

Asırtmalı Aba Wrestling in Turkish sports history and culture

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Abstract

Aşırtmalı Aba Wrestling, which is one of the wrestling types that is made with wearing clothes, expresses itself as an outward reflection of spiritual and physical needs of people as a whole both in previous times and today. It also faces us as a cultural accumulation of Turkish people in their daily lives and values within social dimensions. In other words, practicing wrestling in times when Turks have lived in Central Asia has grown out of the need for the unity of spiritual sentiments and thoughts with body by remaining bound to their living standards and cultural norms of those times. In this research the traditional wrestling of Turks, aşırtmalı aba wrestling, which is performed in Gaziantep, has been analyzed with its historical background, clothing, rules and techniques. In the research, terminologies have been noticed which originated from aşırtmalı aba wrestling and gradually gained technical meanings and contributed to the enrichment of the language. Aşırtmalı aba wrestling receives its name from clothing made by aba, a loose-fitting garment woven of camel or goat hair, which pehlivan, a wrestler of Turkish traditional wrestling, has worn as well as from technical term called 'el aşırma', an act performed by the attacker to grab the belt of his opponent in the back by moving his hand over opponent's shoulder and reaching his hand to opponent's belt in the back. Aşırtmalı aba wrestling is performed in Gaziantep province, especially at the end of harvest, in weddings, festivals and celebrations. Basic games/techniques, which are performed so often in Aşırtmalı aba wrestling, are shown step by step in pictures. With this study, which aşırtmalı aba wrestling is introduced and comparisons are made between forms of this wrestling among other Turkic Republics, you will have the view of Turkish world. The fundamental aim of this study is to present the historical development of aşırtmalı aba wrestling, its terminology, clothing, rules and basic games/techniques which is performed in Gaziantep. These issues, which have been lacking in previous studies, will be filled in this study and therefore, it will constitute weight for the research. In this research, historical and descriptive methods have been used; literature scan and method of interviewing experts in collecting data about aba wrestling have been employed. Since it is widely performed in Gaziantep, an on-site survey has been done by visiting the province.

Keywords: Aba, aşırma, wrestling, culture, history.

INTRODUCTION

In our present day sport is viewed as a social, biological, psychological, cultural and moral event with artistic value. In other words, sports is a type of competition which is performed with equal rules by people who compete against opponents, themselves, nature, distance and time by using their physique and intelligence. As previously mentioned, there is an element of rivalry and competition in sports.

Formation and development of a national culture requires efforts and encouragements. Turks have been closed to sports both when they were nomadic and city residents. Turkish men and women have been involved in sportive events throughout history.

Turks have transformed sports into an entertainment and mixed with their wedding ceremonies and traditions. It was demanded from a man of marriage age the skills such as riding a horse

and knowing how to wrestle. Those successful ones, who performed in Turkic celebrations, used to gain prestigious and respect in the society (10).

The cradle of Turkic settled civilization is Turkestan. Before Islam Turkic civilization had been developed in three stages in Turkestan. First stage was Gokturks, second stage was Western-Turks, Khanate of Turgis and the period of Karluk Yabgu and the third stage is the period of Uighurs (12).

The first settled society in the history of the world is seen among Turks. The origin of the cities was a village of two houses. The villages of 5-25 houses are seen near water banks in 7000 BC. Later these villages had been united and cities emerged from the unification of villages. The cities were formed gradually as a result of economic, political, cultural and military events, and eventually formed cities. In the excavations made in the village of Anau within the boundaries of today's Turkestan, findings

exhibited that Turkic villages were established in 7000 BC and people living in these villages had a superior village culture and civilization level. In the period of Huns, which has come to the scene later, a total of 609 cities have been discovered; 77 cities in Kazakhstan, 75 cities in Mongolia, 72 cities in Altai and a total of 358 cities were found between West Turkestan and Khan Tengri Mountains. As it is known, Turk also means 'a nation that breeds or reproduces faster'. Ergenekon legend, which depicts how Turks no longer did fit in valley and departed from Ergenekon, is a good example to this (24).

Sports had been an important part in the daily lives of Turks in pre-Islamic era. Young Turkic men, who were brought up entirely within a militaristic environment, always had to be ready for war. The life in steppes had made it necessary to be healthy and alert for existence. In addition hound hunting and hunting in general were events that provided dynamism (21).

Sportive games were generally organized in gatherings such as weddings and celebrations. Feasts were given, *kımız*, a traditional alcoholic drink of Turks made from horse milk, was drunk, folk songs were sung and various sportive games were played at the same time. These sportive games had given a novel touch to weddings and celebrations (21).

Turks, who were nomadic and warrior people, have begun to dominate surrounding territories starting from 1700 BC through organized raids and they spread around Altai and Khan Tengri Mountains within two centuries. On the other hand, while some of the same race members, proto-Turks (ancestors of Turks), had contacted dolichocephal Mediterranean races through spreading over today's Kazakhstan to Maverahünnehir in Turkestan, groups, which were moving towards West, had obtained connections with Ural clans (13).

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Historical Perspective to Sports Culture in Turks

When the historical process of wrestling phenomenon is analyzed, it is seen that it does not only hold the content of physical motions, but it also expresses certain social norms. In fact when looked into wrestling within the scope of both social and

sportive dimensions, it is seen that wrestling is an indispensable struggle sports of Turks which had been performed in holidays, weddings, religious and national ceremonies, festivals and even in the funerals of heroes. It has eventually become a symbol of heroism and bravery. In the time of history every Turk had performed wrestling or shown close interest if not performed.

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Popular sports of our time such as horse-riding, archery, wrestling and shooting were daily business of every individual in Turkic period before Islam. Horse races, javelin, shot and hunting with falcons (hunting with raptors) used to sharpen the determination for fighting. Women used to participate in sports too. Horse races used to be organized in musical spring celebrations with the first thunder blast of spring season and various competitions used to take place. Additionally hound hunting used to be organized. Thousands of harmful and wild animals used to be killed; this was done in a nature of war drills and preparing youth for war and how to struggle. According to Chinese records, 100.000 cavaliers had joined to a hound hunting which was organized in 62 BC (21).

Skiing was widespread among Kirghiz Turks who were living Northern part of Altai Mountains and Western parts of Lake Baikal. According to Chinese sources skiing is told to be a way of life for Kirghiz Turks living in the area and among other Turkic clans. According to source "Turks used to sit on a wood and move as if they were flying among mountains and valleys, and never seemed to be scared". Turks living in the Northeast of Kirghiz, on the other hand, were recorded in historical sources as, "Turks with wooden legs" because of their utmost affection for skiing. It was also observed that they participated in ski races among themselves. Because they sometimes gathered, placed their one foot over a wooden ski and moved about 100 meters (21).

Wrestling and alike sports used to be performed among old Turks. It is even stated that there were wrestling between women and men. Women were particularly wrestling with men who

wanted to marry them and married with the one who defeated her (21).

Javelin, shot and similar sports are played among Turks today as well. However, hunting with falcons has a special place for Turks living in Central Asia (21).

There are sources about pre-Islamic Turks that they have participated in athletics such as high jump. This situation has reflected upon legends. In the legends of Gokturk's origin, Gokturks had gathered in a woody place for the occasion of choosing their Khan and participated in a high jump competition; The one, who had jumped the highest point, had become the Khan (21).

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Wrestling Concept

The semantic analysis of wrestling in Turkish emphasizes a competition between two people. However, it has different meanings in different nations. It is Lutte in French, Lotta in Italian, Lucha in Spanish, Lupta in Romanian, Borjba in Russian, Borba in Bulgarian, Wrestling in English, Ringen in German, Zapasy in Polish, Birkozhas in Hungarian, Rvange in Serbian, Hravenie in Croatian and Güreş in Turkish (17).

In certain Turkish dialects, wrestling is pronounced as follows;

Mongolia: Gura. Karachay-Cherkessia: Küreşmek, küleşmek. Kazan: Kirte, küreş, küreşü, küreşmek. Chuvashia: Küreş, güreş. Yakutia: Küres. Tatarstan: Küreş. Kazakhstan: Küreş. Uzbekistan: Kureş. Kyrgyzstan: Kureş. Azerbaijan: Güleş. Turkmenistan: Güreş, hibinski. Crimea: Küreş. Balkan Turks: Güreş, güleş.^(14,11) The word "güreş" is pronounced as "güreş or güleş" in our country.

The children used to begin their education on horseback in a very early age in 3000 BC, grow as if they were a part of the horse and become great riders. Girls and women were very much alike (1).

In one of his famous poems, Chinese poet Di-Po says; "Turkic training gods have created the beauty of this woman with their hands. Woman has gained her beauty by worshipping to training gods" (2).

Famous historian Harold Lamb says " in this land no one would give their daughter for marriage to a man who can't horse ride or wrestle" in his book "Cenghis Khan" when mentioning about Turks (2).

Celebrations and Ceremonies in Turkish Sports

In addition to purpose for hunting, nomadic life and war in the lives of Turks, physical culture is also known to be consulted for the cure of illnesses. It is written in an old Turkish book of medicine, "Tuhfe-i Mübarizi", famous with information given about sports medical science, about how certain physical activities are employed to cure certain illnesses; to wrestle, run, high jump, play bayonet, play sword, run horse, throw arrow, play ball, handstand, play skittle, walk bare-feet, short-distance run are all mentioned in the book (15).

Celebrations and ceremonies which Turks brought from Central Asia to our present day with joy are the following;

Newroz celebrations, weddings, Hızır-Nebi celebrations, celebrations for returning from war, Ooğdarış celebrations, meetings and festives, celebration for the first hunting of the ruler's son, celebrations for coming to throne, spring celebrations, wedding celebrations, birth of son celebrations, death ceremonies, fall celebrations, meadow celebrations, peace wrestling, naming the son celebrations, wearing kispet, a type of hand-stitched lederhosen worn by wrestlers, celebrations, pitching a new tent celebrations, turning rams into the flock or herd at breeding time celebrations, running in pairs celebrations, harvest season celebrations, festival of sacrifices, Ramadan festivals, Friday celebrations (this tradition still continues in Horasan), circumcision feasts, enlisting in the army celebrations, independent day celebrations, Sunday celebrations etc (12).

Historical Development and Characteristics of Aba Wrestling

Aba: A type of coarse woolen cloth. It is generally made of woven of camel hair. Various clothing such as Maşlah, a long, open-fronted cloak worn by women, Çakşır, baggy trousers worn by men, Kalçın, long heavy stocking worn inside boots, Şalvar, baggy trousers, Potur, full-gathered knee breeches worn with tight leggings, Cepken, a short embroidered jacket with full sleeves, Salta, a short collarless jacket, Yelek, vest, Cüppe, robe, Yağmurluk, raincoat, Mest, light thin-soled boot, Terlik, slippers, and Heybe, saddlebag,

Hurç, *large saddlebag*, and eyer örtüsü, *saddle blanket* are all made from black aba.

Red Aba: Its color has given its name. When red aba is woven, generally an ornament is embroidered to its collar. It is especially worn in barren villages.

Earth-brown Aba: It is a yellowish aba. This aba is worn in brook and nut villages (23).

Black Aba: This aba is worn by farm laborers and brook villagers.

Aba wrestling is performed in Gaziantep and Hatay provinces in our country. It has been performed by Turks since old times and able to reach our time without losing its authentic value. Aba wrestling received its name from clothing called aba. Aba wrestling, which is performed in Gaziantep and Hatay provinces, is the first wrestling type that is performed with cloths.



Red Aba



Earth-Brown Aba



Black Aba

Aba wrestling has a specific structure with its history, culture, rules and games. Games are usually performed standing-up in aba wrestling. Some of these games have exact similarities with Judo. It is usually performed in villages and there are some differences in height/weight, match-ups, time, etc. in aba wrestling performed in cities. There are differences in terms of clothing and rules in aşirtmalı aba wrestling between provinces of Gaziantep and Hatay. It is also done with accompaniment of music. Wrestling similar to aba wrestling is still performed in Central Asia (18).

All traditional wrestling forms have showed a one-to-one rational development. Some rules have emanated as a result of cases in killing or wounding the opponent. The importance given to wrestling had increased with this approach and transformed it into a sport. It has been possible for imitative wrestling to be transformed into traditional wrestling with religious ceremonial dances. When people were preparing for these dances, they were also preparing for the traditional wrestling. Different forms of wrestling are used in the training

of soldiers and children. Later on, wrestling competitions from different parts of the world had transformed them into festivals (17).

When one examines the history of wrestling sport, it is seen that aba wrestling is one of the oldest kinds. This wrestling used to be performed by Turks in Central Asia. Today it is performed within the boundaries of Turkey, in the provinces of Gaziantep and Antakya (9).

Turkic clans, which have settled in Gaziantep, had played an important role in the development of the city. After a result of centuries long migration and settlements, Oghuz clans of Beydilli, Kızık, Çepni, Bayındır, Bayat, Yazır, Alayutlu etc. have set up villages that have carried their clan names; they have also moved to the villages that were abandoned by previous settlers of the region. Ottoman Empire has brought many Turkish clans from Anatolia and helped them settle in these regions to prevent Aneze Arabs' attacks after the battle of Mercidabık which had caused previous settlers to leave their home. However, majority of these clans do not know aba wrestling. For instance, Beğ-Deli clan which resides in the southern region of Gaziantep and Afrucanlı clan that resides in the Revanda district of Kilis do not know about aba wrestling (7).

When one examines the clans of these periods, it is seen that aba wrestling had been performed only in Damlıca, Karadinek, Karacaviran, Kızıkyalangoz, Üç Kilise (Yayıktaş) and Taşlıca villages which belonged to Kızık Clan (8).

In the beginning of 17th century Kızık Turks of Mihmatlı and Bozatlı nomadic tent societies from Gaziantep had moved to Altınözü region of Hatay where they have continued their aba wrestling tradition (9).

Kızık Turks were called as one of the "Haremeynuş şerefeyn" clans which Pehlivans, *wrestlers*, were leaders according to the records from 17th century. These nomadic Kızık Turks living with pehlivans have spread aba wrestling to everywhere they have traveled (8).

Sash

Our grandfathers and grandmothers used to wear sash around their belly in old times. People of those times have never known what slipped disc, lower back pain, kidney disease, ovarian discomforts were. They were all agile, healthy and fast. These sashes were pieces of art with their cloth,

color, fabric and designs. Antep was famous with its production of sashes. Antep sashes used to be searched in every part of Anatolia.



Sashes had names in accordance with their designs. Some of them are as follows; Damascus sample, Aleppo sample, Horasan, İsmailiye, Bademli, İstanbul, Hasanbeğli, Kashmir (4).

Music in Aşırtmalı Aba Wrestling

Music is a stimulating element for the spirit in Turkish wrestling. Wrestlers put their performance on the stage with great enthusiasm with accompaniment of drum and horn/shrill pipe. Before wrestling, deliverance of a prayer called "cazgrın duası" and stimulating verses of Pehlivan are effective factors for success (20).

Two drums and two shrill pipes are played in aşirtmalı aba wrestling. This number can increase or decrease in accordance with the characteristics of wrestling and festivals. Mallet keeps tempo in accordance with the motion of wrestler's feet. Drumstick is in a harmony with the rhythm of the wrestler's heart beats (16).

Holding Sash

Wrestler with red aba, who is performing the 'holding sash' technique, moves his right arm over the shoulder of his opponent to hold his sash.

Wrestling Area/Crater for Aşırtmalı Aba Wrestling

The area, which aba wrestling is performed, is called 'crater'. This area can be a village open space, place of harvest, grassland or a field with soft soil. The wrestling area is selected according to the importance of the wedding. If it is thought that there is going to be a crowd for watching the wrestling, then a wider area is chosen. If the wrestling area is muddy, straws are scattered, slipperiness is eliminated, stones and thorns are

collected and floor is softened. The area is surrounded by audience during wrestling where the area remains in the middle of audience. The size of the area changes in accordance with the population of audience.



Technique of holding sash

Aşırtmalı Aba Wrestling in the Villages of Gaziantep

It is obvious that 'village games' are one of the most important entertainment kinds that enrich the traditional village life.

Likewise aşirtmalı aba wrestling is one of the important traditions as much as history, culture and village games. This traditional wrestling has reached our time without degeneration for centuries. It is usually performed in Gaziantep in times of weddings and at the end of harvest.

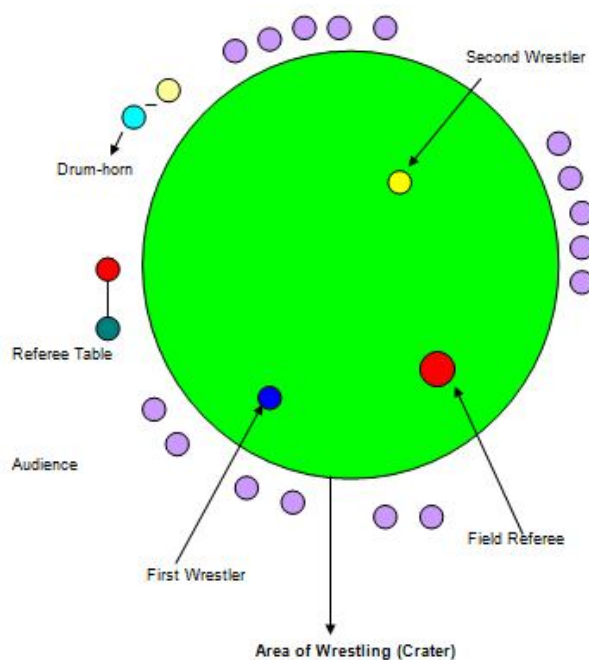
The owner of the wedding invites villagers and relatives to the feast after killing an animal as a sacrifice. After feast, he declares how many villages he will send invitation (it is an invitation sent to villages in the region for the wedding and wrestling). Usually wealthy families send invitations to surrounding villages. The owner of the wedding calculates the approximate number of guests and notifies his villagers and relatives. Then villagers and relatives decide on their own about how many people they can invite without consulting to owner (18).



Drum



Horn/Shrill pipe



Reader (male or female who delivers the invitation to villagers) travels around the villages in the list and deliver the message. Reader in these weddings can sometimes be a woman. This female reader visits all the guests with a bag on her shoulder. She delivers the greeting of the mother of either son or daughter to the lady of the household which she visits. In other words, she invites ladies of the households in places she visits. This reader sometimes gives a branch of flower or rue. In return, the reader is given money or şıra, *unfermented grape-juice*, or cereals (lentil, wheat etc.) for the good news (22). Reader gives information such as who makes the wedding, when the wedding is going to be, how many villages and people the invitation is going to be sent to. After the deliverance of all invitations, the approximate number of attendees becomes clear. The owner of the wedding begins the preparation in the village with this number on his mind. Villagers also make the preparations in their household for hosting the guests and begin to wait them. The guests start to come to the village, where the wedding ceremony is going to be held a week before. If the weather allows, guests are hosted in flat harvest fields of the villages. Cushions and mattresses are scattered in these areas. The people, who live in that region, almost compete with each other for the continuation of this tradition. Because any negative event, that can be lived there, is a shame and disgrace for the village people. The village notables spent great efforts for positive impression. Youngsters just like young girls serve the guests until the end of wedding.⁽¹⁶⁾

Usually nobody comes from villages where an invitation is not delivered. There can be reasons such as quarrel or resentment for not inviting to the wedding. These types of events lower the quality of wrestling. Because good wrestlers living in the uninvited villages do not participate in these wrestling. When the invitation is started to be delivered to other villages, drum-horn begins to be played. The guests, who receive the invitation, begin to travel to the village where the wedding is going to be held with their wrestlers. They stop 500-600 meters before the entrance to the village, they notify their comings by shooting on the air. The owners of the wedding and villagers, who hear the gun shots, start running to greet their guests. The guests are greeted and taken to the harvest field with accompaniment of drum and horns. The guests relax and rest on cushions and mattresses which were prepared for them. During resting period, guests are served cold water, ayran, *a drink made of yohurt, salt and water*, and bitter coffee. All the village residents line up in the harvest field for greeting the guests. After everybody from the youngest to the oldest greet the guests, conversations take place. Those, who have not seen each other for a long time, fulfill their longings. After they rest in the harvest place, they are taken by the villagers to the houses, where they are going to stay, for the feast. At this time, drum and horn play the 'cezayir', *a greeting tune*. After feast drum and horn players gather the guests and bring them to the area where the wedding is going to take place. Animals are killed as a sacrifice in the village during the wedding. The village Women exhibit Gaziantep cuisine substantially. This

serves as an honor and pride source for the wedding owner.

The preparations accelerate when the day of wedding approaches. Harvests are cleaned of stones and thorns. The floor, where the wrestling is going to take place, is softened and made available for wrestling. Wrestlers, who will participate, start their preparations. At the same time audience surround the area where the wrestling is going to be performed. After all preparations are done thoroughly, wrestling begins. Wrestling always takes place between 'brook' and 'Molasses maker' villages. Guests are gathered in the place where their wrestler performs. Wrestling usually can not be finalized within a day and it takes few days (16).

While some wrestlers arrive to village with accompaniment of drums and horns, others arrive late at night so nobody can know or hear they are coming. They spend the night in the house of someone they know. The purpose is to confuse his opponent by suddenly encountering him and take advantage from this situation. With the appearance of this wrestler when it was least expected, hum of voices rises in the field. This time the opposing party might think that they might lose the game. On the other hand, villagers of the wrestler, who has just entered the wrestling field, are quite happy about it. Nonpartisan audience is also happy to watch an entertaining wrestling. One can see the happiness in the eyes of the wedding owner as wrestling becomes more glittering. Other villagers, who anxiously feel that their wrestler will lose the game, send a horse rider to their village for the purpose of bringing a better wrestler. Because they have no intention to lose the award. Horse rider searches and finds the wrestler in their village. He explains the importance of the situation. He explains that this is a matter of honor and that he must wrestle no matter what happens. He convinces him. Wrestler, who says okay, travels to the village where the wedding is taking place with the horse rider. The greeting of the wrestler, who arrives later, is also different. It is warmer and more sincere. Audience runs towards to wrestler. He is now like a hero in the eyes of his villagers. They take him out of his horse and bring him to the wrestling area. If the wrestler is tired, they let him rest for a while. If not, he is brought to the wrestling area after taking off his cloths. At the same time women gather in their roofs to watch the wrestling. Since wrestling is done either with a short undergarment or without it, women are not permitted to watch the wrestling in a closed angle.

When wrestling starts, excitement is at its peak for the audience (6). At the end of competition winner gets the award. At the same time his victory exalts the prestige and pride of his villagers. Villagers of the winning wrestler are quite happy about the outcome. Losing party departs from the wrestling area with sadness. Such a wrestling performance is not erased from minds for long years. All villagers go back to their daily lives until a new invitation is delivered. Aşırtmalı aba wrestling in Gaziantep is such a high-tensioned event (18).

Conclusion: According to research made about Aşırtmalı aba wrestling performed in Gaziantep, findings are as follows;

Humanity institutionalizes phenomenons such as education, belief, scientific research, art, philosophy and war within its own culture. Sports have received its place within this institutionalizing (3).

Even though various prominent sports of different civilizations and cultures are related to geography which those cultures were shaped, cultures and sports, which are ways of living for people, are related to programs which they deliberately developed, skills which would lead them to success in areas where they want to dominate and their struggle with themselves and nature as well as their enemies. Belt wrestling in Sumerians and alike sports such as tatar, aba, sumo, sirim and sports like Judo should be related to living conditions and world perceptions of Ural-Altai language speaking societies (5).

Aşırtmalı aba wrestling, which is one of the traditional wrestling games of Turks, has reached our time and maintained itself as it was with its historical background, clothing, rules and techniques. Findings in the research suggest that aşırtmalı aba wrestling is one of the traditional wrestling games of us and it has specific rules, cultural characteristics and game forms unique to itself.

When findings about the subject of research are analyzed, it is seen that no previous research was undertaken towards determining the games/techniques of aşırtmalı aba wrestling and depicting visually in details. Therefore, this research fulfills the areas that were previously skipped. In addition, it will be a point of reference for future comparative studies.

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