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## WRESTLING WITH MANHOOD: EXPRESSIONS OF MASCULINITY IN BALKAN OILED WRESTLING\*

*Abstract:* Wrestling in many cultures is considered an essential expression of manhood and masculinity. However, recent research in gender studies has problematized the notion of *masculinity*, suggesting that it has several different faces. Through examining the philosophies, representations and practices surrounding male wrestling in general and the sport of oiled *Pelivan* wrestling in Macedonia, this paper seeks to not only illustrate differing notions of masculinity but to show how they are expressed and played out in the context of this traditional form of wrestling.

*Key words:* sport, gender, masculinity, wrestling, Balkan, Muslim

(This article is dedicated to the memory of Mr Mentaz Allejbegu, wrestling coach of Skopje, who gave much assistance and hospitality during my fieldwork)

### “A Training Ground for Macho Men!”

The drum beats militaristically, accompanied by the crazed, biting wail of the *zur-la*. The young boy, clad in leather trousers and oiled from head to foot, begins to dance the wrestler’s dance of dedication. Advancing towards the musicians, his face sets into a hard, stern expression. Each spring-heeled step is a leap, higher, into the air as his hands slap down upon his thighs. The poise is that of a defiant, militant warrior. Nearby, another young wrestler ruthlessly overcomes his opponent, watched by around five hundred men. The only adult female present, a British civilian spokeswoman for UN, turns to me and

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exclaims, “*This is amazing! It’s a training ground in how to be a macho man!*”

The situation was the boys *hand* (category) of an outdoor wrestling tournament in a public park near Skopje; part of an Albanian wedding celebration in the Republic of Macedonia. Pairs of wrestlers, clad in leather trousers (*kyspet*) and coated in oil, wrestled for several hours under the hot sun, winning prizes of cash and livestock.

Pelivan wrestling is a traditional style of oil wrestling practiced predominantly amongst the ethnic (Muslim) Turks and Albanians of the Republic of Macedonia (and elsewhere in the Balkans). It is very close in style and practice to the Yagli Guresh wrestling of Turkey. It is similar to Olympic Freestyle wrestling in that it uses both standing holds and take-down techniques and ground based techniques (Fig 1 & 2). A Pelivan wins when he puts his opponent on his back. A technique unique to this style of wrestling is that wrestlers can put their hands and arms inside an opponent’s leather trousers to gain leverage for a technique. Wrestlers are exclusively male and often learn through a traditional form of transmission, from senior to apprentice (although many also train in “Olympic” style clubs). The exclusivity of the male domain makes it an interesting area within which to examine different forms and subtleties of masculinity. However, if we are to examine this “training ground for macho men” a little more thoroughly, it is necessary to consider a variety of notions concerning masculinity and “male-ness” in an attempt to identify the expressions and machinations of “masculinity” found with the practice of Pelivan wrestling. Before we do so, however, it is important to examine the image and figure of the wrestler in literature, history and society.

## The Wrestler

Much of the literature on wrestling tends to stress three points: two through repetition and one through near exclusion. The first two are the antiquity and the near global existence of the sport in one form or another. The third aspect is the lack of female involvement in the sport at many levels. Sisjord and Kristiansen point out that while there is archaeological evidence of female wrestling it is largely unrecorded and considered “unrespectable” in some societies (Sisjord and Kristiansen 2008: 351-2). While the Olympic forms of wrestling (Freestyle, Judo and Greco-Roman) have female representation (Judo being the first female wrestling form to appear in the Olympics, in 1992) within traditional forms such as Sumo there is some resistance to the growth of female participation (Women are only allowed to compete at non-professional level in Japan). Some other traditional styles, such as Icelandic Glima and Scottish Backhold wrestling not only allow female competition but also mixed matches.

Pelivan wrestling, not only does not allow female participation, it is not always appropriate for females to view large, semi-naked men in oily leather. One story I was told was of a woman who disguised herself and beat all the men. Upon revealing her identity, she was then socially disgraced for having taken part with the men (I have heard a similar story from Mongolia as a reason why Mongolian wrestlers wear open breasted jackets). As such, while acknowledging female participation in the wider sport of wrestling, I shall hereby largely focus on it from a male perspective.

A recurring theme through writings on wrestling is the *manliness* of it. In societies as diverse as the Mongolian Plainspeople, Ottoman Turks and Medieval Britons, wres-

fling was (and, in some cases, still is) considered an essential skill for manhood. According to the Turkish entry in the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemorative book of FILA (the International Amateur Wrestling Federation),

*In ancient times it was customary among Turks not to marry their daughters to any young man who could not wrestle or ride on horseback* (FILA/IAWF 1962: 216).

The entry goes on to say,

*Wrestling is a noble competition among men. In wrestling we find complete dependence on, and display of, intelligence, endurance and holds without help of any instrument* (ibid).

Two notable points here are that wrestling represents a test of *noble manhood* and it requires qualities beyond physical strength. This is perhaps a widespread idea in Turkish and Balkan ideology, being echoed by no less a person than Kemal Atatürk,

*Wrestling is a game of strength and intelligence. The moment these two superior qualities are combined in a person, they can do great things* (quoted in Stokes 1996: 22).

Skill and its utilization, the prediction and anticipation of an opponent's strategy (whilst withholding or disguising one's own) is something which leads many combat-sport competitors to compare their discipline to a chess game (see: Wacquant 1995). Knowing *when* to apply one's strength is of great importance.

The idea of the *noble wrestler* is reinforced by the sport being favored by kings and Turkish Sultans. Elsewhere in Islamic society the Prophet Muhammed and his son-in-law Imam Ali are reputed to have been powerful wrestlers (Chehabi 1995: 49 and Stokes 1996: 23). However, as Chehabi notes with regards to the notion of *pahlavan* (a champion and moral exemplar, see below), the nobility of the wrestler is often seen as a moral attribute, not necessarily a matter of social position.

Chehabi cites as an example the legendary 14<sup>th</sup> Century Iranian figure of Puriya-ye vali, who reputedly once let himself to be beaten in order to allow the poor family of his opponent to win the much needed prize money (ibid). Supposedly, through allowing this defeat he gained sanctity and became a Sufi mystic and poet. He is, Chehabi says, considered as almost a patron saint amongst wrestlers. The notion of a higher spirituality is often connected with wrestling and its great exponents are sometimes attributed with great spiritual status (see also Hill 1999 and Kowlaski 1940). I suggest the graduation from champion wrestler to spiritual figure is comparable to the elevation of the male through a variety of masculinities, attaining new powers and responsibilities as one progresses through the hierarchy.

The moral purity of the *idealized* wrestler is also seen through the avoidance of women. Chehabi notes that it is often found that sportsmen avoid physical contact with women as it is believed to drain their strength (perhaps their concentration, too!). Citing Alter's work on North Indian wrestlers, he says,

*Wrestlers, on the whole, avoid the company of women assiduously. Women, when encountered, are to be treated as mothers or sisters* (J. S. Alter, quoted in Chehabi 1995: 59).

One man in Macedonia told me of a Pelivan he knew during his childhood. He asked the Pelivan how he managed to resist sexual relations with his wife. The wrestler replied that every morning he would go out to the well and tip a huge bucket of ice-cold water over his genitals (personal communication).

This attitude to sex and women may be a clue to their absence in the predominantly male environment.

Chehabi also stresses the importance of chivalry and morality within the notion of *pahlavan*. This was traditionally stressed within the *zurkhaneh* wrestling gyms of Iran (Chehabi 1995: 50). Here, moral prowess and purity was stressed alongside physical prowess. These establishments also organized aid for the poor and deprived members of the community. The image of the wrestler as protector and provider of the community is familiar (the tradition is strong in Mexico amongst masked *luchadores*) and particularly relevant to the discussion of dualities and dichotomies within wrestling and masculinity. In Macedonia, villages often maintain a champion Pelivan who represents the village, sometimes wrestling another village's champion to settle local disputes (such as access to local water supplies etc).

The idealized wrestler may be seen as paragon of positive virtues. He is kind to those around him, a fearless, yet humble, protector and provider. He is respectful to women and may even keep his distance from them. However, there are conflicting notions of wrestlers in their relevant societies which echo our earlier examination of conflicting masculinities.

The *morality* of the wrestler is, in some ways, paradoxical. This in itself may reflect the paradoxes within wrestling itself. As Stokes points out, the technique of successful wrestling often contains elements of deceit;

*... wrestling can be seen as a repository of subversive knowledge, as a recognition that all is not what it seems, that strength is not moral purity, that deceit and guile are necessary parts of social life, that one frequently has to cope with losing face, that compromise is sometimes better than conflict* (Stokes 1996: 22).

After all, was not Puriya-ye Vali's sanctity not gained through deceit?

Whereas a wrestler may be seen as a symbol of morality and humility, there are certain aspects of the lifestyle which seem contradictory. While Chehabi notes the emphasis on humility and kindness which the *zurkhanehs* allegedly promoted, there is still the point that in competition a wrestler (ideally) competed to win, sometimes at great expense of the opponent (physically and emotionally, one assumes). Although contrary to the ethos of *pahlavan*, characters such as the 19<sup>th</sup> Century champion Akbar Khorasani often used extremely violent tactics, often injuring or killing opponents and sometimes had potential opponents poisoned (Chehabi 1995: 50-1). One Macedonian wrestler told me of how he defeated a local champion who had to take time off training to tend to his sick child (the masculine provider). On learning this, a challenge was issued which the champion had to accept, despite being tired and out of condition, a which he lost. Upon learning that somebody from his village had informed the challenger of his situation, he announced his retirement as the villagers he represented *no longer loved him*. However questionable the challenger's actions, it gained him victory.

Stokes points out that in Turkish society,

... a result is everything, and this result requires nothing less than the destruction, shaming and humiliation of one's adversary, performed in front of, and acknowledged by, 'the community' (Stokes 1996: 24).

The figure of the wrestler is, then, by no means always seen in the idealized light we have examined above. Chaucer's drunken, bawdy Miller is also a wrestling champion, being also a bullying braggart and rural simpleton who cares little for feminine sensibilities. While this is an example from Western literature, similar caricatures appear in societies in which we have previously noted a high regard for the *idealized* wrestler, suggesting that there may be more than one type of *idealized wrestler*, as there is more than one type of *idealized man*.

Chehabi notes that the fading of the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the decline of the status of the traditional zurkhaneh and the rise of *undesirable elements* (such as protection racketeers and thugs) began to degrade the more noble notions of wrestlers (A similar process can be seen in the Jujitsu dojos of Japan, prior to Kano developing Judo). These elements were known as the *lutis*, a term referring to socially marginalized, urban, male groups.

*To be a luti can have both a positive and a negative connotation in Persian, as it can refer to one who is fair, kind to the weak but fearless vis-à-vis the strong, and loyal to his friends. This means there are good and bad lutis (Chehabi 1995: 50).*

In some (fairly recent) Turkish political satirical cartoons, wrestling has been associated with negative portrayals of certain elements of Turkish society. Whereas, the modernizer of Turkey, Atatürk once praised wrestling, it is now considered by some, as characterizing an old-world, rural society (Stokes 1996: 27-8). It has been particularly associated with a group of Turkish males known as *kabadayi*, or *maganda*. Comparable to the Iranian *lutis* and Greek *mangas*, they exemplarise a certain aspect of the male society, originally being protectors but now considered old-fashioned, chauvinistic embodiments of inflexible, old traditions and beliefs. They are portrayed as upholders of the *macho* stereotype of open-shirted hairy chests and medallions. One of Stokes's informants referred to wrestlers as *a bunch of rascals* (Stokes 1996: 27) rather than noble characters. In Macedonia, some members of the wrestling fraternity were referred to by other wrestlers as *vagabonds* who perfected their craft for, and through, the practice of street brawling.

The cartoon to which Stokes refers has the intellectual hero of the strip finding himself in a café of *mangadas* where the customers are either wrestling with or sodomizing each other. This suggests a further notion of wrestlers counter to that of the moral exemplar. Rather than being the epitome of the virile male *begetter*, we have the *morally corrupt* homosexual (therefore a *non-begetter*) who molests weaker males (as Chehabi notes with the zurkhaneh, see above citation). The combination of male exclusivity and close contact makes wrestling an easy target in a world more aware of homosexuality. When asking friends and colleagues about Pelivan wrestling in Macedonia, I was occasionally asked (both tongue-in-cheek but also in genuine bewilderment) exactly *why* I was so interested in *big, fat oily men with big moustaches and leather pants* (Curiously, very few Pelivans I saw were fat and not that many had moustaches). Similarly, British colleagues often admitted feeling uncomfortable at seeing my fieldwork photographs of the wrestlers, particularly of boys in the gym. It is significant that most of those who didn't were either wrestlers themselves or players of other close-contact sports.

We can see the dichotomy of the wrestler's identity (ies). The moral champion who protects and provides, who epitomizes the cream of society, as opposed to the anti-social, individualistic, corrupt, outdated bully. Yet another conflict is that of the progressive versus the old-fashioned and unsophisticated; the urban versus the rural (although there is a long history of urban wrestling gyms, such as the old *tekkes* of Turkey). As such wrestling is often at odds to the more "sophisticated" tastes of the cosmopolitan urbanite. Two muscled opponents rolling around in a field suggests something provincial and primitive when compared to a modern, floodlit stadium for football or other team sports. Just as Stokes highlights the preference of an hotelier for soccer, I found many young Macedonians preferred basketball whilst displaying almost total ignorance of traditional wrestling.

These different tastes for sports amongst young, and not-so-young males, may raise a question about how masculinity may be viewed. If, as has been suggested above, wrestling is the epitome of masculinity, how are we to gauge masculinity? What might be the *macho* culture that my female friend commented on at the wrestling tournament? Is it perhaps a little more multi-layered than it might appear? I shall now examine different aspects of masculinity and its fluctuations with particular reference to the Balkan and Mediterranean cultures which many of the wrestlers come from.

## What is "Masculinity"?

A significant section of the literature on gender, particularly in relation to the "male gender", has focused on what actually constitutes "masculinity" (by no means having a clear definition). A number of writers highlight the apparent paradoxes of what Cornwall and Lindisfarne refer to as *taken for granted social categories* (1994: 11). In many cases the notions of what supposedly constitutes appropriate male behavior seem to contradict each other. So, what are these notions and how are we to approach the subject of masculinity?

A starting point suggested by Cornwall and Lindisfarne is linguistic definitions and the notions contained within them. These authors cite the definition of "masculine" contained in the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*: "*Having the appropriate excellence of the male sex; virile, vigorous and powerful*" (1994: 11). The definition of "male", they point out, refers to the sex responsible for *begetting offspring*.

If we accept (for the moment) these definitions as being the basis of the *taken for granted category* of a "masculine male", then it is apparent that the excellent male is one whose status is linked to power, strength and virility. This, presumably, was the notion my friend was making when she made her comment about the young Pelivans. Indeed, the Persian word *pahlavan*, from which the term *pelivan* is derived (written and pronounced using Macedonian Cyrillic) refers to a hero; strong man or performer of deeds of great physical prowess, not just wrestling. However, as I shall demonstrate, there are aspects of male gendering which go beyond simply physical strength and power. Many of these demonstrate the temporal and contextual stages which may dictate expressions of masculinity. Such duality is, I suggest, apparent in the boundaries of the Pelivan tournament and, as such suggests the acceptability of a variety of masculinities within differing contexts. With regards to Turkish wrestling, Stokes comments,



*Wrestling might... and undoubtedly is, seen in Turkey as a cultural exploration of male relationships and the deceptions and inconsistencies of a pervasive masculine ideology.* (Stokes 1996: 22)

In examining these apparent ambiguities of masculinity we may problematise the notion of “macho man, it having different connotations in different cultures. Within the Argentinian context the duality is obvious.

*It includes images of virility and force, but a **macho** can also be generous, be controlled and use seduction, rather than violence, as a tool for domination.* (Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994: 16).

When we consider the young Pelivans, this definition is comparable with that of *pahlavan*, which Chehabi notes as,

*A pahlavan is not a mere champion... but also a moral exemplar who is just, fair, self-abnegating and kind to the weak* (Chehabi 1995: 48)

The notion of utilising *seduction, rather than violence* is arguably something which is more commonly considered a “feminine” technique, which further questions the notion of a polarized masculinity<sup>2</sup>. However, notions of exemplary masculinity need not be seen as single-sided. In addition to the obvious physical attributes of the male, we may also consider forms of different types of disciplined strength. What type of machos are our young Pelivans training to be?

Cornwall and Lindisfarne point out that the “arena” of masculinity contains a variety of different characters who may be seen as being in competition and proving their superior status at the expense of others through a process of subjection or *feminization* (Cornwall, Lindisfarne 1994: 11-47). This can range from the deflowering of virgins (Cornwall, Lindisfarne 1994: 82-96) to prove some sort of sexual supremacy and status, to the demanding behavior of the little Turkish boy who plays “the man of the house” when his father is absent (ibid, Kanidyotti 1994: 206). However, as they point out, the contextual circumstances surrounding the masculine behavior influences how it is interpreted by others and the success (or failure) of affirming ones masculinity.

While physical strength is the prime instrument of this contest, certain forms of “macho” behavior may not only be seen as improper but also self-defeating. A man who throws a punch in a confrontation may be asserting his masculinity but may also be seen as losing his control (like a “hysterical female”) and be considered “less of a man” than the cool customer who refuses to engage. Cowan (1990: 112) notes how the aggressive behavior of youths at dances in Greek Macedonia is often defused and quietened by the calm authority of older men. In such cases masculine “strength” is not simply one of physical power. How does the *macho-man* himself become dominated?

Kandiyotti citing Bob Connell, writes of a gendering process (particularly within Muslim societies) that aids the construction and development of a number of different masculinities (Kandiyotti 1994: 198). Just as social notions of gender dictate relationships between males and females, they also dictate relationships between males. At

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<sup>2</sup> Whilst training in martial arts, I often heard the opinion that as females, often being smaller and less physically strong than male counterparts, may rely more on technique and “sneaky” moves than strength and power when confronting a larger male opponent. Obviously, a smaller male would have to use the same techniques!

each stage of the process, a certain type of masculine behavior is considered appropriate but may often be subservient to another (as we may see from Cowan's dancers, the older men become *peacemakers* to the younger *warriors*) and contesting masculinities may become apparent.

Kandiyotti examines the experiences of Muslim boys, who are originally aligned with the women in society but gradually become aware of their own male aspects. She demonstrates how one's own masculinity is capable not only of dominance in certain situations, such as the little boy who plays "the man" when only his mother and sisters are around yet reverts to the subservient son when his male elders are around (Kanidyotti 1994: 206). Contrasting with hierarchical relationships in single sex arenas such as the army, she demonstrates how in the absence or "real" females, the structure of dominance *feminizes* those males lower down the status scale (Kanidyotti 1994: 207). This is also suggested by Dundes et al in their work on verbal dueling amongst Turkish boys (Dundes et al 1972).

Such feminization and hierarchical structuring is also apparent within the masculine world of wrestling. Chehabi refers to practice in some Iranian wrestling gyms of older wrestlers sexually abusing younger ones (Chehabi 1995: 56). Within the single-sex arenas of certain wrestling tournaments, it is possible to observe hierarchical structures which may be assumed to reflect "everyday life". Older men take the roles of judges and organizers over the younger competitors. Young boys may be allowed to compete like male wrestlers but are still subject to physical rebuke if they misbehave or appear disrespectful.

Wrestling is, of course, not the only activity which can be considered as a display of masculinities. Particularly in Mediterranean and Balkan societies. Dance is also a powerful expressive tool, one which is often an expression of martial power and is often a significant part of rituals connected with certain martial sports<sup>3</sup>. Further illustration can be found in Cowan's account of Greek dancing. Cowan relates how Sohoian youths often attempt to perform a solo dance of the *zeibekiko*. This style of dancing is synonymous with a particular form of Greek masculinity, that of the *mangas* or *rebetis*, traditionally seen in the light of a social outlaw and the epitome of defiant, anti-social aggressive and individualistic masculinity. Dancing the *zeibekika* can be seen as an individual's expression of their own masculinity and defiance, as such it is often considered socially unacceptable to dance at social gatherings such as a wedding. Youths tend to be discouraged from performing it until the more "respectable" elements (usually middle-aged couples) have left.

Cowan points out that the dance can be interpreted as a challenge to the dominant, patriarchal masculinity of the middle-aged, social male, that is the married provider. If danced by an older man it would appear to be tongue-in-cheek, a member of the establishment parodying the role of the youth. Such parody makes it more socially acceptable than an older man performing it seriously (Cowan 1990: 178, 180). Cowan contrasts the social roles of the younger, hormonally (and ouzo) driven youth with the older provider and protector of the social order. Whilst behavior such as the *zeibekika* might be acceptable (if not wholly desirable) of younger males, it is not appropriate to the image of the

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<sup>3</sup> Music is an integral part of Pelivan wrestling (zurna and drum) and accompanies the wrestlers' dance prior to wrestling. Likewise, Muay Thai boxing of Thailand has boxers performing intricate dances before a bout.



older, married man. When danced by youth, it is an act of isolation: danced by the older male, it becomes (in this case) an act of inclusion.

Cowan's observations may illustrate how the progression through various stages of masculinity allow the individual male to exercise his more dangerous and individualistic masculinity under the control of the older group members (as seen in the way the older men defuse potential violence) until they themselves are in a position to join the more "social" ranks through other forms of masculinity, such as marriage and fatherhood. Older males, particularly those who have "proved themselves" in their youth, are able to carry their past glories with them into their new position in society and still exercise power over (and gain respect from) younger males.

From a wrestler's perspective, the Scottish wrestler and coach, William Baxter tells of an event he witnessed sitting with some young Turkish wrestlers in Istanbul in the 1950's.

*Adnan Yurdaer [the wrestlers' coach] went up to an older man at the end of the café... Asthis man came down towards us all the wrestlers suddenly stood up in a row with their heads down. Baba Adnan introduced all of the wrestlers. He'd point out those who were exceptionally talented and they would bow, kiss their right hand and touch their heart and forehead. When this man spoke to one of them their chest got bigger with pride... He was heavyweight Olympic Champion from the 1936 Olympics (Hill 2002).*

Here we can see a different aspect of masculinity, that of the provider and protector of the group (even if it is providing national sporting glory). The male, as we have seen, is often considered the *begetter* (in pre-testtube society!). Masculinity is often associated with propagation and reproduction, material and cultural as well as biological. It may therefore be seen as a force for recreating and expanding the group, as well as protecting and providing for it. It is therefore significant that the wrestler, as a symbol of masculinity, is present at such events as weddings and religious festivals where reproduction and group solidarity are reinforced.

Cowan also highlights an important aspect of "social" masculinity which has a bearing on other aspects of identity beyond that of gender; that of *display* and *performance*. The display of masculinity can carry different semiotic meanings with regards to the audience, which might not be in the immediate sphere. The violent behavior of the youths, like the flourishing of knives by Sarakatsani shepherds, occurs when the "performers" are aware they will be restrained. However, to an onlooker who might not understand this, it projects the dangerous masculinity of the group. As writers such as Stokes (citing Murat Sertoglu) and Hill have pointed out, the image of a strong, tough wrestling nation has certain political semiotics (Stokes 1996; Hill 1999). However, for this paper I shall examine other, social aspects of masculinity demonstrated within the wrestling arena.

I shall now examine events at a wrestling tournament which I attended in whilst on fieldwork, following which I shall analyze some of the displays of masculinity with regards to those aspects we have examined above.

## Wrestling at a Wedding

During my two periods of fieldwork, I attended four tournaments; one near Skopje and the others in the west of the country. While these three were of interest in other ways, it was the wedding tournament which provided the greatest insights into the play of different masculinities (not least because the other tournaments did not feature a boys' division).

The tournament took place in a public park on the outskirts of Skopje on a sunny, May afternoon. The bouts were part of the celebrations for an Albanian wedding, taking place after the main wedding ceremony and attended exclusively by men and the groom's party (I never established what the bride and other women do). Attendance was open, without invitation.

The space was empty when we arrived (09.30) but began to fill up, firstly with a few refreshment vendors and later a large number of men, who sat or stood in rows, forming a kind of human arena. I estimated around 500-700 men.

At around 10.30, the sound of drums and zurlas approached from the opposite side of the river as the groom's party came in procession with flags (one was an Albanian flag, shortly to become illegal to fly in Rep of Macedonia) and musicians. A few speeches were made and then the tournament commenced with the boys' competition. Both junior and adult bouts were marshaled and refereed by older men who, I was led to believe, were usually former wrestlers themselves. Around 30 excited boys lined up for their bouts. Some were in tracksuit bottoms but others, presumably the more serious ones, were in leather kyspet. All the boys were oiled and some did the wrestler's dance to the sound of the music (Fig. 3).

An interesting difference between the boys' dancing and the older dancers was that whereas the older males danced in a more relaxed, almost blasé fashion, the boys seemed to put more into it, leaping higher and slapping their thighs harder. Everything seemed more precise, as if they had to try harder to show they were real men.

The levels of ability between the boys became apparent once the wrestling got underway. As I'd suspected, the kyspet clad boys seemed the more dedicated wrestlers and their technique was often hard and precise. One bout saw a kyspet-clad *Pelivan* matched with a lad in tracksuit bottoms. During the match the tracksuit bottoms were wrenched down, revealing the boy's underwear to the crowd. The unfortunate young wrestler now had the problem of resisting the *Pelivan*'s attempts to put him on his back whilst also trying to pull up his bottoms, which seemed more important. Having pulled them up they were wrenched down again by his merciless opponent. The defeat accompanied by humiliation echoed Stokes's comment about *the result*. Having achieved his result, the young *Pelivan* received a prize of some clothes and the esteem of the others.

The humiliated loser sulkily walked away and was reprimanded by one of the older judges. The older, moral male controlling the younger one, reducing him from warrior to child. This was repeated several times, with older wrestlers as well. At one point in the day there was some crowd trouble (we never found out what) with things being thrown into the crowd. Order was restored by PA announcements and some liberal head-slapping of younger men by the older marshals. Tempers could get heated and, at one point, two old men started to wrestle each other in a disagreement over something, to the laughter of many (one imagines they should have known better!).

The boys' division was followed by older wrestlers. The divisions (hands) are based on skill and experience and while a less experienced wrestler may wrestle in a higher hand, it is not allowed for a wrestler to compete in a lower hand. As well as this, respect is paid to older wrestlers. Any young wrestler who defeats an older opponent should kiss his hand as a sign of respect. The higher the level, the higher the status and prize-value. All the adult wrestlers wore kyspet and danced prior to their bout. Before and after a bout, some Pelivans walked around the crowd collecting money.

The groom's party returned to the area before the commencement of the final, top hand. Speeches and thank-yous were made and then the musicians (Gypsies) began to move along the party, playing frantically to each one, using all their expertise and trying to get the men to give them more money. The members of the party would tease the musicians into greater exertions, to the delight of the crowd, by waving money at them before stuffing it into their instrument or teeth (if it was a drummer).

As the senior hand was preparing, considered some of the elite of the Macedonian Pelivans, the groom's party began sticking paper money to the body of one wrestler, who stood still while this was done, ignoring the occasional note flying away, to the approval of the crowd. In another instance, a young boy excitedly pointed out his favorite Pelivan to me (possibly his village champion) and happily posed for a picture with him.

The final bouts actually proved a disappointment for many of the crowd. Two wrestlers who had a well-known and intense rivalry were not paired together, provoking protests from the crowd and the wrestlers themselves. One of the pairs wrestled, uneventfully, for about an hour and the match was declared a draw. The other match proved somewhat more eventful when one wrestler, having failed to gain a fall from his opponent, suddenly executed a spectacular spinning technique which brought both wrestlers to the ground. He then stood, motioned that he had won and quickly walked away, insisting he had won. By doing so his "victory" could not be disputed. However, he was disqualified for leaving the arena. My translator explained that as he had apparently realized he was unable to get a fall, he forced the technique and left "unbeaten", although his opponent won by default. The crowd voiced their displeasure at both the result and his actions.

## Analyzing of the Tournament

Having previously noted how wrestling can be considered an expression of masculinity, it is perhaps easy to see that wrestling at events such as weddings reinforces the connection between the physical strength of the wrestler's masculinity and the masculinities of reproduction, and perpetuation (of the community). As wrestling may be considered as a supreme expression of masculinity then this aspect and its own continuity (as demonstrated by the children's division) can be seen as integral to notions of fertility. But how are we to view a masculinity which is both related to fertility yet excludes women?

It was often suggested to me by feminist colleagues in the West that women were not allowed to attend wrestling events, and a Macedonian colleague told me how her elderly female relative used to boast that, as a young girl, she would sneak off and secretly watch the Pelivans because she was not allowed to go to the matches. Likewise, Kowlaski (1940) makes no mention of women at the bouts he witnessed in Bulgaria in the 1920's. However, while women may be restricted in their opportunities to watch, they

are by no means totally excluded as I did attend other Pelivan events where women were in attendance. The difference was that these were not weddings and were hosted by predominantly ethnic Turkish communities and it was suggested to me that Albanians were stricter about excluding women from the audience. While no objection was made to the presence of my UN colleague, it may be that being foreign and in the company of males meant allowances were made. However, the later arrival of two young women with (apparent) boyfriends seemed to cause little, if any, reaction. It is obvious, however, that female participation in Pelivan wrestling at any level is slight, if at all. We may therefore consider of the female role as being passive.

Should we accept this notion of the female being passive, we may be tempted to view the masculine solely as being the active. The figure of the wrestler illustrating strength also illustrates a form of protection which corresponds with some symbols of protection in traditional Balkan wedding costumes, such as pistols to protect the bride from bandits (the woman, presumably, being passive). However, we have also noted other forms of masculinity and whilst I do not have sufficient information about the status of women, I shall ask whether all the forms of masculinity we have examined are all (equally) active within the tournaments and the practice of wrestling.

An important difference between the wedding tournament and those I saw in the east of the country was that all the adult wrestlers at Skopje were oiled and wore kyspet. At others, a number of the wrestlers did not wear kyspet and some did not wrestle oiled. Of those I interviewed who did not, several said they did not consider themselves Pelivans and some spoke of taking part in illegal prizefights. One man even mentioned fighting as a kick-boxer for organized crime gangs in Germany (until a “disagreement” forced him to return to Macedonia). Although generalization is dangerous in such a case, this is in some way illustrative of the danger of an individual wrestler, who is not part of the community. Without the support and guidance (control) of the community, a wrestler who wrestles for himself alone, may stray into areas of dubious morality, reflecting the darker image of the wrestler we encountered above.

The wrestlers, obviously, attend tournaments to compete and, at least attempt, to win, reflecting the aggressive, powerful form of masculinity. The violence inherent in the sport and the enthusiasm to excel in it (even to the point of creating a saintly character of a wrestling hero) shows this form of masculinity is desired and sought after, as well as approved of and encouraged. The obvious desire of the boy wrestlers to emulate their older, more successful counterparts, and the almost over-expression of militancy in their dances can be an attempt to express themselves, and perhaps gain status, as *men*. If we compare Kandiyoti's Turkish boy (Kandiyotti 1994: 197 - 213) with our little Pelivans we may find interesting parallels. Just as the little boy attempts to act as he feels his desired role dictates, so too does the boy Pelivan. Attempting to make up for his lack of status when he has the chance to do so, he both over-compensates his expression of (desired) masculinity, perhaps producing an almost comic parody role model. This is accepted, and even encouraged, within certain boundaries but is suppressed should an attempt be made to cross them. As the little boy moderates his behavior in the presence of his father (or else risks a thrashing), so too, the boy wrestlers are verbally and physically admonished if they forget their status within the social hierarchy. They may be champion wrestlers, but they are still only boys and, as such, of lower status.

Considering the aforementioned theory of *feminization* (Cornwall, Lindisfarne 1994: 11-47) we may see further how a masculine hierarchy can be detected within the field of the wrestling arena. The sport revolves around the task of defeating an opponent (by putting him on his back) and, as Stokes reminds us, perhaps humiliating him. As we saw in the case of the boy Pelivan debagging his adversary, the opponent must suffer two indignities; being beaten and being stripped of his (male) clothing. He is reduced to a humiliated child by a boy who emulates the *supreme man*. The boy wrestler, and indeed, the older wrestler, may also suffer being put in his place by a senior individual and having to accept a more passive (feminized) status.

The process of feminization is also found in the interaction with the Gypsy musicians by the groom's party. Such interaction may be seen as a form of *genderized* control. Referring to a similar practice of paying Gypsy musicians in Greek Macedonia, Cowan notes that within the social hierarchy, Gypsies may be considered as,

*...at once a social inferior; and thus an unsexed man, and an instrument. He must be cajoled as well as dominated* (Cowan 1990: 127).

The seemingly belittling manner in which the Greek dancers treat the musicians before placing money in their instruments demonstrates their own empowered status and the Gypsies' lower, feminized (or *unsexed*) status. Arguably, this situation may also be replicated in such situations as wrestling bouts.

If the placing of money on a performer signifies an imbalance of power in the payer's favour, how does this reflect when the money is placed on a wrestler? I suggest that this signifies the wrestler is competing as the champion of an individual or group. Having noted the wrestler's abstention from female contact and sexual intercourse. That the Pelivan at the wedding tournament was decorated by a member of the groom's party (perhaps the groom himself) might suggest that the groom, as a potential begetter of children, is of a higher status than the lone figure of the wrestler.

In this case, we might ask whether the figure of the wrestler is indeed the supreme male, or is he simply a particular rung in the hierarchical ladder? Kandiyoti's notion of a *gendering process* might prove a useful tool with which to examine this problem. Having noted the boys' attempts to emulate and associate with the wrestlers, we can see how they can be viewed as a superior form of masculinity. Age itself brings greater status but also moves the young Pelivan into the higher, adult levels of the sport. Each hand will produce its own champions who will possibly ascend into the ranks of the senior hands, gaining greater experience, ability and prestige. But where does the Pelivan go from there?

The referees and marshals (and some organizers) of the tournaments are older men and usually former wrestlers and champions. This appears to be a traditional practice, as Kowlaski also notes it (Kowlaski 1940: 168). The champion wrestler, perhaps too old to physically compete, now rises to become the controller of wrestlers, the referee. All wrestlers must obey him. They are also unable to fight him and so his status as a champion remains intact (and we have seen that younger wrestlers must still show respect to older opponents in victory). In effect, he has achieved a status higher than that of the wrestler.

Here we can see two pictures emerging; The physical trial of wrestling may now be seen as a liminal stage of masculinity through which some men will pass. The old wrestler, having reached the height of his physical powers, now ascends to a status based less on physical prowess (which he has already proved) and onto a more moral, even spir-

itual power. Coupled with experience, age far from being a disabling phenomenon, now gives him more strength and status. In some cases he may become a guardian of the tradition (Kowlaski notes where an old wrestler is in charge of reciting an address which, he claims, comes from the time of Mohammed), and perhaps, in doing so, becomes the guardian of the community's spiritual and moral awareness.

We might consider that far from being the controlling form of masculinity, the physical power of the wrestler must itself be controlled. Just as Cowan's youthful dancers displayed raw, untamed aggression of virile masculinity, only to be tamed by the older men, so too are the Pelivans subject to (and subjected to) the discipline of the older men who once were as they are (indeed, Pelivans are often trained by a senior wrestler in a master-apprentice relationship, the younger wrestler continuing the practice with a young trainee when the elder wrestler retires). The power of the older men and their masculinity (as with Cowan's dancers) may come more from their status as figures of the community and upholders of the common good rather than through the untamed (and potentially dangerous) power of the wrestler outside of society.

## Conclusion

As I have suggested, the physical strength and violence involved in wrestling is often seen, perhaps too simplistically, as being a supreme form of masculinity within certain cultures, not least, some of the Muslim cultures of the Balkans. However, as I have attempted to show, the subtleties and intricacies of the sport itself and those practices and philosophies surrounding it, can be used to reveal not only different levels and functioning of society but also the subtleties and intricacies of the multilayered concept we call masculinity.

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Слика 1.



Слика 2.



Слика 3.

