

The function of the zurla players in the Pelivan wrestling in some parts of the Republic of Macedonia

The music instrument *zurla* with its piercing and remarkable sound intensity and timbre is still associated and is part of some events that were cherished in the past and are preserved until today in some parts of the Republic of Macedonia. Despite the presence of the *zurla* in the lifetime events such as birth, christening, sunet, weddings, religious or secular holidays, this instrument along with the *tapan* is inevitable in holding the traditional tournaments for pelivan wrestling – an old sport discipline for measuring the physical condition between the two wrestlers called pelivans. This type of wrestling is accompanied with ritual customs which are unusual for other sport disciplines. That is why this discipline stands out as a separate sport which is part of the tradition of lots of nations and it is also preserved in the Republic of Macedonia till today. The subject of our research is the role and the function of the *zurla* instrument played at pelivan wrestling, a sport competition which is still held traditionally, usually accompanied by the sound of the *zurla* and *tapan* instruments. Our presentation is generally divided into two parts. The first part provides informations about the pelivan wrestling in order to have a clear idea about this type of wrestling while the second part covers the *zurla* as a music instrument and some of its characteristics and of course the *zurla* players and their professional participation in the holding of the pelivan wrestlings in some regions of the Republic of Macedonia.

Pelivan wrestling, pelivan fights, folk wrestling

The folk wrestling in Macedonia unlike the other folk sport games such as stone throwing, long and high jump and others has the oldest tradition. It is becoming popular after the Ottoman conquests of the Balkan. Since then a lot of benefits from the oriental heritage were incorporated in many parts in the ethnic culture. The pelivan wrestling was part of that heritage. This type of folk wrestling with its specific elements primarily and mainly started to spread among the islamized population.

Thus, except the Turks as the founders of this kind of wrestling, lots of Macedonians and Albanians which somehow or for variety of reasons accepted the Islam religion have started to practice this sport discipline (Konstantinov 1991: 3). Great number of the sources found lead to the fact that pelivan wrestling as a sport discipline is brought to the Republic of Macedonia with the Ottoman invasion of the Balkan peninsula. In support of this is the fact that in the past the wrestlers were exclusively men from the Turkish population. Later, men from the Islamic population were wrestlers as well which just point to the fact that this type of wrestling was largely accepted by the Muslims in the Republic of Macedonia. The wrestler who take part in the pelivan wrestling is called pelivan and the winner of the competition is called *baspelivan*. The correct pronunciation of this word is *pehlivan* but in the spirit of our language the letter *h* is silent. This word has two meaning, it means a fighter and a hero (Konstantinov, 1991: 36) The pelivan wrestling is an old ritually and knightly sport competition between two prominent fighters which is still present in the Republic of Macedonia (Djimrevski 2000: 41). This type of fighting is also called “*gjures*”.¹ “Borenjeto” or “borejne-gjures” as this old sport discipline was called in the past in the region of Gevgelija, was the most popular among the young people. It was treated everywhere as knightly fight in which both physical strength and the skills should be shown (Konstantinov, 1991: 17). Before starting the fight the pelivan wrestlers douse themselves with oil so it could be harder for the opponents to grab them. Making a comparison between the wrestling and the pelivan wrestling, Konstantinov conclude differences, some of which are essential and other formal. He refer to some special movements and the specific type of equipment such as wearing “kispets”, dousing with oil, rituals, music accompaniment, methods of judging, declaring winners, remuneration etc. (Konstantinov, 1991: 4).² The pelivan fights were usually held in spring and summer, in honour of some religious holiday or at weddings and sunets among the Muslims.³ Pelivan fights which are held on religious holiday are connected with the date on which the holiday is celebrating, and the fights which are organized for the family events such as weddings or sunets are organized spontaneously, ordered by the hosts.

At the wedding pelivan fights participate local pelivans but also pelivans from the neighbouring such as from distant villages. It was rare to find a village with islamized Macedonians, Turks or Albanians without at least two pelivan fighters (Konstantinov 1991: 51) Having the opportunity to watch couple of pelivan competitions we found out that most of the pelivan fighters today are members of the Islamic religion and they think of it as their heritage.

¹ The zurla player Ali Zurnadjiev from Radovis uses this term.

² Kispets are trousers made out of leather which the pelivan use.

³ The process of circumcising a young boy among Muslims.

From the foregoing discussion we assumed that this kind of sport is more practiced and accepted by the population with Islamic religion.⁴ Beside fighters from Macedonia, at the pelivan fights are also invited fighters from outside the country, depending on the financial state of the organizer.⁵

The fights are being held on flat grasslands which are previously cleaned from stones or other things that would prevent the pelivans to hurt themselves while fighting. The winner is given solemn presents and money rewards for achieving good results in the fighting. From our researches we concluded that these fights at some point exceed its sport character and turn into relentlessly fight at the moment when the pelivans start to use some illicit movements in order to win the opponent and not to lose the fight.

For the dedication of the pelivans to these fights and also their desire to win we are telling an actual event which was spread among the population of Gora⁶ and was told to us by Jaja Cako.

Before the last fight between an old pelivan and his young student, the older asked the student not to win this fight in the first round, so he could surrender in the second round and thus finish his career with dignity. But the young pelivan wanting to show off won the fight in the first round. On the second challenge by the young student, the older pelivan hid a stone in the grass and at the ritual hitting the kispets he took the stone and during the fight he hit the young pelivan at his head after which he fell on his back and lost the fight. After losing the fight the young student said to the older: “You told me everything but you didn’t tell me this” to that the older answered: “I beg you not to push me, that’s why I didn’t tell you everything.”⁷

Zurla and tapan – music symbols of the pelivan fights

Over the past, the music instruments were important and constant part of life. The evolution of the music instruments proceeded in parallel with the evolution of the human mind to the point when they reach the needs of the community and became part of the vocal and instrumental music tradition. Along with the human migration, the music instruments also migrated from one place to another along with its consumers. This migration enabled to some of the music instruments to come to new environments. Over time, with the process of acculturation some of the music instruments are being accepted by those people for whom they were previously

⁴ We don’t have accurate information when exactly, but recently Christians too participate as pelivan fighters.

⁵ At the pelivan fights in Sutovo village, Kicevo area, beside pelivans from Macedonia, there were also pelivans from Bulgaria, Albania and Turkey.

⁶ Jajo Cako was born in Brod village, Prizren area, in 1951 and lives in Stip for a long time.

⁷ The ritual hitting the kispets includes introducing of the pelivans in front of the audience which stands in a circle. While introducing themselves they hit their hips with the hands, on the leather trousers smeared with oil. This ritual is accompanied with music played by zurla and tapan.

unknown and were not part of their genetic code. The older folk music instruments, indigenous or brought from other cultures, over time were accepted as their own and soon became an important part of their music tradition which at some regions was preserved until today. That is exactly what happened with the music instrument zurla in the Republic of Macedonia, for which lots of researchers consider that it exists in the same or similar form in other nations and in the Republic of Macedonia was brought during the Ottoman Empire. Although this instrument was not indigenous, its presence in lots of life events today likewise in the past support the fact that it is widely accepted among the people in the Republic of Macedonia showing its significant role in creating the music culture.

“When someone hear the sound of the zurla for the first time, he usually gets stunned. The powerfull and piercing sound of the zurla and tapan, the unique timbre intonation, the mastery of the musicians, its surprisingly diversative repertoire as well as the quantity could not leave anybody indifferent” (Pejceva – Dimov, 2002:8).

Our special interest is the music accompaniment during the pelivan fights, the connection between these two instruments with the event itself, as well as the music and its function during the pelivan tournaments. What we found at spot leads us to the fact that even nowadays the zurla and tapan are inevitable music instruments which accompanied the pelivan fights. The zurla as a music instrument, significant and impressive with its sound intensity and timbre, with its technical and tonal abilities makes the performance possible for variety of melodies and improvisations based on special melodies or played spontaneously by the musician. “As weddings cannot be imagined without music, so the pelivan fights cannot be organized without instrumental accompaniment. That was unwritten rule and there were no exceptions in any part of the Republic of Macedonia. The music accompaniment consisted of instrumentalists of only two types of folk instruments, one of which was from the woodwind group and the other one was a percussion instrument.

It is about the music instruments zurla and tapan.” (Konstantinov, 1991: 54). The instrument zurla consists of four parts which have their role in the final shaping of the sound: the main pipe, a beak (slavec), a mouthpiece (mendik) and a reed (trska). (Photo 1).



(Photo1) Mouthpiece with reed, a beak with the main pipe and the placement of the parts in the main pipe.

In the Republic of Macedonia exist couple of types of the instrument *zurla*: *kaba zurla*, *jaram kaba* and *dzura* (Lenin, 1986:10). Goran Konstantinov says that the orchestra of *zurla* and *tapan* is engaged by the organisers of the *pelivan* fights. If the fights were of local character then engaging the musicians was a duty of the hosts or the people from the village where the fights took place (Konstantinov, 1991: 55). We had the opportunities to attend two *pelivan* competitions one of which was in municipality of Kuklis and the other one in Sutovo village, Kicevo area. We also attended a *pelivan* fight in Delcevo which was organized for sunet of a child. Here, the *pelivan* fight was more symbolic as part of the solemn with the special occasion and the fighters were family members and was more of fun character. In the appendix below we apply a map on which the regions where we attended the *pelivan* fights can be seen. (Appendix 1)



Appendix 1. The map of the Republic of Macedonia with places of the attended *pelivan* fights.

From geographic point of view, these fights took place in the southern, eastern and the western part of Macedonia which shows us their popularity in large part of the Republic of Macedonia. The pelivan fights were accompanied by the music of the zurla and tapan instruments, music that adds to the fights the ancient spirit which evokes from the piercing sound of the zurla and the rhythmic pulses of the tapan. Dzimrevski says that the music played during the pelivan fights does not only show its accompanying side but also its esthetic character (Dzimrevski, 2000: 39). What we have also noticed at these fights was the mutual cohesion between the visual moments of the pelivans and the musical illustration by the zurla players which were intertwined between one another depending on the flow of the fights.

“In Macedonia, the pelivan fights are accompanied exclusively by two zurla players and a tapan. It is an archaic music orchestra, which presents an inseparable and complementary element of the traditional competition where two authentic melodies exist. Before starting the fight, as an introduction for psychological calming and warming up is played *perde* (Turkish word for curtain) a folk term which by its music content represents an instrumental work for zurla with a constant melody and where the sound of the zurla grows emotionally in rhythmic and melodic rubato accompanied by the asymmetric beats of the tapan” (Dzimrevski, 2000: 3). The curtain (*perde*) is a melody which is played before the start of the fight. During this performance the pelivans introduce themselves in front of the audience making specific rhythmic movements through which they show their good physical condition and their readiness of their body for the hard fights that follows. (Photo1).



Photo 1. Ritual movements during the performance of *perde* at the pelivan fights in Kuklis (left: youngest pelivans, right: oldest pelivans).

After the choice of the fighters, who is fighting whom, the pelivan shake hands. Before the sign for beginning of the fight they do temana prayer to Allah by saying the arab words *Bismin - lâhi – rahmani – Rahim* which means in the name of God (Dzimrevski, 2000: 43). This melody for warming up was played at the pelivan fights that we had a chance to attend. After starting the fight the music from the zurla and tapan continuous to play during the whole fight which can take hours. “The second melody at pelivan competitions is played when the pelivans start to fight and is called *Gjures avasi* which means a melody for fight (Dzimrevski, 2000: 43). We concluded that the second melody is not fixed but it consists of more melodies that are being played, depending on the fact where the fights are held and what kind of music is accepted in that region. During the competition the zurla and the tapan are following the fights and they adjust their melodies and improvisations to some certain actions. We could say that it is a syncretic form which were created and transferred by centuries.

At the pelivan competitions in Kuklis that were held in the middle of May, the music accompaniment consisted of two zurla players and a tapan. The oldest zurla player played the first zurla and its accompanying zurla was played by the son of his brother.⁸ An interesting moment was that the son of his nephew, a beginner in zurla, also at moments played as second zurla. (Photo 2, 3, 4 and 5).⁹



Photo 2, 3, 4 and 5. Demir Memedov and his zurla crew

⁸ The main zurla player was Demir Memedov, born in 1955 in Strumica, who also taught his nephews to play zurla.

⁹ The family learning of this craft is inheriting by great number of the instrumentalists.

At some point the tapan player joined the two zurla players only now playing accompanying zurla with free style melodies (rubato). At these competitions participated pelivans from many towns of the Republic of Macedonia many of whom were professionals and with Christians confession. It leads us to the fact that tradition of pelivans being only Muslims is nowadays losing. Pelivans from the Christian confession instead of saying the (*Bismin - lâhi – rahmani – Rahim*) prayer, they just did the act of crossing and after that shook hands. (Photo 6).



Photo 6. Doing the act of crossing before the fight

The zurla player Demir Memedov says that he plays here for a long time at the pelivan fights in the municipality of Kuklis and that there were always pelivans from both Muslim and Christian confession. He considers these fights as professional and their behavior was quite responsible for what they were paid by the organizers. This group of zurla players performs regularly at the pelivan fights in Kosturino village, Strumica area which is held on 12th of July, on the Orthodox holiday Petrovden.

We attended the second organized pelivan matches in the village of Shutovo, Kichevo. These matches were organized in honor of circumcising two boys, ethnic Albanians. The Albanians in the Republic Macedonia have kept the inherited tradition and often organize pelivan fights in honor of a wedding or circumcising.

The pelivan fights in Sutovo village, Kicevo area, stand out from the others by the number of the pelivan fighters, which is huge and the fight lasts quite long. An exception of the established standards was the music accompaniment which consisted of three groups of zurla players. Two zurla player groups were from Kicevo and the third *tajfa* was from Tetovo.¹⁰ The two groups

¹⁰ The term *tajfa* is used for group of people, in this case zurla players and tapan players.

from Kicevo consisted of two zurla players and two tapan players, and the one from Tetovo consisted of two zurla players and three tapan players. (Photo 7, 8 and 9).¹¹



Photo 7, 8 and 9. Zurla players tajfa at pelivan fights in Sutovo village, Kicevo area

These groups were positioned on three places near the court on which the fights are taking place. They often played simultaneously but were playing separate melodies. At some point only one or two groups played and there were moments when there was no music at all. Then, in a given moment they start to play again in coordination with the leader of the match who according to our information is called *caus*. (Photo 10)



Photo 10. Coordinator of the pelivan fights - caus

The role of the *caus* is to coordinate the start of the fight, to determine irregularities, to remove a player for rule violation and of course he gives the music players a sign when to start or stop playing. During the competition the zurla players played simultaneously and they were not interfering with one another. Although the sound intensity of the zurla is loud and piercing,

¹¹ The zurla players from Tetovo played kaba zurlas which are popular in the area of Tetovo and on Kosovo. They differ from the other kaba zurla in the sound timbre and the pitch of the basic tone and also in their appearance being quite bigger from the rest.

they stood apart which allowed them to play separate melodies. When it comes to the repertoire, they played many melodies which were part of their performing collection and were not strictly intended for pelivan competitions.

It was a male audience only with very few girls, which reflects traditional Albanian conservative nature. At these matches in honor of a wedding or circumcision, visitors did not get invited, so anyone who wishes may attend doing the honour to the host. After the fights end, followed by zurla players, circumcised children and their loved ones followed by pelivans led by the foreman make a small parade before the audience present marking the end of pelivan matches (. (Photo 11 and 12).



Photo 11 and 12. Parade at the end of the pelivan matches

At the pelivan fight in Delcevo, in honour of the sunet of a child, the fights were only symbolic and the pelivans were close members of the family fighting in a fun and humorous way. The group of the zurla players here consisted of three zurla players and two tapan players. (Photo 13).



Photo13. Zurla players at sunet in Delcevo

The solemn procession which was moving through the town stopped twice so the pelivan fights could be performed. (Photo14 and 15).



Photo14 and 15. Symbolic fight in honour of the sunet of a child in Delcevo

These fights were performed in front of the child and there was lack of the fighting and the winning spirit which was present in the fights that we have mentioned before. The zurla player Ali Zurnadzjev from Radovis told us that he has played for a long time at the pelivan fights in Calakli village, Valandovo area, inhabited predominantly with Turkish population. The zurla player Miljaim Destanovski from Berovo played at pelivan fights in Berovo in honour of weddings and sunets. These fights were performed in the center of the town where the wedding

procession stopped and the pelivan fighters who fight accompanied with the music from the zurla and tapan stood out.

The zurla instrument – the pelivan fights – Romani people

The best representatives of the zurla instrument and the music of zurla in the Republic of Macedonia are the Romani people who are populated in every part of the Republic of Macedonia. Of course, to get closer to the large masses, the zurla players adjust their music according to the needs for those who play and the occasion to which they play.¹²

As a part of the traditional customs which are deeply rooted in the spiritual culture of every nation, the pelivan fights are incorporated in many components of the Islam culture and people no matter what nationality they are. Thus, except among the Turks, the pelivan fights became part of the Macedonian Muslims and Albanians, and consequentially was accepted by the Islamized Romani people (generally as accompanying musicians at the pelivan fights) (Konstantinov, 1991: 50).

In the Republic of Macedonia and its neighbouring countries where the instrument zurla is still widely played, the players of this instrument are generally from the Romani population. The Romani people consider this instrument as their own which is supported by numerous researches about the zurla which lead to the fact that many of the zurla players in the past as well as today are from the Romani population. The Romani people stand for musically talented nation whose talent is expressed by singing and playing music instruments.¹³ From our field researches about the zurla instrument we come to a conclusion that the zurla players and the tapan player are exclusively people from the Romani population.¹⁴ That is why our main source of information are the zurla players who are hired to complete the whole picture during the pelivan fights.¹⁵ Andirajana Gojkovic says: “It is written a lot about the Romani people and one can deny that they are very musically talented people. The music and dances are inseparable part of their lives and that from earliest time music was their occupation. (Gojkovic, 1883, 71). Speaking about the instrumental tradition and the music instruments played by the Romani people, Rodna Velickovska says: “The Romani people have very rich instrumental tradition. They are known as

¹² The zurla instrument is generally accepted among the greater number of people in the Republic of Macedonia, although there are indicators which show that this instrument and the music from it, is more accepted by the people with Muslim confession and then by the rest of the population who lives in the regions with mixed ethnic background.

¹³ A lot of researches point to the fact that this instrument was brought to the Balkan in military orchestras consisted of many zurla and tapan instruments during the Ottoman Empire.

¹⁴ This, at some point, is due to the fact that this kind of music and the skill for playing the instrument are spread among the members of the family.

¹⁵ There is no doubt that deep in the perception of the people this instrument is always connected with the Romani people.

great musicians ever since the ancient times. Traditional instruments that are used in the music accompaniment for celebrating the holiday Djurdjovden – Ederlezi are the zurla and the tapan.

CONCLUSION

From the aforementioned we can conclude that the pelivan fights and their origin and the zurla instrument and its origin have a lot in common. First of all, we can say that as their mutual feature is the gender because both pelivan fighters and zurla players are men. A second indicator that points to their indivisible nature is the fact that the zurla players are generally people with Muslim confession which is the same case by the pelivan fighters. The zurla players and the tapan players are generally people from Romani population. In support of this, is the fact that very often, during a wedding or sunet by the Muslims, part of the solemn ritual is the pelivan fights in honour of the event.

The function of the instruments zurla and tapan during the pelivan fights is to encourage the pelivans with its impulsive impact and also to inform them about certain moments in the fight spreading a martial feeling. On the other hand, the music entertains the audience and keep their attention focused on the pelivans. What is certain is that these pelivan competitions survived for centuries and will continue to exist in future. What we have also noticed was that these fights and the music from the instruments are not followed by the traditional dance (oro), although the melodies and the rhythm of the tapan evoke that kind of feeling. The professional attitude of the zurla players contributes to their hiring for which they are paid and which is also a reason why this instrument is preserved in the tradition of the Romani people in the Republic of Macedonia. Concerning the fact that main holders of the tradition of zurla and tapan playing are the Romani people, they are also a relevant source of information that tells us that their grandfathers and grand grandfathers played at these events. The traditional way of spreading the skill of playing the instrument among the family members still exists and has an important role in preservation of this instrument and this kind of music. We emphasize that it is about a quite preserved and still present music tradition in the Republic of Macedonia.

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