The Scientific Study of Games

The formal games of Western civilization have intrigued generations of scholars (see Expedition Vol. 27, No. 2). Each set of games, such as dice games, board games, card games, and team sports, has a long and complex history, as it changed and evolved over thousands of years. When Europeans entered upon their age of great explorations in the early 15th century, they began to observe the formal games and gaming behavior of other societies. Striking resemblances found between the game forms and practice of Europeans and those of many other peoples suggested relationships extending over great distances and time.

With the rise of anthropology as a scientific discipline, ethnographic specimens and notes recording human behavior and institutions began to be studied in a comparative manner. It soon became apparent that, in some cases, behavior that we would classify as game playing had a far different function in another culture. For example, ethnologists studying the various legal forms of African states found that elaborate dice games were not entertainment, but were instead rituals of legal trial and of divination, and were a way of obtaining answers from the ancestors.

At the same time, a study of traditional Western games began within the field of folklore. Focusing their attention on the pastimes of European children, folklorists found evidence for the survival of ancient pre-Christian ritual in formal play. Such studies proved to be a rich source of ideas about the survival of obsolete religious forms, and the ways in which specific sequences of ritual behavior may be preserved long after their meanings and original functions have been lost.

The Research of Culin and Cushing

The comparative study of games was brought into new perspective at the end of the 19th century through the work of Stewart Culin (Fig. 1), an Orientalist who was the first director of the University Museum (1892-1903; the Museum was then known as the Free Museum of Science and
"Formal Games in the Cherokee Ritual Cycle"
formulated at various times in the spring to bring thunderstorms and rain. The playing season began just after the planting ceremony or "Corn Dance." The last games were held the day before the Green Corn Ceremony in July, on the last day of the year in the aboriginal calendar. The game ceremonies formed an all-night sequence, and these magical practices were thought to strengthen influence, if not determine, the outcome of the game. The game itself, played entirely by males, sometimes lasted most of the day, but had to be finished by sunset.

Every detail of the aboriginal game was rigidly fixed with symbolic meanings. Nothing for the sticks was made of flying squirrel skin; body painting and tattooing was with charcoal from a lightning-struck tree; and the ball was of red yarn wound upon a living Tiger Beetle and cast in woven strips of groundhog rawhide. Gambling was highly formalized and bets were tied together upon a frame of poles, an elaborate symbolism of feathers and costume prevailed.

In modern times, the game lost its seasonality, its preparatory rituals, its magic, its sacred character, and its rain-bringing function, becoming secularized into a regional variant of lacrosse. Today none of the old conventions are recognized or even remembered. The game survived until recently only as an exhibition played at the autumn Cherokee festival.

Other Traditional Cherokee Games

Tag of War and "Soccer"

Tag of war was played in the afternoon or evening before spring ceremonies, using a grapevine. A team of men pulled against a team of women. To equalize the sides, the strongest man pulled with the women and the weakest woman pulled with the men; these two faced one another, being at the front of each line. The game was won when one side succeeded in pulling the other across a line. Betting occurred before the game. Women, who traditionally did most of the gardening, wagered bread against meat promised by the men. The presence of a man on the women's team and of a woman on the men's team assured some mixture of foods. In several other games, the losers provided the fare for a shared ritual meal.

A game closely related to tug of war was played between men and women in the fall. At the end of a stickball game, this Cherokee variant of the widespread North American kickball or soccer game was called askaladyi ("pulling the ball in") or amalacaha ("they put the feet to it"). The ball itself was a stuffed skin about the size of a baseball. The men's team consisted of 12 to 15 men and a woman, and the women's team the same number of women and a man. The ball was kicked around the field with the feet until one side managed to kick it between the opponent's goal posts, winning the game. The wager between the sexes in this case was a feast for both ball players and spectators, held seven days after the ball play.

The Arrow Game

On the day before a ritual, Cherokee men would play an arrow
game called "put one hard thing on another" (adansadi) or "you and I put long cylindrical objects on each other" (tseetstawita) and was placed in the village square, where men frequently held conferences. For the next manner a heap of brush about 3 feet in diameter and 3 feet high was piled in the middle of the square. A line was drawn about 20 feet from the brush heap.

Virginia Standing Deer heard the game described by her father, an outstanding archer. He told her that each player stepped up to the line in turn and balanced an arrow on his left fist, with the point nearest his body and the feathered end pointing at the brush pile. He used the forefinger of his right hand to flip the arrow into the air. The tip of the arrow should rise, flip over, and land with the point in the brush pile. If a player missed the pile, he retrieved his arrow and lost his next turn. If the arrow came to rest on the shaft against another arrow in the brush heap, the player would pick up all of the arrows in the heap. The arrows of the players were the usual stakes, but side bets were often placed.

A Borrowed Game: Marble

One Cherokee game, marbles, appears to be a variation of a game that the Indians learned from European settlers. Within Europe, marble games are of unknown antiquity, but when first mentioned in the literature of the 1600s, they were played by adults as well as children. The marbles games are a serious pastime for men, and were often used for gambling. They were frequently played with lead musket balls (especially by soldiers), and pottery marbles used in the 18th century were normally of the same size as a musket ball, 70 caliber or seven-tenths of an inch in diameter. The common occurrence of pottery marbles in military camp sites along the American Revolution documents the popularity of this sport.

Several Indian tribes adopted marble games from white culture, but the details have rarely been noted. Among western tribes, the Cheyenne were renowned as marble players. William Bartram noted the game among Creek Indians in a 1771 report, apparently from observations made during his residence in Georgia during the 1770s.

The Miccos, counsellors, and war

Flume pit dice collected at Wind River Reservation in Wyoming in 1901 by Stewart Culin. (University Museum no. 33439)

Cherokee marbles of quartzite purchased by John Witschull in 1944 from collection in RockHall, South Carolina, labeled as having been found on the Cherokee site of Poquaque. (University Museum no. 46-6-151)

The Cherokee too seem to have observed and adopted the game during the colonial period. Pottery marbles found in surface collections of artifacts from 18th century Cherokee archaeological sites are similar to those found at sites inhabited by European colonists. In later times, the Cherokee made stone marbles in imitation of European glass ones. (Fig. 7). In the 1840s, five of the older people at Big Cove, North Carolina, remembered that as boys they had such stone objects among their store-bought marbles, and at least 12 examples have been found at Qualla. The latter are about seven-eighths of an inch in diameter, made of fine-grained, white, flint-like quartzite; the surface is slightly faceted but highly polished and stained with some blackish material. They seem to be spherical sprue pebbles that have been further rounded by grinding and then tumbled and polished by hand. Their appearance differs considerably from the glass marbles that are feebly spherical stones produced in chemical grinding mills, where quartz marbles are crushed with chemicals in a pulverizing machine.

The formal Cherokee game was a male pastime, and each Saturday morning on a level piece of ground where the Green Corn Ceremony was held, and ending before the New Corn Ritual took place. Men divided into two teams, and prepared the ground to elaborate a game on which they wagered. The forms and rules of the game seem to be the same as those of the British game called "tag ring," "tag ring," or merely "ring." Nevertheless, Cherokee believe the game to have an aboriginal origin, since it is involved in the formal myth of the origin of the Pleiades and was played during the time that this constellation appeared above the horizon and rose into the spring sky (see box).

Two parallel lines were drawn about 50 feet apart, and a circle of about 3 feet in diameter was scratched into the dirt midway between the marks. The game marbles were placed at the center of the circle, and four other places were placed as though forming the circumference. There were two of its sides parallel to the two lines (see Fig. 5). Each team assembled behind its line, and each player tossed a marble at the line of the opposing team. The game and the player with the marble closest to the line had the first play, the whole sequence of play being decided by the position of each marble. In standard English this manner of tossing a marble is called "lagging," and the two base lines of the game are called "lag lines." In Cherokee English, this tossing of the marble is called "chunking." The marbles lagged will be used to hit other marbles, and are referred to as "shooters" in both standard English and Cherokee.

The first player tossed or chunked his marble from this baseline towards the ring. His object was to get close to the ring but not inside it. He might try to hit one of the marbles in the ring without leaving his own marble inside the game. If he did not hit a marble, the first player of the opponent's team tossed his marble from his baseline towards the ring, and each followed in turn until all players were on the field.

When playing a marble close to the ring, it must be shot knockles down from the half-formed list with the knockles touching the ground. The marble is driven on the hand by the thumb. This manner of shooting is called "taving" in standard English, and in Cherokee, this game is called the "taving." The twavel marble may be aimed at an opponent's marble or at one of the four marble close on the ring. An opponent whose marble is hit is "killed," and the player and his shooter are eliminated from the game. A player who strikes one of the

"Origin of the Pleiades"

Once there were seven boys, close friends, who became so engrossed in the marble game that they lost track of everything else. They played day after day, neglecting to go home, eat, or even sleep. Their mothers became very worried about them and came to take them away from their obsessive game by force. As their mothers tried to seize them, they floated up in the air and the seven boys escaped, but the seventh mother caught her boy by the foot and pulled him on. In their struggle, she pulled him down to the ground, but he penetrated into the soil and became a yellow pine tree, the first of its species. The others went off into the sky. In the winter they returned to earth to visit their lost friend, but in the spring they rise high to the horizon and again escape the earth. The Cherokee account is one of many different American Indian myths about the origins of the Pleiades. They all refer to the missing seventh star and account for it in various ways, as does the Greek mythology in the stories of Electra or of Merope. All of them refer to the long ago date at which the seventh star of the constellation blew up as a supernova and then darkened to become nearly invisible.
the marbles on the ring and leaves his marble outside of the ring takes that marble and then shoots at another marble on the ring. After all four marbles on the ring are moved, he shoots at the “middleman” in the center of the ring. If he knocks it out of the ring without being fouled (leaving his marble in the ring), his side scores one point and the marbles are replaced. When a player missed a shot or took out the central marble, play passed to the opposing team. When a team had scored four points (four middlemen knocked out of the ring either on a lag shot or after clearing the ring of the outer four marbles), the game was won and the waggers were divided among the winning team.

The Relationship Between Games and Rituals

Most of the games played by the Cherokee outlived the other ceremonies associated with them. At present, with the obsolescence of the native belief system and of its ceremonial cycles, some traditional games have disappeared. A few, like lacrosse, have become completely secularized. In rare cases, the link of game to ceremony was so strong that the game was transferred into a new religious context when the Cherokee converted to Christianity. For example, traditionally the basket dice game was played on the last evening of a major calendric interval (winter solstice), on the evening before the Eagle Dance. When all other traces of the old ritual cycle had been abandoned, the basket game was still played on New Year’s Eve in Christian households.

It has frequently been suggested that all games originated as ritual, and were then secularized into gambling and amusements. The Cherokee provide an unusual case, where the original nature of the games is still very apparent, and the transformation from religion to sport can be traced and understood.

Chunkey Ball

Accounts of Cherokee life written in the 18th and 19th century mention a pastime called the “chunkey game.” An examination of the documentary evidence, however, suggests that the game referred to was actually marbles. Artifacts thought to be associated with the chunkey game fare little better than the supposed descriptions. Moses Owl of Birdtown owned a stone ball about five inches in diameter that his grandfather said was used to play chunkey ball, but it is more likely to have been used in the shootput or stone-throwing game. Some well-made discoidal stone artifacts known in the “relic” trade as chunkey stones were shown to a number of Cherokees in the 1940s. The Indians offered many possible suggestions as to their use, but no one recognized them as parts of a game. These stones are now labeled as “games materials” and are on display in the Cherokee museum; their actual use remains unknown.

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Dr. Bonita Freeman-Witthoft is an Associate Professor of Anthropology at West Chester University. She is also the Director of West Chester University’s Ethnic Studies Institute. She has conducted field research among the Eastern Cherokee and the Allegany Seneca.