



Note: This text is an extract from the book “TRADITIONAL WRESTLING, OUR CULTURE” (pages 8 to 15) produced in order to immortalize the European project TRADWOC (Establishing transregional networks) carried out from 2016 to 2018 in South-East Europe.

Debates and perspectives for Traditional Sports and Games

Guy Jaouen, project manager, researcher.

a) What are traditional sports and games (TSG)

“A game is not just a game. It is part of a whole. It is part of a culture. It has history, a goal, a people, a purpose, a structure, a philosophy and a strategy. It has characteristics and rules; it has ritual, rhythm, dimensions, morals and it is linked to a specific environment. It has educational dimensions; it can be studied from a scientific or from an artistic point of view” said Sean Egan¹, an Irish friend raised in Gaelic language who then immigrated to Canada.

The term 'traditional' (game) is a word added to mean that the practice is transmitted by the population of a particular cultural zone and that one can call *Ludic Community*² or Community of Players. Popular games, sporting games of cultural tradition, cultural sports, are other appellations.

Traditional games as intangible cultural heritage

Social practices which are called traditional games are creations of a culture and fruits of a particular history. Often descended from the local or regional territory, they are indeed the expression of a way of life and to act, of a way to communicate with others. Linked to old beliefs, inspired by sacred rituals, the traditional sporting games are among the most meaningful cultural activities of a society of which they are the testimony. They are part of the body heritage of a culture. These practices stage resurgences rooted in the deep memory of the social group which lives through the memory of body gestures. It is a heritage that every child can make alive at the time of his game relationships with other children.

¹ Symposium of Nantes, Brittany, France – October 2002.

² The Ludic community shares the festive traditions, of which games and regional sports, dances, forms of musical or theatrical expressions, gastronomy, etc.



www.traditionalsports.org

TSG, along with other playful activities from the cultural tradition, reveal the deepest characteristics of the inner culture to which they belong. Then, through the rules, one can partly discover different conceptions of life: tolerance and aggressiveness, valorisation of the image of man and woman, link to nature and technical objects, way to treat animals, place given to the spirit of cooperation and competition in the social life.

These playful (or ludic) practices are at the same time universal, by their functioning structures, and local because each culture models its activities according to its own “habitus” (the cultural and social determinism).

They are elements that are defended henceforth through the 2003 Convention of UNESCO for the safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of the humanity (ICH). As a result the ICH commission of UNESCO has recognized over the past ten years some TSG practices: Human towers of Catalonia (Spain), Turkish traditional oil wrestling at Kirkpınar, the games of the Nadaam festival in Mongolia, the exercises of Zurkhaneh in Iran, etc.

Promotion of the practice and level of sportification respectful of the cultural context.

In 2009, an important meeting was organised in Tehran on behalf of UNESCO. This meeting was organized to build a platform of development for traditional sports and games (TSG) at the world level. The agenda was to form a committee of experts whose role would be to supervise the actions of this platform for TSG, and also to build a definition of traditional games that generated the following text:

“Traditional games are motor activities of leisure and recreation, which can have a ritual character. Deriving from regional or local identity they are part of the universal heritage diversity. Practised in an individual or collective manner, they are based on rules accepted by the group which organise activities, competitive or no. Traditional games have a popular character in their practice and in their organisation, yet if turned into sport tend to become uniformed and institutionalised.

To compare, according to the definition of Parlebas³, modern sport is a practice that has:

- *a motor action*
- *a written regulation identical for the whole planet*
- *a selection organised by competitions and championships*
- *an institutionalisation through globalized federations*

The graphic below shows the pyramid of the sportification. The apex is the point of origin of the process and the base spread out until a complete alienation. As the elements of global regulation increase, the more enlarged and rigid the base becomes, where any fantasy is prohibited. The “seriousity” is privileged. We also move away from the system of the participative democracy implying people invested in the organization of the practice.

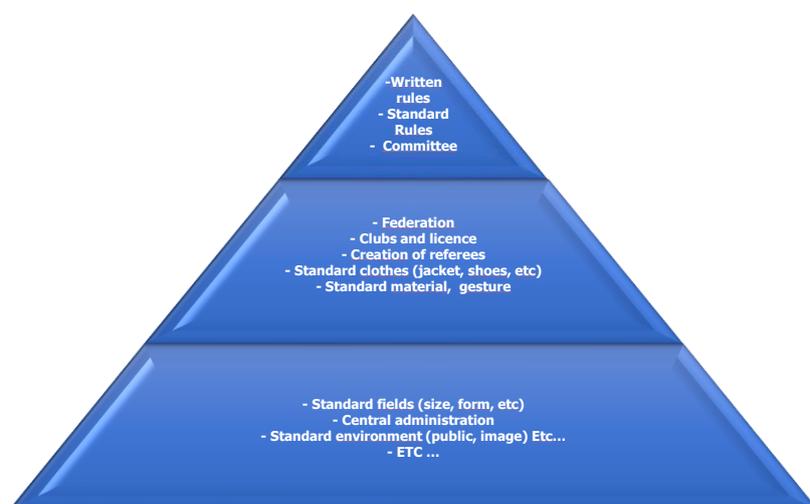
So, the more a federation increase its regulation and the more it move away from the space and the spirit of the Feast as this one represents the unexpected event (the sport wants to eliminate this aspect when it cannot domesticate it). When external

³ Parlebas, P.: *Activités Physiques et Éducation Motrice*: Dossier EPS, 4.Paris. 1986



www.traditionalsports.org

agents to the practice appear, there is the risk that the organization forgets the foundational origins of the practice: the socio-cultural relationships, and emotions, between human beings who share the same culture.



The process of Sportification: *“It is the whole transformation of a game, or a physical activity, to a sport, regulated by rules and norms, all legitimated by institutions”* wrote Elias & Dunning⁴.

However, we must consider that Sportification is not inevitably a binary and rigid process that must result in the extremes as illustrated by Ellias and Dunning. If we consider that there are several stages in the process of Sportification that are often necessary in order to safeguard TSG, these can only be constructed when necessary. All must be decided by the local actors according to their needs, wishes, and customs. It is important to understand that every step is an alteration of the former social structure, such that every decision concerning the rules or the organisation must be analysed carefully. For example, the introduction of referees in a game stops the negotiation between players and of course affects one of the former roles of traditional games, which served to reduce social pressure (in the case of wrestling, self refereeing is not a simple process).

b) Weakness and strength of traditional sports and games

The turn of the twentieth century had seen the advent of modern sport with for counterpart the progressive extinction of hundreds of local popular practices that we today refer to as “traditional games”. These practices had simply been disregarded, as much by the authorities as by the universities.

Many people consider that most of these popular games have disappeared, only remaining in photographs of a past world. However, we know that many or most of them had continued to be transmitted locally, most notably at the local feasts. Later some games structured themselves in small federations, others remained in the ritual and festive practice, and finally many nearly disappeared. In this last case we must consider that they are often still living in the collective memory.

⁴ Elias & Dunning. *Quest for excitement: Sport and leisure in the civilization process*. Oxford 1986



www.traditionalsports.org

What are the tendencies that are threatening the maintenance of TSG

Many popular games have disappeared as the result of **direct repression**. Indeed, in a lot of countries they were condemned as old fashioned, obsolete, reactionary and incompatible with the modernity of the dominant system, of which the one of sport.

Indirect repression has been not less effective through:

Rejection from the school system and the media resulted in a lack of information and a diminished interest within the school system. With a general lack of visibility, this outdated image as a TSG leads to an overall decline in participation.

The **expropriation** of their spaces and areas of expression in towns or in the countryside was often justified by the modernity that had to get in place.

The economic and social **marginalization** resulted in a lack of financial support and low interest from sponsors and, by reaction, in a limited amount of young volunteers. So TSG were generally classified as a non-priority of the political and financial plans.

Decontextualization. Some games have been integrated into the system of the performance sports with an imposed standardization. This process generally results in a loss of significances and ties with the usual way of life. Other games have been exploited for strategies and external goals, often to serve as preparatory exercises leading to globalized sports.

Folklorization. A rigorous conservatism also threatens the games with often the interruption of their transmission to the young generations. The folklorization or the musealization can disconnect them from their social and daily context, and transform them into folk attractions alone.

Facing depreciating tendencies and hostility, the future of TSG has to be built on an undeniable social and cultural significance.

Indeed, we must consider that the **Ludo-diversity**, i.e. the cultural diversity represented by the playful culture and traditional festivities of the human beings (theatre, handicrafts, music, physical culture, body expression, etc) is a wealth that it is necessary to preserve and to develop for ourselves and the generations to come.

TSG are places of meetings, exchanges and experimentations between the different generations. It is an indispensable source of individual and collective enrichment because to know where one is going, it is necessary to know first who we are and where we comes from.

The equipment necessary to the practice of popular games is usually cheap and simple. This reality facilitates the social dynamics of the games while offering a potential of extremely varied realizations for local social projects, as the realization of the material or areas of the games.

By their diversity TSG form a field auspicious to the training. Like "school for life", they can bring a renewal of the educational practices: games of sharing rather than games of competition.

TSG participate thus actively to the physical and mental health of human being, and contribute to a sense of well-being. They are elements benefiting the "global health" as defined by the World Health Organization, a fundamental point for the protection of the "social health" of a community.



www.traditionalsports.org

Games and sports of cultural tradition are also important under the dynamic aspect. They form a sort of philosophy by which to live and to decide together is a way of life for the group – the “Us”. Indeed they are also, by the link to the playful community of a region, the basis of the expression of a strong sociability. This one becomes then a force for proposition, production and intellectual energy.

c) To protect and promote TSG, but for which objectives?

We have seen that TSG have some assets. The work achieved in the last thirty years begins to carry its fruits in Europe and numerous institutions appear to be aware and concerned. Traditional games are therefore at delicate crossing paths. What direction will the restoration movement take? Here are some points of debate.

If we listen solely to the ‘modernists’ the risk is high that the different negative phenomena mentioned above will be amplified, with an increased marginalization of the TSG practices. The norm would then become to only copy the globalized sport system while applying to the maximum the process of sportification, with the adoption of all matters connected with it, included the standardization. It is a form of reproduction of the present economic model and the easy solution for some people, but we know that globalization drives inexorably to standardization and that these two phenomena are associated. However, it is also well-known that it is the desire of differentiation through originality and personal achievement that is the motor of Humanity. The situation seems paradoxical.

A first point is fundamental to understand: if we have 100 similar TSG, standardization will therefore have as an objective to reduce this number to one. The globalization of the activity is necessary to ensure its use as a commercial activity and/or to be included in the Olympic program. However it is necessary to be realistic and to know the following point according to the Olympic Charter: “To be included in the program of the Olympic Games, a sport must conform to the following criteria: Only sports widely practiced by men in at least seventy-five countries and on four continents, and by women in at least forty countries and on three continents, may be included in the program of the Games of the Olympiad.” This very restraining condition shows how much the path to climb is enormous and that very few games could reach this objective. They risk to abandon their soul in this process to the profit of a very hypothetical glory.

The previous point shows the incompatibility between globalization and the notion of intangible cultural heritage. This introduces two other important points. First, we remember that this process has already eliminated hundreds of games. The examples are numerous beginning in the middle of the 19th century. "American bowling" is a type of skittle game (although the term doesn't indicate this), its promotion has marginalized and/or contributed to the disappearance of at least 150 up to 200 traditional skittle games in the west of Europe. Second, there is an existing process of the creation of "new games" from traditional practices, with a commercial objective for recreation offer in the big cities. These practices are in fact inventions that cannot claim a real tie with the Intangible Cultural Heritage of any particular TSG.

Otherwise, a drastic sportification of traditional games into institutionalized sports will inexorably drive to practices strongly valorizing the competition itself and the system of domination. Nevertheless, on this point, it is necessary to wonder very seriously about reflexes created by solely competitive sport meetings during several



www.traditionalsports.org

generations, where the objective was always to dominate the Other. We know that it is the reproduction of the economic system with monopolistic tendency, but the introduction of this antagonistic spirit in the mind of youth is an element that it is necessary to consider with a lot of attention. That is what the equitable, balanced exchange, respecting the cultures, without idea of domination or expansionism proposed through TSG meetings are much more efficient for the progress of democracy in the world than the one where the dominant model wants to impose its idea, champions or model of democracy by force.

Whatever the direction that a practice takes, leaders must have conscience that without the support of the *Ludic Community*, the social contract should be considered broken. This joins the note of the philosopher of games, Johan Huizinga, who wrote that the traditional sport is an action devoid of any material interest when it is deeply associated with a culture as a pastime. That means that the introduction of a logic in which people bend this system to their own profit corresponds to a diversion of property, one or more person appropriating the collective good without the knowledge of the others, who consider themselves possessors of the intangible elements of their culture.

There are numerous alternative ways to explore. Let's see some tracks without closing others that future generations will be in a situation to develop.

We know that the world that we have developed during the last two centuries privileged the system of competition. It is the strongest that decides. Yet the ecological and humanitarian challenges that appear as the Earth is depleting show that it will be necessary to deeply reform the system. From a system of seeking dominance, it will be (should be) probably necessary to develop and embrace a global system of sharing, where we will return to human values that one can still experience in *Ludic communities*. The games and sports of cultural tradition could then function like laboratories or fields of social experimentation for the future.

Otherwise, since a lot of traditional games have a similar vocation beyond the state borders, with festive contexts often so similar, they are in reality bearers of a universal human dimension. This attractive diversity opens up to new perspectives for the development of cultural tourism because there is a substantial interest for TSG. This is linked with the general impulse toward a need for authenticity, discovery of the roots, simplicity and conviviality.

Research works on the educational, sportive and recreational application of TSG are still scarce in many countries. We need to elaborate and strengthen the foundation of knowledge that help us to survey, compare and analyze TSG. It is necessary to generate and support some vocations in which to do publications: books, encyclopedias, movies, Web sites, etc. The scientific research must also be developed. The same is true for the inclusion of TSG in schools and for the development of socio-cultural activities for adults and for tourism. For the successful management in these fields, we have to develop training courses for socio-cultural animators, sport professors and teachers.

All these works will generate the setting up of social and economic applications, as the social integration in the districts, the local animation, tourism, sport leisure, festivities and revitalization of the rural areas.



www.traditionalsports.org

We can see that the future of TSG would find many advantages in the development of models bound to culture and education. They can be promoted at least in two directions:

- **The development of regional or transregional federations** (cross-border) always in order to remain linked with the related Ludic Community (and therefore the ICH), including within the diaspora.
- **The transmission of TSG to the youth** by introducing the most significant practices into school programs.

All contributions brought during the TRADWOC project are elements of support for the construction of promotion policies.

TSG are tools of responsibility of citizens, tools of education and tools for the transmission of social values to the youth. **Traditional sports and games are more than games; they are tools for the future!**