

Stick Game/Hand Game

One ancient game played at traditional events is the Stick Game, also known as the Hand Game, a relatively simple game of intuition, that can easily rise in intensity to a fever pitch. Major elements are the hand drum, which establishes a rhythm, rattles to distract opposing team members, counting sticks, and marked and unmarked bones (which today often are plastic playing pieces). Played for money, prizes and fun, stick games are rich in non-verbal communication and lean in the spoken word. In early times, only men could play; women assisted with the singing and cheering. Today, women play as "hidiers" or "guessers," but the drum still is played only by men.

Two teams (usually of five or more participants each) assemble, seated in a row facing each other. To start, each team leader receives one set of bones and guesses bones in other, each getting equal chances. Winner receives kick stick, which is hidden from rest of sticks, and offers other side choice of which set of "live" sticks (five) to keep on their side, thus each side has two live sets of sticks, with the kick stick hidden.

As the game begins, the two "hidiers" from one team conceal two sets bones, one in each hand -- one is marked = male, the other isn't = female. The guesser will attempt to identify the female bones in the hidiers' hands. The hand gestures are:

1. If unmarked bones are thought to be in the left hands (i.e., both marked bones in the right hands of the hidiers), the guesser will point with his/her index finger to the left.
2. If unmarked bones right. Guesser will point to the right.
3. If unmarked bones inside (marked bones are in the middle two hands of the hidiers). Guesser will hold palm flat and vertical, slicing downward.
4. If unmarked bones outside (marked bones are in the outermost hands of the hidiers). Guesser will hold palm flat and horizontal, with index finger and thumb extended.

If a guesser from the opposing team can identify which hand conceals the marked bone, the team wins those bones, either one or both sets. When both sets won, that team becomes the hidiers and the other team the guessers. For each wrong guess, that team forfeits a stick to the other team. As team loses sticks, first loses own live sticks and then live sticks from other side, which can be combined, until finally the last stick, the kick stick, to brought out and waved in front of team and played for. The team who wins 11 sticks wins the game. Winning team shacks hands with losing team.

While the rules are few, the complicated head movements, fast hand signals and curious whelps can be confusing to the uninitiated. However, the songs and excitement of the game are infectious. It's the simplicity of the game -- that allows old and young to play together -- that is most revealing about Indian society of the past. Some tribal members look forward to the Stick Game to help heal grief over the year's losses. Others say the social component can't be

duplicated in other traditional practices. More and more Indian youth are taking an interest in the game to gain insight into the culture of their elders. As a contemporary glance into the past, the Stick Game offers a fascinating vantage point.