

A brief introduction to the camel wrestling events in Western Turkey

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Abstract:

The aim of this study is to give brief information about camel wrestling events which are commonly held in Western Turkey at certain times in the year. Even today, camel wrestling shows are still important social events in part of Turkish society. The distribution of camel wrestling and the organizations in Turkey which promote them, and the economic and cultural significance of these events, will also be examined, especially since these wrestling events might provide new economic opportunities in terms of local tourism.

Traditional events such as camel wrestling have an important role in the survival of cultural traditions of Anatolia. In their 2,400-year history, these camel wrestling events are held mainly in the western part of Turkey, where the climate in winter is suitable for such events.

Today, camel wrestling is popular mostly in the Aydın province. It can also be seen in the provinces of İzmir, Manisa, Muğla and Denizli in the Aegean region, Balıkesir and Çanakkale in the Marmara region and Burdur, and Isparta and Antalya in the Mediterranean region. Therefore it is mainly a phenomenon of the western quarter of the country.

The first report of a camel wrestling competition which was held as a big public festival was that it took place in the village of Hıdırbeyli, close to the town of İncirliova in the province of Aydın, about 200 years ago.

Although the origins of camel wrestling cannot be determined exactly, it is believed that its roots go back to ancient nomadic times. The people interested in camel wrestling, and also the camel owners, say that the nomads used to have their camels wrestle as part of a competition between caravan owners.

For Metin Çıtak, the main organizer of the tournament at Selçuk, a coastal town in the mid-western part of Turkey, the sport is about keeping alive the bond between Turks and the animal that served their nomadic ancestors for centuries, and which he sees as an integral part of Turkish heritage. “In the past, a camel was something you couldn’t live without – the lives of the camels and the humans were in a symbiotic relationship,” he said. “These days, huge improvements in technology and transportation have made camels redundant for trading purposes, but camel wrestling is still an important event for the preservation of local culture.”

Mainly it is organizations involved in education, culture, health, sports or social welfare which promote camel wrestling competitions, for the purpose of raising funds. In some areas the local councils also support these events. The proceeds earned from camel wrestling, after costs are deducted, are used for specific social purposes. No types of betting are legally allowed on match outcomes.

Wrestling matches are held between male camels of a type called *Tülü*, which are bred by mating a single-hump female Arabian Dromedary camel, or *yoç* camel, (species name *Camelus dromedarius*) with a double-hump male Asian Bactrian

camel, or *buhur* camel (species name *Camelus bactrianus*). These wrestling matches are won as a result of the power and abilities of these camels and it is somewhat remarkable that the sport is called a wrestling match rather than an out-and-out fight between a pair of competing animals.

These very special camels are bred with a great deal of care, and are trained purely for wrestling. Their trainers are called *savran*. The wrestling events are held in winter, beginning in November and lasting until the end of March, and they only take place on Sundays in two or three distinct places on the same day, within specific regions in west Anatolia. However, bad weather sometimes causes the events to be canceled.

Every wrestling camel has to have a name. Sometimes the camel's owner provides a name, and sometimes the spectators give a name to the camel based on how it behaves during the matches. Some camels are even named after popular characters in television shows.

The name of the competing camel is written on a piece of embroidered cloth called a *peş* which is hung behind the saddle and called a *havut*. Beneath the camel's name is written the word *Maşallah* ("may God protect him").

One day before the wrestling contest the camels are decked out in a sumptuous manner as prescribed by tradition. They are then walked through the streets accompanied by music played on drums and *zurnas* to Zeybek tunes. The Zeybeks were a bandit community who are regarded as Robin Hood type heroes in western Turkey, and who have a special music and culture associated with them. When you come into a town which is hosting a wrestling tournament, you can hear this Zeybek music played on the drums and *zurnas*, accompanied by the sounds of the bells which dangle from various parts of the camels' bodies. The whole town celebrates a big carnival.

Owners of the wrestling camels are easy to notice because of their distinctive dress which includes pointed caps, traditional scarves worn around their necks, distinctive jackets, special trousers and long leather boots. Some camel wrestling enthusiasts who don't actually own camels themselves also dress in the same style. Some avid fans will sit around TV sets to watch recorded wrestling contests from the past during the evening before. Also a *Halı Gecesi* (Rug Night) party is held for the camel owners and other guests. This is the sort of party where people meet new friends and old acquaintances with whom they can strengthen their bonds of friendship. They will eat, drink, sing songs native to their particular region, dance, entertain their guests and also sell rugs at an auction. The *Halı Gecesi* always takes place on the night before the big event.

The area where wrestling matches are held is called, as in English, the 'arena' and is on flat soil surrounded by slopes, which act as a makeshift amphitheatre for the spectators. Amateur football stadiums often provide venues for the contests. In the past, some events were held in ancient amphitheatres, which are quite common in many parts of west Turkey, in various states of repair.

Wherever these matches are held, they are held only once per year. There are no naturally comfortable places to sit on the slopes, so spectators bring their own cushions, portable chairs and other items for comfort. Because it is not so easy to move around due to all the picnickers on the slopes and the sheer volume of people, paths can be made where necessary by terracing the slopes in places.

On the morning of the big event, crowds of people start to arrive around the wrestling arena trying to get a good viewing place for themselves and their families, while the camel owners are trying to find a good spot in the fields outside, where their camels

Aydin – Camel Wrestling Events in Western Turkey

can size each other up for the contests.

By about 10 o'clock, the camel wrestling fans have already established their sitting places on the slopes, and the market men have set up their stands and tables within the spectator area, where they offer a wide variety of food, drinks and souvenirs, while drummers and *zurna* players play traditional tunes. Inspired by the music, and perhaps by alcohol, some people will attempt to dance the traditional zeybek dance in macho style.

As you approach to the venue, the cheers of the crowd, the sounds of the instruments and the excited bellowing of the ringmaster – the chief commentator on the events – can be heard blaring into the air, which is thick with charcoal smoke. Fans jostle for a view at the front and lay out their picnics, and the scent of sizzling camel-meat sausages mixes with the sounds of the traditional Turkish *zurnas* and drums and the boom of the commentator. “Camel sausage” is the main food eaten at the event. Another essential element is the drinking of *raki*, which is a traditional Turkish alcoholic spirit, similar to Greek *ouzo*. Camel wrestling matches are quite different from other sporting activities inasmuch as they attract people of all ages. Spectators from the surrounding villages generally attend in whole family groups. At the same time, trucks and tractors stationed at the top of the area are used as small restaurants for eating while people watch the event from a high up position.

During all this hullabaloo, loudspeakers blare the names of the camels which are set to compete, and the activity among the spectators begins to focus on the field of the competition. Camel owners start to bring their camels into the vicinity of the arena.

The *cazgır* – the commentator who announces the names of the wrestling camels – calls out the competitors. The *cazgır* also reads poems praising each camel, adding to the tension. He is perhaps the most important and colourful person in the whole competition. He treats each camel wrestling match as if he were a sports commentator who is commenting on a soccer match – and football is *very* important in Turkey.

Within the wrestling organization there is a referee committee consisting of a chief controller, an intermediate animal overseer, and the match referee, who decides the winners and losers of the contests. Also there are *urgancılar* (people who handle the ropes used to guide the beasts), plus people who are responsible for tying the camels' mouths to stop them biting, and others who check the camels' mouths after they have been tied.

Although camel wrestling events have certain rules, these rules can vary from area to area. Some of these rules are precautionary, so that the camels do not get too seriously injured. Camel wrestling events are only held once or twice a week for each camel. Each wrestling bout lasts about 10 minutes. In the 1980s this period used to be 15 minutes, with a better chance of a win, but today most games end in a draw because of the shorter fighting period, although the spectators do not seem to mind.

Camel wrestling is judged in four categories. A camel can win by making the other camel retreat, by making the other camel scream, or by making the other camel fall.

The fourth way that victory can be secured is when the camel's owner takes his fighter out of the contest in order to prevent him from being hurt. The camel owner throws a rope on the ground indicating that he is withdrawing from the contest. The other camel is declared the winner. But often the game ends in a draw.

The contest organizers try to pit camels who excel at different tricks against others with different manoeuvres to make the matches more exciting. Camels which wrestle

from the right side are called *sağcı*, camels that wrestle from the left are called *solcu*, camels that trip the other by using foot tricks are called *çengelci*, camels that take their rival's head under their chest and then try to sit on them are called *bağcı*, and camels which push their rivals to make them beat a retreat are called *tekçi*.

The number of camels in Anatolia began to decrease as caravans lost their importance due to changes in transportation systems. The fact that nomadic people in the area began to settle has also had a considerable effect. The total number of camels in Turkey was 118,647 in 1935, 72,034 in 1955, and only 12,000 in 1980. The number of camels decreased to 1,350 in 1999 and 811 in 2005.

However, the number of camels increased to 1,004 in 2006 and to 1,057 in 2007, most probably because of the increase in the number of camels connected with the wrestling events, which seem to be gaining ground as a tourist attraction for Turks themselves.

During the early years of the Turkish republic the sport was discouraged since it did not fit with the modern, European image to which the state aspired. But in the 1980s it was revived as a local tourist attraction, and as a result the number of camel owners has risen from 200 to more than 2,000 today.

Wrestling events are fixed at a common time and common place in rural societies in Western Anatolia. Each activity is held in a specific place and in a specific region at a specific period in a year. Therefore the wrestling timetable has a particular direction and, hence, a rhythm. A group of people make their general living from their relation to these camel wrestling events and they move around the festivals throughout the season.

The effect of camel wrestling on local people in the places where they are held is not just limited to the main day. The rituals, traditions and preparations concerned with these events can affect social life for a significant part of the year.

Wrestling camels also participate in the organizations at distances far apart. The participation of approximately 100 camels in each event creates a lot of regional activity in terms of their transportation. Camels, their owners and their carers travel from one event to another using lorries throughout the wrestling season. The particular locations and the popularity of the events are the main factors which affect which camels will participate in which areas, according to what the transportation costs might be.

Camel wrestling events in Western Anatolia are essential social and cultural events because of their uniqueness and their traditional and cultural characteristics. The absence of research about this phenomenon has been limiting from the statistical point of view. Western Anatolia has very many traditional procedures, including commercial activities, rituals, costumes, music and dance, that are associated with camel wrestling, but which have not been properly evaluated.

Some recent changes can be observed in these camel wrestling events. The quality of wrestling has increased recently with the contribution of very well-bred camels. This has meant an increase in the cost of buying and caring for these camels. The events are beginning to draw more spectators from further afield since they can now expect better fights.

Small organizations, who host these events for social reasons, which are largely held in villages and small towns and far away from commercial concerns, try to preserve their traditional identity and struggle to survive if they only have a rural audience. However, in tourist areas close to big cities, the event organizers will try to draw domestic and even some foreign tourists, so that they can become professionally organized festivals.

The organizing committees also have difficulty in overcoming the financial problems of continuing these events. The fact that camel wrestling has continued to survive so far without being supported by outside parties reflects the determination of local communities to sustain them. It is therefore possible that the Ministry of Culture and Tourism may offer financial support and undertake planning activities to ensure its survival and possible commercial success.

According to Vedat Çalışkan, an Assistant Professor of Geography at Çanakkale 18 Mart University, and who is also an expert on the sport, camel wrestling will come to be a rich man's game. Other than serving as an occasional tourist attraction, wrestling camels have no practical use. They cannot be interbred, but always have to be imported, and the sport itself brings no financial rewards: the first prize at the Selçuk tournament for a champion camel is a cheap machine-made rug. "It is just the family interest that continues and keeps the tradition going," he said. "If ... a new generation loses interest, it will die out." Çalışkan and others also fear that the sport may become disconnected from its traditional supporters due to the rising cost of buying and keeping the animals, and it could end up being merely a tourist spectacle, like so many other Turkish traditional events.

However, apart from the potential touristic value, camel wrestling continues to be one of the most popular forms of entertainment among rural villagers in western Turkey, for NOW.

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