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Colonial and Relativistic Approaches to the Cultural Anthropology of Play

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Abstract

In human studies, as we have seen in the case of play, the critical question arises: Why should there be only one definition? Definition is associated with the scholarly imagination of little boxes, which are characterized by neat limits against each other. However, this picture appears very usually in social studies, too. But can one describe by strict limits, what is historically changing, socio-culturally specific or linguistically different? The first definition of what is historical. The second definition of what is socio-culturally specific. And the third, definition of what is expressed by and different in language. The historical, socio-cultural, and linguistic dimensions of human life exclude the use of definition as a universal norm of scholarly work. There are deep differences between the two procedures of defining a certain phenomenon on one hand – and identifying or understanding phenomena in a phenomenological way on the other. Last, but not least, definition has a history in itself. In the historical course of the anthropology of play, definition became important in connection with the neo-positivistic approaches from 1930/50 onward. The older colonial interest in play and games as well as the newer relativistic understanding of play could – or even: had to – proceed without any definition. Definition is, thus, not a universal instrument of knowledge, but a culturally specific construction. Human beings can very well understand play – or whatever phenomenon in human life – without defining it.

Keywords: Anthropology, Definition, Human beings, Play
Introduction

An old rainforest Indian from Siberut, a Mentawai island vest of Sumatra in Indonesia, remembered an episode with a Dutch officer from colonial times:

But once we were not content with him. He said that we should come down to the coast and take bow and arrows with us. There they had prepared all very beautiful and waited for us on a large place. We got meal and drinking, and then they took a coconut and asked us to shoot after it. We did so, and when one of us hit the nut they cheered and screamed, as if we had hit an ape and not a coconut. At the end we received our reward and could go home again. But what was not correct after our opinion was that we did not receive equally. Some received a lot, and others did not receive anything at all. We all became a little bit angry in our hearts. But what should we do? They are as they are…

When asked who those had been who received more than the others:

Yes, this is exactly what we did not understand. It was purely coincidental. It was quite independent of which clan they came from.²

Meeting the colonial “other” – universality, and progress

On Siberut, two cultures were meeting in play, game, and festivity. The Mentawai people had developed great skill with bow and arrow. They were notorious for their handling of poisoned arrows in the tropical rainforest. The boys trained from childhood shooting against coconut shells as target and used their skill especially to shoot monkeys for meal. People from the Christian mission had earlier also become victims. However, the Dutch way of prize and award with its background of sport motivation was unfamiliar for Mentawai people.

Colonial power came to the island with a background in European culture of competition, performance, and sport. For colonial officers, the measurement of achievement and the reward by prizes was self-understanding. The sport-free culture, which they met and upon which they by a friendly invitation tried to impose their own pattern, was unfamiliar for them.

The situation of encounter between those two different cultures delivers a key for understanding the relation between colonized and colonizers – not only on the level of military, political, and economical power, but also in the sphere of everyday-life and play.
The meeting showed a characteristic asymmetry: There were not equal partners meeting. They were not in the same way foreign for each other and not in the same way willing to learn from each other. There were different imbalances involved.

First, it were only the Mentawaians, who learned and should practice the patterns of their colonial masters. Today, they play football and volley in their villages. The Dutch never learned to play in the Mentawaian way – where people either remain equal or differentiate according to the clan system. In Amsterdam there is nobody who shoots after the Mentawaian pattern or who plays the rainforest Indians’ spin-top game. The asymmetry of colonization was – and remains? – stabile.

Second, it were the Mentawaians who noticed that something “was not correct”. They obtained an experience of the others – with “a little bit anger in the hearts” – of those others who “were as they were”. One may doubt whether the colonial officer felt anything similar. Probably, he experienced the opposite: Look, Mentawaians do shooting sport, too! Indeed, ethnologists from colonial times reported about the bow-and-arrow art of the Mentawaians in just this tone of familiarity (Maass 1902, 130). And by the study of people from Sumatra, one concluded with undertones of enthusiasm: “One sees that Orient and Occident fundamentally are the same” (Moszkowski, 1909, Mittelalterlicher, 264). This expressed the world view of universalism, where the dominating (colonial) culture declared itself to represent the universal and “discovered” its own universality among the others all over the world…

Third, if ever the colonial organizer of the Mentawai sport festival had discovered that his own expectations were not identical with the feelings of the colonized, there would be an evident explanation at hand: The Mentawaians had “not yet” developed so far that they could understand a “modern” sport competition. They were still “wild primitives” or an “original natural tribe” (Karny, 1925/26). The difference could, thus, be placed on a historical time scale where the dominating culture was at the top and the others “still behind” and “underdeveloped”. This was the interpretation of evolutionism. The asymmetry was – and remains until today – temporalized (Leclerc, 1973: 16 ff; also Eichberg, 1981 Fremdes).

**Collecting, classifying, and conquering – early positivism**

Inter-cultural research of play and sport took its starting point from these patterns of interpretation, which were evolutionistic, universalistic, and in practice colonial. Earlier studies
tried since the later 19th century to register, document, and classify play and games of those foreign people.

As soon as a very first phase of unstructured or un-systematical collection (Bunzendahl, 1935; Culin, 1895/1958 and 1899; Diem, 1942) was laid behind, one tried to apply a certain systematic classification to the material. It seemed evident to bring order into the games of Indonesians and other Pacific people. For the case of spin-top games, order could follow the material form of the spin-tops (Damm, 1929):

A. Tops without stick in the middle, made of
   1. earth balls
   2. snail houses
   3. coconut shells
   4. wood in form of cone or pear
B. Tops with stick in the middle:
   1. round bowl-formed body of rotation (fruits etc.)
   2. plate-formed body of rotation (made of bone, stone or coco shell)
   3. sounding body (humming top).

This approach was in line with the contemporary interest in cranium measuring, a favorite pursuit of the colonial anthropology, which understood itself as “natural science”. Also from Mentawaian burial sites, an anthropologist stole skulls of the dead for anthropometrical measurement and museum purposes (Maass, 1902: 20-21).

Similar classifications as for spin-tops were applied to the duels and martial arts of Pacific and Indonesian people, following the scheme:

A. Duels without weapons
   1. wrestling
   2. fight of push and pull
   3. boxing
   4. kick fights, foot fights
B. Duels with weapons, with
1. close combat weapons: stick, club, sword
2. throwing weapons: primitive throwing device, javelin, bow and arrow, other weapons (Damm, 1922).

Besides the concrete empirical material, a universalistic assumption was basis for such type of classification. There was no place for otherness of the larger connections. However, an order of spin-tops, having its roots in the ethnographic museums of colonial times, did not allow any insight into the play itself, its social connections, its procedure, criteria of fight, or what the whole was about. The classification made up an abstract pattern, which was fitting to the collection of European travelers and their inner “order of things”, but remained unconnected to the life of those other people.

The deficiencies of the classification of duels and martial arts were less objectified and yet more problematical. The quest of order did not open up towards really understanding the phenomenon of fighting art or combat play, which is indeed important among Indonesian people, pencak silat. Classification rather blocked understanding. The martial art of pencak silat is in family with Chinese exercises like tai chi chuan, wushu, and kungfu. It combines many different variations of foot kick and stroke, rhythmic movement and aesthetic forms, which in Europe – especially in connection with the 18th century’s process of sportization – were sorted from each other in separate disciplines. From Western perspective, pencak silat can be recognized as

- sport on line with wrestling, boxing, and fencing
- gymnastic exercise
- dance, also called “weapon dance”
- meditation and spiritual practice, with elements of magic
- theatrical play
- duel training, i.e. fight for life and death
- military training and self-defense, on line with karate.

not fit to this complex pattern and separated the phenomenon, based on diverse reports of travelers with their accidental local observations. The different parts were split up into different chapters and thus made invisible for connected study and observation. Analysis, thus, resulted in the opposite of understanding. It made a scholarly in-depth study of Indonesian martial art and of its particular character impossible.

In a similar way, the method of anthropological order hampered the study of dance (Nieuwenhuis, 1916). As pencak silat cannot be placed into the categories of either weapon dance or dance without weapon, nor of either religious or military dance, it could not find a place in the net of classification, which Western thinking conceived as universal.

The older ethnology of play tried, however, a further step than just collecting and classifying. On their basis, interpretations were tried on a higher level, bringing order into the space and time of cultures. Concerning space, one asked especially what was the “influence” of different cultures on each other, how games or gaming devices had “wandered” geographically, and how they were related to a certain Kulturkreis. This should result in a cultural geographical or geopolitical order, a spatial order. Concerning an order in time, i.e. in a historical perspective, one believed that one could differentiate either on an upward line between “primitive” and “high developed” forms – of for instance spin-tops. Or one constructed a downward line between “conservation” of “original” forms and “degeneration” – of for instance war games degenerated to weapon dance. This was based on assumptions about certain meanings – later called “functions” – which games should have in social life. Such a meaning, one saw especially in a field, which was defined as “religious” or “cultic” in contrast to the “profane”, for instance the “military”. To the cultic-religious field, one ascribed: oracle or blood sacrifice, magic of sympathy or defense, initiation rituals, and funeral ceremonies. Behind this, an evolutionistic valuation became visible: While Europeans thanks to their high civilization and the progress of their rationality practiced profane, pedagogical, and commercial games, the “primitives” were “still” dependent of their cultic way of thinking (Hagen, 1908; Moszkowski, 1909, Auf neuen Wegen).

As this type of study understood itself as objective, without reflecting or relativizing its own preconditions, this earlier ethnology can be labelled as positivistic. It took its starting point from positively existing artefacts or “facts” in human life, which should by scientific analysis be classified and interpreted along universally valid criteria. In analogy to historiographical positivism, which according to Leopold von Ranke wanted to find out, “how it really had been”, anthropology should describe play “how it really was”. The older positivism was, thus, unable to recognize that
the scientific reproduction of a certain “reality” was influenced by the studying subject, here the foreign Western cultural other – who of course saw Indonesian “boxing” in the perspective of European sport boxing.

The positivistic, classifying, and evolutionistic tendency did not unfold in an empty space of free floating, pure science. It was part of the process of colonial expansion. It was an intellectual superstructure above colonial practice. In sport, this became explicit when American anthropologists and sport managers joined together in 1904 in arranging so-called “Anthropology Days”. In connection with the World’s Fair and the Olympics in St. Louis, they sent African Pygmies, Argentine Patagonians, Japanese Ainu, American “Red Indians”, Philippinos, and Eskimos on the race track. This was regarded as an experiment, by which the sportive-physical achievement of those “primitives” should be tested. And they obtained the result, they had expected. In comparison with the Olympic athletes, the “savages” showed to be low performers, thus disproving the romantic assumption of the “natural athlete”. Sport was used as a laboratory to test and confirm the anthropological hypothesis of white supremacy (Brownell, 2008).

A main work in the field of sports history was later-on Carl Diem’s (1971) two-volumes collection, bridging from older positivism to new evolutionism. By its terminology, it made the connection between sportive practice and colonial domination visible:

The states of Middle and South America have conserved very little of the Indians’ physical activity... The modern development of sport has around the end of the 19th century joined to the so far rather primitive life. Today, sport thrives, though it is still restricted to the upper and middle layers of society... The islands separating the Mexican Gulf and the Caribbean from the Atlantic, are likewise – thanks to the British protectors – entered into the world of sport... The attraction of modern sport has furthermore seized the Pacific islands... Even on Tahiti, football game has entered... Finally, also Africa is in an explosive sportive expansion, where earlier only Egypt and the South African Union had joined, being by their ideas connected with European culture... The complete conquest of Africa for sport is therefore a process, which will soon come to perfection (Diem, 1971, vol. 2, 1093, 1094, 1096, 1104).
Here, not only the historian of sport was talking, but also the Olympic sport manager (who organized the 1936 Olympics in Berlin) – and the Western ideologist of evolution. The “conquest for sport”, which Diem saw, went hand in hand with the colonial conquest of “the primitives”.

**Studying from the inner and from below – cultural relativism**

Since the start of the 20th century, and more explicitly since the 1920s, new ways of knowledge spread in contrast to the older ethnological literature. Researchers discovered that there did not exist any absolutely or universally valid definitions and classifications for cultural phenomena – and thus neither for play and game. The attempt to construct these could not deliver meaningful insight into the social connection, which play was a part of. Every cultural phenomenon and thus also every play with its patterns of participation, its techniques, rules, and values was relative in relation to its cultural background. A universal measure – and be it only as technique of description – was not meaningful to construct.

In Germany, the refrain from older positivism showed only scattered in the field of ethnology. The Africa researcher Leo Frobenius, however, developed since around 1905 a remarkable “cultural morphology”, which implied a new recognition of African cultures and later got remarkable impact on the Négritude of Aimé Césaire and Léopold Senghor, and thus on African decolonization (Senghor, 1949 and 1968; Steins, 1979). Broader significance for anthropological school-building obtained the British so-called functionalism of Bronislaw Malinowski and A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, and the – more radical – American cultural relativism with Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, Alfred L. Kroeber, Edward Sapir, and Melville J. Herskovits (Leclerc, 1973, 38 ff; Rudolph, 1968). It was not accidental that some of these relativists had a Jewish background, thus knowing inter-culturality from their own life.

Now, anthropologists took distance to the natural-scientific tradition of cranial measurement. And in the cultural field, sharp criticism was launched against the older collecting anthropology: Classical anthropologists were desk-top scholars who based their knowledge on the reports of travelers and missionaries. They could present isolated details of habits like divination from intestines or marriage rituals, but could not understand these in the context of the characteristic cultural configurations. They combined details from very different cultures and constructed them into a sort of Frankenstein’s monster, where the right eye was from Fiji, the left from Europe, one leg from Terra del Fuego and the other from Tahiti (Benedict, 1934/1960, 41-42).
The new approach had two important consequences: First, by its cultural monographic “inner perspective” it paid attention to the life of the researcher among the “others”. On this basis, field research arose as a complex, self-reflected way of observation bottom-up. Second, it implied a critical distance towards one’s own, Western life form. It thus opened up for anti-colonial and cultural-critical perspectives. Fictional narratives using a travelling African (Paasche, 1912/13) or a Pacific chieftain (Scheurmann, 1920) as mouthpiece for a critique of Western life became now – and again in the 1970s – bestsellers.

In play research, the focus turned towards cultural monographic description and inter-cultural comparison. From a cultural relativistic perspective, for instance the foot race of Pueblo Indians became visible as a contrast to European racing sport (Benedict, 1934/1960, 71, 78-80, 93, 99; Goldman, 1937/1961, 338). The foot race of Pueblo Indians was a highly valued event for the whole community and prepared by consultation of oracles. A special status had those elderly “who knew” about the race. For the winner of the race, however, the victory did not bring special fame. A purely ritual race over four miles was arranged under the supervision of rain priests, in this case without any competition and without determining a winner. More elements of competition could be found in a race, which however had religious significance, too. It went over 25 miles, where groups of 3-6 runners pushed a stick on their way. Here one made bettings, and both individual winners and winning teams were noted. But those who had won more than one time, would be excluded from participating in future races.

This contrasted in a striking way with the behavioral patterns of the Indians from the North American Plains. These made many activities into a competition about “points”, even war. One could gain so-called “coup” by stealing a horse, touching an enemy, killing and scalping an enemy. The success was celebrated in large style with assignment of dignity in form of feathers. The lack of “sporting spirit” among the Pueblo Indians, in contrast, was related to a social pattern, which was based on harmonic ceremonial and collectivist relations, on moderation, peacefulness, and rituality.

Classical for the new cultural anthropology became also the observations, which Margaret Mead made together with her husband Gregory Bateson in Bali. They filmed in the 1930s and commented the Kris dance at a Balinese temple, where a dragon and groups of Kris dancers fought against a witch. To the accompaniment of gamelan music, a complex pattern of choreographic dance, finger dance, and fight, of males, females, and children, a theatre of pregnancy, birth, and death was unfolded (Bateson & Mead, 1937/1939; Jacknis, 1988).
In the cultural relativistic tradition, one has also studied games among the Papua of New Guinee. Among the Dani people, it was observed how play was arranged primarily around two complexes: to build and form, and to make war. For the first, children built villages of grass, branches or seeds, houses of savanna grass, and miniature gardens of grass. They wove small shirts over the hand, formed figures of sand and produced by threads certain patterns or whole histories. In connection with ritual warfare, which had strong influence on society in the whole, children threw with grass spears, often against rings thrown up in the air (“Kill the ring”). Or they built small armies of pea-like seeds, letting them fight against each other, and “killing” inimical warriors by pencil-like spears. It was striking that play of Dani children was far from competitive, and they were not aiming at finding a winner. If they threw small javelins after fruits or seeds, they would not count points, and they would stop the game before one side had won. Similar patterns could be found in the life of the adults. There were no measures for achievements and no titles, which men could strive for. Cleverness and cooperation were more important than competition (Gardner/Heider, 1969, 65. Similar observations from a positivist perspective, Fischer, 1961: 143).

This relation to competition can also be seen as background for the way how another Papua people, Gahuku-Gama, adopted football play. They did not play for winning, but tried – in matches that might extend over several days – to attain an equal number of goals for both teams. This fit to the pattern of the traditional war between the villages, where one neither determined a final victor nor exterminated the enemy (Read, 1959, 429). Football could even be played as a substitute for blood revenge, which was prohibited by the government: One kicked the adversary under the shinbone so that it broke (Mendner, 1956, 133).

Observations of this type challenged the categories and epistemological interests of earlier ethnology. A worldwide classification under concepts like “football” or “foot race” became meaningless. Universalism was – seen in a scholarly perspective – outdated. Every game followed its own social patterns and was, thus, culturally relative.

Differences of play culture could neither any longer be arranged on a one-dimensional time scale from “lower” to “higher”. There was no longer any “progress” from the races of Pueblo Indians to sport races as organized over 100, 200, 400, 800, 1.500, 5.000 or 10.000 meters in the framework of The International Athletic Federation. But there was structural difference.

Finally, this way of study was no longer suitable for colonial repression. The other peoples’ cultures of play would no longer evoke the expectation to “conquer them for sport”.
Can Play be Defined?

Colonial and Relativistic Approaches to the Cultural Anthropology of Play

It seems not to be accidental that the new relativistic way of knowledge developed synchronously with a transformation in practical relations between Western and “other” body cultures – as well as a new balance between Western colonial powers and the rest of the world. From 1906, mediated by Japanese marine soldiers in Kiel, Japanese martial art jiu jitsu came to Germany (Cherpillod, 1906; Hancock, 1905; Hancock/Higashi, 1906; Rahn, 1932; Takuji, 1906). Handbooks suggested that this reception was connected with the Japanese victory in the Russian Japanese war from 1905, when for first time in modernity a “white” power was defeated by a “colored” nation. Where did this Japanese superiority come from? – people asked. Japanese martial art suddenly obtained a new fascination.

However, this connection should not be overstressed. At the same time, changes marked also the field of dance. Jazz dance with its African origin came from North America, starting with cakewalk around 1900. It brought new rhythms and movement techniques to Europe. Afro American dances came at the same time from Latin America, too, and the year 1912 was in France called “Tango year” (Günther, 1980, 72-84; Günther & Schäfer, 1975, 222 ff). This was also the time of the Chinese “Boxer rising”, which was followed by attempts of anti-colonial revolutions in China, India, Indonesia and the Arab world. At the bodies of Europeans, it became visible that the European colonial domination was in crisis.

Defining and classifying – neo-positivistic approach...

The change was, however, not comprehensive, neither in play research, i.e. in the mind, nor in the practice of body, sport, and dance. The “shaking techniques” of the Afro American dances “on place” (Platztanz) were polished and integrated into the onward moving Western couple dances. Tango became the starting point for the new Western sports dance, organized in competitive tournaments and evaluated by points. The spiritual Japanese martial art found its place in Western sport clubs, in police and even among Nazi storm-troupers. Its form was assimilated to boxing with referee and quantified results. The “other” was reinteegrated into one’s own.

Parallel to this practice, ethnology returned since the 1930s to neo-positivistic and neo-evolutionistic positions. Instead of “progress”, one now talked about “development” and “social change”, and instead of “primitive” or “wild” people, one saw “underdeveloped” people all over the world. The patterns of lineal measurement remained or were reestablished.
Ethnology of play expressed this tendency, too. The project of universal classification was renewed, for instance, in the framework of the American so-called *Human Relations Area Files* from 1937. It should deliver a global pattern to place all cultural phenomena. One expected a certain practical utility from this ethnographic description for the encounter between the US and foreign people. And indeed, soon this instrument could enter into American warfare under WWII, especially in Southeast Asia. This research was connected with powerful financial support, which helped the involved researchers to high public attention. The cultural inventory was “quite pragmatically” based on “common sense” categories and explicitly aimed at a “universal cultural pattern” useful for collecting, organizing, classifying, and scientifically interpreting ethnocentric material (Murdock, 1938/1950, XIX-XX. See also Harms, 1969, 240-56).

In the framework of this system, playful activities (games, gambling, athletic sport) were laid under the over-category “recreation”, together with keywords like conversation, humor, hobbies, leisure and holidays, vacation and facilities for recreation. The basis for this order was a narrow Western pattern from industrial culture. It was marked by the split between production and reproduction, between work and leisure, and had by no means any universal character.

Again, Western common sense was universally extended in an ethnocentric way. After the gains of cultural relativism, this should have been logically impossible. That it happened nevertheless, is eye-opening both for epistemology and history of knowledge. It shows that the change of ethnology – as well as of other sciences – does not proceed after an inner logic, but in connection with social processes. And as a mirror of societal transformation, it showed a step from older colonial thinking, which was questioned in its fundamentals by the crisis after 1900, to neo-colonial imaginations of order.

Attempts of universal inventory and classification demanded among others comprehensive definitions. The diversity of play, games, and cultures should be put into an overall matrix of terminology. Consequently, one asked for the “correct” concept of play, in order to keep “wrong” concepts outside. The problem of this approach can be shown by an attempt to link the definitions of different (European) researchers to material from the (Western) ethnography of play in Samoa. The aim was to develop an independent, comprehensive definition of play that could become worldwide standard.

Play was here understood as an “as-if activity”, which was determined by the following characteristics: that
(1.) in case of children’s imitation of adults’ activities, the given information should be clear that the children in no way really could execute these activities;

(2.) in case of fight activities, the given instruments and rules should make sure that unambiguous decisions about victory or defeat should be possible, and that an exterminating defeat for one or several participants was inhibited, or that the chance of rematch to any time potentially was assured;

(3.) in case of betting (games of chance), it should by the relation between the betters’ actual capital and their stake be clear that the real aim was not to obtain wealth, but the activity of betting itself;

(4.) in case of activities that have the general aim of overcoming difficulties, the given information, especially about the cultural context, in which the action takes place, should make clear that the actors aim at the action itself and not at a utility value for themselves or for the society, which makes up the framework of the activity.

Furthermore, there are the following restrictions: It must be clear that the actors of the activities

(5.) by these activities do not express feelings or put insight into sensual form;

(6.) that all who are involved with the activity follow an as-if behavior;

(7.) that they by their activity do not only give a sign;

(8.) that they do not do these activities, because they are immediately – by their cause or final aim – dependent of other activities, which a) cannot be classified by the concept of “play”, and b) that they do not exclusively summon to do an action, which can be classified as “play” (Harms, 1969, 127-28).

A central problem of this definition lies in its starting point – in the decision whether a given activity should be an as-if activity. The imagination of play as as-if activity was established by Johan Huizinga, who presented a phenomenological theory of play in his classical work *Homo ludens* in 1938. Play as as-if activity is, indeed, convincing for the case of many parts of children’s play, for instance the doll (as-if baby) and the play-toy gun. And yet, the most widespread play-thing, the ball, does not fit to this definition. Players do not play the ball as if it was something else. Single anthropologists have tried interpretations of the ball as symbol of the sun or as the head of a
killed enemy, but these artificial attempts told more about the daydream of Western scholarly reconstruction than about people’s play. Players play the ball as ball. Ballgame is not as-if play. Furthermore, the category of as-if play cannot just be transferred from a sensitive historical phenomenology (as applied by Huizinga) to the positivism of measurement, which aims at defining exactly and at constructing sharp limits between objectified cultural phenomena. If one tries this, one has to add a lot of exceptions distinguishing play from art, deception, threat, rituals, ceremonies, and cult (as in points 5-8 in the definition quoted above) so that the definition becomes as monstrous and absurd as in the quoted example. (For a critique see also Schwartz, 1992: 59-62).

It may be assumed that the differentiation between “real” activity and as-if activity is connected with the typical modern Western dualism between work and play, between working time and leisure time, between production and reproduction, between object and subject, between the profane and the religious. Dualism of this sort is already problematic when applied to European sport – but much more if one wants to understand non-Western play and game. Whether activities express or “do not express feelings or put insight into sensual form” or whether players “by their activity do not only give a sign”, can only be decided – if ever one can – in the context of specific, culturally relative patterns of action and thought and not at all by an “objective” observer from outside. And which deeper purpose should this definition serve? The universal definition showed absurd consequences, where it would exclude gladiator games from ancient Rome, which involved the death of animals and human beings – but it would include the ritual war between Papua villages, which often remained free of casualty and in any case did not aim at “exterminating defeat” of the antagonist.

While cultural relativism had the view that “a fact never speaks for itself” (Kluckhohn, C. 1946, quoted by Rudolph, 1968, 91), thus, a new positivism unfolded. It was new insofar as it historically followed in a period when the innocence of colonial ethnology had been lost. Surely, one cannot ascribe to the younger positivism the older naïve belief in objective perception of mere facts. But the assumption survived and was regenerated that positive facts could give answers to questions resulting from given definitions and classifications – facts that could be tested experimentally and were independent of their cultural context and the way, in which the problem was designed.

Starting from this basis, the ethnology of play began to search for the “fundamental elements of play” again (Fischer, 1961; for sport: Allardt, 1967). For instance, a universal model of correlation could be constructed by distinction between mock fight (Scheinkampf), weapon dance,
fencing game, “real duel”, brawl and martial art (*Kampfspiel*) (Volprecht, 1963). Or one would give a universal definition of sport:

Spontaneous motor activity with playful motivation, which aims at measurable achievement and competition regulated by rules … I regard as universal way of behavior between human beings which can be found among natural people (*Naturvölker*) as well as in early high civilizations (*Hochkulturen*) or in the Greek Roman world (Weiler 1981: XI).

Culturally specific characteristics as measurement, competition, and “achievement”, which cultural-relativistic ethnology had critically discussed through longer time, were now again declared to be universal. Side by side with sportive “fundamental forms for human movement … over all the world”, even the specific gymnastics of *Turnen*, created in Germany at the beginning of the 19th century, appeared as universal form:

*Turnen/gymnastics*: About this form of sport we find only few remarks in literature. About the Eskimo, swing exercises at a device similar to horizontal bar (*Reck*) have been reported. About gymnastic at the horizontal bar, we also hear from Micronesia. A large series of exercises on the ground (*Bodenübungen*) are reported by Kauffmann from Assam, and in pre-Hispanic Mexico different forms of gymnastics are said to have been practiced (Ulf, 1981, 32).

“Frankenstein’s monster” was thus rising again in ethnology – running like a Tarahumara, jumping like a Watussi, and climbing like an Easter Islander – just as if the critique of Ruth Benedict from 1934 and the self-critical reflections of cultural relativism never had existed. Zoology and the new science of ethology, i.e. biological behaviorist studies, were used to illustrate the universality of sport. In soccer, one saw “the fundamental similarities of the human species”. And “where the naked ape becomes wild and superstitious”, one meets in the stadium “chase like in primeval times” (Morris, 1981, reported in: *Die Welt*, 2.1.82 and *Die Zeit, Zeitmagazin*, 2.10.81).
… New evolutionism and policies of “development”

Also in this phase, the assumed universality and – more or less – equality sign between sport and play was only one side of the method. The other side was the hierarchical superorder or subordination in the historical dimension, i.e. the temporal order of cultural phenomena between “primitive” and “higher” forms:

A rising level of culture seems to be connected with an increasingly more complex organization of sport (of the different sport disciplines as well as the “sport festivities”). This is evident in the absence of complex forms of play among people who in the scheme of evolution stand at the beginning (for instance Pygmies and Australian Aboriginals), while higher developed people (as for instance Polynesians and the high cultures of Old America) know more differentiated and more complex forms, which can be regarded as sport (Ulf, 1981, 51).

Anthropology, thus, reestablished the older pattern of “progress” and revived the myth that Australians and Pygmies presented the past time of the Westerners, while these represented the future for all people in the world. Otherness was in a neo-colonial way subordinated on the time scale again.

Assumptions like these could lean onto voluminous studies undertaken by play researchers around Brian Sutton-Smith (Avedon & Sutton-Smith, 1971; Herron & Sutton-Smith, 1971; Sutton-Smith 1972 and 1973). Here, one worked with a definition of games as:

competitive activities which always terminate in an outcome; namely winning, drawing or losing (Sutton-Smith, 1972, 331).

This definition of play and game was very narrow in relation to, for instance, cultures which avoid competition. And it did not fit to the understanding of play as giving priority to the process instead of the result (see below). But the definition was useful for a certain strategy of research: dividing play and game under the aspect of their outcome, modelled after the result orientation in the world of sport. On the basis of this design, three classes of games could be discerned:

(1.) games of physical skill
(2.) games of chance
(3.) games of strategy.

Motor play and game was decided by power and/or skill, for instance in marathon race. Games of chance were decided by guess or an external artefact, like dices or roulette. Games of strategy were decided by rational choice as in checkers and chess. On this basis, mixed forms have developed such as football (placed somewhere between motor skill and strategic game) or poker (between game of chance and game of strategy).

According to these forms of play and game, one tried to differentiate between different forms of culture (Avedon & Sutton-Smith, 1971, 429 ff and Sutton-Smith 1972, 331-358). At the beginning of the scale, there are cultures without any games falling under the given definition, among these the Yir Yuront of Australia. Some other cultures only knew motoric games, or only games of chance, or only games of strategy. Finally, there existed cultures practicing all three types. This order of succession was matching a scale between a stage of "low technology with simple social organization" and a “high developed technology with social complexity”. The latter stage was represented by all “classical cultures” as well as modern industrial civilization.

Another universal classification – though of less evolutionist character – was since the 1980s proposed by the French educationalist Pierre Parlebas (1999), whose work became influential in the Romance countries. Based on mathematical logic, sociometry, linguistics and semiotics and according to the theory of systems, Parlebas tried to formalize play and especially sport. This resulted in the classification of play under three aspects:

(1.) presence of a partner
(2.) presence of an adversary
(3.) uncertainty about the environment.

As each criterion can be combined with another one, eight classes were differentiated. The game of soccer for instance combines 1 and 2 (partner and adversary), but lacks 3 (uncertainty of environment). Large games in nature may combine all three elements. By differentiating between “psycho-motor” play, which one plays alone (psychomotricité), and “socio-motor” play together
with others (sociomotricité), the system of a comprehensive “movement praxeology” (praxéologie motrice) was established.

More streamlined towards modern sport in industrial society were some inter-cultural comparisons, which took the achievement in Olympic Games as starting point. Ranking lists of medals were correlated with the religion of the countries, which the athletes represented (Lüschen, 1962). Or Olympic success was correlated with societal systems of values – like ascetism or mysticism, socialism or fascism – in the athletes’ home countries (Seppänen, 1972). Other studies chose socio-economic data as for instance average income per citizen, urbanization, calorie value of nutrition, and alphabetization as measure for comparison (Novikov & Maksimenko, 1972). The result was normally the same: The higher a country was placed on the Olympic ranking list, the higher was its “developmental stage”, or the more “appropriate to time” was its societal system of values. However, Indonesia, one of the largest countries in the world, can look back to several old “high cultures”, but was lacking success in the Olympic Games – what could there be concluded from this measurement concerning the rich world of play and game in the Malayan archipelago?

The neo-positivistic approaches with their universalistic and neo-evolutionist agenda did not unfold in a space of pure academic analysis. Just as in earlier colonial times and as in the case of new relativism, knowledge production was connected with changing social practice. This happened under the dominance of so-called development policies and development aid. Under the circumstances of Cold War and bloc competition directed towards the Third World, this policy developed in the field of sport, too (Eppler et al., 1972; Naumann, 1972, Africa, and 1972, Führer; Kirsch, 1976; Tetsch, 1978). It became rationalized by functionalist argumentations assuming the universal “functional” advantages of sport for societies all over the world (Digel & Fornoff, 1989; critical discussion in Eichberg, 2010, 239-240). Presenting achievement sport as the historical top of the world history of play, Western sport should be exported to all cultures. In this project, interests of technocratic state competition coincided with humanitarian aspects and social-emancipatory perspectives. Conservative advocates of Western capitalism (Schoeck, 1971) and spokesmen of Eastern European state monopolism (Wohl, 1975) united in praising the universality and progressivity of the achievement principle as expressed in the Olympic slogan “Citius, altius, forties”.

The colonial “conquest by sport”, thus, was renewed. It did not only “fill out the blank areas on the world map of play”, but also transformed or destroyed indigenous cultures of play, typically replacing them by soccer. During the 1970s, Western sport export evoked some critique, which

**Other games, other configurations – phenomenology and comparison**

The critique of sport export reflected a further change in the history of anthropology beginning in the 1960/70s (Brownell, 2006). New approaches to analyze the otherness in play and games had appeared. Two studies – about Mexican bullfight and about Balinese cockfight – became groundbreaking and a sort of classics.

A study from 1967 (Zurcher & Meadow 1970) compared Mexican bullfight with American baseball, analyzing both of them in relation to the respective patterns of family life and societal values. The bull as symbol of the father, the leader of corrida as authoritarian figure and certain sexual allusions of the fight mirrored the Mexican family with its authoritarian, patriarchal structure, the violence and promiscuity of the father, the passive role of the mother and the avoiding maneuvers of the sons. The aggression of the matador could be understood as a symbol for something, which just was avoided in family life. And both – family and bullfight – were related to Mexican society as a whole with its authoritarian and clerical structure. Historical change underlined these connections: Since the 1930s, the killing of the bull and direct aggression were reduced in favor of the work with muleta. (For a similar analysis of Spanish bullfight see Falk, 1962/63, and 1976, 151-199). The change of bullfight mirrored a process of social pacification in connection with the urbanization of the country. – In comparison, one saw relations of different type between baseball and American family structure. Norms of equality and fellowship between child and parents, which could cause objectless frustration, as well as the abstract, bureaucratic character of American society in general, corresponded to the way how baseball avoids open aggression and sexual allusions, to the abstract rules of the game, its discipline, rituals and grave movement style. Since the early 20th century, elements of spontaneity, aggression and participation of the spectators had been reduced step by step. (For a complementary interpretation of baseball see Guttmann, 1978, chap. 4).

By this comparison and by seeing play in connection with social patterns of everyday life – family, sexuality, manners – a new perspective was opened making attempts of universal definition or classification meaningless. Bullfight “as such”, baseball “as such”, competition and striving for
achievement as human universal – all this was left behind. The insight of cultural relativism reappeared that play was not a fact that cross-culturally “spoke for itself”, but that it was culturally imbedded. Hand in hand with this, the evolutionist idea of steps on the universal way of “progress” and “development” was questioned again. However, the new descriptions and comparisons paid more attention to historical changes than the studies of classical cultural relativism had done. They showed divergent shifts, which were connected with cultural change.

In another way, a study on Balinese cockfight (Geertz, 1972) deepened the view. This animal game is connected with gambling, but the betting does not just aim at individual gain of money – it is about status and prestige. Social rivalry between groups plays an important role. Furthermore, the betting male identifies with the cock (as symbol of the penis?), but is at the same time fascinated by the power of darkness – a highly ambivalent relation. And the social time in Balinese cockfight with its atomistic alternations is deeply different from the curve of suspension, which characterizes the Western striving of “progress”. On the basis of very personal field observations, play thus was read as text about human life – deep play.

When paying attention to social patterns and to comparison, other types of Indonesian play and sport appeared in a new light, too (Eichberg 1977, 1978 and 1981, Sozialverhalten:145-71). In play and game of Minangkabau, a people of West Sumatra, a certain dualism of movement patterns was observed. In the theatre- and dance-like martial art pencak silat, in dances and in the ball game sepak raga, played with a rotang ball in a circle, a pattern of social relations appeared, which was not characterized by records, victory or loss like in Western sport. In contrast, the result was important in hazard games and in animal fight, like cockfight. Here, however, the result was not primarily produced by human capability, force or skill. Under the influence of colonization, Western sport entered the picture and made up a third pattern mostly unfolded in ball games, which followed a ping pong configuration: badminton, volleyball, table-tennis and a type of football, which seemed not to be especially result-oriented. These sport activities put neither emphasis on achievement data like centimeter, gram or second nor on either-or decisions as knock out in boxing, but more on interpersonal relations measured by points, on relative performance. - The three patterns of Minangkabau play could be compared with three social spheres in the life of Minangkabau. The economy of the people had traditionally been based on wet-rice agriculture, which is far from any competition directed against each other. The fields were owned by the females representing matri-focal clans. In contrast, contest and competition marked the field of commerce. By rigid rules of matri-local housing, young males were traditionally forced to temporal
emigration where they made their life with commercial activity. As a third, post-colonial structures in administration and bureaucracy developed, involving new forms of clientelism and corruption and imbedding older patterns of relation-building into the imported institutions. Again, play pointed towards social patterns, social relations and their change.

Compared with European forms of fighting art, the movement pattern of pencak silat with its dance-like techniques of avoidance contrasts the confrontational configurations of Western boxing and fencing, force against force. The latter can be compared with the dual confrontations in European juridical tradition and is repeated in modern conflict of political parties, while Indonesian adat, traditional jurisdiction, is marked by ritual and relational patterns (Eichberg, 1983, Force; see also Tanner, 1969).

Later studies described in detail how Indonesian games expressed spatial, temporal, and social-relational patterns by playful practice (Jost & Smidt, 1990). In the spin-top games of Mentawai, one could see patterns, which characterized relations in an acephalous society, i.e. social life without chiefs and state-like power (Eichberg 1983, Schönheit, and 1989). Cultural relations and especially gender aspects became also visible in field studies of rural pencak silat when a Western female entered into the world of this martial art (Cordes, 1992). The “megalithic” stone jump in villages of Nias was seen in connection with local culture and cultural conflict (Marschall, 1976).

Not only colonial domination, but also decolonization could be found in play. *Trobriand Cricket* became what some regard as the most fascinating sport film ever. Melanesian villagers of Trobriand had transformed the English colonial game of cricket into a festivity of play and dance, where the originally highly competitive game was integrated into an event of exchanging gifts, playing and dancing in joyful rhythms, and applying shamanic magic (Leach, 1976 and 1988). The Trobriand practice contrasted the win-lose code of Western sport, its Happy End of final victory, and the sportive-progressive development of athletic training. – Another ground-breaking anthropological film was *Ten canoes*, the first movie ever entirely filmed in an Australian indigenous language, in Yolngu Matha. The story of the movie was about the life of old and young Aboriginals, males and females, family and jealousy, revenge and death in a society before Western contact. In the center of the narrative was ritual war where the offender from the one tribe together with his companion danced playfully, while spears were thrown by the other tribe. The war was according to tribal law “decided” and justice was done at the moment that one of the two is dancers was hit by a spear (Heer, 2006).
Later, further anthropological monographies described the Afghan equestrian game of Buzkashi as a field of power and violence (Azoy, 1982/2003). Chinese sport was seen as moving between tradition, communist state policy, and popular culture (Brownell, 1995). Kenyan running appeared in the context of the runners’ everyday culture and ethnic diversity (Bale & Sang, 1996).

The coexistence of Libyan sport, revolutionary gymnastics, and traditional Bedouin games casted light on societal tensions under the Gadhafi system (Eichberg & El Mansouri, 1998). And Rwandan traditional high jump gusimbuka at the court of Tutsi kings was now understood as a ritual, as a non-sportive jumping display – which Western scholars through generations fundamentally had misunderstood as exotic Olympic sport (Bale, 2002).

**Play research between new anthropological theory and new bodily practices**

The new approaches to the cultural anthropology of play developed hand in hand with a new and broader interest in the ethnology of play and game more generally, though many subsequent studies rather followed the path of neo-positivist methods (Lüschen, 1970). An *Association for the Anthropological Study of Play* was formed (first proceedings: Lancy & Tindall, 1976; see also International Journal of Play, 2012). And more and more researchers from outside Europe took the word, among those Ali Mazrui about African boxing and warrior culture, and Kohsuke Sasajima about Japanese and Chinese sport history. Collected volumes of Asian researchers about sport and games in Asia and the Pacific Area were published in the 1970s (Simri, 1972, 1974/75 and 1976/77). Later followed the half-fictional narrative of Bruce Chatwin (1988) about nomadism, song culture, and land mythology of the Australian Aboriginals. It widened the perspective towards the human being as a wandering being, and to the contradiction between campfire and pyramid. And Barbara Ehrenreich (2007) took anthropological cases of playful dance, people’s carnival, and ecstatic festivity as starting point for a cultural analysis of collective joy. Also this questioned the self-understanding of Western normality.

The new anthropology of play developed in larger frameworks of anthropological theory, which developed since the 1960s. The innovation got inspirations from among others the “structuralist” observations of Claude Levi-Strauss in Indio America, Benjamin Lee Whorf’s (1956) linguistic studies about American Native languages, and the French surrealist Michel Leiris’ research in Africa. A new ethnology took – once more again – the “other” culture seriously without trying to integrate it as “early stage” into “our own” history. At the same time, the spirit of the 1970s tended to a cultural critical approach setting colonialism versus decolonization, Western
rationality versus magic, and the stop watch versus the drum (Duerr, 1976 ff, and 1978; Grevenmeyer 1981; Müller, 1976).

In the political field, anthropological research discovered the so-called acephalous or segmentary societies – and through them the relativity of the “state”, as it had been overexposed by “progressive” historiography. This discovery implied, thus, a dimension of self-criticism, casting critical light on the state fetishism of Western thinking (Clastres, 1974/76; Sigrist, 1967/79). By listening to Sioux tribal experiences (Deloria 1970/76), a new sociology of the tribal became possible (Maffesoli 1988/96). In the field of economy, Marshall Sahlins (1972) discovered, based on Polynesian studies in Hawaii and Fiji, the “original affluent society”. By looking at the time budget of hunter-gatherers, these peoples’ life did no longer appear as “poor and primitive”, but as – by successful food quest – rich of time for leisure and play. This contrasted the “lack of time” in Western modern life. Other studies rediscovered magic and witchcraft practices in Western cultures, both in European history (Ginzburg 1966/83) and – sometimes following the traces of the Tunisian ethnologist Jeanne Favret-Saada (1977/81) – in nowadays practice (Hauschild 2002). Furthermore, ethno-psychoanalysis, as developed by Mario Erdheim and others, used non-European experiences for a deeper understanding of current psychic processes in Western societies.

Anthropological study, thus, opened for critical self-analysis of the researcher’s own culture. Some of these studies could, surely, have undertones of a neoromantic dualism between alienated and non-alienated life. They could sometimes also – again – produce a picture of (to say it with Ruth Benedict’s word) a Frankenstein’s monster, this time in an alternative, romantic way combining Native American shamanism, Hindu gods and African drumming. In anthropology, thus, there appeared not just two, but at least three patterns of underlying interpretation:

- a universal and evolutionist pattern, where research continued to talk about functions, definition, measurement, and development
- relativist and comparative patterns, based on phenomenological field study
- a pattern of dualist cultural criticism.

The new anthropological way of analysis developed – again – hand in hand with contemporary changes in bodily practice. The growing interest in witchcraft signaled discomfort at Western chemo- and apparatus medicine and accompanied attempts, with inspirations from shaman
techniques, to develop alternative and complementary ways of healing (Curare, 1978 ff.; Petersen 2007). Meditative body techniques of non-European origin spread in Western metropolis since the 1960s – yoga and tai chi chuan, tantra and Zen exercises (Schmidt, 1967). Eastern martial arts like karate, taekwondo, and aikido were not only practiced broadly, but opened a new commercial market, and Indonesian pencak silat became pencak international. Brazilian dance-like and playful martial art capoeira expanded worldwide, too. In youth culture, Afro American dancing styles became influential (Günther, 1980; Nitschke & Wieland, 1981), and from Tanzania, Sukuma dancing and drumming came to Denmark. Gol, the ancient ritual of land diving or tower jump, revived by the Bunlap people on Pentecost Island (Vanuatu), gave birth to Western bungy jump (Muller, 1970).

Ethno style, which spread as a trendy fashion with hippie culture during the 1960/70s, was thus more than just a fashion on the surface. Play, games and body cultural practices, which still were colonized or as “forerunners” of modern sport should be condemned to disappear, showed expansive dynamics. And yet, the reception happened – again – as a selective integration into Western life.

**Discontinuities in anthropology of play**

From hundred years’ history of anthropology of play, as described here from late 19th century to late 20th century, questions arise about earlier and later developments and changes. However, the present study is not aiming at a complete survey. What matters here, are some analytical lessons about what it means to describe and analyze – and to “define”? – play in different cultures.

(1.) One important point is that any talk about the “current status of research” becomes questionable. What we find instead, are *changes of knowledge*, which are connected with changes in society and in concrete cultural practice. Humanistic knowledge is never static “status”, and its “results” are steps on a way – or better: flow in a stream – of change.

(2.) These changes of understanding have not the simple form of accumulation. The changes of research do not just step by step make our knowledge richer and better. Instead, we find *discontinuity*. Knowledge changes in certain waves. There is no one-way street, no linear “progressive” discovery in humanities, but patterns of knowledge can also disappear. Concretely, there followed after each other in the anthropology of play:
- positivistic and evolutionistic approaches connected with colonial thinking (from late 19th century)
- approaches of cultural relativism
  (from 1900/1920)
- neo-positivistic approaches connected with functionalist and developmental thinking
  (from 1930/50)
- new approaches and comparison of relativistic and cultural-critical character
  (from 1960/70).

(3.) During the modern history of anthropology, there showed – again and again – two dominant patterns conflicting. There was contradiction. Dialectical oppositions can be seen on different levels:

- positivist and evolutionist approaches versus a view of cultural relativity
- universalist assumptions versus case study
- definition versus phenomenological description and comparison
- measurement versus field study
- colonization versus recognition of otherness
- top-down perspective versus bottom-up perspective.

These oppositions did not in all cases coincide, yet they were related to each other.

(4.) The changes and contradictions of anthropological knowledge developed in interplay with bodily practice, whether this practice was Western sport export or Western reception of “exotic” games. Knowledge with its change and dialectics was, thus, part of life in its societal and cultural wholeness. Knowing about play and game was related to doing play and game.

(5.) The observation of “other” cultures pointed back from those exotic people far away to ourselves, to the researcher’s own world. Anthropological knowledge was not independent of the researcher as, for instance, part of a colonial system. And the waves of cultural relativism had traits of cultural discomfort and cultural criticism. The other life, which anthropologists met “out there”, was related to the other life, which critical thinking would dream of “here”.
(6.) The terminology of anthropology can therefore not be handled naively as if its terms were independent of the changing patterns of knowledge. Measurement and classification are not “natural”. A further example is “definition” – here the definition of play.

**The multiplicity of defining play**

Definition means: to draw a line (finis) between A and non-A. For the case of play, this has been tried in different ways.

(1.) A classical attempt to define a line between play and non-play was developed on the basis of *communication*. Gregory Bateson (1954) observed monkeys in a zoo and found out that they sent signs to each other denoting that their combat was not real combat, but just play. On the basis of this observation, Bateson developed the theory of meta-communication: “This is play.” The same can, indeed, be found when children challenge each other, asking: Shall we play?! By this meta-communication, a line is drawn between non-play and play.

However, poetry has sometimes challenged this strict delineation. Rainer Werner Fassbinder displayed the problem in his science-fiction movie *Welt am Draht* (World on a Wire, 1973). It tells about a computer expert who discovers that one of his colleagues has disappeared without anybody around having any memory about him. They had worked together on a simulation program creating an artificial play world with “identity units” who lived as human beings, unaware that their world was just a simulacron. The mysterious disappearance of the colleague brings the protagonist finally to the insight, that his own life is a simulation play, too, which is controlled from a higher level. Fassbinder’s movie plot is more than just fictional literature, but induces philosophical reflection on play, simulation, and life.

In the field of theatrical play, the forestage – drawing a line between actors and spectators – has been disputed and practically challenged since the early 20th century. After 1900, new forms of theatre play appeared which, on one hand, integrated spectators into the display and, on the other hand, made people play their own – social, political, national – identity on the stage (Fischer-Lichte, 2005). During the 1960/70s, this challenge was renewed by the genre of happening. The happening left the delineated scene and became something like demonstration or experiment of life. Surely, the line between play and non-play is still dominating, but yet, it cannot be used to describe the reality of theatre play.

Another field where the strict delineation is questioned is working life. In the practice of enterprises, play and games are more and more used for team building and for promoting innovation
and creativity. Role games are a means for employing staff, and play is an important element of the culture of advertisement, all this for the benefit of production and sale (Andersen, 2009).

(2.) One of the most established definitions of play – as discussed above – is play being an *as-if activity*. Since Huizinga (1938/56), this definition has been convincing for large parts of play research and used again and again. Indeed, playing with the doll is playing “as if” there was a baby. And yet, there is the ball, and ballgame is not as-if play.

(3.) Play is everything that human beings do for fun and as a matter of joy – this is the broad definition of play used in the field of education. Again, this definition can be used for understanding many phenomena of play, and yet, it is all too harmless. War games as military training challenge naïve pedagogical optimism (Creveld, 2013). Seen in a broader perspective, “dark play” i.e. dangerous or (self-) destructive play, is part of the real existing world of play and challenges the idealism of play pedagogics (Schechner 1988; Sutton-Smith, 1983).

(4.) Another element of the definition of play was since Huizinga, that it was an *unproductive* activity. This has been set in the formula that play is what gives priority to the *process instead of the result*, while work gives priority to the result instead of the process (Møller, 2010). This describes large parts of the field of play, indeed, and yet, it would exclude professional soccer and other achievement sport from play and game.

**The relativity – or impossibility? – of defining cultural phenomena**

The case of play casts light on more general problems of definition in human studies. The analytical meaning of definition – linguistically derived from Latin *finis* – has its origin in physical and mathematical science, where strict lines are useful to delimit certain concepts or terms in a clear, unambiguous way. That is why, in this case there can be only one definition. In human studies, as we have seen in the case of play, the critical question arises: Why should there be only one definition?

Definition is associated with the scholarly imagination of little boxes, which are characterized by neat limits against each other. However, this picture appears very usually in social studies, too. But can one describe by strict limits, what is historically changing, socio-culturally specific or linguistically different?

The first – definition of what is *historical* – was already doubted by Friedrich Nietzsche in his *Genealogy of morality* (1887): “Only something which has no history can be defined.” Philosophers
have – at least since Ludwig Wittgenstein – agreed that for instance a definition of play is not possible. Indeed, play has always a history. Sport, having historical roots in some non-sport games, displays, and competitions, cannot be defined either. And yet, play and sport are important phenomena among human activities – they deserve phenomenological analysis, but not definition.

The second – definition of what is socio-culturally specific – concerns differences as for instance between male and female. Can we define what “man” is, or what is “woman”? The gender difference is often labelled as “natural”. However, there is no strict line given by nature. The modern sport system tried to construct a rigid line when separating male sport from female sport competitions. This social construction produced the need of gender testing, which started in 1966 – first as visual inspection, than as gynecological examination, and finally as high-tech chromosomal analysis. But science could not help, and there appeared too many cases of “third” gender questioning the clear line between male and female causing both analytical and moral problems of this finis. The governing organizations IAFF and IOC capitulated and formally gave up their attempts around 1999/2000. And yet, though the male and the female are not little boxes, they make fundamental difference in human life. The same is true for cultural diversity, as described by ethnology.

And the third, definition of what is expressed by and different in language: Phenomena of human life are in scholarly discourse always mediated through language. And language means always languages in plural. One may try in English to define “play” against “game” – but German Spiel makes no difference between the two words. Other dual terminologies like Danish leg and spil, Swedish lek and spel, and Basque jolas and joko – show analogies to the differentiation of “play” and “game”. And yet, they are not always exactly identical (Eichberg, 2012). Other languages have more than two different terms for play, as Korean nori (spontaneous play), gyunggi (from Chinese: rule-bound and competitive games), and game (from the West: fun games).

The historical, socio-cultural, and linguistic dimensions of human life exclude the use of definition as a universal norm of scholarly work. There are deep differences between the two procedures of defining a certain phenomenon on one hand – and identifying or understanding phenomena in a phenomenological way on the other.

Last, but not least, definition has a history in itself. In the historical course of the anthropology of play, definition became important in connection with the neo-positivistic approaches from 1930/50 onward. The older colonial interest in play and games as well as the newer relativistic understanding of play could – or even: had to – proceed without any definition. Definition is, thus,
not a universal instrument of knowledge, but a culturally specific construction. Human beings can very well understand play – or whatever phenomenon in human life – without defining it.

The misunderstanding between the Mentawaian archers and the Dutch officer, thus, not only witnessed of problems around colonial dominance, sport and play, “primitivity” and “progress”, and around universality and culture. It also sends questions to us concerning the basic procedures of “defining”, describing, and understanding – of “knowing” about human life.

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1 A first version of the anthropological part of this article was published in German in: Wierlacher, A. (1982) (ed.). *Jahrbuch Deutsch als Fremdsprache* [Yearbook German as foreign language], 8, 159-177. – It had its background in my field studies in Minangkabau, West Sumatra 1974/75 and in Siberut, Mentawai, 1979. That is why there is a bias of Indonesia and Pacific cultures – and of German literature.

2 I received this quotation from the Dutch anthropologist Reimar Schefold, whom I thank for this. About the Mentawai art of bow and arrow see Schefold, 1980, 52 and 81. About the Mentawai culture more generally also Eichberg, 1981, Blumen, and 1983, Schönheit; Lindsay & Schefold, 1992. About body culture and play in Mentawai: Eichberg, 1989.