



WRESTLING IN TURKIC PEOPLES FROM A SOCIO-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

Mehmet Türkmen¹,
Cengiz Buyar²

¹Professor Dr., Muş Alparslan University
& Kyrgyzstan-Turkey Manas University,
Traditional Sports and Games Research & Application Center,
Turkey and Kyrgyzstan

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5926-7522>

²Assoc. Dr. Kyrgyzstan-Turkey Manas University,
Head of Department of Turcology,
Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0549-4463>

Abstract:

This monograph will address the following questions: “What was the perspective of Turkic peoples on wrestling branch of sports and what was the cultural aspect of wrestling for social structures and lifestyles of Turkic peoples? What type of a transformation did wrestle experience? What is its current state at national level?”

Problem: The problem of this research pertains to the fact that the richness of traditional wrestling which is known to possess a deep-seated reputation in Turkish history of sports and occupy an affluent position in Turkish sports tradition is not well-reflected in the literature at national and international levels, its traditional cultural elements are lost along with globalization and it is likely to end up being almost erased from national memories. **Objective:** This modest study sought to find an answer to the question as to how Turkic peoples perceived traditional wrestling in religious, national, political, military, economic and social domains of life and aimed to incorporate the finding into the literature rightly. **Methodology:** From among qualitative research methods, descriptive and comparative research techniques were implemented in this study. **Result:** It was deduced that wrestling which was one of the primary activities in socio-cultural structures and lifestyles of ancient Turkic peoples was viewed as a social value and even as a social norm beyond being just a branch of sports, possessed embedded and rich rituals, but began to lose its meaning along with the disappearance of most of these rituals, and even if it was affected adversely by globalization, there still existed affection towards wrestling and the wrestler.

Keywords: Turkic peoples, wrestling, socio-cultural perspective, cultural perception

1. Introduction

Before referring to the significance of wrestling to Turkic societies, this study aims to highlight the continuity between social signs and to demonstrate today's socio-cultural scene with its archetype codes by using a mythical proposal to create a social meaning and national identity. On the other hand, sports have a definite power for promoting the sense of identity at national level. While attempting to find an answer to the question as to how Turkic peoples perceive traditional wrestling, it is essential to look both inside and outside from the perspective of outsiders.

For an outsider, understanding the traditional sports of Turkic peoples will undoubtedly shed light on different aspects of the societal life of Turkic peoples. There is no other branch of sports in Kyrgyzstan with the symbolic 'gravity' of gök-börü. Feelings inspired by the wrestling are far from being static or ordered. Interpretations of symbols and images of wrestling can of course be applied in different formats and used as an instrument in hegemonic processes and their counterparts. Actually, wrestling is used systematically in the creation of myths depicting the national power, in the instruction of morals and in competitions and exhibitions almost with chivalrous spirit of the 12th century. Wrestling is considered by Turkic peoples as a means of enhancing vigilance and sharpening martial techniques, and physical competence is viewed also as a symbol of spiritual power and sanctification. Last but not least, wrestling displays the keen interest in male power and an aesthetic code equaling physical competence to 'the brave male character' disclosed especially by anthropologists in Central Asia (Simakov, 1984).

This monograph is about the exploration of traditional Turkic wrestling as a lifestyle. As already known, culture is the material and immaterial lifestyle dating back to the past, developing the national identity and fitting its own individual nature. In the same vein, tradition is the product of a strong need characterizing a society, deep rooted in the thinking of humankind and in the ideal of a nation. Perception refers to the acquisition of knowledge through senses, its interpretation, selection and arrangement in psychology and cognitive sciences. Here, it is evident that 'culture', 'tradition' and even 'perception' which shape negative or positive feelings and reactions of the person, all of these three concepts have historical backgrounds and claims. Of course, it is essential to distinguish between two orientations toward the history of wrestling even if they are partially interrelated. The first of these methods is objective and historical whereas the second is subjective and psychological. This study will not attempt to prove all arguments of each orientation but try to explain and exemplify them only as representations.

In order to find out the historical background of wrestling, the most useful starting point is to study our cultural know-how heritage brought by previous generations up to the present day through several means. This huge collection of sources called history is not only indispensable for understanding the past but also acts as a building block essential to the construction of the future on strong foundations. However, history of sports in general and wrestling in particular remained to be out of

academic interest in Turkic world. As noted by K. Fişek, the existing historical records are predicated on memories rather than written documents and almost tend to be repetitive of each other. This is the case because of not having original sources, not pursuing or not being able to pursue academic studies conducted all over the world (1985: p. 18) or even not deeming wrestling as worthy of being an object of an academic study. Additionally, exploration of the historical development, intercultural impacts, social scope and structure of these 'networks' is not still deemed necessary by the local researchers. The literature on traditional wrestling is quite insufficient in terms of documented sources and convincing theoretical approaches as well as historical precision. In most cases, authors of Turkic monographs are not historians, anthropologists or specialists of cultural studies, but a case in between, for instance, the case of those authoring for Ministry of Youth and Sports or Ministry of Culture and Tourism and occasionally underscoring a specific ideological plot line (Krawietz, 2012).

2. Method

In this study, theoretical data were obtained by compilation and screening. At the same time, traditional wrestling competitions were held and observations were made. Thus, the inner and outer lines of Turkish traditional folk wrestling (intellectual and shape aspects) were tried to be examined. In this context, from among qualitative research methods, descriptive and comparative research techniques were implemented in this study.

3. Findings

Wrestling dating back to the prehistoric Paleolithic age of humanity achieved in surviving up to the present day in various formats and almost in all cultures. This fact is an indicator of a common inclination to attribute meaning to expressions of physicality which obliges a human being intrinsically to have superiority over another human being (Hatton 2011). Turkic peoples of Central Asia are much more interested in traditional sports than people of Turkey both in theory and practice. However, they are far from the unifying character and populist approach of traditional sports according to the comments made by researchers. As they existed as tribes with individualist inclinations since time immemorial, tribal mindset dominates and precludes the development of national consciousness. This situation had significant repercussions also on practical and theoretical researches on traditional sports. With the approach in which Uzbek researcher excludes the Kyrgyz, Kyrgyz excludes the Kazakh, the Kazakh excludes the Kyrgyz, Turkmen etc., traditional wrestling which is the shared heritage of the national culture is appropriated by researchers for their own tribes, lineage or clans. These researchers even put this dismissive approach into practice. For example, as in the case of Bashkir-Tatar and Uzbek national wrestling, Alysh Wrestling of Kyrgyz people was included in the category of 'International Belt Wrestling' and incorporated into 'United World Wrestling (UWW)' in 2014. Intercontinental and world

championships were organized and of course, the popularity of International Kyrgyz Alysh Wrestling was enhanced (Türkmen, 2016).

In fact, Kyrgyz Alış Kürös (Alysh Wrestling), Kazakh Küres, Uzbek Bukhara Kuraş and Turkmen Göreş were all byproducts of the same culture and all their rituals were matching each other one by one. However, although 39 countries acknowledged that wrestling was a byproduct of Kyrgyz national culture on international arena, the Kazakhs failed to admit this fact. Simply to avoid having the same wrestling style as that of Kyrgyz people, the Kazakhs transformed the Kazakh Küres which was identical to Alysh Kurosh (Alış Kürös) for thousands of years into a format similar in style to judo and sambo, but no more akin to the original Kazakh Küres and not in conformity with national characteristics of the wrestling of Turkic peoples. Kazakhs did not limit themselves to spoiling the national characteristics of wrestling, they, in a similar vein, violated and even inflicted grave damage on Kök-Börü game which is the most popular sports branch of Turkistan region and has particular significance to Turkic peoples beyond being just a branch of sports. At present, Uzbeks make utmost efforts in the same vein as the Kazakhs did to the wrestling (Türkmen, 2016; Türkmen, 2013). In order to transfer traditional wrestling to future generations and to add universal value to this branch of sports, the establishment of cultural ties is indispensable. Actually, Turkistan is replete with resources and historical background likely to reveal these ties. Thus, the purpose should be to perceive traditional wrestling which hosts deep meanings of Turkic culture as the pillar of still practiced values, not as the epic of boasted values, and exhibit and transfer it to the next generations through this perspective.

Before being settled in Central Asia in the 9th century, the ancient country of Turkic peoples was the South Siberia where the first cultures and civilizations came into existence. This region is still inhabited by approximately 15 different Turkic peoples. Away from the influence of streams of Turkic culture and world civilization, these are Yakut people living in the North East Asia and Turkic peoples still trying to continue to live even under harsh conditions in sheltered spots of Sayan and Altai Mountains. Common ethnic and linguistic framework is the element connecting these Turkic people from Central Asia to Asia Minor, from Eurasia to the Middle East and Balkans. By virtue of geographical and economic conditions and depending on their own national identity and characteristics, these people developed various types of wrestling fitting the nomadic way of life on the steppe. Along with migration flows, changes in economic life, religious beliefs and geographical conditions and as a result of interactions with other peoples, while certain new components were inserted to wrestling practice, some of the existing elements were ruled out, and thus, it failed to maintain its exclusive national character. That being the case, whereas some types of wrestling are just forgotten or some of them are about to be forgotten, 38 types of wrestling are still being practiced. Of the still practiced types of wrestling, 31 types are variations of each other whereas 9 types are variations of wrestling styles practiced by other nations (Türkmen, 2012).

4. Discussion and Results

With reference to Turkic wrestling, there are two terms used interchangeably, that is, 'Alp' and 'Pehlivan'. The former is used in Turkic world with a limited scope as it will be noted below whereas the latter which is used more commonly is Pehlivan for addressing two crucial conceptual domains in the wider context of wrestling as a way of life. On the one hand, pehlivan defines a specific self-structuring concept in terms of somatic principles, on the other hand, it represents values and ethics of a different ideology. Studying pehlivan, therefore, is to shed light on the understanding of how wrestlers perceive, through their bodies, whom they themselves are.

In this respect, the word 'güreşçi' (wrestler) is synonymous with the everlasting word 'alp' dating back to the 12th century and still available in the language of Siberian Turkic peoples (Gumilöv, 1964). Turkic clans migrating from Central Asia to Asia Minor in the 12th century tended to use Persian term 'pehlivan' instead of 'alp'. Both terms are synonymous with each other and also with the wrestler, and are defined as *"the person who has several virtues such as being brave, chivalrous, warlike, manly, heroic etc."* (Oynoshev & Chochkina, 2016; Bartold; Thomsen, 1910). The exact equivalent of wrestling in Persian is 'küşti'. Küşti means 'the person who kills, killer' and this does not actually correspond to alp and pehlivan concepts.

The context of being alp and pehlivan has an individual organizational pattern. In the past, alps used to be raised by an institution structured under a fortress construction called 'Piyung' as of the 6th century B.C. as noted by Thomas Barfield (1992: p. 221). It is known that this institution continued to exist in early periods of Khwarezmians and Seljuqs. 'Lodge of Wrestlers / Lodge of Pehlivans' which reached its peak in the late period of Seljuqs and especially in Ottoman period was the institution in which wrestlers did not only have physical training but also were trained intellectually and ethically (Yüksel, 2018). In the period of Gokturks, being Wise and Alp obliged the person to obtain virtues. Inasmuch as the institution depending on 'Erlik' (manliness) for its survival achieved in synthesizing all its characteristics as a single quality, Manliness-Alpism-Bravery happened to be the case. Manliness-Bravery was transferred from institution to the person. Orkhon Kul Tigin Inscriptions, East Side, 9th Column, states that *"Edgü bilge kişi edgü, kişiğ'i / Good and ethical persons, good and manly persons"* (Tekin, 2006; Gabain, 2000).

Wrestling considered as a type of ancestral sports is a ritual of becoming 'Er' (Man) in ancient Turkic peoples. That is why; wrestling site is called as 'Er Meydâni' (Man's Arena). The young man obtaining success by defeating his rivals was assumed to reach maturity and consequently was girding on a belt (golden belt). Gokturks Alps were girding on sword and belt. Belt is a symbol of 'rank' for Turkic peoples. Girding on belt pertains to the transition from childhood to manhood and crossing a threshold. At aforementioned institutions, it also had a mystical and religious aspect. Turkic peoples and bureaucracy had a magical affection towards wrestling and wrestlers (Laqueur, 1979).

Wrestling is viewed also as a means of enhancing vigilance and sharpening martial techniques. However, physical competence is perceived as a symbol of spiritual power and sanctification as well. Various traditional wrestling types in Turkic world can be defined as 'free style' in terms of the international jargon for wrestling. Moreover, wrestling events do not only offer a venue for wrestlers to sweat off, unveil natural combat instincts and express them through symbols but also provide a platform open to public, cautiously structured and organized around societal values corresponding to wide moral and political reverberations (Meltzer & Mollinaro, 2002).

Limiting the nature and history of wrestling to a single nation and civilization, religion or tradition will contradict the true nature of this sports branch going beyond humankind from archetype forms to the present and combined with harmonious movements even in formats peculiar to animals. Wrestling existed even before the time which is specified by the available archeological and historical remnants because a sports branch intrinsically linked to the human nature is supposed to be as old as the humankind. It should be right away underlined that archeology, anthropology and literature disciplines had also a general consensus on the fact that wrestling branch of sports used to have religious roots in the old world. History authorities agree that wrestling was the first form of sports and first organized branch of sports in the world (Poliakoff, 2004).

5. Results

As Turkic peoples always lived together collectively in nomadic period, the child as member of the society enjoyed cultural folk products together with every member of the society. Turkic peoples still bears the nomadic culture in their societal sub-consciousness, and folk cultures continue to develop somehow even in the most modern cities. In fact, in terms of popularity, wrestling comes third following equestrian games and archery in Turkic sports culture. However, what increases the popularity of wrestling vis-à-vis other traditional branches of sports is the fact that it is a folkloric branch of sports because of its traditional framework and social base. Culture lives within the people and is transferred from generation to generation through folkloric dialogue. In this respect, wrestling in Turkic peoples protected a socio-cultural entity for centuries and this fact proved that wrestling was more than a branch of sports. Moreover, it is an integrated social value within the Turkic culture. In this framework, it is obvious that wrestling certainly has the capacity to promote national identity. The following are several cultural representations directly related to wrestling: national power myths and ethical codes of competition and exhibition which are based on Alp ideals underlines the importance of the manly power and reconciliation notions in social coding, and if the person has bad and deceptive manners before starting the practice of wrestling, this person gets rid of these negative manners by developing qualities peculiar to alps. Archetype culture code for the wrestler configures a mythical hero, a skilled warrior and an aesthetic ideal fighting against the universal evil and cruising in search of glory.

Turkic people and royal entourage had a magical affection toward wrestling and wrestlers and as a result, wrestling turned to be the most crucial branch of sports integrating people with the royal family. Wrestling was viewed by Turkic peoples as a means of enhancing vigilance and sharpening martial techniques up until the modern age, physical competence was perceived also as a symbol of spiritual power and sanctification. Written documents about wrestling both served as an ethical code and revealed honorary forms of the past.

There is no other branch of sports in Turkic peoples with the symbolic 'gravity' of wrestling. Feelings inspired by the wrestling are far from being static or rule-based. Interpretations of symbols and images of wrestling could of course be applied in different formats and used as an instrument in hegemonic processes and their counterparts. In fact, it was deduced that wrestling was utilized systematically in the creation of myths depicting the national power, in the instruction of morals and in competitions and exhibitions almost with chivalrous spirit.

References

- Barfield, T. J. (1992). *The Perilous Frontier. Nomadic Empires and China, 221 BC to AD 1757*, Cambridge: MA and Oxford.
- Bartold, V. V. (2013). *Orta-Asya Türk Tarihi Hakkında Dersler [Lessons on Turkish History in Central Asia]*, 2. Baskı, Ankara: TTK Yayınları. Turkish edition.
- Gabain, A. (2000). *Türkçenin Grameri [Grammar of Turkic]*, trans.: M. Akalin 3. Edition. Ankara: TDK Publications. Turkish edition.
- Fişek, K. (1985). *100 Soruda Türkiye Spor Tarihi [100 Questions History of Sports in Turkey]*, İstanbul: Gerçek Yayınevi. Turkish edition.
- Golden, P. B. (1992). *An Introduction to the history of the Turkic Peoples* Ethnogenesis and state-formation in medieval and early modern Eurasia and the Middle East, Wiesbaden: O. Harrassowitz / Thrcologica; Bd.
- Hatton, C. N. (2011). "Grappling on the Grain Belt: Wrestling in Manitoba to 1931." *A thesis presented to the University of Waterloo in fulfilment of the thesis requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in History, Waterloo- Ontario- Canada,*
- Krawietz, B. (2012). The Sportification and Heritagisation of Traditional Turkish Oil Wrestling, *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 29:15, 2145-2161 pp.
- Laqueur, H. P. (1979). *Zur kulturgeschichtlichen Stellung des Türkischen einst und jetzt*, Frankfurt- Bern Cirencester: Europäisch Hochschulschriften, Reine XXXV, Bd. 2.
- Gumilöv, L. N. (2002/1964). *Eski Türkler [Ancient Turks]*, trans.: D. A. Batur, İstanbul: Selenge Yayınları. Turkish edition.
- Meltzer, D., Mollinaro, JF. (2002) *Top 100 pro wrestler of all time*, New York: Winding Stair Press.

- Oynoshev V. P.- Chochkina M. P. (2016). Altayskiye narodniye igry, *Altay: M-vo kul'tury Resp. Agentstvo po kul'turno-istoricheskomu naslediyu Resp*, №111-115. 10-16 ss. Language Russian
- Poliakoff, B. M. (2004). *Kompsport in der antike, das spiel um leben and tod*, Duesseldorf: Patmos Verlag.
- Simakov G. N. (1984). Obshchestvennyye funktsii kirgizskikh narodnykh razvlecheniy v kontse XIX – nachale XX v.: istoriko-etnograficheskiye ocherki, Leningrad: Nauka-Otd. Language Russian
- Tekin, T. (2006). Orhon Yazıtları [Orhun Inscriptions], Ankara: Turkish Language Society Publications. Language Turkish.
- Thomsen, V. (1910) Ein Blatt in Turkischer Runen Schrift aus Turfan, *Sitzungsberichte der Berliner Akademie der Wissenschaften*, 296-306 pp.
- Turkmen, M. (2011). Yesevishism rituals in Ottoman wrestling dervish lodges, *Energy Education Science and Technology Part B: Social and Educational Studies*, Volume (issue) 4 (4), 2081-2090 pp. https://www.academia.edu/34321272/15-Yesevishism_rituals_in_Ottoman_wrestling.pdf
- Turkmen, M. & Demirhan, B. (2013). Concepts of “wrestling – wrestler” within culture of Turkish world. *International Journal of Academic Research Part B*; 5(5), 221-226 pp. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/271025280>
- Türkmen, M. (2016). “Orta Asya'dan Balkanlara: Türk Halklarında Geleneksel Güreşlerin Tarihi ve Evrimleri”, UWW, International Belt Wrestling Konferance, İstanbul: 06-07 February 2016, ss. 3-14. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/319483329>
- Yüksel, Y. (2018). Wrestling And Peace in Divan Poetry, *Journal of Turkish Language and Literature*, Volume:4, Issue:2, Doi: 10.20322/littera.397440, 589-616 pp. <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/463551>

Creative Commons licensing terms

Authors will retain the copyright of their published articles agreeing that a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0) terms will be applied to their work. Under the terms of this license, no permission is required from the author(s) or publisher for members of the community to copy, distribute, transmit or adapt the article content, providing a proper, prominent and unambiguous attribution to the authors in a manner that makes clear that the materials are being reused under permission of a Creative Commons License. Views, opinions and conclusions expressed in this research article are views, opinions and conclusions of the author(s). Open Access Publishing Group and European Journal of Physical Education and Sport Science shall not be responsible or answerable for any loss, damage or liability caused in relation to/arising out of conflict of interests, copyright violations and inappropriate or inaccurate use of any kind content related or integrated on the research work. All the published works are meeting the Open Access Publishing requirements and can be freely accessed, shared, modified, distributed and used in educational, commercial and non-commercial purposes under a [Creative Commons attribution 4.0 International License \(CC BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).