Equestrian Games in Turkish History

The horse as one of the fundamental aspects of the daily life of Turks caused formation and accumulation of a significant social and cultural values and later the emerging of the sportive activities based on the horse as a natural result. The Turks of the Middle Asia developing such skills in the horse equestrianism and archery as horse breeder and hunter shepherd to survive, showed themselves off in the books of history and generated the first forms of the horse related sportive activities in early periods.

This study was carried out to put forth and analyze the equestrianism activities that have a noteworthy place in the history of the Turkish folklore as well as to state the reasons of creating such a culture, the application methods, its functions within the society and the changes in these functions through the history and to determine the contributions of the Turkish folklore to the current application methods of the horse related games.

Key Words: Horse games, equestrian games, Turkish folklore, Turkish culture.

Türk Tarihinde Atl Oyunları

Türk tarihinde, gündelik yaşamın en vazgeçilmez unsurlardan bir olan at, önemli bir sosyal ve kültürel birikim oluşmasına, bu birikimin doğuşunu olarak ise at kültüründe dayalı: spor ativitelerinin doğmasına zemin hazırlamıştır. At yetiştiricisi, avcı çoban olarak varlıklarının devamını için binicilikte ve okçu olarak özel beceriler gösteren Orta Asya Türkleri, sadece tarih olaylarıyla boy göstermekle kalmayan spor faaliyetlerinin ilk formlarını da oldukça erken dönemde geliştirmişlerdir.

Bu çalışmanın amacı, Türk folklor tarihinde oldukça önemli bir yer sahibi olan binicilik faaliyetleri, bunların ortaya çıkışı sebepleri, uygulama biçimleri, topluma yerine gelirdiği fonksiyonları ve tarihsel süreçte bu fonksiyonlardır meydana gelen değişimleri incelmek ve atlı oyunların bugün uygulanan şekillerinde, Türk folklorunun katkılı olarak ortaya koymaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Atlı oyunlar, atlı sporlar, Türk folkloru, Türk kültürü.

Introduction

The equestrianism training in the ancient Turkish life used to begin from the early ages of the childhood and as the time passed the children became almost a part of the horse with an intensive training on the back of the horse. Following the equestrianism training and exercises on sheep or goats plus acquiring bow stretching skill, the Hun children went out hunting to improve their skills of targeting with arrow (1). Even it has been noted that the Turks trained their children for the equestrianism beginning from the very early ages. They used to train the child at the cradle by putting a piece of wood between their legs, following the child’s crawling on all fours by letting him ride the animals such as sheep or dog or exercising on the horse model made of woods (2).

These trainings, started from the early ages, prove that the Turks performed equestrianism and archery in a planned way and by strictly following a program at the period of teenage and maturity (1). All these phases of preparation caused Turkish children to grow within an atmosphere of equestrianism culture and became master riders. These skills in equestrianism were transformed into the mastership by games and sportive competitions played with horse (3).

This study was carried out to put forth and analyze the equestrianism activities that have a noteworthy place in the Turkish folklore as well as to state the reasons of creating such a culture, the application methods, its functions within the society and the changes in these functions through the history and to determine the contributions of the Turkish culture to the current application methods of the horse related games.

When considered in a systematic way, it is possible to classify the equestrianism activities during the Turkish history under three categories. These categories are indicated below:

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1. Skill shows on horse: Standing on a galloping horse, sitting and then standing on a horse, slipping towards the abdomen of the horse, bending and taking anything on the ground while still riding the horse, rider’s taking off and dressing his clothes on horse, taking off and putting back the saddle on horse and shooting arrows to the targets on the front and back on a galloping horse.

2. Horse races: Generally long distance horse races.

3. Games played on horse: Çöven (polo), cirit (jeered), gökbörü, kzbörü, beyge (babiga), kolbörü and kizkovar-bike.

Although there are lots of games in the Turkish history and they all can be mentioned under these three categories, we will first of all and mainly discuss the games played with horse based on a sportive form and competition in this study. To this end, we will analyze the horse race, çöven, gökbörü and cirit games respectively, and then, we will make a general evaluation of the all the games related with horse.

**Horse races**

The first examples of the horse races were observed during the religious ceremonies. The meetings by the Hun Turks (Hsiung-nu) held at a place called tai-lin were the first meetings where the horse races were organised. Sacrifices were given to the Gods and a census for the people and animals were conducted during this meeting and other similar meetings. The most important part of the ceremony was circling around a forest for three times by the horse –in case there was no forest, around a model of forest made by willow branches on the ground. The Göktürks applied a similar ceremony at the funeral service. During these ceremonies, they were riding their horses for seven times around the tent where the corpse of the deceased was at rest. The purpose of the horse race was usually to express their gratitude to the God. The horse races held only at this mentioned religious ceremonies at the beginning, were performed later at the other celebrations and rites held owing to the various reasons by gaining a sportive meaning. The horse races were one of the most significant activities performed at these ceremonies besides the music and dance (4, 5).

It has been observed that there were two different ways of competition in the Turkish history. One of them was the competition with an aim of “winning”. Such kinds of competitions were the essential motives of the wedding ceremonies, and feasts. The second competition was the competition performed with the aim of “fighting”. When two armies came face to face to make a war, a bilateral agreement was approved. Mostly two wrestlers or warriors from both sides step forward and a representative “savaş güresi” (war wrestling) is arranged. The winning wrestler also won the battle for his army; the winning side also deserved the victory (6). The horse races that the participants were from various countries and which were held for different purposes were fairly important for the Turkish people. Because the horse winning a degree in a race meant the glory of the nation or a matter of honour of the clan, and therefore the award was of secondary importance. Usually big fights were experienced at the end of the horse races and even sometimes it was a reason to declare a war (7).

One of the most ancient sources defining the horse races in the terms of the sportive competition is Tonyukuk (725 AC) inscription of the ancient Turks. The expressions in these epitaphs such as “Let’s meet at the race plain…” or “A hundred thousand soldiers were met at the plain where the race will take place”) (8) give clues about the facts that the horse races were held at the early eighth century and the plains in question were named after these horse races.

The horse races kept their importance during the times of Seljuk and Ottoman Empire. The races were held especially on Fridays at the religious festivals as well as the wedding ceremonies, feasts and appropriate days of the spring and autumn and it was one of the most ancient traditions of the Turks. There was a racecourse in the surroundings of almost every Turkish city (9). Organizing a horse race at the wedding ceremonies and the feasts plus in the honour of the ambassadors became one of the established customs during the Ottoman times (10).

The first records ever found regarding the horse races during the Ottoman times goes back to the period of the Sultan (King) Orhan Bey (1324-1362 AC). The first work of Orhan Bey following his invasion of Bursa was to assign and make over a charitable foundation in the area located between the centres currently called Balıklı Village and Atıcılar Square, as racecourse. The people of Bursa used to celebrate their feasts here by organizing races and playing games with horses. This area is accepted as the first playing field (for sport events) built by the Ottomans. The Turks had also built racecourses in Edime, İstanbul, Kütahya, Manisa, Karaman and Amasya other than Bursa (2, 11).

Horse races, where a kind of strong steppe horse was used, were more like a field race performed in long distances from 10-14 km to 100 km (3). It has been noted that the horse races mentioned in the Epic of Manas was held for much longer distances and continued for approximately eight days. “...After the horses had gone, each division ate their meals coming back to their places and started wait the return of the racehorses. The horses would come after eight days later ...” (7). Later on, the races gained a form based on competition thus a rope was pulled at the finish line and the horse that passed the finish line firstly was deemed as the winner of the race.

In order to increase the number of the people participating in the race, announcements were made in a vast area. The cazgirs (person who announces the wrestlers and recites a prayer before a greased wrestling match) were hired to announce the characteristics of the horses and the players; and cavalrymen with bayonets
were ready to ensure the race be applied by the rules (7).

The horses to be used at the race went under the training in the fields assigned especially for this purpose. These horses were cross breeding of mating the wild stallion and domesticated mare. They were called arkun (12). It has been noted that the horses were the horse having maximum amount of first degree in the race.

Although the games were emerged as a religious activity, gaining a systematic order by the time, turning into a regular training process, gaining an award-based structure, assuring the security by the rules through judges with bayonets and marking the finish line by pulling a rope are the evidences proving that the horse races were transformed into sportive events based on the competition within the highest circumstances. However much the researchers set forth the idea that these sportive activities in the Turkish history were not organised to “improve the race” such as the events of the present time (13), we can say that breeding activities and studies on the improvement for the horse race had the purpose of “improvement of the race”. In addition to these, inviting every single person to the ceremonies including the horse without making any discrimination shows the importance attributed to the horse related sports by the authorities. This approach had helped to spread such sportive activities to each class composing the society from the lowest class to the highest. It is a well-known fact that the Turks are talented riders, the fundamental reason lies beneath such a fact is the support for the sportive activities by the whole society from the lowest class to the highest (14).

Çöven (Çögen, Çevgan, Çevgen or Polo)

Çöven is a ball game played on horse. It spread over different regions around the world from Asia and it was the game mostly seen in the history of the many Asian societies. There is no certain evidence proving which nation discovered the game first. According to Ülkütaşır (15), the exact time of the games leave the Middle Asia and spread over India goes back to the times of Babur-Shah. On the other hand, although it has been claimed that the Chinese was playing the game since the early times and that it passed to China from Iran, Eberhard (4) emphasizes the probability that the Chinese learnt çöven from the Middle Asian Turks. According to the author, çöven was seen as a game of ball. When taking into consideration of the dimensions of the role played by the Turkish culture in the formation of the Chinese Culture (16, 17), we can say that the opinion supporting çöven’s being taken to the Chinese by the Turks is getting stronger.

According to the argument accepted in the Turkish resources, it is a game formed by the hunting culture (18). Likewise the other games in the Turkish history such as gökbörü and cirit, it was a game with intent to prepare the drive hunt organised for the military purposes and the game was also played with an intention to avoid the performance loss and it became a body culture by the time (19, 20).

Although there is no note in the great work by Mahmud of Kashgar, regarding the format of the game played with horse, he mentioned a game called çevgan in the explanations of some words and noted that the game had a Turkish origin. However, frequent repeat of the word çevgan may not only prove the prevalence of the game in the Turkish world of the 11th century but also non-mentioning of the game format “played with horse” makes us to consider the possibility that this game was an another game played among the Turks without horse (21).

Çöven played by the Turks at earlier times, was later adopted by the Iranians who were settled on the road of the caravan and it was named çevkân; it was turned into much more professional form by the Iranians who had modern standards of the said era. The game did not remain just as a sportive activity in the new geographies it was adopted; it became a subject of the art and literature at the same time. Thus the game was an opportunity to create unique examples of miniatures and epic poems. Its’ way of playing and the required materials such as ball and stick became common themes addressed in the literature and philosophy (3).

It has been observed that two different forms of çöven were played in the Turkish history. These were tokmak polosu (polo of mallet) and kaşık polosu (polo of spoon). These names were derived from the shape of the sticks used in the game. Tokmak polosu was a tagging and ball handling game, the kaşık polosu was a skill and balance game. But there were two teams who competed with each other in both of the games (19).

The game was played by a ball covered with leather having a diameter of 10-15 cm made of maple or willow, and it was called göy. The ball was handled by a stick with a bent end called çevkên or çöven, the aim of the game was to pass the goal line of the opposing team or to hit a definite target by the ball. The game depended on the principle to take the maximum scores. Hence çöven required a quite well skills and excellent equestrian training and it was played by two groups of four and six persons in a vast square (15). However, sometimes the number of the riders was changeable between 4 and 20, and there were also times the number of the players was not limited. At the latter, the essential thing was the equality in the number of the players. The game was played in two sets of approximately half an hour (twenty four minutes per each) per each, sometimes it took almost two hours. And it was generally played during the late hours of the day close to the sunset. There were goal posts on the both sides of the playing field made of stones or javelins stuck into the ground. When the ball passed the goal post and the player hitting the ball dismounted from his horse and held the ball up, the goal was achieved. All kinds of hits to the ball were free. However, these hits should be made on the course of the ride and before the ball touched the ground. If the ball over passed the goal line, it was not a record for the
score. The game was started by one of the players’ throwing the ball upward and his hitting the ball before it fell on the ground in the midfield. The women might sometimes participate in the games. Colliding into the horse of the opposing team member, blocking the way of the rival and hitting the rival or his horse with the stick were among the prohibited actions during the game (22).

The horses to be used in çöven should be trained specially. The horses were given a special training regarding the movements and acts such as capability to make short turns, making a sudden halt, having the skill to get free of the rivals with swift movements, abrupt accelerating, not getting shy against the noise and sudden movements (23).

A smooth field was enough to play the game. On the other hand, well-kept and orderly çöven fields were constructed by the time; in these fields there were separate places for the kings and the princes. It was important to clean the stones and the foreign grasses in the field. A coating preserved the playing field during rainy weathers. There were games quite simple and there were games where the kings were participated. These games were played in the fields with colourful decorations and accompanying music as a feast. Although it was played generally toward the evening hours, after the game became rather widespread, there were night matches that were played in illuminated fields (19). It became a fairly popular game between the elite society and highest level of administrators in both Turkish and Iranian people. Accordingly, the kings, princes, administrators and ambassadors had to be skilful çöven players. As a natural result of this, there were also games organised specially for the training of princes. Due to all these reasons, the çöven was called the ‘play of the kings’ (14).

So, the games institutionalization by the state support where all people used to participate from all ages in the early years (24), taking the pulse of all classes and great deal of interests, seems quite natural. Moreover, çöven having a purpose to avoid the performance loss in the first place gained the purposes to give physical training for war and to display the skills regarding the horse–human relation with time. And all these things assured the game to institutionalize thus it became a cultural and ethnological product.

Gökbörü

Gökbörü was one of the ancient and national games of the Turks. It was related with the Bozkurt (gray wolf) respected as totem. While it was a religious ceremony or a rite in the times of the totemic belief, then it became a horse related sport following the foundation of the large empires. Currently the game is still played in Tajikistan, where it is called buzKashi, Uzbekistan (ulak or kupkari), Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, some areas of Kazakhstan (kopkar tartu), Kirgizia, and in some parts of Afghanistan where Uzbeks live (14, 15).

The game was played by almost every Turkish clans and called with different words such as gökbörü, kök-
goat or the animal used for the game even though it was roughed up fairly would be the lavish meal of a main feast at the end of the game (27).

Gökbörü, even though derived from a religious origin, subsequently gained a military characteristics and/or it was applied for avoiding the performance loss and training the body physically. Taking into consideration the form based on the rules as a result of the evolution throughout its history to date and looking back from this standing point, we can say that gökbörü may be accepted as a sporting activity within the present terms.

Cirit\(^{(1)}\) (Jeered)

Cirit is one of the most popular and preserved horse related sports, which is still being played today, in the Turkish history. It has been considered that cirit had a religious origin as the other horse related games and varied and developed by the hunting and fighting culture. It has been noted that the Middle Asia Turks (28). Within a general term, cirit was adopted and reflected to the other geographies mostly during the times of Anatolian Seljuks. At this time, special fields were assigned for the game. Cirit was not a game just played among the people; the Sultans and other state authorities also played it and it became a sporting activity where the Sultans and state authorities took place. Hence it has been noted that Anatolian Seljuk Sultan Alaeddin Keykubad I (1220-1237 AC) liked playing the cirit game in person (10).

Cirit has been a game mostly accepted especially in the Ottoman times. Playing cirit on every Friday in the public squares and in places where the armies spending their nights became a tradition (10). Since the times of the Sultan Orhan Bey (1324-1362 AC), cirit has been the most supported activity by the Ottoman Dynasty. Ottoman sultans, viziers and state authorities encouraged the people to play cirit in every opportunity and they participated in the games in person (29). For it was played frequently at the Ottoman period, cirit was called harhari. The games in the palace mostly had a military purpose and played by the riders called cundi (10).

Cirit was produced to develop the skills of using javelin as a fighting instrument; but as the time passed it became a traditional sport (29). This game has purposes to boost the morale, to improve the equestrianism skills, to take courage, to improve the fighting and sporting qualifications and to give well trained and sharp skills (14).

The game depends on the essential of the throwing the javelin to and hitting the moving target (rival) or escaping from the javelin thrown by the opposing party. The game has been played between the two different groups having equal number of players since its early applications. It was generally played by two teams composing four or twelve persons. The team including 4 or 5 persons was called bölük (company) and the team including 6 or 8 persons was called alay (regiment). As the names, which were used to define the teams were derived from military terms, it is plausible to suggest that the game was played from the very first time as a preparation of war. Today cirit is played with teams composing seven persons each according to the standardized rules within the frame of the Directive for Competition of Equestrian Jeered issued by the Turkish Traditional Sports Federation (30).

The Ottoman Sultans gave the order to construct a field in order to play cirit inside or within the periphery of the palace. Because the cirit fields in the palace and castles used to change according to the geographical structure or the place of the fields to be used within the palace or castles, no standardization was brought for the sizes of the fields (10). Today the cirit playing fields consist of rectangular fields with the width of 30-40 meter and the length of 90-140 meter. The game composes two different midfields restricted by the drawings as in a football field; the midfield is also divided within itself according to the rules of the game (30).

There are positions causing the gain and loss of score. Positions resulting in the score gains: A successful hit of the player from the opposing team, catching the javelin thrown by the opposing team member in the air, catching and forgiving the opposing team member, renouncing the score in the positions that can be very dangerous. The positions resulted in the score loss: Catching but not forgiving the opposing team member, colliding his horse to the horse of the opposing team member, demounting the horse, entering into the borders of the opposing regiment, passing the side line. The regiment taking the maximum score is considered as the winner of the game (14, 29, 30).

Cirit having an important place in the Turkish history as an application performed during the religious ceremonies, a training of war, a training of encouragement and a sporting activity has come to the scene as a social necessity taking into consideration its functions in the society. Awarding the attempts in compliance with the fair play together with additional points, punishing the behaviours against the fair play with negative points, encouraging and/or awarding the merits such as honesty, bravery, courage and forgiving capacity, are all significant to show the social responsibility attributed to this game. Within this frame, we can claim that cirit and all horse related sports mentioned here and observed in the Turkish societies through the history first of all have gained a qualification of a training institution that contribute to the establishment of the morale values.

Conclusion

The horse as one of the most important part of the economic, political and military history of the Turks was a dominant element in the Turkish culture. Equestrianism was the centre of this culture based on horse (31). We

\(^{(1)}\)Cirit (javelin) is a wooden made stick at the length of 100 cm, the head part has 2.5 cm diameter, oval, decreasing 1.5 cm diameter moving backwards.
can say that equestrianism activities having a central status in the society resulted in rooted social and cultural structure, as in the beginning of the sportive activities based on horse culture and forming historical varieties.

The Turks who were quite well riders and who produced and awarded to the world culture the harness parts such as stirrup, bit (of a bridle) and saddle proved their capabilities and successes in the games played with horse and turned these games into sportive activities. Thus the acceptance of the horse related sports such as çöven, çirıt and gökbörü in various places of the world for hundreds of years may be the evidence proving that these sportive events had become distinguished sports under the influences of the Turkish culture and an example for the common culture of the world.

In conclusion, it is possible to say that Turkish history is full of the first examples in the matters of the arising, developing and varying of the horse related sports that are still alive in the entire world or certain regions of the world.

References


