Analysis and Research by Christian Jeter

# The Prestige of Cherokee Competitiveness

An investigation using the activity theory framework for the Cherokee sport "Stickball."

The Cherokee people, both before and after the arrival of Europeans, were a very competitive people who saw themselves often through an almost "holy" lens. This was often observed in their warfare practices, which were often fought over honor rather than land or resources (before United States subsequent treaty encroachment). However, during times of peace, the Cherokee often found other ways to add merit to their names such as in their popular game of stickball.

## Context



Before Europeans had arrived on the American continents and the usage of written history became more common amongst native tribes, there was a longstanding culture of passing down knowledge of major events through oral renditions. For these reasons, little is known of the origins of the Cherokee sport known as "Stickball."

This activity, which is very similar to a mixture of rugby and lacrosse, was cultivated by the Cherokee and other surrounding tribes as a way to avoid warfare (Ehle, 2011). However, as time went on, this activity began to become a sort of pre-standardized sports league that allowed for the creation of a prestige system that was not unlike today's athletic celebrities.

In this way, stickball would eventually evolve into a sport that contributed to the Cherokee's peoples beliefs that they were the chosen people of the Earth, with the name of Cherokee (Aniyvwiya**)** directly meaning "the Principle People."

## What is Stickball?

Stickball, or Indian Ball as it is sometimes referred to, is a sport that consisted of two teams which competed head-to-head by using two "sticks" to drive the ball down the field to their respective goalposts, much like attempting to score a goal in soccer or a touchdown in American football (Cherokee NC, 2024).

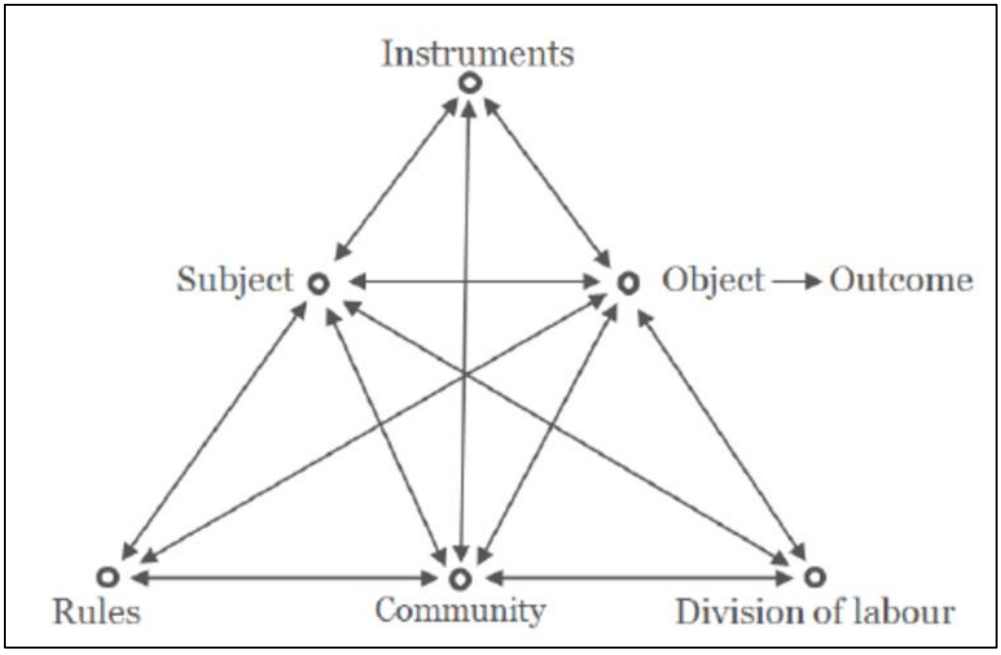
Also like its American counterpart, stickball was a contact sport where players could expect to get physical as tackling and shoving were allowed as players could attempt to steal the ball from opponents. However, when necessary, players could also attempt to make passes and throws to avoid losing their team's hold of the ball.

## Activity Theory of Stickball

Activity theory is a concept that has been tested and defined by various individuals throughout history for varying types of uses and implementations. For this investigation, the definition of activity theory that will be used will be activity theory as a theoretical framework that attempts to understand how certain activities are systematically cultivated as required by social purposes (McAvinia, 2016).

In understanding how stickball plays into said activity theory, there are several different components that will need to be defined:

- **Tools:** Athletic equipment such as hickory sticks were the only main equipment allowed; there was no protective gear given beyond a hide skirt protecting the pelvis.
- **Subject:** Although it was mainly the Cherokee young men who played the sport, other tribesmen did compete as well such as the Choctaws, Chickasaws, or Creek.
- **Rules:** There were not many rules in the game itself beyond what was required to earn a sport. However, there was a deep pre-game and post-game ritual that required players to abstain from certain activities involving more rich food and women to maintain their strength during the game.



- **Community:** As mentioned previously, there were deep religious scruples to stickball. Shamans, who often played a major role in tribe leadership, would often raise these games up as "proving grounds" for which band would be the most powerful over the others, and which players would earn the most prestige.
- **Division of Labor:** Beyond the competitive game itself amongst the players, the bands competing against each other would often host major ceremonies in which respective teams, players, and locations would be chosen for the game. Tribes would pick the field that would be required and then divide up responsibilities and bets amongst them, including setting up the arena and gathering spoils and rewards such as slaves or resources.
- **Object:** The matchup of players in the stickball game itself.
- **Outcome:** The team that won, and the subsequent players of said team who contributed the most, would often go home as celebrated heroes and would earn prestige and honor throughout both their personal band and overall tribe. This is most often akin to the celebrity system of today, where victorious players would earn rewards in the form of attention of clanswomen as well as access to clan resources such as land, cattle, crops, or slaves.

## How is Prestige Cultivated?

In following the aforementioned definition of activity theory, and using the components that have been previously identified, it becomes clear to see that stickball was not simply used as a pastime for young men to burn off steam and energy like much of what non-standardized sports serve to do today. Rather, stickball was cultivated amongst the tribes and bands of the Cherokee and other peoples to create a system of earning merit and prestige.

Instead of simply finding a woman to marry, young men were encouraged to put off engaging with potential partners until they earned enough merit through the sport (or through warfare alternatively), where they had much more of a foundation for courtship (Ehle, 2011). As well as, the game was a key way in which young men were able to rise the ranks of the Cherokee tribe where they were rewarded for their hard work in earning both fame and resources for their band.

## How is Competitiveness Cultivated?

As with the celebrities of today, where there is fame there is often competition. Stickball would create popular athletes out of the young men who would take part in the sport. This, along with the fact that the creation of the sport is most often attributed to the Cherokee tribe, along with the inherent belief that the Cherokee were the "Principle People" of the Earth, it becomes clear that this would add to the ever-increasing competitiveness that the Cherokee tribe would later be known for.

During times of war, the Cherokee tribe were known for their many skirmishes with their surrounding counterparts or Euro-American settlers. Although this was somewhat done out of the necessity of resources or territory, it was most often done out of the Cherokee believing their honor was in jeopardy. Many conflicts, that we know of, were fought between the Cherokee tribe and their opponents over the idea of their prestige being insulted, creating an idea that the Cherokee would need to be competitive to hold on to their honor (Ehle, 2011).

This idea of defending Cherokee merit would be extended into their activities beyond warfare, even into the sport of stickball. Just as warriors on a battlefield would gain rank by way of their abilities in conflict, so too would young athletes attain prestige on their skills in scoring points.

## A Cultural Conclusion

As mentioned before, not much is known about the origins of stickball as the modern concept of written records were not often kept before the arrival of Europeans. Even with this obstacle in mind, it becomes evident to see that, in utilizing the activity theory framework, stickball was most likely created by the Cherokee tribe or similar people to create a greater opportunity for competitive achievement.

In understanding the reasons and rules behind why stickball exists, it becomes further evident that the Cherokee held a very strong cultural competitiveness that extended from their belief that they were a chosen, almost holy people. For these reasons, this investigation has come to the conclusion that, in utilizing activity theory, stickball can be understood as a key mechanism in the Cherokee prestige system.

## Researcher's Note

It should be noted that I, Christian Jeter, am not a confirmed member of the Cherokee, or any other subsequent, tribe. For this reason, all facts, information, and data used were pulled from reliable sources such as the Cherokee nation website or John Ehle's historical account of the tribe in his novel, *Trail of Tears: The Rise and Fall of the Cherokee Nation*.

Furthermore, the game of stickball nor the Cherokee tribe are historical mementos; the Cherokee nation remains as the largest native tribe in the United States with boundaries and reservations in Oklahoma. As well as, stickball is still practiced and played often by various tribes in the United States to this day.

## References


Ehle, John. *Trail of Tears: The Rise and Fall of the Cherokee Nation*. Anchor, 2011.

McAvinia, C. "Activity Theory." *Activity Theory - an Overview | ScienceDirect Topics*, 2016, www.sciencedirect.com/topics/psychology/activity-theory.

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