

V. V. Lutkov

Saint Petersburg State University

Physical Education and Sports: Examining a Modern Islamic Perspective

Physical activity is an intrinsic part of human life and, as such, has been always within the scope of attention of any religion. Physical education and competition in the Muslim world has been legitimized based on the Islamic sources, such as the Qurʾān and the Ḥadīths. The interpretation of the compatibility of the Islamic concepts with modern developments in physical education and sports is an ongoing discussion topic in modern societies. Interdisciplinary approach to understanding how physical education and sports develop in an environment shaped by Islamic norms and practices seems to be fruitful, if an uncommon approach, which is attempted in this article.

Keywords: sports, physical education, Qurʾān, Ḥadīths, Islamic culture, interdisciplinary approach.

Introduction

Sport is often seen as a frivolous exercise that is unworthy of theoretical reflection. As Kildyushov, a contemporary Russian philosopher has pointed out that “for the academic mainstream, serious discussion of theoretical aspects of sports is not self-evident... For most of Russian intellectuals, it is a characteristic attitude to treat sports as an utmost non-serious subject” [1, p. 43–60]. Sports and religious aspects of sports rarely fall within the scope of attention of specialists on the Muslim world. One of the few exceptions is Mercier’s book on sports among the Arabs [2]. In general, however, sports historians and theoreticians tend to neglect Muslim countries. Juxtaposition of sports and religion within Western society has been quite common. This, Lüschen [3] and Lenk [4] pursued Weber’s ideas [5] in their studies of Protestantism and its influence on sports culture in Germany. The focus on the role of Protestantism in the development of Western civilization continues to inform Western sociological discourse. A broad review of existing theories is provided by Guttman in his *Capitalism, Protestantism and Modern Sports* [6, p. 1–42]. Muslim authors, too, have paid some attention to this subject, presenting insider views on sports and aiming their discourse at their own audience [7, p. 55–80]. As a typical example, one can cite the study of a medical doctor from Brunei [8].

Physical activity is an inherent part of human existence, and, as such, has been the subject of every religion or philosophy of life. Ponomarev has defined a broader notion of physical culture as “humanization of the corporeal” (*ochelovechivanie telesnogo*) [9, p. 50–55]. His pioneering analysis of the genesis of physical education is surprisingly free from ideological preconceptions of the Soviet era and remains relevant even half a century after it was written. For a summary of the concept in English, see [10, p. 167–173].

The necessity of physical education for children and adults, preparation for daily activities and warfare are manifested by certain norms codifying these activities within certain cultural and religious tradition. High esteem and social status associated with the role of a warrior can be noted in all traditional societies, where military training and physical education is legitimized as a pious and laudable activity.

The goal of the article is to discuss the functioning of the perception of physical education within the context of Islamic tradition, with special emphasis on the classic sources of the Islamic faith and their use and interpretation in the modern world. This subject calls for an interdisciplinary approach in order to obtain a better understanding of the functioning of sports and physical education in the Muslim world. Such an approach will allow us to combine linguistic, ethnographic, sociological and historical data related to the subject at hand.

The initial phase of the research was conducted in 1992–1994. It included an analysis of the texts dedicated to physical education and sports in the Arab countries, as well as series of interviews with Arab experts involved in sports and administering Olympic movement in their countries. The results of the research were summarized in the form of my doctoral thesis [11]. My subsequent practical work as an international tennis official in 1995–2018 took me to various Arab and Muslim countries, where I collected first-hand information from the sports administrators involved in running professional tennis events in Qatar, the UAE, Kuwait, Syria, Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Iran and Pakistan.

Many scholars of Islamic societies have emphasized that in Islam there is no clear borderline between the sacred and the profane [12; 13]. Indeed, the sphere of physical education and sports has been an integral part of Islamic religious discourse and the sacred texts of Islam have been widely used to legitimize existing sports practices.

The expansion of Islam resulted in the adaptation of Islamic religious norms to pre-Islamic indigenous cultures that featured various aspects of physical education. In Ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Roman Empire we find complex patterns of correlation between body and soul, various approaches to physical/military education, as well as ludic culture. A fundamental concept of “play” in the Muslim world has its vast important as in other civilizations. The Egyptian scholar Touny for instance, has furnished an illuminating overview on the physical education and sports in Ancient Egypt [14]. In particular, he shows that sports and competitions were an integral part of life in that ancient civilization.

In the sports sociology of the Soviet era the role of Islam in the development of physical education was consistently depicted in a negative light. Sholomistkiy’s study of the Soviet Central Asia is a typical example of this approach [15]. At the same time, Erasov correctly states that “in spite of the existence of the secular trends of development, religion creates social mechanisms that help to maintain the accepted way of spiritual life” [16].

References to the Qur’ān and Ḥadīṭs are characteristic of the discourse of modern intellectuals and administrators in the Arab (and Muslim) countries who often combine their Western training in practical aspects of sports with the Islamic tradition [17]. In our conversations, they routinely emphasized the high esteem that Islam has for physical training, physical efforts and skills. For example, Aḥmad Hāshim, a President of Sudan’s Olympic Academy, argued that physical education and sports in his country are based on certain ideas derived from the Qur’ān and Ḥadīṭs. One can also note that, in the process, the foundational texts of Islam are subject to [re]-interpretation and adaptation [18]. References to the sacred texts are also common in the Russian-language Muslim sites addressing various issues related to physical culture and sports (www.islam.ru, www.islam-today.ru and others).

The set of quotes from the Qur’ān in relation to physical education and sport usually includes the following:

لَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا الْإِنْسَانَ فِي أَحْسَن تَقْوِيمٍ We created man the best possible way/form (95:4)

وَمَا جَعَلْنَاهُمْ جَسَدًا لَا يَأْكُلُونَ الطَّعَامَ We did not create them bodies not eating food (21:8)

وَلَا تَنْسَ نَصِيبَكَ مِنَ الدُّنْيَا Do not forget your share of this world (28:77)

وَأَعِدُّوا لَهُمْ مَا اسْتَطَعْتُمْ مِنْ قُوَّةٍ وَمِنْ رِبَاطِ الْخَيْلِ تُرْهِبُونَ بِهِ عَدُوَّ اللَّهِ وَعَدُوَّكُمْ And prepare as much forces and cavalry, as you can muster, so that you would terrify the enemy of God and your enemy (8:60).

References to Muḥammad and his companions (al-ṣaḥāba) traditionally include the following Ḥadīths:

لِمُؤْمِنٍ الْقَوِي خَيْرٌ وَأَحَبُّ إِلَى اللَّهِ مِنَ الْمُؤْمِنِ الضَّعِيفِ Strong believer is better in the eyes of God than a weak believer (Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, Kitāb al-Qadr)

عَلِّمُوا أَوْلَادَكُمْ السَّيِّحَةَ وَالرَّمَايَةَ وَرُكُوبَ الْخَيْلِ Teach your children swimming, archery and horse riding (attributed to ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, the second successor to the Prophet).

The Prophet is treated as the ideal to be emulated, according the following Qur’ānic verse:

لَقَدْ كَانَ لَكُمْ فِي رَسُولِ اللَّهِ أُسْوَةٌ حَسَنَةٌ There has certainly been for you in the Messenger of Allah an excellent pattern (33:21).

Now, another ḥadīṭ asserts that Muḥammad himself took part in competition, thus legitimizing it. Thus, the famous transmitter of prophetic statements Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (d. 855) relates: *The Prophet raced ‘Āisha and she outran him. Then they had another race in which he outran her, whereupon he said, “This time makes up for the other.”*

This prophetic statement is widely used to justify female sports. Modern examples (as witnessed by the author) of the adaptation of the traditional Islamic female dress code to the present-day international sports background can be seen in the use of ‘legal’ attire for female line umpires at the Davis Cup competition in Tehran (2010), the participation of female tennis players from the Maldives wearing the hijab in the Commonwealth Games in New Delhi (2010) and the Iranian women’s national team competing in approved attire at the FedCup event in Astana (2011). The controversy related to the legality of headscarves in team sports (such as basketball and football) has been widely publicized during recent high-profile events (Asian Games in Incheon in 2014). The story of the Qatari female basketball team that was not allowed to play wearing headscarves has received much publicity, e. g., in [19, p. 1] and [20, p. 1]. Lively discussions of the permissibility of certain kinds

of sports for Muslims (wrestling, boxing) are common in the modern Muslim media.

A number of Muslim authors have emphasized bodily and athletic aspects of the Muslim canonical prayer (*ṣalāt*). For example, the beneficial role of such regular physical activity for maintaining agility and fitness is described in [21, p. 42–46]. Similar studies conducted in Saudi Arabia show the positive effects of the movements performed during the five daily prayers [22, p. 177–180]. For a gender-specific approach, see Nakamura's paper on sports dynamics among Muslim immigrants in Canada [23].

Similar interpretations were provided by my informants in relation to the tradition of regular ablution (*ḡusl* — full-body ritual ablution, *wuḍū'* — partial ablution and *tayammum* — ablution with sand). They considered them an important hygienic practice and part of individual physical culture.

Fasting and diet prescribed by Islam are being interpreted as the basis for a healthy life style. Occasional contradictions between the requirements of high performance sports and the religious obligations of Muslim sportsmen and sportswomen compelled religious and secular authorities to make accommodations [24]. For example, the professional ATP Tour tennis event in Doha in 1999 was held during Ramaḍān. A special ruling (*fatwā*) was issued allowing players to drink on court during matches to legitimize the violation of the traditional code of conduct during the month of fasting (as I observed personally or based on the information from the Tournament Director). A number of articles were devoted to the instances in which Ramaḍān coincided with major sports events (e. g., the Olympic Games in London in 2012 and the FIFA Football World Cup in 2014 [25]). One should also mention medical studies on the physical performance of athletes during Ramaḍān [26].

Outside of the scope of the current paper (but within the scope of interest of the author) are the semantic connotations of the notion of play (*la'ib*) [27, p. 615–616], and its transformation within the Islamic tradition [28, p. 35]; current sports policies in the Arab countries in relation to high performance / entertainment sports; participation of Muslims in the Olympic movement; and development of female sports in Muslim countries. Applying the methodology of sports sciences to the existing practices of Muslim prayer and Sufi meditation can be considered as one the possible topics of interdisciplinary research.

It is my firm conviction that studies of the interrelation between Sports and Religion (and Islam in particular) can create a better understanding of the complex nature of interrelation between the corporeal and the spiritual. In conclusion I would like to quote Alkemeyer [29, p.235–236], who argued that “The specifics of its subject creates unique heuristic opportunities for philosophy of sports that are relevant for social theory in general: it openly deals with those corporal sides of the social that are traditionally stigmatized and tabooed within so called high culture”.

Conclusions

Physical education and sports in the modern Muslim world exhibit various influences ranging from conservative to ultra-modern, from religious to secular. Taking into account the relevant Islamic sources and their creative [re-]interpretation by interested parties is necessary to understand the overall direction in the evolution of these phenomena in different modern-day contexts.

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