

## Archaic Tracks of Kyrgyz Traditional Sports Games

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** As a product of certain historical conditions for the development of society, physical culture and sport make up the sum total of the historically emerging consequences of one's spiritual activity. In this study, the background of Kyrgyz traditional sports, one of the oldest Turkic peoples and have a profound history, will be examined. The Kyrgyz have created several steppe-nomadic lifestyle-coherent sports, particularly equestrian games, shooting, and wrestling, by their national will and qualifications.

**Aim:** To determine the natural conditions creating traditional sports, the factors determining the practical character of sports, and the pedagogical and socio-cultural benefits provided to the Kyrgyz people.

**Methods:** In terms of the research method; while it is possible to examine the subject with several methods, the historical method was used among these methods. The limitation of the study was today's Kyrgyzstan and its historical geographies. As a result; Kyrgyz traditional sports, which were understood to be intellectual and moral as well as physical, had taken place in every phase of the social structure and life of the Kyrgyz.

**Results:** There have been a number of inputs and outputs according to the necessities of the time. The economic life of the Kyrgyz people to be based on husbandry, being nomadic peoples, the rough natural and climatic conditions they live in, war-prone structure of the old world determined the style and demand of these sports. Thanks to their pedagogy, customary customs and traditions were ensured to be respected.

**Conclusion:** In practical terms, on the other hand, this enabled the Kyrgyz people to overcome all these difficulties and thus, the Kyrgyz people took its place in the history books as a strong soldier and a rider people.

**Keywords:** Kyrgyz, traditional sports, archaic tracks.

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### INTRODUCTION

We should state that, in this modest study, we will not claim that we will determine the entire historical background of the traditional sports games of the Kyrgyz. Besides, we believe that, first of all, it is necessary to distinguish two different orientations of the history and culture of the game or sports in question. Although they cover each other, the first of these methods is objective and historical, and the second is subjective and socio-psychological. In either case, we will try in this study not to prove all of their arguments, but to explain and exemplify them only as representation.

The Kyrgyz, who have lived on the lands where the ancient Turkish nomadic steppe culture was formed and developed and who determined their settlements, economic and social life areas accordingly, have the characteristic of being the only tribe which has also protected the characteristic peculiarity of Turkish nation. In addition to these, the Kyrgyz have the most potential knowledge and experience among the Great Asia Turkish people in the determination of the origin of the sports mentioned, in the examination from the theory and practical point of view, in the reminding of the forgotten and almost forgotten and in the imitation with the original names and unknown parts (Türkmen, 2013:74).

As a product of certain historical conditions for the development of society, physical education and sport make up the sum total of the historically emerging consequences of one's spiritual activity. In the conditions of the nomadic lifestyle, equestrian sports and games remained the main forms of physical culture and the main tools of physical education; besides, outdoor games, reflecting their content among children, are products of a nomadic lifestyle. Scientists in Kyrgyzstan continue to study history and

culture. There is also great interest in the history of physical culture. There are studies being carried out to preserve and restore the various traditions, rituals and spiritual values of the national culture. The main component of any national image was physical exercises and games. Strength-based and hand-skill-based competitions and distance races were used not only as festival entertainment, but also as a test of people's physical and moral strength and spirit. Flexibility and determination are an expression of a healthy body and spirit (Mendot et al., 2014:128).

A shining feature of every nation's culture is the games it creates. Games are the emblem of a culture, so deep knowledge of game-based practices is an important element in getting to know a society (Parlebas, 2005:13; Lavega, 2007:67). These games have existed in the daily lives of children and adults for centuries. It develops special mental characteristics and important personal qualities, reflects the social structure of the nation's worldviews. Therefore, one of the most important present issues is the revival of Kyrgyz folk culture. To preserve a nation as a nation, it is necessary to examine the history and culture of the nation in depth. The formation and development of physical culture and sports is closely related to the historical stages of the development of the Kyrgyz, their common history and the culture and history of other Turkic peoples. Physical culture is one of the historically formed parts of national culture and is also one of the most important instruments for educating a person. Consequently, as part of the general culture of the people, the development of human culture, including physical culture as well, has become an important subject throughout Kyrgyzstan.

As a continuation of the nomadic age; Kyrgyz ceremonies and toys (festivals), game meat supply was preserved with all its organization in the Islamic period as

well. For example, the continuation of hunting in the Seljuks as a ceremony, a military sport and a maneuver, the Sultans to organize public feasts and entertainment after the hunting ceremonies was nothing but the transfer of the religious rites of the ancient Turks to the Islamic era, by losing their religious nature. In fact, when the Turks were in the period of totemic, these hunting ceremonies were bearing a religious identity. The hunts that the ancient Turks were most careful about were religious hunts. In the ancient Turks, hunting was performed for religious and economic purposes. Since they did not have much to do in the long winters, the Kyrgyz used to engage in hunting. In the Kyrgyz, who were not engaged in other business except husbandry and agriculture, hunting was performed for fun. Mountain goat, wild boar, or in the southern regions, lynx, hyena, and tiger were hunted. All these battues were performed on horseback, using raptorial birds like eagle, merlin and falcon, and hounds called "*The Taigan*", and medieval weapons such as arrows and bayonets. Observing the same order in the Turkish Culture life along with the Gokturks strongly confirms the place of Kyrgyz culture in the Turkish cultural environment (Bartold, 1996:18).

Sport historiography has emerged as a sub-discipline in the western world, as of the first quarter of the 20th century. This gave us very important clues in understanding the history of all societies. On the other hand, it has greatly influenced the transformation of existing social relations and the emergence of new knowledge. For example, in his two-volume work named *The Civilizing Process*, German sociologist Norbert Elias, who is famous for his theory of *Figurational Sociology*, draws attention to the direct proportion between the birth of modern sports and the civilization process and examines the relationship between them (1939:43). Hence, it would not be wrong to claim that the pioneering examples of sports historiography were produced within the framework of the "social history" movement that forced the hegemony of intellectual and political historiography. Moreover, although sports historiography began in the 1930s, it developed at a level that would encourage all disciplines as of the 1980s.

## METHOD

In this study, descriptive identification and comparison method, one of the designs included in the qualitative approach, was used. The research was rather generated from the projects named *Traditional Games and Sports*, led by the author of this article within the Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University - Institute of Traditional Games and Sports.

**Hypothesis and Population of the Study:** The Kyrgyz, who have a profound and rich potential in traditional game and sports practice, have, unfortunately, the fewest publications among the Central Asian peoples. In fact, it would not be right to say that there are few studies on the subject, it is obvious that it is more in number at least compared to the most of the Turkic peoples (Simakov, 1984:72). However, studies evaluating the monographic researches of the peoples of Central Asia on the subject find the studies of all independent states that disintegrated

from the Soviet Union sufficient. They only focus on Omurzakov's Kyrgyz studies (Kyrgyz national sports and national games) and cited him as an example. But they found these Kyrgyz studies "less meaningful" compared to the studies of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan (Taysayev, 1997:21).

## RESULTS

As is known, the thoughts and behaviors, languages, values and habits of societies have ensured the formation of a common culture and allowed them to gain a national identity. A set of instruments (horse, arrow, sword, bayonet, etc.) that human uses in nature management, in the wars with the enemies, had been the elements of the desire to have fun, too, over time, besides, they headed for various sports and games by taking advantage of these. By keeping their bodies energetic thanks to these games, they both defended themselves and prepared for battles, and had fun by engaging in sportive activities. These sporting activities were sometimes turned into a race, and the winner of the race was regarded as the symbols of heroism and strength. They included these games in their social, political, religious and economic structures and at almost every stage of their life.

It was aimed to make a retrospective history examination in order to make a regular period for traditional sports games in the Kyrgyzs, to see their formal and intellectual aspects, and more importantly, to determine their involvement in their social structure and life at every stage. Finding the reasons for the emergence of traditional sports games of any of the Turkic peoples, including Turkey and writing their history and cultural characteristics, without considering the Kyrgyzs, would fall short and would only look good on paper. Meanwhile, academic deepening particularly in equestrian sports, which is the leading actor in Turkish sports culture, can only be facilitated by a good analysis and knowledge of the Kyrgyz traditional equestrian sports games (Türkmen, 2021: 139).

Because the formation and development of Kyrgyz folk dances and entertainment is closely related to the development history of the ethnic group itself. While the reliable studies state that the Kyrgyz are among the oldest peoples of Central Asia, they suggest, based on classical Chinese references, that the Proto-Kyrgyz wandered the Asian steppes in 201 BC (3rd century BC). Wandering and exploring the steppes, which are a link between the nomadic and advanced agricultural cultures of the West and the East, along with the other nomadic tribes, created, developed and enriched the most profound material and intangible culture and more importantly, managed to reach at the present day. This process, naturally, could not happen without mutual interactions and exchanges, without *acculturation* (borrowing traits from another culture) and *enculturation* (learning the traditional content of a culture and assimilates its practices and values) processes (Bartold, 1996:176).

The study of Simakov provides a fine description of these generalized ancient games without any sense of depth or change, making no mistake. Because there is not enough material to suggest any development process. It meticulously depicts a historical picture of the games,

through the Buddhist and Shamanic rituals. However, since Rojdestvenskiy visited the Politburo of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (in Russian: *Političeskoye Byuro*) to give a report and he dealt with games only from marginal aspect, the historical image of most text is partial and opaque. They both gladly cite their sources but do not give the principle of the secret in production, because they both are disdainful of the culture they wrote. Therefore, it can be suspected of falling into many deviations, *sectarian-rhetoric* deviances.

Besides, organizations where traditional sports games are performed in the past and even today, clearly, are a carefully-structured and public domain organizations that are formed up around the social values of broad moral and political influence, rather than a change to “sweat off”, or an opportunity to manifest “*natural*” agonistic instincts or to express them through symbols. The population of the study was limited to examining the historical background of the traditional sports of the Kyrgyz Turks (Türkmen, 2013:78).

## RESULT

Kyrgyz national sports games and toy (festival) form an integral part of its cultural heritage. As a product of certain historical conditions for the development of society, physical culture and sport make up the sum total of the historically emerging consequences of one’s spiritual activity. In the conditions of the nomadic lifestyle, Kyrgyz equestrian sports games remained the main forms of physical culture and the main tools of physical education; besides, outdoor games, reflecting their content among children, are products of a nomadic lifestyle. Specific ethnographic materials show that the sports exercises and games of the nomadic Kyrgyz are a reflection of their life and the elements of folk culture, life, rituals and magical beliefs. Such competitions were very popular and took place in the spare times, they were necessarily held at weddings, funerals, commemoration ceremonies, unforgettable religious days, and rites of the calendar cycle. The Kyrgyzs still conserve many features of their identity in the mountain environment and in sports. This is because militarized physical education has always had special importance in the typical conditions of the steppes and high mountains that are in constant struggle with the elements of nature.

Besides, they preserved the same natural conditions, patriarchal and early feudal, militant lifestyle for a long time. A community that has to constantly search for pastureland for its animals may come into conflict with another tribe or clan at any time. Additionally, their low population has led to the emergence of games and exercises aimed at training talented and brave warriors in the Kyrgyz, that is, the supply of nomadic life put forward the demand for such games by their very nature. The Kyrgyz people, thus, took their place in the history books as a strong soldier and a rider people.

On the other hand, ancient and common sports performed by the Kyrgyz in the classical period and Central Asia and authentic extensions of these sports that have survived until today formed one of the focal points researched by those who deal with social sciences. Only

two of these researchers, with the fuss of ingratiating with the regime individually in the Soviet period, the prejudice that the “*games appeal to the most primitive motives of the Kyrgyz*” led to avoiding these sports activities for a while. However, the very high popularity of the games showed that the interest of social researchers was re-focused.

In the exhibition of Kyrgyz national games, 19th and early 20th century sources bear witness to the existence of the archaic features of pre-Islamic culture within the framework of *toy* (festival) and *ash* (the name attributed to *yuğ* ceremonies organized on the occasion of death anniversary of a prominent person such as the chief of a tribe or clan). Thus, it was concluded that, whichever way you think, the traditional games of the Kyrgyz have a religious side, although they develop warrior skills in their historical or psychological, subjective or objective origin, that these games were spiritual in nature, and at least as old as recorded history. More comprehensive research is recommended to make the development of human culture, including physical culture as part of the general culture of the people, an important subject throughout Kyrgyzstan.

## DISCUSSION

The practices consisted of the entire cycle of rituals carried out over several years in several stages. For example, among the peoples of Central Asia, there was the first independent ride on horseback in three years or the first participation in horse racing in seven years. The games were social and educational games played in nature, because they aimed to prepare children and young people for life and to introduce them to society as a fully-equipped one, according to their age-specific competencies. They consistently became riders, hunters, and fighters. In ancient societies, physical cultural elements were leaching into all aspects of social life. Moreover, physical culture during this period was blessed with various customs, traditions, ceremonies and rituals. As a matter of nomadic culture, The Kyrgyzs conserve many features of their identity in the mountain environment and in sports. This is because militarized physical education has always had special importance in the typical conditions of the steppes and high mountains that are in constant struggle with the elements of nature. Additionally, they preserved the same natural conditions, patriarchal and early feudal, militant lifestyle for a long time. The main characteristics of the games and exercises aimed at training talented and brave fighters were that they were very rough and very risky.

The Asiatic-nomadic physical education instruments were the systematic formulation of physical education in Kyrgyz in the past, the conditions of the militarized social lifestyle. Although the Kyrgyzs are a deep-rooted Turkish tribe, they were lightly populated. Therefore, they were busy training strong, experienced fighters for the future. The children improved their arts by taking the horse, in military affairs, and actively participated in various competitions and martial arts. Domesticating the riding horses results in equestrian games and sports and competitions suited to the purposes of military training. The emergence of military democracy at the stage of the disintegration of the primitive communal system, its goals, objectives, contents and development dynamics vary

depending on the needs of modern physical education of the population and this process is undoubtedly accompanied by the increasing mutual enrichment of national cultures and the active formation of human international characteristics in modern society (Rojdestvenskiy, 1928:22).

The first monographic study on Kyrgyz traditional sports was carried out by Rojdestvenskiy in 1928. Studies conducted in the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century rather composed of subheadings. In 1984, Simakov made the best anthropological compilation of games. At the present time, it is accepted that cultural analysis in anthropology should somehow be contextualized within a historical framework (Cohn 1987; Fabian 1983; R. Rosaldo 1994; Sahlins 1995). This does not mean that ethnography should be based on reconstruction. The history must be integrated into a holistic understanding of institutions and groups. It is not enough to reference the past without a critical evaluation of the history of an event, also without making an objective and unbiased definition and a reflection of current concerns. Rather, a reassessment of history can shed important light on the way ethnography is interpreted and analyzed. The lack of historical information in this study prevents us from using history in this way. Because these two sources have a lot of repetition, but little elaboration (Türkmen, 2021:141).

Sports history is never independent from general cultural history. Meanwhile, we must not forget that history was terribly defaced by the Soviet regime for 70 years. This regime not only succeeded in inventing a history in accord with its doctrinal postulates but was also able to create the extravagance of the fundamental contribution of historical materialism, which was the unmistakable method of the analysis of history and the instrument of political teaching that it must serve as the logical consequence of the compromises originally accepted, by dogmatizing the theories of Hegel and Marx (Türkmen, 2013:76).

T. Adorno stated the following: “*if one were to summarize the most important trends of present-day mass culture, one could hardly find a more pregnant category than that of sports* (1982:56). The Turkic peoples have created almost 400 steppe-nomadic lifestyle-coherent sports, particularly equestrian games, shooting, and wrestling, by their national will and qualifications. It can be clearly seen that, in their display, religious elements lie in the intellectual direction while national elements in the formal direction (Türkmen, 2021:135). The Kyrgyz author Anarkulov states that, “*People’s will, wish, hope, joy, sorrow, heroism, their assertive behaviors and struggle for freedom and equality and for justice and truth were reflected in these games and essentially formed the content of these games. People’s mannered good examples and all the national character of the people can be seen in these games.*” (1997: III).

To understand Kyrgyz traditional sports for an outsider looking in undoubtedly sheds a lot of light on other aspects of Kyrgyz’s and even other Turkic peoples’ social life as well. There is no other branch of sports in Kyrgyzstan with the symbolic ‘gravity’ of *kok-boru*. Feelings inspired by *kok-boru* are far from being static or ordered. Interpretations of symbols and images of *kok-boru* can, of course, be applied in different formats and used as an instrument in hegemonic processes and their counterparts.

Actually, *kok-boru* 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. Traditional sports and equestrian, shooting and wrestling in particular is considered by Kyrgyzs as a means of enhancing vigilance and sharpening martial techniques, and physical competence is viewed also as a symbol of spiritual power and sanctification.

## CONCLUSION

Finally, these sports display 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 (Türkmen, 2021: 145).

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