

TREATISE ON TRIBALISM AND MYSTICISM IN SPORT: MOS MAIORUM VS. LEX NON SCRIPTA

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ABSTRACT. There is a belief that tribalism and mysticism have no major role to play in current sport performance environment. Consequently, sport visions are implemented based upon the intrinsic recommendations of the system itself. However, a deeper investigation of the inter-human interactions on a group level of the world of sports may offer another way of understanding the complexity of human-to-group interrelation in our field of study. This paper examines the literature relating to tribalism from a sociological, psychological and philosophical point of view and its relevance to the world of sport. A better understanding of how group identity, traditions and unwritten laws shape the community's morality judgments can lead to a more rational and healthier way of undertaking reforms of policies.

Keywords: *tribalism, sport, philosophy, group interest, morality.*

Introduction

Indoctrination into tribalism

There is, if seen from outside the box, a continuum of tribalism structure and identity in our society since times immemorial. It started as a form of social structuring and governance that, through the ages, gave way to newer and more

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complex forms of organizing nations or people. Even though simpler by comparison, tribalism emerged from a deep personal and subjective root: clan and by proxy the family-relations.

The drive for survival and fear of the conceptual “others” meant that the clans based on birth relations opened the way for tribalism. It would allow various size social groups to create an aura of perceived safety from their tribal-bubble. Thus, creating a strong feeling from an early age that the conceptual “us” means life as opposed to the conceptual “they”, which could come and perturb “our” way, was mandatory. Imposing beliefs on younger minds had the effect of materializing an invisible blackmailing entity that would coerce the members of the community to prioritize their group rather than pursuing personal desires and drives, that may, at a first glance, put the tribe in danger (Maffesoli, 1996).

In our modern times, the feeling of belonging to a tribe can have its foundation on other “reasons” but all can be reduced to survival: survival in the workplace, survival in the school, survival in the living community or survival in the group. The foundation can take a more convoluted form than the simple reduction stated previously but in the end will have the same tribe-generating outcome. Once the tribe is formed, the next step is the materialization of the blackmailing and coercing, invisible and non-governed authoritarian aura that would drive the individual to submit to the group. It must be stated that this abstract entity oozes out of the beliefs and principles of the group as a whole, and it isn’t the creation of a mastermind behind it all. In the end, it is a self-regulated, automated oppression system for the group (Maffesoli, 1996).

At a macro-scale, tribalism stopped being the official form of governance but there is one field of human life that it is prevalent: sports.

Identity is currently in the spotlight in discussions of politics, society and consumption, according to Gabriel and Lang (2006). Additionally, people involved in sports are preoccupied with the validation of their own identity as authentic by the others or the group (Gabriel & Lang 2006, p. 89).

Members of a sports-tribe have a strong emotional attachment to an entity, whether it is a club or a legacy (Jurisic & Azevedo, 2011). Sports-tribes differ from sport communities in that they: do not control members’ life, are rather than playful stanch, are ephemeral, and are legacy oriented (Goulding et al., 2013). In a postmodern sense, the tribe is revered for its ability to unite members with some sense of social hierarchy, thus forming a hive-mind controlled collective (Cova & Cova, 2002; Maffesoli, 1996).

Tribal membership is based on social connecting, hedonic-based value rather than utilitarian equity, with dyadic communication and emotional exchange as central components of the collective relationship (Veloutsou, 2007). To illustrate, sports-tribal network influence and a preference for interpersonal influence

come before general social membership; in fact, tribal members may be more loyal to the tribe to which they belong than to the social context it represents (Ruane & Wallace, 2015).

Ardent legacy-focused relationships have been described as tribes, with the formation of a community or tribe stemming from an emotional bond with the common traditions of the members (Jurisic & Azevedo, 2011). Sports-tribes are supportive of their members (Luedicke and Giesler 2007) and are united through shared interpersonal and social experiences (Cova 1997), as evidenced by the hive-mind of a group of sport tribe members gathered at a random event. Sahlins (1961) presents an anthropological view of tribalism that includes segmentary lineage (kinship that binds tribe members together), social structure (tribe members' perceived sense of unison), sense of community (tribe members' ability to coexist harmoniously), and defense of the tribe (tribe members' emotionally charged enmity toward opposing tribes).

Mos maiorum (the custom of our ancestors)

According to Schouten and McAlexander (1995), subculturally created laws can be shared or imitated by a much larger community outside of the core subculture, and can even be adopted by the higher hierarchy. We see clear evidence of this in the sports subcultures where members may adopt tribal customs that they never experienced, yet they blindly obey the seemingly stronger customs associated with the smaller sports tribe. Tribal mos maiorum is a distinct subset of society that self-selects based on a shared commitment to a specific legacy, shared feeling of membership, or togetherness activity. Other characteristics of a tribal mos maiorum include an identifiable, hierarchical social structure; a distinct ethos, or shared set of beliefs and values; and distinctive jargon, rituals, and models of symbolic expression (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995).

Sports customs, according to Green (2001), are segments of tribal society that embrace specific cultural elements of their own, such as: a shared set of identifiable beliefs, values, and means of symbolic expression. A sports-tribe is not a single subculture in and of itself, but that each tribe incorporates distinctive values and beliefs, and each provides varied venues for symbolic expression of those values and beliefs. These sports collectives can be accessed through both direct and indirect participation. Participation in a sport-tribe is rarely limited to one type of involvement.

A former footballer, for example, may only play once a week but still subscribes to the original mos maiorum of their tribe, follows the legacy build through the decades and never questions the metaphysics of tribe-created way of thinking. Regardless, this may involve social interaction with other members

of the tribe, which results in members “learning” the tribes’s unique values and beliefs, i.e. members are socialised into the specific spors-tribe, and the tribe’s values and beliefs are reinforced as a result of this process.

Lex non scripta (unwritten law)

Conventions in sports are often referred to as unwritten rules. Unwritten rules, also known as moral laws in sports, are rules that are not written down in documents. Although no official regulation exists, it is more akin to a promise kept by tacit public consent. Unwritten rules generally apply to actions that provoke or mock opponents in situations where victory or defeat has already been determined. In soccer, for example, a player on a winning team should not intentionally provoke or play tricks on a losing opponent with a dribble, such as a stunt. This unwritten rule does not apply only to team sports like basketball, soccer, and baseball.

Is this kind of behavior in sports truly respectful and considerate? The essence of unwritten sports rules, then, is respect for opponents? Is retaliation often justified when the opposing team violates these unwritten rules? The position in favor of the unwritten rule emphasizes the importance of ‘respect and consideration for others’ (Feezell, 1986; Keating, 2018; Simon, 1991). While sports are based on competition, it is easy to lose dignity if there is no courtesy and respect for the competitors.

In other words, in the world of competitive games, where the unwritten rule protects the team’s solidarity and dignity regardless of the outcome and provides a device for checking each other, it has the effect of pre-emptively restraining play against sportsmanship. However, there are as many opponents of unwritten rules in sports as there are supporters. The opposing viewpoint contends that what fans want is a game in which the players give their all, not friendship between the players. It is also said that when the score difference is large, what is required is ‘invigoration’ rather than ‘comfort’ (Dixon, 1999, 2000; Russell, 2018).

Sporting competition can teach us many valuable lessons. Some argue that losing is more valuable than winning in competition.

Mysticism in sport

There has been a significant increase in writings over the last thirty years that have identified the potential of sport to act as a vehicle for experiencing the religious and mystical dimensions of life and, as a result, a sense of psychological well-being. Modern athletes frequently use religious and spiritual

metaphors to describe self-transcendent experiences that appear to have a supernatural origin. There are numerous documented testimonies from athletes from both the “mainstream”—for example, football, hockey, golf, and tennis—and so-called “extreme sports” who have had experiences that have been interpreted as mystical, occult, or religious (Murphy & White, 1995).

Peak experiences (Ravizza, 1984), states of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975), moments of deep play (Ackerman, 1997), and Zen states (Herrigel, 1999) have been used by psychologists and sport theorists to describe athletes’ experiences of the mystical and being-in-the-zone. These positive psychological states can be legitimately grouped with mystical and religious experiences and are commonly referred to as altered states of consciousness (ASC). Taking athletes’ ASC at face value, which is frequently rich in religious and mystical language, a number of contemporary authors have made the dubious leap of implying that sports can provide an avenue to mystical and religious experience in and of themselves.

While this small corpus of writings on mysticism in sport provides interesting and insightful commentary, one could argue that it lacks theological rigour at times, as well as etymological naivety. Theological terms like “mystical” and “numinous” (Prebish, 1993) are frequently applied to sporting experiences.

Conclusion

Given that tribalism in sport seems to have a strong grip of the individual’s decision making through the legacy and traditions it permeates, it is worth considering the degree of alteration policies and laws in the field of physical education and sport have been subjected to. The shackles that such a tribal mentality puts on individual morality, principles and wills may be detrimental in the long run due to the core nature of the tribal society: the preservation of the status quo through the traditions and unwritten laws passed down through the generations.

The existence of mysticism, unwritten laws and tribal customs in the field of sports closes the doors to individual-oriented policies and should always be challenged. Testing the policies implemented based on decades or centuries old uncontested-traditions will, eventually, reshape our field into an objective representation of individual moral framework, rather than the group or collective mentality.

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