

Traditional games: A joker in modern development. Some experiences from Nordic countries and Nordic-African exchange

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Abstract

The development of sport and its contribution to the development of society as a whole is not a movement into one direction only, going from traditional games to modern sport. Experiences from Scandinavian development aid show a much more complex picture of exchanges between popular sports in Denmark and *ngoma* dance in Tanzanian. Also inside the Nordic countries, traditional games are rediscovered in the context of educational and socio-cultural development. In contrast to the established theory of developmental functionalism, which is arguing top-down, sport development can also mean exchange and empowerment of the people, bottom-up. Development is developments in plural. 'Old' games reappearing as new games, challenge the established categories of 'forward' and 'backward' in history. To the experts of the Western sport, the games say: 'We talk – you listen.'

Once upon a time, the development of sports looked like one single path leading from traditional games to modern sport. Just like 'the evolution' of society was imagined as a one-way transformation from tradition to modernity.

Today, the narrative of the one way is still quite living, constituting a fundamental myth of Western self-understanding. And indeed, it includes some important truth (Guttmann 2004: 285). However, the narrative of the one way may also sound like a touching fairy tale from past time. This tale relieves from all those inner contradictions, which 'the progress' has produced for modern life. There are contrasting experiences worldwide.

Sport development aid Scandinavia-Tanzania: top-down and bottom-up

Let us turn to a special focus area of Danish development aid, Tanzania. The Tanzanian case has also played a special role for Scandinavian sport development aid.

Scandinavian development aid to sports in Tanzania was from the beginning characterized by inner contradictions. These conflicts did not only result from the tension between mass sports and elite sports, where West German policies constituted a contrasting model by sending top trainers for the national team of soccer and other elite sports to the African country. The strategy of mass sports or Sport for all could be contradictory, too.

Some Scandinavian projects of the 1980s supported the construction of a national sport administration – under “sport officers” who formed a new hierarchy under the central government of the (at that time) one-party state. And Scandinavians launched sport activities of Western style by sport-ware export.

The main project, which started from the Swedish side, was titled *Idrott åt alla – även i Tanzania* (Sport for all – even in Tanzania). Used sports requisites and discarded sport outfits were collected among Nordic clubs, put into containers, and sent down to Dar Es Salaam to be distributed in the region of Arusha. The project started by a great success and visibility, with the Tanzanian minister of sports opening the arrangement in the stadium of Arusha in August 1983. Courses for trainers, leaders and teachers were connected to the distribution of material. But soon, the reverse of the initiative became visible. Many sport shoes were old and worn out, balls were pegged out. The smart jogging dresses found some illegal ways to wealthier people in the town. Containers were broken up, and one jogger, suspected of theft, though innocent, was shot by the police. Children were sent to jogging in the roads of Arusha, offering them Swedish ski caps, which did not at all fit to the climate of the region. Finally, the best of the sports-wares were canalised into a sports-ware shop selling them to the best-paying strata. Some sports officers began to manipulate the financial means of the courses and the distribution of the sport-wares. In 1989, the project was closed down, and with this closure, all effects of the project disappeared from the region. What had started by the intention of good-will, produced ill-humour on the Tanzanian side, though, it is true, also some impressive statistics for the world of Swedish sports. Development aid affirmed the colonial one-way unbalance – ‘we the rich give to you the poor’ – and finally failed.

Other projects choose another way (Elbæk 1996). If developmental policies should empower the rural people, projects had to be related to the existing practices and resources of movement culture in the villages. This was the strategy of Danish ‘popular sports’ (DGI, at that time DDGU), cooperating with the Danish Sport Federation (DIF) and the Danish Association for International Cooperation (MS), from 1978 onwards (Wessing/Larsen 1994). Some projects took their starting point from popular crafts of making drums, dance bells and other music instruments. Others supported initiatives to build up a local craft industry around the production of soccer balls. Others again developed the living movement culture of games, dances and festivities by founding or supporting local groups of soccer, netball, volley, gymnastics, dances and games. In urban environments, sport was organized with street kids.

What was special was that the developmental approach should not only be designed after the knowledge and ideas of the Western ‘giver’. A study was made to get a clearer picture about the body culture of the region (Larsen/Gormsen 1985). The study showed that rural people in Sukumaland were not ‘poor’ because of a lack of Western sport, but they were rich of sportive festivity culture, called *ngoma* and *michezo*. *Michezo* means play, nowadays including Western sport game like soccer, and *michezo ya jadi* means ancient games. *Ngoma* is an untranslatable term, including dance, music, sport and games, competition and rhythm, complex cultural meeting and bodily communication. (A similar multiplicity can be found in the Swaheli term *kucheza* meaning play and game, song, dance and music.) *Ngoma* consists especially of dance festivity, often arranged in the afternoon of harvest time as a competition between different dance societies challenging each other. There exist some traditional relation between dance societies and work societies engaged in the harvest. The traditional forms of movement culture were differentiated between different ethnic groups. For instance, the *michezo* of the herdsmen nomads Masaai laid stress on individual strength and athletic ability, though mostly non-competitive, while the *ngoma* of the agricultural villagers Sukuma was based on cooperation and group competition (Gormsen 1983, about the ethnic dimension in Kenyan running, among Nandi and Kalenjin, see Bale 1996).

From sport export to popular culture exchange

If sport development aid wanted to support the existing resources and develop their cultural and socio-economic potentials, it had to invest into cultural centres and grassroots at the local level. Danish 'popular sport' entered into cooperation with the cultural centre in Bujora near Mwanza, the second-largest town of Tanzania. 50 local groups of *ngoma* and 20 groups of choir singing were integrated into the sport project. Their dances, drumming, songs, competitions, and pantomimes brought old and young together, male and female (gender unbalance being a repeating problem of Western sport development aid). They treated themes like work in the field, birth control, colonial repression and liberation – and the joy of life.

This type of development aid focussed on the socio-cultural values of popular practices, which tended to be met by non-recognition from the side of the national sport officers' hierarchies as well as from international sport in general. Instead of a top-down approach, the projects aimed at bottom-up development. The step was from sport export to popular culture and to the empowerment of rural people (evaluation report: Mandara 2000).

This approach turned the dominating hierarchical relation between sports people and sports leadership upside down. But more than this, there happened also something unforeseen in the relation between 'giver' and 'taker'. People from Sukuma came as visitors to Denmark and brought their dance and music, their drums and their experiences from festivity with them. This happened for first time already in 1973. Danish young people found the African music and dance attractive and started to practice it themselves. They organized on their own visit tours to Tanzania, and this had the positive effect of giving 'high status' to the local African practices. Since the 1980s, *ngoma* drums have become an element of Danish festivities, invading among others the large city carnival of Copenhagen. A whole grassroots movement – the *Utamaduni* groups – has grown forth from this exchange, consisting of local dance groups in several Danish towns. *Utamaduni* worked by offering courses in different towns, holding annual summer camps in Djursland with hundreds of participants, arranging tours of exchange, and translating Sukuma songs to Danish language. The cultural 'barter' brought new rhythms, play and game to Danish movement culture (Elbæk 1996).

This exchange has survived the societal changes in Tanzania occurring since the 1980s. The anti-colonial one-party state was transformed into multi-party system, Julius Nyereres dream of 'African socialism' and *ujamaa* (community) was substituted by privatisation, *rukhsa* (liberalisation), and new strategies of enriching for the urban elite. This had remarkable consequences for the popular movement culture as well (Leseth 2004). But beyond the questions of state-monopolism and capitalist market, development aid showed potentials of give-and-take between North and South. The exchange, when taken seriously, puts questions to the contents of the sportive practice of the 'giver'. Play and game, dance and festivities obtain a new attention. Old games appear as new games.

Traditional games in the Nordic countries: identity, relic, development

Also inside the Nordic countries themselves, a growing awareness for the significance of play culture has developed during the last years. In the world of education as well as in the policies of culture, health and integration, play and game has become a plus-word. Games give the concept of children's and youth culture another perspective than the one-way strategy of handing culture of grown-ups down to the young people. Play and game are a source of creativity from below, renewed by each young generation.

Because of this, the Nordic Council of Ministers became interested in play and games as historical heritage, regional resource and educational innovation. In 2004, the Council decided to fund a Nordic Cooperation of Play and Games (*Nordisk Legesamvirke*),

which should build a network and arrange a Nordic Day of Play and Games. The first step was an examination of traditional game culture in the Nordic countries (Nørgård 2005).

The report gave a survey of research and documentation in the field of traditional play and game in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, in the autonomous regions of Faeroe Islands, Greenland and Åland as well as among the Sami (Lapps). It described existing networks and activities, presented information from museums and their material collections.

The presence of traditional play and game in the Nordic cultures shows three different tendencies: quest of identity, reconstruction of relics, and interest in development.

(1.) In some regions of the North – though by far not in all – traditional sports and games are today regarded as a particular cultural heritage and as elements of regional identity. This is the case on the Swedish island of Gotland where *varpa*, *park* and other games are halfway transformed into ‘national sports’. In Iceland, *glima* wrestling became in the early twentieth century a part of youth movement and national resurrection. In parts of Norway, *skotthyll* is a regional sport. And in Greenland, Inuit games and competitions are arranged, similar to ‘Eskimo Olympics’ in Canada.

(2.) In other regions of the North, traditional games are mostly a topic for historical and ethnographic reconstruction. Some games have survived in the form of children’s games and are practiced outside public attention and control. Whether these traditional children’s games are actually disappearing under the influence of educational institution culture or whether they are developing vividly and with new dynamics after the children’s own – and pedagogically mostly undiscovered – premises, is an open point of discussion. The contradiction of these different assumptions was regarded as an important challenge: Have we to talk of disappearance, ‘underground’ survival or actual revival of the games? The debate demands future research in order to clear up the picture.

(3.) Play and game is not only something to look back, but also to look forward to. Games contribute to development – in education and in the popular culture of welfare and wellness. This becomes especially evident when looking at some interdisciplinary potentials of traditional play and game, producing a sort of spin-off towards social and economic development:

Games and *festivity* are often linked together. This is the case for instance in the Danish festival of gymnastics (*Landsstævne*) and the Breton festival of Lorient where traditional games are used side by side with Celtic music and rock music. The Tanzanian *ngoma* is another way of combining social body culture, and festivity.

Games, *music and dance* play together. They have a common place among others under the umbrella of “International Council of Organizations for Folklore Festivals and Folk Art” (CIOFF) and – as a national example – in the Breton organisation of music and culture, *Dastum*.

Games, *handicraft* and toy production can be combined. This was started by the “Flemish Central Office of Volkssport”.

Games and *visual art* can be connected in many ways. There is the tradition of Nordic fairy tale and troll illustrations, there are styles of avant-garde art, and there can be used actual pop fantasy, comic strips and computer games.

Games and ‘*Sport for all*’ may join each other. This is what is tried under the umbrella of “International Sport and Culture Association” (ISCA), by the large traditional-sports festivals of TAFISA and by recent initiatives of ‘national traditional sports’ in East Asia (Pfister 2004, Lee 2004).

Games and *tourism* may be also meeting. One of their meeting places is the International Game Park in Gerlev, Denmark. Games and toys offer also possibilities to raise the quality development of souvenir production.

Traditional play and game, thus, deliver perspectives for innovations in-between the cultural genres. They challenge the established cultural habits and the sector-orientation of the dominating policies.

The report concluded that children's culture (*børnekultur*) is not only culture *for* children (mediated top-down to them), nor just culture *with* children (in educational framework). But children's culture is essentially culture *by* children, whose play and game can be fertile for new developments in other cultural fields.

By this bottom-up perspective, the Nordic initiatives of traditional games meet with the *ngoma* case from Tanzania. The people – whether children of Scandinavia or farmers from Sukuma – and their practices are the starting point, not the systems and their administrators. This contrasts fundamentally the dominant strategy of so-called sport development.

The developmental functionalism of sports

The dominant ideology of 'development' has found its paradigmatic expression in West German *Sportentwicklungshilfe* (sport development aid). The philosophy of sport development aid is a comprehensive attempt to write sports into the change of society in general (Digel/Fornoff 1989). This theory – connected with a practice of economic and administrative support – has postulated six central "functions" of modern Western sports for development:

1. Sport as an instrument for the formation of personality
2. Sport as an instrument of integration – social and national integration, nation building
3. Sport as an instrument of identification
4. Sport as an instrument of health policies
5. Sport as an instrument of equalization – demanding equal chances for all
6. Sport as an instrument to satisfy basic demands.

Furthermore, five more functions have been named as important and useful:

7. Sport as educational support
8. Sport as instrument to make social structures more dynamic – effectuated by sport clubs, functional differentiation and institution building
9. Sport as an instrument of economic and foreign policies – useful for tourism, labour market and advertising
10. Sport as an instrument of peace and understanding among the peoples
11. Sport as an instrument of emancipation – especially of the woman.

This understanding of development includes many ideas of good will and positive-thinking. But as a whole, it can be characterized as centralist, functionalist and evolutionist.

The understanding of 'sport' presumes a *unitary central* organization (as in Germany), regulating 'the one sport' after general principles, which are defined by hierarchical central administrations. There is no place for the multiplicity of 'other' movement cultures, which are ridiculed as being old-fashioned and discriminated as being dysfunctional.

The term of the '*function*' underlines this abstract logic by giving associations of (pseudo-) mathematical precision. 'Function' plays together with the term of 'system'. 'System' and 'function' make up the basic pillars of system-functionalism as a philosophy of

analytical order, modelled after administrative premises and organizing knowledge along bureaucratic sectors limits.

If development is understood as '*evolution*', one continues the older ideology of 'progress': There is only one way 'forth', and we, the West, can teach the others how to do it the right way. 'We are the experts – the others are the learners.'

The methodological profile of this Western 'developmentalism' reflects some deeper problems of relational and political character:

(1.) The *hierarchy between top-sport and popular sport* implies a power perspective top-down. This contradicts fundamentally the values of equality, health for all and democracy inside society.

(2.) The concept of sport development after Western premises favours *sport emigration* towards the metropolis of Western sports. Sport training becomes a first step towards leaving one's own home region for the worldwide market circus. Sport development aid contributes – against its own intentions – to neo-colonial globalisation at the cost of the national cultures (Bale/Maguire 1994).

(3.) The developmental functionalism implies a fundamental *non-recognition* of the 'other' practices. All what is not mainstream sport is regarded as 'functionally' outdated, 'medieval' or even 'stone-age'. Non-recognition is a way of cultural alienation. It damages the self-understanding of the people and hampers their quest of identity.

In short, the ideological superstructure reflects (neo-) colonial unbalances.

Another development: traditional games promoted by 'Sport for All'

However and contrary to the 'functionalist' assumptions, traditional games and festivities have reappeared in the real world of sports. And the recent diffusion of 'exotic' body cultures to the Western metropolis point into the direction of another development, too. This 'other development' is not at all uniform, but consists of contradictory elements as well. Two different sides are represented by Sport for All as promoted from above and by social movements acting from below.

Folk game festivals have recently expanded in the connexion with Sport for All. Sport for All was since the late 1960s launched as a concept for mass involvement in sports by European ministers and sport organizations. The existing competitive sport model was regarded as too narrow for social development and should be supplemented by sports for health and fitness, for culture and social integration. Though the concept downgraded the principle of competition, the IOC joined this strategy, trying to control the development.

Among the activities, which were proposed for the healthy and socially integrating Sport for All, ethnic games, traditional sports and folk games soon received special attention. Even leaders of the established sport discovered that competitive sport might be a one-way road, which excluded many of those who should be embraced by healthy sports.

"World sport must not remain a one-way street... Let us not forget the traditional sports in our own countries lest we have the same experience as the Solomon Islands Sports Council. The Secretary General, Mr. Davidson Nwaeramo, wrote to us that he had been talking with some of the island's elders about traditional games on the Solomons and goes on to say: ... It was evident that there were traditional games played on our islands. However, when in the 1950s modern sports like soccer and cricket were introduced, the traditional games ceased to exist."

With these words, the president of the German Sport Federation (DSB) deplored in 1986 the disappearance of traditional games and expressed the wish to include them now again. The

statement was made at an international congress of Sport for All where also other speakers, for instance from Kenya, pointed to the traditional sports and dances in their countries. The executive director of the German DSB referred to among others African dances, Burmese tug-of-war, Chinese tai chi, Inuit games, Indonesian (?) dragon boats, Korean seesaw and Portuguese stilt-walking.

A result was the festival *Traditional Sports and Games of the World*, arranged in Bonn in 1992. It was organized by the German Sport Federation together with *Trim and Fitness – International Sport for All Association* (TAFISA) and sponsored by Volkswagen and Lufthansa. In the name of 'sports culture' and 'cultural identity', the festival presented a broad panorama from Danish village games to Brazilian fighting dance *capoeira*, and from Chinese martial art *wushu* to Flemish pub games. The festival became a success and was later on repeated in Bangkok 1996, and again in Hanover 2000 in connexion with the World's Exposition.

However, the development of traditional games inside Sport for All cannot only be understood as an initiative from the side of authorities in sport and state. The strategies from above reacted to what happened in the world of popular movements, in civil society.

Popular movements, identity, and social indignation: games developed from below

Since the 1970/80s, indeed, social and regional movements have developed outside the systems of the state and the market setting a new agenda. Alternative youth cultures, regional nationalism, and social indignation from below, from civil society, contributed to body culture.

Impulses for the discovery of folk sports came in the early 1970s from the so-called New Games. New Games were an outcome of the "new movement culture", which had begun in California. In connexion with the movement against the war in Vietnam and with hippie culture, young people engaged in non-competitive play and game, they developed new sports and rediscovered existing games. The New Games obtained remarkable influence in the Nordic countries, especially in Finland and Denmark.

At about the same time, in several regions of Europe there arose a new interest in reviving and preserving traditional folk sports. Among the first to engage in this field were people from Flemish *volksport*. *Volksport* consisted typically of urban pub games and popular sports organized by local clubs. Having been neglected during longer time, they received now new attention in a situation of social and national tension. The youth revolt of the 1960s expressed itself by ethnic national uprising of the Flemish people against the Belgian central state. Sport for All was launched in Belgium as a democratisation of sports, parallel with the federalization of the state. In this connexion, folk games received academic status. Also Basque competitions of force and Breton folk games profited from ethnic unrest (Barreau/Jaouen 1998 and 2001, Liponski/Jaouen 2003, Guibert/Jaouen 2005).

Another new phenomenon was the spread of folk sports from Third World countries to Western metropolis, which often happened in the context of youth cultures. *Capoeira*, a traditional Afro-Brazilian sport, became popular among young people in European cities such as Amsterdam, Berlin and Paris. *Tai chi* and *wushu* – historically based on Chinese warrior training and magic folk practices – were now practiced worldwide. The Indonesian martial art *pencak silat* became a Western sport. Immigrant cultures (re-) invented new movement forms like the *bhangra* dance of South Asians in Britain.

Anti-colonial movements in the Third World joined the game, stimulated by the "spirit of Bandung" (1955) of African and Asian nations. Radical countries among the Non-Aligned Nations – as Libya and Algeria – tried to develop traditional games as an alternative to Western colonial sport (Fates 1994).

All this did not only concern ‘old games’. Western practices have also given birth to new folk practices in Africa, Asia and the Americas. Trobriand cricket became the most well-known example, transforming a colonial sport into a Melanesian folk festivity of dance, sport, carnival and gift exchange. Disco dance appeared in China as *disike*, old people’s disco, which became especially popular among elderly women. The Danish-Tanzanian exchange around *ngoma* is a part of this colourful picture.

Some sharper political edges of modern folk sports showed when the Soviet Union broke down around 1989/91 under the pressure of democratic movements and ethnic nationalism. Folk sports and people’s festivals, which had been repressed in the Soviet era, were now revived in many parts of the former empire. The Kasakh New Year’s festivity *Nauryz* reappeared with its dances and games. Mongolians returned in the sign of Genghis Khan to ancient festivities with nomad equestrianism, belt wrestling, and bow and arrow. Tatars held their spring time holiday *Sabantuy* again, with belt wrestling *korash* in its centre. The Baltic peoples assembled at large song festivals, which gave their political change the name of ‘singing revolution’. And Inuit people from Siberia and Alaska met in drum dance and winter festivity *Kivgiq*.

In post-Franco Spain, folk sports accompanied the process of democratic federalization, too. In Basque country, Catalonia and on the Canary Islands, folk sports became active factors in the marking of regional identity. In August 1992, the Olympic Games of Barcelona were supplied – or contrasted – by a festival of Spanish folk sports, showing 40 activities of force, goal throwing, traditional wrestling and ball game *pelota*. This happened in the context of Catalan nationalism, which expressed itself not only by a ‘war of the flags’ around the Olympics, but also by the Catalan traditional dance *sardana* and the folk acrobatic gymnastics *castells de xiquets*, building human towers, which were included into the Olympic ceremony.

Old games as new games: ‘We talk – you listen’

All this is not just a tale of romanticism, of dreams about a ‘renaissance of the old days’. ‘Traditional games’ are themselves a colonial construction (Bale 2002). When Siberian Buriats assemble to hold their popular festivity *Sukharban* today, they do not just continue or restore their ‘old traditions’. The players, the dancers, and the public combine very different and contradictory traditions of Buddhist Lamaism and Soviet sport, of modern state folklore and sponsored market fashion (Krist 2004). ‘Old games’ develop as new games. Popular games are hybrids.

In any case, the reappearance of traditional games and their actual transformations question our categories of ‘evolution’ and ‘development’, of ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’, of ‘forward’ and backward’ in history. Once it was ‘progressive’ to substitute popular games by modern Western sport and by disciplinary gymnastics. Now, popular movements ‘back to tradition’ have pushed developments ‘forward’ – even towards democratic revolution.

Development is not one way. Development is developments in plural.

‘Old’ games, practiced today, are new games. What is happening is neither progress nor regress, but structural change in a world of new contradictions. Placed neither here nor there on the time axis, popular games are a joker.

The games reject the role, which one ascribes them as primitive forerunners. When colonial thinking tells, that all have to listen to the ‘most developed’ Western experts of sport, popular games give paradoxical answers. By body language, games say what a Native American philosopher, Vine Deloria (1970), once has expressed in Lakota Indian words: “We talk – you listen”.

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