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**Making Herstory:
Cherokee Women's Stickball**

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Making Herstory: Cherokee Women's Stickball

Cherokee stickball amongst the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians is a sporting tradition that precedes written records. Historical and academic texts have focused on men's participation in the sport. However, Cherokee women participated in their own stickball games as recent as a decade ago, and stories exist of women playing stickball in the late 19th century. Many in the community believe stickball should not be played by women and doubt evidence of women playing historically. Researchers sought to understand the intersectionality of gender and ethnic identity for female stickball players who took the field to play stickball at the turn of the 21st century. Through interviews and a focus group with Cherokee women who played stickball in the early 2000s, three themes arose: female kinship, proving they belong, and cultural connection. We hope to show how stickball fostered a sense of kinship and family and we suggest that stickball provided these women with an opportunity to claim and connect with their Cherokee heritage in new and meaningful ways.

Keywords: stickball; Cherokee; women; women's stickball; Cherokee stickball; sport; women's sport; culture; heritage; athletics

In the small corner of Western North Carolina, the year 2000 was a pivotal moment in history for the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians. While the world prepared for the millennium, Cherokee women prepared to take the field to play the traditional game of stickball. Many had only known of men ever playing the game but this group of women, with encouragement from several Elders, felt it was the time they take the field. Elders told stories of their female ancestors being the first to play to game, long before the erasure and rewriting of history brought upon by settler colonialism. The women's playing of this sacred game at the turn of the millennium was not without criticism or controversy. Ultimately, the women would end up creating their own legacy that exemplifies the complicated position of modern Indigenous¹ women in a world that has been so heavily influenced by assimilation of colonial values.

Traditionally, women were known as important figures in the men's game—not only as supporters, but as key participants in spiritual rituals such as the ball dance, an all-night preparation where men and women dance in specific formations along with other rituals (Fogelson 1962; Mooney 1890). At the same time, women were prohibited from certain aspects of the game. Men were prohibited from sexual activity with women in preparation prior to games, and some men even refused to eat food prepared by women. These traditions were and still are abided by among Cherokee ballplayers, as Mooney (1890) noted, “it was believed to insure defeat to a party if a woman even so much as touched a ball stick” (105).

While there are ball games specifically designated as women's sports (e.g., a game called fish) in Indigenous cultures (Vennum 2007), Cherokee women playing stickball was different. I²

¹ Throughout this work the terms Indigenous, Native American, American Indian and Native are used interchangeably to refer to the people Indigenous to North America. This is not to downplay the significance of individual Nations but to provide a way to recognize the Indigenous peoples more broadly for the purposes of this article.

² Any use of singular first person refers to first author

remember seeing women play stickball, including some of my closest friends, when I was in high school at the turn of the millennium. During that time, I felt a sense of uneasiness from the community about whether women should play. However, the ball fields were crowded with spectators in excitement to watch the women play. Family and friends speculated about women's stickball historically, wondering when they played, why they played, and when and why they stopped playing. As I spoke to Cherokee women about my research on men's stickball they asked if I would also be researching when the women played during this time period in the early 2000s. Even more compelling, the women who had played expressed a strong desire to discuss their experiences playing stickball, and especially of the social barriers they overcame to participate. Their curiosity, support, and willingness to share inspired me to record and share the experiences of these women who played stickball in the early 2000s.

I felt a responsibility to tell the story of Cherokee women's stickball. Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore women's participation in Cherokee stickball in the early 2000s and understand the impact of participation on these women's lives. Women's participation in stickball is much more complex than one - researcher or player - could imagine. With an Indigenous influence and aim for co-creation (Lassiter 2005), as well as a strengths-based theoretical grounding, the stories, memories, and feelings of these women are explored through semi-structured interviews and a focus group with nine Cherokee female stickball players. This work aims to provide a counter-narrative to the discourse that stickball was exclusively a man's game and attempts to make sense of the inherited colonial values that have been woven into the Cherokee community's own beliefs.

The Creator's Game

Cherokee stickball, as the name suggests, is a traditional stick and ball game. Stickball is recognized by many as the predecessor to the contemporary sport of lacrosse. In many Indigenous cultures it is known as the “Creator’s Game.” Prior to, and during European colonization, the game was played predominantly among northeastern and southeastern tribes; however it was present across all of North America. Nearly every tribe had some version of a stick and ball game attributed with its own unique regional and cultural characteristics. The French word “lacrosse” was initially recognized in missionary records during the first half of the 17th century. Contrary to popular belief, the name of the game came from the expression “jouer à la cross,” a common descriptor for games with a curved stick, not from a bishop’s crosier (Downey 2018; Vennum 1994).

The game was both practical and ceremonial. It could settle disputes as well as bring the community together for a social gathering (Arnold 2012). The ceremonial aspect went beyond the game with several pre-game and post-game rituals. There were many variations across tribes, but there are also several similarities. For example, the oral tradition, and in particular, the story of “Animals as Star Players” has been shared, in one variation another, across different Indigenous nations (Downey 2018; Vennum 1994). The moral of the story being not to belittle and underestimate others just based on their outward appearance (Mooney 1890).

Downey (2018) conducted an in-depth study of the history of lacrosse from 1860 – “the time at which Canada took over ‘Indian policy’ and lacrosse was appropriated by non-Indigenous enthusiasts” (20) – to 1990, when the Iroquois Nationals represented a sovereign nation in an official international competition. Downey’s work examined the “process through which identity is created and articulated – the process by which both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people constructed their shared histories and imagined how they belonged within a

larger group, whether that be a community, nation, or confederacy” (2018, 20). Downey notes that during the eighteenth and nineteenth century, as imperial nations battled to develop their place in North America, lacrosse remained important to Indigenous nations while missionaries regarded it with disdain. Zogry (2014) corroborates this in describing the Cherokee’s relationship to stickball. While the Cherokee held the game up as ceremony, missionaries perceived it to be “heathen” (Zogry 2014, 92).

Cherokees and Stickball

The Eastern Band of the Cherokee are the remaining members of the Cherokee tribe after the forced migration (i.e., the Trail of Tears) west (Finkelstein 1995). The Eastern Band currently consists of approximately 12,500 enrolled members, a majority of which reside on the 57,000 acre Qualla Boundary in the Great Smoky Mountains of western North Carolina (VisitCherokeeNC.com 2019). Current tribal members are the descendants of those who circumvented the Trail of Tears and removal to Oklahoma. The Cherokee community, like many other Native American communities, maintains deep ties between sports participation and traditional customs such as language, kinship and competition (Oxendine 1995). The history of Cherokee in sport, similar to other Indigenous peoples, is one that has been heavily influenced by settler colonialism, including, but not limited to, the institutions of patriarchy, Christianity, and forced assimilation at off-Reservation boarding schools.

The most prominent Cherokee sporting tradition is the game of stickball. Stickball was traditionally a war game, used to settle disputes between neighboring tribes and even inter-tribal communities (Fogelson 1962; Mooney 1890)³. More complex than the physical battle on the

³ Arnold (2012) also notes that it is likely colonizers and missionaries who are partly responsible for characterizing stickball as a war game. While conflict resolution is part of the game, Arnold (2012) also indicates that from an Indigenous strengths perspective, it can also be seen as a game of peace and creation.

field are the important cultural aspects, including a series of pre- and post-game rituals, many of which remain secret and sacred to those who participate. Cherokee stickball has been a subject of study ever since its discovery by outsiders. Missionaries (Gardner 1989), colonial explorers (Barnett 2014; Swanton 1998), and scholars (Fogelson 1962; Mooney 1890; Zogry 2010) have all remarked about the cultural significance of stickball for the Cherokee people. Generally, however, most of these texts—both historical and academic—focus on stickball as it is played by men, and assume that it is primarily a man's sport (Authors 2017)⁴.

Very little written history exists about stickball by Cherokee people before settlers landed in what is now the United States. Lack of documentation could be attributed to its sacred nature or the reliance on oral tradition over written records. In 2019, a team of archeologists and Cherokee scholars, including a Cherokee tribal member and stickball player, translated cave inscriptions that date back to the 19th century in present-day northern Alabama. The inscriptions, written in the Cherokee syllabary, refer to a game of stickball on April 30, 1828, and includes the text, “We are those that have blood come out of their nose and mouth,” which the authors believe refers to the “red condition” of the stickball players (Carroll et al. 2019, 526). The red condition refers to the cycle of stickball activities in which players were more susceptible to danger, injury, and death (Vennum 1994).

While known for its violence, Cherokee stickball as a game is relatively simple. Unlike other tribes who use one stick in their stick and ball games, Cherokee players carry two sticks of about three feet in length and clasp the ball in between the webbed cups of the sticks. The field of play is marked off by each teams’ medicine man, with pairs of tree saplings on each end signifying the goals. Once the ball is thrown into the air amidst the crowd of both teams the

⁴ Authors Omitted

game has begun. The first team to carry the ball through its own goal 12 times wins. While some have suggested that stickball play has declined since it was first investigated by colonial missionaries in the late 1800s, others argue that it is currently experiencing a resurgence (Mooney 1890; Zogry 2010). On the Qualla Boundary in Cherokee, North Carolina, I have observed the growth of the game in the past 10 years as it has grown from a one team representing one community to nearly all of our community's fielding a team.

Colonialization & Aboriginal Feminism

It is critical to acknowledge the role of Native American women in their Indigenous societies and how that has been influenced by colonization. Allen (1996), in her rich collection of essays on Native American feminism, outlines the vast ways in which the Indigenous female traditions have been obscured by colonialism. She explains how Indigenous societies more often than not lived by gynocracy, or were governed by women, and that the cultural genocide of Indigenous peoples was mostly about the patriarchal fear of the gynocracy. Allen (1996) refers to the Cherokee tribe specifically and explains how Cherokee leaders compromised their gynocritic systems for political power. Cherokee women, who were once equal in power to men in their matrilineal society, fell victim to rape and murder, and “the women of the leadership class retreated to Bible classes, sewing circles, and petticoats that rivaled those worn by their white sisters” (Allen 1996, 37). Male Cherokee leaders, in trying to stave off their removal, disenfranchised women and blacks. Allen (1996) described how Cherokee women, “no longer possessing a voice in the Nation's business, women became pawns in the struggle between white and Cherokee for possession of Cherokee lands” (37). Ultimately, the position of Cherokee women as matriarchs declined and the natural order of both male and female roles of the Cherokee worldview eroded (Perdue, 1998).

Cherokee women, along with all other Indigenous women, were disempowered by colonization and as Lee Maracle (1988) described in her seminal book on sociology and feminism, “the result of being colonized is the internalization of the need to remain invisible. The colonizers erase you, not easily, but with shame and brutality” (8). This invisibility brought upon by colonization led to a distortion and confusion over identity for Indigenous women and interrupt Indigenous nations’ very “sense of being a people” (Smith 2005, 3). There has been much resistance to the term feminism among Native women in the belief that is a movement for white women and further upholds the patriarchy (Green 2007; Maracle 1988). Arvin, Tuck, & Morrill (2013) called for the decolonization of feminism and argue that there cannot be feminist thought and theory without Native feminist theory. As they described, “Native feminist theories make claims not to an authentic past outside of settler colonialism, but to an ongoing project of resistance that continues to contest patriarchy and its power relationships” (Arvin, Tuck and Morrill 2013, 25).

Colonialization is not a thing of the past but something Indigenous people, and especially Indigenous women have to work to demolish every day. To fully understand how our thinking and practices have been altered we “must be both decolonizers and feminists” (LaRocque, 2007, 68). Cherokee women, like all other modern Native women, find themselves in a constant struggle to reconcile traditional tribal definitions of women with industrial and postindustrial non-Indigenous definitions (Allen, 1996).

Cherokee Women and Stickball

Cherokee women’s early inclusion in the game of stickball is not unusual when you consider that the Cherokee society is matrilineal in nature. Cherokees take the clan of their mother when they are born and are associated with her family lineage. The Cherokees lived by the rule of equality,

not hierarchy, and before colonization Cherokee women had political, economic, and social rights equal to those of Cherokee men. Conversely, much of the historical writing by traders, missionaries and explorers on Cherokee women viewed them from the European white male hierarchical perspective (Henning 2007). As Cherokee scholar Theda Perdue describes, “such encounters led Cherokee women to understand that Carolinians regarded their agricultural labor, sexual autonomy, control of children, and other behavior as deviant” (1998, 62).

In 1762, Lieutenant Henry Timberlake wrote, “I was not a little pleased likewise with their ball-plays (in which they show great dexterity) especially when the women played, who played one another about, to the no-small amusement of a European spectator” (Fogelson 1962, 21). Timberlake’s comments are understood to be the first written record of Cherokee women playing stickball. In the 1800s, James Mooney recorded a Cherokee interviewee whose mother claimed that she had played stickball (Vennum 2007). More recently, Zogry (2010) has conducted extensive research on the historical game of stickball, aggregating previous findings. He found archival evidence from the John Howard Payne Papers (written in the early 1700s) that, “women were conservators and transmitters of cultural traditions commonly ascribed to men” (Zogry 2010, 38). Irwin (1997) noted that the majority of missionaries, some of the earliest to interact with Cherokee culture, were men and the “comments of Cherokee women show that these elder women also had a knowledge of many rituals, the ceremonial prayers, purification and childbearing rites, traditional dress, and mourning customs” (13).

More recently, Zogry (2010) covered the controversial emergence of women’s teams when describing the game’s growth in the early 21st century. My experience as a Cherokee woman in the early 2000s matched Zogry’s (2010) observations of Cherokee women playing stickball. I have been told that a male Elder who mentored several women told them about

women being the first players of the game and encouraged them to start playing at the turn of the 21st century. The women in the study describe the first games as taking place in the fall of 2000 and continued in a more organized and public fashion until approximately 2007. Organized games were played every year during the first week of October at the Cherokee Indian Fair on the Qualla Boundary. The Smoky Mountain Times, a local paper in western North Carolina, recorded the women's return to the field in 2000 with an article entitled "Women's Stickball Returns After 130 Years". That article reads:

According to Cherokee elder Jerry Wolfe, when the Creator gave the game of stickball to the Cherokees, it was given to the women.

Women played stickball for centuries, he said recently, although through the years the game became rougher and rougher. In 1870, the men of the tribe made the women quit playing because one woman was almost killed and another could no longer bear children.

Then in 1900, the government outlawed stickball, mostly due to "exorbitant gambling." It was four decades before the Cherokees resurrected stickball, in 1941, with the men playing. It has continued as a men's sport, until this year.

This year, noting the historical perspective, Patsy French decided to organize a women's stickball team. The decision was not without controversy: Some in Cherokee believe that stickball is not for women. But, says French, "this is the new millennium, it's time for women to play again." She began making phone calls to women she thought might be interested. She arranged for a playing field and contacted Jerry Wolfe who agreed to become the women's teacher and explain rules, tradition, and history.

Beloved Elder Jerry Wolfe told me this story in the summer of 2017 and the women I interviewed have also corroborated this story.

During this time, I remember women often playing after a men's game, with crowds just as big, and sometimes bigger. The crowds were big but the spectators were not in consensus of their support of women playing the game. The community was split between support and condemnation, with no lack of intrigue into the controversy. The way these women played was nearly identical to the way the men played—rough and no holds barred. The rules and regulations were the same, distinguishing the Cherokee women's sport from the modified games of women in some other Native American and Indigenous communities (Vennum 2007). A handful of Elders who had been taught that the game was traditionally played by women encouraged the younger Cherokee women, most of whom had never seen or heard of other women playing before, to play the game. These Elders also shared the “medicine,” or the preparation and healing rituals, of the game. These rituals included formulas, body-marking, concoctions, and taboos that are considered just as important to the game as the actual physical play. Traditionally, a medicine man implements the medicine by preparing special recipes, performing chants, and serving as a spiritual advisor for the team. Many Cherokee believe that stickball is really a battle between the medicine man's powers, not the players on the field. Still, other Elders were not as supportive as they were raised with the tradition of stickball being a men's game only.

Purpose & Rationale

When a group of women decided that the turn of the new millennium was time for women to play stickball and took the field, many women, including myself, were intimidated by the ferocity in which they played. There was no shortage of critics throughout the community,

many whom believed that women never played the sacred game and should not be allowed to play now. The female players' families were against the idea of them and other women playing the violent and sacred sport. Despite the physical and social barriers, these women continued to play in the opening decade of the 21st century. In 2007, the ceremonial board that oversees the annual festival program, where stickball is a highlight of the activities, "banned" women from playing on the fairgrounds during the festival. While there is no literature documenting this banishment, it was discussed by all of the community members I interacted with before, during and after this research was conducted (Kovach 2010; Tuhiwai-Smith 1999). The women continued to play in a more scrimmage-like style at other fields for several years, but participation dwindled and eventually women stopped playing altogether. Some community members said that the women gave up; others said they became too busy with family to maintain the commitment to playing regularly; critics claimed that there were not enough women living the clean lifestyles required of stickball. These are all hearsay and there are no records of how this phenomenon faded out. Regardless of the reason for ceasing to play, this research found that those who played experienced a strong connection to Cherokee culture—as *women*—through their participation in the game. While there are many unanswered questions surrounding the women's game of stickball, this work seeks to add to our understanding of this cultural connection between sport and Native communities.

History might as well be "his story" because how historians have traditionally written about specific events from a man's perspective and only included men in that perspective. There is a lack of documentation of Native American women because of the fact they were Native, compounded by their gender (Perdue 2001). When Native American women were portrayed to outsiders, they often took on the role of characters and not actual autonomous human beings

(Carney 2005). The involvement of Native American women in sport is also lacking documentation as sport is often perceived as having less relevance for women (Coakley 2014; Lovell 1991). Personal narratives from Cherokee women involved in stickball are practically nonexistent. Their voices exemplify the importance of stickball to Cherokee women and provide a counter-narrative to the stories of stickball as a man's game. These women also challenge the inherited colonial values that have permeated Cherokee community's own understandings of stickball.

Theoretical Framework

When embarking on this research, it was important to me as a Cherokee woman to approach the phenomenon of women playing stickball as an example of strength in the Cherokee community. While the game was only played among women for a small period of time, I wanted to appreciate that contribution and not overlook its significance. Most research regarding Indigenous people, especially regarding Native American health, is from a deficit perspective. The deficit perspective identifies problems or barriers and then, "explores potential solutions for overcoming such problems, primarily by drawing on the skills of 'experts'" (Paraschak 2013, 230). Research conducted from a deficit perspective reinforces what is not working without considering or encouraging what is working well (Paraschak 2013).

Rather than approach the Cherokee community from the often-used deficit model, I seek to disrupt the ways Native communities have been colonized by the social scientific research process. The strengths-based model used by scholars such as Victoria Paraschak and Kristi Thompson (2014) is one we use to guide this work. A strengths-based approach aligns with other recent research in sports sociology which place Aboriginal voices at the center of the research process (Bennie, Apoifis, Marlin, and Caron 2017; Stronach, Maxwell, and Pearce 2019). We

did not want to portray stickball as something these women had lost but as an empowering period to inspire future generations.

Methodology

There is a complex and often historically-fraught relationship between Indigenous peoples and research. Tuhiwai-Smith (1999, 1) argued that “research is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism.” In fact, she wrote, “[t]he word itself, ‘research,’ is probably one of the dirtiest words in the Indigenous world’s vocabulary. When mentioned in many Indigenous contexts, it stirs up silence, it conjures up bad memories, it raises a smile that is knowing and distrustful” (1999, 1). Given these historical realities, research with Indigenous communities requires special consideration for issues of ethics and exploitation.

One way that researchers can mitigate against the exploitation of their participants is to adopt a “collaborative” model (Lassiter 2005). Lassiter explained how a more deliberate and explicit collaborative research project includes collaboration at every stage of the process “from project conceptualization, to fieldwork, and, especially, through the writing process” (2005, 16). We pursued this research collaboratively with our participants throughout the research process. In fact, the study was first conceived at the behest of the Cherokee community while researching on men’s stickball. The community was enthusiastic about this work, and several women encouraged me to pursue research on women’s stickball.

Additionally, I am a Cherokee woman, and I approached this study “with the traditional knowledge and understanding of what it means to be a Cherokee” (Tate and Duncan 1998, 2). As a member of the community, I not only had access and insight to women’s stickball, but also personally experienced the tensions in the community around women’s participation in stickball. While I did not play stickball, I remember these community tensions and was excited to work

with the women who did play to learn more about women's stickball and its importance to Cherokee women.

In order to best develop a collaborative research project, we chose a qualitative design. Specifically, we sought to “understand the meaning, for participants in the study, of the events, situations, and actions they are involved with and of the accounts that they give of their lives and experiences” (Maxwell 1996, 17). Qualitative research relies on the researcher as the data collection instrument, and privileges the researcher's ability to be sensitive to underlying meaning when gathering and interpreting data. Combined with my own positionality as a researcher and Cherokee woman, a qualitative approach was the best way to understand how these women constructed their worlds, how they interpreted their experiences, and the meaning they attributed to those experiences in regard to participating in stickball (Merriam and Tisdell 2016).

The qualitative design was further framed by an Indigenous approach to research, which “recognizes that people exist in connection with other people, both living and nonliving, as well as with land, animals, and other beings” (Reyes 2016, 104). This ontology suggests that the individual exists because of his or her community and that the community exists because of its individuals (Chilisa 2012). Knowledge, then, is built on and through relationships (Chilisa 2012; Wilson 2008). As Reyes stated, “the researcher can only come closer to true knowledge not through a retreat to the ego but through his/her understanding and appreciation of relationships, those between him/herself and what/who is being researched as well as between what is being researched and entities connected to it” (2016, 105). As a researcher, I constantly asked myself, “whose interests are being served throughout this work?” As I answered that question, I sought

to situate myself as both a member of the research team and as a Cherokee, though I aimed to prioritize the wishes of my community.

I, the primary researcher for this study, identify as Native American, specifically as a member of the Eastern Band of Cherokee. I grew up on the Cherokee Reservation in western North Carolina and had moderate knowledge of the sport of stickball prior to beginning this research. I had previously conducted a study on the men's game (Authors 2017) and was implored by Tribal members to study the women's game. Also, as a woman I had a particularly resonant connection to this work. My membership in the tribe granted me easier access to the community and allowed me to build rapport and trust with the participants and allowed for an insider perspective culturally. This insider perspective may allow for a "deeper contextual insight into the community" (Innes 2009, 447). Additionally, the position of being an insider in Native American communities improves the strength of the research process (Swisher 1998). As Kovach (2009) states in her book on Indigenous methodologies, "those that aim to provide information about Indigenous methodologies face anxiety about the misinterpretations, appropriations, and dismissals when placing their ways of knowing into Western research" (12). I did experience anxiety but also a sense of pride and responsibility in conducting this research.

Through both personal inspiration and community involvement, the following research questions guided this study:

What were the experience of Cherokee women who played stickball during the early 2000s?

What do their narratives show about what it meant to play, why they stopped playing, and what they think about the potential of a re-emergence of women's stickball?

Do the women's narratives provide any counter narratives to how stickball/lacrosse is currently understood?

Sampling

Criterion-based, purposeful sampling was used in order to identify potential research participants (Patton 2005). The criteria for inclusion included being a tribal member of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, a woman, and a former stickball player. Recruitment occurred via emails, mobile text messages, and in-person communication. It was estimated that approximately 50 women played stickball during this time, from approximately 2000 to 2007. After reaching out to 20 potential participants through my personal relationships, 10 responded to the inquiry, and nine agreed to be included in the study. The participants ranged in age between 29 and 60. All the participants were residents of the Qualla Boundary, the Cherokee Reservation in western North Carolina. After completing interviews with nine women, we felt that saturation had been reached as the participants were repeating the same themes (Corbin and Strauss 2008). Corbin and Strauss (2008, 149) consider saturation as having occurred when new themes and categories stop emerging, and when sufficient “depth and breadth of understanding about a phenomenon” has been reached.

Method

Semi-structured interviews were utilized in this study as it was important to understand the participants' perspectives (Merriam and Tisdell 2016). Since the activity of women's stickball was no longer being performed on the Cherokee Indian Reservation, having access to the participants' recollections was paramount for this study. Nine interviews were conducted with women who played stickball during 2000-2007. Additionally, a focus group was conducted at the request of the women because they felt they would be able to more easily remember their

time playing stickball if they were gathered with other women who had played. Of the nine women who participated in interviews seven participated in the focus group. This group meeting was very informal and was what some in the South call a “visit,” where people meet for casual conversation without an explicit goal in mind. I was able to prompt the women with some of my memories, and then they were able to respond to one another’s stories and memories of games, practices and general recollections of stickball. Storytelling is an important facet of Cherokee culture and it was important for the interview and focus group structure to be informal and allow the participants to tell their stories completely (Tate and Duncan 1998).

Establishing trust, of the researcher and of the research findings, was crucial at every step of this study. As a member of the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indians, I was able to establish a comradery with the participants. Many were classmates or friends in which I had a previous relationship. They were familiar with me and my work on stickball and had certain understanding of what would be requested. Strategies to enhance trustworthiness included open-ended questioning to gain insight into the participants’ points of view; member-checking, where participants were provided with copies of interview transcripts and asked to provide reactions, corrections, or additional insight (Merriam 2009); and a peer review process where the researchers met to discuss and agree upon final themes (Marshall and Rossman 2013).

Data Analysis

The primary researcher transcribed the audio from the interviews and the focus group and the participants chose pseudonyms in order to protect their identity. Data analysis was performed using the constant comparative method, where one segment of data was compared to another in order to find similarities and differences (Glaser and Strauss 1967). A thorough reading and rereading of the data was done and codes of individual instances were continually compared to

the rest of the data (Boeije 2002). The transcripts were read individually by each researcher and their individual codes were assigned to the data. The researchers met to discuss their individual codes and categories on several occasions before deciding upon the final three themes. The meaningful and repetitive codes were organized and condensed to make categories that were eventually transformed into themes (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

Findings

Three themes were gathered from the data analysis: (a) female kinship, (b) proving they belong, and (c) cultural connection. Female kinship is the family-like environment that stickball provided for the women who participated. While the women felt that their team was like family, they felt they had to prove themselves to their families and communities who doubted women's belonging on the stickball field. Finally, the game provided these women with a strong cultural connection and significance that was not attained by alternative cultural activities.

Female Kinship

Since Cherokee is such a strongly connected community, it was not surprising that these women had experienced stickball with their families, often through their male relatives that had played at some point. The reservation is a relatively small geographical territory, but it includes seven distinct communities or townships, such as Wolfetown (also known as Soco) and Birdtown. Stickball players play for the team that represents their community, similar to the way that other recreational and youth sports are organized. While women spoke of their allegiance to their community the idea of kinship and family was even more prominent. As Holly described:

One of the things that's really neat about the women's team is that Soco, Wolfetown, we had a group of girls and it was really tight-knit. We were never beat. We were scored on a few times but we were never beat. And I like to believe that that sisterhood and that sense of family, I'm

going to use this word but not in the cultural sense, the clanship that we had together is what made us united. We came together, we stood together.

Among all the participants, the sense that kinship made their team stronger was present. Women spoke of the bonds between individual women, rather than just a connection to their representative community. Pride in their accomplishments on the field was logical, but that was only one piece of the connection these women created. The game was much more than just the play on the field. The women spoke of how cultural rituals, including the conjuring ceremonies, created a bond that set stickball apart from their participation in other sports. Holly continued:

We shared. We shared medicine together. We shared rituals together. We came together. We ate together. We observed together. If there was one of us that needed help, we helped them. We protected each other. And I think that's what makes us different...the way we were taught was maternal and it was instinctual. And I think that women can be very vicious but at the same time when they have a connection and are able to feel like sisters you protect what is yours. You protect what you hold sacred. I think it's very easy to say that every single one of those girls, I would have protected and they would have protected me.

Stickball brought together women who were familiar with each other and in many cases, sisters and cousins played together. There were even mother-daughter pairings. Jane described her teammates, "I grew up with them, but it was just awesome, just that family atmosphere. And just coming together as a team, it was really on a different level." This higher plane of sisterhood came across throughout all the interviews and while the game had not been played recently, it felt very current to the participants. Jane described how the bond formed on a stickball team was not one that faded over time:

I'll see the girls that I played with now, and we may not like be the best of friends and hang out all the time but there's a mutual respect for each other. I can see girls that I play with and not have

seen them in a year and be like “Hey, how's it going” and talk to them and genuinely interested in how their life's going. And it's not just a “Hey, how are you?”, and you go on your way. You're excited to see them and it's just that connection because you've been out there and you know that the other girls are looking out for you.

Nancy echoed this sentiment of not just respect but genuine caring for one another,

And to this day a lot of us are still really close ... I could call up any one of them. Any one of the 56. I think there's 56 in all. But I'll have somebody I can talk to. We're close on a stickball team because we go through a little bit more trials. And we have that medicine. That medicine just makes a bond.

The female kinship had a lasting effect on the individuals as well as the participants' families, and in turn the greater Cherokee community. One of the leaders of a women's team, Michelle, described how playing could also impact the girls' family. She spoke of how she made sure the girls got the permission of their parents:

I would tell these high school students, you bring that grade level up and you listen to your parents and you do what they say or you do not walk on this field. I had maybe four or five sets of parents and I asked them to sign a paper saying that it was okay for them to play. These parents came to me later and said you're the only person that could get my child to bring up their grades, to listen to me. Before they wouldn't listen to me, they would talk back to me. They would just ignore me. And they'd say whenever you told them that they had to ask me and get my permission and it was up to me to decide, they said, I'll bring my grades up, I'll do good in school. They were really pleased with it and had the respect of the game to respect their parents. The kids, they went to school they graduated, they made something of themselves and I'm really proud of them.

Obviously pride plays and significant part in this game, but as the previous quote shows, the cycle between players, parents, and the community creates bonds that are not easily broken.

For these women, playing stickball was not only about representing their community, it also provided a deep sense of kinship and belonging.

Proving They Belong

While the women experienced a sense of belonging among their teams, this experience was more fraught in relation to their families and communities. Historically, women who wanted to form their own teams and play stickball faced resistance from the community. In part, this stemmed from the sacred manner of the men's game, because of its close association with cultural and spiritual aspects of Cherokee culture. As an enduring tradition, stickball is precious to community members and they expressed not only interest, but also concern over the involvement of women in what was predominantly seen as a men's game.

Nearly all of the participants told stories about how when they started playing, they first had to persuade their parents to allow them to play. Some players mentioned having respected men's players advocate on their behalf to assure their families they had the approval of the men's teams to play what they considered their (the men's) sport. One point of contention was whether or not there was historical precedent for women playing stickball. All the participants discussed how they had been told that women shouldn't play, but they also argued that they knew women had played. Several women mentioned a beloved elder who told stories of how women had played long ago. Erica described the elder and her logic on women playing:

He's 90-something years old but he was probably a very young kid, maybe not even born, and heard stories growing up that women used to play stickball, but they don't anymore because they're not supposed to because they were banned. Our Elders now don't remember women playing stickball so they were always taught that women couldn't play stickball because they were banned at one time. They know that women played at one point because they heard those stories. They passed on that women were banned to play, but that's because they *did* play once. If

they never played it would never have come up. But because they did play and they were banned, that's why everybody says they're not supposed to play.

“Banned” is a word that evokes strong emotions and it is not used lightly in this instance. However, I felt these women viewed the banishment of women in the past as not reason against women playing, but proof that women did play and could play again. It was almost as if the women being banned before was similar to other outdated traditions of the past, such myths about women’s strength, and now women could rightfully take the field.

There was an overwhelming sense among these women that they had to prove to the community that women did play. It was their personal mission to show that they were doing something their Elders had not only done, but approved of them doing. In what was considered a victory for all the women players, they did research to find proof that women did play. Holly described finding proof of a women’s game in a journal entry from a historic Cherokee community:

The fact that I was able to find that journal entry should have been a little bit of a feather in our cap but for the most part it kind of felt like it was justification...And I think for women in that day and that time to act and to do as the men was considered barbaric. It was considered savage and I think that it was very frowned upon. So while it was something that was able to survive the generations, the diminishment of women and their ability to play was kind of plagued with, “you don't do that because you're a woman.”

When Holly speaks of the opinions of others on women playing she spoke of those of outsiders, not of the Cherokee community. It made sense to these women that when explorers and missionaries landed upon the Cherokee people they found Cherokee women behaving in ways they would never approve of in their own culture. They alluded to the influence of colonization as another obstacle to overcome in their playing of the game.

Women players went beyond finding proof of women playing and provided a traditional reasoning behind their beliefs that women belonged on the field. They argued that there was a logical connection between women's general empowerment within the Cherokee tribe and participation in stickball. Jane elaborated:

It's obvious that there is documentation that women played, and it's kind of hard for me, how people may discredit that, when women are held so highly, or have been held so highly in our tribe. They did play. Because if they are so strong in everything, I think that they would be able to do exactly what the men did. I've not done my own research, but I do hear people, and that it's definitely in our history that they played... I mean there's a lot of us that wouldn't be out there if it wasn't in our history that we played. Because we respect the game and we don't want to disrespect it in any way.

As Jane touched on, an important aspect of belonging on the field was respect. In Cherokee culture, it is expected and instilled to have respect for community, self, and the game of stickball. It would be disrespectful to play a game in which tribal members, especially Elders, believed women should not participate. Lauren echoed the sentiment of respecting the game when they started playing in the annual Cherokee Indian Fair:

After we played in the fair this first couple of years there was a lot of people just saying well, women didn't play stickball, you guys are so disrespectful, and all this and that. But, if I wouldn't have talked to the men, just jumped out there I wouldn't have been playing because that would have been disrespectful, and not getting the okay from them. But it came down to ignoring it, all these people saying stuff, and we just kept playing.

Lauren went on to speak of the times that there was not another team to play at the fair, so the Wolfetown community women's team played amongst themselves. They had a passion for the game that wouldn't allow them stop playing, despite the lack of an opponent. This speaks

again to the significance of the game for these women. If the game was only about winning, maybe they would not have played if there was no opponent to beat. This exemplifies how adamant the women were to prove they had a right to play in that they did not let small numbers keep them from taking the field.

Cultural Connection

Nancy stated, “The game for us is more than baseball is to America... It's in your blood.” Unlike baseball, stickball has elaborate surrounding rituals and regulations that have been handed down and enforced for generations. Diane explained, “the ritual part of it, the medicine part of it and what we do was probably the most important thing, because that's all stickball was, it was a cultural tradition. That is the most important part.” She described how all of the random events in the game, such as a stick breaking or a lost ball, were all linked to what was happening mentally, physically, and perhaps most importantly, spiritually, with individual players and the team. In this sense, spirituality is not necessarily linked to organized religion but a focus on harmony that comes from balance and respect for “all of our relations” (Garrett and Garrett 1994, 139).

Like many Indigenous communities, the Cherokee people are in a battle to keep their culture alive. For example, the Cherokee language is at risk of being lost as fluent speakers pass on and the impact of generational erasure of Native languages is fully seen (Kipp 2000). The tribe has implemented an immersion school for children to teach Cherokee as a first language. The incorporation of language is also encouraged through sports and other activities. In stickball, language was an integral part. Michelle explained how stickball helps with this preservation...

Our culture is dying out and there's hardly any of it left, except our dancing and our ballgames. That's about it. That's all that's left of our culture. Our beadwork, our crafts, we don't have nowadays because the kids are so into games and videos that they don't take time to be outside and to learn things that's what is dying out from us. Our language, it's something, we can do that

out on the field, learn words out there, how to toss the ball or how to pick it up or you know just say these (Cherokee) words. Every one of us (has) an Indian name. We put an Indian name on and we use it. That way we know who we're talking to and who the ball's going to go. It (stickball) does help our culture.

Language is so closely tied to stickball that a language lesson can be hidden within a practice session on technique. As the tribe fights to preserve any cultural components it can, this integration is more crucial than ever to the survival of what makes the Cherokee people distinctively Indigenous.

There is a strong sense in the community that if there is a focus on culture we will be more resilient to outside corruption. Culture is a tool to fight back against epidemics that plague those of us on the Reservation, as Holly described:

It's the ability to show perseverance. Instead of saying let's focus on this instead of drugs and alcohol. No, let's make this a focus always. Let's be the inspiration that our youth and that our community needs to see. That you're a healthy person. You're an active person. It doesn't mean you have to be the best at the sport. I think being healthy and being active doesn't always have to be that you're the one of that puts up the numbers.

There is also acknowledgement of the importance of the game for future generations. Many of the women spoke of living vicariously through their sons who currently played. Holly elaborated:

That immersion is a testament that shows us that the children are able to duplicate what they see and what they're immersed in. And if it has that kind of effect and it has that type of capability to empower our youth as it did my sister, why would they say that we couldn't play? Why?

When contemplating the criticism she faced Holly resolved:

Ultimately, to be a part of history and to be a part of something that was so controversial at the time...I was sitting here thinking when you said, "do people chastise me for playing?" No, they

didn't. More times than not I got kudos because I was part of a team that was strong. I got kudos for being a part of a team that was trying to be positive in changing the way we think. I'm sure there were nasty remarks and snickers, but for the most part people were like "I like the way your team plays. I like the way you play. You aren't out there to fight. You're out there to play ball."

Kelly had a similar conclusion, "Play for the medicine. Play for who you are. Play for Cherokee. Strong Cherokee Women. We're Warriors. We're the warriors".

Discussion

The women of Cherokee who played stickball in the early 2000s may have been outliers, but they exemplified the significance of identity and culture in sport. Cherokee women's participation in stickball also showcased the complicated gender dynamics in conjunction with colonialism. Looking more closely at stickball, this was not simply about women playing sport; it was more about women playing the sacred sport of the Cherokee. It was about what it meant to fully engage in the culture of stickball, not because the men did it, but because it was important to their Cherokee identity. The kinship they developed was incomparable to any other activity, including any other sport. Sisters, mothers, and cousins took the field together and created bonds that time could not erase. The passion of these women extended beyond the game to the relationships they fostered and the bonds they created over a piece of their culture.

Sport is an important aspect of culture for Indigenous people across the world. Kendall Blanchard's (1981) in-depth ethnographic study with the Mississippi Choctaws found that they integrate their Choctaw values in to their leisure time. Blanchard (1981) noted that, "girls grow up learning to compete with and defeat their masculine peers without fear of rejection or social ostracism" (55). Stronach, Maxwell, and Pearce (2019) argued that Indigenous Australian women become empowered to improve their mental and physical health through participation in sport. Indigenous culture is often intertwined with a sense of community and community can be

fostered by sport. McHugh, Coppola, Holt and Andersen (2015) found in their study of community among Aboriginal youth and adults that sport *is* community

Sport has also been used as a tool to assimilate and erase Indigenous cultures. Settlers in North America invoked governmental and religious authority to develop an assimilation policy with the goal of turning American Indians into “Christian white farmers” (Iverson 1978). In schools, Native students were dressed the same as white children, taught the masculine and feminine codes of Western society, sang the national anthem and played baseball (Delsahut and Terret 2014) While sport might have been intended to be used as a part of the assimilation process it was often used by Native people as tool to resist to colonization and enhance culture, including the reinforcement of family and community through physical activity (Paraschak and Thompson 2014).

The concept of “playing for the right reasons” can be linked to the spiritual and cultural significance of stickball. Motivations for playing should be rooted in kinship and respect for the game, not a desire for violence and vengeance. This included living a “clean” or “pure” lifestyle and abstaining from any unhealthy habits such as drinking and drugs. There was an emphasis on playing for the right reasons not as much in the moral and ethical sense but more so in the cultural sense. Playing for the right reasons meant respecting the field, the medicine, the ball, and every other aspect of the game. Without many technical restrictions there are few explicit rules to break. However, respecting oneself and the Cherokee culture was of utmost importance to maintaining the necessary spiritual balance. Due to the strong familial bonds and holistic lifestyle influence, we argue that playing stickball provided these women with an avenue to connect to their cultural identity in a way that was more significant than other cultural traditions such as cooking and craft-making.

Where Women Belong

There is a unique juxtaposition between the women's role in the men's game of stickball and playing themselves that is also worth exploration. Women had strict roles and restrictions when it came to the men's game. They were key participants in the all-night dance ceremony for the men before each game. The women would often line up behind the men on the field to literally back them up. However, they were seen as dangerous during menstruation (Fogelson 1962). The women spoke of how they were never allowed to touch the men's sticks and in the weeks leading up to their games they were prohibited from sleeping in the same bed, let alone have any sexual contact. It is even seen as bad luck for a woman to prepare a man's food in that pregame phase. This is meant to test men's strength of resistance as well as keep them pure. Women spoke of their own restrictions; similar to men, they were to abstain from sexual contact, alcohol and drugs. These women did not imply that they felt held back by these restrictions, they were a part of the experience. Downey (2019) found a similar situation between the Hodinöhsö:ni women, who were not allowed to play but assigned roles on the sideline, as organizers, supporters, and fans. Cherokee women respected their role in the men's game, however limiting it may be, and yet defied other societal restrictions in their own playing of the game.

The cultural preservation aspect of the game for the women is more complex because they have revitalized the game without expectations. Women were often discouraged from participating by community members who had not seen or heard of women playing. From my experience, much of the interest in women playing was not for the cultural significance but more for superficial drama and controversial violence. The women in this study fought to demolish this sensational perception and played for the genuine athletic and cultural meaning of the sport. It begs the question – if it is not completely accepted by modern society, is cultural preservation

still significant? These women had an extra hurdle to overcome before they could even fulfill their intentions of preserving the culture they hold so dear. These women fought for something worth emulating, much how American society idolizes women who championed Title IX and equal rights in sport. But, like Title IX, stickball presented many contradictions in spite of the positives it inspired. Some people were not opposed to women playing sport as much as they were upset with women overtaking what were previously seen as exclusively male spaces. Similar to stickball, there was a sense that people did not want the women to tarnish what the men have with sport. Downey (2018) also points out this contradiction between the traditionalist and modernists views within the Indigenous community, and women playing lacrosse. He noted that the lack of representation of Hodinöhsö:ni women playing lacrosse could reflect “the limiting gender constructs of sport generally and the larger shift in Hodinöhsö:ni communities from a matrilineal society to one that privileged male hegemony, as aided by colonialism” (229). However, he states that the women’s playing is more complex, rooted in both traditionalism and nationhood (Downey 2018).

Colonial Coincidence

It seems that it is not merely coincidental that the historical accounts of Cherokee women playing stickball in the 1800s, and then stopping, coincide with colonialism. These participants, after conducting their own research, spoke of how European settlers observed Cherokee treating women as equals to the men, including their stickball participation, and declared the women barbaric. The implementation of colonial sociological beliefs upon Cherokee society could have easily led to the abolishment of women’s stickball teams. This influence regarding the role of women impacted many other aspects of Cherokee society (Johnston 2003; Perdue 1998).

When these colonial figures arrived, they did not simply observe the Cherokee, they enforced their influence on how they should live their lives. The Cherokees abided by the rule of equality, something traditionally unheard of in most hierarchical Western societies. The European influence on politics and social structures caused much turmoil in these tribal communities. For example, the implementation of blood quantum, the system of declaring tribal membership by blood degree rather than community and cultural involvement. Women helped deal with all these momentous changes, perhaps leaving less time for recreational activity (Perdue 2001). However, throughout these changes Cherokee women clung to traditions that, “defined them as a sovereign nation and that have kept their people together” (Carney 2005, 163)

It makes sense that with shifting gender dynamics a superficially violent sport fell to the wayside while language, crafts and other cultural traditions became more of a focus. This colonization cuts even deeper when looking at present day Cherokee society, where there are current tribal members, both men and women, who still refuse to believe that women can compete in the same stickball game as the men. I will not go as far to say women playing stickball deny their colonization, rather they defy the victim role put upon them in modern society (Maracle 1988).

In discussing colonization and women’s roles in sport, we must also consider the discourse around tradition. As Green (2007) explained:

For Aboriginal peoples...tradition has come to represent a pre-colonial time when Indigenous peoples exercised self-determination. For the most part, this is assumed, and rightly so, to have been a good and appropriate path. But tradition is neither a monolith, nor is it axiomatically good, and the notions of what practices were and are essential, how they should be practiced, who may be involved and who is an authority are all open to

interpretation...Too many Aboriginal women have been silenced or had their social and political roles minimized by invocations of appropriate tradition relative to women's voices and choices. (27)

Conversely, sports like lacrosse are held up as pillars of tradition. As Downey (2018) described, "lacrosse remained a critical holistic element – the interconnectedness of the physical (i.e., land, humans, animals, environment) and spiritual worlds (i.e., creation, medicine, afterlife)" (39). To this day there are constant contradictions between tradition, sport and where women belong. The patriarchy demands that the Native female be below the Native male (Maracle 1988) and it would be silly to think that women could compete in a "men's sport." Not only did these women play, they chose to make new traditions regarding stickball while upholding sacred rituals. For Indigenous people self-determination is the ultimate goal and LaRocque (2007) felt that, "the means or the capacity to make choices is really what self-determination is all about" (61). These women who played stickball exemplified self-determination and exerted their power to play. It was not as easy as just picking up a ball stick and taking the field. Like LaRocque (2007), we choose to focus on the good that came from women participating in the sacred game,

One feels compelled to offer a more positive portrait of the ways in which Aboriginal women live: as victims of colonization and patriarchy, yet as activists and agents in their lives; as oppressed, yet as fighters and survivors; and as among the most stereotyped, dehumanized and objectified of women, yet as the strong gracious and determined women that they are. (LaRocque 2007, 53)

Conclusion

The cultural influence of stickball in Cherokee has been evident for generations and the women's game adds another layer to this already dynamic sport. First, one must consider the unique

juxtaposition of Cherokee women in their Native American tribe. Cherokee women historically had an autonomy that non-Native American women could only imagine and struggled for hundreds of years to achieve (Johnston 2003). Perhaps the best way to think of the complicated role women inhabit can be seen in Perdue's statement: "the story of Cherokee women, therefore, is not one of declining status and lost culture, but one of persistence and change, conservatism and adaptation, tragedy and survival" (1998, 195).

This balance of tradition and modernization is illustrated through sport. There was an overwhelming passion and desire with these women participants regarding the game of stickball. While they had the urge to play, they also felt it important to respect the game, the men, and the Elders within Cherokee society by doing things the "right" way. They fought against the naysayers who were too quick to declare their involvement a violation of tradition. They sought proof that they belonged and worked with the community to share their findings. Instead of conforming to play a "women's game" they emulated the traditional game of stickball in every way possible.

Even with what many believe are more barriers than ever, with more work, more family, more social activities, I sensed an infectious longing among these women to return to the game. Many of the participants believed that this research project alone might ignite a renewed interest in competitive stickball for women. Through this collaborative work we noticed a longing for more time dedicated to face-to-face cultural activity in a society that has entered the digital age.

James Murphy (1972) proclaimed that, "Leisure may be viewed as that part of life which comes closest to freeing us...It enables [people] to pursue self-expression, enlightenment, and [their] inner soul" (22-23). While the women spoke fondly of the freedom they felt of running on the field barefoot alongside their sisters, it was obvious this sport was important to them not

because of the technicalities or skills required of the game but because of the pride attached to the spiritual, cultural, and kinship aspects of stickball. Stickball is more than just a game - it's a community builder and serves a cultural significance that defies gender. Cherokee women by taking to the stickball field to bring in the 21st century may have broken some traditions, but for many women it was a natural right and a way to exemplify that no matter what the future brings for the tribe, the women will fight to keep the culture alive, on their terms.

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