



Knee-joint bone games in Tibet, Mongolia, and beyond: a study in comparison

Eric D. Mortensen

In the Tibetan world, games played with the knee-joint bones from goats or sheep (and occasionally yak) are still common and widespread. Children play more than 30 different types of games with the bones, with countless variations. This paper is an attempt to outline the basic Tibetan types of bone games, with an eye to the patterns of geographic morphology of the games. Variants of these “knucklebones” games are prevalent in the Mongolian cultural sphere, and, in fact, versions of the game are well known in western and northern Europe.

In the paper, I will discuss the findings from my fieldwork in Mongolia and Tuva in 2000, in comparison with my fieldwork on Tibetan children’s games in North India and Tibet beginning in 1991, and continued in 1995, 1997, and 2002. I will also outline the small academic body of literature on such bone games, and offer some preliminary conclusions as to the likely historical diffusion of the practice of these games in Tibet. I will then explain some of the Tibetan versions of the bone games in detail. In conclusion, I will offer evidence of an emerging model of similar diffusion patterns for divinatory animal bone ritual materials, and question the viability of comparing bone games to either scapulamancy or to (cubic six-sided) dice. Included in this inquiry will be questions of the divinatory aspect of some children’s games, the distinction between Indic and (predominantly) Mongolian dice, and the extent to which the games have been vanishing in Tibet throughout the last half-century.