

# 'Ethiopian' wrestling between sportization of national heritage and dynamic youth culture

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## Abstract

*The following article uses cultural wrestling in Ethiopia as a lens to study sport as a social practice. It discusses the relation between a highly diversified phenomenon, which had already been studied by national authorities from the late 1970s onwards, and the various attempts to produce a regulated form. This "sportization" process, which has resulted in regional and national competitions, is thwarted by local wrestling practices that not only guarantee the preservation of diversity, but also keep wrestling as a game which is still conceptualized as leisure. Using an example from rural Tigray, the article also discusses wrestling as part of a youth culture by which young males are taught to control aggressive behaviour and to act in a responsible way towards their community.*

**Keywords:** Wrestling – heritage – sportization – leisure – youth culture

## Introduction

In 2000-1, the sport expert Tibebe Gorfu published a study about the possibilities for standardizing places which could be used on a daily basis for practicing cultural sport games in Ethiopia. Based on a survey in three federal states (Tigray, Afar, and Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples), he identified eighteen terms for local wrestling and no less than six different styles. A workshop on wrestling as body technique at the University of Mekelle in July 2012 substantiated the fact that wrestling is highly diversified.<sup>2</sup> During the workshop it became clear that the differences refer not only to style, dress and age groups, but to much more complex social practices in which wrestling is embedded.

In light of such a variety it might be difficult to speak of 'Ethiopian' wrestling as such. The term exists only in blogs and is usually substituted by the Amharic words *tigil* or *gibbigibb*.<sup>3</sup> These refer to a specific style, practice and,

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<sup>3</sup> *Shaking hands: Mark wrestles tigil in Ethiopia*. <http://wrestlingroots.org/shaking-hands-mark-wrestles-tigil-in-ethiopia/> (accessed, 13 August 2012).

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last but not least, process which attempts to turn a cultural game into a sport. The British sports sociologist Joseph Maguire defines this process as follows:

*The sportization process involved a shift towards the competitive, regularized, rationalized, and gendered bodily exertions of achievement sport that, in turn, connected to wider changes at the level of personality, body deportment, and social interaction. This process entailed regulating violence, developing formalized sets of rules and governing bodies, and shifting body habitus.<sup>4</sup>*

The following observations about wrestling in Ethiopia and 'Ethiopian' wrestling are situated in the productive tension between diversification and standardization. They are based on archival research in Addis Ababa (Library of the Ministry of Youth and Sports, Library of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies), interviews with sport officials in the Ethiopian Cultural Sports Federation, the Addis Ababa Youth and Sports Bureau, Department for Cultural Sports, the Youth and Sports Bureau in Hawzén (Tigray) and participant observation at local wrestling matches in Debrī (Tigray) in 2011/12.<sup>5</sup>

The historiography of wrestling in Ethiopia, which I deal with in the first part, concerns the various attempts by sport historians, sport officials, tourist offices and the media to describe wrestling as a cultural body practice of national importance. Although it has not yet reached the status of national heritage which is primarily assigned to tangible artefacts, this might change in future. Prior to the UNESCO "intangible heritage" convention in 2003,<sup>6</sup> debates on what heritage means included various aspects of intellectual property and traditional or indigenous knowledge, which included body practices such as games right from the outset.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, since the *Kerkpınar Oil Wrestling Festival* was inscribed in 2010 on the Representative List of the *Intangible Cultural Heritage* of Humanity, cultural sport officials around the world may well have become even more interested in local styles of their own countries.

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<sup>4</sup> Joseph Maguire, *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, Blackwell Reference online, 2007; [http://www.blackwellreference.com/public/tocnode?id=g9781405124331\\_yr2012\\_chunk\\_g978140512433125\\_ss1-242](http://www.blackwellreference.com/public/tocnode?id=g9781405124331_yr2012_chunk_g978140512433125_ss1-242) (accessed 13 August 2012).

<sup>5</sup> I am greatly indebted to Mulugeta Hagos, Julian Tadesse and Fitsum Tefere for their assistance in libraries and archives. My fieldwork in and around Mekelle would have been impossible without the help of Mel'aku Kidane and Wolbert Smidt. The interviews in Hawzén and Maryam P'ap'aseyti were conducted together with Luna D'Ambrosi, Tekla Jenovese, and Sylvia Panoni. Bisrat Gebru has to be thanked for his excellent work as a translator.

<sup>6</sup> Tibebe Gorfu (1993 E.C./2000-1), *Yebabil sport mazenteriya sijrawočč standard menneša finat*, Addis Ababa, uncatalogued Ms., Library of the Ethiopian Sports Commission, pp. 12-14.

<sup>7</sup> For worldwide discussion about the definition of "intangible cultural heritage" see the replies to UNESCO questionnaire (<http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/doc/src/00078-EN.pdf>, accessed 6 August 2012).

Studies by Ethiopian experts of the 1980s and 1990s about cultural sport practices directly fed into various aspects of formulating a national sports policy. Wrestling, because of its widespread practice, was selected as one of the six cultural sports and games (*yebabil sportočinna čewata*) to undergo “sportization” from above. I will discuss in the second part what exactly this entails and how this part of the national sports policy is implemented.

Thinking in dialectical terms that every process also produces its opposite, we have to ask if the policy of promoting a tamed version of diversified cultural sport practice encourages communities and individuals to explicitly keep and practice local styles. In the third part, I will reflect on this question on the basis of field research done in rural places near Mekelle (Tigray).

### Historiography of wrestling in Ethiopia and the heritage question

Similar to the study of other cultural sport practices, wrestling began to attract the systematic attention of Ethiopian researchers only in the late 1970s.<sup>8</sup> Following a proclamation enacted in 1975 to establish sport competition with the view to promote, to coordinate as well as to scientifically and systematically register and study traditional sports in Ethiopia, significant work was undertaken through the involvement of Tefere Mekonnen (then Sport Commission’s staff in charge). By 1978 a group of sport experts had made a study in the existing provinces and registered 293 traditional sports. Later, six cultural sport practices were chosen for further promotion. Wrestling was one of them.<sup>9</sup>

Studying the historiography of wrestling in Ethiopia, I realized that it was buried in obscurity prior to the mid-nineteenth century. The absence of written or visual documents before the twentieth century not only forced authors to resort to reduced forms of oral history methods (*af tarik*),<sup>10</sup> which obscure the oral sources by saying only that “the forefathers testify” (*yeqedmo abbatočč yimesekkirallu*).<sup>11</sup> They also apply an essentializing discourse of timelessness and unchangeability because they might not have any other option than to read the present into the past. “Although tangible evidence is rare to find as to when and where wrestling started we can understand from history that Ethiopians

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<sup>8</sup> Tibebe Gorfu (1993 E.C./2000-1), *Yebabil sport mazenteriya sifrawočč standerd mennaša tinat*, Addis Abbbaba, Ms. Library of the Ethiopian Sports Commission.

<sup>9</sup> Teferi Mekonnen (1973 E.C./1981), *Nebbar sport* (Ms. Library of the Ethiopian Sports Commission; Addis Ababa). The historical part of this manuscript *Tintawi nebbar sportoččacčinin be’addis sir’at inninqaçčew/inniččawanwetaččew* (p. 30-31) was reproduced in later publications (Be’ityop’iya bahilawi sport fēdērēšin (1992 E.C./1999), *Babilawi sportoččacčinin sir’at inninqaçčew/inniččawanwetaččew*, Ms. Library of the Ethiopian Sports Commission, Addis Ababa, pp. 7-8, Tibebe Gorfu (1993 E.C./2000-1), p. 29-20).

<sup>10</sup> Be’ityop’iya bahilawi sport fēdērēšin (1992 E.C./1999), p. 30.

<sup>11</sup> Mekonnin Teklu et al. (2001 E.C.), *Tešaššilew yeqerrebu yebabil sport*, Addis Ababa: n.p; p. 7.

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tested the strength of their physical power to earn higher reputation in wrestling and such fights.”<sup>12</sup> Such statements formed the basis for promoting the sport in the media.<sup>13</sup>

The justification for freezing cultural sport practices in the mould of an unknown past might be the result of an understanding of 'culture' as *a set of stable ideas*, which would shift the term closer to the classic definition of 'tradition', as the "internal handing on through time".<sup>14</sup> What Ethiopian researchers and authors did, however, was to *observe* wrestling. Thus, their writings did not even reflect on the possibility of earlier changes and only considered the organisational structures at one moment in time. The discussion to understand culture beyond organizational structures and to include discontinuities and unexpected changes had only just started.<sup>15</sup>

As a consequence, I suggest that we not speak of 'traditional' or 'Ethiopian' wrestling, but of *tigil, gibbigibb, qilis* etc. as wrestling practices in Ethiopia. Avoiding the nominal qualifier 'traditional' also relieves us from the very unhealthy "traditional vs. modern" dichotomy.<sup>16</sup> The explicit change in terminology from 'traditional' to 'cultural' sports was facilitated by Ethiopian sports officials in the late 1970s.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, the term 'local wrestling' bears the danger of defining a specific practice in terms of place, which is often linked to ethnicity, thus overlooking the fact that practices spread and change and labelling certain wrestling practices as illegal.

All documents agree that wrestling gained enormous popularity in Ethiopia during the reign of Emperor Tewodros (who died at Meqdele in 1868). The story goes that he invited some British to try the strength of some of his men;

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.; similar introductory sentences can be found in Tibebe Gorfu (1993 E.C./2000-1), p. 19 and Beṭtyop'iya bahilawi sport fēdērēšin (1992 E.C./1999), p. 30.

<sup>13</sup> "Although wrestling is now an authentic sport, it was never 'invented'. Since time immemorial and at all stages of their youth men have played and fought together matching their strength against strength to show off their individual strength and superiority." Jill Last (1982), *Ethiopian festivals: Sports, games, celebrations, occasions and pilgrimages; Text and illustrations*, A.A. Ethiopian Tourist Commission, IES Library, 791.6 LAS. Reprinted under the title "Tigil: Traditional Wrestling", *Ethiopian Herald*, 11 July 1990, p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> This understanding of the term 'tradition' is mainly associated with the American anthropologist Alfred L. Kroeber.

<sup>15</sup> Stewart Hall's article "Cultural studies: Two paradigms", *Media, culture and society* 2 (1980), 57-72 is still very revealing about the epistemological implications in the study of culture as practice vs. culture as concept.

<sup>16</sup> For an excellent critique from an African historian's perspective see Frederick Cooper (2005), *Colonialism in question: Theory, knowledge, history*, Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 113-114. James G. Ferguson argues for non-linear, variation-centered models of social transformation that include unfulfilled expectations and unexpected change (James G. Ferguson (2008), "Global disconnect: Abjection and the aftermath of modernism", in *Readings in modernity in Africa*, ed. Peter Geschiere, Birgit Meyer, and Peter Pels, Oxford: James Currey, p. 8-16).

<sup>17</sup> Aleme Eshete (1982), *The cultural situation in socialist Ethiopia*, Paris: UNESCO, p. 53 (<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0004/000481/048160eo.pdf>, accessed 15 August 2012)

it is said, and seems quite probable, that the Ethiopians won easily and were rewarded in consequence by their king with mules and panoplies, oxen, sheep, sword and shields. Tewodros himself is said to have acted as the referee in these matches.<sup>18</sup> This case recalls what the sociologist Norbert Elias described for the functional character of competitions at the French Royal court in the sixteenth and seventeenth century. There, knights' tournaments (*Ritterspiele*) secured the king's domination and the balance of power.<sup>19</sup>

If wrestling, which is after all a contact/combat sport, was part of displaying power and, as reward, improving the condition of potential soldiers, the question arises whether we can conceptualize it as part of what Donald Levine described as *gobezinnet* – “a symbol for masculine aggressiveness and hardiness”.<sup>20</sup> Jumping, at least linguistically, between the past and the present, Levine says that “the traditional Amhara ideal of masculinity primarily refers to aggressive capacity”.<sup>21</sup> The author goes so far as to label the Ethiopian ideal of masculinity as “aggressivity unbound” (in contrast to the Japanese “bound aggressivity”).<sup>22</sup> He explains this “unboundedness” by the fact that boys are trained to be aggressive (especially towards outsiders). “Temper tantrums are regarded positively [...and] norms of violent revenge [...] are taught to growing boys.”<sup>23</sup> Looking through the lens of wrestling, and assuming that it was part and parcel of a boy's physical and mental education, especially during the time of his adolescence, we find a reverse picture. With its regulating features and the strict supervision by elders and the community as a whole, it was and still is a way to teach *bound aggressiveness*. In *Bahilawi sportoččaččinin besir'at inninqaččew/inniččanwetaččew* (Let us learn and play our cultural sport disciplines in the right way!) we read that the *attagay abbat šimagiločč* (elder counseling referees) reprove fighters who try to convert the competition into a fight. According to common practice, the one who throws has to stand up in order not to inflict any further harm to his opponent. The opponent is carefully checked to see if can continue the match.<sup>24</sup>

In their historical introductions, the documents mentioned so far are consistent in attributing cultural sport practices to rural settings, special places, specific times of the year and specific ages. According to the natural and

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<sup>18</sup> Mekonnin Teklu et al. (2001 E.C.), p. 8.; Be'ityop'iya bahilawi sport fēdērēšin (1992 E.C./1999), p. 31.

<sup>19</sup> Norbert Elias (1984), “Das höfische Ritterspiel als ein Symbol gesamtgesellschaftlicher Machtbalance”, in: *Sport im Zivilisationsprozeß*, ed. Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning, Münster: Lit Verlag, pp. 82-84.

<sup>20</sup> Donald Levine, “The masculinity ethic and the spirit of warriorhood in Ethiopian and Japanese cultures”, in: *International Journal of Ethiopian Studies* Vol. 2, No. 1/2 (Summer/Fall 2005-2006), p. 164.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166.

<sup>24</sup> Be'ityop'iya bahilawi sport fēdērēšin (1992 E.C./1999), p. 31.

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seasonal conditions, wrestling takes place on riverbanks, on meadows or collected green grass or the straw which can be found on the threshing floor (*awdimma*). It was (and still is) connected to the agrarian cycle in so far as contests were conducted after the harvest when people had time for relaxation.<sup>25</sup> Although the texts mention holidays (*awid 'amet*), none of them is specific about them. According to the documented oral testimony of the forefathers, the wrestlers (sg. *tagay*) were chosen by their villages or by the inhabitants of a sparsely populated area. They wrestled according to age groups. On a holiday, the best wrestlers of different villages competed in public for the title. The champion became the leader of the area (*yegobez alaḳī*), got his price and his heroic name (*yegobez sim*). He was respected and feared by the whole community.<sup>26</sup> Concerning the 'age of wrestling', the documents are not very specific. Teferi (1973/81) and his 'reproducers' mention adolescents (*guremsocč*), which is linked to the fact that wrestling has been part of male youth culture – a topic to which I will return in relation to current observations in rural Tigray. The documents also report that young males used to signify their strength as wrestlers by tattooing their arms after having tested their strength while herding.<sup>27</sup>

With regard to style and dress, the work by Ṭibebu Gorfu (1993 E.C./2000-1) contains the best information. Since the data were collected in the 1980s, I prefer here to use the past tense. Apart from the different terms for wrestling, which he lists for three regions (Afar, Tigray, Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples), the author relates that wrestling in the south and in the Afar region was done with naked upper body (*iraqut kewegeb belay*) whereas in Tigray wrestling was done in trousers and shirt. With regard to styles he mentions the widely practiced waist-to-waist style (*wegeb lewegeb meyyayaz*), the neck-to-neck style (*maḡirat lemaḡirat*) and the style of the Kambata of the Sodo Zuria district in the Southwest, who included a stick or a whip into the competition.<sup>28</sup>

Before I turn to the heritage question, let me briefly mention that urban centers were associated with 'modern' sports only; i.e. in the case of wrestling with the Olympic style. My survey of Amharic and English newspapers and magazines from the 1940s until the 1970s reveals that wrestling was mentioned only sporadically and if so only Olympic-style matches were reported. This style was trained and practiced by members of the Imperial Body Guard or members of Olympiakos, the sports team of the Greek Club in Addis Ababa,

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>26</sup> Ṭibebu Gorfu (1993 E.C./2000-1), p. 20; Beṭtyop'iya bahilawi sport fēdērēšin (1992 E.C./1999), p. 31.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.; Teferi Mekonnen (1973 E.C./1981), p. 22.

<sup>28</sup> Ṭibebu Gorfu (1993 E.C./2000-1), pp. 12-14.

and openly displayed shortly after World War II.<sup>29</sup> In his memoirs about life in the Piazza quarter, Fikru Kidane remembers that the Greek Club used to invite wrestlers from Alexandria (Egypt) or Athens (Greece) for public wrestling matches.<sup>30</sup> The Italian community had their wrestling community who seem to have regularly gathered in the La Gare quarter.<sup>31</sup> Later in the 1960s, the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) offered three-month courses in Freestyle Wrestling (*netsa tigil*).<sup>32</sup> Given the fluidity and permeability of urban-rural boundaries and overlapping cultural practices, we might assume that cultural wrestling styles were also practiced in urban areas. The Orthodox Christmas celebrations in Addis Ababa definitely testify to continuity in this respect. However, further research is needed about urban places where people trained for this event and where knowledge was passed on.

Although wrestling is widely practiced, highly diversified, quite well researched and, above all chosen as one of the six cultural sports which are further promoted and 'developed', it has not yet attracted attention as a potential candidate for the intangible heritage list. Reading through the documents of the *Authority for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage*, it becomes clear that cultural sport practices in general are not part of the agenda.<sup>33</sup> Although the diverse institutional bodies for the research and conservation of cultural heritage were organized under the Ministry of Culture and Sport Affairs (1974-1995),<sup>34</sup> they have rarely been recognized and represented as a distinct part of Ethiopia's intangible heritage. A noticeable exception is the exhibition in the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (Addis Ababa) which displays games according to age, i.e. *gebeṫa*, table tennis, soccer, kicker, rope jumping for children, the "jumping the bull" practice as a rite de passage for adolescent male Hamar (Southern Ethiopia) and the "Mursi dueling" for male adults. Instead of conservation and documentation, research and policy are geared towards sportization of selected cultural sport practices within the framework of a national sports policy.

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<sup>29</sup> "Addis Ababa public sees catch-as-catch-can wrestling bout", *Ethiopian Herald* 1 December 1947, p. 5.

<sup>30</sup> Fikru Kidane (2009), *Yəfīyasa li liḡ*, Addis Ababa: no publisher, p. 104.

<sup>31</sup> I am grateful to Giuliano Chiccoria for drawing my attention to this fact.

<sup>32</sup> "Wetatočč benetsa tigil yiseleṫṫinallu", *Addis Zemen*, 1964.

<sup>33</sup> Report on the meeting on inventorying intangible cultural heritage in Ethiopia, Djibouti and Somalia (19-20 October 2006, Addis Ababa) from 4 January 2007, <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/doc/src/00062-EN.pdf> (accessed 14 August 2012).

<sup>34</sup> Authority for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage, <http://www.mysc.gov.et/ARCCH.html> (accessed 14 August 2012).

### From research to sportization

Following the research on cultural sport practices in the late 1970s and 1980s, these practices gradually became part of sports policy.<sup>35</sup> Most important are paragraphs § 1.1 and § 6.1-3 of the *Sport Policy* of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. The stated objective was to “[...] enhance the participation of the community in traditional sports [*babilawi sportočč* - cultural sports in the Amharic version] [...] to realize the fundamental rights of citizens towards exercising sport”,<sup>36</sup> “to register traditional sports [...], make research on them and prepare rules and regulations to ensure the increase in their frequency among the peasantry, [...] to organize competitions at the national level [...] and traditional sport festivals.”<sup>37</sup>

Since cultural wrestling (hereafter referred to as *tigil*) had already been identified as one of the most widely practiced cultural sports, it became important for implementing this policy under the Department for Cultural Sports (*babil sport kifil*) of the Ministry of Culture and Sports (created in 1977) and later under the Ethiopian Cultural Sport Federation (founded in 1990, and currently organized under the Ministry of Youth, Sport and Culture). The first attempts to regulate *tigil* were undertaken by the Department for Regulating Cultural Sport Practice<sup>38</sup> in the Commission for Sport and Physical Culture. In the booklet on *Nebbar Sport* (Traditional Sport) from 1981, Teferī Mekonnen and his colleagues published their fieldwork results – eleven different styles of wrestling were mentioned – as well as a few suggestions for regulating the sport on the national level. These basically concerned the place, which instead of grass, straw or riverbank became either a circle of 5-7 meters radius plus 1 meter outer circle, or a rectangular mat of 5 x 7 meters. In this publication age groups and weight classes are mentioned; it is suggested that men may wrestle between 14 and 50 years of age.

Regulatory attempts were in full swing in the 1990s. The Ethiopian Cultural Sport Federation which is organized under the Sport Commission (Ministry of Youth, Sport and Culture) issued rules that regulate *tigil* on a national level. The Revised Manual for Techniques and Rules of Cultural Sports (*Tešaššilew yeqerrebu yebabil sport*)<sup>39</sup> has been distributed to the Sport Bureaus on the regional and district level for implementation. The regulations basically concern the place, time, dress, penalties, and the referee system. According to these rules *tigil* takes place on a 5 x 5 meter mat, where the

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<sup>35</sup> How far this process had already begun under the socialist sports policy still remains to be researched.

<sup>36</sup> Ministry of Youth and Sport, *Sport policy of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia*, Addis Ababa, 24 April 1998, p. 4.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>38</sup> The official name in Amharic was *widdidir sportočč memriya yenebbbar sport inqisiqqasē kifil*.

<sup>39</sup> Mekonnin Teklu et al. (2001 E.C.), *Tešaššilew yeqerrebu yebabil sport*, Addis Ababa: n.p., p. 7.

wrestlers fight on a 4,50 x 4,50 meter area. With regard to style, three waist-to-waist styles including in-and-outward surge are allowed, with all other styles explicitly labeled harmful. In *tigil* a competitor scores a point when both parties' physical bodies are within the limits of the mat and when the opponent's back, seat and side touch the floor. For timekeeping a stopwatch and a horn or whistle are required. A match has a duration of 9 minutes, which is split into 3 rounds of 3 minutes with one minute break in between. By rule the athletes have to appear at the venue 30 minutes before the match in order to register. Apart from wearing appropriate wrestling dress (shorts, or shorts and shirt), they have to appear in their team uniform. A team is led by its team leader and accompanied by a coach, who is responsible for registering the athletes. Four officials are in charge: a central referee, a scorekeeper, a timekeeper, and a health professional. In addition to illegal movements and grabs, insulting the opponent or the officials is absolutely forbidden as well as inappropriate acts like spitting on the mat.<sup>40</sup>

These rules alone might not yet indicate the success of a process whereby *tigil* is turned from a game to a sport, in the sense that sport historian Henning Eichenberg describes as the sportization of what were originally games.<sup>41</sup> Eichenberg argues that these athletic practices have been subjected to the fierce temporal-spatial discipline of measurement and record-breaking, when time-space becomes minutely calibrated by the technology of the stop-watch and the horizontal bar. In addition, peculiarities of the natural environment become smoothed out in the uniform geometry of the gymnasium, running track, sports hall and stadium, and in the case of *tigil*, by the mat.

A closer look at the implementation of these rules on the national, regional, district, and everyday level might be more revealing. On the national level, regulated *tigil* can be observed during the Orthodox Christmas Festival (1-7 January), especially at the Jan Meda sports field in Addis Ababa. Training is reported from Youth Sport Centers in town, which starts approximately 3-4 months before the celebration.<sup>42</sup> As described by the American amateur wrestler Mark Lovejoy, who reported on his experiences with the sport and the festival in 2011/12, *tigil* is practiced in athletic clubs as part of the athletic training.<sup>43</sup>

On the regional level, *tigil* is included in competitions such as the *All Tigray Sport Game*. The poster advertising the event for February 2012 displayed *tigil* side by side with what are considered 'modern' sports. Furthermore, with the Abbay Dam – also called the Grand Millennium Dam or the Grand Ethiopian

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 8-24.

<sup>41</sup> John Bale and Chris Philo (1998), "Introduction: Henning Eichenberg, space, identity and body cultures", in John Bale – Chris Philo eds. *Body cultures: Essays on sport, space and identity*. London and N.Y.: Routledge, p. 12-14.

<sup>42</sup> Interview with Adane Wubshet, Head of Cultural Sports Addis Ababa, 18 November 2009.

<sup>43</sup> Shaking hands; e-mail communication with Katrin Bromber, 7 July 2012.

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Renaissance Dam and currently serving as the top signifier of a bright future – as the background picture, this cultural sport practice becomes part of an omnipresent discourse of progress.



Fig. 1: *Waist-to-waist style*

This discourse can also be identified in courses on cultural sport games, which are in the curriculum at Kotebe College of Teachers Education, Bahir Dar University, and Alemaya University. According to Hayle Mika'el, sport expert at the Hawzén district (*wereda*) Youth and Sports Bureau, the course's objective is to modify cultural sport – which is called “low organized sport” – into modern sport. Every student is assigned a project to demonstrate how he/she would implement it.<sup>44</sup> Using *qilis*, as cultural wrestling is called in Tigray, as an example,

Hayle Mika'el emphasized that in the past there were no rules and regulations. Fights could last for three hours, ending in complete exhaustion. As the sport is regulated now, they fight for three minutes followed by a break. Athletes are trained by coaches and winners get rewards. In spite of the sportization trend, he did not consider cultural sport practices as sports but as games, which are first and foremost for the recreation of young males. The moment, however, when young talented wrestlers are identified, the sportization process is inscribed in their body. In contrast to being grouped according to age as is usual in the rural context, they now have their weight checked and weight class assigned. Their coaches ensure that they keep their weight stable. An athlete who is disciplined and, above all, skilled is what Hayle Mika'el calls *gobez*. In this statement he was supported by Birhane (Widd) Alemayehu, a 26-year-old active wrestler from Hawzén and 2004 vice-champion in the All Tigray Sport Games.<sup>45</sup> He also emphasized that wrestlers like him, who have grown up with other styles than the 'regulated' *tigil*, faced a double challenge. In the case of

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<sup>44</sup> Interview with Hayle Mika'el, sport expert at the Hawzén district (*wereda*) Youth and Sports Bureau, Hawzén 17 July 2012.

<sup>45</sup> Interview with Birhane (Widd) Alemayehu, Hawzén 17 July 2012.

the All Tigray Sport Games it becomes even more challenging, since the *manṭan manṭa* (waist-to-waist) style from Rayya in southern Tigray forms the basis for the ‘regulated’ style.

For Birhane (Widd) Alemayehu, who comes from northeastern Tigray where the *hilego* (neck-to-neck) style is widely practiced, the stakes in the regional competition are much higher than for his Rayya opponents, whom he considered as more traditional with wrestling and using a stronger style.

Although there is a serious shortage of good coaches, Birhane (Widd) Alemayehu had the able Teklay Seged. He trained him on a grass or sand pitch at Ḥawzén primary school. There Birhane learned that in order to become a strong fighter, he had to be more systematic and to develop specific tactics to win. Although *tigil* is not taught in Physical Education classes, schools might play a much more important role in disseminating the sport than usually expected especially by sport officials. *Re’sedebri* Gebreaninya Gebremedhin, a 78-year-old from Maryam P’ap’aseyti village, revealed that he started wrestling in the religious school in Čala (place near Ḥawzén). During the breaks the priests suggested that the students practice wrestling. One of the priests was acting as the referee (*danya*). *Re’sedebri* Gebreaninya, who himself gives religious instruction to a small group of boys, continues with this practice.<sup>46</sup>

Wrestling is usually conceptualized as a male’s game. However, we know already from ancient Greek sources that woman from Athens were (in)famous for their (oil) wrestling practices. Cultural sports in Ethiopia are, according to the overall sports policy and especially under the 8 March Plan, open to women - until recently with the exception of *tigil*.<sup>47</sup> The Christmas Celebration in January 2012 saw the first women’s *tigil* openly fought at Jan Meda. Girls’ wrestling matches are also reported from southern Tigray. Hayle Mika’el from the Ḥawzén Youth and Sport Bureau informed me that female wrestling had started in the Rayya zone. The first female wrestling match was held in the city of Maych’ew. At this event, girls also participated in weight lifting. As a sport official, Hayle Mika’el had tried to encourage girls of ‘male character’, as he phrased it, to participate. But they were afraid that rumors about them might spread.<sup>48</sup>

Whereas *tigil* has been opened to girls and young women, older males who traditionally acted in the capacity of counselors or mediators (*šimagilē*) or as referees (*danya*) seem to be excluded from the sportized competitions. According to Hayle Mika’el, no older people are involved in organizing the game, except in the Rayya district.<sup>49</sup> There the respective communities choose

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<sup>46</sup> Interview with Alemnesh Gessesew and *Re’sedebri* Gebreaninya Gebremedhin, Maryam P’ap’aseyti village 18 July 2012.

<sup>47</sup> Aklilu Shaffo, General Secretary, Ethiopian Cultural Sport Federation, 19 November 2009.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with Hayle Mika’el, sport expert at the Ḥawzén district (*wereda*) Youth and Sports Bureau, Ḥawzen 17 July 2012.

<sup>49</sup> Interview with Hayle Mika’el, *ibid.*

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their *šimagiločč* (delegates, counselors) – normally four or five people. They meet and discuss the concrete procedures and the rules that will be applied. Out of their midst, they choose one *šimagilē* who takes over the ceremonial function. He opens and closes the match, and he announces the winner. During the match, the *šimagiločč* observe the game as a whole in order to prevent any disturbances. In case of a problem, they give advice and also have the right to expel. The *danya* (referee) might also be chosen amongst the *šimagiločč*. He is the one who strictly observes the technical rules. Whereas the *danya* and the *šimagiločč* do not belong to the age group of the wrestlers, the *halaf* (group leader) belongs to the team and hence to the wrestling age group.<sup>50</sup>



Fig.2: Female wrestling in Addis Ababa 2012

This observation largely corresponds to a flyer by the Ethiopian Cultural Sport Federation for the 25th World Festival of Traditional Sports and Games in Bangkok (10-16 December 1996). It shows how *tigil* is marketed to an international cultural sports community, including mention of the role of the elders: “In the good sense of rural life, the young and adults test their strength and skill by WRESTLING MATCH, while their elders judge so that the struggle is a fair play.” Interestingly, the Amharic version of the text mentions

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<sup>50</sup> Information given by the participants of the Workshop “Traditional wrestling: A body culture or a body technique?” at Mekelle University, 11 July 2012.

neither elders nor fair play.<sup>51</sup> My field research in 2011/12 in Northern Tigray, however, did show that fairness plays an important role. What is more, it is trained through a rigid scheme amongst the local wrestlers.

### Wrestling as a social practice

In November 2011 and July 2012, I had the opportunity to watch *qilis* (as wrestling is called in this area) in Debrī, a settlement approximately 2 km north of Mekelle. There, boys and young men between 12 and 25 years of age wrestle throughout the year. The annual competition is scheduled on *Ṭimqet* (Epiphany), i.e. 19th January. Furthermore, there are matches organized at *Qiddus Yohannes*, the Orthodox New Year in September, or as part of other festivities such as weddings. Since neither November nor July is the time for major competitions or the period of their preparation, wrestling matches were organised specially for me, my colleagues and students.<sup>52</sup> Before we went to Debrī, Mel'aku Kidane, a 22-year-old native of Mekelle, introduced us to the local youth culture and provided us with some initial information.<sup>53</sup> In contrast to other areas in Tigray, the age of wrestlers in Debrī is limited to the age of marriage; approximately between 20 and 25. Since this age corresponds largely with adolescence, it might be appropriate to conceptualize 'youth' in this special context in relation to adolescence.<sup>54</sup> *Gubizina*, the Tigrinya term for this life period, entails for a young man not only the apparent change in his body and high temper, but also the wish to test himself in physical action.<sup>55</sup> It is, not just linguistically, linked to *gobezinnet* insofar as it also means puberty, and to notions such as attitude, aggressiveness, and strength. In other parts of Tigray such as Raya, where men wrestle until the age of 40, the category of 'youth' might have to be broadened or at least partly dissociated from the

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<sup>51</sup> "Ṭigil: - *yetigil widdidir yewetatininna yegolmasawn gulbet aqim beteleyyim bemeher giṣē aqimaččawn yemmifetattenubbet bahilawī widdider new.*" "Wrestling: - The wrestling match is a cultural competition in which, especially during harvest time, youngsters and young adults test their strength and skill." (YeṬtyop'ya bahilawī sport fēdērēšin, *2nyaw ye'alem bahilawī sport festivalinna čewaṭanočč ketahsas 1 iske tabisas 6/1989 a/m be-Bangkok/Thailand*).

<sup>52</sup> In November 2011, I was accompanied by Wolbert Smidt (Department of History and Cultural Studies, Mekelle University), Verena Krebs (Graduate School, University of Konstanz), and Pino Schirippa (Department of Anthropology, University of Rome "La Sapienza"). The group which went to Debrī in July 2012 included Wolbert Smidt and Luna D'Ambrosi, Tekla Jenovese, Sylvia Panoni, and Alice Rocca, who are students of social anthropology at the University of Rome "La Sapienza".

<sup>53</sup> Informal talk with Mel'aku Kidane, 24 November 2011.

<sup>54</sup> For current debates on how youth is conceptualized in Ethiopia see Daniel Mains 2011, *Hope is cut: Youth, unemployment, and the future in urban Ethiopia*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

<sup>55</sup> I would like to thank Mulugeta Hagos (Addis Ababa University, Faculty of Education, Department of Curriculum and Instruction) for drawing my attention to this fact.

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concept of adolescence. Whereas in Debrī the young men leave the wrestling group and join associations such as a local beer group, the rite de passage for boys in Alamaṭa (southern Tigray) is performed as part of their wrestling career. Usually on Ashenda holiday (26 August), the youngsters of a settlement are taken at night by selected elders to the center of a football pitch where they have to wrestle.<sup>56</sup>

According to Mel'aku Kidane, Debrī consists of three quarters – Dungur, Hawate, Mayeh. Each quarter has its own wrestling group. The *qilis* matches, which I observed, differed from the 'regulated' *tigil* as well as from wrestling events in other parts of Tigray with regard to time and place. There is only one round in each match. This round is not defined by a definite period of time and there are no acoustic signals. The place is a meadow near the settlement, which is similar to the training ground which the boys use while herding the livestock.

Two teams with leaders named *Bisrat* and *Orten*<sup>57</sup> were competing. The leaders of the groups (*ganta ḥalafi*) selected ten athletes who were of different ages. One of the *ganta ḥalafi* acted as referee (*danya*) and made sure that the participants competed according to the rules given by the chosen wrestling style – in this particular case the *hilego*-style.

In *hilego* each wrestler places one arm around the neck of his opponent. With the other hand he grabs the opponent's trouser parallel to his waist. Their waists are apart. They have to remain in this position until one of them is thrown to the ground either by lifting the opponent or by pulling his leg. The match is over when one of the wrestlers is lying on his back. If one of the athletes leaves this position or applies inappropriate grabs, not only is he disqualified but his whole team as well. Hence, the young wrestlers are additionally disciplined by applying group pressure. During the two wrestling events I witnessed, irregularities happened and both the referees and the audience responded to them negatively by shouting and stopping the match. Since the illegal grabs reminded me of American wrestling, I asked the athletes if they had seen such 'wrestling shows' and what they think of them. They responded that they had seen videos, especially those showing the American bodybuilder and wrestler John F. A. Cena. Although his popularity is still very high amongst the local youth – Debrī's best *qilis* wrestler is nicknamed *Cena* (also *Jonsina*) – the application of this style is strictly forbidden.

In an earlier interview, Birhane (Widd) Alemayehu, 2004 vice-champion in the All Tigray sport games, remembered that he used to watch American Wrestling until he saw at the end of the TV show the comment "Don't try this

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<sup>56</sup> Information given by Kassa Tefere during the Workshop "Traditional wrestling: A body culture or a body technique?" at Mekelle University, 11 July 2012.

<sup>57</sup> A nickname referring to the wrestler Randy Orton, who became known and popular among Tigrayan youth through local film clubs.

at home!” and realized that it was a fake.<sup>58</sup> The fact that John F. A. Cena had a career as a bodybuilder and wrestler tempted me to ask the athletes from Debrī if they also do bodybuilding in order to become good wrestlers. They answered that they use the nearby quarry, where they cut stones as building material for use in Mekelle. However, I did not have the opportunity to observe any exercises for the simple reason that it was Sunday. Bodybuilding for them meant to lift heavy stones and to throw them onto a carriage. Sometimes they try to throw the stones a bit further in order to test their strength. As they explained to me, bodybuilding is not only considered a ‘modern’ sport, but it is clearly associated with work. *Qilis*, as they emphasized, is pure leisure.



Fig.3: Hilego style in Debrī

Scholarly discussions on the category of ‘leisure’ have seriously called into question Victor Turner’s distinction between work and leisure as separate spheres of action.<sup>59</sup> A wealth of academic literature has provided convincing examples of how modes of work organization affect leisure and how the restlessness of modern subjectivity, to use Georg Simmel’s term, requires ‘rational’ recreation. Leisure has thus become a symbol of modernity, resulting in highly specific ideas on society as a whole, as well as on genres of industrial leisure such as film, art, and sport. African historians Emmanuel Akyeampong

<sup>58</sup> Interview with Birhane (Widd) Alemayehu, Hawzén 17 July 2012.

<sup>59</sup> Victor Turner (1982), *From ritual to theatre: The human seriousness of play*, New York: Paj.

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and Charles Ambler stress the fluidity of the concept and call for a thorough examination of how activities are conceptualized as leisure and by whom.<sup>60</sup> Since works on African notions of leisure primarily refer to colonialism or urbanization, a closer look at rural spaces or the interface between rural and urban settlement might open up new conceptual avenues.

In Debrī, where *qilis* is obviously associated with leisure, the winner of a match wrestles against the next-older boy. In doing so, he is trained to overcome his fear of older and physically bigger opponents. With regard to the concept of *gobezinnet*, it might be appropriate to say that young males not only learn to act out aggressive behavior in a regulated way, but that they are also taught to take responsibility for their social group. *Qilis* is not an individual sport but a team sport, which produces team spirit rather than heroes. The latter aspect also translates into the fact that the winner is rarely remembered beyond the next competition. Since the group represents the community, i.e. village, settlement quarter etc., the victory always belongs to the community. Although the winner of the match might be celebrated and his abilities exaggerated in various ways and told in the area for roughly a year, the songs which are sung celebrate the village.

### Conclusion

In this article I have made an attempt to discuss cultural wrestling in Ethiopia in general, and Tigray in particular, along three lines. The first concerned historiography and the research underlying it, which started in the late 1970s. I argued that apart from the mythical involvement of the Emperor Tewodros, who is reported by all documents to have used wrestling as a demonstration of his strength towards British settlers in the mid-nineteenth century, the history of this sport has been based on modern observations, which were read into the past. I further showed that wrestling, like other cultural sport practices, has not yet reached the status of (intangible) cultural heritage, although it is a part of important festivals.

The second line of argumentation concerned sportization processes, i.e. the turning of a game into a sport. Regulatory attempts went hand in hand with the institutionalization of cultural sports in Ethiopia, which resulted in the creation of the Ethiopian Cultural Sport Federation and related structures on the regional and district level. Similar to the development of soccer in Europe, wrestling in Ethiopia now has one 'regulated' form *tigil*, with a strict time-place management. In terms of organizing personnel, the role of elders who acted as counselors and referees has been limited, if not substituted, by specialized referees and a sports management system. Informal transmission and training by knowledgeable people in the community is replaced by certified coaches.

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<sup>60</sup> Emmanuel Akyeampong – Charles Ambler, "Leisure in African history: An introduction," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 35, 1 (2002), p. 6.

Thirdly and finally comes the role of wrestling in the society. In contrast to the sportization process, field research in a community near Mekelle revealed that local styles such as *bilego*, a style which is regarded as harmful by sport officials, continue to be regularly practiced amongst young males. As I have shown, *qilis* serves not only as a leisure pastime. It is also a method to teach adolescent males to control aggressive behaviour and to act in a responsible way towards their community.

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