

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN TRADITIONAL GAMES AND SPORTS

Dr.P.SATHIYAVATHI,

Shanmuga Industries Arts & Science College,
Tiruvannamalai

Culture has its own range of popular games, dances, physical activities, sports and competitions. On close inspection, the colourful world of games and sport (in its broadest sense) comprises numerous culture specific patterns. The different kinds of traditional sport and the objectives behind them, participants and spectators, the time and venue of sporting activities were and remain dependent on the situation and ideas of a whole society. For example, quite different types of sport can be played in pursuit of the same goal, e.g. to honour the gods, while the same activity may have different meanings, motives and objectives for different groups of people. Running, for example, can form part of military training, where not only speed, but also resilience is vital. However, a run can also imitate the path of the sun, seeking magical effects. In modern sport, on the other hand, performance is all that counts. Finally, running is a means of covering distances and getting from A to B, although it is rarely used for that purpose these days. Any attempt to analyse and interpret physical activities must therefore take context into consideration. "Exotic" activities such as belly dancing, sumo wrestling and the Brazilian capoeira, a mixture of combat, art and dance, which are becoming popular even in Europe, prove that there are other forms of traditional physical activity than one-dimensional modern sports with their constant purpose of breaking records. Clearly, we need to get away from the narrow definition of "sport" when dealing with traditional physical activities. Pre-industrial societies considered "sport" to be a variety of physical activities popular at local, regional or A by Gertrud Pfister* even national level, requiring particular skills and abilities and founded in a particular culture. However, the Anglo American style of modern sport seeks universal recognition and worldwide popularity. It is based on the principles of equal opportunities, competition, winning and record-breaking.

Traditional sports and games in pre industrial societies were character zed, amongst other things, by their connection with rituals and magic, heir close links with living conditions, production processes and military conflict, a lack of regulation and bureaucracy and the absence of the need to perform well and win. They often signalled or enhanced national r ethnic identity and, in an era when modern sport is becoming increasingly globalized, they can now lend support to the revival of local and regional customs, values and behaviour. thanks to various correlations between society and traditional sport, such activities can reflect and enhance social structures. This is why participation in games and sports is often strictly regulated. Spear duels in hawaii and archery in Tahiti, for example, were reserved for members of the aristocracy, who could thus demonstrate their superiority. However, there 38 seems to be no general connection between types of activity and their degree of exclusivity. Even in societies which lacked any strong hierarchy, participation in traditional physical activities was usually restricted to certain groups, such as children, teenagers or adults, men or (more rarely) women, married or single people. On the one hand, traditional games and sports, just like gender roles, depend on social conditions and cultural patterns; they embody the values and norms of a particular society. On the other hand, the colourful world of games and sport (in its broader sense) produces and reproduces social structures and models of interpretation and identification. Gender roles are also closely intertwined with traditional sports and games, although social status and age were also very important factors with regard to participation in and the significance of physical activities.

Since men dominated and continue to dominate most societies, they usually tended to play the leading role in sporting activities. Nevertheless, there have always been cultures where women were integrated in the world of sports and games. Some women either participated in activities previously reserved for men or developed and practiced a sport specifically for women.

Women, the Invisible Sex

Today, top-class sport is in the limelight, attracting the interest of scientists, economists, politicians and the general public. Meanwhile, as far as interest and support are concerned, traditional sports and games are a long way behind. Since early modern times, discoverers and missionaries, and since the 19th century, ethnologists, anthropologists and historians in particular, have published reports on the physical activities of primitive peoples. Although they have collected many pieces of the jigsaw, they have only formed a rather sketchy picture of the traditional sports played in different regions at different times. Most people, including games and sports researchers, are unaware that ancient Greek gymnastics and agonistics, as well as German gymnastics, are traditional sports. Books dealing with sport in pre-industrial societies give the instant impression that traditional sports and games formed and continue to form a male only occupation. This impression emerges from the style of the written accounts and is backed up by actual gender roles in sport and society. Literature on the games and sports of different cultures does not generally state whether participants were male or female. It fails to point out that only half the population (men) were involved in certain sporting activities. In many articles, books and descriptions, women are either not mentioned at all or only in a footnote or in the margin. A brief glance at current research shows that nobody has yet looked into whether and how women were involved in traditional sports and games.

The lack of interest in the “other sex” is obvious not only in secondary literature, but also in original sources. Individuals, players and the population in general are usually described, with no indication of whether women were included or not. It should generally be assumed that participants were men, since women were considered the “other sex”, the exception. To those who drew up rules for games, for example, it was so self-evident that only men would be playing that they did not have to justify the exclusion of women, nor even mention it. Bolivian women playing football. 39 In cases where the participants’ gender is specifically mentioned, however, it emerges that many sports and games were reserved for the “stronger sex”. There were always exceptions, though, and it should also be pointed out that the people who recorded these activities were men. Even missionaries and, later, ethnologists carried out their research only in male society. They did not even try to analyse the lives of the other sex, often dismissing them as uninteresting or irrelevant. Consequently, it is now difficult, if not impossible, to define women’s involvement in sporting activities in traditional societies. Systematic analyses of gender, which have only been carried out in certain cultures and regions, clearly show that many traditional games were only played by men. This is the case, for example, with many popular games in Europe, such as Hornussen (a game where one team tries to intercept a century, ethnologists, anthropologists and historians in particular, have published reports on the physical activities of primitive peoples. Although they have collected many pieces of the jigsaw, they have only formed a rather sketchy picture of the traditional sports played in different regions at different times. Most people, including games and sports researchers, are unaware that ancient Greek gymnastics and agonistics, as well as German gymnastics, are traditional sports. Books dealing

with sport in pre-industrial societies give the instant impression that traditional sports and games formed and continue to form a male only occupation.

This impression emerges from the style of the written accounts and is backed up by actual gender roles in sport and society. Literature on the games and sports of different cultures does not generally state whether participants were male or female. It fails to point out that only half the population (men) were involved in certain sporting activities. In many articles, books and descriptions, women are either not mentioned at all or only in a footnote or in the margin. A brief glance at current research shows that nobody has yet looked into whether and how women were involved in traditional sports and games. The lack of interest in the “other sex” is obvious not only in secondary literature, but also in original sources. Individuals, players and the population in general are usually described, with no indication of whether women were included or not. It should generally be assumed that participants were men, since women were considered the “other sex”, the exception. To those who drew up rules for games, for example, it was so self-evident that only men would be playing that they did not have to justify the exclusion of women, nor even mention it. Bolivian women playing football. In cases where the participants’ gender is specifically mentioned, however, it emerges that many sports and games were reserved for the “stronger sex”. There were always exceptions, though, and it should also be pointed out that the people who recorded these activities were men. Even missionaries and, later, ethnologists carried out their research only in male society. They did not even try to analyse the lives of the other sex, often dismissing them as uninteresting or irrelevant. Consequently, it is now difficult, if not impossible, to define women’s involvement in sporting activities in traditional societies.

Boxing, Wrestling, Dancing and Playing Games – Women are Involved

There is an incredible variety of traditional sporting activities; women have participated in virtually all of them, Young Japanese girls practicing naginata. Although often only occasionally, in a few small communities or under particular circumstances. One activity which, in most societies, has been open to women and which in many cultures is predominantly a female pursuit, is dancing. However, most studies of traditional physical activities do not cover dancing, often with no clear justification. When dancing is included in the range of traditional sports, the idea of women as the “immovable sex” is quickly discredited. Dance, usually associated with femininity in the West today, is clearly a male activity in some other cultures. It may be a ritual, a form of worship, trance, magic, play or art, but it can also express emotion and constitute the focal point of festivities and celebrations, a demonstration of eroticism and a form of conviviality.

Weapons in Women’s Hands?

From a western ethnocentric point of view, weapons do not belong in the hands of women, so combat sports are considered to be for men only. Traditions differ outside Europe however, for example wrestling was a popular sport for many African tribes, usually as a form of ritual. Some groups did not exclude women automatically. The Yaunde in South Cameroon, for example, allowed women and girls as well as men and boys to wrestle. “Generally people enjoy themselves, but they also demonstrate a certain level of dignity and follow a specific set of rules” (Weule, 1926, p.32). In Western Sudan, young men would celebrate harvest by wrestling with girls, probably as a form of fertility ritual. The natives of New Zealand, meanwhile, used to hold wrestling matches between one or two women and a man at burial ceremonies. In some parts of Polynesia, women even participated in boxing matches on specific occasions like on one group of Tongan islands at a festival held in honour of the god Hikuleo (Weule, 1926). One combat

sport which was some- times practised by women only is Japanese naginata, named after the weapon used. A naginata is a long stick, curved at the bottom, originally with a sickle-shaped blade attached.

Running to Imitate the World

Running has been a popular ritual and/or sport in many eras and in many cultures in which women and girls have often participated. A female runner played an important role in Greek mythology: Atalante, a brave huntswoman, would only marry a man who could run faster than her. Many of her suitors lost the race and hence their life. Only Meilanion managed to beat her, thanks to a clever trick. During the race, he dropped three golden apples. As Atalante picked the apples up, he managed to overtake and beat her. Races between women, with ritualistic significance, were very common in the ancient world. Young girls would run at the festival held in honour of the goddess Hera, for example. This event was held in Olympia every four years. It remains unclear whether these were marriage rituals or whether they were meant to bring fertility to the land (Guttmann, 1991). Running was one of the most important sporting activities for South American Indians. For example, tremendous physical strength was required for “block running”, which formed the focal point of traditional festivities of Indian tribes such as the Canela in Brazil. The Canela are renowned as superb runners and are said to be even faster than horses over long distances. In “block running”, two teams must carry a block weighing around 100 kg over a distance of approximately 10-12 km. During the race, the block is passed from one runner to the next, the objective being to carry it to the village square. Women and girls also run long distances, but carry blocks that are somewhat lighter than those carried by the men. Some tribes celebrate certain festivals with races between men’s and women’s teams, while on other occasions, only women take part. These races form part of the tribe’s traditional festivities. As well as the physical benefits, they fulfill many different social functions such as strengthening games as a symbol of life. Ball games are popular throughout the world. They often used to have religious or magical significance. Various Indian tribes in North America were particularly fond of ball games, whose original purpose was much more than just physical exercise or entertainment. According to Chief Black Stag, throwing a ball up in the air represents human life: “the ball means Uakan-Tanka – the cosmos” (Mathys, 1976, p.16). Many games were played with a stick curved at one end with a net attached. This kind of stick is still used in lacrosse. There were also hockey-type games, football, handball and games where spears or sticks had to be thrown through a hoop. When, by whom and how these games were played varied greatly from tribe to tribe. The number of players fluctuated from several hundred to six or eight, for example. The Cherokees called one particular ball game “the lit- tle brother of war”, for example, because it was similar to battle and an excellent way of developing military skills. A team comprised several hundred players, with the whole male population of a village or tribe often taking part. The goals through which the ball had to pass were several miles apart and the game could last up to three days. Mathys (1976, p.19) wrote that this game was played “almost exclusively by men”. However, he mentioned some games in which women took part. Young girls training with the skipping rope (7862). part. Shinny, a hockey-type game played throughout the continent, was played mainly by women in some tribes, but by men only in others. The Crows even had mixed teams. Doubleball, however, was played almost exclusively by women. Here, two balls strapped together had to be thrown using sticks. Unlike Mathys, Oxendine (1988) pointed out that women played an important role in Indian societies. Their significance to society was also reflected in sporting activities.