

## KICKBALL AND SOME OTHER PARALLELS BETWEEN SIAM AND MICRONESIA

By

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During a trip through Micronesia in December 1945 I came across a group of young men and boys playing a game of kick ball in the village of Ine on the atoll of Arno in the Marshalls. This game consisted in keeping a pandanus cube (in size about three inches across each way) in the air by kicking it with the inner side of the foot, the group keeping time to the movements by clapping. The aim was to keep the cube in the air as long as possible. There were no winners or losers, nor was any particular number of players required in the game. Jetmar, my guide in Arno, joined in the game which was already going on in the later afternoon.

This game was also reported about the same time from Kusaie by Dr. Harvey Fisher of the University of Hawaii. In reference to the game he saw he writes: "A clap for each time the ball is successfully kicked. Thus, if ball has been in the air times, six claps before it is kicked seventh time. Game works up to tempo as a result."<sup>1</sup>

Varieties of this kickball game are reported from Japan, China and Korea as well as Southeast Asia and Indonesia. Kaudern, in his *Games and Dances in Celebes* (Vol. 4 of *Ethnographical Studies in Celebes*, Goteborg, 1929) devotes a section (pp. 85-105) to its distribution in Indonesia and East Asia including one citation from Palau. Usually it is a game for men and boys as in the Marshalls. The form of the pandanus cube of Micronesia is closer to the rattan balls of Indonesia than the footballs of China and ancient Japan.

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<sup>1</sup> *Private note to the writer by Harvey Fisher, Department of Zoology, University of Hawaii.*

The following is a description of the game as played in the Philippines and by Filipinos in Hawaii:<sup>1</sup>

"*Sipa*" (foot volley ball): Afternoons, at the plaza, you can see young people standing in a circle, kicking a ball-like thing into the air. They are playing sipa. The game is named for the ball, made of split rattan woven in sphere shape about four inches in diameter with six or eight pentagonal holes evenly on its surface. Its weight is just enough to resist being blown by a moderate wind. It is made hollow so that it bounces when kicked or when it hits any hard surface.

The rule of playing is to kick the ball back and forth without letting it touch the ground, although a bounce is allowed sometimes. Every kick is a point. When the sipa touches the ground the scorer stops recording. There is no contest involved in this game. The aim of the players is to make as many points as possible with one *vivo*, (start). Six or eight play to best advantage although two to sixteen can play satisfactorily. In regular play the number of participants is always even. To start the game, one of the players throws (*vivo*) the sipa to his partner who tries to kick it back. From this time on, only the feet are allowed to touch the sipa. A good partner usually kicks the sipa back and forth fifty or more times before it goes to another man in the circle. But whoever kicks the balls, it is still a part of the *vivo* and is therefore a point.

In exhibitions or tournaments two teams are required. Sipa is then played like volley ball. Each player has to kick the sipa over the net. If the opponent fails to kick back over the net, the point is against his team. Two or three men usually compose a team.

Sipa is an old game of the Filipinos and requires good teamwork. To make a high score it is necessary that the feet of each player be educated. When the sipa comes to you from different angles, you must kick the ball from different but corresponding positions.

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<sup>1</sup> From "*Native Filipino Sports and Games*" by Maximino R. Velasco, *Mid-Pacific Magazine*, January-March, 1936, Vol. 47, No. 1, pp. 47-8. Mr. Velasco writes as a "sports enthusiast."

There are many fancy ways of kicking the ball. At Aala Park, Honolulu, some Filipinos play quite regularly. Sipa is also played on the different plantations of the Territory by the Filipino laborers."

In Siam the game is called Takraw and is described by Kenneth Landon on p. 171 of his book, *Siam in Transition*:

"*Takraw* is one of the oldest sports played by Siamese, and it is as popular as ever. The game is played with a hollow ball made of plaited rattan which is about the size of an indoor baseball. The players stand in a circle, barefooted, and with lower garments tucked up out of the way. The ball is put into play by tossing it to someone across the circle. The ball must not touch the ground and must not be caught with the hands. It may be kept in motion by the foot, knee, shoulder, elbow, or head. Skilful players frequently allow the ball to fall behind them before kicking it back over their heads with a quick motion of the heel or flat of the foot. Most small towns have several circles of players kicking the ball in the cool of the evening. Some players become very expert and keep the ball bouncing in the air from foot to knee to shoulder to head and back to foot again before kicking it on. One player of note went on a vaudeville tour with an act in which he kept six or eight balls in the air simultaneously. Takraw is everyman's game. It is generally non-competitive."

One of the first things the writer saw this spring on arrival in Bangkok was a group of young men playing the game about five or six pm. Every little shop in the city that sells baskets has a bunch of rattan kickballs hanging from a nail. As in the Marshalls the game seems to be an informal early evening recreation and to be noncompetitive in character. But in Siam, unlike some of the other areas, players are not limited to the feet in keeping the ball in the air.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Phya Anuman*, the director of the Department of Fine Arts of the Siamese government and an authority on Siamese culture wrote the following comment after reading the above descriptions of kickball:

"In Siam, particularly in the central and southern parts

The distribution of this game through Micronesia and Southeast Asia and its present contemporary existence in several parts of this region (e.g. Marshall Islands, Philippines and Siam) provides one more bit of specific data for the solution of problems in relation to the movement of cultures and peoples from Southeast Asia to the Pacific.

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where pandanus and cocoanut trees are found in abundance a cubical kickball made either of plaited pandanus or cocoanut leaves is used as a plaything by little children to kick and toss in a haphazard manner. The pandanus kickball as played by the Marshalls' islanders is perhaps identical with the Siamese one mentioned above, save that in the Marshalls it is an organized game while in Siam it is merely a plaything for little boys. I have no doubt that this kickball is a takraw game in its embryo.

"The sipa or kickball of the Filipinos is identical with the Siamese takraw, but the latter is more of a skilled pastime rather than an organized game of the former. Of course we have a competitive game of takraw in which the takraw is passed over a net like the Filipinos, or passed through a loop hung high above the heads of the players but these are later developments of very recent date.

"The takraw is also played by the Cambodians and the Burmese and it is played in the same manner as the Siamese one. The Cambodians call their takraw game "Si", a word that looks like a shortened form of sipa,

"I cannot find a satisfactory answer as to the real meaning of the word takraw. The word looks to me to be of a foreign origin. The manner of keeping the ball in the air not limited to the feet as displayed by the Siamese and Burmese players of takraw is no doubt a later development when the players have acquired more skill in their technique of play. I was told that there is no such game as takraw in India, and I do not know whether down south with the Indonesians there is a takraw game. The Siamese or rather the Thai in the north of Siam so far as I know, have no indigenous takraw game unless it is introduced from the Siamese. The word takraw itself does not exist in their dialects of the Thai language."

Siamese culture provides some other interesting parallels with certain parts of Oceania, in particular the Island of Ponape. On that Island, as in Siam, there is a traditional class structure with several grades of royalty and a broad base of commoners. A point of special interest is the etiquette whereby an inferior hands something to a superior. The way this is done, in both areas, is to hold the object being handed in the right hand with palm up and elbow flexed, the left hand resting just at the crook of the elbow. In the act of giving the giver of lower rank kneels in Siam. As I recall he bows in Ponape, but the bow may be due to recent Japanese influence with the breakdown in the class hierarchy in recent years in both areas, the etiquette of giving with respect is beginning to disappear but it was still practiced enough in 1946 and 1947 to be noticeable among the more conservative.<sup>1</sup>

Like kickball, this manner of giving with respect is a remarkably specific trait. Of a more general nature are other cultural

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<sup>1</sup> *Phya Anuman comments on Siamese giving with respect as follows:*

*"In Siam the act of giving and receiving is done with the right hand. Nobody whether a superior or an inferior dares to use his left hand. The inferior be he a giver or receiver must hand or receive anything lower than the hand of the superior that gives or receives it. This act is extended to persons of equal rank too if you want to be polite and formal. In ordinary etiquette an inferior must use both hands in the act of giving or receiving anything from a superior. Of course the actual act is the right hand only, the left hand being merely a support in a conventionalized way. Another way to be polite in etiquette when receiving anything is to raise your right hand outstretched before you receive it. This act is called in Siamese "au ngan" (เอางาน)*

traits common to Micronesia and Southeast Asia such as the way young men walk down a pathway hand in hand, or the general tabu on touching another person's head.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Phya Anuman* adds :

*"In Siam as elsewhere in the East the head is tabued. It is a gross insult to have one's head touched by women and inferiors. If you want two boys to fight each other the easy way to provoke their fury is to draw on the ground two circles pretending that they represent the heads of the two boys. If either of the boys dares to rub the circle which represents the other boy's head with his foot which is deemed the lowest and dirtiest thing, then it is a challenge and a fight ensues. It is also rude or rather an insult if you point to somebody with your foot instead of with your hand."*