

# An Overlooked Storytelling Tradition: Teyo Pehlivan and the Turkish Tall Tale

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**Abstract:** This study explores the often un(der)-recognized presence of tall tales in Turkish folklore, highlighting the narratives and storytelling techniques of Teyo Pehlivan and Cumhuriyet Seval from Erzurum as key illustrations of this presence. Despite their universal appeal, tall tales have yet to be acknowledged as a distinct genre within Turkish folklore. Likely due to their unique blend of truth and fiction, these tales are often classified into broader categories such as fairy tales, folktales, anecdotes, or jokes. This study examines the limitations in previous folklore research and the terminology issues that may have led to these misclassifications. It proposes the term ‘üfürme hikâye’ (blown tale) to capture the playful essence of tall tales and distinguish them as a unique genre.

Teyo Pehlivan’s deadpan delivery of tall tales in teahouses and Cumhuriyet Seval’s animated performances of these stories on stage and screen highlight the evolving nature of storytelling traditions. However, Teyo’s tales, fragmented and reduced to mere jokes in written records, highlight the difficulty of capturing the essence of tall tales in written form and the challenges in categorizing them. This underscores the vital role of performance in preserving and conveying the dynamic, multifaceted nature of this folklore.

The study highlights the significant contributions of Teyo Pehlivan and Cumhuriyet Seval in preserving the cultural heritage, values and dialect of Erzurum through their tall tales, fostering a sense of

belonging among their audiences. Seval carries on Teyo's legacy by embodying his character and playing a crucial role in preserving the tall tale tradition. This research aims to stimulate interest in Turkish tall tales and advocates for their recognition as a vibrant and essential aspect of Turkish folklore.

**Keywords:** cultural heritage, Erzurum, Fıkra, oral tradition, storytelling, tall tales, Teyo Emmi, Teyo Pehlivan, Turkish folklore, Üfürme Hikâye

## INTRODUCTION: TALL TALES AND THEIR CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

Storytelling has always been a crucial part of human culture, serving various purposes such as sharing experiences, transmitting knowledge and offering entertainment. One particularly entertaining form is the tall tale. A tall tale, broadly defined, is an entertaining account that typically starts with everyday events but quickly stretches credibility through exaggerations and outlandish claims until it implodes due to its overwhelming absurdity (Brown 1987: 20; Caron 1986: 29; Hegerfeldt 2005: 109). The storyteller, often the larger-than-life protagonist, presents these events as true, and the audience knowingly plays along (Brown 1987: 11, 32; Wonham 1989: 295), enjoying the performance.

While tall tales are commonly associated with American folklore, particularly during the period of westward expansion (Boatright 1949: 357; Wonham 1989: 284), their origins and influence extend across Europe and beyond. For instance, the adventures of Baron von Münchhausen, a global icon of tall tales, were already well-known in America by 1835, with 24 publications of his tales (Spiller et al. 1963: 728). In fact, the tradition of tall tales is not a modern invention but rather a narrative form with deep historical roots, reaching back to ancient times and across various cultures around the world (Brown 1987: 11).

Tall tales, while flourishing globally with particular prominence in American folklore, remain relatively unexplored in Türkiye. The lack of a clear and established definition, coupled with the absence of a Turkish equivalent that fully captures the essence of tall tales, has hampered research in this area. This study, therefore, seeks to fill this gap by examining the storytelling styles and selected tales of Erzurum-based storytellers Teyo Pehlivan<sup>1</sup> and Cumhur Seval. In doing so, it highlights the significant but neglected presence of tall tales within Turkish storytelling traditions. Furthermore, the study proposes a distinct Turkish term for the genre to address this cultural gap. The findings of this research will shed light on previously unexplored aspects of tall tales within Turkish folklore and pave the way for new areas of exploration.

## UNDERSTANDING TALL TALES IN TURKISH FOLKLORE: CHALLENGES AND MISCONCEPTIONS

Tall tales have flourished in North America with cultural significance, inspiring enthusiasm for their exploration (Brown 1987: 12; Henningsen 1966: 69; Thomas 1977: 1, 5). However, scholarly attention to tall tales varies globally (McMullen 2015: 19). In America, they were recognized early as a distinct genre (Ibid.: 24), whereas Europe categorized them much later (Thomas 1977: 4). In contrast, in Türkiye, Pertev Naili Boratav (1907–1998), a pioneer of Turkish folklore research, highlighted such stories in the Turkish narrative tradition in the late 1960s (1969: 101–102).

Early folklore studies, both globally and in Türkiye, often focused narrowly on form and content, frequently overlooking tall tales. This approach emphasized the exaggerated nature of these tales, leading to their dismissal as mere ‘lies’ (Hansen 2008: 445). While classification systems, like Aarne and Thompson’s indexes, have been valuable for cross-cultural folktale studies, their categories, such as ‘Tales of Lying’ and ‘Humor of Lies and Exaggeration’, may have unintentionally reinforced this misconception (Thomas 1977: 5).

In Türkiye, Boratav contributed to this misunderstanding by using the Aarne-Thompson (AT) index to categorize various Turkish folktales, such as hunting tales, homeland boastings, and Münchhausen-like exploits, under the label ‘Tales of Lying’. He defined the term “yalanlamalı masal” (Boratav 1969: 101–102), where ‘yalan’ means ‘lying’ and ‘masal’ means ‘fairy tale’ in Turkish. This term was likely influenced by the German ‘Lügenmärchen’ (lying fairy tale) and further emphasized the fantastic elements of the tales through the concept of lying<sup>2</sup>.

Boratav, however, did not clarify the term ‘yalanlamalı masal’ nor his use of the concept of ‘yalanlama’ (Kökus 2018: 4). He used both terms interchangeably with ‘tekerleme’ and also to refer to a humorous, first-person narrative style that consists of a series of unbelievable stories (Boratav 2009: 58; Kökus 2018: 61). Boratav further complicated the issue by suggesting that both yalanlama and tekerleme originated from fairy tales but had structurally diverged over time.

Although his examples of yalanlamalı masal align with tall tales, his inconsistent terminology led to varying classifications in academic studies. Some scholars classify these narratives as tekerleme, others as yalanlama, and still others as fairy tales (Kumartaşlıoğlu 2021: 307). Despite the value of Boratav’s work in Turkish folklore, his terminology has caused confusion, often linking his examples of ‘yalanlamalı masal’ with lying in Türkiye.

Exaggeration and outlandish claims are hallmarks of tall tales, intended to entertain by embracing the extraordinary and unbelievable (Kumartaşlıoğlu 2021: 308). Tall tales, as a performance-based genre (Thomas 1977: 7), rely on the storyteller’s skill and the audience’s engagement. They function as a form

of ‘play’ (Brown 1987: 32), a ‘conspiracy of make-believe’ where the storyteller feigns truthfulness and the audience pretends to believe. Therefore, dismissing tall tales as mere lies overlooks their inherent creativity and artistry (ibid.: 38) as well as their social relevance and historical context (Thomas 1996: 1452), which offer a unique window into their cultural universe. To fully appreciate tall tales, one must consider them in their original oral form and context.

Studying Turkish folktales is a complex task, fraught with challenges primarily due to research methods, most notably the reliance on transcribed texts (Bars 2017: 44). This method can result in inaccuracies and misclassifications, often losing the subtleties of tall tales during transcription. Tall tales are “told as truth but heard as fiction” (Wonham 1989: 288, 295), relying on an implicit agreement between the teller and the audience, or at least a part of it. This crucial element affects the story’s effectiveness and is difficult to convey in print, often leading to a loss of its contextual and functional essence (Stewart 2007: 98; Wonham 1993: 25–28).

The distinction between tall tales and other genres is often obscured by the incongruity between a tall tale’s apparent form and its actual content. Tall tales, as previously noted, are ‘told as truth but heard as fiction’, embodying a dual nature that fundamentally relies on the audience’s perception. Therefore, this ambiguity complicates their identification and raises the possibility of misinterpreting stories originally told as tall tales, leading to their classification into different categories. For instance, anecdotes exemplify this issue, as tall tales often masquerade as anecdotes due to their presentation as personal narratives (Brown 1987: 10; McMullen 2015: 98). This misclassification arises from the surface appearance of these tales, which align with anecdotal storytelling, while their essence, marked by exaggerated fictionality, remains disguised. Consequently, the inherent duality of tall tales, appearing as plausible anecdotes but fundamentally being fictional, poses a significant challenge in preserving their unique genre identity.

Türkiye is known for its abundance of anecdotes, often referred to as ‘fıkra’, which outnumber other storytelling forms (Walker 1993: 35). Although ‘fıkra’ and ‘anecdote’ are often used interchangeably in Turkish discourse, ‘fıkra’ primarily denotes jokes (Andrzejewski 2013: 20; Kara 2002: 60; Walker 1993: 40). This creates a conflation between anecdotes, fıkra and jokes within Turkish folklore. As a result, many tall tales may have been misidentified as jokes. For example, all the tales about Teyo are labelled as fıkra, even in the only two available academic studies<sup>3</sup>. This suggests that these stories have been misunderstood and inaccurately classified as mere jokes, underscoring the need for a more precise term.

Tall tales are exaggerated narratives with larger-than-life elements, designed to entertain by stretching believability. In contrast, anecdotes are shorter narratives rooted in personal experience and intended to illustrate a particular point. Likewise, jokes are brief forms of humour that rely on witty

punchlines or wordplay to provoke laughter (McMullen 2015: 75; Wonham 1993: 52). Current folklore classifications fail to adequately capture the playful and performative essence of these larger-than-life stories. Existing frameworks tend to conflate tall tales with other narrative traditions and forms discussed in this paper, leading to potential misinterpretations. To address this gap and better reflect the unique characteristics of this storytelling tradition, a more precise term is needed in the Turkish context.

### DEFINING THE TURKISH TALL TALE: INTRODUCING ‘ÜFÜRME HİKÂYE’

In a brief yet thought-provoking article, Güneş Sezen (2013: 1281) emphasizes the importance of context and function in defining and categorizing folklore. Although Sezen’s article does not specifically address tall tales, it offers valuable suggestions on how such stories might be classified. In this context, she argues that narratives with shared historical backgrounds, such as hunting and soldier stories, evolve in their social roles and purposes (Ibid.: 1284). Some narratives aim to recount real events (factual) and serve social or personal functions, while others evolve into humorous tales that incorporate exaggeration and fantastical elements (fictional) for the sake of entertainment.

Sezen (2013: 1285) proposes classifying factual accounts that highlight bravery or reminiscence as “kahramanlık anlatı” (heroic narrative) and stories that focus on entertainment through exaggeration as “palavra edebiyatı” (palaver literature). While this term seems initially applicable to tall tales and is sometimes used to refer to Teyo’s tales analyzed in this study, the word ‘palavra’ carries negative connotations in Turkish, suggesting lying, belittling, or humiliation. Therefore, it is not a suitable term for tales whose primary intent is not to deceive but to entertain through humorous exaggeration. Recognizing this distinction is essential, as it underscores that tall tales, though primarily designed to amuse, also fulfil important social and personal functions.

As a result, this research proposes using the term ‘üfürme hikâye’ (blown tale) to represent the Turkish equivalent of the tall tale. This term captures the essence of tall tales by emphasizing their humorous nature and the exaggeration inherent in their storytelling. The word ‘üfürme’ (blowing up) highlights the humour of exaggeration, signalling that the story is meant to be lighthearted and not taken too seriously. By combining the metaphorical sense of ‘blowing something up’ with the concept of a tale, ‘üfürme hikâye’ effectively conveys the idea of exaggerated storytelling. This aligns with the performative nature of tall tales, where the storyteller’s skill in exaggeration is key to entertainment. Moreover, ‘üfürme hikâye’ underscores the interactive nature of storytelling, showing how storytellers adapt their tales based on audience reactions, making the experience engaging and dynamic. This interaction is crucial, as it highlights how the story grows and expands as it unfolds, enhancing the experience for both the storyteller and the audience.

In summary, ‘üfürme hikâye’ encapsulates the core of the humorous and exaggerated storytelling tradition in Turkish folklore, emphasizing creative embellishment, interactive performance and the dynamic relationship between the storyteller and the audience.

## **TALL TALES IN TURKISH FOLKLORE: THE ERZURUM TRADITION AND ITS KEY FIGURES**

Tall tales are often local stories, shaped by the unique challenges and special characteristics of the places where people live. In particular, areas with extreme weather, tough landscapes and limited resources tend to inspire these stories, where people often exaggerate their struggles with survival and isolation to make their experiences more relatable to others (Blair 1987: 1; Wonham 1993: 24). One such place is Erzurum, Teyo’s hometown. While tall tales have not yet been officially recognized as a separate genre in Turkish folklore, Türkiye has a rich and vibrant storytelling tradition that includes humorously exaggerated tales that might fit under this category. Erzurum, located in Türkiye’s East Anatolian region at 1,950 meters, is known as the coldest city in the country, famous for its harsh winters, heavy snowfall and freezing temperatures. Locals often call it ‘Türkiye’s Siberia’, a nickname that plays on the exaggerations common in tall tales. In fact, certain areas can still be cut off by snowstorms, inspiring stories that reflect the creativity and resilience of those who call it home. One such tale is shared by the renowned traveller Evliya Çelebi<sup>4</sup>, echoing the common tall tale motif (ATU 1889F) of the frozen voices that thaw in spring. He tells of a traveller who dubbed Erzurum “Erezolúm” (cruel to man) after experiencing 11 months and 29 days without summer. He also recounts a cat that, while jumping from roof to roof, froze in mid-air and thawed with a “Miaú!” when spring arrived, falling to the ground (Çelebi 1834: 114).

In addition to its harsh natural conditions, Erzurum, as a strategic border city, has also witnessed a turbulent history shaped by wars, occupations, famines and epidemics (Küçükuğurlu 2023: 553). Despite the hardships of the past, the city has maintained a resilient sense of community. Social gatherings are a part of daily life and help maintain community ties and cultural practices (Naldan 2020: 257). However, these gatherings occur within a framework of strict gender separation, with men and women socializing in separate spaces. This is particularly the case in places like the ‘kahvehane’ and ‘çayevi’, which are entirely male-dominated spaces (Bozkurt 2019: 3; Çağlayan 2013: 106). In these spaces, evenings often find men gathered around warm hearths, sipping tea, chatting, sharing stories, and occasionally enjoying folk songs accompanied by traditional instruments like the ‘saz’ or ‘bağlama’, thereby preserving the cultural heritage that defines the city (Ünalán 2021: 226–230).



## The Legacy of Teyo Pehlivan and Cumhuriyet Seval: Evolution of Erzurum's Tall Tales

One of the bearers of this cultural heritage is Şeyh İde, also known as Teyo Pehlivan. Born in 1913, he spent his entire life in Erzurum (Ertekin 2022), captivating audiences with his fantastic tales in local coffee and teahouses. Living in a small municipal cottage, he relied on charity from the local soup kitchen for survival (Teyo Pehlivan Kimdir? [Who is Teyo Pehlivan?] 2013). Initially dismissed as a liar and madman, his storytelling eventually gained recognition late in life when a journalist (Narmanlıoğlu 1998) wrote about him.

Despite his lack of formal education and illiteracy, Teyo had a vast knowledge of the world, particularly in current events and local history, which he gleaned entirely from the radio, television, and conversations around him (Teyo Pehlivan'ı Yakından Tanıyalım [Let's Get to Know Teyo Pehlivan Closely], 2013). His tales featured diverse characters, from historical figures like Mustafa Kemal Atatürk to celebrities and cultural icons such as Marilyn Monroe and Muhammad Ali. His tales were a refuge from everyday worries, providing solace and levity to his audience, who eagerly gathered in the teahouses to hear him tell his tales.

Teyo's tales, commonly found in newspaper clippings and Erzurum humour books, are all labelled as *fıkra* (jokes). However, this label simplifies his storytelling, which was more intricate and performance-based. Some years ago, an Erzurum encyclopaedia project was initiated to preserve Teyo's legacy (Narmanlıoğlu 2003: 203), but it remains pending a quarter of a century later, becoming a tall tale in its own right.

Cumhuriyet Seval, born on 29 October 1955 in Erzurum, has been a prominent theatre artist who has played a crucial role in preserving and expanding Teyo Pehlivan's legacy. A beloved figure in Erzurum's cultural scene<sup>5</sup>, he has devoted himself to promoting his hometown both locally and internationally. Like Teyo Pehlivan, he has never moved away from Erzurum and remains closely connected to his roots. By assuming Teyo's character, Seval enriched it with new stories inspired by Teyo's style. Nevertheless, he truly immortalized Teyo and gained national recognition for both himself and Teyo by sharing tales he had previously reserved for special occasions on television, recreating the teahouse atmosphere where Teyo originally spun his tales.

In masculine spaces like teahouses, tall tales, with their boastful exaggerations, are a celebrated form of expression (Henningsen 1965: 214; Ryan 2023: 209). These tales, which tie in with traditional masculinity (Edwards 2009: 10), not only add a light-hearted element to storytelling but also foster a competitive spirit. Teyo championed this tradition, and despite being a lifelong bachelor, he frequently boasted of his romantic encounters with famous women, spoke of his intimate experiences, or exaggerated his physical attributes (Duman 2000: 279–280, 281–282, 300, 305–306; Narmanlıoğlu 2003: 202, 209–210). As a result, his stories, while adding a light-hearted element and

fostering a competitive spirit, often included language and themes that could be considered quite lewd.

Seval, on the other hand, aware that his audience now includes families and children, avoids vulgar and overly masculine language, excluding Teyo's lewd stories. As a result, this makes his performances accessible and enjoyable for all. This shift may explain why Şeyh İde is known as Teyo Pehlivan (Teyo the Champion Wrestler), while Cumhur Seval is called Teyo Emmi (Uncle Teyo). Seval's portrayals have turned Teyo the Champion Wrestler into a more family-friendly 'uncle' figure.

### Erzurum's Cultural Ethos and the Dadaş Spirit in Tall Tales

The dominance of male storytellers<sup>6</sup>, audiences, and protagonists in traditional tall tales, especially those from American folklore (like the stories of Paul Bunyan and Pecos Bill), reflects the gender norms of their time. These tales often center on male characters involved in activities traditionally associated with men, such as hunting, fishing, warfare and boxing. As time progressed, however, the tall tale genre has evolved to include a broader range of voices and subjects, with an increasing inclusion of female protagonists as well (Hanson 2011: 140). This evolution mirrors changing societal dynamics, as the genre has moved beyond its masculine roots to embrace more diverse characters, themes, and storytelling formats.

The tall tales from Erzurum share many similarities with traditional American frontier tall tales, both featuring exaggerated feats of strength and resilience, while reflecting the values and cultural pride of their communities. However, one notable difference is the much stricter role of women in Erzurum's stories. Unlike frontier tales, where women may sometimes be participants or even storytellers (Brown 1987: 13–14; Piacentino 2001: 60–61), in Erzurum, tall tales are almost exclusively the domain of men. Teyo Pehlivan's influence in establishing the tall tale tradition in local, male-dominated tea-houses likely shaped the Erzurum tall tale tradition, which excludes women from both participation and recognition. However, it is important to note that the main goal of this study is to highlight the presence of tall tales in Turkish folklore, with examples from Erzurum. Therefore, the exclusion of women in the Erzurum tradition may not necessarily reflect a broader Turkish tradition, which is believed to exist. In fact, future research in other regions of Türkiye could uncover variations in tall tale practices, some of which might also feature women in more active roles. This would help to highlight the important role of local factors in shaping the tradition by revealing how tall tales adapt to different cultural and social contexts.

The roots of this male-dominated tradition can also be traced to Erzurum's broader social and historical context. Erzurum, like many other places in Anatolia, has long been shaped by patriarchal traditions, with men traditionally occupying public roles while women were often confined to domestic



spaces (Çalıkoglu 2018: 2). Although these customs have softened over time, the one-time tradition of large families living together under one roof likely played a significant role in strengthening gender roles and fostering a more conservative mindset.<sup>7</sup> Erzurum's challenging history, marked by occupations, wars and harsh living conditions, helped shape these deeply rooted social structures. Despite the growing acceptance of modern, progressive ideas in Erzurum today, traces of old traditions are still evident in certain aspects of daily life, such as some traditional gender roles and segregated social spaces, with teahouses remaining a prime example of male-dominated spaces.

Erzurum's key role in the Turkish War of Independence<sup>8</sup> further moulded its masculine identity and shaped its distinctive character. The men of Erzurum are called 'Dadaş', a title that represents resilience, bravery, honour and reliability (Aliyeva 2018: 9). As a symbol of masculinity, this title has come to define Erzurum, earning it the nickname 'Land of Dadaş'. As a result, the values of patriotism and heroism have become central to the region's identity, instilling a deep sense of pride in its people.

The traditional role of the tall tale to exaggerate heroic exploits provides an ideal framework for Teyo and Seval to embody the Dadaş spirit, aligning with Erzurum's cultural ethos and values. Drawing from the "deep cultural matrix" (Brown 1987: 31) that unites the people of Erzurum, both storytellers use the local dialect to highlight the region's values, social norms and shared concerns. As such, their tales serve not only as entertainment but also as a reflection of regional pride and tradition. Through their stories, they foster a bond with and among those who hold these tales dear as part of their heritage.

Teyo's tales of bravery and patriotism are a perfect reflection of the Dadaş spirit, which only adds to his legendary status in Erzurum. For example, he claims to be the originator of 'cirit', a traditional equestrian javelin-throwing sport, and boasts of throwing a javelin that circled the globe before returning to Erzurum (Çarbaş 2011: 402). Pehlivan's self-portrayal goes beyond merely exaggerating his athletic prowess. Indeed, his stories depict him as a man of unmatched strength and martial skill.

However, in his tales, Teyo upholds a code of honour, even in times of war, claiming that he withdrew from the Korean War to maintain balance after a soldier pleaded with him not to intervene (Narmanlıoğlu 2003: 205–206). Furthermore, he proudly recounts defeating the legendary Muhammad Ali, which led to the boxer's conversion to Islam (Ibid.: 206–207). Teyo's legendary patriotism includes a tale where he downed an Armenian aircraft with a single stone during the 1918 occupation of Erzurum, demonstrating unparalleled bravery in protecting his people (Ibid.: 205)<sup>9</sup>. His exploits extend to romantic adventures as well, including a story where he saved a woman, later revealed to be Marilyn Monroe, from three terrifying men (Duman 2000: 297). His exceptional shooting and hunting abilities, such as killing a whole flock of cranes with a single shot (Teyyo Pehlivan Hikayeleri! [Teyyo Pehlivan Tales!] 2010), align with the

tall tale tradition of exaggerated feats of strength and skill. In one tale, due to his marksmanship reputation, he boasts of being invited on a unique hunting trip where he defends his country's pride and honour.

*Shah Reza Pahlavi invited President İsmet İnönü and me to Iran. We went, and the world's leaders were there. They took us to a hunting party. Whoever pointed the rifle shot the prey. Then it was my turn. İnönü bowed and said, 'Teyo, I beg you, please don't let us down'. After praying to God, I picked up the rifle and shot at the ducks flying in the air. Two ducks fell to the ground immediately. However, I heard a buzzing sound and realized that the bullet I had fired was still circling, seeking more prey. After three or five more had been shot, one of the ducks hid behind the rocks. The bullet found it and killed it there. As soon as we returned to Türkiye, İnönü said, 'Teyo, without you, we would have been ruined and kissed me on the eyes.'<sup>10</sup> (Narmanlıoğlu 2003: 204–205).*

With the exception of one instance, Teyo consistently takes on the central role in the tales told by him and Seval. This characteristic feature of tall tales, typically told in the first person, lends the storyteller's exaggerated accounts an air of immediacy and authenticity (Siporin 2000: 89), making them feel like real anecdotes. When the narrator himself is not the protagonist, he may share a story about a close friend or relative (Brown 1987: 17). An example of this exception occurs in a tale where Teyo is not the main hero. Instead, the story recounts his grandfather bringing tea, the favourite drink of the people of Erzurum, to Türkiye (Fıkralarla Türkiye 2018).

Regardless of the vantage point, tall tales are always told anecdotally as a reminiscence (Brown 1987: 17; McEntire 2014: 747), enhancing their authenticity by anchoring them in the familiar and personal. However, it is important to note that this effort to establish a sense of reality is not intended to mislead the audience. The storyteller creates this reality only to collapse it later (Hegerfeldt 2005: 109), akin to a sequence of dominoes, where carefully arranged pieces are eventually toppled down for amusement. The essence of the tall tale lies in its ability to weave the ordinary and the extraordinary together. The storyteller establishes a credible foundation for fantastical exploits to unfold by grounding the story in familiar settings and characters while incorporating details from the narrator and audience's daily experiences (Brown 1987: 17; Caron 1986: 28). This juxtaposition, the unexpected fusion of realism and the extraordinary, fosters humour and makes the tall tale so captivating.

Additionally, the comedic effect of the tall tale may stem from the disparity between the narrator's delivery and the content being conveyed. This incongruity, exemplified by Teyo Pehlivan's delivery of even his most fantastical

tales in a serious and deadpan manner, evokes an air of absurdity that captivates the audience.

## **PRESERVING AND INNOVATING TEYO'S LEGACY: TECHNIQUES AND CHARACTERISTICS**

While very few of Teyo Pehlivan's tales have been transcribed, and those that have are often simplified into mere jokes, our understanding of his storytelling remains limited and fragmented, relying on scattered mentions from audiences who experienced his performances. In light of this, Cumhur Seval has emerged as a pivotal figure in preserving Teyo's legacy and nurturing the tradition of tall tale telling. For more than two decades, Seval has embodied Teyo in his performances, becoming so immersed in the character that many now regard him as the authentic Teyo Pehlivan<sup>11</sup>. Through his own 'Teyo Tales' and skilful adaptations of Teyo's stories, Seval has not only revitalized the character for new generations but also demonstrates the richness of the overlooked Turkish tall tale tradition.

Both Teyo and Seval tell the story of rescuing a jeep that has fallen into the 'Sarıkamış Sea'. This story provides an ideal platform to explore not only their distinct narrative styles, but also some diverse narrative strategies and techniques employed in tall tale telling. In the transcribed version (Duman 2000: 295–296) of Teyo's original story, the governor of a neighbouring province calls on Teyo as their last hope. Teyo rides to the rescue and dives into the water to retrieve the jeep. Having found it at the bottom of the sea, he takes the vehicle under his arm and, commenting on its weight, begins to surface. When he gets ashore, he realizes that he has not only pulled out the jeep but also a ferry somehow attached to it. This story illustrates the risks of evaluating a tall tale solely based on its transcribed form. When removed from its original performance context, the narrative loses the essence of its genre, often reduced to a mere joke hinging on a punch line or surprising twist, such as the ferry emerging with the jeep. This loss of context highlights how the tall tale tradition itself can be overlooked and overshadowed by a focus on written classifications. In contrast, tall tales, unlike jokes with punchlines (Wonham 1993: 52), distribute humour throughout the narrative by building on increasingly absurd exaggerations.

Seval's reimagining (Fıkralarla Türkiye 2020) of Teyo's tale stays true to its core while enriching it with humour, cultural details and unexpected embellishments. Moreover, the audience is drawn deeper into the narrative through questions, incredulous comments, expressive gestures and cleverly planted prompts. These interactive elements serve various purposes, such as motivating the storyteller, guiding the flow of the story and enhancing engagement. For instance, questions play a crucial role in Seval's storytelling, aiding in structuring the narrative and highlighting the interactive nature of the tales.

In this vein, Seval's retelling of Teyo's tale begins with an inquiry about Teyo's whereabouts, asking where he had been after a lengthy absence from the tea-house. Teyo was known for his brief disappearances (Çarbaş 2011: 403), which not only piqued the curiosity of his listeners and provided a convincing back-drop for his adventures but also presented an opportunity to coax Teyo into telling a story. Since no one could force Teyo to tell a story, he would only do so if he wanted to (Kim Demiş Palavracı Diye [Who Says He is a Show-Off?], 1998). Thus, the initial question about Teyo's whereabouts is strategically formulated to urge him to speak, serving as a typical opening for many of Seval's tales. Likewise, in some of these tales, it is Teyo himself who poses the opening question. A compelling opening question can spark curiosity and set the stage for the narrative. For example, the tale about Teyo's grandfather begins with Teyo asking the audience if they know who introduced tea to Türkiye. This serves as an excellent example of a compelling opening question, as it is culturally contextual; tea is a staple for the people of Erzurum.

Some other tales of Seval begin with highly provocative questions. Provocative comments or questions seem to fit well with tall tales, which typically feature exaggeration and boasting. The role of provocation enhances the competitive spirit of tall tales, leading to even more elaborate and exaggerated accounts. In the context of the tall tale as a predominantly masculine discourse, Teyo's skills associated with masculinity are often doubted or challenged. This dynamic exemplifies how tall tales serve as a means of asserting social and personal status within their cultural milieu. Questions regarding Teyo's competency in culturally emblematic activities, such as *cirit*<sup>12</sup>, and *skiing*<sup>13</sup>, become particularly provocative, as they challenge not only his skill set, but also his very identity as a *Dadaş*, given the centrality of these practices to Erzurum's cultural fabric. As tall tales entertain a group of insiders (Brown 1987: 101), Teyo handpicks topics of cultural significance for the Erzurum community. Moreover, by telling his tales in the local dialect, Teyo reinforces his insider identity and adds an authentic, local flavour to his stories, cementing his bond with the audience.

Sometimes, it is the tall tale teller who, through their storytelling techniques such as exaggerated gestures, dramatic pauses and accentuated exaggerations creates a space for the audience to interrupt and ask a question (Grobman 1975: 19; Henningsen 1965: 196–197; Thomas 1977: 6). A notable example of such a provoked interruption comes when Teyo pauses in the middle of his thrilling narrative about his life-and-death struggle with a bear to light a cigarette, and the audience immediately interjects to ask what happened next (Duman 2000: 276). By using these techniques, storytellers keep the audience's interest constant, creating an engaging and interactive experience.

This interactivity can involve a stranger, an overly eager or naive person, or any audience member who challenges the story by believing it to be factual or trying to expose a lie (Wonham 1993: 46). Sometimes, a friend of the tall

tale teller planted in the audience acts as an interlocutor, contributing through rhetorical questions and reactions. These elements play a significant role in deepening the audience's engagement, as seen in Seval's tales.

Whether the questions or interactions with the audience are real or rhetorical, an experienced storyteller like Seval always turns them into opportunities to deepen and enrich the narrative. For example, in the jeep story, right at the beginning, when the audience objects that there is no sea in Sarıkamış, Seval skilfully uses this objection as a springboard to escalate his tale to a whole new level of absurdity. Although there is no sea there, only a lake, Seval boldly claims that the sea supplied all the water needed by the hundreds of thousands of soldiers encamped in the region during the Great Mobilization<sup>14</sup>. He implies that the water level of the sea dropped significantly as a result, causing it to become a lake. Furthermore, by highlighting that the soldiers also used the water to brew tea, an indispensable part of the Erzurum lifestyle, Seval adds a cultural touch and humorously rationalizes the dwindling water for the tea-consuming people of Erzurum. Tall tales always provide a 'rational' explanation for their fantastical elements (Caron 1986: 29; Henningsen 1965: 214–215), albeit using their own distinct logic, as this example shows. To top it all off, Seval also verifies his claims with his trademark phrase, 'Bende yalan yok, hilaf da yok!' ('I don't lie, nor do I cheat!'<sup>15</sup>).

In tall tales, truth assertions can establish a sense of realism and then gradually undermine it, creating a contrast that amplifies the humour of the exaggerated elements. This dual function exemplifies the paradoxical nature of tall tales, which aim to "cover yet reveal their true nature" (Caron 1986: 28). Like the fairy tale, the tall tale also often begins with opening phrases that function like a 'code', signalling the genre to the audience. Fairy tales typically use phrases like 'once upon a time' to instantly draw listeners into a magical world, establishing their fictional nature. In contrast, tall tales, grounded in the real world (McMullen 2015: 13), often begin with claims of truth, presenting "fiction disguised as fact" (Brown 1987: 2). Through these realist and truth-asserting techniques, tall tales initially position themselves in a familiar setting and recognizable context (Brown 1987: 20; Wonham 1989: 289). However, as the story unfolds, this foundation is gradually undermined by exaggerations and increasingly absurd events, eventually stretching the narrative to the point where it collapses under its own "sheer absurdity" (Caron 1986: 28–29; Hegerfeldt 2005: 108–109). This progression from the apparently factual to the clearly fantastical is a defining characteristic of tall tales.

The jeep story has a classic tall tale narrative that moves from the realistic to the impossible and culminates in an absurd climax (Boatright 1949: 360). In this sense, the story takes place in a familiar setting near Erzurum, a region dotted with large and small lakes. To add to his tale's credibility, Teyo again asserts the veracity of his story right at the beginning with his characteristic phrase. The story then takes an unlikely but theoretically plausible turn when



Teyo claims that the ‘Sarıkamış Sea’ was once a real sea but has since shrunk due to dwindling water. As the story progresses, the exaggeration intensifies, crossing the boundaries of believability as Teyo recalls a seemingly endless, hours-long search for the jeep in the inky depths.

Nevertheless, when asked if he ever came up for air, he boldly responds that those who know him know he can hold his breath for a long time. This response both maintains his claim to authenticity and arrogantly embarrasses the questioner. Finally, he retrieves the jeep, paddling to the surface with it. Amidst the astonished crowd on shore, he then realizes that along with the jeep, he has also pulled out a previously sunken ferry boat, marking the story’s absurd climax.

Beyond the formulaic progression from familiar to fantastical, tall tales, like those of Teyo, often culminate in typical endings (Brown 1987: 20). For example, as with the jeep story, they can conclude with climactic moments that highlight humorous or outrageous elements, emphasizing the tale’s exaggeration and absurdity (McEntire 2014: 748). Tall tales might also end with unexpected and humorous resolutions (Brown 1987: 20), adding entertainment value through inventive twists and absurd scenarios. These conclusions sometimes provide a ridiculous solution to ‘prove’ the incredible events in the story (Wonham 1993: 35). In one such tale, Teyo returns home to discover his horse missing a leg after colliding with a vehicle. Undeterred, he retraces his steps, finds the missing leg, and reattaches it to the horse, showcasing the whimsical nature of this storytelling tradition (Duman 2000: 278–279)<sup>16</sup>. Sometimes, tall tales may also end with an absurd answer to an audience question (McEntire 2014: 748), highlighting the story’s impossible point and eliciting laughter and a sense of playful disbelief. For instance, when asked about his life-or-death struggle with a bear, Teyo ends with: “The bear ate me”<sup>17</sup> (Duman 2000: 276).

It is also common for storytellers to end their tales with a claim of truth, reinforcing their authenticity while acknowledging the fantastical nature of the story (Brown 1987: 20; McEntire 2014: 748; Wonham 1993: 35). This playful insistence on the story’s truthfulness is a defining feature of tall tales, adding to their charm and entertainment value. In keeping with this pattern, Seval’s tale of duck hunting (Komedi Dünyası 2006) on the Aras River during an icy winter in 1910 begins with Teyo’s signature catchphrase. He describes how the freezing temperature froze the ducks in the river, so he collected and put them in the saddlebags of his donkey. On his way home, the ducks thawed out and flew away with the donkey. Later, Teyo claims that he kept the story to himself because he thought no one would believe it, winking at the audience and inviting them in on the joke, adding another layer of absurdity to the story. As the tale progresses, he adds that he saw the news on television about a flying donkey. When questioned about the existence of television in those days, Teyo responds that there was no such thing at that time. Instead, he claims that his nephew cleverly made a television out of an old, broken radio. He finishes the



story as he began it, with his formulaic truth-asserting catchphrase: ‘I don’t lie, nor do I cheat!’<sup>18</sup>

No matter how absurd the conclusion, a tall tale is always about the “will-  
ingness to tell a lie and to be lied to, knowing that the end result will be shared  
amusement” (McEntire 2014: 748). It reflects the playful nature of storytelling  
and the understanding between the teller and the audience that the tall tale is  
meant to entertain, not deceive. Ultimately, tall tales, even when occasionally  
teasing outsiders or strangers, maintain a spirit of good-natured humour and  
amusement rather than hostility. This light-hearted tone emphasizes their  
optimistic essence, reflecting the belief that challenges can be overcome with  
creativity and foresight. In this way, both Ide and Seval, through their ‘Teyo  
tales’, embody this spirit, offering perfect examples of Turkish tall tales that  
align with all the characteristics discussed in this study.

## CONCLUSION: THE IMPACT AND FUTURE OF TURKISH TALL TALES

In conclusion, this study reveals the rich yet un(der)recognized tradition of  
tall tales in Turkish folklore, with a particular focus on Erzurum’s narrative  
masters, Teyo Pehlivan and Cumhur Seval. Historically, Turkish tall tales have  
been obscured by issues of terminology and classification, often misidenti-  
fied or overlooked due to a lack of precise terminology and an over-reliance  
on transcribed texts. To address this, the term ‘üfürme hikâye’ (blown tale) is  
proposed, positioning these tales as a distinct genre. This term not only cap-  
tures their playful and humorous essence but also emphasizes their interactive  
nature. It reflects the dynamic blend of exaggerated storytelling and audience  
engagement, which are essential features often lost in written forms.

Through a comparative analysis of established universal tall tale charac-  
teristics, this study confirms that Turkish tall tales align with this tradition.  
While an exhaustive look at the presence of tall tales in other regions, or at  
regional variations, is beyond the scope of this work, the tales of Teyo Pehlivan  
and Cumhur Seval serve as representative examples of the Turkish tall tale tra-  
dition, particularly from Erzurum.

Teyo and Seval embody Erzurum’s tall tale tradition through their unique  
storytelling styles. Teyo, with his composed and dignified manner, delivers his  
exaggerated humorous stories in a deadpan tone that resonates particularly  
with the local male audience in teahouses. In contrast, Seval adopts a more  
playful approach, using animated gestures and laughter to engage a broader  
audience while adapting his narratives for stage and screen.

Had Seval not taken on Teyo’s persona and shared these stories on new plat-  
forms, Teyo’s legacy might have remained confined to Erzurum and been lost  
to time. However, Seval’s dedication to reshaping and sharing both Teyo’s and  
his own tales allowed the Erzurum tall tale tradition to reach a wider audience,  
ensuring its survival.

Despite their different styles, both Teyo and Seval have made lasting contributions to Erzurum's cultural identity. Their stories go beyond entertainment, serving as important vehicles for preserving and transmitting the region's history, values and distinctive dialect. By embracing humour and exaggeration, they celebrate local traditions and foster a sense of belonging and pride among their audiences, connecting them to their cultural roots. In doing so, their tales create a bridge between generations, making the region's folklore accessible to contemporary audiences while also preserving its historical significance.

Ultimately, this study confirms the existence of Turkish tall tales in folklore by showcasing their presence through the tales of Seval and Pehlivan. By proposing 'üfürme hikâye' as the Turkish equivalent of tall tales, this research solidifies it as a distinct genre in Turkish folklore. This framework will facilitate the identification and exploration of other potentially overlooked tall tales and storytellers throughout Türkiye. Bringing these stories to light will deepen our understanding of this rich storytelling tradition and the cultural values embedded within it. Furthermore, this research aims to spark scholarly interest and foster appreciation for this vital aspect of Turkish folklore.

## NOTES

- 1 Hereafter referred to as 'Teyo'.
- 2 Boratav was well-versed in German folklore and collaborated with the renowned folklorist Professor Wolfram Eberhard to publish an index of Turkish folk tales (Typen Türkischer Volksmärchen, 1953).
- 3 See Bedir 2023; Kara 2002.
- 4 Michael D. Sheridan (2011) considers certain stories in Çelebi's travelogue to be 'tall tales', and his article examines a story about Erzurum and its harsh climate in this context.
- 5 Seval had already established himself for his embodiment of 'Ferezet Eze', a fictional female character from the region (Duman 2005: 273)
- 6 A scarcity of female tall tale tellers appears to be a cross-cultural phenomenon (McAndrews 1999: 66, 69; Wonham 1989: 306). Reinforcing this observation, research uncovered no documented female practitioners of this tradition in Türkiye.
- 7 See Sarioğlu 2013.
- 8 Erzurum hosted the Erzurum Congress, where crucial decisions for the nation's future were made. The city's strategic location and its people's unwavering spirit contributed significantly to the nation's liberation during the Turkish War of Independence.
- 9 This tale is also part of Seval's tall tale repertoire. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xbH3qHCVSVQ> (00:00-03:49).
- 10 Translation by the authors. The original passage reads: "Şah Rıza Pehlevi, İsmet İnönü ile beni İran'a devet etti. Gittik dünyanın sayılı liderleri orada. Bizi av partisine götürdüler. Silahını nişan alan avı vurur. Sıra bene geldi. İnönü eğildi kulağıma, Vola Teyyo ne olur yüzümüzü kara çıkarma dedi. Aldım silahı elime sığındım yaradana, havada uçan ördeklere ateş ettim. İki ördek anında yere düştü. Ancak bir vızıltıdır ki gopti. Kurşun ateş olmuş, dolanır, ördek arır. Üç-beş derken ördeklerden biri kayalıkların arkasına gizlendi. Kurşun onu da kayalıkların arkasında buldu ve öldürdü".
- 11 Even in academic research Ali Bedir (2023: 117) attributes Teyo Emmi's catchphrase 'I don't lie, nor do I cheat!' to Teyo Pehlivan, possibly confusing the two characters.
- 12 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rf7WU8wsV3w> (00:00-03:01).

- 13 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IxKvLSxG548&t=85s> (00:00-03:17).
- 14 The general mobilisation proclaimed by the Ottoman state at the time of WWI.
- 15 Translation by the authors.
- 16 Seval also incorporates this tale into his tall tale performances. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NioR16of5dk> (03:42-06:28).
- 17 Translation by the authors.
- 18 Translation by the authors.

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