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**Safeguarding Intangible  
Cultural Heritage  
- The Case of Traditional Oil Wrestling**

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# Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage - The Case of Traditional Oil Wrestling

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Kırkpınar Oil Wrestling Festival was inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2010. Since 14th century in Rumelia (southwestern part of Türkiye), Kırkpınar Oil Wrestling is one of the world's oldest festivals. Firstly, it is important to provide some brief information on the history of the tradition or the legend about its origin.

The widespread legend about the origins of Kırkpınar is about two brothers named Selim and Ali, who were among the 40 brave men who ventured into Rumelia in 14th century. These 40 warriors would wrestle for sport, whenever in Anatolia. When they arrived in Rumelia and reached the Ahırköy meadow, the brothers began wrestling again, seeking to resolve an unfinished match. During the match, neither could overpower the other and they both died while wrestling. Their friends decided to bury them under a fig tree.

Later on, their companions continued their journey towards Edirne (a city near the border with Greece and Bulgaria), they remembered their fallen friends. After Edirne was conquered by the Ottoman Empire, they returned to Ahırköy meadow to build a proper grave for the brothers. They discovered that a stream of water was flowing from the fig tree where their friends had been buried. When they inquired about the stream of water flowing from the fig tree, the companions were told by the locals that "They were forty. They were the first to set foot on this land." And so, this place became known as Kırkpınar, meaning "Forty Springs."<sup>1</sup>

As has being organized more than 6 centuries, Kırkpınar Oil Wrestling Festival is one of the world's oldest festivals. Currently, it is usually organized on the last week of June or first week of July by the Municipality of Edirne. And the tournament is a huge gathering with traditional music and celebrations. Among wrestlers in Türkiye, Kırkpınar is considered the "Olympics of oil wrestling" because the chief wrestler is decided there.

Wrestling events at Kırkpınar, Edirne are a series of ceremonies and rituals which attract people of all ages and social background. The enthusiasm of the wrestlers, as well as the performances of the traditional music bands and folk-dance groups turns "Kırkpınar Oil Wrestling" into a traditional festival. For many people, competing at Kırkpınar means more than the chance to win award and acclaim. It is considered an ancestral sport and almost a cultural duty. Because of these reasons, it appeals to young generations.

Oil wrestling is done on the grass by the oiled wrestlers who are called "pehlivan" and who wear a type of hand-stitched lederhosen called "kispet." The word "pehlivan" means "brave, bold, courageous and honest". The word is also related to being generous. Thus, a wrestler is considered a role model in the society with these characteristics.

The original name of the element on the UNESCO Representative List is "Kırkpınar Oil Wrestling Festival." Kırkpınar is today located in the province of "Edirne" which is a city in the northwestern part of Türkiye; so close to Greece. And according to historical resources, the history of Kırkpınar and oil wrestlings start with the taking of Edirne by Ottoman Empire in 1361. So, it is a tradition with deep roots in history. It is also important to point out that, although Kırkpınar is the center and symbol of oil wrestling, there are many other cities with their own oil wrestling festivals in Türkiye.<sup>2</sup>

Besides some of these key figures mentioned above, there are other main elements in traditional oil wrestling which makes it a traditional ritual with a complex structure. The Festival can be considered as an event with some traditional objects, rituals and cultural identities:



Figure-1: Kırkpınar Ağası (main sponsor)



Figure-2: The Men's Field (arena)

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Above, the *Figure-1* belongs to a *Kırkpınar Ağa*. This is one of the most fundamental elements of *Kırkpınar Oil Wrestling*. Because, *Kırkpınar Ağa* is regarded as an institutional identity and he is the main sponsor of festival. And the *Figure-2* is “the men’s field”, *er meydanı* in Turkish. It is the arena where the oil wrestling is held as a customary practice. Before the match, the wrestlers start the process of warming up and salutation of the public, which includes series of some rituals. At the same time, there is a “*cazgir*” who introduces wrestlers to the audience citing their names and titles by improvised poems. In the city of Edirne, people are invited to the *Kırkpınar Oil Wrestling Festival* with a red bottomed candle. It is the official symbol of invitation to the festival (*Figure-3*). And the *Figure-4* below shows the moment of oiling just before the game. It is necessary to make it difficult for wrestlers to grasp and take down their opponents.



Figure-3: Red Bottomed Candle



Figure-4: Oiling of wrestlers

Another essential element of the festival is “*davul-zurna players*” who play *Kırkpınar* music during the festival. They are trained in master-apprentice tradition in different associations in Edirne. They can tell the audience what is going on in the arena by playing their instruments rhythmically. Everyone thinks that, the festival without them is like food without salt. So *Kırkpınar Ağası* (main sponsor of festival), music players and *cazgir*s should be seen as elements that ensure the continuity of the festival.

The basic outfit of wrestlers is called “*kispet*”. It is a kind of leather trousers with small trotters reaching from the waist to the calf. *Kispet*s are sown in special sizes according to the wrestlers. Because, the success of the wrestlers is directly related to the fitting of his *kispet* to his body. And it should be added that, *irfan Sahin*, the *kispet* master has been declared as Living Human Treasure by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism in 2009. So, recognition of the *kispet* master as Living Human Treasure is one of the examples showing that Türkiye pay attention to the safeguarding of tradition with all its related elements.<sup>3</sup>

There are a number of groups, parties and associations involved with the element and contributed to the nomination file and safeguarding process. These groups, parties and associations are composed of Ministry of Youth and Sports, Municipality of Edirne, Turkish Traditional Wrestling Federation, Edirne *Kırkpınar* Musicians Association (NGO), The Association for Promotion of Edirne Culture and Handicrafts (NGO), etc. There is a diversity of stakeholders including NGOs, municipality, and ministry. So, it is possible to say that the efforts to safeguard the element are in line with the priorities of UNESCO, particularly in terms of involvement of communities.

With regard to the safeguarding measures, it is possible to point out the efforts in three categories to show some of the important aspects of safeguarding process. There are a few projects that had been conducted on traditional oil wrestling. The first one is a European Union project that was completed in 2018. It aims to support the tourism potential of two cities by the promotion of two local festivals in Türkiye and Bulgaria. The leading partner of the project was the Association for the Promotion and Maintenance of *Kırkpınar* Culture which is an NGO.

Second one is the modernization project by the Municipality of Edirne for men’s field at *Kırkpınar* which still continues. This is an investment to improve the facilities and infrastructure to contribute to the continuity of the festival. Also, it is important to note that Municipality of Isparta (located in southwest of Türkiye) started to build the first and biggest complex for oil wrestling this year. And third one is the digitization project that was started by the Municipality of Edirne in 2016.

Digitization project to establish the “Information and Documentation Center for *Kırkpınar* Oil Wrestling” is one of the most important projects. All printed, verbal, visual and audio data in libraries, archives and local newspapers had been scanned and transferred into digital projects. The archive is continuously updated with new materials each year. It serves as a free, open archive with 48.000 electronic resources including books, newspapers, photos, posters, etc. And above all, 450 people who are masters, wrestlers, mayors, symbolic leaders (*ağa*) had been interviewed to collect the materials of the project.<sup>4</sup>

Visibility of the heritage is considered a central aspect for safeguarding efforts. First of all, the Festival, being a very well-known organization, attracts hundreds of wrestlers from all around the country. Türkiye pay attention to the use of media in the Festival. During the festival, Turkish national televisions and the local TVs broadcast live the opening ceremony and the final games of the festival. At the same time, in recent years, famous users with many followers on social media are invited by NGOs and the municipality to promote the Festival on their social media accounts. The Ministry of Youth and Sports and Turkish Wrestling Federation also make contribution to the visibility of the Festival mostly through contests and training courses. Turkish Radio and Television Association, which is the state sponsored channel, shot some documentary films on the legend of Kırkpınar oil wrestling and also the festival a few years ago.

In addition, “Young Wrestlers”, another documentary, which was shot with the support of Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism, won two awards in Berlin and Antalya (Türkiye) back in 2016.<sup>5</sup> So, these documentaries helped a bit to the visibility of the element. The documentary is particularly important as it tells us about the dreams of children who are trained at a Boarding School of Wrestling. The documentary directly encourages the participation of youth and children in traditional wrestling. It should be noted that there are also some independent individuals who shoot documentaries on oil wrestling that are available on Youtube.

Another development that is related to the visibility is that the Turkish Radio and Television Association and some other local TVs broadcasted some productions on success stories of wrestlers. Turkish Finance Bank, one of the Turkish private banks, sponsored the festival for three years to help the festival reach wider audiences in all around the country. This is a good example of partnership with private sector for the efforts to safeguard the heritage. Another important actor for safeguarding is “The Union of Oil Wrestling Organizing Cities”, which was established in 2017. The Union makes a significant contribution to promote and spread out the tradition with its 63 member municipalities.



Figure-5: Festival Poster (2011)



Figure-6: Festival Poster (2024)

The *Figure-5* mentions UNESCO and its heritage discourse for the first time: It says “World Heritage”. This is the first poster design after the inscription of the festival on the UNESCO Representative List in 2010. And the *Figure-6* is from 2024, that was designed for 663<sup>rd</sup> festival. The golden belt is located in the middle of the poster. If a wrestler wins the title of “chief wrestler” 3 times in a row, then he has the right to get the golden belt.

There are also a number of publications on traditional oil wrestling. While there are some books published by municipalities or individual researchers, the most comprehensive work on the Kırkpınar oil wrestling is the book titled *Pehlivan* that was published by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism right after the inscription of the Festival in the UNESCO Representative List (The Figure-7). The book contains a wealth of important information about the history and transformation of the tradition.



Figure-7: The Book *Pehlivan*

It is also important to emphasize that intangible cultural heritage education was one of two funding priorities for UNESCO between 2017-2021. Because of this reason, Türkiye think that safeguarding efforts should be integrated with formal and non-formal education.

“Research and Application Center for Kırkpınar Values” which operates in affiliation with Trakya University in Edirne is valuable in terms of academic publications and applications. For example, the Center conducted a project in cooperation with another university from east side of the country to promote traditional oil wrestling at 14 universities. In addition, by August 2024, nine master’s and PhD dissertations were completed on traditional oil wrestling. On the other hand, Sportsman Training Centers that operate under the authority of Turkish Wrestling Federation help the transmission of the tradition with its 27 centers all around Türkiye with 600 students annually. Sports clubs supported and administered by local municipalities and chief wrestlers also provide decent conditions to train young wrestlers. Oil wrestlers who are trained in these clubs represent the majority of sportsman participating to the Kırkpınar Oil Wrestling Festival and many of the chief

wrestlers had been trained in these clubs. The local initiatives contribute much to the transmission of the tradition.

To conclude, it might be relevant to mention some of the challenges. The number of participating wrestlers to the Kırkpınar Oil Wrestling Festival is high. Actually, it was much higher till 2023 but the federation changed the regulation to limit the number of wrestlers who are eligible to participate. And the festival only lasts 3 days which means there is not enough time for rituals which is obviously inconsistent with the tradition.

It is another problem that, in the recent years oil wrestling organizers and the federation started to transfer some of the rules, points from other categories of wrestling which were not there previously. The problem is that the audience is not familiar with the new procedures and rules which negatively effects the pleasure of watching the wrestling matches. Another thing that is related to audience is the age groups. The festivals are mostly followed by the people who are over 40. There is no problem with attracting young wrestlers to the festival as “participants” but young people should be encouraged to watch the games as part of the “audience” which is very important for intergenerational transmission as well. And last challenge is about financial problems. The cost of organization relies on the budget allocated by the Municipality of Edirne and Kırkpınar Ağası, who is the main sponsor. The municipality’s budget is limited for such a huge event and the financial contribution of individuals as main sponsors might not always be there in the future. So it should not be taken for granted.

### References

- [1] Çevik, Doğanay (ed.). *Pehlivan*. Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı, Ankara, 2011.
- [2] UNESCO Website, Nomination Form, Kırkpınar Oil Wrestling Festival, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/krkpınar-oil-wrestling-festival-00386>
- [3] Festival’s Website, Municipality of Edirne, <https://www.edirnekirkpinar.com/tr/yazi/1-ogeler/1-altin-kemer>
- [4] For information on the Digitization Project, please visit <https://www.edirnekirkpinar.com/tr/yazi/5-projeler/39-dijitallestirme-projesi>
- [5] Please visit the website for a short video with English subtitles: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5xsWSJ0rtdQ>