

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN TRADITIONAL GAMES AND SPORTS

Almost every era and every 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

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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 characterized, amongst other things, by their connection with rituals and magic, their 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 or 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

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 broadest 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 practised 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.

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



Bolivian women playing football.



projectile hit round a field by the other team) , *Klootschiessen* (a throwing game played on ice with a lead-weighted wooden ball) and *Bosseln* (a similar game played on fields), but also various types of skittles and ball games. The same is true of the early stages of German and Swedish gymnastics. The study by Renson and van Mele about the spread of traditional sports and games in South America, as well as Schwartz's research into the aboriginal games of Samoa and Tonga, illustrate that the overwhelming majority of adult sports were reserved for men only.

In many parts of Europe, traditional games remain popular today. An empirical survey of participants in 30 traditional Flemish sports showed that the "local heroes" in these disciplines were still almost exclusively male (Renson et al. 1997).

However, on closer inspection, reading original sources in greater depth and interpreting them in a new way, it appears that women were involved in more dances, games and sporting activities than seems possible at first glance. New research involving different questions, more sophisticated methods and more intensive theoretical examination was needed to define gender roles within traditional sports, which depended on specific social structures. To put it quite simply, what did women do if the men were enjoying themselves playing games and sport?

Some examples of women's involvement in different physical activities in various eras and regions are described below. Systematic analysis which would enable us to paint a clear picture of traditional women's sport is out of the question, not least because of a lack of relevant research.

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 practising 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 sometimes 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. Experts differ as to the origin of this weapon, although its use is known to

have been widespread from the 10th century onwards. It was mainly used by foot soldiers under attack from men on horseback. There are thought to have been many female soldiers at the time, who used this highly effective weapon. Women also used the naginata to defend themselves and their children when the men were away. Its length enabled them to keep attackers at a safe distance. When firearms were discovered in the 17th century, the naginata became less effective, which is why training with the blunted weapon grew in importance. During the Edo period, which lasted until the second half of the 19th century, all Japanese girls had to learn how to handle the naginata. Today, it is a popular women's sport. Participants wear face masks and protective clothing. Traditionally, the naginata was not used for competition. It was confined to the "kata", a mock fight in which precision of movement, choreography, aesthetics, strength, concentration and quick reactions were important. Naginata is supposed to enhance mental and moral as well as physical strength. These days, naginata is practised by both sexes, sometimes competitively.

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 fes-

tival 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 fulfil many different social functions such as strengthening

of the tribe's identity and community spirit, the socialization and initiation of the young and the demonstration of physical and mental strength. These races are also supposed to have ritualistic, cultic and magical significance. A celebration of the dead, fertility rites or a ritualistic representation of the cosmos, i.e. the path of the sun and stars – ethnologists have many different interpretations. One thing is certain: these races are an example of outstanding sporting achievement, but they are much more than just "modern sport" (Hye-Kerkdal, 1956; Dieckert, 1997).

From the Middle Ages until the modern era, women participated in running races, including in various European countries, and the winners were often awarded a skirt. Most runners were girls and women from rural areas, often shepherdesses, which is why the events were also known as "shepherdess races" or "smock races". This custom was popular in many European countries, such as England, Belgium and Germany. Races were usually held locally as part of a religious festival or annual fair. They formed part of the entertainment programme, designed to amuse the public just like other "sports" such as sack races, wrestling or pig-catching (where pigs with greased tails had to be caught). Age restrictions and the race distance were announced in advance. As mentioned above, the winner usually received a skirt, although sometimes the prize would be a hat, petticoat, piece of material or a sheep bone (Pfister, 1997).

In the 18th and 19th centuries, female runners who were more or less professional demonstrated astounding abilities in short- and long-distance running. So-called pedestrianism, derived from the Latin word "pedes", meaning foot, became popular in England and Scotland from the beginning of the 19th century and in America from the late 19th century. When running became an established



Gondola races by women in Venice (1610).

sport in the 19th century, women were excluded and had to fight for many years (until 1928) for women's athletics to be included in the Olympic Games. Women have only been allowed to run an Olympic marathon since 1984.

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 little 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



Young girls training with the skipping rope (1862).

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: "*North American Indian women participated in ball games as active, agile players and as avid, ardent spectators*" (p.22). He wrote that women played all known games, although often with different rules.

Skipping

Skipping is one physical activity which, in Germany at least, almost every child can more or less master. The origins, spread and significance of skipping, together with how it has changed over time, could only be explained by tracing its history in different countries and continents. An initial survey shows that skipping was and remains popular in many societies and eras.

In Tonga, for example, various exercises and competitions using long and short skipping ropes were, and are, common. Skipping used to be a boys' game in Korea. A book on children's

games published by Catsen in Zurich in 1657 even contains a picture of a boy skipping. The corresponding text points out that skipping can help children learn a correct rhythm.

Skipping was important for philanthropists such as GutsMuths, whose book "Gymnastik für die Jugend" (Gymnastics for young people), published in 1793, was one of Europe's most important works on physical educa-

tion. However, "young people" in this book referred only to "young males". GutsMuths devoted a whole chapter to dance using ropes, cords and hoops.

Skipping was also an established part of German gymnastics. Friedrich Ludwig Jahn, the "father of gymnastics", and his followers had both educational and political aims. Gymnasts were trained to be ready for battle, to fight against foreign rule by the French and to defend German unity and the German Constitution. Women had no place either in the philanthropists' concept of gymnastics or in any other. The 1816 handbook of German gymnastics describes exercises using a short rope (skipping with crossed arms, while running and trotting, with turns, etc.) and a long rope (various types of running and jumping). Instructions on setting up a gymnastics venue suggest that a number of places should be reserved for skipping exercises. Skipping was therefore clearly part of men's gymnastics. From the 1830s, girls' gymnastics began to develop in Germany. The motto "head up, legs down and closed" was adopted. Since skipping was not unseemly, immoral, too exhausting or dangerous, it was said to be especially suitable for girls.

In the second half of the 19th century, skipping formed part of gymnastics



lessons for both girls and boys. It was also mentioned in the numerous games books published from the 1860s onwards, particularly in the context of the games movement which emerged in Germany in the 1880s. In his book of games for girls, Netsch deals with skipping in great detail. Using vivid colours and poetic language, he describes how, *"when the spring sun has barely had time to warm people's hearts and to dry the streets and playgrounds, cheerful girls get out their skipping ropes and wave their favourite toy in a variety of pretty curves and circles, skipping lightly and gracefully along"* (p.49 f.).

Skipping has survived not only as a training exercise for boxers, but also as a gymnastics exercise and a game for girls. It became a sport in its own right in the USA, where new ropes, new kinds of exercise and lively music were used. The new sport of rope skipping has now reached Europe and Germany. Competitions and championships have recently been inaugurated for both sexes.

The imbalance between the sexes

There are countless examples of women and girls participating in traditional games and sports. The inclusion of women – or even of men in games usually played by women – often meant a break from traditional standards and values, linked to a change in cultural context, often secularization, or to the process whereby a sport became established or was exported to other cultures. For example, attempts are currently being made to establish naginata as a combat sport for men and women in the

USA. When an activity was first recognized as a sport (e.g. running), women were often excluded at first because sport tended to be associated with war and war with masculinity. With other activities, such as skipping, the gender involved, male or female, has changed. The introduction of modern sports to traditional societies has also provided opportunities to develop new activities and new attitudes towards gender. English cricket was taken to Samoa, for example, but has now been fundamentally changed. The whole population of a village often participates in a game of Samoan "kirikiti", from 60-year old grandmothers to six-year old grandchildren.

The involvement of each sex differed according to the activity and culture. For example, some sports were played

only by men or only by women, while others involved mixed teams or even men's teams against women's. Sometimes women would use the same rules as men, or there may have been different rules for men and women, e.g. the weight of the block carried in "block running". In some dances, men and women performed the same movements, whilst in others they played different roles. Sometimes the roles would even be reversed as a form of parody, with each sex imitating the other's costume, gestures and movements.

It should always be remembered that many traditional sports and games have been forgotten and have disappeared, while others were adapted to changing social conditions (see Beckers/Schulz; Pfister/Niewerth/Steins, 1996).

We cannot discuss these and other transformation processes in any detail here.

It is also interesting to consider whether there is any universal pattern to the gender of participants in traditional sports and games. In other words, are there any types of sport from which girls and women were excluded all over the world? It is quite clear that women often participated in dancing, but relatively rarely in activities with strong military connotations. However, this is not always the case. It should also be noted that, in many societies, women were not considered the "weaker sex". They carried out heavy manual labour, covered long distances, often with a baby on their back, and in many cultures took part in hunting, but rarely in war.

After studying sport played by primitive peoples, Ulf



A young girl from the Canela tribe taking part in the "block running".



wrote that some sports were definitely men's sports while others were clearly played by women. "However, it is impossible to list these sports, since a sport played by men in one culture may be played by women or by both sexes in another" (Ulf, 1981, p.48). Sutton-Smith's attempt in 1978 to define a pattern for each gender's involvement in particular sports is also unconvincing. On the one hand, he wrote on p.143 that "men are more likely to play games which demand physical agility, whilst women play games of strategy and chance which require less physical strength." On the other hand, he thought that games of strategy were played in particular by people with a higher social status. In the end he concluded that "gender differences could not always be defined so clearly".

This is not surprising when gender is considered a social trait rather than a biological fact. If it is assumed that gender is culturally defined and that traditional sports embody society itself, the inclusion of women in the world of sport and games is likely to reflect their standing in society. However, nobody has yet investigated fully the links between the importance of gender in society and women's participation in physical activities. Nevertheless, many findings seem to confirm "at first glance" the relationship between women's importance in society and their role in sport. Hye-Kerkdal (1956), for example, put the involvement of South American Indian women in "block running" down to the camaraderie that exists between the sexes. She also referred to the matrilineal descent regulations of Indian

tribes and the *high social position typically enjoyed by women* in these tribes.

Traditional sports and "Sport for all"

Finally, what role can traditional sports play in the "Sport for all" movement where women and girls are concerned? Do we need new types of sport at all? Is it a good idea to expand the range of leisure activities by preserving or resurrecting traditional games?

Generally speaking, there is an incredibly wide range of sports in wealthy industrialized nations. Cities such as Berlin seem to offer sporting activities to suit every taste, ability level, objective and pocket. Activities such as jogging, tai chi and even capoeira can be practised in clubs, fitness studios, adult education centres or alone and



A ball game practised by the Indian tribes of North America (1832).



independently. Even so, many people and groups are not catered for. This is particularly true in countries and regions where, for a variety of reasons, sport is not an option for the population or for certain groups. This may be due to a lack of facilities or religious regulations, for example.

New sports should therefore be promoted by the "Sport for all" movement, provided they fulfil the following criteria: they should be easy to learn, involve a low risk of injury, be good for the health, cater for different age and ability groups (both sexes) and require little expenditure on equipment. Ideally, it should be possible for anyone to play the sport anywhere. Many, though not all traditional games, dances and sports meet these criteria. The ball games played by North American Indians, "block running" and rope skipping all fall into this category. It should be remembered, however, that when traditional games become established sports or leisure activities, their original meaning and values can be lost, along with their spiritual and metaphysical background. In this way, the activity loses its potential to strengthen an ethnic, local or regional identity in a globalized world. "Block running" becomes just a normal running event and dragon boat racing just another type of sailing practised throughout the world with the same rules, in the same clothing and in exactly the same way. People soon forget that dragon boat racing comes from China and that "block running" used to have great ritualistic and social significance for South American Indian tribes.

The International Society for the History of Physical Education and Sport (ISHPES) and the Trim & Fitness International Sport for All Organization (TAFISA) endeavour to preserve the traditions of the different sporting cultures of the world. However, both organizations also try to enhance future prospects for traditional sports and games. Their activi-

ties include the TAFISA World Festival of Traditional Sports, in which girls and women play an important role. The third UNESCO International Conference of Ministers and Senior Officials Responsible for Physical Education and Sport (MINEPS III), held in 1999, established that traditional sports and games should be preserved and enhanced. It also called for gender equality in sport and physical education. This is also an invitation to pay more attention in future to the participation of girls and women in traditional sports. The TAFISA plans to select a number of traditional games which should be protected and supported as part of world cultural heritage. The level of interest shown by girls and women in a particular sport will be among the selection criteria.

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