

Cultural Elements in the Rituals of Traditional Sports among Turkic Peoples

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ABSTRACT

Background: In this study, the material and spiritual culture elements in the rituals applied in the organizations where the traditional sports of the Turkic peoples are performed will be examined together with their archetypal codes. Each element of traditional sports materials and rituals has some symbolic meaning in religious and moral contexts.

Aim: The main rituals to be examined in traditional games and sports are: the fields where the games held, calendar days, awards, music, category/weight classes (categories), master-apprentice relationships, clothing, top of the organizational hierarchy (wise man (el-yahshisi/elders, aqsaqal), those who announced racing horses, wrestling Alps to the audience, who chanted lyrical poems during the races, and who praise the wrestler before the competition (announcer [cazgır]/ eulogizer [Salavacı]), and dance performed according to music in wrestling (peshrev), etc. \

Methods: It will be tried to seek answers to the questions of whether the national characteristics of these rites were maintained today and what kind of transformation they have undergone. Descriptive research and comparison method, among the models included in the qualitative approach, was used in the study. The population of the research was limited to the Turkic peoples from Siberia to the Balkans.

Results: With the effect of the inclusion of Turks in many belief systems in history and their contact with other societies for various reasons, as a matter of course, the style of the games and some rituals in the games have changed and transformed, and some have been forgotten. However, it was observed that most of the ritual practices continued instinctively.

Conclusion: It was concluded that, although there were national and economic factors in the formal manners of the games, there was a religious aspect to the origin of these subjective or objective rites and these rites were inherently spiritual, and that most rites were, at least, as old as the recorded history.

Keywords: Turkish peoples, traditional sport, ritual, culture.

INTRODUCTION

Importance and purpose of the study: As is known, the concept of culture is broad to cover almost all social and human disciplines such as religion, intellectual, national ethnography, folklore, and anthropology, etc. The identity shaped individually or collectively creates continuity in shaping the future with what has been gained from the past. All societies consider individual identity and the more widely functioning collective identity as an important tool for the preservation and maintenance of their existence. This psychological interest turns into a powerful social feeling through rites. As symbols, ceremonies, and rituals that gather individuals strengthen the bonds between individuals in the society and consolidate the partnership; through the tradition of sports, they keep the society alive by allowing them to continue their traditions, renovate their beliefs, and enable their value judgments and customs become established.

Traditional games and sports have emerged according to Turkish steppe lifestyle-coherent national will and qualifications and have been an integral part of religious, national and economic ceremonies. Games and sports that have played an important role in the formation of the arts, literature, customs and traditions of the Turkic

peoples have taken part in almost every phase of their social structure and life and performed versatile functions. In the communities where these are displayed, the consciousness of being the same nation gets stronger, national feelings are whipped, national pride are felt, peoples who enjoy the same rituals cohere, collective memory revives, and archetype culture codes wake up like sleeper cells.

There are lots of things to discover in the world of traditional sports. While the concepts and perspectives presented here are historically-motivated, they come from sociology and cultural sciences, moreover, and they offer many ways to further analyze their role in engaging with traditional games and sports and building culture and identity in communities (Sahlins, 1995: 27, Ilkim and Mergan, 2021). Most of the socio-cultural concepts are linked by the phenomenon of collective identity, ranging from local to national identity. In this study, we aimed to interpret some rituals that are practiced in traditional sports but that we cannot understand most of the time, to contribute to the studies examining the roles these rituals play for society and to point out the areas of rituals that need research.

Rituals of traditional sports: There are many rituals in the performance of traditional sports of Turkic peoples,

where the main ones are as follows: the fields where the games held, calendar days, awards, music, category/weight classes (categories), master-apprentice relationships, clothing, top of the organizational hierarchy (wise man (el-yahshisi/elders, aqsaqal), those who announced racing horses, wrestling Alps to the audience, who chanted lyrical poems during the races, and who praise the wrestler before the competition (announcer [cazgir]/ eulogizer [Salavacı]), and dance performed according to music in wrestling (*peshrev*), etc. With the globalization eddy, some of these rituals have been forgotten, while some began to be forgotten, some influenced by other cultures, and some were exposed to semantic loss and failed to preserve their originality (Gordlevsky, 1968: 81).

When the ancient Turkic peoples turned west, they did not add food only to their vocabulary, or they did not carry the flocks of sheep and goats they could live off along with them. They brought cultural elements along with the requirements of their economic life with them as well. When a Western Turk or Central Asian human sciences researcher, e.g. a Kyrgyz, Kazakh, Uzbek or Turkmen anthropologist, ethnographer or cultural historian, seeks an answer to a question such as “*What are the traditional games or sports that enrich our civilization and appear to be the product of values that we can identify with our culture?*”, a mind without prejudice and not hesitate to investigate would come across a long list of names consisting of an enormous treasure dating back thousands of years.

Hypothesis and population of the study: The social environment where the individual lives creates a framework for the form and content of common memories. Historical interpretations and perception patterns stem from the mutual relationship between individual and collective memory. Every individual is embedded in cultural and social structures that are internalized through language and communication. However, the individual cannot develop a memory that does not have a specific social context and individual memories can only be understood within the collective memory framework. Rituals, on the other hand, are a way for people to attach to the collective, to remember and to build the mythological past, to establish social cohesion, and to sustain creativity in society. Besides, making a ritual allows people to withdraw from their current status and prepare to move from one place or status to another. Deep-rooted heritages adorned with national and religious motifs such as traditional sports can be kept alive by individuals and institutions who have that heritage, who consider them valuable, and who have the consciousness of belonging to them. Sine qua non of being a subject is to feel responsibility towards individuals and society, and to keep alive the values that guide humanity. In today's globalization process, it has become very difficult for especially underdeveloped and developing societies to protect traditional cultural elements. Those who have made this organization and see it as a national duty to live, let live and promote our traditions and to leave written documents for future generations' use, hold also a social mission with national culture's carrier and protective vision (Lavega, 2007:154).

MATERIAL AND METHOD

As in all ancient tribes and civilizations, Turkic peoples, too, used a number of tools (arrow, sword, bayonet, etc.) and living creatures (horse, elephant, camel, etc.) in their fight against nature and their enemies, these, over time, have also been the elements of the entertainment desire and they turned to various games and sports by benefiting from these. They gave spiritual thoughts of what they believed at that time to the rituals of these games and sports. The research material consisted of the material and spiritual elements of these ancient warfare vehicles, which existed in the past and reflected in the present. Descriptive research and comparison method, among the models included in the qualitative approach, was used in this social study examined within the framework of folklore.

FINDINGS

Days of traditional sports / calendar: “*Toy*”, which rather meant a state institution for ancient Turkic peoples, also refers to celebration or commemoration ceremony organized for the occasions such as; birth, marriage, death, demonstration of heroism, name giving, welcoming, return from hunter conquest, salvation from captivity, determining the succession to the throne, accession to the throne, oath-taking, and plunder culture. Sine qua non for these ceremonies in Turks was the realization of traditional sports games particularly equestrian games, archery and wrestling. Eid al-adha (Festival of the Sacrifice), Eid Ul-Fitr (Ramadan Feast), and the Newroz Festival, in particular, became the Olympiad of Turkic peoples (Sımakov, 1984:97).

Fields where the games held: In ancient Turks, sport organizations were held beside and especially under the “Sky Pillars”. This tradition continues among the Siberian Turkic peoples. This is because these objects reaching into the sky symbolize the center of the Earth and form a nexus with the Pole Star, which is considered the House of God, or the Gate of Heaven. Usually, a traditional yurt (tent) is set up in the meadow and a beech tree whose trunk is engraved nine stairs is planted inside the yurt. The competitions start with the libation (*saçı*: a ritual pouring of a liquid, or grains such as rice, as an offering to a deity or spirit, or in memory of the dead) ritual, which generally accompanied prayer (*applause*). In Muslim Turkic peoples, this ritual is referred to as “*Altın Kabah*” (Golden Kabah), “*Gümüş Tirek*” (Silver Pillar), “*Kabak Meydanı*” (Poplar Square). The square is mentioned as a place of worship for Alevi-Bektashis. To set another example, in the Ottomans, wrestling means “worshiping”, a wrestling area means “a prayer hall”, a wrestling ground means a “field of contest, gathering (*cem*) area” (Melikoff, 1999:38,40).

Beadsman (Announcer [Cazgir]/ Eulogizer [Salavacı]/ Da'i al-Mutlaq [Dâî]): This prayer ritual was performed by “*Carcı-sudyalannouncing referee*” in Central Asia, and by “*Salavacıyan*” in the Ottomans, who were head-coaches of sports-lodges, former wrestlers, and who had a knowledge of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), as well as being a Hafiz and Poet, whereas by *Salıkçazı* in Siberian Turkic peoples. They were also called “*Dâî*”, meaning “*Mürşîd*” (murshid: a guide, mentor) or “*beadsman*” (prayer). Today,

this tradition is mostly continued in wrestling (Türkmen & Alimov, 2020: 605).

Awards: Both in epics and in real life, gifting of male animals is quite common in Turkish sports culture. We can find the same expressions of Dede Korkut, which is “*I had studhorse (among horses), tup (among sheep), and buğra (adult male camel, among camels) sacrificed.*”, also in traditional sports organizations except the Ottoman Palace (Türkmen & Useev, 2020: 107). In Kyrgyz, Kazakhs and Uzbeks, there is a ritual called “*yettileme*” and “*tokkuzlama*”, which refer to the wrestler’s awards are increased seven or nine fold. The same tradition is observed in the Ancient Turkic peoples, too. These serve to carry the souls of mighty bodies to the world in the seven or nine floors in the sky, that is, to God and the souls of the ancestors. In the wrestling (*Huresh*) competitions of Tuva Turks, both the loser and the winner were respected in the same way. The one chosen by the *Kök* (Tengri) was only one person, the “*moge*”, that is, the “*victorious*” one. His soul is depicted as the soul of an eagle flying into the Eternal Blue Sky (Khukhe Munkhe Tengeri) (Mendot et al., 2014:130).

Master-apprentice relationship: An apprentice, who regards those who teach him sports such as wrestling, archery and equestrian as a master, should have great respect for them without fail. In “*Mukaddimetü’l Edeb*”, written out by Mahmūd bin Omar in 1127 (ez-Zemahşerî, 2009:97) and “*Gülistan*” written in 1258, they explain how his apprentice, who disrespected his master (*Hukema*) during a wrestling, kicked his master from the ground to the ground with the following verses: “*Do not give so much strength to your friend and apprentice, so he won’t gain victory over you if he becomes an enemy... Didn’t I hear? He suffered from the person he raised. He learned to shoot arrows from me, and he finally made me a target for his arrows.*” (Şirazi, 2016:143). It is understood that the master did not teach a game that he applied very well to his apprentice also in the ancient Indian and Iranian Turkish dynasties, too.

Wise man (El-yahshisi / Elders [Aqsaqal]): In our country, the notable people who were called “*mediators*” or “*decision-makers*” until recently, the Kyrgyz people rather call it “*el-cakshisi*”. El-cakshisi refers to “*the most respected person among the people*”. It is also seen that the same people are sometimes referred to as “*Aqsaqal*” (literally meaning white beard in Turkic languages) or “*wise of the community*”, too. These people, who were the top of the hierarchy in social ceremonies, were loved and respected in the locality and nobody doubted their honesty. They act as “*sinchi/chief referees*” in traditional sports and they are the top of the hierarchy in traditional sports organizations, finishing the discussion during races (Türkmen & Belek, 2020:198).

Social security (financial adjustment): This term means that, during the competition, when a sportsman is injured or suffers financial losses such as the death of the horse he was racing with, or financial losses such as sports equipment or supplies, this case is compensated by the wedding or festival host or the organizing committee, this can be called “*social security*” in today’s term. Compensation for the damages of those who suffered material and physical damage during the competition is a

very old tradition in Turkish sports history. In the Central Asia (Turkistan) ethnographic study of Russian author Abramzon, we see that a similar or superior horse is granted to the person whose horse was injured during the race, in private sports organizations (Abramzon, 1963: 48). This ritual is also very common in Ottoman chronicles (Rojdestvenskiy, 1928: 19).

2.8. Categories/ Weight classes: On the basis of wrestling, archery and horse racing, which have a vast place in Turkish sports history, we come across four categories: IV., III., II., and I. categories. IV. Category is the lowest category in age, includes beginners. The wrestler, who places a degree in a few competitions in this category, wrestles in the upper category, that is, II. Category. When a wrestler wins his competitions and places the required degrees, he promotes in the I. Category, in the vernacular of the day, he becomes a “*Chief Wrestler*” (Türkmen & Useev, 2019: 152).

2.9. Prelude (Peshrev): It is a rhythmic dance accompanied by music in traditional wrestling. It is a sine qua non ritual in the traditional wrestling of the Siberian Turkic peoples, especially the Tuva Turks, and the Anatolian and Balkan Turks. Tuva wrestling competitions begin with the impressive and daring *Devigi* (Eagle) dance. All wrestlers join the dance. *Devigi*, a fast dance, represents agility and strength. It imbues the wrestler with a belief in victory. While Tuva Turks perform the eagle dance, they mean “*I dream of flying to the skies, getting away from world affairs*”. Among ancient nomadic Turkic peoples, the eagle is the messenger of the Sky (*Kök-Tengri*) on the ground, it is a messenger between the lower and upper Worlds. Therefore, the “*devigi-dance*” is also a ritual that expresses one’s respect for the Eternal Blue Sky. In *peşrev* performed in Anatolia, the scene of wolf and eagle attacking their prey is portrayed and, in the end, the *peşrev* ends with the ritual called “*temenna*” (a traditional wrestling salaam), representing the pillars of faith “*amentü*” (testament) (Melikoff, 1999: 327). Besides, the holy names are mentioned in the eulogies (lyric chansons sung by Cazgır [announcer]), which refer to wrestling praises in Anatolian and Balkan Turks, and faith-oriented practices are performed. Each element of the materials and rituals in traditional wrestling has various symbolic meanings in religious and moral contexts.

3. Discussion and Conclusion

Equestrian, shooting and wrestling in particular, which are an integral part of ancient mysteries, “*toy*” (assembly, meeting or state council), “*yuğ*” (lamentation), and ritual ceremonies peculiar to the ethnicity, had a ritual significance in Turkic peoples. The physical aspect of the training of these traditional wrestling was happening with the master-apprentice relationship. The apprentice’s emulation to his master was covering also to undertake the role of the carrier of this ancestral moral understanding. Besides, myths depicted in rituals were intended to reproduce today’s cosmogonic deity acts. In the sense of multiplication of present versions of creative actions realized by gods or goddesses unguided and periodically on a divine calendar, and in the sense of being the code of this divine calendar and holidays, wrestling had a ritual importance. Following the short journey in the written sources of the above researchers, traditional sports and

games can now be seen as the *social capital* of a society (Rosaldo, 1994: 525).

Scientifically expressed cultural memory, collective subconscious, and archetype cultural codes, or ritual practices that we call traditions, go on instinctively and may come across somehow despite the globalizing world. There are local rituals that come from the ancient and continue among Siberian Turkic peoples who kept away from Turkish and world cultural flow, or among the *Yörüks* (also known as *Yuruks* or *Yorouks*) or Turkmens in the countryside of Central Asia and Anatolia, who became the least degenerated tribes before history (Türkmen & Buyar, 2019: 160).

Guiding an individual about acting in society, ritual offers both ready patterns of behavior and provides an emotional bond and commitment to the past. New generations, thus, are taught how to act. Rituals are collective memories encoded into actions. Many people equate ritual with religion, with the sacred. In religion, rituals give form to the sacred, communicate doctrine, open pathways to the supernatural (Elias, 1939:76; Simakov, 1984: 102). Although rituals are mostly regarded as sacred, many, perhaps most, rituals are both *secular* and *sacred*. C.G. Jung defines archetypes as “*patterns organizing our perceptions, ordering, changing and developing the contents of consciousness*” (2007:58). Before defining as archetypes, Jung first referred to them as “*primordial images*” and “*dominants of the collective unconscious*”. Jung characterizes mythological images as archetypes, and claiming that these mystical symbols are shaped in the subconscious, he takes and interprets the mythological images reflected from the metaphysical field within a scientific framework. He also, interestingly, links this primordial images actualized in the mind of archaic humans with the *planets* as well (2007:72).

According to Mircea Eliade, famous mythologist and historian of religion: “Every religious festival, any liturgical time, *represents* the deactualization of a sacred event that took place in a mythical past, *‘in the beginning’*” (2003: 108). V.A. Gordievsky suggests that the Pleiades is the oldest Cosmological figure of the Turks (1962:91). Turks in Anatolia still determine their seasonal cycles according to this constellation. Russian anthropologist Gordievsky, who came to Turkey (Anatolia) from Soviet-era Siberian Altai in 1966, states that: “*Entire formal and intellectual characteristics seen in the organization of wrestling among Turkic peoples are a follow-up of old bakhshi (or bakshy)/shamans, traditional Turkmen musicians.*” (1968:21). Even though its archaic context has been forgotten, Hidrellez rituals which falls on May 6 are still celebrated. The “Kırkpınar Oil Wrestling Festival” was held on the first three days of Hidrellez, until 1961. Again, according to M. Eliade: “*Not all religions have all the attributes and not all religions are entirely ‘new’.*” (2003:76). Like the ritual of reaching Tengri (God) after climbing seven or nine levels of sky for the “*goal to a secret*” in Siberian and Central Asian shamanism, this belief has turned into “*The Stages of Nafs*” in the Turkish-Islamic Sufi (mysticism) Philosophy, such as *tokız-ayak*, *tokız-tabak*, *tokız-kumalak* in Kazakhs, *Tokkuz Korgol* (a traditional Turkish mancala game) in Kyrgyzs, and *dokuz taş* (nine men’s morris: a kind

of strategy board game), *dokuz-enecik* in Turkey, etc. (Drompp, 2005: 102; Cohn, 1987:18).

Sky Pillars (in Latin: *Universalis columna*) erected by Siberian Turkic peoples who were followers of Kök-Tengri religion on the fields, where sports and games were held, were the centers that connect the earth and the sky, which Shamans use in their celestial trance ceremonies. Holy Sky Pillars were erected to connect these two centers. This center was the Center Point of the World. To all four sides of the center, four pillars signifying the “*Four Cardinal Directions of the World*” were erected. Center and Four Cardinal Directions Symbolism were used in the Khwarazmian dynasty, Karakhanids (a *Turkic khanate that ruled Central Asia in the 9th through the early 13th century*), the Seljuks, Mamelukes (*The Kipchaks*), the Ottoman Empire (until the 19th century), ancient Iranian and Turkish dynasties in India (Türkmen & Buyar, 2019: 160).

Like the ritual of reaching Tengri (God) after climbing seven or nine levels of sky for the “*goal to a secret*” in Siberian and Central Asian shamanism, this belief has turned into “*The Stages of Nafs*” in the Turkish-Islamic Sufi (mysticism) Philosophy. In the Ottomans, there was “*İhsân-ı âlel ihsân / gift over gift*, while in the theory of “*perfect man*” (*al-insan al-kamil*) of the Yasawi thought, *there are seven stages of recognizing the truth*. At the same time, there are *seven kinds of qualitative stages (degrees)* that serve to show the *maturity of the soul*. The numbers seven (7) and nine (9) herein are directly related to “*Tengrism*”, the ancient ethnic Turkish religious cult. Cultural motifs brought by Anatolian Turks from their heirloom lands, Central Asia, come across in a way. Today, in the ceremonies such as ritual festivals seen in the Anatolian countryside and particularly in the Yuruks (the Turkmens), sheep mating festival, harvest festival, etc., the rituals such as traditional wrestling (sinsin, karakucak, şalvar, oil, aba wrestling [Turkish Jacket Wrestling]), eagle-wolf dances, tradition of multiplying the determined prizes of the pehlewans by *seven or nine* times, continue, albeit limited (Türkmen & Belek, 2020: 195).

As a result: Elements of nature that Turks regarded as a means of reaching God in the pre-Islamic period, over time, have become a cult within Turkish belief patterns and mindscapes. Some of the folk beliefs and practices developed within the framework of the aforementioned cults maintained their continuity in the Islamic period, by being subjected to a legitimation that preserves its essence within the framework of the rules of the new religion. We see this most obviously in the traditional sports ritual. The loss of meanings ascribed in the context of the Creation in parallel with the changes worldview over time is called “*semantic loss*”, besides, it was experienced in some of the rituals.

Besides, sport games in Turkic peoples were a carefully-structured and open-to-public organizations built around the social values of broad moral and political repercussions, rather than a change to “*sweat off*”, or an opportunity to manifest “*natural*” agonistic instincts or to express them through symbols. It was seen that, of the traditional sports performed in Turkic peoples, “*shooting*” (archery), equestrian and wrestling mean more than just a sports format. It was understood that entire formal and

intellectual characteristics seen in the organization of traditional sports among Anatolian and Turkistan Turkic peoples were composed of old *bakhshi* (or *bakshy*)/shamans and of the polish of Islamic-looking rituals, on the other hand, and that they were originated from Kök-Tengrism in their essence. It was concluded that, although there were national and economic factors in the formal manners of the games, there was a religious aspect to the origin of these subjective or objective rites and these rites were inherently spiritual, and that most rites were, at least, as old as the recorded history.

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