

# Medicinal Games-Rites of the Iroquoian Linguistic Family

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The member tribes of the Iroquoian Linguistic Family\* were examined to determine the relationships that existed between certain play-forms and the medicinal practices of these peoples.

The study revealed that not only were games used as medicinal agents but that any game familiar to the Iroquois could conceivably serve in this capacity — games such as the bowl game, the hand-dice and straw game, guessing contests, football, hoop and pole, lacrosse, snow-snake, tug-of-war, hide and seek, and so on. Further, some of these play activities (i.e., the bowl game, as one of the Four Sacred Rites) were considered to be among the most effective and potent forms of medicine available.

As remedial devices, the games served as focal points around which many of their preventive and curative rituals revolved — rituals that were conducted both on a needs basis and as part of standardized annual religious festivals. Basically, preventive rituals were conducted in order to curtail the spread of an epidemic; to provide individual immunity from a particular disease; and/or to prevent the reoccurrence of a previous illness. Curative rites, on the other hand, were designed to either affect a direct cure or to increase the potency of the administered herbal remedies. While certain games-rites were considered effective in combatting a variety of minor ailments, others were only prescribed in conjunction with specific mental or physical disorders.

Why were these ritual games believed to be such efficacious agents of medicine? To understand this, one has to appreciate the importance of the dream or vision in the Iroquoian culture. The dream was believed to have originated from an ethereal source; thus, its contents were viewed as a supernatural decree. As such, a native who dreamt that a specific game would prevent, contain or cure a particular malady had no recourse but to request that that activity be performed for him, for failure to do so could incur the wrath of the spirit in question. Further, what remedy could be more effective than one that was prescribed by, and was known to be the property of, a powerful preternatural being? Thus, the dream with its metaphysical associations underlay the entire medical structure of the Iroquoian peoples. The relationships between the game-rite, the patient and the supernatural are outlined in the accompanying diagram.

Several other factors bear mention at this point. Firstly, the sexual composition of the teams appears to be related to either the rite in question or the sex of the sponsor. In general, men and women played together although segregated teams have been observed. As illness was a communal concern, and the Iroquoian societies were matrilineal, the males and females participated on an equal basis. Secondly, the medicinal

\* This linguistic family consisted of the following cultures: Huron, Tobacco, Neutral, Cayuga, Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Seneca, Tuscarora, Wenro, Erie, Susquehanna, Meherrin, Nottaway, Coree, Neusiok and Cherokee.

value of the game-rite was not determined by the sex of the contestants, nor was it influenced by the outcome of the contest. Rather, the potency of the rite lay in the manner in which it was contested — the more spirited the play, the more effective the cure. To promote the desired level of competition magico-religious aids and gambling were associated with the various games. Finally, the players were subjected to a variety of pre- and post-game feasts, taboos and purification rites. Esoteric practices of this nature were considered to be an integral part of the overall ritual, for these sympathetic or imitative rites had to be conducted in a manner acceptable to the presiding spirit. Thus, while the value of “medicines” of this nature may be queried from a physiological standpoint, their unknown psychological aspects must not be underrated — a firm belief in the prescribed remedy may be as valuable as the remedy itself.

