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The Arctic Winter Games as Festive Event: Beyond the Sports versus Culture Dichotomy

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the sporting event known as the Arctic Winter Games, which features young people (aged ten to twenty) from the Arctic regions, provinces, and nations. It demonstrates that young participants primarily experience this event as festive, thus fulfilling the Games' stated promise of combining sports with the promotion of Arctic culture. Drawing on data collected during the 2023 edition, the article investigates the expectations of both the young athletes and the organizers and then compares them with how participants experience the event. The behaviors, interactions, and relationships that develop during flagship Games events, such as Arctic sports and Dene games, during which festive practices take center stage, are also part of this study. The article thus illustrates that the Arctic Winter Games place festivity, primarily as a means for participants to socialize and foster a symbolic unity among young people of the North, at the heart of the event. The festive and partying moments, which are integral to this youth-focused event, make the Arctic Winter Games an unique platform to observe how international sports events are striving today to renew their model by constructing a strong social and cultural sense of belonging.

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Introduction

January 29, 2023, 6:30 p.m., Fort McMurray (regional municipality of Wood Buffalo, northern Alberta, Canada), -30°C: between 1,800 and 1,900 participants entered the arena for the opening ceremony of the Arctic Winter Games 2023. In the next few days, these ten-to-twenty-year-olds either competed in sporting performances in one of the twenty sports featured or took part in artistic performances, such as traditional dances. They originated from eight different areas: Greenland (Denmark), Nunavut, Nunavik, the Northwest Territories, Alberta, Yukon (Canada), Alaska (United States), and Lapland (Sweden, Finland, Norway). Initially, the atmosphere was joyful and the participants were reinvigorated after the three-year suspension of this biennial event due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Arctic Winter Games are part of diverse Indigenous multisport events in Canada. Among these events, the North American Indigenous Games bring together regions of Canada and the United States for mainstream sports like basketball, as well as traditional Indigenous games.¹ Other events include the World Eskimo Indian Olympics, held in Alaska, which focus exclusively on traditional North American Indigenous practices and strive to replicate animals and the surrounding dangers to cultivate the abilities required for hunting and survival.² Indeed, traditional games generally embody vestiges of competitions that were once practiced in specific contexts associated with martial skills, labor, or survival with Indigenous traditional games serving various societal functions, such as instructing survival abilities.³ As an illustration, the knuckle hop, or seal hop, an Inuit practice, involves athletes maintaining their weight on their heels and hands; this event is believed to originate from a hunting practice where hunters mimic the movements of seals on ice to avoid being noticed.⁴

The Arctic Winter Games have extended their influence beyond the North American continent, encompassing European regions surrounding the Arctic. In addition, the Games have established themselves as “the premier sporting competition and cultural gathering of and for the Arctic North,” thus blending mainstream sports, traditional sports, and artistic performances.⁵ Traditional sports stand out as the symbol of these Games with two flagship events: Dene games, originating from the Dene (also known as Athabaskans), Indigenous residents around the Arctic, and Arctic sports, derived from Inuit culture.⁶ Emerging from diverse Indigenous backgrounds, these kinds of sports incorporate contests and are recognized as a major element within the Arctic Winter Games, alongside non-Native sports.⁷

At the start of the 2023 edition, the speakers on the opening ceremony podium began by stating, “The Wood Buffalo Region is located in Treaty 8 Territory, and is home to six First Nations and six Métis communities, all with very distinct, diverse, and rich histories....We acknowledge where we live, work, play, and compete, in this traditional territory.”⁸ Over the sound of drums, a flute tune, and traditional songs, a video honoring this land and its peoples was played, before Alice Martin, elder of the Mikisew Cree First Nations, spoke in her native language to welcome

1. Tom Fabian, “Games within Games: Traditional Games at Indigenous Multi-Sport Events,” *International Journal of Sport and Society* 13, no. 2 (2022): 111.

2. Fabrice Delsahut, “L’héritage ludo-sportif des Nord-Amérindiens,” in *Héritages sportifs et dynamiques patrimoniales*, ed. Jean-François Loudcher, André Suchet, and Pauline Soulier (Montpellier: Presses universitaires de la Méditerranée, 2022), 84.

3. Fabian, “Games within Games,” 112.

4. West Lighthouse, “Les origines pratiques et symboliques des Jeux d’hiver de l’Arctique,” Radio-Canada, February 3, 2023, 12:00.

5. “Home page,” Arctic Winter Games 2024 website, accessed September 5, 2023..

6. On the Dene games, see Audrey R. Giles, “Beyond ‘Add Women and Stir’: Politics, Feminist Development, and Dene Games,” *Leisure/Loisir* 32, no. 2 (2008): 489–512.

7. Kristin Helweg Hanson and Sheila (Tusaagvik) Seetomona Randazzo, “Survival Then, Survival Now,” *International Journal of Sport and Society* 2, no. 4 (2012), 91.

8. 2023 Arctic Winter Games, “2023 Arctic Winter Games Opening Ceremonies,” streamed on January 29, 2023, YouTube video, 1:28:25, quotation at 23:07.

9. "Cultural Gala," Arctic Winter Games 2024 website.
10. *The Ulu News* 27, no. 7 (2023): 4.
11. On Sami yoik, see Soile Hämäläinen et al., "Sami Yoik, Sami History, Sami Health: A Narrative Review," *International Journal of Circumpolar Health* 77, no. 1 (2018): 1–8.
12. *AWG International Staging Manual*, Arctic Winter Games International Committee (AWGIC) website, January 7, 2021, 64.
13. Bernard Lahire, *La culture des individus: Dissonances culturelles et distinction de soi* (Paris: La Découverte, 2006), 232.
14. "About the Arctic Winter Games," AWGIC website, accessed September 5, 2023.
15. *50 Years of Arctic Winter Games, 1970–2020*, Arctic Winter Games 50th anniversary booklet, AWGIC website, accessed September 5, 2023.

participants to her land. Then, traditional and contemporary music groups and dancers followed one another onto the stage to launch the Games. The youth started singing songs, laughed in groups, and warmed up by dancing. The atmosphere was friendly and cheerful, with participants spontaneously expressing their enjoyment and pride in attending the ceremony. The tone was set: beyond mere athletic competition, the Arctic Winter Games serve as a platform for a celebration that underscores the significance of exchange; festivity; encounter; and discovery and recognition of the history and culture of the First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples, and more broadly of the Far North and the Arctic.

A different moment, a different perception: February 1, 7 p.m., Keyano Theater, Fort McMurray. In 2023, the official cultural gala of the Games, featuring diverse artistic performances, took place on the stage of this small theater. Described as a "showcase of diverse youth talent," the biennial gala aims to highlight the skills of young people from the circumpolar regions.⁹ Those involved, commonly identified as cultural performers, present a show and exhibit their arts "as a form of creative expression" that "inspire[s], enrich[es] and connect[s]."¹⁰ After speeches by representative members of the communities, dance, music, and other performative forms summon up the culture of each delegation. In 2023, the event notably featured circus performances (including stilts, ball juggling, diabolo, and human pyramids), traditional dances (a Yupik dance from the Alaskan native culture, Gwich'in Dancers from the Northwest Territories, and drum dancers), and the performance of a traditional *yoik* (traditional form of singing) from Sami culture sung a cappella.¹¹ Unlike sports participants, these individuals do not compete for an Ulu medal (the traditional crescent-shaped Inuit knife), and there is no ranking between them; however, each participant receives a commemorative gift, such as a cultural medallion, as a gesture of appreciation for their participation.¹² Shielded from the competitive dynamics inherent to sports, this cultural evening appears at first sight as a festive occasion, in the sense that it is about honoring the arts and traditions of northern cultures. However, besides organizers, sponsors, and local officials, almost no young sports participants can be seen in the audience. The lateness of the event cannot alone explain their absence. If the participants are not there, it is first and foremost because, for them, these institutionalized cultural and festive performances are out of place during the Games.

Between these two scenes, there is one big gap. The Arctic Winter Games can be perceived as a festive manifestation through the "spontaneous" celebration of culture, expressions that arise naturally from its immersion in this culture of the Far North and the Arctic. This culture, encompassing an organized set of knowledges, codes, values, and representations associated with specific social groups, is shared among participants.¹³ The official discourse cultivates this intention: the cultural dimension of the Arctic Winter Games is intended to "offer participants from all contingents who come together to learn from one another and to celebrate and demonstrate their unique artistic talents ... and promote an atmosphere of social interaction that strengthens cultural awareness and understanding, increases community pride, enhances self-esteem and promotes volunteerism."¹⁴ Indeed, the stated mission of these Games is to promote sporting competition, cultural exhibition, and social interaction among northerners (symbolized by the three interlocking rings in the logo).¹⁵ However, in reality, things appear to be more complicated; the place of festivity and culture in the Arctic Winter Games has to be put into perspective with regard to participants' diverse motivations. Another essential aspect to take

16. Victoria Paraschak, "[Variations in Race Relations: Sporting Events for Native Peoples in Canada](#)," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 14, no. 1 (1997): 9.

17. Marijke Taks, "[Social Sustainability of Non-Mega Sport Events in a Global World](#)," *European Journal for Sport and Society* 10, no. 2 (2013): 121–41.

18. See, for example, Mathys Viersac and Michaël Attali, "[Discuter l'héritage social et culturel des grands événements sportifs: Une revue de littérature internationale](#)," *Staps* 134, no. 4 (2021): 113–36.

19. Cécile Collinet and Pierre-Olaf Schut, "[L'héritage social des Jeux olympiques](#)," *Movement & Sport Sciences*, no. 107 (April 2020): 1–2.

20. Christine Dallaire, "[Sport's Impact on the Francophoneness of the Alberta Francophile Games \(AFG\)](#)," *Ethnologies* 25, no. 2 (2004): 33–58; Christine Dallaire, "[Fier de qui on est... nous sommes francophones! L'identité des jeunes aux Jeux franco-ontariens](#)," *Francophonies D'Amérique* 18, no. 1 (2004): 127–47; and Christine Dallaire, "Les festivals sportifs et la reproduction des communautés minoritaires," in *Les enjeux du sport et des jeux dans la francophonie canadienne*, ed. Jean-Pierre Augustin and Christine Dallaire (Talence: Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme d'Aquitaine, 2007), 139–72.

21. On ritualized festive practices, see Stéphane Héas and Dominique Bodin, "La fête sportive: Essai de compréhension

into account is how the organizers construct the event, prioritizing unconsciously its sporting dimension. This sports-oriented approach is undoubtedly perceived as more legitimizing, a trend that can also be observed in the history of the Games, as the cultural dimension has sometimes faced difficulty in being recognized. In fact, at their inception, the Arctic Winter Games predominantly featured sports of Euro-Canadian origin, while traditional Indigenous games were either deemed unsuitable for inclusion in the sports category or positioned as demonstrations in the 1970 and 1972 editions.¹⁶ In this context, the general aim of our research is to identify festive elements in a sports event where institutionalized and traditional practices coexist.

These initial observations enable us to reflect on how extra-sporting dimensions, particularly festive elements, intertwine with high-profile sporting events. While these international events have often been considered from the point of view of their significance for local populations and through the prism of their economic meaning (costs, benefits, and scope of hosting for local economic actors) and social meaning (such as interests of the populations involved, in terms of skills development), their festive and cultural meanings remain underexplored.¹⁷ A preoccupation with the question of long-term impact, which seems crucial today for many researchers on an international level, nevertheless pushes research in this direction.¹⁸ So far, the social and cultural impact of the Games has been analyzed through the transformation of practices after the event; the commitment to physical exercise; and other more intangible dimensions, such as public support for the event, the enjoyment felt, the image of the host city, and the feeling of social inclusion.¹⁹ The question of young people's patterns of sociability and cultural experience during the Games, however, has rarely been addressed, except in the scholarly work of sports sociologist Christine Dallaire on the Canada Games.²⁰ Research on the relationship between sport and celebration has dealt with ritualized festive practices organized on the periphery of sports activities; with marketing approaches that facilitate the integration of festive programs with major sports events; or with the ambiguous—sometimes convergent, sometimes divergent—relationships that have historically linked games, festivity, and sports.²¹ There are few works dealing with a genuine "festivization" of sporting events that nuance the "festivalization" process.²² Among these, an article by sports sociologist Olivier Bessy on the Médoc Marathon (a French wine-growing region) shows how a practice emblematic of sporting asceticism became the object of festive appropriation during which the participants celebrate the pleasures of wine, fancy dress, and conviviality, and the organizers gradually push back the sporting and competitive logics to promote a festive event.²³

We explore how participants experience both the sporting events and the festive practices of the Games, such as shared moments of fun, friendly exchanges during informal times, meals, gatherings, and even cooperation during certain events. Thus, beyond the ritualized and institutionalized aspects, such as official ceremonies, the Games first appear as a moment during which interactions are played out and where emotions are embodied, which we can imagine structure the representations of sport, of other cultures, and of the environment that these young people construct for themselves. We reflect on festivity as a lived moment, that is, in a phenomenological rather than functionalist approach, by which we refer to a classic discussion of sociological and philosophical approaches to festivity.²⁴ In other words, rather than focusing solely on institutionalized festive rituals, we examine festivity as a social and cultural practice that is evident through sports activities and the informal, spontaneous relationships developed by participants over the course of the event.

chez les footballeuses et les rugbywomen,” *Histoire et anthropologie* 27 (2003): 5–18. On marketing approaches, see Michel Desbordes and Julien Falgoux, *Organiser un événement Sportif: Stratégie et méthodologie d'organisation* (Paris: Editions Eyrolles, 2017), 19. On links between games, festivity, and sports, see Bertrand During, “Fête, sport et culture,” in *Sport, fête et société*, ed. Jean-Paul Callède (Pessac: Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de l’Homme d’Aquitaine, 1995), 113–26.

22. Jodie Taylor and Andy Bennett, *The Festivalization of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2014).

23. Olivier Bessy, “Le Marathon du Médoc ou le Carnaval de la course à pied: Du sport apollinien au sport dionysiaque,” in *Sport, fête et société*, ed. Jean-Paul Callède (Talence: Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de l’Homme d’Aquitaine, 1995), 127–33.

24. François-André Isambert, *Le sens du sacré: Fête et religion populaire* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1982).

25. Laurent Sébastien Fournier, “La fête est-elle non-essentielle?” *La vie des idées* (March 2021): 1–12.

26. Denis Jeffrey and Angelo Cardita, *La fabrication des rites* (Québec: Presses de l’Université Laval, 2015).

27. Nadine Cretin, *Inventaire des fêtes de France d’hier et d’aujourd’hui* (Paris: Larousse, 2003).

28. On its expression, see

This postulate leads us to define the festive aspects of the Games according to their “cardinal dimensions,” those that relate to the logics of socialization, transgression, and celebration, as the ethnologist Laurent Sébastien Fournier reminds us in an essay on the essential functions of festivity.²⁵ Indeed, if we understand festivity from a phenomenological perspective, it remains dependent on a specific social and cultural framework, that is, a constrained space that makes possible the festive logics of socialization (getting together and meeting), celebration (celebrating who the participants are), and transgression (giving oneself the right to go beyond certain rules and customs, particularly sporting ones). The Arctic Winter Games, through their history, characteristics, and functions, set a framework within which sporting, cultural, and festive dimensions cohabit. These games are built around a major sports program, and the influence of the Olympic model can be seen on a number of occasions, notably during the opening ceremony (including ceremonial speeches, referees’ oaths, and arrival of the flame), in the organization of the delegations, and in the inaugural protocols of the matches (including presentation of teams, national anthems, and identifying sportswear).

The sporting dimension is central, and the relationship between competition and performance, while not totally hegemonic, remains a major factor in motivating participants. The cultural offering complements the sporting events, but it is clearly of lesser importance, and above all, it suffers from relative disinvestment by the participants and even by the organizers. On several occasions, the cultural program has been modified or even canceled without prior notice and without any obvious major negative consequences. Hence, the rationalization and formalization of the organization remain constrained, as evidenced by access and circulation conditions for the various audiences within the facilities hosting the Games. Competition sites are integrated into facilities open to the public, and spectators often mingle with athletes, volunteers, and accompanying persons. In the 2023 edition, at Macdonald Island Park—the main venue for the Games and the location of the organizing committee—local users and regular attendees of the hosted sports facilities pursued their activities and shared with the athletes a vast open space. This relative lack of delimitation of event spaces and times, perceptible even on the edges of the official competition grounds, could diminish the ritual and therefore the socially recognizable dimension of festivity.²⁶ However, it should also be noted that it is characterized as a time and place that diminishes social statuses and their effects of distinction.²⁷ This element of organizational license and permissiveness, which we postulate is also due to the youth-oriented character of the event, enables athletes to develop the informal and spontaneous relationships favorable to festivity.

In the context where sporting logics dominate, where social statuses intertwine, and where the sense of festivity extends beyond just artistic activities and official ceremonies, our study questions the spontaneous, informal social interactions, in the way that they express the festive spirit of the Arctic Winter Games for its young participants. As it moves into social interstices conducive to its expression, festivity, as a spontaneous, informal, and non-ritualized cultural practice, emerges at the circumvention of official and programmed activities and of the framework of highly institutionalized, protocol-based event models.²⁸ Drawing on the cardinal functions of festivity that are operative at the Games, namely, socialization, celebration, and transgression, we seek to understand where festivity manifests itself in the Arctic Winter Games by analyzing the expectations and experiences of those taking part in the Games as well as the

Albert Piette, "[L'intervalle festif: Hypothèses théoriques et problématique de recherche,](#)"

Cahiers internationaux de sociologie 85 (1988): 325–42.

On festivity as cultural practice, see Laurent Sébastien Fournier, "[Le Patrimoine, un indicateur de modernité: À propos de quelques fêtes en Provence,](#)" *Ethnologie française* 34, no. 4 (2004): 717–24.

29. On socialization, celebration, and transgression, see Fournier, "La fête est-elle non-essentielle?"

30. This research received ethical approval from the University of Ottawa.

31. On the previous studies, see especially Robert C. Thomsen, Carina Ren, and Renuka Mahadevan, "[We Are the Arctic: Identities at the Arctic Winter Games 2016,](#)" *Arctic Anthropology* 55, no. 1 (2018): 105–18; and Julien Fuchs, "[What Future Model for International Sports Events? The Case of the Arctic Winter Games,](#)" *European Journal for Sport and Society* 20, no. 1 (2022): 38–56.

32. A Chef de mission is designated for each delegation and coordinates the overall selection, preparation, supervision, and management of the delegation. *AWG International Staging Manual*, 64.

33. Among other issues, we were interested in the concept of "athletic identity," defined as the degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role.

See Britton W. Brewer, Judy L. Van Raalte, and Darwyn E. Linder, "Athletic Identity: Hercules' Muscles or Achilles

various forms of practices present at the event.²⁹ The focus is then on illustrating how athletes take advantage of the Games to engage in socializing experiences outside the main activities and official programs. The value of these experiences lies both in a form of transgression of the sporting order and in the celebration of a shared territorial belonging that differs according to the interlocutors but whose common culture refers to what they call "the North," "the Arctic," and, for some of the Inuit, Dene and Métis, "our culture." So, the festivity is not where it seems to be, but it is present in the many "side events" of a seven-day gathering, bringing together between 1,800 and 1,900 athletes representing eight regions crossed by the Arctic Circle.

Methodology

The current study is built on a research project conducted during the 2023 Arctic Winter Games, which took place in Fort McMurray, Canada, from January 29 to February 4, 2023. Seven researchers from the Universities of Ottawa (Canada), Western Brittany (France), and Aalborg (Denmark) worked together on the project. Two of the team's researchers had already attended previous editions of the Games. This research integrates fieldwork methodology with interviews and questionnaires.³⁰ The overall objective was to explore the social, sporting, and environmental dimensions of these Games, allowing us, within the scope of this study, to investigate their festive aspects. Our research question aimed to identify festive elements in a sports event where institutionalized and traditional practices coexist.

Fieldwork consisted of observations during the 2023 Games using an observation grid covering ceremonies, sports activities, cultural activities, and sustainability (see appendix 1). As in previous studies of the 2016 Games, we paid attention to the environment and atmosphere of the Games, such as the placement of flags and signs in the city or in the arena, and various interactions and exchanges between the people around us.³¹

Thirty-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with youth participants, including twenty-seven athletes and four cultural performers between the ages of thirteen and eighteen. We explored their perspectives on the Games, particularly regarding the sports, social and cultural impacts, and environmental sustainability. We consulted organizers and "Chefs de mission" for input on how to approach and conduct interviews with youth participants at the Games and ensured their agreement for each interview.³² The interviews occurred in person at the Games, during competition breaks, either individually or in small groups according to participants' preferences, and were conducted in English (twenty-four), French (three), or Danish (four). The interview guide comprised questions exploring participants' experiences and the impact of the Games, along with information regarding the athletic identity of the participants, cultural aspects, and environmental issues (see appendix 2).³³ Interviewees were also encouraged to express their perception of the Games through drawings (see figures 2–9 below). The use of drawings, coupled with questions facilitating the sharing of meanings and interpretations attributed to them, is a method that can help individuals express dimensions of their lived experience that might be difficult to articulate in words.³⁴ In her studies on various sports festivals in Canada, Dallaire employs this method to discern dimensions of identity and community among youth within the context of these Games.³⁵ In our study, we consider that drawings have the potential to illuminate the symbolic perception of the event through how participants view themselves as individuals originating from the Arctic or the North, how they envision the Arctic or the North,

Heel?," *International Journal of Sport Psychology*, no. 24 (1993): 237. Athletic identity is reflected in the dedication to specific sports routines, which entail a commitment to the demands of practices, training sessions, and matches, where athletes strive to achieve or exceed individual and collective objectives. See Jamian Newton, Diane L. Gill, and Erin J. Reifsteck, "[Athletic Identity: Complexity of the 'Iceberg.'](#)" *Journal of Athlete Development & Experience (JADE)* 2, no. 2 (2020): 74.

34. Amy T. Blodgett et al., "[Moving beyond Words: Exploring the Use of an Arts-Based Method in Aboriginal Community Sport Research.](#)" *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* 5, no. 3 (2013): 312–31.

35. Dallaire, "Fier de qui on est!"; and Dallaire, "Les festivals sportifs."

36. For example, "Just go have fun and win"—male futsal participant from the Northwest Territories, sixteen years old; and "My goals for the games are to try my best of my ability and see how far I can go. I also want to have fun and become friends with my competitors"—female short track speed skating participant from Alberta North, sixteen years old.

37. *AWG International Staging Manual*, 8. On the Canada Games, see Paraschak, "Variations in Race Relations."

38. *The Ulu News* 1, no. 1 (1970): 2.

or how they regard the Arctic Winter Games as a distinctive event pertaining to the Arctic or the North.

Furthermore, an online survey, encompassing multiple-choice and short-answer questions addressing the social, sporting, and environmental aspects of the Games, was administered to participants (athletes and cultural performers) between the ages of twelve and thirty-one, to mission team members (coaches and all other volunteers), and to Chefs de mission. A total of 689 individuals responded to the survey with most respondents being female (55 percent versus 43 percent males, with 2 percent choosing a different option, that is, "Two-Spirit" or "non-binary," or preferring to self-describe). The delegations represented were Yukon (N=153), Alberta North (N=131), Northwest Territories (N=116), Alaska (N=110), Greenland (N=73), Nunavut (N=65), Nunavik (N=27), and Sami (N=14).

In addition, we collected information from the 2023 event website. Indeed, before the Games, on its website, participants (athletes and cultural performers) were asked to describe their "goals for the games." Participants' responses to this open-ended question ranged from a few words to longer answers.³⁶ This question was part of a larger set of demographic information cells for participants, requested by the Games' organizers and displayed on the Games' website, covering such details as type of sport, age, delegation, hometown, gender, and years of experience in sports. Although some participants did not answer the section titled "My Goals for the Games," we were able to gather 758 complete responses about goals, consisting of 415 males, 342 females, and 1 respondent who preferred not to identify, with a total average age of 15.4 (SD=2.37). The delegations represented were Alberta North (N=212), Alaska (N=167), Yukon (N=137), Nunavut (N=126), Northwest Territories (N=105), and Sami (N=11).

The Place of Festivity at the Arctic Winter Games

Founded in the late 1960s, following poorer results obtained by northern athletes at the first Canada Games compared to athletes from southern provinces, the Arctic Winter Games are "a high-profile circumpolar sport competition."³⁷ The first Games were conducted in Yellowknife (Northwest Territories, Canada) in 1970, with five hundred athletes from Alaska, the Yukon, and the Northwest Territories competing in ten different sports and participating in cultural and traditional performances. The goal was to provide a platform for northern athletes to enhance their skills by competing in an international event alongside peers with similar backgrounds and abilities, while also fostering mutual understanding and friendship among people from northern areas.³⁸ Because this event was the first of its kind, it generated a special and festive atmosphere.

The 2023 edition had four times the number of athletes and twice the number of sports as the first edition (for a list of all the sports, see figure 1) and offered opportunities for participation in diverse cultural activities and performances. The Games' expansion has opened doors for athletes from a wide array of sports, cultural performers from a wide array of arts, and diverse delegations to engage in the event, thereby enriching cultural exchanges and fostering a more vibrant and celebratory environment than the 1970 edition. According to the 2023 technical package for the event, which provides guidance to host societies and mission teams (head members of delegations) for coordinating sports competitions and team participation, an athlete

39. On the addition of archery, see [The Ulu News](#) 27, no. 1 (2023): 16.

40. "The Host Organization," AWGIC website, accessed September 5, 2023.

41. "2023 Cultural Program Technical Package," Team Alaska Arctic Winter Games website, accessed September 5, 2023.

42. Ibid.

43. Michael K. Heine, "Performance Indicators: Aboriginal Games at the Arctic Winter Games," in *Aboriginal Peoples and Sport in Canada: Historical Foundations and Contemporary Issues*, ed. Janice Forsyth and Audrey R. Giles (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2013), 160–81.

44. Julien Fuchs, "Les jeux d'hiver de l'Arctique: Jeunesse, culture et territoire. La valeur publique d'un événement," *Revue internationale animation, territoires et pratiques socioculturelles*, no. 23 (June 2023): 31–46. Organizers encourage every person to contribute in the form of a donation, in particular via the website.

shall be a "developing athlete" to be eligible to compete, meaning that the athletes have not competed for their country in an international competition in the sport they are participating in. Organizers aim to encourage as many participants as possible living North of the 55th parallel. Organized on a biennial basis, this sporting event has evolved with the introduction of new sports (such as the addition of archery in 2023) but also with the suppression of others (for example, judo has not been included since 1982, and dog mushing was removed in 2023).³⁹ Criteria for selecting sports include the number of participants in the delegations and the sport's development potential. Organizers also favor the selection of sports with a "unique Nordic flavor," in line with the distinct climates and cultures associated with the region.⁴⁰

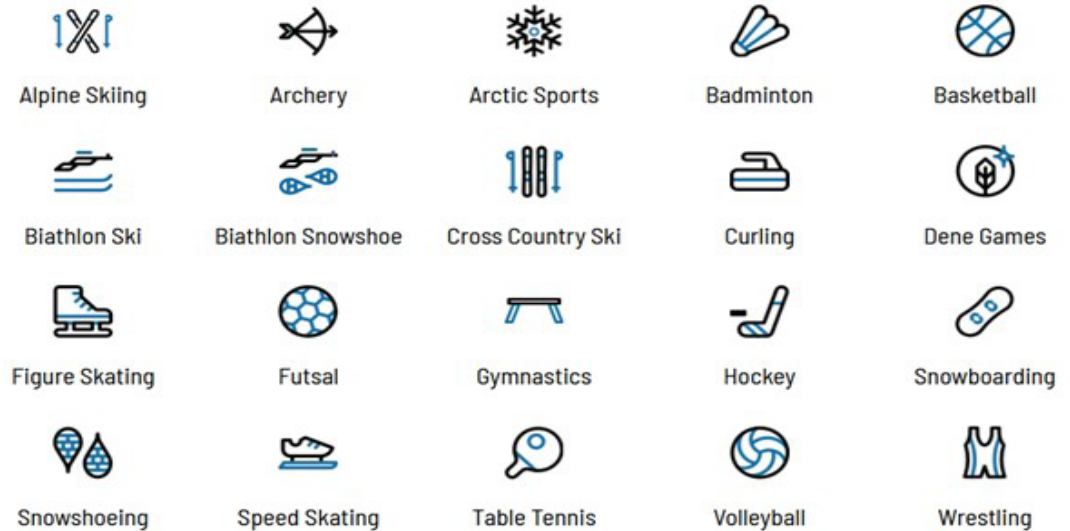


Figure 1. Twenty Different Sports. 2023 Arctic Winter Games [website](#) (site discontinued).

Alongside sporting activities, as mentioned earlier, the Arctic Winter Games also feature a number of cultural activities. Indeed, to organize cultural performances, the host society is required to set up daily performances, gala concerts, and cultural exchanges (such as interactions with professional artists under the artistic direction and leadership of a program-dedicated artistic director).⁴¹ Thus, organizers also call on young cultural delegates from the participating regions. Like the sports participants, they have to be in development of an "artistic voice" in various fields of music, dance, theater, and storytelling.⁴²

Since the early 1990s, when the organizing committee restricted attendance to youth between the ages of ten and twenty, the majority of competitors have been young people, although adults are allowed to compete in Arctic sports and Dene games, the traditional Indigenous games.⁴³ In view of the educational and symbolic stakes involved, the governments of the participating regions, private sponsors, the local population, and national and international media steadfastly invest in the Arctic Winter Games.⁴⁴ As the main focus is on young participants, organizers prioritize educational and social goals. Emphasizing the importance of shared experiences, socialization, cultural discovery, and the promotion of a sense of unity is essential to the Games alongside the sporting dimension. This framework provides a platform for young people to share, thus indirectly affecting their experience of the Games. Festive moments, perceived in light of their cardinal dimensions, are central to the Games.

45. Sylvain Ferez, Sébastien Ruffié, and Stéphane Héas, "Recognizing Geographic and Cultural Alterity through Sport? Institutionalizing the Arctic Games," *Diagoras: International Academic Journal on Olympic Studies*, no. 2 (2018): 27–46, hal-02172160.

46. On the southern restriction, see Heine, "Performance Indicators," 166. On meetings and exchanges of athletes from the North, see Helge Chr. Pedersen, "[A Sporting Nation: Creating Sámi Identity through Sport](#)," *International Journal of the History of Sport* 38, no. 12 (2021): 1222.

47. Thomsen, Ren, and Mahadevan, "We Are the Arctic."

48. Jordan Lankford et al., "[The Impact of the Arctic Winter Games: A Social Capital Perspective](#)," *AWG Social Impacts Report*, 2015; and Samuel V. Lankford et al., "[Arctic Winter Games: Personal, Social, and Community Benefits of Participation](#)," *AWG Social Impacts Report*, 2010.

49. *AWG International Staging Manual*, 8.

50. The percentages presented here were calculated based on data collected from the [Games website](#) (site discontinued) from which we gathered the complete responses of 758 participants who indicated their goals for the Games.

51. Quotations from data collected from the Games website.

Expectations and Experiences at the Arctic Winter Games: Between Socialization and Celebration

According to studies previously undertaken on these Games, the Arctic Winter Games can be approached in a number of ways: they can be understood in terms of their identity and territorial functions, their governance, or their socializing effects. Sociologists Sylvain Ferez, Sébastien Ruffié, and Stéphane Héas present the Games as promoting the expression of a "geographical identity" particularly reserved for individuals living alongside the Arctic.⁴⁵ This restriction prevents the participation of better-equipped and better-trained athletes from the South, while offering the possibility of meetings and exchanges between athletes from the North.⁴⁶ Supporting the expression of a place-related identity, historian Robert C. Thomsen, geographer Carina Ren, and economist Renuka Mahadevan present the Games as a space for the construction of several identities linked in particular to a polar "us," the regions, the nations, and Indigenous ethnicities.⁴⁷ Over the years, Jordan Lankford, Samuel V. Lankford, and others have shown that the objective of the Games has remained the same: to provide an opportunity, through sport, for a social and cultural meeting between the peoples of the North, regardless of the languages they speak, the ethnicities they represent, or the religions they believe in.⁴⁸ Organizers also support the idea that improving sporting skills is a by-product of participation, with this participation being the main objective.⁴⁹

Cultural identity building and socializing logics are therefore constitutive of the Arctic Winter Games. But our investigation also shows that the event remains defined by its sporting dimension, despite the stated objectives of the organizers, who claim an equal interest between culture and sport. Thus, among the various objectives formulated by young participants on the Games' website, they claim to participate first to achieve a performance (49.25 percent), then to live an experience (32.98 percent), and finally to build relationships with other participants (17.77 percent).⁵⁰

Respondents are therefore attached to the results they hope for, the progress they can make, and the idea of doing their best, whether in an individual or collective logic (in relation to their teams or delegations), as the following quotes testify:

To win an Ulu—male futsal player from Nunavut, thirteen years old

To place for my team—male wrestler from Nunavut, fifteen years old

My goals are to improve as a player—male ice hockey player from Alaska, eighteen years old

Grow as a team—female basketball player from Alberta North, nineteen years old

My goals are to play as hard as I can—female volleyball player from Alaska, seventeen years old

I would like to represent the NWT well—female ice hockey player from the Northwest Territories, seventeen years old.⁵¹

Finally, the young athletes' drawings express the significance of the sporting component in their

52. Quotation from data collected from the Games website.

portrayals of the Arctic Winter Games (see figures 2, 4, 5, 6, 8, and 9). Although it is frequently linked to community or environmental dimensions, this sporting aspect is sometimes exclusive and featured in eleven out of the fourteen drawings we collected. Even within cultural practices, participants have expressed the desire to come to the Games to perform (with such objectives as “Create unique performances and grow my vocabulary in dance” [male cultural participant from Yukon, seventeen years old]).⁵²

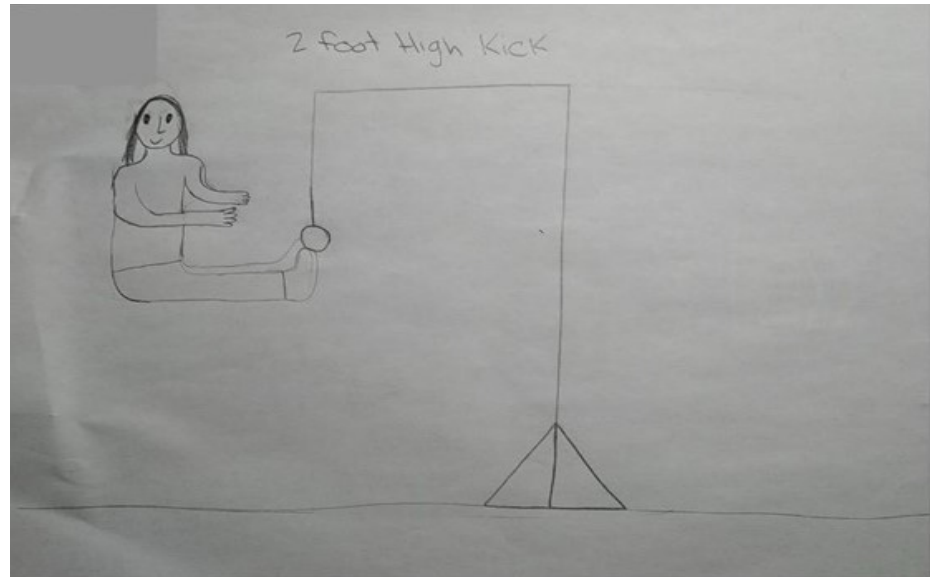


Figure 2. Female Dene games athlete from Yukon, fifteen years old.

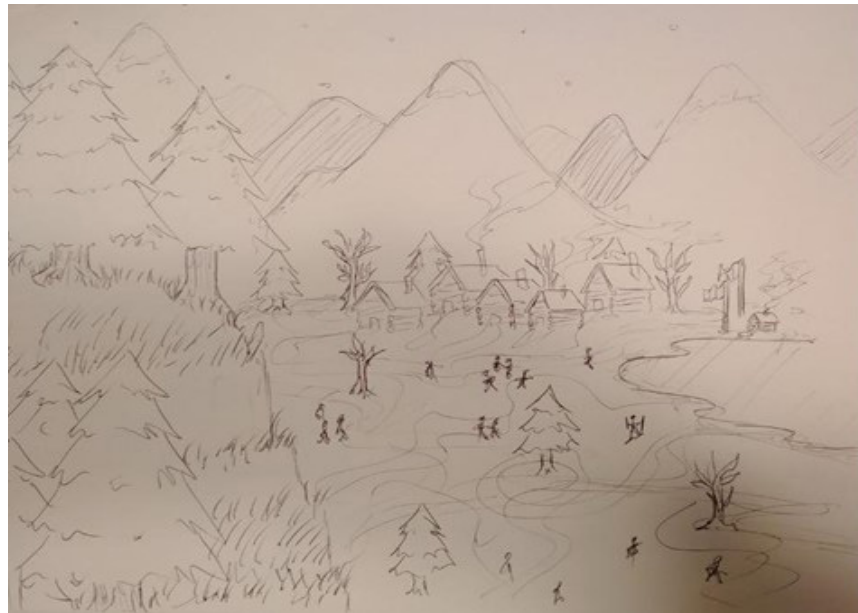


Figure 3. Female wrestler from Alberta North, sixteen years old.



Figure 4. Female wrestler from Alberta North, seventeen years old.

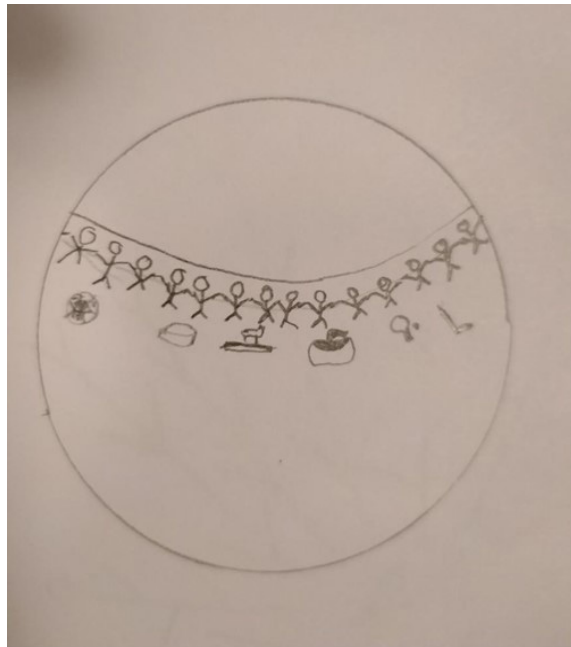


Figure 5. Female speed skater from the Northwest Territories, seventeen years old.

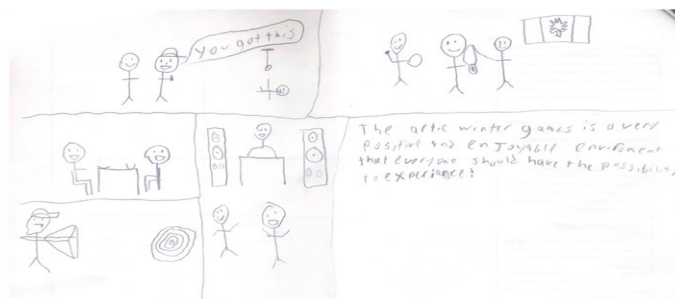


Figure 6. Male archer from Alberta North, eighteen years old.



Figure 7. Male alpine skier from Yukon, thirteen years old.

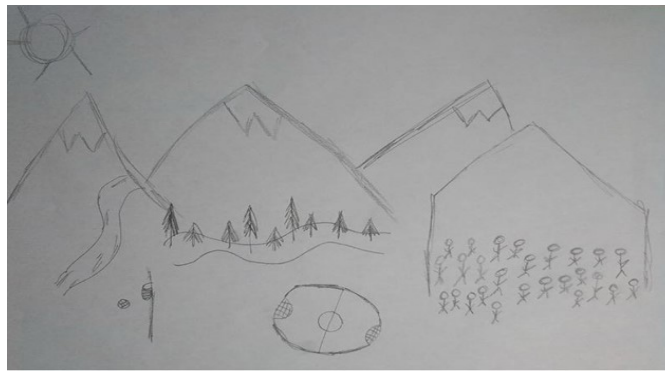


Figure 8. Female cross-country skier from Yukon, seventeen years old.



Figure 9. Female alpine skier from Alberta North, thirteen years old.

53. Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning, *Quest for Excitement: Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing Process* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).

54. Laurent Sébastien Fournier, "[The Inventory of Traditional Games in France: Cultural Heritage, Sportification, and the Revitalization of Local Practices](#)," *International Journal of Sport and Society* 13, no. 2 (2022): 23–33.

55. In ice hockey, more than half of the declared goals (51.60 percent) are performance related.

56. Lisa Kaida and Peter Kitchen, "[It's Cold and There's Something to Do: The Changing Geography of Canadian National Hockey League Players' Hometowns](#)," *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 55, no. 2 (2020): 216–17.

57. Jason Blake, *Canadian Hockey Literature: A Thematic Study* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 134.

58. Michael A. Robidoux, "[First Nations Hockey Tournaments: Celebrating Culture through Sport](#)," in *Stickhandling through the Margins: First Nations Hockey in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 59.

59. Ibid, 107.

60. John Vincent and Jane Crossman, "Our Game Our Gold: Newspaper Narratives about the Canadian Men's Ice Hockey Team at the 2010 Winter Olympic Games," *Journal of Sport Behavior* 38, no. 1 (2015): 100.

61. Brian Wilson, "[Selective Memory in a Global Culture: Reconsidering Links between](#)

Celebrating Performance: The Example of Ice Hockey

In the context of the Arctic Winter Games, elements of the Games can be associated with what sociologists Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning refer to as "sportification."⁵³ This term denotes the process whereby traditional games undergo transformation into modern sports, notably characterized by structured competitions with media coverage, athletes identified by unique uniforms, and ranking based on performance, thereby facilitating the inclusion of new audiences.⁵⁴ Within the framework of these games, we observed such elements as the cult of performance and victory, as well as the institutionalization of practices and the importance of competition in the internal logic of the activity.

Ice hockey matches, in particular, are the object of intense commitment, and spectators of a hockey game enjoy a typically North American sporting spectacle, with, for example, the ritual salute following a point scored, coaches in suits and ties, and recorded music used to accompany match highlights. Our observations, as well as the results of the analysis on participants' objectives, show that ice hockey is one of the most competitively invested events, insofar as the emotions expressed by both spectators and athletes are particularly linked to a match outcome.⁵⁵ Of course, all the team sports of European or North American origin present at the Games, like volleyball and futsal, are part of the competitive sporting logic, but to varying degrees, with ice hockey being the sport with the greatest symbolic value, whatever the delegation. Philippe Chiasson, Nunavik-Québec's Chef de mission, thus confided to us that participation requests in ice hockey are often overrepresented. This is, no doubt, a reflection of how widespread hockey is across Canada, even within small communities, as well as the notoriety of the NHL (National Hockey League), in which Canada is overrepresented compared with other regions of the world.⁵⁶ The sport is deeply embedded in Canadian society, as shown by its ritualized attendance of matches, substantial media coverage, and commercial exploitation.⁵⁷ Even among First Nations, hockey has been embraced with passion, whether for the skill demonstrated or the sense of community pride it represents.⁵⁸ Community-based ice hockey tournaments, for example, the Northern First Nations Hockey Tournament held in Ontario, provide players with the opportunity to represent their community on the ice, playing not only for themselves but also for the collective identity and honor of their community. The successes achieved by the teams are celebrated as victories for the entire community, fostering a profound sense of pride and unity among its members.⁵⁹ Additionally, the prestige of ice hockey extends to the realm of politics, where it is employed as a tool for asserting national identity.⁶⁰ The distinctive atmosphere during ice hockey matches at the Arctic Winter Games, embodied by the energy and intensity exhibited by participants and spectators, could reflect the significant role this sport holds in Canada. Indeed, especially in the Canadian context, ice hockey can even be perceived as embodying valued traits and characteristics associated with a promoted behavioral model, illustrating such attributes as courage, tenacity, and determination.⁶¹

At the Arctic Winter Games, the festive aspect of ice hockey is notably reflected in the general atmosphere during the matches, which is characterized by support and dedication, much like in other modern sports competitions. The audience remains captivated by the trajectories of the hockey puck and reacts with exclamations to the players' actions (enhanced by noise-making tools, such as cowbells), and the players show devotion to various actions (tackles against the barriers, noise from the sticks on the ground, etc.) (figure 10). Furthermore, ice hockey embraces

[Youth, Hockey, and Canadian Identity](#)," in *Artificial Ice: Hockey, Culture, and Commerce*, ed. Richard S. Gruneau and David Whitson (Toronto: Broadview Press, 2006), 53.

62. Quotation from data collected from the Games website.

63. Lisa Edwards, Carwyn Jones, and Charlene Weaving, "Celebration on Ice: Double Standards following the Canadian Women's Gold Medal Victory at the 2010 Winter Olympics," *Sport in Society* 16, no. 5 (2013): 682.

64. Two female biathlon athletes from Yukon, sixteen and eighteen years old, interview by authors.

65. Quotations from data collected from the Games website.

celebration, with players from various delegations and their supporters expressing their pride. For instance, at the 2023 Arctic Winter Games, when the Alberta North team of eighteen-year-olds and under scored and emerged victorious in their first match, we saw visible displays of celebration: hugs, raised arms and sticks, cheers, and reactions from the crowd. The same element of celebration was observable at the sixteen and under match, where we witnessed during the first match a significant contingent of Nunavut supporters, identifiable by flags and classic supporter attire (clothing and accessories related to the team). Along similar lines, a sixteen-year-old male ice hockey player from Alaska set a goal for participation in the Games linked to showcasing his team's sporting prowess: "My goal for the 2023 Arctic Winter Games is to show the passion, fierce competition and good sportsmanship that Team Alaska brings to the games."⁶² These various elements adhere to sporting traditions, where celebrating victory as a team is a fundamental aspect of competitive sports.⁶³



Figure 10. Ice hockey at the 2023 Arctic Winter Games. Photographs by Elina Bertet.

Indigenous Culture, Territory, and Family: Celebrating Participants' Identities

Though a "sporting logic" predominates at the Games, it is not hegemonic. Individual behaviors leave a significant place for positive interactions between athletes and even, as we show later, between athletes and referees in the context of Arctic sports. In other words, the Arctic Winter Games are a space for the recomposition of admitted sporting norms, as two young biathletes from the Yukon pointed out when they told us that, while sport is important, the meetings, the collective life, and the sharing explain even more faithfully the reason for their participation.⁶⁴ This attachment to the social logic and identity of the Games is reflected in the arguments and rhetoric commonly used by the organizing host society. This host society claims special attention for Indigenous cultures, their right to recognition, reparation, and appreciation of their history. This attention is also apparent among certain participants who expressed, for example, pride to "represent our ancestors" who "have been natives of Alaska for 10,000 years" (male Dene games participant from Alaska, sixteen years old) or excitement to show the values learned from other events featuring traditional North American Indigenous practices within the Arctic Winter Games, "including sportsmanship, uplifting other competitors, and being a community" (female Arctic sports participant from Alaska, seventeen years old).⁶⁵

66. Ibid.

67. Ibid.

68. Thomsen, Ren, and Mahadevan, "We Are the Arctic," 106.

Alongside sharing and celebrating Indigenous cultures, the wish to build, through the event, a shared attachment to territories whose common denominator is that they are crossed by the Arctic Circle was also prevalent. To some extent, the young participants adhered to these general objectives, but at the same time, their motivations and justifications showed nuance in the institutional discourse. The territory, for example, cannot be summed up in an Arctic identity reserved for those who live "in the ice," while others are first and foremost "from the North," that is, from a harsh, wild environment, isolated and far from the southern provinces, big cities, and all their facilities. The analysis of goals reveals major differences in the very definition of attachment or identification with a territory. For some, it was a matter of representing Canada ("Represent Team Canada" [female volleyball player from Nunavut, sixteen years old]), while others referred to their province (e.g., "Represent the Yukon" [male wrestler from Yukon, fourteen years old]) or even their community (e.g., "To represent my community" [male snowshoeing participant from the Northwest Territories, thirteen years old]).⁶⁶

The "Arctic" identity is plural, as the biographical trajectories of the participants were not comparable and the living conditions and cultural backgrounds of the delegations were diverse. However, there was a common bond that united the young athletes we met, based first on the conviction that they were united by an existence whose condition was dictated by a natural environment that was specific to them. The practice of sport remained important, but, for many, it was also about being there and being in it. The Games are often a family affair: parents take part, followed by siblings and cousins, who are often involved in the same sporting or cultural disciplines. Participants even drew on their family ties to perform: "Playing hard alongside my older brother" (male basketball player from Nunavut, seventeen years old) or "To go home with a gold ulu like my older brother" (male futsal player from Alaska, fifteen years old).⁶⁷ And it was not uncommon to find coaches who, a few years earlier, took part in the event as athletes. This replication is the logical adaptation of communities with relatively small demographics: in other words, as a form of sporting endogamy made necessary by the management of a sometimes very small number of practitioners. But this transmission, both familial and social, must have a sufficiently structuring meaning in the participants' sporting and community socialization to last over time, so that the Arctic Winter Games retain a special place in the sporting events to which the participants can also aspire (such as the Canada Games or national championships in their discipline).

Socialization: Coming to the Games as a Delegation, Leaving as a "Northerner"

On the basis of these various elements, participants are inclined toward a commitment that goes beyond simple sporting competition. Indeed, Thomsen, Ren, and Mahadevan perceive the Games as "more than a, or at least an alternative kind of, sports event."⁶⁸ It is a question of making the most of the moment, of not missing out on any opportunities for meetings and exchanges—in other words, of fully investing the socializing and identity-building potential of the Games. On a number of occasions at the 2023 Games, participants spontaneously embraced every opportunity, even the most official ones, to turn the event into a space favorable to exchanges and interactions. This supports the demonstration of a sociability that escapes the cleaving and agonistic dimensions of competition and also introduces festive dimensions. To illustrate our point, at the 2023 Games, participants grouped together in delegations in a large gymnasium while waiting for the opening ceremony, and, in addition to the musical

entertainment provided by the organizers, spontaneously organized sessions of hand games, a game originating from the Dene culture. Another example was the frequent exchange of pins or clothing, symbolizing the friendly nature of the relationship between participants. The practice is so important that it was mentioned in several of the participants' "goals for the Games" statements.

Indeed, at the closing ceremony of the Games (figure 11), participants were allowed to transcend Olympic rituals and sporting codes observed during the opening ceremony. After more than a week of shared life, delegations mixed joyfully, participants gathered based on newfound affinities, and many athletes exchanged their uniforms, making it even more challenging to formally identify the delegations. While the opening ceremony was marked by the formality of protocols and the solemnity of speeches, the closing ceremony was directed primarily toward the participants. Less formal than the opening one, the closing spectacle unfolded to the rhythm of sung and danced performances that highlighted the cultural diversity of the Games. The musical content drew from both Cree traditions and the iconic classics of Anglo-American pop culture. The youth enthusiastically transformed the well-known Queen song "We Are the Champions" into "We are the champions ... of the North," thus emphasizing the pride of both participating in the Games and representing a territory whose geographical, climatic, and environmental features constitute a shared identity among athletes. Through the celebration of a community of practices and territory, and the assertion of youthful socialization in which the Games play a significant role, the festive dimension of the closing ceremony emerged. This festive dimension was even more perceptible as it directly emanated from the young athletes, given that the lighter ceremonial protocol enabled them to spontaneously appropriate or even reinterpret the various elements. Participants also openly expressed their pleasure in attending the Games, forging new connections or strengthening existing friendships. The closing ceremony emerges as a moment of "truth" for the Arctic Winter Games, wherein while their sporting dimension is foundational, the true essence of social, cultural, and identity-related goals, as emphasized in institutional discourse, remains challenging to objectively measure among young athletes. The spontaneous emergence of festive dynamics during the closing ceremony shed light on how, beyond their sporting commitment, participants actually experienced the Games.



Figure 11. Closing ceremony at the 2023 Arctic Winter Games. Photographs by Julien Fuchs.

69. The percentages presented here were calculated based on data collected from the [Games website](#) (site discontinued) from which we gathered the complete responses of 758 participants who indicated their goals for the Games.

70. Fournier, "La fête est-elle non-essentielle?," 9.

71. Giles, "Beyond 'Add Women and Stir,'" 493.

72. Michael K. Heine, "[No 'Museum Piece': Aboriginal Games and Cultural Contestation in Subarctic Canada](#)," in *Native Games: Indigenous Peoples and Sports in the Post-Colonial World*, ed. Chris Hallinan and Barry Judd (Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2013), 7.

73. Victoria Paraschak and Michael Heine, "[Co-Transforming through Shared Understandings of Land-Based Practices in Sport for Development and Peace](#)," in *Sport, Development and Environmental Sustainability*, ed. Rob Millington and Simon Darnell (London: Routledge, 2019), 184–85.

74. Heine, "Performance Indicators," 173–75.

75. "[Snow Snake](#)," Dene Games website, accessed September 5, 2023.

Participating in the Games means, for most athletes, taking part in the various opportunities for interaction and exchange created by the event. While performance remains the main concern, 32.98 percent of participants' responses expressed the desire to enjoy an experience and 17.77 percent were linked to the relationships that they might cultivate during the Games.⁶⁹ In sportized and formalized competitions, such as futsal or volleyball, the emphasis placed on the final result was strongly pronounced, with no ostentatious display of fair play or adjustment of gameplay level in the case of significant disparities. However, participants appeared genuinely aware of the importance of fair play, acceptance of referee decisions, and the uncertainties present in competitive scenarios. Indeed, aggression or excessive expression of frustration are behaviors not tolerated within the culture of the Arctic Winter Games. What is important is what participants share in common: the celebration of a territory of belonging ("We are the champions ... of the North"), the relativization of emotions linked to victory or defeat, the importance of youthful sociability, and interpersonal relations. The euphemizing of the "sporting dimension," favoring the emergence of other social relations and cultural dimensions, is particularly perceptible in the case of Dene games and Arctic sports.

A Form of Transgression through the Renegotiation of Norms: Exchanges and Interactions within Dene Games and Arctic Sports

Entering Macdonald Island Park, we heard the sound of drums and songs resonating from the initial rooms of the large sports complex, intriguing some and causing others to move to the rhythm. These elements disrupted the ordinary tempo of this sports facility, as an expression of a "collective breath," emblematic of festivity.⁷⁰ Indeed, whereas typically the sports complex is marked by the sounds of squeaking shoes, bouncing balls, or the hum of the crowd entering and leaving various facilities, these auditory manifestations during the 2023 Arctic Winter Games contributed to creating an exceptional time of celebration—a moment of temporary escape from normal daily pressures. Nevertheless, these sounds are part of a scheduled competition within the sports agenda of the Arctic Winter Games: the hand games, one of the disciplines of Dene games.

Dene games represent training for survival in a hostile environment, requiring the skills needed to travel and hunt in the wild.⁷¹ Historically, living in a particular subarctic environment, the Dene were highly dependent on food sources that changed with the seasons and therefore had a highly mobile, community-oriented lifestyle that also favored individual autonomy.⁷² Dene games are thus grounded in specific social and cultural systems, which emphasize cooperation, value in the process rather than the result, and inclusion rather than the distinction between winners and losers.⁷³ The diverse practices of Dene games showcased within the Arctic Winter Games serve to embody festive dynamics of celebrating a particular culture linked to the fishing, hunting, and traveling traditions of the Dene, while also acting as a means of exchange and gathering.

Five Dene games have been included in the Arctic Winter Games since 1990. Finger pull and stick pull are two activities said to have been used to help strengthen the Dene's hands and prepare for the fishing season. One involves locked fingers with defensive and offensive roles, and the other is a greased stick-pulling contest.⁷⁴ The snow snake, which is played outside, involves throwing a spruce or pine stick as far as possible. It derives from the spear-throwing technique used to kill caribou lying on snow-covered lakes.⁷⁵ The two other games are group activities. Pole push,

76. "Pole Push," Dene Games website, accessed September 5, 2023.

77. Michael Heine, "It's a Competition, Not a Show! Traditional Games at Arctic Winter Games," *Stadion* 31, no. 1 (2005): 150.

78. "2023 Dene Games Technical Package," Team Alaska Arctic Winter Games website, accessed September 5, 2023.

which is also played outdoors, consists of two teams of four players holding a tree trunk and pushing the opposite team out of a circle marked out on the ground—a practice thought to be linked to the Dene's frequent journeys, which involved transporting heavy equipment, such as canoes.⁷⁶

Hand games with singing and drum music playing in the background traditionally have been played to gamble equipment (bullets, furs, dogs, stick matches, etc.). They focus on concealing and locating objects through elaborate hand signals and gestures. Hand games, complex games of chance and strategy, are evaluated through criteria foreign to the current standard field of sports.⁷⁷ Indeed, hand games do not align with a strict assessment of physical skills as one might expect in a sports competition. Once a team conceals its objects, the designated captain of the opposing team must then make a hand signal indicating the placement of these objects—for example, pointing their index finger to the left to indicate that all objects are on the left side. Thus, it is not physical strength—as found in finger pull, stick pull, and pole push—that is evaluated but rather the ability to identify the strategies of an opposing team. As explained in the game rules, players attempt to dupe opponents with elaborate hand, arm, head, and upper body gestures.⁷⁸ Competitors also make facial expressions, such as grimaces, smiles, and stern looks, supported by festive codes (songs and music), which contribute to the unique atmosphere of this competition. The competitors, referees, musicians, and audience all try to figure out where the hidden objects are (figure 12).



Figure 12. Hand games at the 2023 Arctic Winter Games. Photographs by Camille Gontier.

79. These percentages are based on data collected from the Games website from which we gathered the complete responses of twenty-five participants in Dene games who indicated their goals for the Games.

80. Quotations from data collected from the Games website.

81. Eleven athletes in the Dene games addressed the idea of having fun in their objectives formulated on the Games' website (for example, "to have fun"—a female participant from Alaska, fifteen years old).

82. Heine, "Performance Indicators," 169.

83. *Ibid.*, 169.

84. Heine, "It's a Competition, Not a Show!," 149.

85. Céline Petit, "Jouer pour être heureux: Pratiques ludiques et expressions du jeu chez les Inuit de la région d'Iglulik (Arctique oriental canadien), du XIXe siècle à nos jours" (PhD diss., Université Laval, Québec, and Université Paris Ouest Nanterre la Défense, France, 2011), 416.

86. On record breaking, see Petit, "Jouer pour être heureux," 413. On Spitdonk's performance, see April Hudson, "Oldest Competitor at Arctic Winter Games Chris Stipdonk Nearly Breaks Record to Win Knuckle Hop," *CBC News*, February 2, 2023.

87. These percentages are based on data collected from the Games website from which we gathered the complete responses of thirty-seven participants in Arctic sports

The sporting logic therefore is expressed differently in Dene games than in contemporary sports. Dene games participants formulated more experience-related objectives (53.57 percent) than performance (28.57 percent) or relationship-related ones (17.86 percent).⁷⁹ For example, they expressed objectives of experiencing new opportunities: "I'd love to try new food!" (male participant from Alaska, sixteen years old) or "See how much I can learn at Arctic Winter Games" (male participant from Alaska, twenty-one years old).⁸⁰ They also talked a lot about "having fun" (among the goals of eleven out of twenty-five Dene games participants whose goals for the games were collected).⁸¹ Given that Dene games are open to inexperienced participants and are perceived as being technically less demanding, it can be inferred that in these activities, participants come to the Arctic Winter Games primarily for the experience.⁸² These participants consider the Games as a way of discovering, experimenting, entertaining, and learning. However, certain aspects, such as the restriction to four players per team, the reward system (a stick for a correct guess in hand games, for example), the time limit (thirty minutes in hand games), and the use of a microphone to announce the competing teams, bear resemblance to elements of sports regulation.

The term "Arctic sports," in the context of the Arctic Winter Games, refers to a small number (11) of the total 150 known Inuit games.⁸³ These games mostly require the skillful execution of movement sequences of agility or flexibility, for example.⁸⁴ Ethnologist Céline Petit's research into the diverse gaming traditions of the Inuit Iglulingmiut of the eastern Canadian Arctic has shed light on the deliberate association of festive practices with Inuit games. The athletes, for example, refuse to participate in the warm-up phases and do not hesitate to drink alcohol and smoke between engagements, all of which is part of an asserted Inuit style of practice.⁸⁵

While we did not observe such deviations from the conventional standards of sports during the 2023 Arctic Winter Games, our examination of Arctic sports offers a more contrasting perception than that of Dene games. The sporting and competitive dimension is exalted. Record breaking is possible and valued, as Chris Spitdonk's performance in the knuckle hop contest attests.⁸⁶ Indeed, performance-related goals (44.44 percent) outnumbered experience-related goals (31.94 percent) and relational-related goals (23.61 percent) across Arctic sports participants.⁸⁷ They set goals that were mostly related to:

individual results:

Aim to score new personal records in one-foot high kick, triple jump, kneel jump—male participant from Nunavut, sixteen years old

To place top 10 in sledge jump—male participant from Yukon, thirteen years old

individual progress:

To soak in newly collected knowledge about new techniques to improve my performance—male participant from Nunavut, sixteen years old

Improve on my personal records—female participant from Alaska, twenty-two years old

who indicated their goals for the Games.

88. Quotations from data collected from the Games website.

89. Paraschak, "Variations in Race Relations"; and Heine, "Performance Indicators," 10.

90. On aligning with other events, see Fabian, "Games within Games," 115. On inclusion of non-Indigenous elements, see Hanson and Randazzo, "Survival Then, Survival Now," 92.

91. Heine, "It's a Competition, Not a Show!," 149–50.

individual effort:

To try my best—female participant from Yukon, fifteen years old, and female participant from Alberta North, sixteen years old

To spread my love and passion for the sport I participate in—male participant from Alaska, nineteen years old.⁸⁸

This predominance of a desire to compete could perhaps be explained by the introduction of this discipline within an event such as the Arctic Winter Games. Historically, Arctic sports appeared before Dene games at the Arctic Winter Games and were featured as a cultural demonstration event during the first two editions of the Games. During the third edition, in 1974, they were incorporated into the competition program.⁸⁹ Following that addition, organizers of the Games modified the structure of these activities to align it with other events, as evidenced by the inclusion of non-Indigenous elements (such as an emphasis on "victory," the use of medals as markers of distinction, adherence to predetermined schedules, and the establishment of records).⁹⁰ Arctic sports have strong parallels with modern sports, as many of these activities necessitate the mastery of difficult technical skills.⁹¹ For example, in the Alaskan high kick, competitors hit a target with one foot while holding the other foot and keeping balance with one hand, which takes specialized training (figure 13).

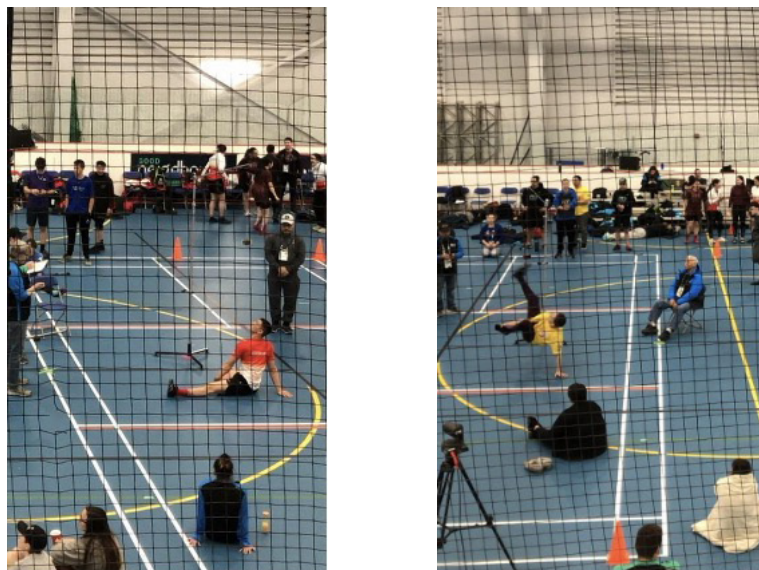


Figure 13. Alaskan high kick at the 2023 Arctic Winter Games. Photographs by Elina Bertet.

Participants in Arctic sports expressed fewer performance-related objectives (44.44 percent) than participants in contemporary sports (50.36 percent). Interestingly, these Arctic sports participants also formulated more relational goals (23.61 percent) than participants in non-native sports (17.43 percent) and even Dene games (17.86 percent).⁹² The relational dimension is important for Arctic sports participants, as it notably involves sociability with other people (new friends, new players, and people from other communities, for example, were mentioned) and encouragement from teammates. Indeed, one thirty-one-year-old Arctic sports participant from Alaska explained that he would like to "foster relationships with fellow athletes to strengthen the community of Arctic Sports."⁹³ Perhaps he was underlining the desire to celebrate, maintain, and sustain these Inuit practices through exchanges.

This is consistent with our observations, where the exchange dimension seems to mitigate the

92. These percentages are based on data collected from the Games website.

93. Quotation from data collected from the Games website.

94. Heine, "It's a Competition, Not a Show!," 152.

95. Petit, "Jouer pour être heureux," 411.

96. Quotation from data collected from the Games website.

97. Fournier, "Inventory of Traditional Games in France," 32.

98. Marcel Mauss, *Essai sur le don: Forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques* (Chicoutimi: J.-M. Tremblay, 2002), 50.

performance aspect embodied in Arctic sports. In the running of this discipline, Arctic sports are characterized by a distancing from agonistic logics. Even if the dimension of records is important to these participants, cooperation and various interactions between coaches and athletes are present even when the athletes are performing. This is what the sports sociologist Michael Heine observed when he explained that "this self-contained demonstration of athletic accomplishment is temporarily interrupted by competing athletes, coaches from all participating teams, and even elders, all of whom volunteer advice on how to improve a given skill execution."⁹⁴ The practice of these sports, notably in school settings, encourages the appreciation of others' skills, fair play, and a jovial spirit of competition.⁹⁵

At the 2023 games, notable instances were witnessed where athletes extended support, guidance, and motivation to their fellow competitors. For example, following an unsuccessful attempt at the one-foot high kick by an athlete from Nunavik, an athlete from Alaska demonstrated a technique to assist her. Likewise, after an athlete from the Northwest Territories executed a successful attempt, she shared smiles and handshakes with an athlete from Greenland. A thirty-one-year-old Arctic sports participant from the Northwest Territories explained, "Coming together and the camaraderie amongst 'competitors' is the best of all," showing that a cooperative frame of reference that fits with how Inuit traditional games are played is also important.⁹⁶ Reflecting Fournier's advice to refrain from seeing traditional sports as opposed to modern sports but rather as complementary, it becomes apparent that traditional games adapt to address contemporary needs and realities while maintaining their traditional heritage.⁹⁷

Consequently, Arctic sports appear to be culturally hybrid activities: competition is the main object of athletes' commitment, but it implies the leveling of statuses and hierarchies (between coaches, referees, participants), just as it integrates strongly cooperative logics. In other words, while Arctic sports borrow many features from modern competition and sportsmanship, they are distinguished by the collective construction of individual performance, a process that tends to downplay personal achievement in favor of a sharing of cultural resources whose apparent gratuity is reminiscent of the logics of giving and spending that characterize the festivity. This form of sharing evokes "the potlatch," a form of exchange practiced among certain peoples of Alaska and British Columbia. Potlatch is characterized by the gathering of tribes, clans, families, and even nations, which generates tension and excitement. Participants simultaneously foster camaraderie, remain somewhat estranged from each other, and communicate while also engaging in opposition.⁹⁸

Another aspect we observed is that, compared to other sports, the distinction between the teams taking part in Dene games and Arctic sports is not as evident. The construction of a sporting culture specific to these disciplines is reflected in the athletes' outfits: contrary to the customs and even formal rules of modern competition, athletes are free to wear an outfit of their choosing, some opting for jerseys in the colors of their delegation, while many others dressed in their own personal outfits. The identification of teams, regions, and nations is discreet, if not absent, leading uninformed observers to think that they may be attending a simple training session. The absence of uniformity in the participants' clothes may underscore a different approach to competition where the distinction between competing teams does not appear as relevant. Finally, while the participants regularly assemble by delegation around

99. Fournier, "La fête est-elle non-essentielle?"

100. Michael Dubnewick et al., "[There's a Cultural Pride through Our Games: Enhancing the Sport Experiences of Indigenous Youth in Canada through Participation in Traditional Games](#)," *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 42, no. 4 (2018): 213–14.

101. Alana Thomson et al., "[Sport Event Legacy: A Systematic Quantitative Review of Literature](#)," *Sport Management Review* 22, no. 3 (2019): 295–321.

the practice fields, the various breaks in the day also present an opportunity for meetings and individual exchanges between athletes who, a few minutes later, will be competing against each other.

Arctic sports and Dene games foster a sense of community among participants that echoes the intimate and communal nature of pre-sportified traditional festivities.⁹⁹ As suggested by a recent study of Indigenous youth aged fourteen to eighteen from the Northwest Territories, participating at the annual Traditional Games Championship of the region with Dene and Inuit games, traditional games can enhance the sporting experiences through important social and cultural dimensions. They foster cultural pride by imparting teachings, stories, and cultural protocols, thereby ensuring the knowledge and continuity of these practices.¹⁰⁰ Every time these games are played, they are a celebration of culture, traditions, and community values. At the Arctic Winter Games, while spectators are present to observe these two disciplines, they are rarely engaged by the athletes and participants and sometimes even forgotten entirely during intense hand games sessions (organizers are often compelled to remind those on the playing field to step aside and allow the audience to watch the performances). Distant from the logic of sports spectacle and even festive events, which may often try to entertain or actively involve spectators, Arctic sports and Dene games stand apart from other disciplines at the Games due to their communal and experiential nature. Just as a celebration cannot be produced without being intimately experienced, these elements primarily revolve around and for groups of practitioners rather than spectators.

Conclusion

Festivity is neither merely an added-on dimension of the Arctic Winter Games, nor is it solely associated with the cultural aspect of the program, nor is it an activity exclusively reserved for spectators who gather around the peripheral animation events. It is an integral part of the event as experienced daily by the participants. It asserts itself within informal relationships fostered by a gathering that, due to its occasionally amateur nature but primarily its ability to challenge prevailing norms of sportsmanship, encourages meetings, interactions, and exchanges—all essential elements for the development of a socializing experience, which, according to athletes, is characteristic of the Arctic Winter Games. The relative streamlining of the Games facilitates the establishment of fluid and open relationships and promotes the emergence of festive aspects for the young participants. This is further embraced by the organizing committee, as it reflects the political objectives of an event focused on welcoming young athletes who represent the diversity of Arctic populations. Prior to being the finest athletes in their respective disciplines and generations, the participants are ambassadors of the North and the Arctic.

Festive and cultural dimensions coexist alongside sporting logics during the numerous moments of free time available to participants. The Arctic Winter Games can thus be predominantly perceived as a sporting event that allows youth from Arctic regions to experience ways of being together and live moments of sociability and exchanges. The Games deviate from the norms of a number of other global sporting events and belong to those occasions that contribute to questioning, and even challenging, the dominant competitive sporting model of today. The importance underscored in this study regarding the youth's experience at the Games

and the ways they celebrate can be regarded as one of the components of the legacy left by sporting events on territories and populations, an area of growing research interest.¹⁰¹ In other words, the festive aspects, in addition to the competitive ones, represent the imprint that an event can leave on participants and their perceptions in the long term.

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Appendix 1: Example of an Observation Grid for Dene Games

<p>Activities observed: type and context of the activity (training, warm-up, demonstration, competition...), place and duration, weather conditions, etc.</p>	<p>Obs. 6: Dene Games:</p> <p>At Macdonald Island Park, on Wednesday, January 2, 2023, in a large hall next to the Arctic sports hall, the hand games competitions take place between Alaska, Alberta North, Greenland, Northwest Territories, Nunavik, Nunavut, and Yukon for the men, and the same teams without Greenland for the women.</p>
<p>Environment and configuration of the site: indoor/outdoor, open-air/urban, open-air/equipped, facilities and infrastructures already existing or developed for the Arctic Winter Games, reception of participants, reception of the public.</p>	<p>The configuration of the hall is pretty much the same as for Arctic sports: there are round tables to the side with chairs, there are raised bleachers overlooking the hall, in the middle is the competition area, and at the back of the hall is a table for the officials. Behind the officials' table is a tepee. In the competition area are chairs, mainly for the musicians, and tatami mats.</p>
<p>Audiences present: attendance levels, typology, distribution, placements. Identification of participants, officials, coaches, and accompanying persons. Interactions between participants, and between audiences and participants. Proximity of participants and audience, rules, conditions of circulation and accessibility within the sites (formal, informal, absent).</p>	<p>The audience in the hall is standing very close to the competition area. You can see a dozen officials in their black and blue outfits and a dozen volunteers in green and black. In addition, there's a bleacher in the competition area where a few people are seated. In the audience on the bleachers outside the competition area, there are a lot of children who probably come here with their schools, as well as families with children, officials, volunteers, and other people.</p>
<p>Information available on the site: signage, programs, posters, flyers, audio material. Objects, contents, and themes of the information.</p>	<p>Volunteers at the entrance control access. At the entrance there's a "Dene Games" board.</p>
<p>Site activities: speaker, music, para-sport activities (initiations, demonstrations). What target audience, content, languages, etc.?</p>	<p>Musicians play drums, and shouts are heard to accompany them. A microphone announces the two concurrent teams.</p>

<p>General atmosphere: formal/informal organization, importance of competition/sportivization, expression of emotions and feelings, type of prevailing atmosphere (indifferent, peaceful, confrontational, committed, supportive, good-natured, complicit, etc.).</p>	<p>The prevailing atmosphere is convivial: athletes on their knees and the public in the hall are closely grouped, hopping, dancing.</p>
<p>Identification of the participants: do they wear clothes that show belonging to a sport or nation? Are they the same every time? Are they different for athletes on the same team? Special sports accessories and equipment? Presence of banners or flags according to a particular affiliation? Are they the same each time?</p>	<p>The participants' outfits are not uniform among the participants and do not all reflect a particular belonging:</p> <p>In the Northwest Territories men's team, some have a T-shirt or sweater with the inscription "team NT" but another has a plain gray sweater, some have makeup with "NT" on the cheek or lines of paint on the face.</p> <p>In the Alberta North men's team, some have a T-shirt or sweater with the inscription "team Alberta North," another has a plain gray T-shirt, some have makeup with blue and white lines under the eyes and on the nose.</p> <p>The NT women athletes have a T-shirt with "team NT" written on it, but they're not the same T-shirts (one long-sleeved, one with "team NT" written in a smaller size, etc.).</p> <p>Team Alaska women athletes have a navy blue T-shirt with "team Alaska" and a map of Alaska on the front, and "Dene Games" on the back, with characters performing the various Dene games.</p> <p>Team Nunavut male athletes wear yellow T-shirts with "Dene Games" on the front and "Team Nunavut" on the back.</p> <p>Some athletes wear caps.</p>

<p>Participants' behavior (1):</p> <p>Environmental choices: do participants stay alone or as a group (athletes, family, community, coaches, others)? Do they place themselves in the practice areas or outside?</p> <p>Organization/planning: how do athletes organize themselves in their sports practices? Do they warm up a lot? Do they practice a lot outside of competition time? Are they guided by coaches or not?</p>	<p>In the competition area there are two groupings for two hand games competitions (one for men's teams, one for girls' teams). Athletes can be seen jumping, dancing, and clapping to the rhythm of the Dene drums. Some athletes film or take photos of the athletes competing.</p>
<p>Behaviors (2):</p> <p>Atmosphere: performance and competitive behaviors? Importance of medals, results, rankings? Importance of interactions? Stakeholders and objects of interactions?</p> <p>Encouragement and support: do parents, family, teammates, coaches, other adults encourage or send words of confidence about the sport or exercise? Attention and comments related to the athlete's performance? In general, is the behavior of athletes and the environment different for different activities (mainstream, Arctic, and Indigenous sports)?</p>	<p>The atmosphere is all about play: the competitors play with their facial expressions (grimaces, smiles, dark looks) and shout. As much as the athletes, the musicians and the audience in the room try to find out where the objects are hidden. The judges control the game, observe the expressions of the participants, some jump to the rhythm of the drums and award points (put small sticks in front of the winning team). Some coaches stand next to the teams and observe.</p> <p>During discussions with Dene games officials, they explain that they see hand games as a sport inspired by traditional Dene practices (fishing, hunting, hand games for betting objects, etc.). For them, whoever is the best at the games is the best in practice, and there is an emphasis on "performance." They do feel, however, that there is a difference in practice at the Arctic Winter Games and when they are with their families: here, participants are judged, and there are four of them per team, whereas there may be six or more at other events or at home. There is also the international aspect to the Arctic Winter Games, which enables these practices to be visible and passed on.</p>

<p>Behaviors (3): Are we proud of the athlete? Are there any interventions by coaches or athletes toward other delegations? Are these interventions prepared or spontaneous?</p> <p>Visibility: do participants take photos? Do they share their achievements on the networks?</p>	<p>The athletes seem driven and supported by the music, dancing and jumping. The coaches don't seem to be able to intervene in the game, but some are positioned next to the teams, observing and applauding. There are lots of people (volunteers, athletes, families, etc.) around the games, filming and taking photos.</p>
<p>Participants' emotions:</p> <p>Negative: negative effect in response to undesirable outcomes in a sport role and space? Does the participant appear upset if something prevents planned sports or exercises? Do they appear depressed when they perform poorly in sports?</p> <p>Positive: positive effect in response to favorable results in a sport role and space? Does the participant show joy? Does he or she appear rather enthusiastic or at least satisfied? Does the expression of emotions differ between activities (mainstream sports, Arctic sports, and Indigenous sports)?</p>	<p>The athletes are very expressive and play with this a lot: for example, when the men's Northwest Territories team traps the Alberta North team (they are designated even though they don't have the object), they show pride, shout, and jump with greater amplitude, but when they have been designated and have the object, they lower their heads and almost stop jumping. The same thing is observed among the women between the NT and Alaska teams, but perhaps with a little less expressiveness and energy.</p>
<p>Emotions of the audience:</p> <p>Does the audience participate in the general atmosphere and show their presence and support? Does the audience interact with the sports performance, positively or negatively? Does the audience encourage all participants equally? Does the audience give expert opinions? Does the audience use the "classic" registers of sports support? If not, what modes of expression are used? Do the expressions of emotions differ according to the activities (classic sports, Arctic sports, and Indigenous sports)?</p>	<p>The audience in the hall contributes to the general atmosphere and shows its presence and support by applauding, jumping, dancing, exclaiming, etc. There are lots of people (volunteers, athletes, families, etc.) around the games, filming and taking photos. The audience in the bleachers applauds, jumps, dances.</p>

Appendix 2: Interview Guide

Start of interview:

Go through the consent form and answer their questions.

Give them a copy of the consent form if they want one.

Interview guide youth participants:

How have you liked the Arctic Winter Games so far? Why?

What do you like the most about the Arctic Winter Games? Why?

What should change at the Arctic Winter Games to make them better? Why?

Why did you want to participate in the Arctic Winter Games this year?

- Was it your idea? Why?
- Or, if you were encouraged or recruited, by whom?
- And why did you accept?

Are you an athlete or an artistic/cultural performer?

- What sport/art are you participating in at the Games?
- How long have you been practicing this sport/art?
- Would you like to continue in this sport/art? Why?
- How would you describe yourself as an athlete/artistic performer?
- What is the place of this sport/art in your life?
- Would you define yourself as an athlete/artistic performer? How? Why?

How old are you?

Is this your first time at the Arctic Winter Games?

Describe the Arctic Winter Games in your own words.

- What are the goals of the Arctic Winter Games?
- What are their values?

Who comes to the Arctic Winter Games?

- Who are they?
- How would you describe the organizers and volunteers?
- How would you describe the participants? How would you describe the people who are involved in one way or another with the Arctic Winter Games (as a collective or as a community)?

Excerpts from the International Committee's website:

"The Games provide an opportunity to strengthen sport development in the participants' jurisdictions, to promote the benefits of sport, to build partnerships, and to promote culture and values. The Games celebrate sport, social exchange and cultures. The Games provide an opportunity for the developing athlete to compete in friendly competition while sharing cultural values from northern regions around the world.

Arctic Winter Games brings our Circumpolar World closer together. Strengthening and showcasing our communities and providing our young people an International Games opportunity to participate, showcase their talent and share in the joy of Sport."

From your experience and/or knowledge of the Arctic Winter Games so far, in what ways are the Games promoting the cultures from northern regions around the world?

- Have you experienced this at the Games?
- How was it?
- Do you think it is relevant and important to foster exchange and shared cultural values among northern people at the Arctic Winter Games?
- What are these shared cultural values of northern people?
- Do you find that the Games contribute to strengthening northern communities? How?
- Do you think that the Games should do more to strengthen northern communities? Why?

From your experience and/or knowledge of the Arctic Winter Games so far, in what ways are the Games promoting environmental sustainability?

- Have you experienced this at the Games? When? How?
- Do you think it is relevant and important to adopt sustainable practices at the Games? Why?

How would you describe yourself in terms of "sense of belonging"?

- What community do you feel the most attached to (cultural group, town/city, Indigenous people/nation)? Why?

Would you say that the Arctic Winter Games create a sense of belonging to the Arctic or to the North? How? Why?

How would you say it plays a role in how you identify yourself? Why? Do you see yourself as a northerner or someone from the Arctic?

Should the Games play a role in the preservation of Arctic nature/landscape?

Would you say that the Arctic Winter Games create a sense of belonging to the Arctic or to the northern nature/land? How? Why?

Do you think that environmental sustainability has a different or particular relevance for northern regions and communities? Why?

- Do you think that the Games should do more to protect the northern environment? Why?

Here is some paper, a pencil and a clipboard—could you draw:

- How you see yourself as someone from the Arctic or the North, or
- How you view the Arctic or the North (cultures/communities and/or nature/environment), or
- How you view the Arctic Winter Games as an event specific to the Arctic or the North (cultures/communities and/or nature/environment)?

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