

# Masculine Violence in Turkish Folk Dances

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## Abstract

As a social issue, violence continues to manifest and remains a current topic of academic research. Scientific studies mostly focus on the individual and societal dimensions of violence; however, studies that address violence in the context of everyday life practices remain limited. This study argues that violence has a masculine character as a result of gender inequality and within the framework of the masculinity-power relationality. On the other hand, this study considers folk dances as a product of social culture and views them as an effective form of non-verbal communication within society. The study is based on the claim that, in folk dances observed in formal or informal ceremonial events, which are part of everyday life and contain elements of violence, violence is legitimized as a spectacle. In this context, local folk dances from different regions of Turkey, performed exclusively by male dancers and portraying themes of heroism, victory, bravery, and courage, have been selected as examples. These include Trabzon Bıçak Horonu, Bursa Kılıç-Kalkan, Manisa Seğmen Sekmesi, Balıkesir Bengi, Erzurum Köroğlu Barı, Giresun Tüfekli Çandır Karşılması, and Diyarbakır Şur-u Mertal. The violent content of these dances has been analyzed through the method of semiotic analysis. Weapons used in these dances, fast and rhythmic tunes, and rigid movements have been considered as indicators of violence. It has been concluded that these dances, admired and enthusiastically applauded, normalize violence. This study makes a significant contribution by addressing folk dances within the context of violence and aims to fill the gap in the literature in this field.

**Keywords:** Social culture, Folk dances, Gender, Masculinity, Violence.

Focusing solely on the outcomes of violence against women, a significant social issue, within the context of visible instances and events, overlooks the root cause of the problem. Scientific studies that explore the patriarchal structure, gender inequality, and the culture of masculinity, which constitute the foundation of this issue, continue to develop findings and suggestions aimed at solving the problem. This study aims to highlight and make visible violence that has become normalized and thus invisible in everyday life practices as a spectacle

of entertainment. From this perspective, the study includes an identification of the problem, as the solution can only be possible through understanding the problem.

Within the scope of this study, the place of folk dances in social culture and the representation of gender in these dances are first discussed. Subsequently, the phenomenon of violence as a spectacle in folk dances is addressed, and the theoretical framework of the study is established. In this direction, a survey of folk dances from different geographical regions

has been conducted with the claim that the violent content, enthusiastically applauded by spectators, legitimizes violence. A sample fitting the purpose of representing violence was selected. Based on the premise that folk dances are a form of non-verbal communication and contain linguistic signs, a qualitative research method, semiotic analysis, was applied to the selected sample.

Although some studies exist on gender in folk dances as a field of research, no study in the literature has been found that addresses or associates folk dances within the context of violence. While this poses a significant limitation for research, it is believed that this study will make a substantial contribution to the literature as the first work to approach the subject from this perspective. Furthermore, the application of semiotic analysis as a research method to analyze folk dances as a form of performance art or dance execution also appears to be a first in the literature. Despite these limitations, it is expected that this study will serve as an example for future research.

## Folk Dances as a Product of Social Culture

Huizinga, who defines humans as a playful being (*homo ludens*) and emphasizes that "play" is at the core of all cultural structures, states that "primitive communities performed their sacred rituals, offerings, sacrifices, and ceremonies, which provided them with the means to ensure the well-being of the world, in the form of simple games" (1995: 21), thereby linking the origin of play to rituals. Giurchescu, on the other hand, defines dance primarily as a non-verbal communication tool that establishes contact between people or between humans and the supernatural world, stating that a dance text can only be understood within its internal and external textual relationships. In this context, she speaks of four levels of meaning in dance: deep intercultural level, conceptual level, ritual level, and artistic level (2001: 112).

On this basis, folk dances, as non-verbal forms of communication and visual cultural products, emerged with the purpose of expressing human emotions and beliefs and narrating various heroism and war stories, much like oral and written texts. These dances, which are anonymous because they date back to times too ancient to trace their origins, have choreography characteristics that are related to the stories told by the movements and their context. Some dances depict events through individual movements, while others, performed collectively, present a display of living and rejoicing together, showcasing social solidarity (Mete, 2020: 738).

Folk dances are defined as "measured and orderly movements that reflect the cultural values of the society they belong to, express an event, a joy, or a sorrow, originate from religion and magic, and are performed with or without music, individually or in groups" (Eroğlu, 1999: 33). Folk dances, which mostly reflect the characteristics of limited geographical regions or areas, have a local nature in this sense. These dances, which are a re-enactment of the past (Keskin, 1988: 102) and provide important insights into the lives of the communities that perform them, also play significant roles in the transmission of social knowledge and beliefs (Sernikli, 1976: 5).

In the past, folk dances were learned "spontaneously" in the enculturation process by the people of the communities they belonged to and were performed in their "natural" environments. Today, however, they are learned by enthusiasts through special efforts in institutions and organizations, with the addition of new choreographic elements, special costumes, sound and lighting effects, resulting in a modernized stage performance (Özbek, 1981). Nevertheless, because they contain traditional cultural elements, they maintain their essence and continue to be passed down from generation to generation. In other words, "the conflict between permanence and variability, as it spreads across the entire culture, is also observed

in individual cultural elements. Although permanence and variability are two conflicting characteristics of culture, this situation does not disrupt the unity and integrity of culture; this conflict gives culture a dynamic harmony, not a discord" (Karşlı, 2016: 52-53).

A large portion of folk dances in Anatolia are mimetic, dramatic dances. These types of dances rely on the imitation of daily life, natural events, male-female relationships, wars, or animals. For example, Uzundere, played in Kars, or Coşkun Çoruh, played in Artvin, are dances about natural events. In the figures of the Karadeniz horon, the gentle and then harsh, fierce waves of the Black Sea, the boats dipping in and out of the sea, and the fish struggling in the nets are depicted. Bursa's Kılıç Kalkan and Erzurum's Hançer Barı are reenactments of wars and battles. Keklik, played in İçel, and Kartal, played in Bingöl, are dances that imitate animals. The Hasat dance of Adıyaman and the Teşi dance of Artvin are dances that imitate work and daily life (Mete, 2020: 740-741). In this context, halay, bar, horon, zeybek, and karşılama are the most common dance forms. These forms, which are grouped based on certain common features like music, figures, and costumes, are regionally classified according to where they are performed, although not with strict boundaries. For example, zeybek is most common in the Aegean region, horon in the Black Sea region, bar in Eastern Anatolia, and halay in Central and Southeastern Anatolia. However, there are no definite boundaries in this regard, as it is possible to find the halay, performed in Central Anatolia, also played in Eastern Anatolia (Ertural, 2006: 8).

In general, folk dances, which have social functions such as forming a common consciousness, ensuring solidarity, and reinforcing traditional values, are typically performed collectively. These group dances are classified as women's dances, men's dances, and mixed (women and men together) dances (And, 2007: 172). The visibility of dominant gender norms in this classification is noteworthy.

## Representation of Gender in Folk Dances

Gender roles encompass societal expectations that limit the activities men and women can engage in and dictate what they should do. These societal expectations create pressure on individuals to conform. This reality is also reflected in folk dances. In traditional performances, the expectations of female performers align with gender-related societal expectations. To better understand this, we need to first examine the stereotypical gender roles between men and women in traditional performances, how these roles are portrayed, how masculinity and femininity are presented, the prominence of female dancers/performers in shows, role distributions, and even costume styles (Saral, 2004, [www.art-izan.org/](http://www.art-izan.org/)).

Examples of this, which were less common in traditional practices of the past, have become more visible in folk dance staging efforts since the 1950s, with men and women starting to appear together on stage. However, despite performing together, the role of women in traditional performances remains modest and reserved. Even if the dance movements are the same as the man's, the active one is always the man. It is the men who lead the group, give commands, direct the dance, perform difficult movements in the spotlight, and control the flow of the group dance. Therefore, the ones who are "followed" are the men (Kurt, 2008, <https://www.art-izan.org/>). While male dances emphasize physical strength and activity, women must act in accordance with the grace of femininity. "Femininity" is a particularly emphasized aspect of traditional dance (Ötken, 2011: 270).

The focus of this study includes folk dances such as Hançer Barı, Bıçak Horonu, Köroğlu, and Tüfek Oyunu, which tell stories of war, struggle, and heroism and are performed only by men, incorporating dynamic and forceful movements. In these dances, props like swords, shields, sticks, daggers, knives, and rifles are used. These props are not only seen in men's

dances but also appear frequently in dances that portray relationships between men and women—where the woman plays hard to get, is the object of jealousy, or where the man seeks to demonstrate his power to the woman. Even in these dances, where the woman is frightened, subdued, or conversely, pursued, she must maintain her femininity. For example: "In the Sarı Zeybek dance from Sivas, one dancer is a woman, and the other is a man. The woman sits, while the man pleads with her, and then tries to impress her with his daggers. Eventually, the woman agrees, stands up, and they dance together... In the Yerli Zeybek dance from Çorum, the bride stands in the middle, and the groom and the other men try to intimidate her... The Bıçak (Knife) dance from Elâzığ is similar. Here, the girl sits on the edge of a drum while the men, driven by jealousy, attack with knives, trying to show off their strength and bravery..." (And, 2007: 175).

### Violence as a Spectacle in Folk Dances

There is no clear or conceptually agreed-upon definition of the scope, boundaries, impact, or categories of violence. It can refer to behavior or emotions, as well as an action or situation. Although violence is often the subject of studies within the framework of interpersonal relationships and psychological effects, it should also be addressed in the context of cultural patterns and its social consequences.

How violence is presented and accepted within society is important. This is because accepted violence is legitimate. In fact, if violence is generally adopted as a way of life, it is not seen as a problem and is even approved as a tool for problem-solving (Ergil, 2001: 40). The acceptance and legitimization of violence are directly related to its "visibility" and the "normalization" of this visibility.

From the past to the present, violence has been a source of inspiration and a subject in religious, literary, and artistic works. Immortal works from all cultures around the world often

depict terrifying representations of hunts, battles, murders, fires, accidents, or post-death remains (Trend, 2008: 103). In this context, the universal tendency toward violence has attracted human interest, not only in such works but also as a spectacle. According to Han, who conceptualizes pre-modern societies as "societies of blood," violence in these societies was a theatrical performance that was watched or displayed as a part of everyday life, even serving as an entertainment element. As displays of power, "the ceremonies and symbols of authority solidify dominance. Spectacular ceremonies and symbols of violence, brutal feasts, and ceremonial punishments are part of the theater and performance staged by power. Physical torture is exhibited publicly to create the greatest effect" (Han, 2022: 9). From the Roman Empire's "Panem et circenses" (bread and circuses) to the French Revolution's guillotine executions or the torturous executions of the Middle Ages, these events have always drawn large and enthusiastic crowds (Scognamillo, 1996: 357). In today's world, events like Spanish bullfights or combat sports such as karate and boxing also function as entertainment spectacles involving violence.

Violence is directly related to power, and power, in turn, refers to masculinity. In other words, violence operates as a demonstration of power and authority, which are foundational elements of hegemonic masculinity. In this context, violence, inherently masculine in nature, continues to be a significant social issue regardless of place or time—whether directed by men toward women, other men, or even themselves. The most important source of this social issue lies in the practices embedded within societal culture, daily life, and traditions that reproduce, reinforce, normalize, and legitimize violence. It is possible to talk about practices that affirm violence, from children's street games to the language used to express love, from media representations to customs and traditions.

Studies addressing violence in the context of representation have mostly been conducted within the field of cinema. In his pioneering

work on the subject, Giroux identifies three categories related to visual violence in cinematic narratives: ceremonial, symbolic, and hyper-realistic (1995: 301-304). In this context, the violence displayed in folk dances can be classified under the ceremonial category, which is superficial and visually appealing. Therefore, it can be argued that folk dances, which are performed in various settings, sometimes during official ceremonies and other times in informal entertainment contexts or opening ceremonies, containing elements of violence, are practices where violence appears as a spectacle in everyday life.

Additionally, as Mikkelsen and Soogard highlight: "While such verbal, bodily or storied displays hint at the individual's violent capacities or future violent scenarios, they are often in themselves not recognized as actual violence. Male performance of violent potentiality in this way seems to encapsulate a particular strategy for expressing masculinity that operates through a simultaneous (symbolic) transgression and reconfirmation of cultural taboos on violence" (2015: 285).

### **Semiotic Analysis of Masculine Violence in Turkish Folk Dances**

In this study, which examines the representation of masculine violence in folk dances as part of social culture and a form of non-verbal communication, the method of semiotic analysis has been used. Folk dances have been considered as performances that utilize body language, and the figures, tools, and dance compositions within these dances have been evaluated as signs that contain traditional codes.

As is well known, according to Saussure's approach, a pioneer of structural linguistics, language is a system composed of signs. Signs, which represent the combination of the signifier and the signified or the form and meaning, constitute written, spoken, or visual language. In this context, although it is not possible to claim

that dance is a structured language, it can be said that folk dances, in particular, are a form of communication containing conventional codes. Bannerman, who considers dance as a form of expression that communicates with the audience, notes that while this systematic form of representation does not easily correspond to dance in general, the situation is different when it comes to body language. This is because every nation or society develops and uses various traditional bodily gestures, and such gestures are frequently seen in dance performances (2014: 68).

In the realm of Turkish folk dances, seven folk dances from different geographical regions of Turkey were selected as a sample using the purposive sampling technique. Among these dances, Erzurum Köroğlu Barı, Bursa Kılıç Kalkan, Diyarbakır Şur-u Mertal, and Trabzon Bıçak Horonu fall under the category of dances that mimic armed combat; Manisa Seğmen Sekmesi/Bıçak Havası, Balıkesir Bengi, and Giresun Tüfekli Çandır Karşılması are dances that depict heroism in war and the celebration of victory.

It should be noted that folk dances with similar themes are found in different parts of the world. For example, dances such as Capoeira (Brazil), Māori Haka (New Zealand), Cossack (Ukraine-Russia-Kazakhstan), Kalaripayattu (India), and Khevsuruli (Georgia) are folk dances that feature dramatic representations of violence and focus on themes of courage, war, and heroism. Each of these dances, like those in Anatolian folk traditions, both glorifies these values and legitimizes violence within their respective cultures.

To analyze the signs of masculine violence in the selected Anatolian folk dances, the video recordings of these dances were first examined, and the signs of violence within them were identified. These signs, consisting of music, rhythm, and figures representing masculine violence, as well as weapons, were analyzed using the method of semiotic analysis. The costumes worn by the dancers in these

performances are local in nature and are also used in the performance of different types of dances in each region. Therefore, they were not considered as signs of violence in the analysis.

### 5.1. Trabzon Bıçak Horonu

**Music and Figures:** This type of horon dance, seen in the Trabzon region, is performed by two male dancers. After a poem recitation aimed at energizing both the "warrior dancers" and the audience, the dance begins with the traditional horon figures, performed by two dancers standing side by side and holding hands, accompanied by the melodies of the kemençe, a traditional Black Sea musical instrument. When the dancers shift to a face-to-face position, the drum joins the melody, and the drumbeats make the knife-wielding and clashing movements rhythmic. The attack figures between the dancers create a performance that is both intimidating and awe-inspiring. In the fight symbolized by the Bıçak Horonu, the goal is to display warrior skills and intimidate enemies through this display. This exhibition of violence is also intended to create a spectacle for the audience. While the dance entertains, it simultaneously conveys the message that the one showing violence is powerful and that power brings superiority.

**Weapons:** In this folk dance, long knives called *karakulak* or Circassian daggers are used. These handmade weapons, which have an important place in the cultural history of the region and are produced locally, can also be seen as a representation of the militaristic character of the men from the region.



(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rrqqILTCs1U>)

### 5.2. Bursa Kılıç Kalkan

**Music and Figures:** This dance, from the Bursa region, is known as the only folk dance performed without music. The rhythm of the dance is created by the sound of swords striking shields and the ground, as a group of male dancers forms a circle on stage. These sounds symbolize the noise of battle and the intensity of combat. At the same time, they convey to the audience the chaotic and tense atmosphere of the battlefield. The commands of the team leader direct the synchronized movements of the dancers, which imitate an assault and combat against the enemy. Two dancers from the group engage in attack and defense movements, accompanied by battle cries. These shouts, symbols of excitement and bravery, allow the dancers to display courage and strength to one another and the audience, adding a sense of realism to this battle-imitating dance.

**Weapons:** In this folk dance, the sword has been a symbol of power, war, and bravery throughout Turkish history. The shield, used as a complementary piece to the sword, serves as a defensive tool to protect against incoming sword blows. The skillful use of these war instruments, which give the dance its name, directly represents war and violence, showcasing the warrior skills of the dancers.



(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p4sDObD507U&t=590s>)

### 5.3. Manisa Seğmen Sekmesi/Bıçak Havası

**Music and Figures:** The dance known as Seğmen/Seymen sekmesi, seen in the İzmir and Manisa regions, is performed with long knives.

This dance is also referred to as bıçak havası. The dancers strike their knives together while performing spinning and crouching movements, accompanied by the tunes of drums and zurna (a traditional woodwind instrument). In this region, the individuals performing the dance are called "bıçak" (knife), and the group of dancers is referred to as the "bıçak alayı" (knife procession) (Dağlı, 2012: 18-19). The fact that the dancers are named after the weapon used in the performance highlights the direct connection between this victory celebration dance and war and violence.

The drum and zurna, traditional Turkish folk music instruments with roots in the Middle East and Central Asia, add a lively rhythm and excitement to the dance. The sound produced by the dancers striking the knives together is accompanied by battle cries. These cries, an expression of the joy of victory, also strengthen the sense of unity among the dancers. Performed as a celebration of soldiers returning from war, this dance symbolizes bravery and heroism.

Weapons: The knives used in the Manisa Seğmen Sekmesi dance are not used to represent a conflict between the dancers. Instead, the dancers hold the knives in both hands and strike them together in the air, symbolizing the collective celebration of soldiers as the victors of a battle. These long knives serve as symbols of strength, courage, bravery, and heroism.



([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gL3Yj5cB4\\_c](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gL3Yj5cB4_c))

#### 5.4. Balıkesir Bengi Dance

Music and Figures: The bengi dance, performed in the Balıkesir and Bergama regions,

symbolizes a celebration of victory. The bengi dance, which means "immortality," is one of the zeybek types from the Aegean region and is performed in large circles to the special rhythm of drums and zurna, called ceng-i harbi (meaning spear or bayonet warfare). In the dance, the dancers' bold and forceful movements, accompanied by battle cries, symbolize heroism in battle. These cries, which represent a display of masculinity and power, dominate the entire dance. The figure of the dancers striking their knees on the ground is considered a representation of the number of enemies killed in battle. These movements also demonstrate the agility, bravery, and warrior skills of the dancers.

Weapons: In the bengi dance, the dancers do not use any weapons. This shows that heroism and courage can also be displayed through physical strength and agility in the performance.



(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2AGOqrj2Scs>)

#### 5.5. Erzurum Köroğlu Bari

Music and Figures: This dance, performed in the Erzurum region, is a mimicry of armed combat. It begins with a synchronized performance of bar figures by a group of dancers, known as yayvan bari. The Köroğlu Bari, symbolizing the struggle with the enemy, is performed as two male dancers, separated from the group, engage in combat with broadswords or swords in the center. The attack and defense movements, showcasing the dancers' warrior skills, are sometimes accompanied by verses from a Köroğlu poem, which directly incites

violence with lines like "strike my Ayvaz, strike, break my Ayvaz, break." As in many Anatolian folk dances, the rhythmic movements of the *Köroğlu Barı*, played to the tunes of drums and zurna, enhance the dramatic structure and excitement of the performance.

**Weapons:** In the Erzurum *Köroğlu Barı*, broadswords or swords are used. These weapons, symbols of bravery, strength, and heroism, are skillfully wielded by the dancers, creating excitement among the audience and serving to reinforce the acceptance of violence.



([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7GVqLXI TcUA&ab\\_channel=r%C4%B1fatk%C4%B1rk keseli](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7GVqLXI TcUA&ab_channel=r%C4%B1fatk%C4%B1rk keseli))

#### 5.6. Giresun Tüfekli Çandır Karşılması

**Music and Figures:** This is a male dance originating from the village of Çandır in the Şebinkarahisar district of Giresun. As a local dance, it is a variation of the *karşılama* form and is performed to the tunes of *bağlama* and *zurna*, traditional Turkish folk music instruments. The theme of the *Tüfekli Çandır Karşılması* revolves around heroism and the celebration of victory, with dancers holding rifles and incorporating up-and-down movements of the weapons along with traditional *karşılama* dance figures.

**Weapons:** In the Giresun *Tüfekli Çandır Karşılması*, rifles are used, making it the only folk dance in Anatolia that incorporates firearms. The mastery of rifle use is demonstrated as a symbolic expression of power and authority,

serving as a display of masculine strength. The rifle, as a direct representation of violence, and the skillful handling of this weapon, are also markers of social respect within the culture of masculinity.



(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pq4nA1s8yu4>)

#### 5.7. Diyarbakır Şur-u Merteal Dance

**Music and Figures:** This is a type of *halay* dance from Diyarbakır that represents a battle between two groups of men. The dance portrays a battle scene where two groups meet with the aim of inflicting casualties on each other (Koraltan, 2020: 72-82). In the choreography, the intertwined groups symbolize clashing soldiers. Unlike the *Kılıç-Kalkan* (Sword-Shield) dance from the Bursa region, this is a musical dance performed to *halay* tunes played by an orchestra consisting of traditional Turkish folk music instruments such as drums, *zurna*, and *bağlama*. The rhythmic sounds produced by swords striking shields enhance the dramatic nature of the dance. These sounds help create excitement by conveying the atmosphere of battle to the audience. As with other combat-mimicking dances, the enthusiastic display of violence as a spectacle and the celebration of this violence contribute to its legitimization.

**Weapons:** The name of this dance comes from "*Şur-u*," meaning "sword," and "*Merteal*," meaning "shield." Sticks representing swords are used in the performance. These weapons, the clearest symbols of war and violence, are important elements of the culture of masculinity.





(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jsILKIWC EUE>)

## Evaluation and Conclusion

Whether direct and visible or normalized and symbolic, violence arises as a result of social, individual, cultural, or economic structures of inequality. In this context, violence reproduces hegemonic masculinity, which is based on power and authority, benefiting from gender inequality.

In folk dances, which are products of local folk culture, rhythmic music, harsh movements symbolizing attack or combat, and the use of weapons symbolize war or male rivalry, while also narrating stories of masculine heroism. Therefore, in these dances, which are performed exclusively by men, weapons such as knives, swords, rifles, and sticks are used as direct representations of violence. The display of strength by the male dancers, characterized by the harshness and agility of the dance

movements and their threatening demeanor, reveals the masculine nature of these dances.

This study has identified that folk dances, such as zeybek, halay, horon, karşılama, and bar, performed across different geographical regions of Turkey—from the north to the south and from the east to the west—share a common theme in showcasing masculine violence as a spectacle of entertainment that represents bravery and heroism. It was concluded that the enthusiastic applause from the audience for the display of violence normalizes and legitimizes societal violence. Additionally, these folk dances, which are part of daily life and contain elements of violence, facilitate the learning of violence by children and young people through observation and imitation. In this way, violence becomes normalized and ordinary, eventually becoming invisible and no longer recognized as a problem. This study, which addresses violence in traditional folk dances, identifies normalized violence as a problem and makes it visible through analysis. The identification of this issue, as one aspect of the multidimensional problem of societal violence, represents the first step toward finding a solution.

The fact that this research is the first to address the topic from this perspective posed a significant limitation in the preparation of the study. While the first step has been taken in contributing to the literature, there is a need for more extensive and detailed studies in this field.

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