

Guessing and Gambling Games: Play Patterns of North American Indian Cultures

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Guessing and dice games appear to be universal in the North American Indian cultures. Varying modes of play differ with geographical location (environment), behavior codes, and available materials for equipment. These games of chance are defined as risking something of value against another on an uncertain event.

Games of chance meet the requirements of a game as defined by Roberts, Arth, and Bush, “. . . a game is defined as a recreational activity characterized by: 1) organized play; 2) competition, 3) two or more sides, 4) criteria for determining the winner, and 5) agreed upon rules.”¹

Useful functions which guessing and dice games perform include: 1) a safety valve for the spirit of rivalry; 2) a peaceful redistribution of wealth; 3) a fair medium for settling arguments or aggression; 4) provision for social interaction of kinship groups; 5) satisfying ritualistic experiences for participants and observers; 6) an opportunity for imitative learning by the young; and 7) entertainment of the sick.

Games of chance can be categorized by outcome such as the result of random guesses (guessing) or by the unbiased action of some artifact as a die or an erratic natural force over which the players have no control (dice). Kinds of guessing games of the North American Indians comprise the hidden-ball game, the hand game, the stick game, and the four-stick game. Gambling games embrace a variety of dice which are made from varied materials, have two faces or sides with differentiating markings or colors, and are tossed in a bowl or basket or are thrown by hand. The score in both types of games is kept by counters or counting board. The game terminates when one of the opponents wins all the counters or reaches a pre-set score of wins. These games are participated in by men and by women; however, they seldom play together. Basic equipment used in both guessing and dice games include: 1) small objects (to be hidden from opponents or to be tossed or thrown) made of wood, bone, horn, stone, metal, brass, pottery, teeth, shell, glass, leather, paper, or parts of plants; 2) containing surfaces as in guessing where an object is hidden in a moccasin or shoe, hand, grass, tree bark, dirt, sand, rug, mat, or leather; or in dice throwing by using a blanket, basket, rug, stone, or ground; 3) counters for keeping score as sticks, pebbles, beans, seeds, or notches on an abacus, counting board or circuit; 4) prizes, stakes, or winnings from betting as personal, exchange, or real property including game equipment, food, clothing, jewelry, livestock, crops, land, homes, money, and human beings; 5) accompaniment as ritual accessories, body and facial gestures, drumming, beating of sticks, singing, chanting, or vocal distraction.

Diffusion patterns, similarities and differences of guessing and dice games' artifacts from selected North American Indian tribes provide strong evidence that games of chance historically have been played in all the differing Indian culture areas in the North American continent. Colored slides of the above artifacts accompanied the presentation.

1. Roberts, J.M.; M.J. Arth. and R.B. Bush. "Games in Culture, " *American Anthropologist*. 61:1597, (1959)