age groups, but thinking over the situation, we came to an understanding that this would have been too luxurious in terms of time and space, so we worked together with all children at once. However, conducting story sessions in such a small place with so many children was challenging. During the time in Halıdere, I had the children write down stories and had them illustrate these stories individually and in groups, which lent a powerful dimension of validation and witnessing.

We had to keep the children busy: having children between the ages of 3 and 15 meant that every child had to participate in the maintenance of the tent. Later on, we saw that this had influenced children positively, since they gained a better sense of responsibilities and rights. Together with the children, we divided the daily chores. Everybody took turns cleaning the tent before they went to some other tent space. Perhaps as important as the narrative sessions were the times spent together in the tent, because the tent meant "community."

Several survivors, as I developed a rapport with them, underlined that they became tired of hearing "So, tell us what happened that night?" or similar questions asked by some psychologists who lost interest in talking with the survivors after a few sessions. Having 35 boys and girls from different age groups also created an interesting dynamic among the group. As I briefly alluded above, we witnessed a strong presence of traditional gender roles. One of the children in the tent once told me that the boys and girls could never sit together at the same desk in the classroom (Birkalan, 2001).

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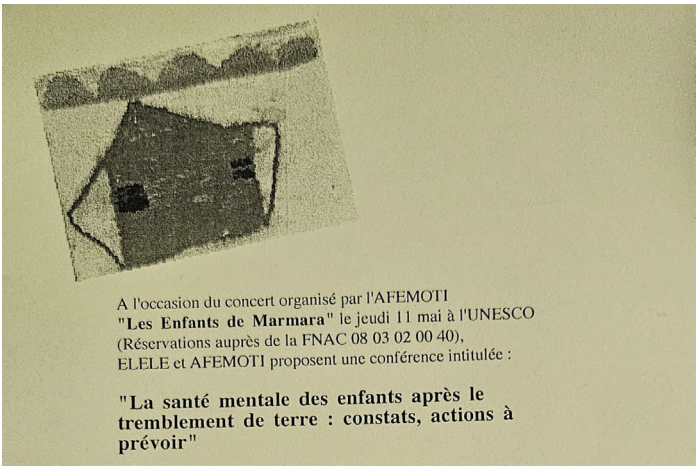
As well as children, curious parents grew into active Masal Evi participants and helped to build the community again. Older children became the sisters and brothers of the young ones and learned the meaning of "watching out for the others" and "lending a helping hand when necessary." In this respect, much credit was due to the project coordinator Necdet Kutlucan, who was probably the most instrumental figure in providing this environment. Unlike the other volunteers, including myself, Kutlucan stayed in the region and got a better sense of the people, and he continued the activities through the rest of the week. This was also the greatest strength of the project: unlike some other models, our model involved "hands-on-learning," and emphasized the "doing" part in life, rather than giving children some passive learning drills.

With his humanist vision and constructive ideas and support, Prof. Dr Semih Vaner spearheaded the project in many ways. For example, he was very receptive when I suggested exhibiting children's drawings in Paris. As a result, at the planning stage of the exhibit, I selected a great number of children's drawings and took them for professional curating at a *passepartout* atelier in Istanbul, which treated the children's paintings as artworks. With the help of volunteers and, again, with the support of Semih Vaner and Ali Kazancıgil, who directed social sciences at UNESCO, we set up the pictures for the exhibit. The meeting in 2001 in Paris at ELELE - Migrations Cultures de Turquie (literally meaning hand in hand-Migration Cultures of Türkiye, was another occasion which increased the visibility of the project. ELELE is an organisation that focused on the migrant Turkish population in France and organised, in collaboration with AFEMOTI, a public evening on the mental health of the children after the earthquake.

In 2000, I presented some preliminary thoughts on the use of folktales in coping with tragedy at the American Folklore Society Conference that took place in Columbus, Ohio.[8] In 2001, I provided an initial assessment of the activities, to underline the valuable support of AFEMOTI in the Young Researchers issue of the journal (Birkalan, 2001). I gave two talks on Masal Evi activities with children and their state of mental health both at ELELE and at UNESCO, in Paris, which drew French and Turkish academics and intellectuals alike and created an environment for the visibility of the storytelling activities I conducted with children with the support of AFEMOTI



Picture 3 : Information flier of ELELE for the lectures on the mental health of children. (From the archive of the author).

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2. Putting folktales to use after the Marmara Earthquake

I aimed at using a wide range of tales with different characteristics. Primarily, I selected familiar stories with therapeutic themes. These included fairy tales that addressed themes relevant to the children's experiences, such as loss, fear, and the restoration of safety and security, inspired by Bettelheim's assertion that a child "can find a better solace from a fairy tale than he can from an effort to comfort him based on adult reasoning" (1989: 45).

I tried to prioritise fairy tales with happy endings, offering a sense of hope and the possibility of overcoming adversity. The tales which started with the hero's departure were certainly of great use for this purpose. What happens to the hero? He undergoes a journey, which is not easy, but eventually reaches the happy ending: the famous cycle of relief though hardship, which is often seen in Turkish and Middle Eastern tale traditions.[9] In these activities, for example, one idea was to use a familiar story that already contained a theme we wanted to convey-such as a child or character eventually finding safety after a frightening experience or dealing with the loss of family or home. By these means, I aimed to help children overcome fears of separation from their parents, family, and home, as Dr Chaoul highlighted in his preliminary report.

Second, based on a familiar protagonist, children created new stories together, where the protagonist went though some hardship, but eventually reached the happy ending. This is what I called "collaborative storytelling." I performed this type of activity in small groups, where I used familiar fairy tale characters placed in the context of the earthquake and encouraged the children to create new narratives and explore their feelings through imaginative storytelling (Birkalan, 2001). I asked, for example, what happened to [the Turkish version of] Cinderella in the earthquake? I allowed for venting of experience and emotion first since that was vital in post-crisis. Then we joined with the narrative and shaped it in a mutual storytelling format to expand on themes in a therapeutic way.

Likewise, I tried to introduce certain Aesop's fables that explored themes of resilience and the importance of perspective, such as "The Hares and the Frogs" and "The Lion and the Elephant," hoping to help children cope with their feelings of vulnerability and loss (Birkalan, 2001). The first one exemplified the themes of self-perception, courage, and contentment, underlining that feeling perplexed and anxious is not limited to certain characters. The moral of the story is often interpreted as a reminder to appreciate one's own circumstances and to realize that others may struggle with similar or even greater challenges. It encourages contentment and resilience in the face of difficulties, highlighting that everyone has their own fears. The second one, "The Lion and the Elephant," showed that strength alone does not make one invincible, and that humility is important, especially for those in positions of power. It serves as a reminder that everyone has weaknesses, and that true strength often includes the wisdom to recognize and respect others. These fables were well aligned with our purpose, since they enabled the children to talk about their in the post-trauma periods and became vehicles to talk about similar experiences they had.

In another group, I tried using "stories in the form of everyday experiences," which created one-dimensionality for children to navigate between the world of the fairy tales and the real world. To offer an example: In the spring, when the weather was more pleasant, we

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took the kids outside. It was important for them to pass time in nature, since it had the most healing effect through a sense of rejuvenation. A 5-year-old boy was playing with some leftover woodblocks for the home he was building. I once approached and asked him if he knew the story of the little boy who wanted to build a house. He said, "Yes" and we started "creating" a story together. The important point of this exercise was that we were no longer talking about the boy-he faded away as he became out of focus, while the narration with the first and the third person alternated. The "other" boy was our hero, who happened to be interested in making a home. Through the story he told me that he wanted to make a "sturdy" one that would withstand the earthquake. His house should have only one floor and two rooms: one for him and his brother, and one for his parents. After the story, when we talked to his mother, we learned that he has not been able to sleep without his mother-during the day, or at night (Birkalan, 2001).

In retrospect, my usage of folktales come closer to three of the four approaches that were identified by Veronika Brun, Ernst W. Pedersen, and Marianne Runberg identified as intuitive, psychodynamic interpretation, play therapy and creating fairy tales (1993). The tales I selected oscillated between the "intuitive" approaches, where the client identifies with a fairy tale intuitively. The authors also noted play therapy, driven by a child's choice of a toy or play, which also become important vehicles in some of the narrative sessions in Halıdere. As I mentioned earlier, I also relied on the creation of individual fairy tales with children, mostly in group sessions. I did not use psychodynamic interpretation, which went beyond the scope of my expertise in narrative research in general and the application of folktales for therapeutic cases in particular.

In addition to the narrated stories, I also purchased books and painting supplies for the children thanks to the financial support of AFEMOTI. We read the stories in the books and, in the later phases of the sessions, children painted different scenes from their favourite fairy tales. Most of the paintings, created in the middle phases of the research, presented the hopeful landscape of the stories. However, there were a few "unpleasant" landscapes-dark colours and a hodgepodge of painting with skulls and blood (Birkalan, 2001: 301). Under the group of written and illustrated stories, children were encouraged to write down their stories and create illustrations, which supplied them with a tangible means of expressing and validating their experiences.

Conclusion

Through various usages of the stories, we were able to talk *to* and *with* the children in Halıdere after the great Marmara earthquake. Our work with a group of approximately 35 children, however small, drew great attention from the local community. First, using folktales as narratives in their own rights provided an "imaginary" space for children to express the inexpressible and to say the unthinkable. Masal Evi tried to emphasize a philosophy of life that involved "doing" rather than "memorizing." It also aimed to make not only children but also adults act upon their own lives by moulding them into active participants, rather than passive observers.

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As I wrote back in 2001, much to our dismay, we had to leave the project, without knowing with any certainty whether the children had recovered. As I said at the beginning, AFEMOTI provided a modest budget for the storytelling sessions, which were enriched by children's tales and drawings. Reflecting on the project, I believe that having additional team members and conducting more structured assessments could have enriched our work with the children. While the project had many positive aspects, it faced challenges due to limited resources and its temporary nature, which restricted its scope and impact. At times, I felt a strong need for interdisciplinary work—folklorists collaborating with psychiatrists, counsellors, and particularly a child psychologist, as having a counsellor on the team could have enabled us to assist others who were willing to share their experiences.

Nevertheless, it became clear that fairy tales served as powerful tools for helping children communicate, socialize, and reconnect with their external world, particularly in a time of crisis. Furthermore, being in the region for nearly nine months also brought other positive effects in terms of gender equity: mothers, many of whom were homemakers, began taking on more active roles within the community. In retrospect, I should underline that Masal Evi showed the power of the community, as it became more than just a space for storytelling for children. It evolved into a hub for community building and support. Parents actively participated in the project and helped to create a sense of shared social space through which people were able to develop a sense of belonging. Older children took responsibility, demonstrating empathy and care for their younger peers. The project, in its essence, fostered a spirit of collective healing and resilience.

In spite of its visible and invisible challenges, Masal Evi underscored the profound therapeutic potential of fairy tales for children who have faced trauma. Through these storytelling sessions, children found a culturally sensitive and emotionally secure space to explore their feelings, process their experiences, and take early steps toward healing. The project emphasized how vital community engagement, imaginative expression, and the transformative power of narrative can be in fostering resilience and rekindling hope amid adversity. The impact on the children of Halıdere, and the insights gleaned from their connection to fairy tales, highlights the need for creative, culturally attuned approaches to trauma recovery. In its modest setting, Masal Evi stands as a powerful testament to the enduring strength of storytelling to bring light to the darkest of times, helping to guide a path toward healing and renewed hope.

As I alluded at the beginning, Türkiye's rich historic and geographic geography, which also makes it culturally and socially unique is located right on different seismic lines. This makes the inevitability of the occurrence of the earthquakes. What is however evitable is the human and material loss. It is my only hope that earthquake preparedness takes the full force in the coming years. On the other hand, in the case of post-trauma recovery-not only just related to earthquakes but also applicable in similar situations—my Masal Evi experience highlights the crucial need for interdisciplinary collaboration in projects aimed at post-trauma recovery, especially when working with children and communities affected by disasters. Future initiatives would benefit from the combined expertise of folklorists, social workers, psychologists, and child development specialists, among others. Each discipline

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can offer unique insights and methods that together create a more holistic approach to healing. For example, while folklorists provide valuable cultural narratives, psychologists and counsellors could bring strategies for addressing trauma and emotional resilience. Social workers, meanwhile, could facilitate ongoing community engagement and support. By forming diverse teams, future projects can build on a wider range of skills, making their interventions more comprehensive and impactful. This approach not only fosters greater healing but also empowers communities to become active participants in their own recovery.

Endnotes

1 Freud's concept of the *"unheimlich"* (uncanny) serves as a profound exploration of the familiar becoming strange. He explains that the term *"heimlich"* refers to what is known and familiar, while *"unheimlich*" denotes that which is concealed or hidden. This transformation occurs when something familiar is repressed, leading to its return as something alien. In essence, the uncanny is not a new or foreign experience; rather, it is an old, familiar aspect of our psyche that has been pushed out of sight, only to resurface in unsettling ways. Freud's insights reveal how our minds grapple with the complexities of repression and recognition, making the uncanny a significant theme in understanding human psychology.

2 In the simplest terms, one dimensionality can be described as the state in which the supernatural and earthly dimensions are levelled in the same world, or when supernatural and non-supernatural elements exist side by side in the same dimension, such as Cinderella talking to the fairy godmother. In this framework, a princess will not question her turning into a bird and flying away. Similarly, a prince traversing a land by means of a magic object is not to be questioned because the tale will present everything in the tale as natural and ordinary. Accordingly, there is no explanation for supernatural events.

3 According to Lüthi, depthlessness is another characteristic of a fairy tale. Characters lack stable relationships, they exhibit very slow ageing processes, they do not grow or change emotionally, they do not struggle with difficult decisions, and injury and violence do not harm the hero permanently.

4 Lüthi explains abstract style as the means for achieving depthlessness of the tale as a whole. The abstract style refers to a lack of realism; in other words, nothing or nobody is described in detail and the plot is always action oriented. Abstraction often employs clichéd descriptions such as the "handsome prince," "old woman," or "beautiful princess," which enables children to focus more on the plot rather than on the features of the characters in the tale.

5 In Lüthi's conceptualisation of the European folktale, characters often exist in isolation, embodying a sense of detachment from sustained connections and close relationships. The protagonist is staged in dark, labyrinthine forests, high, unapproachable towers, or vast, empty fields. Each environment emphasizes the character's separation from society, creating a backdrop that is as detached and eerie as the encounters within it. Separated from family, the hero sets out on a journey from the familiarity of "home" into the unknown "real world." Here, tasks await—challenges that will test their resilience, cleverness, or bravery. The hero encounters other characters in isolated episodes, brief yet pivotal interactions that serve a specific purpose. Relationships are transactional, designed to propel the protagonist towards their goal without entangling them in emotional ties. Thus, the interactions in the world of the fairy tale are temporary, functional, and devoid of deep interpersonal connections.

6 According to Lüthi, the fairy tale encompasses an entire world within its small frame, drawing on any motif it finds useful—the "magical, the mythic, the numinous" or the spiritual. It can combine elements from rites, erotic and worldly elements, absorbing and reshaping these motifs, stripping them of their original meanings to serve its own purposes. In this way, a fairy tale represents the contents of the world, creating a microcosm where every theme, symbol, and event contributes to a larger, universal narrative of the tale itself.

7 Semih Vaner (1945-2008) was a political scientist with a specialization in Türkiye and international relations in the Middle East. He was research director at the National Foundation for Political Science (FNSP-CERI). Born in Istanbul and a graduate of the Faculty of Political Science at the University of Lausanne, Vaner received his PhD from the University of Paris-Sorbonne. He taught at the University of Bursa (Türkiye), before becoming a researcher at the CERI (Centre d'études et de recherches internationales) in 1982 in Paris. He was the director of the Cahiers d'Études sur la Méditerranée Orientale et le monde Turco-Iranien (CEMOTI) and president of AFEMOTI (Association française pour l'étude de la Méditerranée orientale et du Monde Turco-Iranien). For more information, see: Jean Marcou: https://ovipot.hypotheses.org/465. [Accessed on 12 August 2024]

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8 My paper "Masal Evleri: Children, Folktales and the Marmara Earthquake" was presented at the "Coping with Tragedy" panel that took place on Friday, 27 October 2000 in Columbus, OH.

9 As demonstrated by Ulrich Marzolph in 2017 in his book *Relief After Hardship The Ottoman Turkish Model for the Thousand and One Days*, the theme of relief after hardship is a fundamental structure in the European fairy tales, where the protagonist overcome his trials and attains a better status. This phrase reflects the belief that after times of struggle or adversity, ease and relief will eventually come, a common theme in Middle Eastern literature traveling to the West and conveying messages for hope and resilience, often used to comfort someone facing tough times.

Research and publication ethics statement: This article is developed from the work I voluntarily participated in at the Fairy Tale House project conducted by AFEMOTI in Halıdere between 1999 and 2000, as well as from my research paper summarizing these activities. It has been enriched with contemporary theoretical and methodological approaches. In its current form, the article has not been published elsewhere and has not been submitted as a journal article or book chapter to any other journal or publisher.

Authors' contribution levels: The article is single-authored.

Ethical committee approval: Since the research was conducted before 2020 (between 1999 and 2000), ethical committee approval is not required.

Financial support: I conducted the storytelling sessions at Masal Evi project in Halıdere on a voluntary basis. AFEMOTI provided financial support for operational expenses related to the project (such as children's artwork and its exhibition).

Conflict of interest: There are no potential conflicts of interest related to this study.

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