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WELCOMING AND FAREWELL MILK TEETH TRADITIONS

FUNDA GULAY KADIOĞLU

ABSTRACT

Milk teeth are the only organ that human beings directly witness to their emergence and extinction. Due to this special situation, the milk tooth is not only a biological structure but also a cultural entity which is the subject of folkloric rituals. It is physiologically painful and uncomfortable that this special organ of the digestive system comes to and leaves from the mouth (tooth eruption and shedding). Possibly, to help overcome this troubled period, almost every society has established its own rituals within their cultural values specific to these processes. Thus, milk teeth have become the only organ with the tradition of "welcoming and farewell" for them in a folkloric context. In Turkey, the Balkans, the Turkic Republics and Arab countries, it is particularly important to carry out a "tooth wheat ceremony" for the first milk tooth of a child. The dominant view in these traditions is that holding this ceremony will help the child's milk teeth erupt on time and be strong. Unlike Eastern societies, in the folklore of Western societies, there are almost no welcome rituals performed for the eruption phase of milk teeth. However, the farewell traditions of the first milk tooth exist in every society. In Turkish culture, there is also a symbolic farewell ceremony for the loss of the first milk tooth. The purpose of this ceremony, in which the milk tooth is thrown to the roof of the house along with a wish rhyme, is to ensure that the permanent teeth are strong and white. In the farewell tradition, some special characters are in the foreground in European and American cultures. In European culture, this character is the Tooth Mouse, while in American culture it is the Tooth Fairy. In terms of oral and dental health and overcoming the concerns of the child's tooth loss, the Tooth Fairy was also adopted by the dental community. As a reflection of the effect of globalization factors on local cultures, the rapid acceptance of the Tooth Fairy, which is not found in Turkish culture, brings along the concern that national cultural values can be forgotten. In Turkish culture, the ritual of "wishing for a healthy tooth" is spiritually valuable, while the Tooth Fairy's "taking the milk tooth and giving money in return" displays a material value.

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The possibility of changing values undoubtedly makes it necessary to emphasize our traditions of welcoming and farewell of the milk tooth.
Keywords: Folklore, milk tooth, milk tooth eruption and shedding, tooth fairy, tradition.

INTRODUCTION

The tooth is an important organ of the digestive system. Milk teeth are formed during the intrauterine period, and they begin to erupt in the baby's dental arches at about six months of age. At around six years of age, when the permanent dentition period occurs, the milk teeth start shedding and leaving the mouth, and then are replaced by permanent teeth (American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry 2019). All organs are developed in prenatal period, and under normal circumstances, they continue to exist within the body throughout life. Unless an organ transplantation is performed, no organ is ever replaced. Only the teeth are renewed during a lifetime, and since human beings witness the emergence and extinction of them, milk teeth are special. This interesting situation makes milk teeth not only a biological structure, but also a cultural entity that is subject to folkloric rituals. In fact, eruption and falling out of a primary tooth is physiologically painful, and it is an uncomfortable traumatic process. Perhaps in order to help overcome this troubled period, almost every society has created their own cultural traditions, and thus milk teeth have become an organ for which a "welcome and farewell" ceremony is held in folkloric context.

The farewell traditions of the first milk tooth exist in every culture including Turkish folklore and they are rather similar. However, in American dental folklore this tradition is quite different. In Turkish culture, the ritual of "wishing for a healthy tooth" is at the center of a farewell ceremony, while in American culture the Tooth Fairy picks the milk tooth and gives money in return. As a reflection of the effect of globalization factors on local cultures, the rapid acceptance of the Tooth Fairy, a figure that is not found in Turkish culture, brings along the concern that national cultural values can be forgotten.

In this study, the welcoming and farewell traditions of milk teeth in Turkish culture and other cultures are introduced, and Turkish traditions' tendency to change is discussed.

WELCOMING TRADITIONS OF MILK TEETH

The eruption of the first milk tooth, which is considered as one of the biological growth and development signs of the baby, is celebrated with the ancient tradition of "tooth wheat" ceremonies in Turkey. The basis of this tradition is the desire to have healthy and aligned teeth, living an abundant life and blessing the food (Gürbüz 1995: 81-87, İrkil 2014: 257–258).

In his book *Folklore of the Teeth: History of Dentistry* published in 1927, Leo Kanner states that the rituals of welcoming milk teeth are limited in the

Western societies (Kanner 1927: 293). He mentions about the Nordic myths and German traditions. In the former, a gift is given to the child whose first milk tooth appears while in the latter those who see the first milk tooth buy new clothes for the child. Welcoming the milk teeth with the tooth wheat ceremony is more common in the folklore of Turkey, Turkic Republics such as Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan, some of the Balkan and Arab countries (Başal 2006: 45–70, Çokişler 2007: 177, Gürbüz 1995: 81-87, Kalafat 2010: 124, Kesgin and Özcebe 2004: 49, Perçemli 2011: 59, Svanberg 1987: 111–137).

According to Kanner, the origins of tooth wheat ceremony in Eastern culture can be traced back to a religious poem about Brihaspati in Indian Mythology. Considering the possibility that the child, whose erupting teeth are growing like tiger teeth, may harm his parents, Brihaspati fixes the teeth and advises: "You eat rice, wheat, sesame with these sharp teeth… Do not harm your parents" (Kanner 1927: 293).

In the tooth wheat ceremony in Turkish culture, wheat is boiled in water and enriched with other ingredients such as legumes, nuts and dried fruit, and served to guests. The purpose of this celebration, differently from the Indian tradition, is to share the good news about child with family, friends and neighbors while eating a special treat prepared from wheat in a joyful environment (Albayrak 2006: 40, Başal 2006: 45–70, Keskin 2009: 143, Perçemli 2011:59, Yaşar 2008: 108–112). It is believed that the tooth wheat ceremony will help the child's teeth to erupt in time, and the teeth will be strong. There are also some complementary rituals specific to this tradition. These complementary rituals include scattering boiled wheat grains over the head of the child, placing different items in front of the child and interpreting his/her choice of item in regard to their future profession, and giving presents to the child (Balkaya 2016: 193, Çokişler 2007: 177, Kayabaşı 2013: 82–84, Kesgin and Özcebe 2004: 49, Kıyak 200: 25, Polat 1995: 20).

In order to ensure that the child's teeth eruption process is as easy as wheat's swelling and bursting, wheat grains are scattered over the child's head during the ceremony. In other words, the aim is to establish "contact". The wheat scattering on the child's head can be explained by the Turkish folklore principle of "imitation and contact" which is based on the idea that "things that come into contact would pass on their positive effects to each other" (Albayrak 2006: 40, Kalafat 2010: 124, Perçemli 2011: 59, Sarıtaş 2011: 122–126). In the Eastern cultures, including Turkey, it is particularly significant to witness and herald the eruption of the child's first tooth. It is an important part of the tradition that the first person to see the child's tooth come out is to dress the child from head to toe and buy him new clothes (Balaban 2006: 86, Gürbüz 1995: 81–87, Keskin 2009: 143, Yolcu 2008: 48, Yüksel 2007: 166–170).

FAREWELL TRADITIONS OF MILK TEETH

Although farewell traditions are common and structurally similar all over the world, they differ from culture to culture in terms of content. We can find the roots

of the Western rituals about the shedding milk teeth in Scandinavian myths. For instance, burying the fallen teeth in the ground to protect them from the witch's curse or hanging them around the child's neck as a necklace are among these rituals (Capps and Carlin 2014, Hellisen 2017, Uihle 2018). The concern underlying these rituals is the possibility of a body part being taken by another person and used for harming its owner. Leo Kanner's extensive study of dental folklore reveals how tooth farewell traditions can have similar characteristics in different societies around the world. Kanner summarizes the farewell traditions as follows: "When the milk tooth falls out, the child throws it back over his shoulder onto a rooftop or into a rat hole, and asks an animal, usually a rat or a squirrel, to replace it". He argues that this tradition is same in almost every culture including Germany, Russia, Romania, North Africa, Mexico and New Zealand. Additionally, he explains that in Armenian culture the fallen tooth is buried in the ground while in Arab societies it is thrown towards the sun (Kanner 1927: 292–293). Kalafat (2010: 115–129), in support of Kanner, underlines in his study on Jordanian society that the first tooth that falls out is thrown into the sun along with the rhyme "O sun, take my donkey tooth and give me a gazelle tooth". In his comparative study on Turkish culture and folklore, Svanberg (1987: 111–137) states that there are similar farewell rituals in a wide geographical area including the Balkans, Anatolia, Turkic Republics and Arab countries, and that the teeth are thrown onto the roof or to the sun or placed into a rat hole with wishes and requests.

Another interpretation, different than Kanner and Svanberg's arguments, especially regarding the traditions in Turkish culture, was published in the British Dental Journal. The British Dental Journal has dedicated 12 covers out of its 24 issues published in 2016 to original paintings with the theme of tooth fairy traditions in the world. These paintings were made by the English artist Thomas Allen. The river picture on the cover of the first issue represents the fallen milk tooth wrapped in cotton and thrown into the river in Pakistan and New Zealand traditions (British Dental Journal, 1, January 2016). The theme of the second issue is about traditions involving a tree. According to the description, in a tradition that belongs to North America, the fallen milk tooth is put on a tree by the mother or grandmother, and the family dances around the tree in the belief that the child's permanent tooth will grow as strong as a tree (British Dental Journal, 2, January 2016). The theme of the third issue is the necklace. In Chilean tradition, the child's fallen teeth are attached on a thread (sometimes placed in a small gold or silver frame) by the parents and worn by the child (British Dental Journal, 3, February 2016). In the fourth issue, it is stated that the tooth is thrown at the sun in Arab culture (British Dental Journal, 4, February 2016). The theme of the fifth issue is the Tooth Fairy itself. According to the common belief in England, the United States, Ireland, Canada, Australia and Denmark, when the fallen tooth is placed under the pillow at night, the Tooth Fairy collects these teeth and leaves coins instead (British Dental Journal, 5, March 2016). On the cover of the sixth issue of

the journal a squirrel on a tree is depicted. According to the tradition in Sri Lanka, the children take the milk tooth in their hands, close their eyes and say, "Squirrel, squirrel, take this old tooth and give me a new one" while throwing the tooth into the tree, and then they run away without looking back (British Dental Journal, 6, March 2016). The cover of the seventh issue represents the tradition in Tajikistan. In this tradition, the teeth are sown in the fields in the belief that they will grow into protective warriors. It has been noted that Aboriginal Australians have a similar tradition. Aborigines put the tooth inside the pandanus plant so that when the pandanus grows into a tree, protective spirits that are believed to reside in the leaves of the plant will look after the child (British Dental Journal, 7, April 2016). On the cover of the eighth issue, the similar traditions of Botswana and Bhutan are depicted with the image of "moon in the night sky". In this tradition, children throw their milk tooth onto the roof of their houses, they call out the moon goddess and ask for a new, strong and healthy tooth (British Dental Journal, 8, April 2016). The image of the ninth issue is a bird flying in the air. In Brazil, India, Korea and Moldova, the fallen milk teeth are thrown on the roof of the house and the birds flying in the air are called by saying "Take away my tooth, bring a new one to me" (British Dental Journal, 9, May 2016). The cover of the tenth issue illustrates the traditions that involve throwing the lost tooth on the roof. According to the description, in Taiwan, Greece and Georgia, milk teeth are simply thrown, either towards or backwards, to the roofs (British Dental Journal, 10, May 2016). The theme of the eleventh issue is the mouse. In Spanish-speaking countries, the tooth fairy has been replaced by the tooth mouse. It is believed that the teeth hidden under the pillow at night will be taken by the mouse named Ratoncito Perez when the children fall asleep, and some money or candy will be left in their place (British Dental Journal, 11, June 2016). On the cover of the twelfth issue, a child burying his tooth in the ground is illustrated. According to the explanation, in Turkish tradition, the lost primary tooth is buried in the garden of the place where the child is expected to be in his future career (British Dental Journal, 12, June 2016).

Aforementioned information does not coincide with the results of authentic folklore studies carried out in Turkey. In Turkish culture, instead of being buried in the ground, the fallen milk teeth are thrown to the roof of the house along with wish rhymes. Seeing that this practice is well-established in our culture, further investigation is needed to clarify why such a different representation exists in the foreign literature. Although it is common to bury the tooth in the ground, it is usually thrown on the roof in Turkish culture. The error in the explanation of the cover picture is about the relationship between child's career and buried tooth. In Turkish tradition, rather than the teeth, baby's umbilical cord plays a role in determining child's future career. According to our traditions, when the umbilical cord dries and falls off, it is buried in the ground in the expectation that the place it is buried will be related to the future profession of the child (Örnek 2015: 111, 173). In Turkish culture, the rituals to determine the future profession also

involve the teeth. However, it is not practiced when the milk teeth are shedding but as a part of the welcoming ritual when baby's first teeth are erupting (Örnek 2015: 111, 173; Yüksel 2007: 166–170).

The purpose of the farewell ceremony for baby tooth in Turkish culture is to ensure that the permanent teeth will be strong and white. The common ritual of the ceremony is to throw the milk tooth to the roof or chimney of the house while singing a rhyme (Arslan 2011: 62, Çokişler 2007: 177, Karakaş 2012: 3–6, Keskin 2009: 143, Kıyak 200: 25, Sarıtaş 2011: 122–126, Yaşar 2008: 108–112, Yolcu 2008:48). The fallen tooth is thrown onto the roof of the house as it is believed that if the parts (the first tooth, nail, hair, etc.) leaving the body are kept somewhere close to the house, the child will also be closer to it (Yüksel 2007: 166–170).

Sometimes the tooth thrown on the roof is entrusted to birds, especially to crows. The core belief of this tradition is that birds are magical creatures (Perçemli 2011: 59). Due to regional differences, the tooth can also be thrown into a rat hole along with a wish rhyme (Balkaya 2016: 193, Kalafat 2010: 124, Gürbüz 1995: 81–87).

Some examples of the rhymes related to the first fallen baby tooth can be found below: (İrkil 2014: 258, Kayabaşı 2013: 82–84, Perçemli 2011: 59, Svanberg 1987: 111–137, Yaşar 2008: 108–112, Yüksel 2008: 170)

"Milk-tooth to the mouse, The iron-tooth to me",
"Crow, take the rotten tooth and Give me the new tooth",
"Crow, take this, my rotten tooth, Give me my silver-tooth",
"Crow, crow, take my tooth and Give a new tooth",
"Take my rotten tooth and Give me my pearl-tooth",
"Grow white, grow clean, Grow thick like the tooth of the sheep",
"Take this rotten tooth, Give me an iron-tooth",
"Grow whiter than a lamb's tooth, Grow stronger than a dog's tooth",
"Take, crow, this coal-tooth, Get me an iron-tooth".

It can be seen that the wishes for the fallen milk tooth in Turkish culture focus on the concepts of strength, whiteness and durability, which are the indicators of a healthy tooth.

TOOTH MOUSE AND TOOTH FAIRY

In the farewell traditions of the milk tooth, two special characters exist in European and American dental folklore. These characters are the Tooth Mouse and the Tooth Fairy (Blair 1980: 691–694, Capps and Carlin 2014: 265–280, Svanberg 1987: 111–137). Their common feature is to exchange the milk tooth for money or gifts. In France, Spain and South American countries such as Argentina, Venezuela and Guatemala a Tooth Mouse named Ratoncito Perez collects the teeth placed under the pillow and brings some money or candy to the child (Hellisen 2017, Uihle 2018). The Tooth Fairy is a more common figure in England, Canada, Australia, and the United States. According to cultural historians, while the fallen teeth used to be buried in the ground to protect the child from witches, today they

are kept under pillows to be exchanged for money or gifts by the Tooth Fairy (Alty 2006: 18–22, Capps and Carlin 2014: 265–280).

The Tooth Fairy in American folklore evidently has its roots in European folklore, and moreover, it is related with the Tooth Mouse (Alty 2006: 18–22). The story *La Bonne Petite Souris*, written by Madame d'Aulnoy in 1697, found in the *Fairy Tales of French* literature, tells how the Tooth Mouse turns into the Tooth Fairy. In the story, the queen imprisoned by the demon king asks for help from a mouse who can turn into a fairy. The kindhearted mouse pulls out the king's teeth, then transforms into a fairy and hides the teeth under the king's pillow. Thus, the queen is set free (Uihle 2018). While the Tooth Fairy was continuing to be a rising star in dental folklore, Spanish writer Luis Coloma brought the Tooth Mouse named Ratoncito Perez alive again in 1894 with his story titled *Casa del Raton Perez* (Hellisen 2017).

The number of the children's books and cartoons about the Tooth Fairy has increased since the second half of the twentieth century especially in the United States and Canada. In terms of oral and dental health and for overcoming the anxiety of tooth loss, the character of the Tooth Fairy was quickly adopted by the dental professionals (Capps ve Carlin 2014:265–280, Muğlalı 2011:68–72, Svanberg 1987: 111–137). Since the 1980s, the Tooth Fairy has gained a different quality, and its commercial aspect has come to the fore. Especially in the United States, the amount of money given to the child by the family on behalf of the Tooth Fairy has increased over the years. With this aspect, the Tooth Fairy has sometimes become a field of interest for economic experts (Capps ve Carlin 2014: 265–280).

Becoming a favored product in popular culture, the Tooth Fairy has started to appear in party costumes or toys such as "tooth box" and "tooth pillow" created for the fallen milk teeth. In 1994, the Tooth Fairy became widespread in Europe when Barbie launched the first Tooth Fairy Barbie. As children's movies and books started increasing from the 2000s, the Tooth Fairy became a dominant figure in the farewell rituals of milk tooth (Blair 1980: 691–694, Capps and Carlin 2014: 265–280).

At this point, it is important to mention the relationship between consumption and culture. Özdemir (2007: 241–252) points out that the relationship between consumption, culture and production can meet altogether in the term "culture industry". The culture industry is about controlling the masses by providing products for their consumption. The internet, which is both a cultural field and a product, constitutes the basic context of the cultural economy of the new era. All kinds of cultural products are easily promoted, marketed and consumed with the help of social networks. The media, the most effective weapon of the culture industry, can be influential on the cultural structure of the society (Özdemir 2007:241–252). Considering the consumer goods such as books, costumes, toys and boxes, it is possible to say that the Tooth Fairy also falls into scope of the culture industry.

CONCLUSION

Cultural change is defined as the material and spiritual changes in a society's culture. Although cultures are based on continuity, they are not static and therefore can change by the effects of globalization (Düzgün 2019:73). Some traditions of Turkish culture are also subject to change over time. If we take a closer look at dental folklore, it is possible to see such a change. The prominent wish for the child is to have healthy and strong teeth in the rituals of the Turkish culture, whereas in the American society, the child receives money from the Tooth Fairy. In other words, the "spiritual element" is evident in the tradition of Turkish culture, while the "material element" is evident in the tradition of American culture. Due to the increasing Western influence on local cultures in the globalized world and the effects of the culture industry, the Tooth Fairy has started to gain acceptance in Turkey while bringing the concern that national cultural values may be forgotten.

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