

Lavine, Sigmund A. *The Games the Indians Played*. New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, Inc., 1974. Pp. 93, \$4.25.

It was with considerable anticipation that I opened Sigmund Lavine's small book, *The Games the Indians Played*. My excitement stemmed from the fact that the author's vitae indicated that he had to his credit some sixteen published manuscripts, that he possessed a graduate degree and had been involved in education for over thirty years, several of these having been spent in teaching the native peoples of Belcourt, North Dakota. During this time he mastered the Sioux, Cree and sign languages, visited reservations throughout Canada and the northwestern United States and developed an interest in Indian play forms. Here, surely, were the ingredients that would result in a scholarly, indepth analysis of the ludic activities of the Dakota (Sioux) and/or Cree peoples.

As my reading carried me through the final chapter, I resolved that never again would I speculate as to the thrust of a book solely on the basis of the information contained on the over-leaves of its dust jacket. For Lavine's focus was not as I had expected. Rather his data was drawn from such diverse and far-flung societies as the Maya of Yucatan, the Tlingit of Alaska and the Micmac of Nova Scotia. Further, he endeavoured to cover a time span of some 1500 years—from the fifth century Lenca of Honduras to the twentieth century Iroquois of Ontario and New York.

What did the author hope to accomplish within such a wide compass? The answer to that question, unfortunately, must remain in doubt for nowhere has he provided the reader with a statement of his objectives. However, based on the type of material contained within the book, I am forced to assume that Lavine, cloaked in the garb of an antiquarian, set out to collect, catalogue and describe as many Indian play activities as possible. If this was his purpose then he has been partially successful, for by employing a typology that clumped together activities under such headings as games of chance-dice, stick, and guessing; games of dexterity-with balls, and for training: and children's games, Lavine was able to list and describe, within an orderly framework, a large number of North and Mesoamerican native play forms. How well he has done this is

another question entirely.

The problem that he faced lay in the number of cultures contained within the time span and the geographical area that he was attempting to cover. This was compounded by the failure to delimit the study, to wit: the term “Indian” was applied to all the indigenous inhabitants of the continent, irrespective of whether they were residents of Baffin Island or the Guatemalan Highlands. Similarly, no attempt was made to differentiate between “games” and “amusements”—everything of a ludic nature, from doll-play to chunky, was tagged as a game and tossed into the pot. This resulted in a rather superficial treatment of the subject matter and a number of very general and, at times, somewhat questionable statements. To illustrate: Lavine would have us believe that the games he discusses were contested throughout the Americas (p. 10) and were originally played only as ceremonial contests in a religious setting (p. 12). The first statement is completely false and while we do not possess the data to prove or disprove the latter, generalizations of this type, and there are others throughout the manuscript, serve to cloud rather than clarify.

There are a number of other misleading statements in the text, some of which bear mentioning at this point. For example, Lavine’s comment that “. . . the Cherokee called games ‘the little brother of war’” (p. 9) is incorrect for this translated phrase referred specifically to one game—lacrosse: further, both the Wahpeton Dakota, during the course of their “ghost gamble” and the Onondaga, during their New Year divining rites normally played the bowl game, not the stick-dice game (pp. 22-23); and finally there is simply no evidence to suggest that lacrosse is, or ever was, the national game of Canada (p. 48). These things I can overlook for I suspect that we all stand convicted of mouthing generalities and inaccuracies at some point in time.

What caused me considerable consternation, however, was the apparent similarity between certain material contained within Lavine’s book and that housed between the covers of Steward Culin’s voluminous manuscript, the “Games of the North American Indians.”¹ I will not bore the reader with extensive documentation, nevertheless, I would suggest by way of illustration that interested scholars may wish to compare the following: Lavine p. 7 to Culin p. 5; Lavine pp. 10-12 to Culin pp. 32-35; Lavine p. 13 to Culin p. 227; Lavine pp. 15-16 to Culin pp. 230-231; Lavine p. 17 to Culin p. 257; and Lavine pp. 18-19 to Culin pp. 237-238. While this list could be extended it would serve merely to consume space for in completing the onerous task of crosschecking, I find that only one section of Lavine’s book has not been covered by Culin—namely that dealing with the ball-courts of Central America and Arizona (pp. 40-46). I would be interested to know the source of this

¹ Steward Culin, “Games of the North American Indians,” *Twenty-Fourth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, 1902-1903*, Washington: Government Printing Office, 1907. Pp. 846.

information (Stern? Clune? COX?)² for here, as elsewhere in the book, references are noticeably absent.

Although the book could be attacked on a number of other fronts—for the lack of an historical and a cultural framework or for the antiquarian approach and the “convenience” typology employed—there is really no point in doing so as the text holds little of interest for the serious scholar. However, because it is small in size, relatively inexpensive and well illustrated, there is a distinct possibility that it may prove to be of some value to the layman interested in Indian lore. I would simply request that such a user bear in mind the shortcomings of *The Games the Indians Played*.

Michael A. Salter
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²Theodore Stern, “The Rubber-Ball Games of the Americas,” *Monographs of the American Ethnological Society*, No. 17, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1966 (1949). Pp. 121; Francis J. Clune, Jr., “A Functional and Historical Analysis of the Ballgame of Mesoamerica,” unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1963, Pp. 287; and Allan E. Cox, “An Historical Analysis of the Competitive Rubber Ball Games in Mesoamerica, Arizona and the Greater Antilles,” unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Alberta, Edmonton, 1967, Pp. 209.