Lost Tradition in Kirkpinar Oil Wrestling: Importance of Kispet and Ceremony of Kispet Wearing

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Lost Tradition in Kirkpinar Oil Wrestling: Importance of Kispet and Ceremony of Kispet Wearing

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ABSTRACT. The pressures of globalization have contributed to the disappearance of some traditional sports, as well as various other elements of national culture. The annual Kirkpinar oil-wrestling tournament, in Edirne in Turkish Thrace, has been held since 1362. In recent times it has lost many of its traditional rituals, despite its inclusion in 2010 in UNESCO’s “List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.” The ceremonies associated with wearing the kispet (the leather pants worn by the oil wrestler, also called kisbet) is one example of this loss of tradition. This ceremony contained both old Turkish beliefs and Islamic themes. The kispet is very important for the pehlivan (the name given to the oil wrestler, meaning hero). Today’s wrestlers do not practice or know these old traditions and rituals, even though the kispet is still worn when wrestling. This historical research is important for keeping oil wrestling and its traditions alive, as well as its role in Turkish national heritage.

It is the aim of this research to examine the disappearance of the ceremony associated with wearing the kispet, and its place as an indispensable element of Kirkpinar oil wrestling. Live interviews and literature-tracking methods were used in this research. The results are a description of the ceremonies that are a part of wearing the kispet, which is characterized as a ritual in traditional Kirkpinar oil wrestling, having deep sociocultural and spiritual meaning.

Keywords: ceremony, kispet, Kirkpinar, oil wrestling, ritual.

INTRODUCTION

Some of society’s greatest assets are its own history, customs, and culture. Cultural assets are kept alive through their transference from generation to generation (Özbil, 2009). Tradition has been a mainstay in Turkish sports activities. Wrestling is one of the most important activities, and represents the warrior spirit of the culture, and is particularly associated with religious purposes from earlier nomadic societies. These rituals are woven into the games held in worship and entertainment (Ongel, 2001).

In this context, the Ottoman raiders, when they were not fighting in times of war, would pass the time by wrestling. It is believed that Turkish wrestling traditions began during this time period. Kirkpinar oil wrestling is seen as a time-honored tradition and one of the world’s oldest sports competitions. Kirkpinar oil wrestling contains many elements from centuries ago. Elements such as er meydanı (wrestlers square off), Bas Pehlivan (the head wrestler), Kirkpinar agası (Kirkpinar leader or master), davul and zurna (music from drums and flutes played throughout the wrestling), cazgrı (announcer and commentator), yaglanma (lubrication ritual), kırmızı dipli mum (red-bottomed candle, a form of invitation), salap ur bezi (cloth rope), zembil (straw bags in which the kispet is stored) and kispet (leather knee-high pants worn by an oil wrestler) are some examples of the important rituals that carry on to today ( Firat, 2012).

These elements have come to have many meanings from past to present. In fact, performing these rituals is part of the mission. The traditional sport of oil wrestling has today grown to be an important element in Turkish culture, honor, and pride (Devellioglu, 2002). The kispet is a good example; in the past, these applications had a variety of meanings, and the wearing of the kispet was well known to be an honorable and ceremonial event with special meaning.
In this study, the past ceremonies of wearing the *kispet* and some rituals that are disappearing will be reviewed. Traditional Kirkpinar oil wrestling is one of the indispensable elements for all of wrestling and we aim to examine this from a historical perspective, particularly regarding the wearing of the *kispet* ceremonies that are being forgotten and close to disappearing altogether.

**Kispet**

The *kispet*, the Ottoman-style rugged leather pants worn by the oil wrestler, is an expression derived from Ottomans. The *kispet* covers the wrestler from the waist to just below the knees; they have no buttons, zippers, or pockets. The *pehlivan*’s *kispet* are leather pants decorated with embroidery (U. Kesen, personal interview, 4 March 2013). That the *kispet* is very important to the *pehlivan* is reflected in the comment, “The *Kispet* is half of the *Pehlivan.*” (Kahraman, 1989). To be successful in wrestling, the *pehlivan*’s body must be in harmony with the *kispet*. This is only possible through rigorous study of the *kispet* and the tailoring of these pants. Cutting the leather for the *kispet* is more important than the sewing (if the pants are not a good fit, this may cause the *pehlivan* to lose the match). During the wrestling match the *pehlivan* can use maneuvers such as pulling the *kispet*’s waist area to gain leverage. However, if the wrestler’s *kispet* comes off, comes down, or is removed in any way it will be deemed that the *pehlivan* is defeated and has lost the match (Kahraman, 1989). For this reason the *kispet* must be cut and tailor-made to fit the wrestler. The wrestler should only wear his own custom-fit pants, and it is not suggested they wear another wrestler’s *kispet* (U. Kesen, personal interview, 4 March 2013). A soft and comfortable *kispet* is very important for the *pehlivan* to be able to move freely. Therefore, the *kispet* should be made by an experienced *kispet* tailor (E. Kesen, personal interview, 2 March 2013).

The *kispet* is made from water buffalo or calf leather. In the past the *pehlivan* only wore a *kispet* made from water buffalo leather. Before being oiled the *kispet* can weigh from 13–17 kg, and the weight drastically increases after being oiled (Kahraman, 1989). In the 17th century in Edirne, when the *pehlivan* prepared for wrestling, it is said that the *kispet* made from water buffalo leather after being oiled weighed 50 *okka* (64 kg; Celebi, 1970).

Currently the *kispet* is made from calf leather instead of water buffalo leather. There are 40 parts specially cut, shaped, molded, and sewn together to create a pair of *kispet*. Also, approximately 60 meters of rope are used in the sewing of the *kispet*. Because leather *kispet* are hand sewn and the leather is thick and difficult to work with, holes are pre-punched before the sewing process with a tool called a *biz* (U. Kesen, personal interview, 4 March 2013). The different parts of the *kispet* are shown in Figure 1.

**Kasnak**

This part of the *kispet* is the waist area or waistband (a thick rope is used for a drawstring). It is also called the *paskavz*; this area of the pants is most used to grab onto in order to gain leverage over the other opponent (Bilgin, 1994). For this reason, the most embroidery work is done on this section of the *kispet*, making it harder to grab this section of the pants, compared to a pair of *kispet* that has no embroidery work. The *kasnak* (*kispet* waistline or drawstring) is the upper drawstring area in which a thick rope is used (*urgan*). A thick rope is passed through the *kasnak* waistband called the *sak*. This part of the *kasnak* is used as a belt and is tied off, providing a snug fit for the waistline (Güven, 1999).

**Hazne**

This part of the *kispet* is the groin area (A. Kesen, personal interview, 1 March 2013).

**Arka**

The rear (back) side of the *kispet* is made a little bit large; the purpose for this is to provide some comfort when the wrestler is in a sitting position. Some wrestlers customize the back section of the *kispet* with their name. Some wrestlers even put decorative reflective grommets on the back of the *kispet*. These wrestlers are sometimes called “mirrored wrestlers.” (Özbil, 2009).

**Oyluk**

This section of the *kispet* (waistline) is the hip area on the pants; it is made narrow for comfort in the waistline. This section is from the *kasnak* (waistline) to about 10 cm down,
and is the decorative embroidered area on the pants (M. Kesen, personal interview, 18 March 2013).

**Paca**

This area of the kispet (knee tie-offs), the leg area just under the knee, is called the paca (Dergin, 1950). A long strip of cloth was used in the past to wrap around the leg to tie off the pant leg and is called the pacabend. A long piece of ordinary rope is used now instead of a piece of cloth made from felt (H. Kesen, personal interview, 28 February 2013). Also on the kispet, the lower part of the pants (the cuff) is called the siraze. This portion is usually decorated fancy, with a variety of different shapes such as decorative triangles (Kahraman, 1989).

**Kispet-Wearing Ceremony**

In the past the pehlivan had to possess specific requirements in order to be bestowed the honor of wearing the kispet. The kispet was not awarded to every wrestler, and to wear the kispet the honor had to be earned. The kispet-wearing honor was awarded at the discretion of the master wrestler (an older and more experienced wrestler). Thus the kispet-wearing wrestlers had to be courageous, hardworking, and intelligent, and also had to be an ethical person. The pehlivan who possessed these qualities as a wrestler was dressed by the master wrestler at a ceremony he hosted (Kose, 1990).

In this ceremony the young wrestlers kissed the hand of a master and older wrestlers as a sign of respect, thus gaining their praise, support, and their prayers. The wrestler then takes to the field (the wrestling area) with his peers, trying to then gain the spectators’ praise and approval. This ceremony takes to the field (the wrestling area) with his peers, trying to then gain the spectators’ praise and approval. This ceremony was hosted by the wrestlers’ families. In the kispet-wearing ceremony rosewater was added into the oil (olive oil) boilers or pitchers (Kose, 1990).

The pehlivan made two rakat namaz (namaz, an Islamic application of prayer, and rakat, the specific movements used) prayers before getting dressed in the kispet. Then they kissed the kispet’s front waistline and placed their foreheads to the kispet. When getting dressed the wrestler always started with the right foot when putting on the kispet (Bilgin, 1994; Köse, 1990).

After putting on the kispet, first the pacabend (the pant leg is tied off with a cloth piece) ritual takes place. The pacabend (cloth piece) rope is wrapped around the leg 3 times. This refers to Islamic rules, sect and truth, and means one will be higher in Islamic rule: to be permanent in the sect, and to be aware of the truth. Then the kispet is pulled (the cuff is folded up) to top the pacabend (cloth piece), and the rope is now connected to the kispet. Next came the kasnak (waistband) ritual, starting with a prayer of basmala, bismillah (In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful), and then starts to tie the kispet drawstring (waistline). Three knots are made; each knot has a different meaning.

The first knot is for Allah (God), the second knot for the Prophet Mohammad, and the third knot is for Hazrat Ali (fourth Islam caliph). After this is finished, one end of the rope is extended toward the right side and is pointed to the Hazrat Hassan (grandson of the Prophet Mohammad) and the other end is extended to the left side pointed to the Hazrat Hussain (another grandson of the Prophet Mohammad; Ozbil, 2009).

After the wrestling matches are finished, the pehlivan then removes the kispet. The kispet is removed in the same manner as it was put on, starting with the right foot and the kissing of the kispet’s waistband drawstring. The kispet and the zembil (bags made of straw) are then re-lubricated (never letting them dry out or weather), and the kispet is carefully placed into the bag (Bilgin, 1994; Köse, 1990).

The honor of wearing the kispet was not bestowed to every pehlivan. If they do not have this honor, they may be allowed to carry the master pehlivan’s (elder wrestler) kispet. Also, this task was not bestowed (destiny) to every wrestler. In the past even the great master pehlivans were once young apprentices, and had to carry the kispet themselves. Also the young pehlivans who were honored to carry the master’s kispet had to catch the eye of the master (the young apprentice is under the watchful eye of the master), which means the master believes that the young wrestler will be a successful wrestler (E. Kesen, personal interview, 2 March 2013). If the master wrestler does not see enough potential, or enough effort from the young wrestler, he would not be awarded the honor of carrying his master wrestler’s zembil, the straw bag that is used to store the master’s kispet (Ayağ, 1983).

In the past the kispet was of great importance for the wrestlers. When the pehlivan was ready to leave wrestling and retire they would hang the kispet in a most important place on the walls of the guest rooms in their home (Kahraman, 1989). Some wrestlers would hang their kispet in Kaaba (the center of Islam and the most sacred mosque) or would send it with someone going to Kaaba. If this was not possible the wrestlers would adapt by hanging the kispet facing Kaaba. With this ritual (after retiring from wrestling) they gave thanks to God. For example, when Kurtdereli Mehmet Pehlivan (a great master pehlivan) retired from wrestling he was at war, stationed at the front lines. He sent his own kispet to Kaaba with a friend (Sevük, 1948). This is believed to be around the time of Sultan II Mahmoud. Shepherd Veli Pehlivan from Gocbey village of Bergama, Izmir, went to Kaaba to pay homage, and he also took Kurtdereli Mehmet’s kispet. He hung the kispet in a corner at Kaaba (Kahraman, 1989).

**DISCUSSION AND RESULTS**

The kispet has a special place in the hearts of this nation, and especially for the pehlivan. The kispet-wearing wrestler is accepted by society as an athlete that has earned respect
from the wrestling family. Therefore the *kispet*-wearing ceremonies are applied in oil-wrestling tradition as a ritual. The current wrestlers in the Kirkpinar wrestling organization do not practice these rituals, and some are not even aware of these rituals (R. Kara, personal interview, 23 March 2013). In recent years the effects of globalization has been seen in all areas of life, and these types of rituals belonging to the roots of civilization are declining in numbers, or even lost and forgotten altogether.

Technology has brought interactions between cultures that actually have no cultural exchange; the reality is that the rush towards what is new will lead to a destruction of the old customs and culture. In this context, some societies are unaware of their civilization and traditions. Such trends will cause culture and rituals to be lost or completely forgotten over time. Traditional wrestling fed from civilization can only survive with the customs and rituals. Such rituals are very important for the survival according to the essence of traditional wrestling (A. Güngör, personal interview, 9 March 2013).

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

Such ceremonies are the colors and motifs of traditional oil wrestling. It is thought that traditional ritual should be revitalized, kept alive, and transferred traditionally from old to young, generation to generation. All wrestlers start in the same place, at the bottom.

Kirkpinar oil wrestling should be kept alive, along with ceremonies and traditions, in order to preserve the honor, appreciation, and the spirit for oil wrestling. These types of traditions should be allowed to survive and to be remembered. In our rush to be successful in the international styles of wrestling, federations must study ways to preserve traditional forms. Integration of traditional styles at major international events can turn the event into a festival. More scientific research like this paper is desperately needed to preserve every aspect of this sport. We must use modern media and our international federation to preserve the interviews, video, pictures, books, and heroes of our traditional wrestling heritage.

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