"THE HOLUA: THE ANCIENT HAWAIIAN SPORT OF SLEDDING"

by

Reet Howell
Queensland University of Technology

Introduction

The Hawaiian Islands are part of Polynesia, and were originally called the Sandwich Islands by Europeans. There are eight main islands: Hawaii (the largest island), Oahu (where modern day Honolulu and Waikiki are located), Maui and Kauai are the four most populated and visited today; the others are Lanai, Molokai, Nihau and Kahoolawe. In total, however, the Hawaiian archipelago is made up of 132 islands, islets, sand cays, and reefs. Straddling the Tropic of Cancer in the Pacific Ocean, the Hawaiian islands were isolated with the extensive oceanic expanse acting as a natural barrier to foreign plants and animals as well as to humans. The ancient Hawaiians developed a rich culture with well-defined patterns of behaviour, and for years, their traditions, values and norms were maintained and transmitted from one generation to the next. Integral to the Hawaiian cultural patterns were diverse forms of games, amusements and dances.

The ancient sports contests and amusements are too profuse for a definitive list, but the following were among the most significant. Among the most highly skilled and trained athletes were the specialist runners, called kukini, who were popular at least from the time of King Umi, approximately 1500 A.D. Kamehameha I was another who highly prized the speed of running, and the feats of his renowned runners, Makoa, are well known to us. Perhaps the most popular sport was that of surf riding, heenalu, a sport which could be considered as Polynesia's gift to the world. Some of the more prevalent cultural pursuits were swimming (fashe), canoe races (hei-hei-waa-waa), cock-fighting (hoo-haka-moa), kite flying (lu-pe), boxing (mokomoko) and wrestling (hakoko), stick fencing (kaka la'au), checkers (konane), stilts (ku-ku-lu-a-e-o), cup and ball games (hoo-lei-po-po), jacks or knucklebones (ki-mo-ki-mo), spear throwing and dodging (mo-ko-mo-ko), dart throwing or snow-snake (teka), bowling discs (mai-ka) and pitching discs (pua), the hiding game (hu-na po-ha-ku), cat's cradle or string figures (hei), the bull-roarer (o-e-o-e), swinging (le-le-ko-a-li) and finding the stone (no-a). There was also the Makahiki festival, which could be likened to the ancient Olympic Games, in that athletes from the various villages would compete against each other. The last year of the festival was in 1819, when Kamehameha died.
Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the present study is to examine one of these ancient sports, the sport of holua, or sledding.

Relationship to Culture

Athletic games, sports and festivals among the ancient Hawaiians were highly ritualistic, acted as transmitters of culture and exercised a constraining effect on social behaviour. They were, indeed, a microcosm of Hawaiian society, reflecting the intrinsic values of the specific cultural setting. The presumption was that the character of the sports played was the result of particular cultural norms.

Jones, in his extensive study of Polynesian games, analysed the evidence of sports and recreational activities, examining both their internal and external characteristics. The external characteristics aimed to determine whether the activities were economic, political, family, ceremonial, socialization or social psychological-related; the internal characteristics categorized the activities as pursuit, strategy, vertigo, exultation, dexterity, enigma, chance or imitation-related.

Jones concluded that the games reflected the Hawaiian society, with the social psychological determinant having the greatest influence on such games. The close communal existence and co-operativeness of the ancient Hawaiians were transmitted through their recreational amusements. Political-type games were also greatly in evidence, which demonstrated the need for self-preservation. As only five domestic activities were identified, it was concluded that it was not felt to be the duty of the family to provide for games and amusements. As for the internal characteristics, the high number of dexterity activities pointed out the need in society for physical power. Exultation type activities were likewise prolific, demonstrating the importance of reciprocal relationships.

Holua, as a sport, had an important role in Hawaiian culture. In so far as external characteristics were concerned, its main role was in relationship to political concerns, particularly in reinforcing the power and exclusiveness of royalty. There were social—psychological aspects as well, as the sport served cultural—identification purposes and bound people together as a community. Competitors, spectators, gamblers—all were intrigued and intimately bound to this exciting sport. The principal internal characteristics that were manifested in the sport were vertigo and dexterity, but also, strategy and pursuit.