

**MUSIC and DANCE
in SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE:
NEW SCOPES of RESEARCH
and ACTION**

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THE FUNCTION OF THE *ZURLA* PLAYERS IN THE PELIVAN WRESTLING IN SOME PARTS OF THE REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA

The musical instrument *zurla* with its piercing and remarkable sound intensity and timbre is still associated with events that were cherished in the past and are preserved until today in parts of the Republic of Macedonia. Despite the presence of the *zurla* in lifetime events such as birth, christening, *sunet*, weddings, religious or secular holidays, this instrument along with the *tapan* is essential for *pelivan* wrestling – an old sport discipline for measuring the physical condition between two wrestlers called *pelivans*. This type of wrestling is accompanied by 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 many nations and has also been preserved in the Republic of Macedonia until today. The subject of this research is the role and the function of the *zurla* instrument played at *pelivan* wrestling.

Keywords: Macedonia; *pelivan*; wrestling; *zurla*; *tapan*.

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 became popular after the Ottoman conquests of the Balkan. Since then many benefits from the oriental heritage were incorporated in many parts of the ethnic culture. The *pelivan* wrestling was part of that heritage. This type of folk wrestling with its specific elements primarily started to spread among the Islamized population. Thus, in addition to the Turks who were the founders of this kind of wrestling, many Macedonians and Albanians who somehow for a variety of reasons accepted the Islam religion started to practice this sport discipline [Konstantinov 1991:3]. A great number of the sources found led to the fact that *pelivan* wrestling as a sport discipline was 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 also points to the fact that this type of wrestling was largely accepted by the Muslims in the Republic of Macedonia. The wrestler who takes 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 meanings; it means a fighter and a hero [Konstantinov 1991:36]. The *pelivan* wrestling is an old ritual 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 or *borenjeto* or *borejne-gjures* as this old sport discipline was called in the past in the region of Gevgelija, where it was most popular among the young people. It was treated everywhere as a 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 would be harder for the opponents to grab them. Making a comparison between wrestling and the *pelivan* wrestling, Konstantinov concludes that some of the differences are essential and other formal. He refers to some special movements and the specific type of equipment such as wearing *kispets*, dousing with oil, rituals, musical accompaniment, methods of judging, declaring winners, remuneration and so on. [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 holidays are connected with the date on which the holiday is celebrated, and the fights that are organized for the family events such as weddings or *sunets* are organized spontaneously, ordered by the hosts. At the weddings the local *pelivans* participate in *pelivan* fights, but also *pelivans* from neighbouring and 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 a 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.

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

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

***Zurla* and *tapan* – music symbols of the *pelivan* fights**

In the past, the musical instruments were important and a constant part of life. The evolution of the musical 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 musical instruments also migrated from one place to another along with their consumers. This migration enabled some of the musical instruments to come to new environments. Over time, with the process of acculturation some of the musical instruments have been accepted by those people for whom they were previously 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 in some regions was preserved until today. That is exactly what happened with the musical instrument *zurla* in the Republic of Macedonia. Many researchers consider that it exists in the same or similar form in other nations and was introduced into the Republic of Macedonia during the Ottoman Empire. Although this instrument was not indigenous, its presence in many life events today, as in the past, supports the fact that it is widely accepted among the people in the Republic of Macedonia showing its significant role in creating the musical culture.

When someone hears the sound of the *zurla* for the first time, he usually gets stunned. The powerful and piercing sound of the *zurla* and *tapan*, the unique timbre intonation, the mastery of the musicians, its surprisingly diverse repertoire as well as the quantity could not leave anybody indifferent [Peycheva and Dimov 2002:8].

Our special interest is the musical accompaniment during the *pelivan* fights, the connection between these two instruments within the event itself, as well as the music and its function during the *pelivan* tournaments. What we found on the spot leads us to the fact that even nowadays the *zurla* and *tapan* are essential music instruments for accompanying the *pelivan* fights. The *zurla* as a musical instrument is significant and

impressive with its sound intensity and timbre and with its technical and tonal abilities makes the performance possible for a 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 an unwritten rule and there were no exceptions in any part of the Republic of Macedonia. The musical 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]. In the Republic of Macedonia there are a number of different types of the instrument *zurla*: *kaba zurla*, *jaram kaba* and *dzura* [Linin 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 opportunity to attend two *pelivan* competitions one of which was in the municipality of Kuklis and the other one in Sutovo village, Kičevo area. We also attended a *pelivan* fight in Delčevo which was organized for the *sunet* of a child. Here, the *pelivan* fight was more symbolic as part of the solemn ceremony with the special occasion and the fighters were family members and it was more of a fun character. The map below shows the regions where we attended the *pelivan* fights (Figure 1).

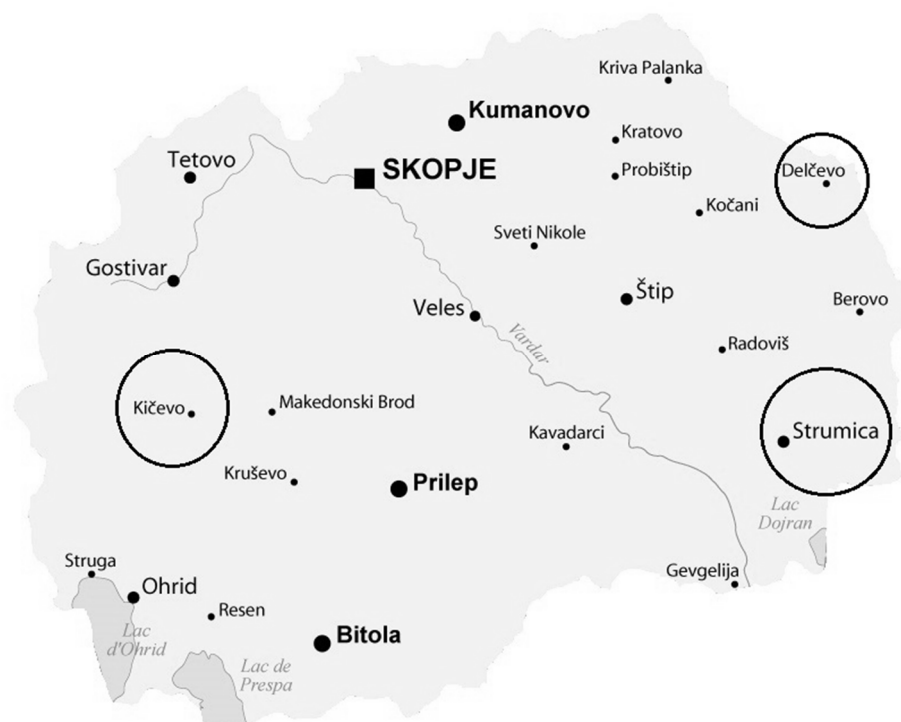


Figure 1. The map of the Republic of Macedonia with places of the *pelivan* fights attended.

From a geographical point of view, these fights took place in the southern, eastern and the western part of Macedonia which shows us their popularity in a large part of the Republic of Macedonia. The *pelivan* fights were accompanied by the music of the *zurla* and *tapan* instruments, music that adds the ancient spirit to the fights which evokes from the piercing sound of the *zurla* and the rhythmic pulses of the *tapan*. Djimrevski says that the music played during the *pelivan* fights does not only show its accompanying side but also its aesthetic character [Djimrevski 2000:39]. What we have also noticed at these

fight was the mutual cohesion between the visual movements 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* [Djimrevski 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 the readiness of their body for the hard fights that follow (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Ritual movements during the performance of *perde* at the *pelivan* fights in Kuklis (photographer Gorančo Angelov).

After the choice of the fighters, who is fighting whom, the *pelivans* 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 [Djimrevski 2000:43]. This melody for warming up was played at the *pelivan* fights that we had the opportunity to attend. After starting the fight the music from the *zurla* and *tapan* continues 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" [Djimrevski 2000:43]. We concluded that the second melody is not fixed but it consists of more melodies that are being played, depending on 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 specific actions. We could say that it is a syncretic form which was created and transferred through the centuries.

At the *pelivan* competitions in Kuklis that were held in the middle of May, the musical 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.⁶ An interesting moment was that the son of his nephew, a beginner in *zurla*, also at moments played as second *zurla* (Figure 3).⁷



Figure 3. Demir Memedov and his *zurla* crew (photographer Goranco Angelov).

At one point the *tapan* player joined the two *zurla* players, only now playing to accompany the *zurla* with free style melodies (*rubato*). This group of *zurla* players performs regularly at the *pelivan* fights in Kosturino village, Strumica area which are held on 12th July, on the Orthodox holiday Petrovdan. At these competitions *pelivans* from many towns of the Republic of Macedonia participated, many of whom were professionals and of Christian religion. It leads us to the fact that the tradition of *pelivans* being only Muslims is nowadays disappearing. *Pelivans* from the Christian confession instead of saying the (*Bismin - lâhi – rahmani – Rahim*) prayer, they made the sign of the cross and after that shook hands. The *zurla* player Demir Memedov says that he has played for a long time at the *pelivan* fights in the municipality of Kuklis and that there were always *pelivans* from both Muslim and Christian confessions. He considers these fighters as professional and they respected their opponents. In our view, when the fighters

received payment to fight, they quite often violated fighting rules so as to get a bigger financial prize if they won.

We attended the second organized *pelivan* match in the village of Sutovo, Kičevo. This match was organized in honour of circumcising two boys who were ethnic Albanians. The Albanians in the Republic of Macedonia have kept the inherited tradition and often organize *pelivan* fights in honour of a wedding or circumcision. The *pelivan* fights in Sutovo village, Kičevo 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 musical accompaniment which consisted of three groups of *zurla* players. Two *zurla* groups were from Kičevo and the third *tajfa* was from Tetovo.⁸ The two groups from Kičevo consisted of two *zurla* players and two *tapan* players, and the one from Tetovo consisted of two *zurla* players and three *tapan* players (Figure 4).⁹



Figure 4. *Zurla* players *tajfa* at *pelivan* fights in Sutovo village, Kičevo area (photographer Goranco Angelov).

These groups were positioned in three places near the court in which the fights took 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, at a given moment they started to play again in coordination with the leader of the match who according to our information is called *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, 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 performance 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 honour of a wedding or circumcision, visitors did not receive invitations, so anyone who wishes may attend doing honour to the host. After the end of the fights, a small parade was made in front of the audience marking the end of *pelivan* matches. This was led by the foreman, followed by the *zurla* players, circumcised children and their loved ones, then by *pelivans*.

At the *pelivan* fight in Delčevo, 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. The solemn procession which was moving through the town stopped twice so the *pelivan* fights could be performed (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Symbolic fight in honour of the *sunet* of a child in Delcevo (photographer Goranco Angelov).

These fights were performed in front of the child and there was a lack of the fighting and winning spirit which was present in the fights that we have mentioned above. The *zurla* player Ali Zurnadziev from Radoviš 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 centre of the town where the wedding procession stopped and the *pelivan* fighters who fought accompanied by the music from the *zurla* and *tapan* stood out.

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 their mutual feature is 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 with the *pelivan* fighters. The *zurla* players and the *tapan* players are generally people from Roma population. In support of this, is the fact that very often, during a wedding or *sunet* among 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 their 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 keeps their attention focused on the *pelivans*. What is certain is that these *pelivan* competitions survived for centuries and will continue to exist in the 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 Roma people in the Republic of Macedonia. Concerning the fact that the main holders of the tradition of *zurla* and *tapan* playing are the Roma people, they are also a relevant source of information that tells us that their grandfathers and great 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 the preservation of this instrument and this kind of music. We emphasize that it is about a preserved and still present music tradition in the Republic of Macedonia.

Endnotes

1. The *zurla* player Ali Zurnadjiev from Radoviš 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.
4. We do not have accurate information when exactly, but recently Christians also participate as *pelivan* fighters.
5. At the *pelivan* fights in Sutovo village, Kičevo area, beside *pelivans* from Macedonia, there were also *pelivans* from Bulgaria, Albania and Turkey.
6. The main *zurla* player was Demir Memedov, born in 1955 in Strumica, who also taught his nephews to play *zurla*.
7. The learning of this craft in the family is inherited by a great number of the instrumentalists.
8. The term *tajfa* is used for group of people, in this case *zurla* players and *tapan* players.
9. The *zurla* players from Tetovo played *kaba zurla* 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 larger than the rest.

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