

WHY WE PLAY
AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDY

Roberte Hamayon

Enlarged Edition

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Foreword by Michael Puett



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FOREWORD

In praise of play

MICHAEL PUETT

Always contextualize. Always historicize. Always focus on the particular and the specific. These have become basic mantras in cultural anthropology, as well as the humanities in general. And with these mantras have come a deep suspicion of wide-ranging comparative studies, and in particular a deep suspicion of the general categories that undergird such comparative work. Terms like myth, ritual, and sacrifice have come to be treated with wariness—as remnants of an earlier anthropology that had not yet shaken off its ethnocentric biases.

This turn to contextualized studies, this focus on indigenous terminologies, has been crucial for the field. But the concurrent suspicion of comparative studies and comparative categories has come at a great cost. Long gone are the generalist studies that would define a topic—say, the gift—and then explore the complexities of that activity through a comparative study of the different modes in which it has appeared across cultures. Such studies are now often seen as inherently ethnocentric, since the categories are seen as being defined with implicit reference to a dominant (usually Western and usually Christian) culture, with the preconceptions of that culture then being superimposed on very different practices.

This is one of the reasons Roberte Hamayon's *Why we play: An anthropological study* is such an exciting and important study. Hamayon happily takes what

she calls a generalist approach—the approach that defined the great works of classical anthropology like Mauss' *The gift*, or Hubert and Mauss' *Sacrifice*. The approach, in other words, that is now so rare.

Hamayon certainly agrees that the categories we have inherited from these classical works need to be rethought. Yet, her response is not to reject generalist categories per se but rather to argue that we need a new one: play.

As she argues so persuasively, play has often occupied a minor role in anthropological theorizing—even in the heyday of generalist, cross-cultural studies organized around themes. Play has been deemed the non-serious activity performed by children, or by adults in their leisure. Even if we do look at play, it has typically been seen as simply a less serious form of ritual. A lesser cousin, in other words, to the important activities that should be the focus of our anthropological analyses.

So why have we failed to bring play fully into our studies? Hamayon argues that this is based on a latent set of associations traceable back to Christianity's rejection of the Roman Circus Games and related forms of play. She then generalizes the point. Forms of religious practice that emphasize belief in a single great deity—a deity that cannot be imitated, represented, played with—also entail a rejection of play. The field of anthropology, she argues, implicitly carried on these same biases when we focused all of our energies on ritual at the expense of play, on the *agon* of the gift as opposed to the play of gift-giving.

To break down these biases, Hamayon begins her study with indigenous notions of play. Hamayon is one of the world's leading authorities on the Buryat, and she accordingly begins her study here. Through a beautiful series of analyses, Hamayon explores Buryat understandings of play, Buryat performances involving play, and the significance of paradox in Buryat practices.

These notions then become the basis for her larger theoretical and comparative discussions—discussions that range across historical and ethnographic materials and even include studies in cognitive science. One of the aspects that makes Hamayon's work so compelling and so powerful is that she insists on the full implications of her generalizing approach: the play of children, the play of a shaman, and the play of gift-giving are all treated as various manifestations of a comparable way of acting in the world.

The resulting analysis proves, ironically (although one is tempted to say predictably), that it is precisely by *not* undertaking comparative studies that we are most at risk of recapitulating our ethnocentric biases. It is on the contrary through generalizing works such as these that we begin to alter our

understandings. When reading Hamayon, one feels the excitement that earlier generations must have felt when reading the great works of Mauss: through the generalized lens of a comparative anthropology, one reads basic practices in new ways.

So what happens when we take such a generalist approach to play? What happens when we see play not as a poor second cousin to ritual but rather as a fundamental way of human acting in the world? When we develop an anthropology that takes paradox and play as a starting point, rather than as a secondary object of analysis?

Beginning with the Buryat material, and then continuing from a comparative perspective, Hamayon notes the overriding significance of the body in everything from etymologies of the notion of play to the practices of play themselves. She then develops a conceptual vocabulary to analyze the complexity of these embodiments. Play, she argues, is a fundamental way of interacting with the world, involving a fictional framework with values and possibilities different from empirical reality. The dimensions of play are then analyzed through the operations of imitation, abstraction, and inference—operations through which humans develop the dispositions and attitudes required of particular modes of being.

The resulting exploration forces a rethinking of the seemingly more serious activities of ritual or prayer or sacrifice. Far from being a less serious version of the same sort of thing as prayer and sacrifice, it turns out that play involves fundamentally different types of activities, implying different types of relationships.

Take, for example, Hamayon's reading of shamanic acts. By imitating the movements of animals, shamans create a frame within which they also grant existence to the relevant animals spirits. Within this frame, the shaman interacts with spirits in relationships of partnerships, albeit with the shaman as the more active partner. This is contrasted with the purely hierarchal relationships created through prayer and sacrifice.

And this is also why, as Hamayon argues, play pleases the spirits but displeases God. Play builds a homology between humans and immaterial entities—something unacceptable to religions defined by a transcendent, non-imitable deity. Hence the Christian opposition to play as being anything other than children's games or adult leisure—an opposition, as we have seen, that leaked into anthropological theorizing as well.

Hamayon's readings also force us to see other dimensions of the activities that have become classical examples in the annals of anthropology. Take the gift.

Since Mauss we have focused on the *agon* of the gift, on the endless competitive acts of gifting in order to best an opponent or render him submissive: the hierarchies created through the potlatch, the big men of the *moka* exchange, the ranked relationships resulting from the *kula* ring. But missing in such accounts is the play that underlies the practice of gift-giving. We have explored only one dimension of the gift, and missed so many others.

Or take luck. Techniques of dealing with indeterminacy and randomness involve an inherent element of play—something that can be traced through activities as seemingly diverse as hunting and divination. Hence the decision by the medieval Church in France to forbid games of chance: again, the displeasure that God has with play. Looking at play opens new ways of thinking about practices that we have long known about but never explored fully.

Or drama. Or even fiction itself. The list goes on. One of the exciting aspects of Hamayon's work is the sheer volume of activities that we are asked to think anew once we start exploring the worlds of play.

Underlying all of these examples is the notion of play as a form of reciprocal interaction in which relationships to alterity are developed and worked upon. Suddenly, we have a new set of dimensions of human activity to analyze. Instead of rejecting our generalist categories of ritual and sacrifice, we have another category to work with. Moreover, it is a category that forces us to rethink our other ones.

I mentioned above that the generalist approaches of classical anthropology have been criticized for being overly based on ethnocentric conceptions. This is certainly in part true, as Hamayon has argued as well. But it is also important to remember that these generalist studies in anthropology have always been based upon indigenous understandings that were then expanded into broader, comparative categories. Hubert and Mauss' study of sacrifice may, in retrospect, have been overly indebted to Christian understandings. But it was a study based primarily upon Sanskrit theories. And the same can be said of all the major comparative studies of anthropology: the goal was always to begin from indigenous understandings and build comparatively from there to develop larger theoretical perspectives.

Hamayon is arguing that we need to return to such approaches. The way to develop our generalist theories is to develop them further, as we continue our exploration of indigenous understandings. The way to develop our generalist categories is to develop more, and to rethink our earlier categories accordingly. Hamayon has done this beautifully by beginning with indigenous Buryat

understandings, generalizing to comparable activities throughout the world, and from there rethinking our larger anthropological categories in general.

And, as we develop our theories in a world of indeterminacy, play offers a powerful way of thinking about the work we are trying to do.

Play, in short, is an inherent dimension of human activity, and one that anthropology needs to start taking very seriously.