



For references: Kylasov, A.V. (2019) *Traditional sports and games along the Silk Roads*. *International Journal of Ethnosport and Traditional Games*, (1), 1–10.
DOI: <https://www.doi.org/10.34685/HI.2019.1.1.006>

TRADITIONAL SPORTS AND GAMES ALONG THE SILK ROADS

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Abstract

The author summarizes the results of his report at the UNESCO Expert Meeting on the theme “Traditional Sports and Games of the Interactive Atlas of Cultural Interactions along the Silk Roads” on 4-5 December 2018 in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan. There are two main approaches to the study of traditional sports and games – theoretical and praxeological, allowing to rethink the main problems of research on the ontogeny and phylogenies of traditional sports and games on the Silk Roads. A typical cultural memory trap in this case is the fact that their origin is associated today with the peoples who declared them as an object of their intangible cultural heritage. Gaming traditions in the extensive material of historical sources appear before us as an integral part of the rites of male initiation, their existence is associated with the rites of the festive culture of the solar-lunar calendar. A typology of traditional games is presented. The description of traditional games in epos, literature and scientific works allows us to speak about their high cultural significance, thanks to which they are added to the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage List. The actual problem of sportization of traditional sports and games leads to a loss of authenticity as a result of the fact that they are held as sports competitions with time measurements unthinkable for traditional culture, awards of points and divisions into weight and age categories. But the main threat is represented by the so-called “traditional game festivals”, which use the irrelevant formula of the IOC Olympiad multisport games, resulting in a profanation of the idea of Olympism, replaced by the cultivation of pseudo-Olympic games with a program from a set of primitive competitions, exemplified by the World Nomad Games. A critical attitude to a rich empirical material allows us to conclude that the sustainable development of traditional games is possible as a subject of event tourism – the most dynamically developing cluster of the world economy.

Key words: ethnosport, event tourism, intangible culture heritage, sport, traditional sports and games.



The phenomenological study of cultural space in the historical areas of the Silk Roads began with the German scientist Ferdinand von Richthofen (1833–1905) introduced the name *Die Seidenstrasse* to denote the system of China's trade relations¹. Thus, Richthofen laid the foundation for a whole direction of historical research, which later became interdisciplinary, since the subject of analysis is the processes of cultural, economic and political interaction of states along the Silk Roads. A new impetus to research was given by the strategy of international cooperation of the Chinese Government, "One Belt – One Way"², aimed at reviving interaction with the countries of the belt of the ancient Silk Roads and the new maritime direction – the Silk Road of the XXI Century.

In addition, on the initiative of China and with the participation of more than 55 countries, the project of the UNESCO International Online Platform Interactive Atlas of Silk Roads is being successfully implemented. The projects of the Interactive Atlas include visual arts, cuisine, fashion and textiles, music, religions and beliefs, crafts, etc. Traditional sports and games became one of the themes. The UNESCO Expert Meeting on the theme "Traditional Sports and Games of the Interactive Atlas of Cultural Interactions along the Silk Roads" was held for the first time within the framework of the international conference "The Great Silk Roads Importance: Present and Future Development" 4-5 December 2018 in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan³.

The Silk Road Interactive Atlas website states that it serves to establish active relations between peoples in the past and to continue "cultural interaction, as well as the sustainable development of creative industries, education and tourism". The annotation states that "through constant interaction on the Silk Road originated traditional craftsmanship, such as silk weaving, social rituals like Nowruz celebrations, and sporting events such as horsemanship displays, all emerged over millennia through continual exchange and interaction along the Silk Roads, and their vitality today stands as a testimony to this remarkable history, with traditions often being passed down through generations for centuries. The platform's commitment to such traditions will raise awareness of their importance to visitors and promote an appreciation of how these cultures and customs are linked (40% of which travel for cultural purposes). There is a plethora of World Cultural and Natural Heritages Sites, living traditions (many on UNESCO's Intangible Heritage List⁴), museums and movable heritage, creative products and languages enrich the lengths of the Silk Roads"⁵.

¹ The name 'Die Seidenstrasse' refer to China's trading system appeared in the first volume of the five-volume book "China. The results of their own travels" (1877-1911), the publication of which was completed after the death of the author.

² The "One Belt – One Way" strategy was first announced by the President of the People's Republic of China Xi Jinping during his speech in Astana, as part of a state visit to Kazakhstan in September 2013.

³ The author took part in this meeting of UNESCO experts, theses of his report are the basis of this article.

⁴ The UNESCO ICH List is a representative list of the masterpieces of the oral and intangible cultural heritage of mankind, which is formed in accordance with the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.

⁵ The UNESCO Silk Roads Project. March 23th 2019, retrieved from:
<https://en.unesco.org/silkroad/unesco-silk-road-online-platform>



Approaches to the study of traditional sports and games

In the study of traditional sports and games researchers use two main approaches – theoretical and praxeological. The theoretical approach is based on ethnographic materials, literary sources and research papers on the subject of games. Johan Huizinga, Marcel Mauss, Roger Caillois, Conrad Lorenz, Pierre Bourdieu, Henning Eichberg, Allen Guttman and Boris Gorbunov made a significant contribution to the development of the theoretical approach. The praxeological approach is aimed at finding effective measures for the preservation and development of traditional sports and games in modern society, mainly based on interdisciplinary studies of the Sport Science and includes working with relevant sources – laws and intergovernmental agreements, normative documents in the field of Intangible Cultural Heritage, education, sport and tourism. Pierre Parlebas, Wojciech Liponski, Guy Jaouen, Andrey Yarovoy and Anatoly Tedoradze conducted the praxeological studies that had a significant impact on the habitat of the game heritage. Today, in the praxeological approach, the concept of “ethnosport” is most often used, introduced into the scientific circulation by the author of this article in the Encyclopedia of UNESCO-EOLSS in 2011⁶.

Ontogenesis and phylogenies of traditional sports and games

The integrity of the image of the Silk Roads creates the illusion that the origins of traditional sports and games are strictly connected with those peoples with which they are declared today as Intangible Cultural Heritage. However, this is a typical trap of cultural memory, due to the network of phylogenetic relationships of puddling cultural practices.

When we talk about the origin of specific traditional sports and games along the Silk Roads, we should do this only in the context of their ethnocultural customs determination. This approach fits perfectly into the methods of ethnology, and also allows you to use the concept of the *ethnomotricité* of Pierre Parlebas⁷.

Traditional sports and games along the Silk Roads, reviewed on the basis of extensive material from historical sources, most often appear before us as part of male initiation rites. It is important to note that women's games did not have the same social meanings that men's competitions were endowed with and therefore cannot be considered (as a rule) in the context of public social practices. Women's games were part of leisure, they are determined by the *nowadays culture*, while men's competitions were organized exclusively within the framework of holidays, and therefore they were part of a *festive culture* — initiation rites in the universe of primordial tradition, as defined by René Guenon⁸.

By the fact of participation in games, men demonstrated their readiness to continue the traditions of their own kind, so the winners of the competitions became prestigious bridegrooms. Of course, the stories of some participants in traditional

⁶ Kylasov, A., Gavrov, S. Ethnocultural diversity of sport (2011) Encyclopedia of Life Support Systems (UNESCO EOLSS). March 23th 2019, retrieved from: <http://www.eolss.net/Sample-Chapters/C05/E6-168-59.pdf>

⁷ Parlebas, P. (2003) The Destiny of Games Heritage and Lineage // In: Studies in Physical Culture and Tourism. – Poznan, Vol. 10, №1, 2003. – Pp. 15–26.

⁸ This idea was expressed by Rene Guenon in: Guenon, R. (1931) The Symbolism of the Cross. Sophia Perennis; Revised edition (August 11, 2004).



games became legends that have come down to us in the epic. One of the numerous examples is contained in the Kyrgyz epic *Manas*, which has been inscribed on the UNESCO ICH List by China. With the advent of writing, plots of traditional sports and games began to appear in the literature of the peoples along the Silk Roads, for example, in the works of John Chrysostom, Firdausi, Mikhail Lermontov, Chingiz Aitmatov, and others.

The most often traditional games were arranged within the framework of the patrimonial holidays and rites, where the game ethics and customs of competition regulations were formed. Expansion of participation to the level of many clan's events occurred extremely rarely – in case of the unification of territories as a result of conquests or the opening of trade routes through the tribal habitats of the peoples. Thus, we can conclude that the development of a network of trade routes played a decisive role in shaping a common typology of traditional sports and games in the history of most peoples along the Silk Roads, but it is important to note that cultural borrowing of other people's game traditions extended only to the regulations, the matrices of traditional games and competitions remained inviolable and authentic in form and content.

The only exceptions were cultural convergence zones, when the peoples living in the neighborhood practiced mutual participation in celebrations. For example, there are widely known cases of the participation of Russians in traditional games at the Tatar Sabantuy festivals throughout the Volga region and, accordingly, of the Tatars in the original amusements at the Russian holidays – Shrovetide, Red Hill and Trinity.

Despite active intercultural communication, traditional sports and games along the Silk Roads demonstrate two divergent trends – in one case, we are witnessing the universalization of rules and customs against the background of widespread gaming traditions, in another case, the closure of customs within the local existence of ethnic groups is clearly manifested. The most common traditional sports and games in Asia were racing with camels and horses (added Oman to the UNESCO ICH List), horse games as a *chovgan*, *kok-boru*, polo (Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan, and others entered the UNESCO ICH List) and various traditional wrestling styles (Georgia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Korea and others entered the UNESCO ICH List). An example of a closed tradition of local rites can serve as oriental martial arts, which formed clusters of a separate gaming culture (China and the Republic of Korea entered the to the UNESCO ICH List).

The main factor in the universalization of the rules and customs of the traditional sports and games was the similarity of the cultural environment and landscapes. In this context, the singularity of the Chinese tradition, which is manifested even now in the creation of Chinatowns, is of particular interest, it was she who led to the isolation of game traditions. However, the historical processes of the conquests of the West and the subsequent colonization of Asia led to the opening of borders in the spread of Eastern practices of traditional styles of physical activity, as well as the inevitable transformation of game customs under the influence of the Anglo-Saxon model of sport. As a result, now Indian *yoga* and Chinese *taijiquan* have lost their former function as meditation and bodily austerities in Premodern society, becoming ethnic styled gymnastic exercises. A similar situation occurred with the martial arts, in which the main function of the transfer of killing skills or elimination of enemy in a battle was lost, and they turned into harmless combat sports, suitable even for women: *bokator* in Cambodia, *karate* in Japan, *kalaripayat* in India, *lehrdrit* in Thailand, *silat* in Malaysia,



etc.

The researchers are particularly interested in traditional logic games along the Silk Roads, which today have global dominance as the most common mind sports – *chess*, *go* (*baduk*, *weiqi*) and *backgammon*. Most researchers agree that the most ancient references to logic games are found in India, which is associated with the origin of *chess* from the game of *chaturanga*. In this hypothesis, it should be recognized only that *chaturanga* is the oldest logical game known to us according to the artifacts and descriptions found in the Vedas, but the statement that *chess* comes from *chaturanga* is in doubt, if only because there is no evidence of borrowing this games by other nations outside the subcontinent of India. Meanwhile, the evolution of the game, which later became chess in Persia, is quite obvious and connected with the table entertainment of its progenitors – the Persians mentioned in the same Vedas – in the Rigveda, but there is a major difference that has become an insurmountable obstacle to genealogy from *chaturanga* to *chess*: *chess* differ from *chaturanga* in that there are only two players behind the game board, whereas in *chaturanga* there are three or five of them. One way or another, it should still be acknowledged that the borrowing of logic games between India and Persia did happen. Without a doubt, it happened and became a continuation of the cultural influence of Persia, which intensified after King Darius I (reigned 522-486) conquered the vast and densely populated territories of India. The final fact of the penetration of *chess* and *backgammon* in India was recorded during the reign of Khosrov I Anushirvan (reigned 531–579).

The transformations of Indian *chaturanga* in the eastern direction cause no less doubt than in the western. The coincidence of the penetration of Buddhism into the Middle Kingdom with the wide distribution of Chinese games widely known to us is not enough to categorically assert that it was Buddhist monks who became the guides who contributed to the spread of Indian game traditions. In addition, all three Chinese games are too different from *chaturanga* – Chinese chess *xiangqi*, *mahjong* card game and the most popular game in the entire Far East – *weiqi* in Chinese tradition, it is also a *baduk* in the Korean tradition and *go* (*game*) in the Japanese tradition. But the main argument for doubting the transformation of the Indian game of *chaturanga* is the same as for the Persian games – the Chinese games are paired, and the Indian game for three or five players. In addition, the differences in the inventory are too dramatic, the relative similarity is only with the game *weiqi*.

Be that as it may, the contribution of the peoples along the Silk Roads to the development of mind games was appreciated in the world sports movement and Beijing was chosen to host for the first World Mind Sports Games in 2008, which included Chinese *weiqi*, Persian *chess*, and Japanese *go* (*game*), Sumer-Arab *checkers* and Anglo-Saxon *bridge* (*game*).

Typology of traditional games

It is important to note that the events at which they practiced traditional sports and games along the Silk Roads were not multisport. The only exceptions are Eryn Gurban Naadan (Three Games of Men), where they simultaneously organized wrestlers, archers and horse races during the Nadom holiday in Mongolia (included in the UNESCO ICH List). Usually, tournaments were held on one of the traditional styles



of physical activity, the classification of which is set forth in the theory of ethnosport⁹:

1. Traditional gymnastics and dances.
2. Traditional races (running, swimming, canoeing, kayaks, horses, camels, elephants, sleddogs, etc.).
3. Traditional combats (traditional wrestling, fist and stick fighting, fight with weapons).
4. Traditional gaming competitions (duels and team games).
5. Traditional competitions of strongmen in throwing, lifting, pulling and holding weights (stones, logs, bags, etc.).
6. Traditional jumps (in length, in height, through an obstacle, using a pole, a bowstring, etc.).
7. Traditional competitions for accuracy (throwing a knife, an ax, a dart, archery, slingshot shooting, etc.).
8. Traditional Logic and Board Games.

Habitus of traditional sports and games in the modern society

In a study of the modern habitus of traditional sports and games, Henning Eichberg notes that their existence "attached to a particular ideology, whether rightwing (German *völkisches Turnen*) or leftwing (Italian sport popolare). In Portugal, there was differentiated between "traditional games" (*jogos tradicionais*) with romantic, conservative, and idyllic undertones on one hand and "popular games" (*jogos populares*) with undertones of people's culture and self-determination, as promoted by leftwing milieus".¹⁰ The interest of politicians to traditional sports and games is due to the processes of self-identification of peoples in the context of globalization and the threat of erasing cultural differences, and therefore programs are being implemented in a number of countries that have been raised to the status of state to preserve and develop traditional sports and games. These countries include China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Russia, Turkey, Uzbekistan, regular sports events are held there with government grants and include traditional sports and games in their program.

Thanks to the interest in society, in recent years, a (yet fragmented) movement has emerged for the preservation of traditional sports and games, consisting of several international and regional non-governmental organizations. However, the predominance of sportsmen in this movement creates the risk of turning traditional sports and games into modern sports, which leads to a loss of authenticity, because they are held as sports competitions with time measurements that are unthinkable for our ancestors, awarding points and divisions into weight and age categories. The thing is that the sportsmen-organizers use the usual, but inappropriate formula of the IOC multisport Olympiads, and hold the so-called "festival of traditional games". The result is a pseudo-Olympiad's with a program from a set of primitive competitions in which losers take part who have not high achievements in Olympic sports. For example, losers from freestyle or Greco-Roman wrestling styles participate in the belt-wrestling

⁹ Kylasov, A. (2012) *Ethnosport. The End of Decline (Sport: Kultur, Veränderung / Sport: Culture, Change)*. Published by LIT Verlag, 2015.

¹⁰ Eichberg, H. (2012) Folk sports and traditional games in Europe. In: John Nauright & Charles Parrish (eds.): *Sports around the World: History, Culture, and Practice*. Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO 2012, vol. 2: 304-312.



competitions. Unfortunately, there are more and more “festival of traditional games”: more than 50 national festivals and 2-3 international festivals are held in different countries every year. The practice of holding such “festival of traditional games” not only distorts the gaming tradition, but also turns the gaming heritage into unnecessary junk, similar to that traded on flea markets.

Among other things, such events create challenges for the Olympic movement, since primitivization of the competition leads to erosion of the value of Olympism, which unites different sports. Up to the first decade of the 2000s, international federations of ethnic styled sports sought to recognize the IOC and include their sports in the program of Olympic Games, but now the situation is gradually changing, a radical denial of Olympism as a value of Western society is emerging. First of all, it occurs in the Islamic countries of Central Asia under the auspices of the Turkic Council, in which Turkey plays the main role, setting an anti-record for bids and refusals to host the Olympic Games: seven IOC refusals were received for seven applications. Perhaps this was the reason for Turkey to create an anti-Olympic movement, launched under the auspices of the UNESCO Ad hoc Advisory Board on Traditional Sports and Games¹¹.

This was preceded by the fact that Turkey assumed the coverage of the main expenses of the organizers of the World Nomad Games in Kyrgyzstan, which became the main event of Asian anti-Olympians. It should be noted here that the denial of Olympism is a catchy, but not at all relevant, motive for the promotion of a modern sports event. But the organizers proved enough that this event is supported by the governments of the underdeveloped Central Asian countries, where Turkic-speaking people live, for whom it is difficult to ensure the effectiveness of their national teams in the world sports arena and therefore they seek to create niche event opportunities for them. However, this same circumstance makes such a challenge to Olympism a farce, the effect of which was so expected in Turkey together with the organizers of the games in Kyrgyzstan.

In addition, the organizers of the World Nomad Games are literally confused in terms, they present their events as ethno-cultural, based on the gaming traditions of nomadism, but they invite teams from countries where this phenomenon never existed: Austria, Brazil, France, USA, etc.¹² More absurdity is brought about by the presence in the program of sports that have nothing to do with the traditions of nomads: Iranian pahlavani wrestling, Korean ssireum wrestling, tug-of-war, Japanese sumo wrestling, as well as styled but dressed, showing gross incompetence of the organizers, such as the made by Kyrgyz "Alish" wrestling, made by Soviet people sambo wrestling and made by Yakut mas-wrestling¹³.

The result of the uncritical attitude of the organizers of the World Nomad Games to the preservation of traditions, together with an inappropriate challenge to Olympism, was the absence of spectators and television broadcasts. However, the Kyrgyz

¹¹ Turkey sponsored a meeting of the IV Collective Consultation of the UNESCO Ad hoc Advisory Board on Traditional Sport and Games, which was held in 2018 under the auspices of the fake organization World Ethnosport Confederation, which does not have registration data in Turkey, where its office is supposedly located Kyrgyzstan, where it was allegedly founded in 2015. The author of the material sent a request to the Government of Kyrgyzstan and received a response from the Minister of Sport that there was no and never had any organization of ethnosport in their country.

¹² World Nomad Games. March 23th 2019, retrieved from: <http://www.worldnomadgames.com/>

¹³ Ibid.



experience of neglecting authentic traditions is not unique, unfortunately it can be found in the whole spectrum of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Arguing about these processes of the remake, Andre Desvallées notes that this kind of ridiculous events are persistently called "folk festivals that have been stuffing Western Europe for a century and a half already"¹⁴. We add that not only Western Europe, but also Eastern Europe, and Asia, and the whole of America.

Traditional games in event tourism

Meanwhile, in the muddy series of fakes of traditional games, real traditional games continue to exist, including the brightest and most attractive – Three Games of Men at the Nadom festival in Mongolia, traditional fist-fighting games Atmanov's Kulachki in Russia and traditional oil-wrestling yağlı güreş tournament on the Kyrkpınar festival in Turkey. It is no coincidence that these events formed the direction of event tourism demanded by tens of thousands of visitors, creating a new trend of sustainable development of this sector of the tourist industry.

The increasing interest for the development of event tourism is represented by authentic traditional games in places of aboriginal existence. In one case, these are local events that have existed for centuries and do not pretend to become part of the event tourism industry. In another case, these are manifestations of a local culture aimed at increasing the recognition index of the traditional culture of ethnic groups.

Arguing about what builds up the interest of event tourism in authentic events, John Merryman proposed to divide countries in terms of cultural property ownership into two categories: *source nations* — for example, Germany and Scandinavian countries, where the supply of such values exceeds the demand for them, and *market nations* — for example, Italy and Greece, where demand exceeds supply¹⁵.

Merryman's ideas are consonant with the position of Nobel laureate Robert Aumann, who argues that if the state has some value in demand on the world market, it is to forceful cooperation fearful punishment so that it cannot refuse provide them with commercial access on the proposed (imposed) conditions¹⁶. Aumann concludes that such is the need for the development of the world market, of which the event cluster of the global tourism industry is also a part, the regulation of which is carried out according to the same pattern of "inevitable cooperation". Consequently, we can only wait for a rapid increase in the subject base of event tourism, where traditional games are one of the sustainable development resources due to the growing interest in them in society.

¹⁴ Desvallées, A. (2004) La muséologie et les catégories de patrimoine immatériel. Questions de terminologie, à propos de intangible heritage / patrimoine immatériel et patrimoine intangible // Museology and Intangible Heritage. International Symposium, org. by ICOFOM. 20th General Conference of ICOFOM. Complete edition of the papers. Seoul: ICOM – München: MPZ, 2004. Pp. 7–14.

¹⁵ Merryman, J. H. (1986) Two ways of thinking cultural proprieties // The American journal of international law. 1986. Pp. 831-853.

¹⁶ Robert Aumann's and Thomas Schelling's Contributions to Game Theory: Analyses of Conflict and Cooperation (2005). March 23th 2019, retrieved from: <https://www.nobelprize.org/uploads/2018/06/advanced-economicsciences2005.pdf>



Traditional games and modern sport

Sportization is concerned not only the considered formula of “festivals of traditional games”, but also individual competitions in traditional styles of physical activity, which are massively turned into sports. Recently, international sports federations such as Gorodki sport, Kazakh Kores, Wushu, Yoga, Zurkhaneh and others have appeared. Well, consumers appreciate ethnic styled sports; it creates significant cognitive advantages in the spectacle market. But it is important to note that the sports federation does not develop game’s traditions, but sports, albeit with an ethnic flavor, but still sport, and there are plenty of examples: curling, judo, karate, muay thai, skeleton, taekwondo and others.

Portuguese anthropologist Luis Silva, arguing about turning the village into an object of cultural heritage and as a result – a subject of rural tourism, notes that the emerging "second life in the form of heritage" can interfere with the first and main, forming the living space of the rural population¹⁷. Similarly, the cultural conflict of federations of ethnically stylized sports can be explained – there is no clause in their charters with a “nationality” column and a reference to “game heritage”, since they predictably create unnecessary problems for mass distribution.

Genuine harmonization of the relationship between traditional sports and games became possible only thanks to the innovative formula of the World Ethnosport tournaments Ethnosport Challenge, in which famous athletes are invited to participate in the competitions according to the rules and with the equipment of local traditional games. Ethnosport Challenge Tournaments have been held as part of the World Series since 2018 and have already been held in Russia, Malaysia, Brazil and Lithuania.

Traditional games in education

For the first time, educational programs began to be used by those countries that are along the Silk Roads - China, Indonesia, Korea, Japan, etc. These same countries remain leaders in an inclusive approach with the inclusion of ethnopedagogy to this day. European Union universities participate in the Erasmus+ program in exploring the Asian experience.

Conclusion

Traditional sports and games along the Silk Roads have survived to this day and have become the cultural basis for the development of equestrian sports, wrestling, martial arts, boat racing and many other sports. However, in the context of globalization, they were facing the threat of extinction or transformation into sports according to the Anglo-Saxon model, which leaves only some outward signs of connections with authentic tradition. Public interest in various manifestations of intangible cultural heritage creates optimistic prerequisites for the preservation of traditional games, the sustainable development of which is possible as subjects of event tourism – the most dynamically developing sector of the world economy.

¹⁷ Silva, L. (2011) Beneath the Surface of the Heritage Enterprise. Governmentality and Cultural Representation of. Rural Architecture in Portugal // *Ethnologia Europaea. Journal of European Ethnology*. Vol. 41:2. 2011. Pp. 39–53.



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