



# The Agon Motif and the Concept of Movement Culture

## Authors' contribution:

- A) conception and design of the study
- B) acquisition of data
- C) analysis and interpretation of data
- D) manuscript preparation
- E) obtaining funding

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## ABSTRACT

At a symposium on 12 June 2009 on "Homo Movens: International symposium on movement culture" at the occasion of my 'rite of passage' to the emeritus status at the KU Leuven, John W. Loy, co-authored by W. Robert Morford, presented a paper on "The agon motif: A study of the contest element in sport". I am very glad that this excellent paper will finally be published as it was not included in "The making of sport history: Disciplines, identities and the historiography of sport" (Delheye 2014), which appeared five years later as a so called "...crystallization of the international symposium." (p. XVII). Moreover, some of these contributions were severely criticized by Allen Guttmann (2014).

In this introduction, I will try to clarify the concepts of 'ludodiversity' and 'movement culture', which I have often had the chance to discuss with John Loy personally. We did – of course – not always agree but this kind of 'joking relationship' with John Loy was and still is for me a "... joy forever"!

ludodiversity, movement culture, homo movens, agon motif

## KEYWORDS

## Continuity and change

Our bodies are made for movement: humans are therefore to be considered as 'homobiles'. Throughout history (based on written records) and even throughout prehistory (based on archaeological evidence) humankind has been involved in a wide variety of movement activities. This stability or continuity in our cultural movement behavior is explained by our physical movement capacities such as strength, speed, flexibility, balance, endurance, coordination etc., which have not changed a single bit ever since humans have evolved to Homo Sapiens Sapiens. We are indeed made of exactly the same "...muscle and blood, skin and bone ..." as our predecessors.

If today we can run, jump, throw, fight, dance or engage in all kinds of play or games, our ancestors could do the same. Nevertheless, archaeologists and historians have clearly shown how the movement activities of each epoch vary considerably, according to the specific emphasis laid on either playful, competitive, performance orientated or expressive forms of movement. Human movement forms are thus a specific *text* or content, which is shaped in a specific socio-cultural *context*. That is why they have changed considerably throughout time.

## Ludodiversity

‘Continuity’ and ‘change’ also applies to the rich diversity of movement forms which appears from cross-cultural comparisons. Anthropologists have documented both the great similarities as well as the wide variation in the movement forms of different ethnic groups and cultures. In analogy to the ‘biodiversity’ concept, I have proposed the concept of ‘ludodiversity’ in order to raise our awareness for safeguarding this cultural heritage of ‘endangered movement species’ (Renson, 2004; 2016).

Sport can be considered as an anachronistic and ethnocentric term, both from a diachronic and from a cross-cultural perspective. Sport refers to a rather recent modern and typical Western cultural product, which has been exported and imported worldwide. Imposing this concept of sport on periods of the past or on other non-Western cultures may be considered as a form of anachronism on the one hand and of cultural imperialism on the other hand. Some postmodernist sport sociologists have therefore proposed the more value-free term and concept of ‘body culture’, but in my opinion ‘movement culture’ is a more adequate denominator.

## Movement culture

The concept of movement culture encompasses four spheres of activities, which are historical and cultural universals, elements shared by all groups of people throughout time and place. Physical exercises are part of the ‘instrumental’ physical culture sphere of *Homo Exercens*. Physical contests are part of the ‘competitive’ sphere of *Homo Agonizans*. Movement games belong to the ‘ludic’ play sphere of *Homo Ludens*. Acrobatics and dances are part of the ‘expressive’ performance sphere of *Homo Exhibens*. The ‘model of *Homo Movens*’ shows how these four spheres are all intertwined and how ‘sport’ occupies a central position, where the four spheres overlap each other (Renson, 2000).

Here follows a concise overview of the four major components of the components, starting with the ‘instrumental’ sphere and then rotating anticlockwise (like in track athletics) to the three other ones.

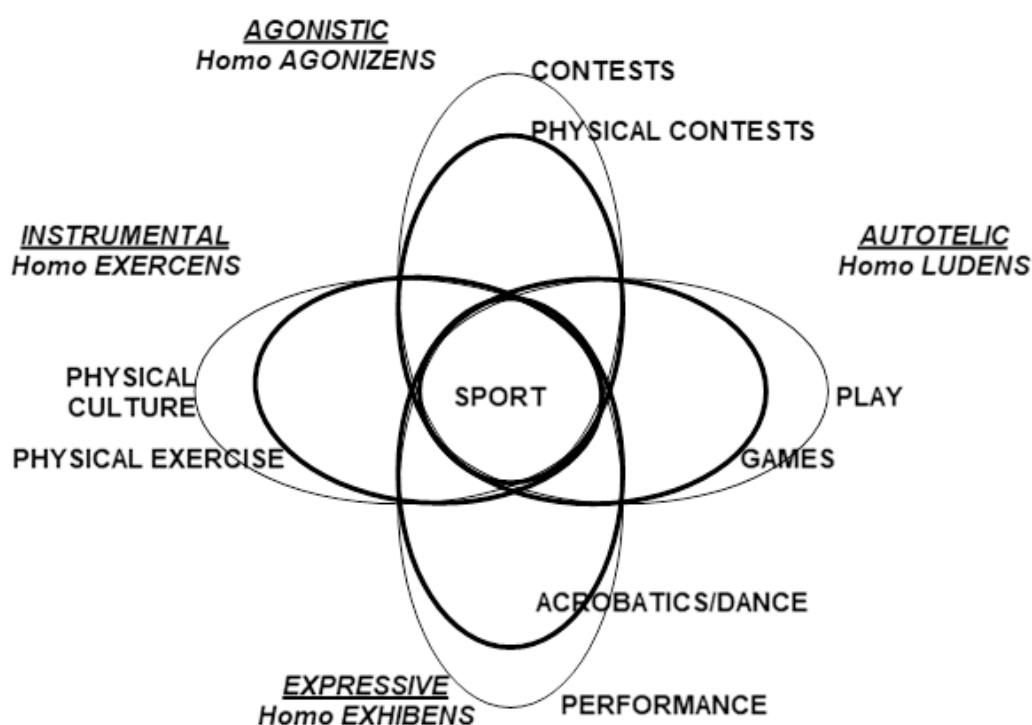


Figure 1: The concept of movement culture

Source: Renson, 2000.

There exists an abundant literature on the ‘instrumental’ domain of physical culture through the physical education tradition in the Western world. Roberta Park (2014) has given an excellent overview of the – sometimes Platonic – relationship between the historiography of physical education and the historiography of sport. Dance, acrobatics and other forms of public performances are the ‘expressive’ sphere of Homo Exhibens. They are cultural universals but they vary widely in their appearance and cultural meaning (Royce, 1977; Hanna, 1987).

The Dutch scholar Johan Huizinga was the academic trailblazer for the study of ‘autotelic’ play (play for its own sake) with his *Homo Ludens* (1938) of which the original Dutch subtitle was: “*Essay to define the play-element of culture.*” I have tried to point out how the German (1944), French (1951) and English translation (1955) of his critical essay have struggled with the fact that there is no equivalent term for the English concept of ‘game’ in Dutch, German nor French and that his work was not intended as an essay on play in culture, but as an essay on the playful (creative) element of culture (Renson, 2003; 2009).

Allen Guttman (1978, p. 6) stated that Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens* is seriously flawed by his inclusion of legal contests and even warfare under the rubric of play and also Brian Sutton-Smith, in his remarkable book “*The ambiguity of play*” (1997, p. 79), has criticized that Huizinga has idealized certain kinds of contest play.

For all this, the present article by John W. Loy and W. Robert Momford offers an intriguing insight in the ‘agonistic’ element of movement culture, not to be confused with gratuitous play. John Loy and Graham Hesketh (1995) had already dedicated an extensive analysis of *Competitive play on the plains: an analysis of games and warfare among native American warrior societies 1800-1850*, and I was very honored when Loy presented the topic during the international symposium in Leuven in 2009. Finally, justice has been served by publishing the Loy-Morford paper in its original form.

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