
Generalizations on Play in “Primitive” Societies

by

MAXWELL L. HOWELL

San Diego State University

CHARLES DODGE

San Diego State University

REET A. HOWELL

Vancouver Community College

This study attempted to generalize about play in so-called “primitive” societies, taking four major societies into consideration: the Polynesian, the Australian aboriginal, the Eskimo and the Melanesian. Acknowledgements are expressed to the authors who developed the primary studies of the societies analyzed: Keith Lansley (Melanesian), Michael Salter (Australian aboriginal), Kevin Jones (Polynesian) and Karen Danielson (Eskimo). The comparative study could not have been undertaken without the scholarly work of these individuals.

The following generalizations were advanced by the authors:

First, the evidence in any one of the studies is never complete, but rather merely partial knowledge of the play of that society. This is due to a lack of a written language and most certainly to an incomplete record of games.

Second, the “primitive” societies studied lacked distinctive class separations; because of this fact, perhaps a more complete record of these societies’ play was recorded. In previous comparisons of ancient western civilizations, there was a preponderance of games of the upper classes listed.

Third, in any study dealing with historical material, there is difficulty in ascertaining if the evidence studied was indeed play, as well as a difficulty in definition of terms. The authors stressed the value of holding a seminar to standardize terminology, particularly in the field of anthropology and sport.

Fourth, the amount of evidence of an activity is not necessarily related to the amount of

that activity in a society. Swimming, for example, was obviously common in the Polynesian and Melanesian societies, and yet it is not overly alluded to.

Fifth, it is apparent that geographical groupings may be convenient and are certainly traditional, but they are a limiting factor in the total understanding of games.

Sixth, games related to warfare did not appear to occupy such a large proportion of the play activities in primitive societies in comparison to the ancient Western civilizations. Warfare-type activities were seemingly non-existent in the Eskimo society, for example, which is certainly an indication of the nature of that society.

Seventh, it appeared that games were a mirror of the particular societies studied. The play of the societies was analyzed from the viewpoint of the major aspects of culture, and it was decided whether the activities were predominantly political, economic, domestic, ceremonial, cultural or social. The following table shows the percentage of occurrence of the six major aspects of a culture in each of the societies as revealed by their play.

PERCENTAGE OF OCCURRENCE OF THE SIX MAJOR ASPECTS OF A CULTURE
IN THE PLAY ACTIVITIES

	AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL	POLYNESIAN	MELANESIAN	ESKIMO
Political	13	15	5	4
Economic	31	8	7	13
Domestic	9	4	2	12
Ceremonial	8	12	2	3
Cultural	13	7	5	7
Social	23	52	78	57

Among the Polynesians, for example, where food was extremely plentiful, economic-type play accounted for only 8% of the play in that society — similarly with the Melanesians. For the Australian aboriginal, such play constituted some 31% of the play. Social-type games occupied only 23% of the play of the Australian aboriginal, but 78% of the activities of the Melanesians.

It was felt that play was indeed a mirror of the particular society; it affords us invaluable data in better understanding societies and is highly underrated in its importance.

Eighth, diffusion, spontaneity and emergence are important factors in studying play activities in primitive societies. There was no actual evidence of acculturation among the four societies represented in this study, though this could, and undoubtedly did, occur. With respect to diffusion and emergence, it is interesting to note the similarity of many activities, considering the vast differences between the societies studied.

Ninth, certain games appear to be unique to a civilization. Some of the play activities which one may classify as unique are the boomerang games and quivering of the Australian aboriginal; spear dodging, hand rubbing and propping open the eyes with sticks of the Polynesians; land diving, foot fighting and face pulling of the Melanesians; and the pole rise, prone wrestling, back-to-back pushing contest and dualis of the Eskimo.

Tenth, certain activities may be classified as "empty categorized." That is, an activity may appear in three of the civilizations but not in the other. This may simply be occasioned by a lack of completeness in the recording of the play activities in some of the societies, or could also be due to climatic or geographical differences. Kites, for example, did not appear in the play of the Australian aboriginal; likewise, swinging did not appear in Eskimo play.

Eleventh, certain games display commonality. That is, there are certain games which appear in each society. Some games which display commonality are the use of the toy canoe and the bullroarer, wrestling, string figures, tobogganning, top spinning and imitation games.

Twelfth, each type of play was evidenced in an analysis of the four primitive societies. The types of play analyzed, called internal characteristics, were chance, dexterity, enigma, exultation, imitation, pursuit, strategy and vertigo activities. The following table summarizes the data.

PERCENTAGE OF INTERNAL CHARACTERISTICS IN EACH SOCIETY				
	AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL	POLYNESIAN	MELANESIAN	ESKIMO
Chance	4.0	9.0	1.0	3.0
Dexterity	29.0	34.0	29.5	25.0
Enigma	8.0	5.5	1.5	2.0
Exultation	8.0	20.0	2.0	10.5
Imitation	27.0	5.0	29.5	23.0
Pursuit	9.0	10.0	16.0	8.0
Strategy	9.0	10.5	12.5	20.5
Vertigo	6.0	6.0	8.0	8.0

Activities of chance, for example, comprised 4% of the play of the Australian aboriginals, 9% of the Polynesians, 1% of the Melanesians and 3% of the Eskimos. Such differences are undoubtedly significant and lead one to a better understanding of the individual societies. Despite this undoubted significance, the close similarity in internal characteristics, when compared to the data on major aspects of culture, is most interesting when the vast geographical differences and climatic differences are considered.

Thirteenth, play which was primarily related to a major aspect of society was evidenced in each of the "primitive societies. The political aspect, for example, is reflected in such activities as avoiding the boomerang (Australian aboriginal), boxing (Polynesian), crossing the bridge (Melanesian) and tug-of-war (Eskimos). The economic aspect was apparent in such activities as spear the disc (Australian aboriginal), stilts (Polynesian), canoes (Melanesian) and sealing (Eskimo). The domestic aspect was apparent in such activities as playing at marriage (Australian aboriginal), draughts (Polynesian), the courting pastime (Melanesian) and dolls (Eskimo). The ceremonial aspect was apparent in such activities as the corroboree (Australian aboriginal), pitching discs (Polynesian), dancing (Melanesian) and playing the drum (Eskimo). The cultural aspect was evidenced in such activities as playing emu (Australian aboriginal), jumping jacks (Polynesian), surfboard riding (Melanesian) and buzz (Eskimo). The social aspect was apparent in such activities as mud sliding (Australian aboriginal), juggling (Polynesian), finger games (Melanesian) and ball games (Eskimo).

In all, therefore, some thirteen generalizations are advanced following intensive primary studies of four primitive societies. An increasing world view of games is becoming more apparent.