

## RELIGION, POLITICS AND MYSTICISM IN ANCIENT SPORT

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**ABSTRACT.** The history of ancient sports shows us that sports practice was not a secular one but was closely linked to religious faith. Whether we are talking about ancient Greece (Athens, Sparta, etc.), whether we are talking about Latin America or the Far East, the presence of homage and respect towards the gods is seen as something sacred and no one could dispute it. We have researched the religious phenomenon in sports for more than 30 years, and the result is like religion, politics and the arts of war decided the history of the world and civilization. (*Barbos, 2015*). It is proven by ancient writings, but also by archaeological traces, from ancient temples and stadiums dedicated to gods and legendary heroes, such as Hercules, the most famous demigod of the ancient world, who remained in legends as one of those who achieved the most successful sports. This article summarizes some ancient sports competitions, which were strictly related to the respect for the gods, which was rewarded with sports games, such as the Olympic Games of Greece.

**Keywords:** *Hylozoism, anthropological, animism, secular ritual, sacred ritual, oracle, Delphi, ecotheology, sumo, kyudo.*

**REZUMAT. Religia, politica si mistica in sportul antic.** Istoria sporturilor antice ne arată că practica sportivă nu era una laică, ci era strâns legată de credința religioasă. Fie că vorbim de Grecia antică (Atena, Sparta etc.), fie că vorbim de America Latină sau Orientul Îndepărtat, prezența omagiului și a respectului față de zei este văzută ca ceva sacru și nimeni nu l-ar putea contesta. Este dovedit de scrierile antice, dar și de urmele arheologice, din templele și stadioanele antice dedicate zeilor și eroilor legendari, precum Hercule, cel mai faimos semizeu al lumii antice, care a rămas în legende ca unul dintre cei care au realizat cele mai multe sporturi de succes. Acest articol rezumă câteva

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competiții sportive antice, care erau strict legate de respectul față de zei, care era recompensat cu jocuri sportive, precum Jocurile Olimpice din Grecia. Politica-religia și artele războiului erau inseparabile în toată istoria omenirii, au influențat și practica educației fizice, cât și sportului.

*Cuvinte-cheie: hilozoism, antropologic, animism, ritual secular, ritual sacru, oracol, Delphi, ecoteologie, sumo, kyudo.*

## INTRODUCTION

The study of the anthropology of sport is one of the essential themes of the sociology of sport. Although we live in a modern world, different from the point of view of the standard of living of half a millennium ago, the questions that are asked by anthropologists are also found in modern activity, therefore also in sports.

Sport, as stated by *Lawrence (1982)*, can also be seen as a secular ritual. The history of sports proves to us that the practice of certain movements, the decor, the equipment and the manner of conducting the competitions, fall into religious ritual (*Barboș, 2015*).

But today's sport, modern sport, is a materialistic form, based strictly on obtaining records, on fitting into statistics, losing the original purpose (*Guttmann, 1978*).

In the ancient period, when we already have an organization of sports activities, but also in the primitive periods of history, we have archaeological evidence that the practices of magic, fetishes, prayers were part of the competitions in which the people of those times participated (*Culin, 1907*).

Regardless of which region we are studying, the ancient and medieval period was dominated by *Hylozoism*, the spiritual world, the unseen, is closely related to the material world.

### Sports and anthropology

From an anthropological point of view, evidence related to religious practice in ancient sport took different forms depending on the region. Among the many forms of magic, but also of religious beliefs, the most practiced is *animism*. Animism is the belief that objects, places, and creatures possess human forms of existence. In a religious painting that works miracles, it is actually the presence of divinity, with the same qualities as a human, a living being. Gods are found in various forms, in stone, in trees, in the wind or even in the breath of living beings.

## **Types of ritual**

The ritual can be compared to a secret, symbolic form whose message is addressed to the divinity, but accessible to be transmitted only to the initiated (priests, shamans, sorcerers, magicians, etc.). The result of the ritual is defining for society. Failure can lead to the destruction of the community and its disappearance from history, but almost always after a slaughter of the surrounding tribes.

In order not to create confusion when transmitting the message, the ritual can be divided into two:

1. The secular ritual
2. The sacred ritual

In the ancient period, these rituals took place in all environments. The believer did not have to go to the temple, to do a certain ritual, he could also do it at home. He could pray at home, having a small altar dedicated to the gods, especially those gods whose role was to protect the home and family. If there was one or more family members in the house who were going to participate in sports competitions in honor of the gods, then the prayers were accompanied by magic (Stevens, 1988).

*Oracle* – translated from Latin, "the one who speaks" - is one of the most important figures of the ancient world. The oracle is called upon for any important political, social, or sporting event. Whether we mean Pythia, the oracle of Delphi, or Dione of Epirus or the Sibyls, the oracle is one of the most important personalities of the ancient world. There was no great human community without an oracle. Kings, heroes, simple people or political, military people called on him.

## **Sports activities that involved magical rituals**

The entire ancient and medieval world knew forms of magic, religious rituals, practiced especially in moments of social crisis, but also in moments when participating in sports activities. Even if we refer to a radical Christian medieval period, what forms of witchcraft were present, sometimes even in the bosom of the church, and even more so in the secular world (Peters, 1988).

In the ancient period, sports practice was not a playful form of relaxation, but a form of respect addressed to the gods. The games were not a simple form of relaxation, but one of extremely close communication and connection with the gods, the latter being present and sometimes incarnating in the bodies of the athletes. People practiced sports in honor of the gods, some of whom were responsible for the development of agriculture, the basic form of existence of a people. Each game was a form of recognition, a prayer to the gods who brought prosperity to the believer through rich harvests. The prayer of the earth and its offering bring prosperity to the believer's home.

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### **Ancient Greece**

Ancient Greece is the one that developed the concept of *Ecotheology*. The gods are integrated in nature, in every living body in nature, and the relationship between religion and nature is part of the social life of the Athenian.

Athens knew many competitions dedicated to the gods, and the most famous being the Olympic Games, which were not just simple competitions, but a tribute to the God of Olympus, and the conduct of these competitions was one with a splendor hard to imagine for those times.

Numerous games were dedicated to the gods of Olympus:

*The Pythian Games* - were held at Delphi, the place most famous in the ancient Hellenic world for its oracles. These games were instituted by the god Apollo himself, as a commemoration of the slaying of the great serpent Python.

*The Isthmian Games* - were held every two years in Corinth. They were initiated by the demigod Theseus, son of Poseidon, who killed the Minotaur. The games were dedicated to him. Legends of the Nemean games are given by an event in which an army led by Polynices, a son of Oedipus, killed a snake that had killed the infant Opheltes (Snake Man).

*The Nemean Games* - sports competitions that took place every two years. They are the games that have been reborn, today being practiced in quite a large number. (<https://www.traveleuropa.ro/obiective-turistice-corint-jocurile-nemeene/>)

All the champions of the races were considered demigods, and statues were erected to them, and the city from which they came had many financial facilities.

### **Japan**

The most famous form of religious competition is *sumo*. It is the only sporting art in the world that still preserves the religious rite today. The Shinto cult, the religion of the Japanese people, is present in sumo competitions, from the beginning of the competitions to its end.

Dedicated to the two Kami (gods), *Takemikazuchi* and *Takeminakata*, every competitive match begins with a religious dance in their honor. They are still present just above the battle surface, *Tsuryane*, which serves as a roof. The green dragon, *Seiryu*, the *kami* (God) that protects the western region of Japan, is present on the roof of *Tsuryane*. The offerings brought to sports competitions: chestnuts, seaweed, salt and holy rice. *Salt* is the substance with which evil spirits are removed from the competitions, that's why the fighters always throw salt over the entire fighting surface.

This is followed by rinsing the mouth and wiping it with a *chiga-gami*, a paper with miraculous powers that will help the fighters become as strong as the wood the paper is made of.

After the wrestling, the sumo tournament is over, there is a religious dance, the *yumitorishiki*, the bow dance, in which the sumo wrestlers pay homage to the gods. This dance used to be called Kagura (Barboş, 2015).

*Kyudo*, the art of archery, is also a religious act. Even if, seen from the outside, the archer does not seem to be paying attention to the world in which he finds himself, in reality, he is present not only in the physical world, but at the same times in the spiritual world as well. The relationship between the body and the soul is, in *Kyudo*, closely linked, and the achievement of great performances cannot be done in other nations, the performances remaining only in the Japanese space. The bow is the link between man and his spirit. The arrow is an extension of the archer's will. His thought is sent to the target with the help of the arrow, and throughout its movement towards the target, the arrow does not depend on the archer's thought.

To unite spirit and mind, the archer uses *Hara* (abdomen) breathing techniques, which directs the circulation of air throughout the body. In this way *Ki* is developed, the power, the force, necessary to carry out the tasks. Although the process seems simple at first glance, still achieving this performance requires going through 8 stages, and only starting with the 7th stage, the *KAI* (meeting) stage, one can talk about the unity of mind and body. The release of the arrow from the archer's hand, *hanare*, represents the moment when the energy of the archer's body is transmitted to the arrow, which in turn sends it to the target (Onuma, & DeProspero, 1985).

## China

The famous Shaolin Monastery, which has been training elite fighters for hundreds of years, is based on a physical and spiritual training derived from the Buddhist religion, the Dayana sect. The system was implemented by the famous Bodhidharma, around the year 530, who, after 7 years of waiting at the

monastery gate, is received by the monks, and he will develop a spiritual and physical training system that will lead you to achieve incredible performances .

The Chinese *oracle* is the basis of social activity. Divination in turtle or ox bones offered those interested in the future a way to organize their lives in the coming months. Only after receiving the verdict of an oracle could a decision be made regarding future actions. There were no weddings, no going to war, and no harvest from the field if the oracle's answer was not favorable. Placed at an extremely high temperature, the shape these bones left depicted the future.

These oracles would form the basis for the formation of later Chinese writing (Zhang, 2002).

*Poe Divination* - another method of divination used in Ancient China, refers to throwing small pieces of wood in the shape of a crescent, and the way they fell gave information about the future of the person concerned. If the curved side of the wood was pointing upwards, then the message from the gods was a negative one, and the believer had to abandon the project he had proposed (Brückner, 1995).

### **Latin America**

Latin America, to this day, preserves religious rituals that have hundreds of years of practice. Witchcraft, magic, etc., have not disappeared, but are an integral part of social life. For example, *Tezcatlipoca* is the patron saint of sorcerers and practitioners of magic to this day, even though in some regions he goes by different names. Its origin lies in the creation myth. *Oxomoco* and *Cipactonal*, the gods who divine in corn kernels are considered to be the first diviners.

In Latin America, the most famous games in which religious rituals were present can be found in the games of the *Olmecs*, *Toltecs*, and *Aztecs*, who before declaring the games open, held a religious process in which both the athletes and the audience participated (Schroeder, 1955).

The ball game, until the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors in the 16th century, was associated with the ritual of human sacrifice. The origin of the games is found in the creation myth, the *Popol Vuh*. The term de *Popol Vuh* describes the adventures of the twin heroes Hunahpú and Xbalanqué, and a chronicle of the people *K'iche'*.

The games were held only around the temples, where all around were the skulls of those sacrificed over time. Every game began and ended with a series of prayers. All those who lost the competition were sacrificed as food for the gods. The sportsmen, not to be seen in today's sense, were redoing the ball game of the two twin brothers.

Tradition says that Hunahpú and Xbalanqué played the ball game on a field where their father, Hun, from the land of the dead (Xibalba) had also played. But this game was not approved by the gods of the underworld. Invited to participate in the game, the gods accept, but call them to their realm. The two twins manage to overcome all the obstacles set by them, and reach the competition. Enraged, the dark gods asked the brothers to play the ball game. The ball was actually a skull hiding a sharp blade. The two brothers protested and wanted to leave the competition (Coe, 1989).

The gods allow the game to be played with a rubber ball, and in the end they are defeated by the brothers, which angers the gods, who do not view the contest as a game, but as something personal and with envy. To take revenge, the gods sought to kill them, building a furnace, then invited them to enter it. The brothers accepted the invitation and were burned to ashes, which were to be thrown into the river. But this did not lead to the death of the twins, but they were reborn, returning to the mortal world, but without being recognized, and performed a series of miracles, killing and reviving the bodies.

News of their miracles also reached the gods who killed them. The two brothers, in a different form, will not be recognized by the gods of darkness, and the twins avenge their father, so that, in the end, through their ascent to the sky, they become the Sun (Hanahpu) and the Moon (Xbalanque) (Tedlock, 1985).

Also in Latin America, in the Sierra Madre, Mexico, Raramuri, or Tarahumara (foot runners) competition were held in honor of the creator God, Riosi, and his wife, Maria, and their rival, the Raramuri, the Devil. Athletes participate in competition similar to the Greek marathon, but over a distance of 320 km, in a maximum of two days. The running is done after the wild animals they are chasing, and because of their fatigue they collapse, and they can easily be hunted, being killed by strangulation.

There is a custom that these races are also held with a ball, symbol of the earth, which is passed over a distance of at least 170 km (Sanktjohanser, 2016).

## CONCLUSIONS

Although the sport practice of the ancient period is much more complex than I have presented in this article, it can be considered as a guide in the study of ancient sport for those who want to study the subject in detail. Practices that today have entered the category of mysticism, subjects that are not studied by the academic world. However, they did exist in the ancient world, and indeed they decided the fate of people and gave political and social verdicts. This remains an open topic, which must be analyzed by both anthropologists and sociologists,

but especially by physical education teachers, in order to understand the phenomenon of sports practice in antiquity, which was not just a simple participation of a group of athletes, but a living tribute to the gods, and the champions identified with the gods.

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