This chapter is concerned with games and sportlike activities in precolonial Africa. Many of these activities are still practiced, especially in rural areas, and their existence provides a challenge to contemporary uses and abuses of sport and to arguments about its function in modern industrial societies. Physical activities that have been variously described by ethnographers as "play," "games," "sports," "pastimes," "physical education," "recreations," and "dances" were generally classed together as extensions of human aesthetic and ludic capabilities, and integrated into social life and the continuing education of all members of a community—not only as reflections and reinforcements of cultural tradition, but also as means of enhancing people's creativity and adaptation to changing circumstances.

There are three sections: in the first I ask to what extent "sport" is a transformation of human institutions that are probably as old as human society and as fundamental to its existence as kinship and economic organization. This view was implicitly held by some writers on African physical activities, and especially by Geoffrey Gorer. The second section contains a brief survey of some of the references to games and sports in sub-Saharan Africa. The third section explores some common patterns in the available evidence. I suggest that precolonial African models of games and sport treat them as forms of play in ways that may help us to understand better the nature of modern sport and to appreciate the creative "open-mindedness" of true play as a series of techniques of the body.

The general distinctions between the concepts of "play," "games," and "sport," which have been summarized by Harris and Park,1 have been adopted as a rough guide to uses of the words in this chapter. But many of the authors quoted use them in different ways.

Is "Sport" a Transformation of Ancient Human Institutions or a Modern Invention?
During the half-century from 1933 to 1983, there was a massive increase in the quantity and sophistication of social anthropological fieldwork carried
out in sub-Saharan Africa. Unfortunately, there was a corresponding decrease in the attention that fieldworkers gave to play, games, sport, dance, music, and the arts. Whereas most early monographs contained brief descriptions and illustrations of such activities, recent works have rarely carried more than a few passing comments in the text and perhaps one or two entries in the index.

This does not reflect the interests of the members of the societies studied, for whom these activities have always been sources of emotional satisfaction and signs of the distinctiveness, creativity, and imagination of their cultures. It reflects rather the professional and material interests of the fieldworkers. Religion and kinship were traditional and highly respectable areas of theoretical discourse for social anthropologists; political and economic organization and problems of development assumed importance later and were reflections of the colonial and postcolonial interests in sub-Saharan Africa of governments, political parties, and commercial enterprises, on whose patronage the provision of research grants depended directly or indirectly. The few scholars who turned their attention to dance, music, games, and what most of their colleagues regarded as marginal areas of anthropological interest in sub-Saharan Africa soon found that these areas were not considered marginal either by the members of African societies or by the national governments and educationists who have assumed responsibility for their future development.

The study of “sport” in traditional African societies therefore poses two major problems: first, there is a critical lack of information about what might be described as “play, games, and sport”; and second, there must be considerable debate as to whether any activity in traditional African societies corresponds to what is now understood by the Western concept and practice of sport. The lack of information will no doubt be rectified by African scholars, who can collect oral testimony about the past as well as describe current practice of what Coakley has defined as “spontaneous play” and “informal games.” Perhaps some anthropologists from Europe and North America could also assemble hitherto unpublished field data on these topics. The second problem is fundamental to any anthropological discussion of sport and is the theme of this chapter. It has practical implications as well as being theoretically interesting.

Africa provides particular cases that relate to the general problem: is sport a transformation of institutions and patterns of action that existed in most, if not all, societies of horticulturalists and hunter-gatherers? Or is it a comparatively modern invention that arose in response to social and cultural changes in feudal, capitalist, and industrial societies? Unless we accept Joseph Mazo’s somewhat idiosyncratic definition of dance as a contact sport, there were very few activities that could be described in terms of modern concepts of sport. Moreover, even though traditional wrestling seems to have its modern counterparts, we cannot assume that because of similarities of product there are continuities of meaning and significance. We cannot, for example, automatically define Nuba wrestling in the same way as Olympic wrestling as part of a group of activities called “sport” because the contexts and processes involved are very different.

On the other hand, certain types of experiences and the subjective meanings assigned to those experiences, as well as certain general patterns of physical movement and interaction, are not necessarily limited to the contexts and practice of modern sport. They could well be found through other activities in societies that, strictly speaking, had no sport, just as people in societies with sport make sense of it in many different ways. Although there are clearly significant contrasts between the structures of tennis, boxing, running, football (soccer), and gymnastics that must influence the experiences of their practitioners, there is also evidence that people share attitudes to sport and interpretations of their experiences that are not restricted to any particular sport or group of activities. They may even “vibrate in and out of” say, “a state of playfulness during the course of almost any activity,” as within a single game of football.

I am not convinced that sport is a novel human phenomenon, and I suggest that many processes of practicing and making sense of sport had their analogues in traditional African societies. If my guess is right, then there ought to be two interesting consequences for contemporary societies. First, analyses of the equivalents of sport in traditional African contexts might enable us to arrive at more flexible evaluations of sport in general, as well as particular sports, in industrial societies. And second, if some sport-like activities were more characteristic of certain cultural configurations rather than others, it may be better for African nations to invest in sports that are more appropriate for their development and in which their citizens are most likely to succeed and find satisfaction, than to succumb to the pressures and fashions of the Euro-American-dominated sports world.

Sport and excellence in sport are social facts, and the bodies of people when they first engage in sport are not infinitely plastic. They have been molded by motives, habits of posture and gesture, and patterns of movement that are as much a product of enculturation as of individual variation. We should be asking what cultural factors could have influenced the performances of Olympic athletes like Abebe Bikila, Kip Keino, and Ben Jipcho. We should be asking what kinds of modern team games might be the best equivalent of a dance that fulfilled a vital role in the past. Perhaps some kinds of sport might be positively harmful in certain contexts and innocuous in others. R. G. Sipes’s study of correlations between war and combative sports was a timely reminder that sport can never be neutral or apolitical, as some people imagine. Sipes argued that war and combative sports were not alternative discharge responses to accumulated aggression,
but rather complementary institutions that were part of a general culture pattern. The two institutions were in a proportionate, and not an inverse, relationship: in societies in which war and violence were present, there was also combative sport; but where war was relatively rare, combative sports tended to be absent. In other words, aggression was institutionalized in some societies, but not others, as a component of a cultural pattern, and combative sports were not a “healthy” guarantee of peaceful behavior.

One has to go back to 1921, to Basden’s study Among the Ibo of Nigeria, to find a chapter entitled “Sports and Pastimes.” George Basden was a committed British missionary, and although some of his remarks are patronizing, his respect for the Ibo encouraged him to make a thorough study of their traditional life. The opening paragraphs reveal his concept of sport:

Ordinarily the Ibo is a very serious person. At the same time he has a well-developed humorous side to his nature and he can, on occasion, give play to his emotions with complete abandon, so much so that he becomes totally oblivious of things around him.

The games commonly played by boys and girls have been described in Chap. V [turning somersaults in the air; shooting with bows and arrows, wrestling and dancing]. In the case of adults it is not always easy to distinguish between recreation and serious occupation; sometimes the two are combined, as in shooting. In the case of dancing it is often difficult to differentiate between that which is simply recreative and that which is the physical expression of religious enthusiasm. Shooting, wrestling, dancing and swimming are the sports of men; comparatively few of the women swim, but all indulge freely in dancing. The national game of Okwe is common to both sexes.  

Basden went on to describe archery competitions, wrestling contests, dancing, swimming, and the Okwe board game, which is widely known as mancala and found in many different forms in sub-Saharan Africa. In Igbo it was often played for high stakes, so that some people accumulated large debts. Wrestling was practiced by boys and unmarried men, and Basden was distressed at the lack of “sporting instinct,” 7 because athletes preferred to retire rather than lose. He comments on their dancing:

The twistings, turnings, contortions and springing movements, executed in perfect time, are wonderful to behold. Movement succeeds movement in rapid succession, speed and force increasing, until the grand finale is reached. . . . For these set dances . . . the physical strength required is tremendous. The body movements are extremely difficult and would probably kill a European. The whole anatomy of the performer appears to be in serious danger, and it is a marvel that his internal machinery is not completely thrown out of gear. The practice of such dancing leads to a wonderful development of the back and abdominal muscles. Moreover, the movements are free, there is nothing rigid about them, and they produce no sign of “physical exer ciser” stiffness. Every movement is clean, sure and decided, showing absolute control of the muscles. 8

This kind of dancing, often performed by professionals, was very different from the dancing connected with religious festivities, in which women played a leading part. That consisted of “strange sinuous movements of the limbs and body,” which Basden thought superior to contemporary dancing in England and America. He also observed an important feature of African dancing that was frequently ignored by later writers: “in all native dances each man (and woman) acts independently of his fellows and yet fits into his proper place in the general scheme.” 9 The importance of individuality and creative originality in African societies is too often overlooked by those who emphasize the formal and corporate elements of their traditional life. It was, and still is, in dancing that people were able to combine most successfully the education and integration of mind, body, emotion, and sensitivity, and the development of social consciousness and self-actualization.

Traditional African performing arts were equated with modern physical education in a study by an American mission worker, Gladwyn Murray Childs. He wrote an account of Umbundu kinship and character in Angola in the 1930s, whose point of view he described as “a composite of practical anthropology, progressive education, and the newer approach to Christian missions.” 10 He concluded that “the dance is of great importance to Umbundu life: social, educational, and ceremonial,” 11 and in commenting on what he described as “physical education and recreation” he wrote:

The dance is very good physical exercise but it is much more than that. It is much more than mere [sic] recreation. . . . There is nothing which can take its place. It is doubtful whether the solidarity of any group of Ovimbundu can be firmly established or long maintained without the dance. They do adopt various foreign forms of recreation, but the dance meets a deeper need. Whatever new exercises and games may be introduced the physical educator cannot afford to neglect indigenous forms. 12

Writing of his travels in West Africa in 1934, Geoffrey Gorer described amateur wrestling as “by far the most popular, indeed almost the only West African sport,” 13 and he deplored the introduction of compulsory organized games and sports as a puritanical substitute for dancing. 14 His book, originally published in 1935, contained the first descriptions of many African dances, but it was not until the 1950s that researchers began to make systematic studies and recordings, in West Africa and other parts of the continent.

Most writers have implicitly or explicitly agreed with Basden, Childs, Gorer, and earlier ethnographers that modern African sports are a substitute for ceremonial and recreational dancing, and that many modern games are
extensions or elaborations of traditional games and activities. Since these changes are largely the result of colonial systems of education and of subsequent experience of the hegemony of European and North American cultural styles in international politics, they can hardly be described as transformations. That is, a modern African society's prowess in international sport may have little or no direct connection with its traditional concern for dancing. On the other hand, the possibility that much sport is a transformation of dancing is of great theoretical interest and of particular relevance to educational development in African societies. Could there be a connection between the dance styles of the Teso of Uganda and the fact that the Uganda record for the high jump has been held for several years by Teso and an Etseot gained second place for Uganda in the high jump at the Empire Games in Vancouver in 1954?13

Play, Games, and Sports in Sub-Saharan Africa

Some of the earliest ethnographic accounts of southern African games were included in Dudley Kidd's *The Essential Kaffir* in 1904 and Savage Childhood: *A Study of Kaffir Children* in 1906, and George Stow's *The Native Races of South Africa* in 1905. The first two covered a variety of Bantu-speaking peoples in the southeast from the Cape to the Zambezi, and the latter was concerned with the so-called Bushmen and Hotentots as well as Nguni and Sotho-Tswana societies. As in most subsequent accounts, the descriptions of games are not as detailed as one could wish, and there is little indication of the extent to which recruitment and social organization were spontaneous and informal or influenced by the players' membership of other social groups.

Stow described two types of ball game of the San but classified them as “dances”:

Some of their dances required considerable skill, such as that which may be called the ball dance. In this a number of women from five to ten would form a line and face an equal number in another row, leaving a space of thirty or forty feet between them. A woman at the end of one of these lines would commence by throwing a round ball, about the size of an orange, and made of a root, under her right leg, and across to the woman opposite to her, who in turn would catch the ball and throw it back in a similar manner to the second woman in the first row; she would return it again in the same way to the second in the second, and thus it continued until all had taken their turn. Then the women would shift their positions, crossing over to opposite sides, and again continue in the same manner as before; and so on until the game was over, when they would rest for a short time and begin again.

Another ball dance was played merely by the men. A ball was made expressly for this game out of the thickest portion of a hippopotamus' hide,

...cut from the back of the neck; this was hammered when it was perfectly fresh until it was quite round; when finished it was elastic, and would quickly rebound when thrown upon a hard surface. In this performance a flat stone was placed in the centre upon the ground, the players or dancers standing around. One of them commenced by throwing the ball on the stone, when it rebounded; the next to him caught it, and immediately it was thrown again by him upon the stone in the same manner as by the leader, when it was caught by the next in succession, and so on, one after the other passing rapidly round the ring, until the leader or one of the others would throw it with such force as to send it flying high and straight up into the air, when during its ascent they commenced a series of antics, throwing themselves into all kinds of positions, imitating wild dogs, and like them making a noise "chel chel chel" but in the meantime watching the ball, which was caught by one of them, when he took the place of leader, and the game was again renewed.

The play was sometimes varied by two players being matched against each other, each throwing and catching the ball alternately, until one of them missed it, when it was immediately caught by one of those in the outer ring, who at once took the place of the one who had made the slip, and thus the play continued.16

Henri Junod described boys', girls', and adult games of the Shanga-Tsonga of Mozambique in 1912.17 He included as adult games the pastimes of beer drinking, hemp smoking, and the Tsonga version of the mancala game, *ts huba.* Hemp smoking was not as common as beer drinking, and it was accompanied by a saliva-squirting contest, whose rules Junod described.18 He attributed the craze for playing *ts huba* to the enforced decline of the 'great sports' of fighting and hunting, which had absorbed the Tsonga in earlier times.19

Forty years later, when writing of the southern Sotho in the 1930s, Hugh Ashton declared that fighting and cattle raiding had been "their major sports."20 Stick fighting was as important among the Red Xhosa in the 1950s21 as it was for the Mpondo in the 1930s. Monica Hunter described it as follows:

Fighting with sticks is as constant an occupation of the Mpondo as is playing with a ball of the English. I have seen a mother playing with her son of 2 or 3, pretending to hit him so that he put up one arm for defence and tried to hit back; boys of 4 and 5 have their knobbykerries, and begin to scrap. When out herding the elder boys arrange contests, pairing off couples and forcing them to fight; the combats between individuals are constant; the boys of one umzi [homestead] fight those of another, the herds of one set of umfazi, the herds of another, one district another. Often two neighbouring districts are in such a state of war, that if a boy from one enters the other he is immediately "attacked." The borderline between a
game and a serious fight between districts, in which several may be killed, is undefined. 22

Professor Hunter’s implied comparison of Mpondo and English sporting activities is rather unfair on the Mpondo, as it suggests that violence was more endemic in their society. In fact, stick fighting as a combative sport was not as lethal and damaging to the body as boxing, or as punishing as ice hockey and American football, or indeed as many other accepted Euro-American sports that do violence to the body. It is perhaps significant that, with the notable exception of dancing, most of the traditional African activities that have been described as sport or might qualify as such according to modern definitions, were aggressive and combative and often associated with warfare. Moreover, their distribution in sub-Saharan Africa was uneven, unlike that of many games that were played almost everywhere. In other words, sport was no more a mere pastime than it is in contemporary industrial societies. It was psychologically and sociologically related to the exercise and maintenance of power and to the enculturation and social control of young people. If a comparative study of traditional African sport were undertaken, its incidence in different societies would almost certainly be seen to vary proportionately with the incidence of certain modes of political and economic organization and patterns of intergroup relations. 23

On the other hand, I would expect that dancing, for reasons I shall discuss later, would follow significantly different patterns.

Ashton mentioned the peaceful Sotho sport of racing, whose distribution in other parts of Africa is limited by environment and the availability of animals. Lindblom had reported in 1931 that oxen were widely used in Africa as riding animals, 24 and it was common for herdboys to ride and sometimes race their animals home. In the mountains of Lesotho, riding was the major means of transport, and few people rode “for pleasure, except at race meetings. Racing is an old sport. Formerly special oxen were raced over arduous courses of many miles, but they have now been replaced by horses.” 25 Tobogganing was another sport of limited distribution, which I have seen only in Karamoja, Uganda, where youths sat perched on stones and set off down the side of suitably smooth hills of bare rock. O. F. Raum reported that Shira children used “the hard fruits of the Kigelia tree, which are the shape of a large cucumber. The boys cut seats into them” and rode “down steep grass-covered slopes.” 26

The comparatively limited practice of racing and tobogganing contrasts with the widespread distribution of the rolling target (hoop-and-pole) game 27 and the mancala game, both of which have already been cited. Junod gave a detailed description of the rules and course of the Tsonga version of the game, 28 and his example was followed by Smith and Dale for the chisolo of the Ila of northern Zambia, 29 by Stayt for the mufukha of the Venda, 30

and by others. The themes of the mancala game varied but the style and characteristics of the different versions were broadly the same.

Not all games that were structurally similar, however, were given even remotely similar meanings and uses. For example, the curious movements that Dorothy Bleek described for the Great Water Snake game of the Naron of the central Kalahari 31 were the same as those that all Venda novices had to perform during their premarital domba initiation. But in the latter the movements were accompanied by a song about the labors of the dung beetle and the rite was designed to warn the girls of the pains of childbirth. 32 In 1958, I observed another distinctive dance movement for novices at the Venda girls’ puberty rites, with a song referring to religious worship. 33 The same movements were observed among the Ila of Zambia between 1902 and 1915, as a boys’ game imitating a battle fought on marshy ground. Boys formed up in two lines, kneeling on one knee, and advanced, changing from one knee to the other and clapping hands. 34 Even within the same Venda society, standing on one’s head had different meanings as a boy’s singing game and a girl’s initiation dance. 35 I hope that those who are involved in the revival of interest in the anthropological study of play and games will not neglect to consider the diffusion of African games and structured movement or the transformations of meaning that have been assigned to them. Such information can be valuable both because of the light it can throw on the analysis of play and ritual in contrasting cultural systems, and because of what it may contribute to historical studies of different African groups.

A great opportunity was missed in the ethnographic survey of Africa sponsored by the International African Institute in the 1950s and 1960s. Very few of the volumes contain any references to play, games, dances, or the affective, aesthetic, and imaginative aspects of African life, let alone accounts of what forms they took. And yet, when one scans the information that is available, it becomes clear that the differences in the forms and meanings of the repertoires of games, sports, and dances in particular societies are more interesting than the recurrence of certain games to which many writers have drawn attention. I agree very much with the general argument of Helen Schwartzman that we need to look at the imaginative, creative, and transformative aspects of children’s play and use of games, and I have been convinced at least by my own children and others whom I have known well that they are active participators and manipulators, rather than passive receptors, almost from birth. Schwartzman’s conclusion is persuasive:

Play is an activity that is very much alive and characterized always by transformation and not preservation of objects, roles, actions, and so forth. By emphasizing the preservative quality of play texts, researchers have ignored the transformative quality of play contexts. And, similarly, by
emphasizing the socialization function of play contexts, researchers have
ignored the satirical, critical, and interpretative qualities of play texts.36

Nevertheless, the congeniality of the social and cultural environments in
which children can exercise their creativity varies greatly, and the frame-
works of games, sports, and discourse through which play can be channeled
can impose limits on transformation. Thus variations in repertoire suggest
significant contrasts in the patterns of cultures as well as the more obvious
consequences of different environments.

Not surprisingly, the Reverend John Weeks found in 1909 that the Boloki
of the Upper Congo River had three water games,37 and in 1958 Burssens
added that they had canoe races,38 in addition to children's games that are
found all over Africa. For them, wrestling was more of a ritual than a sport,
and it was accompanied by dances, music, songs, and magical acts.39 They
also played a gambling game, "a sort of hopscotch," and often became so
involved that they wagered tools and even wives. For the Wolof of Seneg-
gambia, wrestling was the favorite sport,40 with inter-village competitions
during the period from harvest in October to the trade season in December
and January. But when Gerhard Lindblom worked among the Akamba
south of Mount Kenya from 1910 to 1912, he found no wrestling and no
games of chance, and gambling was rare. In fact, he stated that "no real
sport" existed, though there were many dances, games, and pastimes, such
as sparring the hoop, and various thought-reading games, walking on the
hands, standing on the head, and the Kamba version of mancala.41 Jean La
Fontaine found no riddles or riddle games among the Gisu,42 which was
most unusual, and Walter Goldschmidt found no games of chance and no
games of skill except jackstones among the Sese,43 who live to the east of
the Gisu on the slopes of Mount Elgon. He provided illustrations of child-
hood play but reported that contests formerly associated with boys' se-
clusion after circumcision—throwing spears, throwing clubs, and wrestling—
had gone.

Games and Sport As Play: African Challenges to Conventional Wisdom

A cursory survey of forms of play, games, and sport in Africa reveals many
common patterns of behavior, which at first invite easy comparison and
generalizations. For example, the informal play of children was often sex-
specific and modeled on the activities of adults: girls pounded earth, cooked
mud, or formed "families" for the distribution of wild fruits that they had
collected; and boys shot beetles with miniature bows and arrows, made
model houses with discarded mats,44 built miniature cattle kraals, and
exchanged "cattle." Children's counting games and songs, games of touch,
and varieties of five-stones or jacks seem to have been as widespread as
different types of riddle contests and of the game of throwing "spears" at
moving objects—whether they were the rolling hoops of the Karomojong
or the tubers of the Venda.45 Relay songs and dances were a common
pastime, especially on moonlit nights, and the common call-response (solo-
chorus) structure of much African music allowed players to succeed each
other in taking over the solo parts.46 Youths exhibited and challenged
others' individual skills and physical prowess in the mancala game, and in
different types of boxing and stick fighting. Teams of dancers, representing
ethnic groups, chiefdoms, neighborhoods, or voluntary associations, re-
hearsed and performed for the benefit of their own group or in friendly
competition with others.47

As soon as one begins to inquire into the meaning of such activities and
their significance as action to the people involved, then a different picture
emerges. As I suggested in the last section, the meanings, uses, and func-
tions of apparently similar types of play and games vary considerably
according to the attitudes and statuses of individuals and contexts of dif-
ferent institutions and sociocultural systems, and it would be wrong at this
stage to make any generalizations about play, games, and sport in sub-
Saharan Africa on the basis of available ethnography. For example, chil-

For example, in traditional Venda society, children's life was considered to
be part of the real world, and they could be present at adult activities as often
as they wished. Play and games were as much an appropriate and integral
part of children's life as were singing, dancing, and beer drinking. Although
some games were used for political purposes (see the description of sasha
below), and they were always vehicles for social interaction and identity
maintenance, they were not expected to reinforce values or establish social
control. In any case, although they were available for use by all, there was
no sense of compulsion, or even fear of social sanctions, that drove all to
join in. Some people enjoyed riddle contests, while others were not par-
cularly interested: knowing riddles was not regarded as a key to knowl-
edge and understanding, but as a game that could bring a good player some
recognition.40 The word for "game" or "play," mutambo, could have dif-
ferent significance according to context. If I asked children or adults about
the meaning and uses of some children's games, my question was usually
treated with some amusement and amazement: “Athi divhi. Ndi mutambo fhezi!” [I don’t know. It’s only a game!] A rather different attitude was taken to similar questions about the boys’ and girls’ team dances *tshikangana* and *tshigombela*, which were also called “games” (*mitambo*). And the games of the *domba* initiation school were taken seriously as an essential part of the education of every young Venda.

These attitudes were only partly reflected in Venda classifications and terminology, and the intended meanings of the verb *tomba* (to play) and its derivatives depended on the context referred to and often the status of the speaker as well. This should not surprise anyone who has considered the extraordinary variety of interpretations of the concept of sport in almost any symposium on the subject, and so I make no apology for failing to take a stand and declare what I mean by sport. As a result of my experiences as an enthusiastic participant in sports and gymnastics at school and in the army, and of subsequent irritation as an observer of the uses and abuses of sport and sportsmen, sportswomen and children, I am unable to arrive at an anthropological definition of sport that is not severely limited by the bias of my cultural experience and acquired prejudices. Marie Hart and some other authors whom she included in *Sport in the Sociocultural Process*, such as the late Allan Tindall, were quite right to stress the need to study the categories and meanings of those involved in sport. But this enterprise is from the start complicated by the fact that the very phenomenon they wish to interpret in a variety of contexts is defined in their own terms. This is methodologically acceptable as long as sport is treated as a gloss word that covers a variety of activities that may appear similar or be given the same name, or if the researcher is simply concerned to examine the contexts and distribution of activities that fit precisely his/her definition of sport. But it is unacceptable and unhelpful if the concept of sport is treated as unproblematic, and it is assumed that we know what we mean by sport, and therefore only have to look at this phenomenon in a variety of contexts in order to understand better its range of uses and significance.

I suggest emphatically that although we may have very clear ideas about the significance of what we choose to call sport in particular contexts, we do not yet know what sport is as a human phenomenon. For example, sport has been compared with ritual, and it has been asked to what extent games, athletic contests, sports, and dramas are secular rituals. The anthropologists Mary and Max Gluckman responded to this:

After wavering toward thinking they might profitably be so considered, we have decided that they do have similarities with rituals, but have also elements which are so very different, that it is wiser to keep them distinct . . . . This statement does not deny that on occasions games or masquerades formed parts of ritual ceremonies, nor does it deny that ceremonies of one kind or another can be attached to the playing of games or the staging of dramas. It does deny that all—perhaps most—games and dramas can be so regarded, without putting them out of context and distorting the means by which they exhibit moral values.

Similarly, we cannot accept the suggestion that sport is, or should be, a transformation of the dancing of traditional societies, as was implied by the comments of Basden, Chids, Goror, and others who provided ethnographies of what they called variously “play,” “games,” “sports,” “pastimes,” “physical education,” and “dances.” The very reasons that the Gluckmans gave for distinguishing games and athletic contests from ritual must also be applied to distinctions between different kinds of dances; there were dances whose progress, like the main activities of ritual, was “always known in advance, and conformity to rule and tradition” was “important,” and there were dances that were like games and athletic contests, because the actors had “a series of choices open to them.” Dances could therefore be play, games, sport, and/or physical and moral education, depending on context, use, and user.

In some African societies, distinctions between different styles and purposes of “dance” movements were expressed with special terminology. In Venda, for instance, there was a general verb *tshina* that referred to all kinds of dancing, but particularly to the characteristic communal dancing in a circle (*mona*), which was alternated with display dancing (*geva*) by solo dancers or by groups of two, three, or four together. Men’s and boys’ communal dancing differed in style from that of women and girls; but although everybody recognized this, both styles were called *tshina*. Old ladies danced in a stately way (*gangja*) on important occasions, or sometimes they and older men danced excitedly for joy (*pembelo*). The characteristic movements of girls’ initiation (*vhusha*), which might be compared to gymnastic routines, were called *khaga*.

Venda communal dances were classified as either *mutambo* (game, from *tomba*, to play) or *ngoma* (literally large bass drum, hence sacred). The latter included the most important dance *tshikona*, the main initiation dances of *vhusha* and *domba*, and the “possession” dance *ngoma dza mizimuzi*. A further distinction was made between “the song of *vhusha*” and “the song of *domba*,” which referred to the central choral dance of each initiation, which were repeated several times daily for the duration of the schools, and the different *ngoma* rites and accompanying songs and movements, which all novices had to perform at least once to qualify as graduates. There were other songs and dances at *domba*, performed in a lighter vein in contrast to the sacred choral dance, and these were described as “game songs” (*nyimbo dza mitambo*). Although they were sometimes arrangements of the games of childhood such as dance songs of the class *dzhombo*, their meaning in the context of initiation was much more serious.
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The other Venda games of childhood and youth, the dances *shikanganga* and *shigembe*, also became serious affairs because of their use for the networks of *mabe pha* (musical expeditions) that chiefs and prominent headmen sent to each other, to express sympathy after a death, to greet or visit a newly established ruler, to ask for tribute, and to greet humbly or pay homage. In 1962, I compared the musical expeditions that I had observed in Venda to the school rugby matches that I had experienced in England, and I think the comparison remains valid, although the political significance of the Venda institution was clearly greater.

**Bepha** has a variety of meanings according to the status of the individual. For members of the team it is entertainment of the same order as preparing for, and participating in, an away-match to another school, without the anxiety of being dropped from the team [all who were prepared to attend rehearsals and improve their performance were allowed to serve in the team]. . . . The journey to another district is important not so much for the extension of young people's geographical knowledge, nor for the association with strangers, as for the consolidation of existing relationships based on locality rather than kinship. . . . From my own similar experiences of away matches at school, I remember how the journey gave us an excellent opportunity of cementing friendships, especially when we came from different Houses, and how we had an impression of an association of Headmasters and senior staff, whose solidarity was expressed in the friendly rivalry between a group of schools . . .

**Bepha** is, therefore, an agreeable means by which a ruler can cultivate indirectly the continued loyalty of his people and remind them of his position . . . .

Above the entertainment and prestige value and the consolidation of district loyalties, are the links which *bepha* expeditions reinforce between the widely scattered members of ruling clans . . . . their chief political function is to consolidate both locally recruited groups and the widely dispersed, and predominantly consanguineous, families who rule those groups.

Several kinds of behavior and action that would seem to come under the general rubric of sport in modern industrial societies were present in traditional Venda society. But I cannot say whether or not they could be accurately described as analogues of sport, and whether or not the essential characteristics of modern sport were present in traditional Venda and other African societies. My own impression is that, apart from some games and the more obvious activities such as wrestling, certain non-trivial aspects of dancing will provide the most likely sources for useful analogies with sport. Studies of dance from different parts of Africa seem to corroborate this, as well as observations such as those of the Bohannans about the role of dancing and its relationship to work in the context of *Iv* markets, and of M. d'Hertefelt about the Rwandan use of dance as an appropriate sport for conduct in warfare. During their military training, the young men learned war dances in which new figures were continually being created. Their purpose was to portray the changing fortunes and uncertain outcome of battle and final victory. I am reminded of the role of golf in modern business, and again of my own school experiences, where the purposes of sport and officer cadet training were often hard to disentangle, and the military instructor and games coach were often one and the same person.

It is not too late to find out more about the concepts and uses of games and sport in traditional African societies, although much of the research must inevitably be historical rather than sociological. It is not too late to learn from African societies something about the origins and essence of modern sport, and perhaps as a result to understand contemporary trends in such a way that the abuses of sport may be diminished and its positive social, educational, and emotional benefits be increased.

Above all, the kind of study that is required must investigate play, games, and sportlike activities as parts of the shared conceptual system of interacting individuals and social groups. A fine example of how this can be done has been provided by Dr. Charles Adams, who investigated concepts of play and games in Lesotho and the ways in which these concepts were realized in practice.

Dr. Adams pointed out that many of the analytic distinctions contained in models that are widely used in discussions of play, ritual, and expressive behavior "frequently reflect more our own concerns, our own social and intellectual histories, than they do the phenomena which are their purported objects of analysis." The Basotho domain of *games*, however, includes ways of behaving that are expressive, performative, dramatic, and processual. *Games and playing* refer to behaviour and aspects of behaviour that are not only "play" and "ritual," but "art" as in playing music and dancing, and "science" in the sense of procedures for knowing and understanding, experimentation and learning, hypothesizing and testing. The graphic and plastic arts, such as architecture, pottery design, and painting, as well as technological crafts, such as carpentry and making toys and models, are excluded from the domain of *games*. Playing ranges from the simple spontaneous activities of telling jokes and riddles to the rehearsed, proscribed, rule-governed events of the nine-months process of men's initiation and inter-village dancing competitions.

Playing and *games* were not categorically differentiated activities. Hopscotch, soccer, competitive dancing, and playing poker belonged to the domain of *games*, or things that were *played*, as much as judicial hearings, herding cattle, curing the psychosocial effects of witchcraft, and gift exchanges. "The concept of *game* contains . . . the notion of 'making things parallel or commensurate,' and *games* are applications of, or ways of creating, comparisons, similitudes, identities, analogies, and metaphors."
The Sotho concept of games as described by Adams differed in several respects from the Venda concept and uses that I observed. Nevertheless, Adams's main conclusion could be applied to the Venda data and, I suspect, to data from many other African societies: "The most challenging issue raised by the Basotho model is that concerning the integration of artistic, ludic, scientific, and ritualistic performative activity and domains."65

This is also a challenge to the aims and purposes of modern sport, which the Sotho and the Venda have now incorporated into their traditional category of games. It recalls the observation of Gregory Bateson that "the evolution of play may have been an important step in the evolution of communication,"66 namely, the ability to recognize that a signal is a signal and not necessarily a mood. Play combat is not real combat, just as the "pseudo-love and pseudo-hate of therapy are not real love and hate."67 The paradoxes of play allow for creative changes in people's habits of communication, which are essential in psychotherapy and generally desirable in social life. Sport has the potential to be socially therapeutic and to enhance creativity, but only when it really is play and is not merely a reflection or reinforcement of the status quo, as Sipes argued in his analysis of combative sports and aggression. The traditional Sotho and Venda concepts coincide with the arguments of Bateson. Together with similar evidence from other African societies, they suggest that a more integrated concept of games and sport as techniques of the body and as extensions of aesthetic and ludic capabilities68 may help us both to understand better the nature of modern sport and to turn it to more creative social uses.

Notes

1. Harris and Park, 2–3.
2. Coakley, passim.
3. Mazo, passim.
4. Harris and Park, 3.
5. Sipes, passim.
7. Ibid., 129.
8. Ibid., 132.
9. Ibid., 133.
10. Childs, viii.
11. Ibid., 114.
12. Ibid., 144.
15. Lawrence, 106.
18. Ibid., 344.
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58. Ibid., 8–9, 10.
59. Bohnman and Bohannan, 72, 146.
60. D’Hertefelt, et al., 74–75.
62. Adams, “Distinctive features,” I. Dr. Adams referred to analytic distinctions between “play and games, ritual and play (and bricolage), symbols and signs, fantasy and reality, activity and passivity, routinization and revolution, work and leisure, integration and innovation, serious and non-serious, anxiety and boredom, structure and process.”
63. Ibid., 3.
64. Ibid.
65. Ibid., 14.
66. Bateson, 316.
67. Ibid., 324.
68. Blacking, Anthropology of the Body, “Introduction” and “Towards an Anthropology of the Body.”

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Sport in Africa
ESSAYS IN SOCIAL HISTORY

Edited by William J. Baker
and James A. Mangan

AFRICANA PUBLISHING COMPANY
a division of Holmes & Meier
New York • London