

Joseph-François Lafitau (1684-1746) and the Beginning of Comparative Sport History. Some Notes on Ethnography and Ancient History

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In his ethnography about the *Moeurs des sauvages américains, comparées aux mœurs des premiers temps* (Paris 1724) Joseph-François Lafitau is familiar with several forms of games (Chapter 6) and funeral feasts (Chapter 8) in the Caribbean, in South America, and among the Indians in North America. In his description of the funeral games of the Iroquois and Hurons he says,

People busy themselves also with different games. The young men on one side, and the young women on the other, exercise from morning to evening separately, either shooting arrows for a prize or exercising with the handspike. Each exercise has a prize for the victor and these funeral honours in which force and skill have their reward recall even today in the heart of America the memory of the games of Elis [the Olympic Games] marked by epochs which served to order the chronology of the first times and aroused for several centuries the emulation of all Greece.

This research pursues the question of what Lafitau knows about the attitudes of the Indians toward game-playing and competition, in order to better define the value of the contests in a broader spectrum of sport history. The sources of ancient games and contests is remarkable: Homer, Herodotus, A. Gellius, Plinius the Elder, Apollonius Rhodius, Kallimachus, Athenaeus, Propertius, Aristotle, Persius, Eustathius, Pausania, Statius, Sueton, Virgil, Pollux, Antiphanes, Martial and Isidorus of Seville. In Chapter 6 the reader learns that the Indians, “besides the necessary occupations,” also practise ones “which are either pure diversion, as are their games of chance, or diversion mixed with exercise,

which are in the province of gymnastics, serving to exercise and form the body.” Before describing in detail the “game of bones,” the “game of straws” and “ball games,” Lafitau determines that Indian games, “...are also among the first institutions of men and the first with which the ancient authors have acquainted us.” He argues that the games of the *sauvages* are motivated by pure *divertissement* and physical fitness, both of which are considered to be the *premiere institution des hommes*. Lafitau establishes primarily in his early writings that these motives can be equally traced to mutual anthropological components, which differentiate the *sauvages* in America from stupid livestock. In regard to terminology, he employs such expressions as *jeux*, *sphéristique*, and *gymnastique*, and describes under the latter the Indian ball games, including, among others, *le jeu de Crosse*.

The methodological bases for Lafitau’s comparisons can be found in a monogenetic concept and in the theory that archaic/primitive traits of an earlier stage of human development are reflected in the Indian cultures. Despite all the ambivalence that hallmarks Lafitau’s conception of the American Indian, he sees many similarities between Huron and Iroquois societies and ancient Greek society. He emphasizes this in his title, *aux moeurs des premiers temps*. Accordingly, the Introduction reads: “I carefully read each ancient author who had ever written about customs, laws, and traditions of peoples they had known. I compared these customs with one another, and I must say: If the ancient authors have opened up new insights to me which support a few happy conjectures about the savages, then the customs of the savages have also provided me with insights that allowed me a clearer understanding of certain things written by the ancient authors.” These ideas, which wick Lafitau vehemently fought a widespread notion of the time -- that the *barbares* or *sauvages* could not be differentiated from animals -- may seem naïve today; however, they formed the methodical basis for his systematic, comparative way of looking at things. More recent researchers have found in this fact “the beginning of modern comparative ethnology” (W.E. Mühlmann), because Lafitau was successful at developing a common ethnological typology (and comparison demands such a typology), and because he regards the Indian *savages* and the ancient Greeks and Romans as comparable for the first time.



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