III

PLAY AND CONTEST AS CIVILIZING FUNCTIONS

WHEN speaking of the play-element in culture we do not mean that among the various activities of civilized life an important place is reserved for play, nor do we mean that civilization has arisen out of play by some evolutionary process, in the sense that something which was originally play passed into something which was no longer play and could henceforth be called culture. The view we take in the following pages is that culture arises in the form of play, that it is played from the very beginning. Even those activities which aim at the immediate satisfaction of vital needs—hunting, for instance—tend, in archaic society, to take on the play-form. Social life is endued with supra-biological forms, in the shape of play, which enhance its value. It is through this playing that society expresses its interpretation of life and the world. By this we do not mean that play turns into culture, rather that in its earliest phases culture has the play-character, that it proceeds in the shape and the mood of play. In the twin union of play and culture, play is primary. It is an objectively recognizable, a concretely definable thing, whereas culture is only the term which our historical judgement attaches to a particular instance. Such a conception approximates to that of Frobenius who, in his *Kulturgeschichte Afrikas*, speaks of the genesis of culture "als eines aus dem natürlichen 'Sein' aufgestiegenen 'Spieles' " (as a "play" emerging out of natural "being"). In my opinion, however, Frobenius conceives the relationship between play and culture too mystically and describes it altogether too vaguely. He fails to put his finger on the point where culture emerges from play.

As a culture proceeds, either progressing or regressing, the original relationship we have postulated between play and non-play does not remain static. As a rule the play-element gradually recedes into the background, being absorbed for the most part in the sacred sphere. The remainder crystallizes as knowledge: folklore, poetry, philosophy, or in the various forms of judicial and social life. The original play-element is then almost completely

hidden behind cultural phenomena. But at any moment, even in a highly developed civilization, the play-"instinct" may reassert itself in full force, drowning the individual and the mass in the intoxication of an immense game.

Naturally enough, the connection between culture and play is particularly evident in the higher forms of social play where the latter consists in the orderly activity of a group or two opposed groups. Solitary play is productive of culture only in a limited degree. As we have indicated before, all the basic factors of play, both individual and communal, are already present in animal life—to wit, contests, performances, exhibitions, challenges, preenings, struttings and showings-off, pretences and binding rules. It is doubly remarkable that birds, phylogenetically so far removed from human beings, should have so much in common with them. Woodcocks perform dances, crows hold flying-matches, bower-birds and others decorate their nests, song-birds chant their melodies. Thus competitions and exhibitions as amusements do not proceed from culture, they rather precede it.

"Playing together" has an essentially antithetical character. As a rule it is played between two parties or teams. A dance, a pageant, a performance may, however, be altogether lacking in antithesis. Moreover "antithetical" does not necessarily mean "contending" or "agonistic". A part-song, a chorus, a minuet, the voices in a musical ensemble, the game of cat's cradle—so interesting to the anthropologist because developed into intricate systems of magic with some primitive peoples—are all examples of antithetical play which need not be agonistic although emulation may sometimes be operative in them. Not infrequently an activity which is self-contained—for instance the performance of a theatrical piece or a piece of music—may incidentally pass into the agonistic category by becoming the occasion of competition for prizes, either in respect of the arrangement or the execution of it, as was the case with Greek drama.

Among the general characteristics of play we reckoned tension and uncertainty. There is always the question: "will it come off?" This condition is fulfilled even when we are playing patience, doing jig-saw puzzles, acrostics, crosswords, diabolo, etc. Tension and uncertainty as to the outcome increase enormously when the antithetical element becomes really agonistic in the play of groups. The passion to win sometimes threatens to obliterate the levity proper to a game. An important distinction emerges here. In

games of pure chance the tension felt by the player is only feebly communicated to the onlooker. In themselves, gambling games are very curious subjects for cultural research, but for the development of culture as such we must call them unproductive. They are sterile, adding nothing to life or the mind. The picture changes as soon as play demands application, knowledge, skill, courage and strength. The more "difficult" the game the greater the tension in the beholders. A game of chess may fascinate the onlookers although it still remains unfruitful for culture and devoid of visible charm. But once a game is beautiful to look at its cultural value is obvious; nevertheless its aesthetic value is not indispensable to culture. Physical, intellectual, moral or spiritual values can equally well raise play to the cultural level. The more apt it is to raise the tone, the intensity of life in the individual or the group the more readily it will become part of civilization itself. The two ever-recurrent forms in which civilization grows in and as play are the sacred performance and the festal contest.

Here the question broached in our first chapter arises once more: are we entitled to include all contests unreservedly in the play-concept? We saw how the Greeks distinguished ἀγών from παιδιά. This could be explained on etymological grounds, since in παιδιά the childish was evoked so vividly that it could hardly have been applied to the serious contests that formed the core of Hellenic social life. The word ἀγών, on the other hand, defined the contest from quite a different point of view. Its original meaning appears to have been a "gathering" (compare ἀγορά—"market-place"—to which ἀγών is related). Thus, as a term, it had nothing to do with play proper. The essential oneness of play and contest, however, still peeps through when, as we have seen, Plato uses παίγνιον for the armed ritual dances of the Kouretes (τά τῶν Κουρήτων ἐνόπλια παίγνια) and παιδιά for sacred performances in general. That the majority of Greek contests were fought out in deadly earnest is no reason for separating the agon from play, or for denying the play-character of the former. The contest has all the formal and most of the functional features of a game. Dutch and German both have a word which expresses this unity very clearly: *wedkamp* and *Wettkampf* respectively. It contains the idea of a play-ground (Latin *campus*) and that of a wager (*Wette*). It is, moreover, the normal word for "contest" in those languages. We would allude once more to the remarkable testimony from the Second Book of Samuel, where a fight to the death

between two groups was still called "playing", the word used being taken from the sphere of laughter. On numerous Greek vases we can see that a contest of armed men is characterized as an agon by the presence of the flute-players who accompany it. At the Olympic games there were duels fought to the death.[1] The mighty *tours de force* accomplished by Thor and his companions in their contest with the Man of Utgardaloki are called *leika*, "play". For all these reasons it would not seem overbold to consider the terminological disparity between contest and play in Greek as the more or less accidental failure to abstract a general concept that would have embraced both. In short, the question as to whether we are entitled to include the contest in the play-category can be answered unhesitatingly in the affirmative.

Like all other forms of play, the contest is largely devoid of purpose. That is to say, the action begins and ends in itself, and the outcome does not contribute to the necessary life-processes of the group. The popular Dutch saying to the effect that "it is not the marbles that matter, but the game", expresses this clearly enough. Objectively speaking, the result of the game is unimportant and a matter of indifference. On a visit to England the Shah of Persia is supposed to have declined the pleasure of attending a race meeting, saying that he knew very well that one horse runs faster than another. From his point of view he was perfectly right: he refused to take part in a play-sphere that was alien to him, preferring to remain outside. The outcome of a game or a contest—except, of course, one played for pecuniary profit—is only interesting to those who enter into it as players or spectators, either personally and locally, or else as listeners by radio or viewers by television, etc., and accept its rules. They have become play-fellows and choose to be so. For them it is immaterial whether Oxford wins, or Cambridge.

"There is something at stake"—the essence of play is contained in that phrase. But this "something" is not the material result of the play, not the mere fact that the ball is in the hole, but the ideal fact that the game is a success or has been successfully concluded. Success gives the player a satisfaction that lasts a shorter or a longer while as the case may be. The pleasurable feeling of satisfaction mounts with the presence of spectators, though these are not essential to it. A person who gets a game of patience

[1]Plutarch deemed this form of contest contrary to the idea of the agon, in which Miss Harrison (*Themis*, pp. 221, 323) agrees with him, wrongly, as it seems to me.

"out" is doubly delighted when somebody is watching him. In all games it is very important that the player should be able to boast of his success to others. The angler is a familiar type in this respect. We shall have to return to this self-approbation later on.

Closely connected with play is the idea of winning. Winning, however, presupposes a partner or opponent; solitary play knows no winning, and the attainment of the desired objective here cannot be called by that name.

What is "winning", and what is "won"? Winning means showing oneself superior in the outcome of a game. Nevertheless, the evidence of this superiority tends to confer upon the winner a semblance of superiority in general. In this respect he wins something more than the game as such. He has won esteem, obtained honour; and this honour and esteem at once accrue to the benefit of the group to which the victor belongs. Here we have another very important characteristic of play: success won readily passes from the individual to the group. But the following feature is still more important: the competitive "instinct" is not in the first place a desire for power or a will to dominate. The primary thing is the desire to excel others, to be the first and to be honoured for that. The question whether, in the result, the power of the individual or the group will be increased, takes only a second place. The main thing is to have won. The purest example of a victory which has nothing visible or enjoyable about it save the mere fact of winning, is afforded by a game of chess.

We play or compete "for" something. The object for which we play and compete is first and foremost victory, but victory is associated with all the various ways in which it can be enjoyed—for instance, as a triumph celebrated by the group with massed pomps, applause and ovations. The fruits of victory may be honour, esteem, prestige. As a rule, however, something more than honour is associated with winning. We see this even in the "staking out" of a game: the marking of its limits. Every game has its stake. It can be of material or symbolical value, but also ideal. The stake can be a gold cup or a jewel or a king's daughter or a shilling; the life of the player or the welfare of the whole tribe. It can be a prize or a "gage". This is a most significant word. Etymologically and semantically it is related to the Latin *vadium* (German *Wette*), meaning a "pledge" in the sense of a purely symbolical object thrown down into the "ring" or play-

ground as a token of challenge. It is not quite identical with "prize", which conveys the idea of something intrinsically valuable—for instance, a sum of money—though it may be simply a laurel-wreath. It is very curious how the words "prize", "price" and "praise" all derive more or less directly from the Latin *pretium* but develop in different directions. *Pretium* arose originally in the sphere of exchange and valuation, and presupposed a counter-value. The mediaeval *pretium justum* or "just price" corresponded approximately to the idea of the modern "market value". Now while *price* remains bound to the sphere of economics, *prize* moves into that of play and competition, and *praise* acquires the exclusive signification of the Latin *laus*. Semantically, it is next to impossible to delimit the field proper to each of the three words. What is equally curious is to see how the word *wage*, originally identical with *gage* in the sense of a symbol of challenge, moves in the reverse direction of *pretium*—i.e. from the play-sphere to the economic sphere and becomes a synonym for "salary" or "earnings". We do not *play* for wages, we *work* for them. Finally, "gains" or "winnings" has nothing to do with any of these words etymologically, though semantically it pertains to both play and economics: the player receives his winnings, the merchant makes them.

We might say that proper to all the derivations of the Latin root *vad* is a sense of passion, of chance, of daring, as regards both economic activity and play activity. Pure avarice neither trades nor plays; it does not gamble. To dare, to take risks, to bear uncertainty, to endure tension—these are the essence of the play spirit. Tension adds to the importance of the game and, as it increases, enables the player to forget that he is only playing.

The Greek word for "prize"—ἆθλον—is derived by some from the same fruitful root *vad* just discussed. ἆθλον yields ἀθλητής, the athlete. Here the ideas of contest, struggle, exercise, exertion, endurance and suffering are united. If we bear in mind that in savage society the majority of agonistic activities really are "agonizing", involving as they do mental and physical hardship; and if we remember also the intimate connection between ἀγών and ἀγωνία (which latter word originally meant simply "contest", but later "death-struggle" and "fear"), we shall see that in *athletics* we are still moving in that sphere of serious competition which forms our theme.

Competition is not only "for" something but also "in" and

"with" something. People compete to be the first "in" strength or dexterity, in knowledge or riches, in splendour, liberality, noble descent, or in the number of their progeny. They compete "with" bodily strength or force of arms, with their reason or their fists, contending against one another with extravagant displays, big words, boasting, vituperation and finally with cunning and deceit. To our way of thinking, cheating as a means of winning a game robs the action of its play-character and spoils it altogether, because for us the essence of play is that the rules be kept—that it be fair play. Archaic culture, however, gives the lie to our moral judgement in this respect, as also does the spirit of popular lore. In the fable of the hare and the hedgehog the beau role is reserved for the false player, who wins by fraud. Many of the heroes of mythology win by trickery or by help from without. Pelops bribes the charioteer of Oenomaus to put wax pins into the axles. Jason and Theseus come through their tests successfully, thanks to Medea and Ariadne. Gunther owes his victory to Siegfried. The Kauravas in the *Mahābhārata* win by cheating at dice. Freya double-crosses Wotan into granting the victory to the Langobards. The Ases of Eddic mythology break the oath they have sworn to the Giants. In all these instances the act of fraudulently outwitting somebody else has itself become a subject for competition, a new play-theme, as it were.[1]

The hazy border-line between play and seriousness is illustrated very tellingly by the use of the words "playing" or "gambling" for the machinations on the Stock Exchange. The gambler at the roulette table will readily concede that he is playing; the stock-jobber will not. He will maintain that buying and selling on the off-chance of prices rising or falling is part of the serious business of life, at least of business life, and that it is an economic function of society. In both cases the operative factor is the hope of gain; but whereas in the former the pure fortuitousness of the thing is generally admitted (all "systems" notwithstanding), in the latter the player deludes himself with the fancy that he can calculate the future trends of the market. At any rate the difference of mentality is exceedingly small.

In this connection it is worth noting that two forms of business

[1] I have failed to discover a direct connection between the hero of the legends who attains his objective by fraud and cunning, and the divine figure who is at once the benefactor and deceiver of man. Cf. W. B. Kristensen, *De goddelijke bedrieger*, Mededeelingen der K. Akad. van Wetenschappen, afd. Lett. No. 3; and J. P. B. Josselin de Jong, *De oorsprong van den goddelijken bedrieger, ibid.* Lett. No. 1.

agreement in the hope of future fulfilment have sprung directly from the wager, so that it is a moot point whether play or serious interest came first. Towards the close of the Middle Ages we see, in Genoa and Antwerp, the emergence of life-insurance in the form of betting on future eventualities of a non-economic nature. Bets were made, for instance, "on the life and death of persons, on the birth of boys or of girls, on the outcome of voyages and pilgrimages, on the capture of sundry lands, places or cities".[1] Such contracts as these, even though they had already taken on a purely commercial character, were repeatedly proscribed as illegal games of chance, amongst others by Charles V.[2] At the election of a new Pope there was betting as at a horse-race to-day.[3] Even in the 17th century dealings in life-insurances were still called "betting".

Anthropology has shown with increasing clarity how social life in the archaic period normally rests on the antagonistic and antithetical structure of the community itself, and how the whole mental world of such a community corresponds to this profound dualism. We find traces of it everywhere. The tribe is divided into two opposing halves, called "phratriai" by the anthropologist, which are separated by the strictest exogamy. The two groups are further distinguished by their totem—a term somewhat recklessly jargonized out of the special field to which it belongs, but very convenient for scientific use. A man may be a raven-man or a tortoise-man, thereby acquiring a whole system of obligations, taboos, customs, objects of veneration peculiar to raven or tortoise as the case may be. The mutual relationship of the two tribal halves is one of contest and rivalry, but at the same time of reciprocal help and the rendering of friendly service. Together they enact, as it were, the public life of the tribe in a never-ending series of ceremonies precisely formulated and punctiliously performed. The dualism that sunders the two halves extends over their whole conceptual and imaginative world. Every creature, every thing has its place on one side or the other, so that the entire cosmos is framed in this classification.

[1]Anthonio van Neulighem, *Openbaringe van 't Italiaens boeckhouden*, 1631, pp. 25, 26, 77, 86 f., 91 f.

[2]Verachter, *Inventaire des Chartes d'Anvers*, No. 742, p. 215; *Coutumes de la ville d'Anvers* ii, p. 400, iv, p. 8; cf. E. Bensa, *Histoire du contrat d'assurance au moyen âge*, 1897, p. 84 f.: in Barcelona 1435, in Genoa, 1467: decretum ne asseveratio fieri possit super vita principum et locorum mutationes.

[3]R. Ehrenberg, *Das Zeitalter der Fugger*, Jena 1896, II, p. 19.

Along with the tribal division goes the sexual division, which is likewise the expression of a cosmic duality as in the Chinese *yin* and *yang*, the female and male principle respectively. These, alternating and collaborating with one another, maintain the rhythm of life. According to some, the origin of this sexual dualism as a philosophical system is supposed to have lain in the actual division of the tribe into groups of youths and maidens, who met at the great seasonal festivities to court one another in ritual form with alternate song and dance.

At these festivals the spirit of competition between the two opposing halves of the tribe or between the sexes comes fully into play. For no other great culture has the immensely civilizing influence of these multifarious festal competitions been more clearly elucidated than for ancient China, by Marcel Granet. Basing his reconstruction on an anthropological interpretation of ancient Chinese ritual songs, Granet was able to give an account of the early phases of Chinese culture as simple as it is convincing and scientifically accurate.

He describes the earliest phase of all as one in which rural clans celebrate the seasonal feasts by contests devised to promote fertility and the ripening of crops. It is a well-known fact that such an idea underlies most primitive ritual. Every ceremony well performed, every game or contest duly won, every act of sacrifice auspiciously concluded, fervently convinces archaic man that a boon and a blessing have thereby been procured for the community. The sacrifices or sacred dances have been successfully executed; now all is well, the higher powers are on our side, the cosmic order is safeguarded, social well-being is assured for us and ours. Of course this feeling is not to be imagined as the end-result of a series of reasonable deductions. It is rather a life-feeling, a feeling of satisfaction crystallized into faith more or less formulated in the mind.

According to Granet the winter festival, celebrated by the men in the men's house, bore a markedly dramatic character. In a state of ecstatic excitement and intoxication animal-dances were performed with masks, there were carousings and feastings, bets, tricks and *tours de force* of all kinds. Women were excluded, but the antithetical nature of the festival was still preserved. The effectiveness of the ceremonial depended on competition and regular alternation. There was a group of hosts and a group of guests. If one of them represented the *yang* principle, standing for sun,

warmth and summer, the other embodied *yin*, comprising moon, coldness, winter.

Granet's conclusions, however, go far beyond this picture of a pastoral, almost idyllic existence lived by scattered tribes against a background of pure nature. With the rise of chieftains and regional kingdoms within the immense spaces of China there developed, over and above the original, simple dualisms each comprising a single clan or tribe, a system of many competing groups covering an area of several clans or tribes put together, but still expressing their cultural life mainly in the festal and ritual contests. From these age-old seasonal contests between the parts of a tribe and then between whole tribes, a social hierarchy was born. The prestige won by the warriors in these sacred contests was the beginning of the feudalizing process so long dominant in China. "The spirit of competition," says Granet, "which animated the men's societies or brotherhoods and set them against one another during the winter festivities in tournaments of dance and song, comes at the beginning of the line of development that led to State forms and institutions."[1]

Even if we hesitate to go all the way with Granet, who derives the whole hierarchy of the later Chinese state from these primitive customs, we must admit that he has demonstrated in an altogether masterly fashion how the agonistic principle plays a part in the development of Chinese civilization far more significant even than the agon in the Hellenic world, and in which the essentially *ludic* character shows up much more clearly there than in Greece. For in ancient China almost every activity took the form of a ceremonial contest; the crossing of a river, the climbing of a mountain, cutting wood or picking flowers. A typical Chinese legend about the founding of a kingdom shows the hero-prince vanquishing his opponents by miraculous proofs of strength or amazing feats, thus demonstrating his superiority. As a rule the tourney ends in the death of the vanquished party.

The point for us is that all these contests, even where fantastically depicted as mortal and titanic combats, with all their peculiarities still belong to the domain of play. This becomes particularly evident as soon as we compare the contests which Chinese tradition has in mythical or heroic form, with those seasonal contests still in living use to-day in various parts of the world, namely

[1] *Civilization*, p. 204. José Ortega y Gasset has also outlined the same theme in his essay on *El origen deportivo del estado*, *El Espictador vii*, pp. 103-143, Madrid, 1930.

the tournaments of songs and games between the young men and girls of a group at the spring or autumn festivals. Granet, when dealing with this theme for ancient China in the light of the love-songs in the *Shih Ching*, mentioned similar festivals in Tonking, Tibet and Japan. An Annamite scholar, Nguyen van Huyen, has taken up the theme for Annam, where these customs were in full flower until quite recently, and given an excellent description of them in a thesis written in French.[1] Here we find ourselves in the midst of the play-sphere: antiphonal songs, ball-games, courtship, question games, riddle-solving, *jeux d'esprit*, all in the form of a lively contest between the sexes. The songs themselves are typical play-products with fixed rules, varied repetition of words or phrases, questions and answers. Anyone who wishes to have a striking illustration of the connection between play and culture could not do better than read Nguyen's book with its wealth of examples.

All these forms of contest betray their connection with ritual over and over again by the constant belief that they are indispensable for the smooth running of the seasons, the ripening of crops, the prosperity of the whole year.

If the outcome of a contest as such, as a performance, is deemed to influence the course of nature, it follows that the particular kind of contest through which this result is obtained is a matter of small moment. It is the winning itself that counts. Every victory *represents*, that is, realizes for the victor the triumph of the good powers over the bad, and at the same time the salvation of the group that effects it. The victory not only represents that salvation but, by so doing, makes it effective. Hence it comes about that the beneficent result may equally well flow from games of pure chance as from games in which strength, skill or wit decide the issue. Luck may have a sacred significance; the fall of the dice may signify and determine the divine workings; by it we may move the gods as efficiently as by any other form of contest. Indeed, we may go one further and say that for the human mind the ideas of happiness, luck and fate seem to lie very close to the realm of the sacred. In order to realize these mental associations we moderns have only to think of the sort of futile auguries we all used to practise in childhood without really believing in them, and which a perfectly balanced adult not in the least given to superstition may sometimes catch himself doing. As a rule we do not

[1] *Les chants alternés des garçons et des filles en Annam*, Paris, 1933.

attribute much importance to them. It is rather rare to find such futilities actually recorded in literature, but as an example I would refer you to the passage in Tolstoy's *Resurrection*, where one of the judges on entering the court says silently to himself: "If I reach my seat with an even number of steps I shall have no stomach pains to-day".

With many peoples dice-playing forms part of their religious practices.[1] The dualistic structure of a society in phratria is sometimes reflected in the two colours of their playing-boards or their dice. In the Sanskrit word *dyūtam* the significations of fighting and dicing merge. Very remarkable affinities exist between dice and arrows.[2] In the *Mahābhārata* the world itself is conceived as a game of dice which Siva plays with his queen.[3] The seasons, *ṛtu*, are represented as six men playing with gold and silver dice. Germanic mythology also tells of a game played by the gods on a playing-board: when the world was ordained the gods assembled for dicing together, and when it is to be born again after its destruction the rejuvenated Ases will find the golden playing-boards they originally had.[4]

The main action of the *Mahābhārata* hinges on the game of dice which King Yudhiṣṭira plays with the Kauravas. G. J. Held draws ethnological inferences from this in the study noted below. For us the chief point of interest is the place where the game is played. Generally it is a simple circle, *dyūtamaṇḍalam*, drawn on the ground. The circle as such, however, has a magic significance. It is drawn with great care, all sorts of precautions being taken against cheating. The players are not allowed to leave the ring until they have discharged all their obligations.[5] But sometimes a special hall is provisionally erected for the game, and this hall is holy ground. The *Mahābhārata* devotes a whole chapter to the erection of the dicing-hall—*sabhā*—where the Pāndavas are to meet their partners.

Games of chance, therefore, have their serious side. They are included in ritual, and Tacitus was at fault in being astonished at the Germans casting dice in sober earnest as a serious occupation.

[1]Stewart Culin, *Chess and Playing Cards*, Annual Report of the Smithsonian Institute, 1896; G. J. Held, *The Mahābhārata: an Ethnological Study*, Leyden thesis, 1935—a work of interest for the understanding of the connection between culture and play.

[2]Held, *op. cit.*, p. 273.

[3]Book xiii, 2368, 2381.

[4]J. de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, ii, p. 154. Berlin, 1937.

[5]H. Lüders, *Das Würferspiel im alten Indien*, Abh. K. Gesellsch. d. Wissensch. Göttingen, 1907. Ph. H. Kl. ix, 2, p. 9.

But when Held concludes from the sacred significance of dicing that games in archaic culture are not entitled to be called "play",[1] I am inclined to deny this most strenuously. On the contrary, it is precisely the play-character of dicing that gives it so important a place in ritual.

The agonistic basis of cultural life in archaic society has only been brought to light since ethnology was enriched by an accurate description of the curious custom practised by certain Indian tribes in British Columbia, now generally known as the *potlatch*.[2] In its most typical form as found among the Kwakiutl tribe the potlatch is a great solemn feast, during which one of two groups, with much pomp and ceremony, makes gifts on a large scale to the other group for the express purpose of showing its superiority. The only return expected by the donors but incumbent on the recipients lies in the obligation of the latter to reciprocate the feast within a certain period and if possible to surpass it. This curious donative festival dominates the entire communal life of the tribes that know it: their ritual, their law, their art. Any important event will be the occasion for a potlatch—a birth, a death, a marriage, an initiation ceremony, a tattooing, the erection of a tomb, etc. A chieftain will give a potlatch when he builds a house or sets up a totem-pole. At the potlatch the families or clans are at their best, singing their sacred songs and exhibiting their masks, while the medicine-men demonstrate their possession by the clan-spirits. But the main thing is the distribution of goods. The feast-giver squanders the possessions of the whole clan. However, by taking part in the feast the other clan incurs the obligation to give a potlatch on a still grander scale. Should it fail to do so it forfeits its name, its honour, its badge and totems, even its civil and religious rights. The upshot of all this is that the possessions of the tribe circulate among the houses of the "quality" in an adventurous way. It is to be assumed that originally the potlatch was always held between two phratriai.

In the potlatch one proves one's superiority not merely by the lavish prodigality of one's gifts but, what is even more striking, by the wholesale destruction of one's possessions just to show that one can do without them. These destructions, too, are executed

[1] *Op. cit.* p. 255.

[2] The name was chosen more or less arbitrarily from a number of terms in different Indian dialects. Cf. G. Davy, *La Foi jurée*, Thèse, Paris, 1923; *Des Clans aux Empire* (*L'Evolution de l'Humanité*, No. 6), 1923; M. Mauss, *Essai sur le Don, Forme archaique de l'échange* (*L'Année Sociologique*, N.S. i), 1923–4.

with dramatic ritual and are accompanied by haughty challenges. The action always takes the form of a contest: if one chieftain breaks a copper pot, or burns a pile of blankets, or smashes a canoe, his opponent is under an obligation to destroy at least as much or more if possible. A man will defiantly send the potsherds to his rival or display them as a mark of honour. It is related of the Tlinkit, a tribe akin to the Kwakiutl, that if a chieftain wanted to affront a rival he would kill a number of his own slaves, whereupon the other, to avenge himself, had to kill an even greater number of his.[1]

Such competitions in unbridled liberality, with the frivolous destruction of one's own goods as the climax, are to be found all over the world in more or less obvious traces. Marcel Mauss was able to point to customs exactly like the potlatch, in Melanesia. In his *Essai sur le don* he found traces of similar customs in Greek, Roman and Old Germanic culture. Granet has evidence of both giving and destroying matches in Ancient Chinese tradition.[2] In the pagan Arabia of pre-Islamic times they are to be met with under a special name, which proves their existence as a formal institution. They are called *mu'āqara*, a *nomen actionis* of the verb *'aqara* in the third form, rendered in the old lexicons, which knew nothing of the ethnological background, by the phrase "to rival in glory by cutting the feet of camels".[3] Mauss neatly sums up Held's theme by saying: "The *Mahābhārata* is the story of a gigantic potlatch".

The potlatch and everything connected with it hinges on winning, on being superior, on glory, prestige and, last but not least, revenge. Always, even when only one person is the feast-giver, there are two groups standing in opposition but bound by a spirit of hostility and friendship combined. In order to understand this ambivalent attitude we must recognize that the essential feature of the potlatch is the winning of it. The opposed groups do not contend for wealth or power but simply for the pleasure of parading their superiority—in a word, for glory. At the wedding of a Mamalekala chieftain described by Boas,[4] the guest-group declares itself "ready to begin the fray", meaning the ceremony at the end of which the prospective father-in-law gives away the

[1]Davy, *La Foi jurée*, p. 177.
[2]*Chinese Civilization*, p. 156.
[3]G. W. Freytag, *Lexicon Arabico-latinum*, Halle, 1830, i.v. *aqara:* de gloria certavit in incidendis camelorum pedibus.
[4]Quoted by Davy, *op. cit.*, p. 119 f.

bride. The proceedings at a potlatch also have something of a "fray" about them, an element of trial and sacrifice. The solemnity runs its course in the form of a ritual act accompanied by antiphonal songs and masked dances. The ritual is very strict: the slightest blunder invalidates the whole action. Coughing and laughing are threatened with severe penalties.

The mental world in which the ceremony takes place is the world of honour, pomp, braggadocio and challenge. The performers dwell in the realms of chivalry and heroism, where illustrious names and coats of arms and splendid lineages bulk large. This is not the ordinary world of toil and care, the calculation of advantage or the acquisition of useful goods. Aspiration here turns to the esteem of the group, a higher rank, marks of superiority. The mutual relations and obligations of the two phratriai of the Tlinkit are expressed by a word which means "showing respect". These relations are continually turned into actual deeds by an exchange of services and presents.

To the best of my knowledge, anthropology seeks the explanation of the potlatch mainly in magical and mythical ideas. G. W. Locker provides an excellent example of this in his book *The Serpent in Kwakiutl Religion* (Leyden, 1932).

No doubt there is an intimate connection between the potlatch and the religious preconceptions of the tribes observing it. All the characteristic notions about intercourse with ghosts, initiation, identification of men and animals, etc., are constantly displayed in the potlatch. But that does not prevent us from understanding it as a sociological phenomenon having no ties whatever with any definite system of religion. We have only to think ourselves into a society wholly dominated by those primary impulses and incentives which, in a more cultivated phase, are peculiar to boyhood. Such a society will be animated in the highest degree by things like group-honour, admiration for wealth and liberality, trust and friendship; it will lay great stress on challenges, bettings and "darings" of all kinds, competitions, adventures and the everlasting glorification of the self by displays of studied indifference to material values. In brief, the potlatch spirit is akin to the thoughts and feelings of the adolescent. Quite apart from any connections it may have with the genuine, technically organized potlatch as a ritual performance, a contest in the giving away or destruction of one's own property is psychologically quite understandable. That is why instances of this kind which are not based

on a definite system of religion are of particular importance, as, for example, the one described by R. Maunier from a report appearing some years ago in an Egyptian newspaper. Two gypsies had a quarrel. In order to settle it they solemnly called the whole tribe together and then proceeded each one to kill his own sheep, after which they burned all the bank-notes they possessed. Finally the man who saw that he was going to lose, immediately sold his six asses, so as to become victor after all by the proceeds. When he came home to fetch the asses his wife opposed the sale, whereupon he stabbed her.[1] It is obvious that in this whole sad affair we are dealing with something quite different from a spontaneous outburst of passion. It is manifestly a formalized custom with a special name of its own, which Maunier renders by the word *vantardise*; and it seems to me to have the closest affinities with the pre-Islamic *mu'aǧara* mentioned above. There is no reason to look for a specifically religious foundation.

The underlying principle in all the strange usages associated with the potlatch is, in my view, the agonistic "instinct" pure and simple. They must all be regarded first and foremost as a violent expression of the human need to fight. Once this is admitted we may call them, strictly speaking, "play"—serious play, fateful and fatal play, bloody play, sacred play, but nonetheless that playing which, in archaic society, raises the individual or the collective personality to a higher power. Mauss and Davy pointed to the play-character of the potlatch long ago, though considering it from quite a different angle. "Le potlatch," says Mauss, "est en effet un jeu et une preuve." Davy, who approaches it from the juristic side and is only concerned to demonstrate the potlatch as a law-creating custom, likens the communities that practise it to big gambling dens where, as a result of bets and challenges, reputations are made and whole fortunes exchange hands. Consequently, when Held comes to the conclusion that dicing and primitive games of chess are not genuine games of chance because they pertain to the realm of the sacred and are an expression of the potlatch principle, I am inclined to put his argument the other way about and say that they pertain to the realm of the sacred precisely because they are genuine games.

[1] R. Maunier, *Les echaufes rituels en Afrique du Nord* (*L'Année Sociologique*, N.S. ii), 1924–5, p. 81, n. i.

Livy complaining of the prodigal luxury of the *ludi publici* as degenerating into crazy rivalry;[1] Cleopatra going one better than Mark Anthony by dissolving her pearl in vinegar; Philip of Burgundy crowning a series of banquets given by his nobles with his own Gargantuan feast at Lille, when the *voeux du faisan*, or "students" as we would call them, indulged in a ceremonial smashing of glassware—all these instances display, in the forms appropriate to their respective times and civilizations, the real *potlatch* spirit, if you like. Or would it not be truer and simpler to refrain from making a cant-word of this term and to regard the potlatch proper as the most highly developed and explicit form of a fundamental human need, which I would call playing for honour and glory? A technical term like potlatch, once accepted in scientific parlance, all too readily becomes a label for shelving an article as filed and finally accounted for.

The play quality of the "gift ritual" found all over the earth has emerged with singular clarity since Malinowski gave a vivacious and extremely circumstantial account in his masterly *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, of the so-called *kula* system which he observed among the Trobriand Islanders and their neighbours in Melanesia. The *kula* is a ceremonial voyage starting at fixed times from one of the island groups east of New Guinea and going in two opposite directions. Its purpose is the mutual exchange, by the various tribes concerned, of certain articles having no economic value either as necessities or useful implements, but highly prized as precious and notorious ornaments. These ornaments are necklaces of red, and bracelets of white, shells. Many of them bear names, like the famous gems of Western history. In the *kula* they pass temporarily from the possession of one group into that of the other, which thereby takes upon itself the obligation to pass them on within a certain space of time to the next link in the *kula* chain. The objects have a sacred value, are possessed of magic powers, and each has a history relating how it was first won, etc. Some of them are so precious that their entry into the gift-cycle causes a sensation.[2] The whole proceeding is accompanied by all kinds of formalities interspersed with feasting and magic, in an atmosphere of mutual obligation and trust. Hospitality abounds, and at the end of the ceremony everybody feels he has had his

[1] Book vii, 2, 13.

[2] The objects in the *kula* custom may perhaps be compared with what the ethnologists call *Renommiergeld*—bragging-money.

full share of honour and glory. The voyage itself is often adventurous and beset with perils. The entire cultural treasury of the tribes concerned is bound up with the *kula*, it comprises their ornamental carving of canoes, their poetry, their code of honour and manners. Some trading in useful articles attaches itself to the *kula* voyages, but only incidentally. Nowhere else, perhaps, does an archaic community take on the lineaments of a noble game more purely than with these Papuans of Melanesia. Competition expresses itself in a form so pure and unalloyed that it seems to excel all similar customs practised by peoples much more advanced in civilization. At the root of this sacred rite we recognize unmistakably the imperishable need of man to live in beauty. There is no satisfying this need save in play.

From the life of childhood right up to the highest achievements of civilization one of the strongest incentives to perfection, both individual and social, is the desire to be praised and honoured for one's excellence. In praising another each praises himself. We want to be honoured for our virtues. We want the satisfaction of having done something well. Doing something well means doing it better than others. In order to excel one must prove one's excellence; in order to merit recognition, merit must be made manifest. Competition serves to give proof of superiority. This is particularly true of archaic society.

In archaic periods, of course, the virtue that renders one worthy of honour is not the abstract idea of moral perfection as measured by the commandments of a supreme heavenly power. The idea of virtue, as the word for it in the Germanic languages shows, is still, in its current connotation, inextricably bound up with the *idiosyncrasy* of a thing. *Tugend* in German (*deugd* in Dutch) corresponds directly to the verb *taugen* (*deugen*), meaning to be fit or apt for something, to be the true and genuine thing in one's kind. Such is the sense of the Greek ἀρετή and the Middle High German *tugende*. Every thing has its ἀρετή that is specific of it, proper to its kind.[1] A horse, a dog, the eye, the axe, the bow—each has its proper virtue. Strength and health are the virtues of the body; wit and sagacity those of the mind. Etymologically, ἀρετή is connected with ἄριστος: the best, the most excellent.[2]

[1]One might suggest that the closest English equivalent of the German *Tugend*, apart from the word "virtue" itself, is "property". Trans.

[2]Cf. Werner Jaeger, *Paideia i*, Oxford, 1939, p. 3 ff.; R. W. Livingstone, *Greek Ideals and Modern Life*, Oxford, 1935, p. 102 f.

The virtue of a man of quality consists in the set of properties which make him fit to fight and command. Among these liberality, wisdom and justice occupy a high place. It is perfectly natural that with many peoples the word for virtue derives from the idea of manliness or "virility", as for instance the Latin *virtus*, which retained its meaning of "courage" for a very long time—until, in fact, Christian thought became dominant. The same is true of the Arabic *muru'a*, comprising, like the Greek ἀρετή, the whole semantic complex of strength, valour, wealth, right, good management, morality, urbanity, fine manners, magnanimity, liberality and moral perfection. In every archaic community that is healthy, being based on the tribal life of warriors and nobles, there will blossom an ideal of chivalry and chivalrous conduct, whether it be in Greece, Arabia, Japan or mediaeval Christendom. And this virile ideal of virtue will always be bound up with the conviction that honour, to be valid, must be publicly acknowledged and forcibly maintained if need be. Even in Aristotle honour is called the "prize of virtue".[1] His thought is, of course, far above the level of archaic culture. He does not call honour the aim or basis of virtue, but the natural measure of it. "Men crave honour," he says, "in order to persuade themselves of their own worth, their virtue. They aspire to be honoured by persons of judgement and in virtue of their real value."[2]

Consequently virtue, honour, nobility and glory fall at the outset within the field of competition, which is that of play. The life of the young warrior of noble birth is a continual exercise in virtue and a continual struggle for the sake of the honour of his rank. The ideal is perfectly expressed in the well-known line of Homer: αἰὲν ἀριστεύειν καὶ ὑρείροχον ἔμμεναι ἄλλων ("always to be the best and to excel others"). Hence the interest of the epic depends not on the war exploits as such but on the ἀριστεία of the individual heroes.

Training for aristocratic living leads to training for life in the State and for the State. Here too ἀρετή is not as yet entirely ethical. It still means above all the *fitness* of the citizen for his tasks in the *polis*, and the idea it originally contained of exercise by means of contests still retains much of its old weight.

That nobility is based on virtue is implicit from the very beginning of both concepts and right through their evolution, only the meaning of virtue changes as civilization unfolds. Gradually the

[1] *Eth. Nic.* iv, 1123 D 35. [2] *Ibid.* i, 1095 D 26.

idea of virtue acquires another content: it rises to the ethical and religious plane. The nobility, who once lived up to their ideal of virtue merely by being brave and vindicating their honour, must now, if they are to remain true to their tasks and to themselves, either enrich the ideal of chivalry by assimilating into it those higher standards of ethics and religion (an attempt which usually turned out lamentably enough in practice!) or else content themselves with cultivating an outward semblance of high living and spotless honour by means of pomp, magnificence and courtly manners. The ever-present play-element, originally a real factor in the shaping of their culture, has now become mere show and parade.

The nobleman demonstrates his "virtue" by feats of strength, skill, courage, wit, wisdom, wealth or liberality. For want of these he may yet excel in a contest of words, that is to say, he may either himself praise the virtues in which he wishes to excel his rivals, or have them praised for him by a poet or a herald. This boosting of one's own virtue as a form of contest slips over quite naturally into contumely of one's adversary, and this in its turn becomes a contest in its own right. It is remarkable how large a place these bragging and scoffing matches occupy in the most diverse civilizations. Their play-character is beyond dispute: we have only to think of the doings of little boys to qualify such slanging-matches as a form of play. All the same, we must distinguish carefully between the formal boasting or scoffing tournament and the more spontaneous bravado which used to inaugurate or accompany a fight with weapons, though it is not at all easy to draw the line. According to ancient Chinese texts, the pitched battle is a confused mêlée of boasts, insults, altruism and compliments. It is rather a contest with moral weapons, a collision of offended honours, than an armed combat.[1] All sorts of actions, some of the most singular nature, have a technical significance as marks of shame or honour for him who perpetrates or suffers them. Thus, the contemptuous gesture of Remus in jumping over Romulus' wall at the dawn of Roman history constitutes, in Chinese military tradition, an obligatory challenge. A variant of it shows the warrior riding up to his enemy's gate and calmly counting the planks with his whip.[2] In the same tradition are the citizens of Meaux, standing on the wall and shaking the

[1] Granet, *Chinese Civilization*, p. 270.

[2] *Ibid.* p. 267.

dust off their caps after the besiegers have fired their cannons. We shall have to revert to this kind of thing when treating of the agonistic, or even the play, element in war. What interests us at this juncture is the regular "joute de jactance".

It need hardly be said that these practices are closely related to the potlatch. Forms mid-way between boasting-matches and competitions in wealth (or what we might call "squandering-matches"), are to be found in the following, as reported by Malinowski. Foodstuffs, he says, are not valued among the Trobriand Islanders solely on account of their usefulness, but also as a means for parading wealth. Yam-houses are so constructed that one can compute from outside how much they contain, and make a shrewd guess as to the quality of the fruit by looking through the wide interstices between the beams. The best fruits are the most conspicuous, and particularly fine specimens are framed, decorated with paint, and hung up outside the yam-stores. In villages where a high-ranking chieftain resides, the commoners have to cover their store-houses with coconut leaves, so as not to compete with his.[1] In Chinese lore we find an echo of such customs in the tale of the bad King Shou-sin, who caused a mountain of foodstuffs to be piled up on which chariots could be driven, and a pond to be dug full of wine for sailing boats on.[2]

Competition for honour may also take, as in China, an inverted form by turning into a contest in politeness. The special word for this—*iang*—means literally "to yield to another"; hence one demolishes one's adversary by superior manners, making way for him or giving him precedence. The courtesy-match is nowhere as formalized, perhaps, as in China, but it is to be met with all over the world.[3] We might call it an inverted boasting-match, since the reason for this display of civility to others lies in an intense regard for one's own honour.

Formal contests in invective and vituperation were widespread in pre-Islamic Arabia, and their connection with the contests in destruction of property, so prominent a feature of the potlatch, is particularly striking. We have already mentioned the custom called *mu'āqara*, where the competing parties cut the tendons of their camels. The basic form of the verb to which *mu'āqara* belongs

[1]Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, p. 168.
[2]Granet, *Chinese Civilization*, p. 202.
[3]Cf. my *Waning of the Middle Ages*, ch. 2.

in the third degree, means to wound or to mutilate. Now among the significations of *mu'āqara* we also find: "conviciis et dictis satyricis certavit cum aliquo"—to fight with invective and opprobious language; which reminds us of the Egyptian gypsies whose destroying-match bore the name of *vantardise*. But besides the term *mu'āqara* the pre-Islamic Arabs had two other technical terms for the slanging-match and its allied forms, namely, *munāfara* and *mufākhara*. It will be noted that all three words are formed in the same way. They are verbal substantives derived from the so-called third form of the verb, and this is perhaps the most interesting feature of the whole business. For Arabic possesses a special verbal form which can give to any root the sense of *competing in something* or excelling somebody in something. I am almost tempted to call it a kind of *verbal superlative* of the root itself. In addition, the so-called "sixth form", derived from the third, expresses the idea of reciprocal action. Thus the root *hasaba*—to count, to enumerate—becomes *muhāsaba*, a competition in good repute; *kathara*—to excel in numbers, to outnumber—becomes *mukāthara*, a competition in numbers. But to return to our point: *mufākhara* comes from a root meaning "to boast", while *munāfara* comes from the semantic field of "defeat" and "rout".

Honour, virtue, praise and glory are, in Arabic, semantically akin, just as the equivalent ideas in Greek gravitate round ἀρετή.[1] With the Arabs the central idea is *'iṛḍ*, which can best be translated by "honour", provided that we take it in an extremely concrete sense. The highest demand of a noble life is the obligation to preserve your honour safe and unsullied. Your adversary, on the other hand, is supposed to be animated by a consuming desire to damage and demolish your *'iṛḍ* with an insult. Here too, as in Greece, any physical, social, or moral excellence constitutes a basis for honour and glory, hence is an element of virtue. The Arab glories in his victories and his courage, he takes an inordinate pride in the numerousness of his clan or his children, in his liberality, his authority, his strength, his eyesight, or the beauty of his hair. All this makes up his *'izz*, *'izza*, i.e. his excellence, superiority over others, hence his authority and prestige.

The abuse and derision of your adversary, which is carried on with particular zeal when you are extolling your own *'izz*, is

[1]Cf. Bichr Farès, *L'Honneur chez les Arabes avant l'Islam, Etude de Sociologie*, Paris, 1933; ed. Encyclopédie de l'Islam, s.v. *mufākhara*.

properly called *hidja'*. Contests for honour, the *mufākhara*, used to be held at fixed times, simultaneously with the yearly fairs and after the pilgrimages. Whole tribes or clans might compete, or simply individuals. Whenever two groups happened to meet they opened the proceedings with a match of honour. There was an official spokesman for each group, the *sha'ir*—poet or orator—who played an important part. The custom clearly had a ritual character. It served to keep alive the powerful social tensions that held the pre-Islamic culture of Arabia together. But the onset of Islam opposed this ancient practice by giving it a new religious trend or reducing it to a courtly game. In pagan times the *mufākhara* frequently ended in murder and tribal war.

The *munāfara* is primarily a form of contest in which the two parties dispute their claims to honour before a judge or arbitrator: the verb from which the word is derived has the connotations of decision and judgement. A stake is set, or a theme for discussion fixed; for instance, who is of the noblest descent?—the prize being a hundred camels.[1] As in a lawsuit the parties stand up and sit down in turns while, to make the proceedings more impressive, each is supported by witnesses acting under oath. Later, in Islamic times, the judges frequently refused to act: the litigious pair were derided as being "two fools desiring evil". Sometimes the *munāfara* were held in rhyme. Clubs were formed for the express purpose first of staging a *mufākhara* (match of honour), then a *munāfara* (mutual vilification) which often ended in the sword.[2]

Greek tradition has numerous traces of ceremonial and festal slanging-matches. The word *iambos* is held by some to have meant originally "derision", with particular reference to the public skits and scurrilous songs which formed part of the feasts of Demeter and Dionysus. The biting satire of Archilochus is supposed to have developed out of this slating in public. Thus, from an immemorial custom of ritual nature, iambic poetry became an instrument of public criticism. Further, at the feasts of Demeter and Apollo, men and women chanted songs of mutual derision, which may have given rise to the literary theme of the diatribe against womankind.

Old Germanic tradition, too, affords a very ancient vestige of

[1] G. W. Freytag, *Einleitung in das Studium der arabischen Sprache bis Mohammed*, p. 184, Bonn, 1861.

[2] *Kitāb al Aghāni*, Cairo, 1905–6, iv, 8; viii, 109 *sq.*; xv, 52, 57.

the slanging-match in the story of Alboin at the Court of the Gepidæ, evidently rescued by Paulus Diaconus from the old epics.[1] The Langobard chieftains have been invited to a royal banquet by Turisind, King of the Gepidæ. When the king falls to lamenting his son Turismond, slain in battle against the Langobards, another of his sons stands up and begins to bait the Langobards with taunts (*iniuriis lacessere coepit*). He calls them white-footed mares, adding that they stink. Whereupon one of the Langobards answers: "Go to the field of Asfeld, there you will surely learn how valiantly those 'mares' of yours can put about them, where your brother's bones lie scattered like an old nag's in the meadow". The king restrains the two from coming to blows, and "then they bring the banquet to a merry end" (*laetis animis convivium peragunt*). These last words clearly reveal the playful character of the altercation. It is undoubtedly a specimen of the slanging-match. Old Norse literature has it in a special form called *mannjafnaðr*—the comparing of men. It is part of the Jul-feast, as is also the competition in swearing vows. The Saga of Orvar Odd gives a detailed example. Orvar Odd is staying incognito at the court of a foreign king and takes on a wager, with his head at stake, to beat two of the king's men at drinking. As each proffers the drinking-horn to his rival, he boasts of some doughty exploit of war at which he, but not the other, was present, because the latter was sitting in shameful peace with the women at the hearth.[2] Sometimes two kings try to outdo one another in boastful language. One of the Edda songs, the *Harbarðslojoð*, deals with a contest of this kind between Thor and Odin.[3] To the same genre we must also add Loki's disputations with the Ases at a drinking-bout.[4] The ritual nature of all these contests is revealed by the express mention of the fact that the hall where the wassailing and disputing are held is a "great place of peace" (*griðastaðr mikill*), and that in it nobody is allowed to do any violence to another whatever he says. Even if these instances are literary redactions of a theme harking back to a remote past, the ritualistic background is too obvious for them to be passed off as specimens of a later poetic fiction. The Old Erse legends of MacDatho's swine and the Feast of Bricreud have a similar "comparing of men". De Vries has no doubt of the religious origin of the

[1] *Historia Langobardorum* (Mon. Germ. Hist. SS. Langobard.), i, 24.
[2] *Edda* i, Thule i, 1928, No. 29, cf. x, pp. 298, 313.
[3] *Edda* i, Thule ii, No. 9.
[4] No. 8.

Mannjafnaðr.[1] How much weight was attached to obloquy of this kind is clearly illustrated in the case of Harald Gormsson, who wanted to undertake a punitive expedition against Iceland on account of a single lampoon.

Beowulf, in the saga of that name, while staying at the court of the Danish king, is challenged by Unferd with taunts to recount his former exploits. The Old Germanic languages have a special word for this ceremony of mutual bragging and execration, be it the prelude to armed combat in connection with a tournament, or only part of the entertainment at a feast. They call it *gelp, gelpan.* The substantive, in Old English, means glory, pomp, arrogance, etc., and in Middle High German, clamour, mockery, scorn. The English dictionary still gives "to applaud, to praise" as obsolete meanings of "yelp", now reduced to the yapping of dogs; and "vainglory" for the substantive.[2]

Old French has the approximate equivalent of *gelp, gelpan* in *gab, gaber,* of uncertain origin. *Gab* means mockery and derision, particularly as a prelude to combat or as part of a banquet. *Gaber* is considered an art. On their visit to the Emperor at Constantinople, Charlemagne and his twelve paladins find twelve couches made ready after the meal, upon which, at Charlemagne's suggestion, they hold a *gaber* before going to sleep. He himself gives the lead. Next comes Roland, who accepts willingly, saying: "Let king Hugo lend me his horn and I will stand outside the town and blow so hard that the gates will fly off their hinges. And if the king attacks me I will spin him round so fast that his ermine cloak will vanish and his moustache catch fire".[3]

Geoffroi Gaimar's rhymed chronicle of King William Rufus of England shows him indulging in similar braggadocio with Walter Tyrel, shortly before the latter's fatal bow-shot in the New Forest that cost the king his life.[4] Later, in the Middle Ages, this convention of boasting and scoffing seems to have dwindled to an affair between heralds at tournaments. They glorify the feats of arms performed by their masters, praise their ancestry and some-

[1] *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte,* ii, p. 153.

[2] An instance of *gilp-cwida* from the 11th century is given in the *Gesta Herwardi,* edited Duffus Hardy and C. T. Martin (in an appendix to Geffrei Gaimar, *Lestoire des Engles*), Rolls Series 1, 1888, p. 345.

[3] *Le Pélerinage de Charlemagne* (11th century), ed. E. Koschwitz, Paris, 1925, pp. 471–81.

[4] F. Michel, *Chroniques anglo-normandes,* i, Rouen, 1836, p. 52; cf. Wace, *Le Roman de Rou,* ed. H. Andresen, Heilbronn, 1877, vv. 15038 *sq.* and William of Malmesbury, *De Gestis Regum Anglorum,* ed. Stubbs, London, 1888, iv, p. 320.

times mock the ladies. On the whole heralds are a despised tribe, a rabble of braggers and vagabonds.[1] The 16th century still knew the *gaber* as a social diversion, which at bottom it had always been despite its origins in ritual. The Duke of Anjou, it is said, found this game mentioned in *Amadis de Gaule* and decided to play it with his courtiers. But Bussy d'Amboise was loth to answer the Duke back. So a rule was made that all parties should be equal and no word be taken ill (just as in Aegir's hall where Loki starts a slanging-match). Nevertheless the Duke's *gab*-party becomes the occasion of a despicable intrigue through which the perfidious Anjou brings about Bussy's downfall.[2]

The contest as one of the chief elements of social life has always been associated in our minds with the idea of Greek civilization. Long before sociology and anthropology became aware of the extraordinary importance of the agonistic factor in general, Jacob Burckhardt coined the word "agonal" and described the purport of it as one of the main characteristics of Hellenic culture. Burckhardt, however, was not equipped to perceive the widespread sociological background of the phenomenon. He thought that the agonistic habit was specifically Greek and that its range was limited to a definite period of Greek history. According to him, the earliest type known to Greek history is the "heroic" man, who is followed by the "colonial" or "agonal" man, to be superseded in his turn by, successively, the man of the 5th century, the 4th century (who have no specific names) and finally, after Alexander, by the "Hellenistic man.[3] The "colonial" or "agonal" period is thus the 6th century B.C.—the age of Hellenic expansion and the national games. What he calls "the agonal" is "an impulse such as no other people has ever known".[4]

It is only to be expected that Burckhardt's views were limited by classical philology. His great work, published after his death as *Griechische Kulturgeschichte*, had taken shape from a series of lectures delivered at Basel University during the eighties, before any general sociology existed to digest all the ethnological and anthropological data, most of which, indeed, were only coming to light

[1]Jaques Bretel, *Le Tournoi de Chauvency*, ed. M. Delbouille, vv. 540, 1093–1158, etc., Liège, 1932; *Le Dit des Lérants*, Romania xliii, 1914, p. 218 *sq.*

[2]A. de Varillas, *Histoire de Henry III*, i, p. 574, Paris, 1694, reproduced in part in Fr. Godefroy's *Dictionnaire de l'ancienne langue française*, Paris, 1885, see ***gaber*** (p. 197).

[3]*Griechische Kulturgeschichte*, p. 111.

[4]iii, p. 68.

then. It is, however, rather disconcerting to find that Burckhardt's views have gained adherence from more than one scholar even to-day.[1] Victor Ehrenberg still regards the agonistic principle as specifically Greek. "To the Orient," he says, "it remained alien and antipathetic"; "we search the Bible in vain for evidence of agonistic contests".[2] In the foregoing we had frequent occasion to refer to the Far East, to the India of the *Mahābhārata* and to the world of savage peoples, so that we need not waste time refuting such assertions here. And it is precisely the Old Testament that affords one of the most convincing examples of the connection between the agonistic factor and play. Burckhardt admitted that primitive and barbaric peoples practise contests, but he attached little importance to it.[3] Ehrenberg condescends to recognize the agonistic principle as universally human, but at the same time he calls it "historically uninteresting and without significance"! The contest for sacred or magical purposes he completely ignores, and attacks what he calls "the folkloristic approach to Greek material".[4] According to him, the competitive impulse "hardly ever became a social and supra-personal force outside Greece".[5] It is true that after having written his book he grew aware at least of the Icelandic parallels to Greek tradition, and declared himself ready to attribute a certain significance to them.[6]

Ehrenberg also follows Burckhardt in focussing "the agonal" on the period that succeeded the "heroic" one, conceding at the same time that the latter already had a certain agonistic complexion. He says that on the whole the Trojan War was devoid of agonistic features; only after the "de-heroizing of the warrior-class" ("Entheroisierung des Kriegertums") did the need arise to create a substitute for heroism in "the agonal", which was therefore a "product" of a younger phase of culture.[7] All this is based more or less on Burckhardt's striking aphorism: "A people knowing war has no need of tournaments".[8] Such an assumption may sound plausible enough to our thinking but, as regards all archaic periods of culture, it has been proved absolutely wrong by

[1] H. Schäfer, *Staatsform und Politik*, Leipzig, 1932; V. Ehrenberg, *Ost und West: Studien zur geschichtlichen Problematik der Antike*, Schriften der Philos. Fak. der deutschen Univ. Prag, xv, 1935.
[2] *Ost und West*, pp. 93, 94, 90.
[3] *Gr. Kulturg.* iii, p. 68.
[4] *Ost und West*, pp. 65, 219.
[5] *Ibid.* p. 217.
[6] *Ibid.* pp. 69, 218.
[7] *Ibid.* pp. 71, 67, 70, 66, 72; cf. Burckhardt, *op. cit.* pp. 26, 43.
[8] *Gr. Kulturg.* iii, p. 69; cf. Ehrenberg, *op. cit.* p. 88.

sociology and ethnology alike. No doubt the few centuries of Greek history when the contest reigned supreme as the life-principle of society also saw the rise of the great sacred games which united all Hellas at Olympia, on the Isthmus, at Delphi and Nemea; but the fact remains that the spirit of contest dominated Hellenic culture both before those centuries, and after.

During the whole span of their existence the Hellenic games remained closely allied with religion, even in later times when, on a superficial view, they might have the appearance of national sports pure and simple. Pindar's triumphal songs celebrating the great contests belong wholly to the rich harvest of religious poetry he produced, of which, indeed, they are the sole survivors.[1] The sacred character of the agon was everywhere apparent. The competitive zeal of the Spartan boys in enduring pain before the altar is only one example of the cruel trials connected with initiation to manhood, such as can be found all over the earth among primitive peoples. Pindar shows a victor in the Olympic games breathing new life into the nostrils of his aged grandfather.[2]

Greek tradition divides contests in general into such as are public or national, military and juridical, and such as are concerned with strength, wisdom and wealth. The classification would seem to reflect an earlier, agonistic phase of culture. The fact that litigation before a judge is called an "agon" should not be taken, with Burckhardt,[3] as a mere metaphorical expression of later times but, on the contrary, as evidence of an immemorial association of ideas, about which we shall have more to say. The lawsuit had in fact once been an agon in the strict sense of the word.

The Greeks used to stage contests in anything that offered the bare possibility of a fight. Beauty contests for men were part of the Panathenaean and Thesean festivals. At symposia contests were held in singing, riddle-solving, keeping awake and drinking. Even in the last-named the sacred element is not lacking: πολυποσία and ἀκρατοποσία (bulk-drinking and drinking neat) formed part of the Choen festival—or feast of pitchers. Alexander celebrated the death of Kalanos by a gymnastic and musical agon with prizes for the doughtiest drinkers, with the result that thirty-five of the competitors died on the spot, six afterwards, among them the prize-winner.[4] We may note in passing that contests

[1] Jaeger, *Paideia*, i, p. 208. [2] *Olympica*, viii, 92 (70). [3] *Op. cit.* iii, p. 85.
[4] After Chares, cf. Pauly Wissowa, s.v. Kalanos, c. 1545.

in swallowing large quantities of food and drink, or guzzling-matches, also occur in connection with the potlatch.

A too narrow conception of the agonistic principle has induced Ehrenberg to deny it to Roman civilization, or actually to attribute to it an anti-agonistic character.[1] It is true that contests between free men played a comparatively small part here, but this is not to say that the agonistic element was altogether lacking in the structure of Roman civilization. Rather we are dealing with the singular phenomenon showing how the competitive impulse shifted, at an early period, from the protagonist to the spectator, who merely watches the struggles of others appointed for that purpose. Without a doubt this shift is closely connected with the profoundly ritualistic character of the Roman games themselves, for this vicarious attitude is quite in place in ritual, where the contestants are regarded as representing—i.e. fighting on behalf of—the spectators. Gladiatorial games, contests between wild beasts, chariot-races, etc., lose nothing of their agonistic nature even when carried out by slaves. The *ludi* were either associated with the regular yearly festivals or were *ludi votivi*, held in honour of some vow, usually to pay homage to the deceased or, more particularly, to avert the wrath of the gods. The slightest offence against the ritual or the most accidental disturbance invalidated the whole performance. This points to the sacred character of the action.

It is of the utmost significance that these Roman gladiatorial combats, bloody, superstitious and illiberal as they were, nevertheless kept to the last the simple word "ludus" with all its associations of freedom and joyousness. How are we to understand this?

We shall have to revert once more to the place occupied by the agon in Greek civilization. According to the view expressed by Burckhardt and taken up again by Ehrenberg, there is a sequence of stages as follows: first an archaic period, also called the "heroic", which saw the rise of Hellas by serious combat and war, but lacking the agonistic principle as a social factor. Then, as the nation had consumed its best forces in these heroic struggles and was gradually losing its heroic temper, Greek society began to move in the direction of "the agonal", which thereupon became dominant in social life for some centuries. It is a transition from "battle to play", as Ehrenberg puts it, hence a sign of decadence. And undoubtedly the predominance of the agonistic principle

[1] *Op. cit.* p. 91.

does lead to decadence in the long run. Ehrenberg goes on to say that the very pointlessness and meaninglessness of the agon finally led to the "loss of all the serious qualities in life, in thought, and in action; indifference to all impulses from without, and the squandering of national forces merely for the sake of winning a game".[1] In the last words of this sentence there is much truth; but even admitting that Greek social life did at times degenerate into mere passion for emulation, Greek history as a whole follows a very different course from that supposed by Ehrenberg. We have to put the significance of the agonistic principle for culture in quite another way. There was no transition from "battle to play" in Greece, nor from play to battle, but a development *of* culture *in* play-like contest. In Greece as elsewhere the play-element was present and significant from the beginning. Our point of departure must be the conception of an almost childlike play-sense expressing itself in various play-forms, some serious, some playful, but all rooted in ritual and productive of culture by allowing the innate human need of rhythm, harmony, change, alternation, contrast and climax, etc., to unfold in full richness. Coupled with this play-sense is a spirit that strives for honour, dignity, superiority and beauty. Magic and mystery, heroic longings, the foreshadowings of music, sculpture and logic all seek form and expression in noble play. A later generation will call the age that knew such aspirations "heroic".

In play, therefore, the antithetical and agonistic basis of civilization is given from the start, for play is older and more original than civilization. So to return to our starting-point, the Roman *ludi*, we can affirm that Latin was right in calling the sacred contests by the simple word "play", because it expresses as purely as possible the unique nature of this civilizing force.

During the growth of a civilization the agonistic function attains its most beautiful form, as well as its most conspicuous, in the archaic phase. As a civilization becomes more complex, more variegated and more overladen, and as the technique of production and social life itself become more finely organized, the old cultural soil is gradually smothered under a rank layer of ideas, systems of thought and knowledge, doctrines, rules and regulations, moralities and conventions which have all lost touch with play. Civilization, we then say, has grown more serious; it assigns only a secondary place to playing. The heroic period is over, and the agonistic phase, too, seems a thing of the past.

[1] *Op. cit.* p. 96.