

An Analysis of the Role of Games in the Fertility Rituals of the Native North American

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Nature, with equal mind,
Sees all her sons at play;
Sees man control the wind,
The wind sweep man away.

(M. ARNOLD, Empedocles on Etna, I, 2. 263).

That man plays is an established fact. That he desires to control his environment is likewise unquestionable. Unfortunately for man, however, many forces have proven to be beyond his comprehension. Faced with such a dilemma and spurred by his primeval fear of the unknown, man wasted little time in selecting the path of least resistance on his road to survival. When faced with a situation beyond his control, he employed his ingenuity in an overt attempt to tilt the scales in his direction. If perchance this strategy failed, he drew from his time-proven rituals and launched fervent appeals to the governing powers – powers both real and figments of his imagination. When these appeals went unanswered, he sought the one recourse remaining; that being to placate and please the dominating, and by now, all-powerful forces in the hope that they would bring about the conditions desired. Herein lie the ingredients of magic and religion.

When confronted with the unknown, the uncontrollable or the threatening, homo sapiens, the change-agent, dipped into his arsenal for the weapon deemed most suitable for the task of guaranteeing the well-being of his person. Among the remarkable array of implements and techniques contained therein resides that phenomenon known as play. To thus cope with situations considered beyond the control of mere mortals, the play world of man began to weave itself into, and become part of, his metaphysical world.

It is the purpose of this paper to investigate the relationships that existed between the games of the North American Indians, specifically those