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Le baseball aléoute : création et innovation culturelle à partir d'un évènement sportif

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Résumé de l'article

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Le baseball aléoute est un sport populaire pratiqué par les Sugpiat de Nanwalek et de Port Graham, à l'extrémité de la péninsule de Kenai en Alaska. Bien qu'il présente quelques ressemblances avec le baseball américain et le *lapta* russe, le baseball aléoute doit être considéré comme une innovation culturelle sugpiaq. Ce jeu, que l'on pratique pour le plaisir ou pour la compétition, est l'occasion d'évènements communautaires qui rassemblent souvent les villages et les communautés sugpiaq. Cet article expose quelques-uns des éléments fondamentaux qui font du baseball aléoute un véhicule d'expression de la culture sugpiaq, et un canal de renégociation et de revitalisation des normes et des valeurs établies. De plus, en examinant le baseball aléoute sous l'angle du concept du jeu de Victor Turner, les auteurs avancent que les sports et les jeux procurent à l'innovation et à l'expérimentation culturelle d'immenses opportunités, en plus de renforcer l'identité du groupe. Enfin, cet article explore la capacité des sports et des jeux à lier les perceptions globales aux réalités locales.

Abstract: Aleut baseball: Cultural creation and innovation through a sporting event

Aleut baseball is a popular game played by the Sugpiat of Nanwalek and Port Graham on the lower Kenai Peninsula of Alaska. Despite its resemblance to American baseball and Russian *lapta*, Aleut baseball should be considered a Sugpiaq cultural novelty. Ranging from recreational to competitive, the game is a communal occasion, which often brings together Sugpiaq villages and communities. This article presents some of the profound elements that make Aleut baseball expressive of Sugpiaq culture, and a channel for renegotiating and re-energising established norms and values. Furthermore, looking at Aleut baseball through Victor Turner's concept of play, the authors argue that sports and games provide immense opportunities for cultural innovation and experimentation, as well as for strengthening of group identity. Finally, the article explores the capacity of sports and games to link global perceptions with local realities.

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Introduction

Aleut baseball is a favourite pastime of the Sugpiat of the Kenai Peninsula in Alaska. While the rules vary from community to community, all players and spectators agree that it is quite different from American baseball. Indeed, the Sugpiat of Nanwalek and Port Graham consider Aleut baseball distinctively Sugpiaq and proudly claim it as such, emphasising its difference from American baseball, especially to outsiders. Elenore McMullen of Port Graham described her perceptions to Ronald Stanek in 1997:

> I remember some of the younger men in the cannery [in Port Graham] teaching us basketball and volleyball. We never knew anything about these things. We knew Aleut baseball, we taught them that. They tried to teach us the regular baseball. We would never ever accept that as part of our sports activity—we would always prefer Aleut baseball (in Stanek 2000: 45).

When asked by Medeia Csoba DeHass during her fieldwork in Nanwalek, fellow spectators at an Aleut baseball match pointed out the general differences between the two sports. Almost all conversations included a mention of Aleut baseball as Sugpiat's "own" game and American baseball as an "alien" activity, a mere reference point in explaining *their* game to an outsider. In fact, people frequently went to great lengths to explain the rules of American baseball, such as multiple bases, "striking out," and no tagging, to underline what they considered fundamental differences from Aleut baseball.

In terms of its rules, Aleut baseball resembles the Russian game of *lapta (лапта*), which dates back to 14th-century Russia (Schreck 2003: 1). Indeed, there is evidence that *lapta* was introduced to the Sugpiat in the 18th century during Russian colonisation. Interestingly, Nanwalek residents are today seldom aware of *lapta* and its similarities to Aleut baseball. Moreover, this possible origin, when brought to their attention, quite often neither surprises nor interests them. In any case, the adamant determination to keep American baseball separate from Aleut baseball has no parallel in people's response to *lapta*, perhaps because many originally Russian cultural elements have been integrated into Sugpiaq traditions. Notwithstanding its origins, the Sugpiat have made Aleut baseball part of their local reality.

Based on an Aleut baseball tournament between Nanwalek and Port Graham on August 26, 2007 and over 16 months of participant observation in Nanwalek, we argue that Aleut baseball in particular and sports and games in general provide opportunities to innovate and experiment culturally, to construct and deconstruct meaning, and to negotiate identity and group membership. These opportunities are in fact part of a dynamic internalising process that makes a foreign game or sport one's own. Using Victor Turner's concept of "play," we explore the processes by which local cultural logic is expressed in the symbolic space of the baseball field.

Nanwalek: Past and present

Sugpiaq (Alutiiq) communities are spread out along the coasts of Prince William Sound, the Alaska Peninsula, and Kodiak Island. Nanwalek and Port Graham are the only two Sugpiaq villages on the Kenai Peninsula. The village of Nanwalek, meaning a 'place by a lagoon,' is located directly on the coast of Kachemak Bay and surrounded by the Kenai Mountains. Nanwalek's history is similar to that of many other local Native communities. Its people have been profoundly influenced by Russian colonisation and several of the approximately 300 current residents are partially of Russian descent. Fort Aleksandrovsk, the second fort built in Russian America, and the first one on Alaska's mainland, was erected in 1786 (Black 2004: 123-124) at the location of the village currently called Nanwalek.[1] One legacy of the Russian colonial past is devotion to the Russian Orthodox faith. It is the only religious denomination represented in the life of the village (Csoba DeHass 2007: 215).

Another Russian legacy is the term *Aleut*. During the Russian period, the colonial administration called many Native people on the Alaska coast *Aleut*, and the term became a social classification (Black 1980: xxv). This identity has been re-interpreted into the new term *Alutiiq* (plural: *Alutiit*), which is the pronunciation of *Aleut* in Sugt'stun, the language of the Sugpiat (Leer 2001: 31). *Sugpiaq* (plural: *Sugpiat*) is the original ethnonym, meaning a 'real person.' In Nanwalek, the preferred term is *Sugpiaq*, with occasional references to *Aleut*. In this sense, the name "Aleut baseball" provides not only a clear cultural distinction from other ball games (e.g., American or "regular" baseball, cricket, and their townball predecessors), but also insights into its origins.

Nanwalek is a maritime community with no access to a road system. The majority of transportation is usually by small aircrafts that connect the village to the outside world. Otherwise, Nanwalek is connected to the neighbouring community of Port Graham by a 5-mile (8 km)-long foot trail. Even though each of them has a distinct identity, the two villages are connected by cultural heritage, history and, in many cases, kinship. In Nanwalek, most of the houses and buildings are further up along the hills, while the airport is on a strip of land separating the ocean from the lagoon. The end of the airstrip is separated by a channel from the other side of the bay. This channel is used by watercraft, and allows fish to migrate up to the extensive lake system. The airstrip is also used for activities other than landing and taking off. People often use the flat, gravelled airstrip as a promenade for walking, strolling, and riding trucks and ATVs after the hours of operation have ended for the day. The ocean side of the airstrip is covered with tall beach grass. Beyond, the rocky shores are exposed to the high tides of Kachemak Bay. The lagoon side is also covered with grass and the lagoon serves as a safe harbour for the locals' various boats and skiffs, although high tides may almost completely cover the strip of land with water. In addition to the various subsistence, transportation, and recreational activities, the airstrip is also used for Aleut baseball.

1 From the early 1900s to 1992 the village was known as English Bay, which the community officially changed back to the Sugt'stun name, Nanwalek, by public vote (McCoy 1992: 6).

Theoretical approaches to sports analysis

In arguing that Aleut baseball is an important part of to the cultural reality of the Sugpiat, we essentially refer to a process by which the people adopted a batting game and adapted it to their own logic (Heider 1977). In fact, the game has become a marker of identity. Central to understanding this process is Victor Turner's notion of "play." In most of Turner's work on the multivocal nature of symbols, on his descriptions of the sacred and the profane, and on the exploration of the rites of passage, the word "play" refers to any action used by people to experiment, subvert, and formulate new meanings, essentially to "*play* with the elements of the familiar and defamiliarize them" (Turner 1974: 60). It is then that "novelty emerges from unprecedented combinations of familiar elements" (*ibid*.). According to Turner, activities such as writing, singing, dancing, painting, and acting all involve a degree of playfulness, abetting in the reconfiguration of culture.

It is in Turner's description of liminoid spaces, however, where play attains its full potential. Complex post-industrial societies have set aside specific symbolic structures in which socially imposed rights and obligations are suspended (*ibid.*: 61), thus allowing individuals or groups to "play" with culture. For Turner, liminoids are "the settings in which new symbols, models and paradigms arise—as the seedbeds of cultural creativity in fact" (*ibid.:* 60). These structures, *meant* to come into sharp contrast with the normative structures of society, are the space where cultural aspects become malleable and symbols attain their multivocality, as people experiment with established norms and values. Therefore, they become a space, both private and social, and set aside from normative reality, that can become a domain of cultural creativity and, in turn, feed back to the mainstream structure.

Our approach to Aleut baseball is heavily influenced by the creative aspect of play and the ways by which any game can be played with and changed to the players' satisfaction. In addition, the symbolic dimensions of any playing field for any game or sport are compared to Turner's liminoid settings and are themselves excellent examples of the creative capacities of people. Throwing a ball to another player creates a symbolic game space that is recognizable to everyone. Players understand their role by situating themselves in or out of the playing field: extra players will seek to position themselves to show their desire to participate. Spectators will seek a spot where they do not interfere with the play, while those passing by will give the playing field a wide berth. People automatically act out these different roles even if no visible lines demarcate the field's boundaries. Indeed, the very essence of "playing" is the ability to create game spaces anywhere; roads, yards, corridors, or even airport fields can momentarily serve a purpose that has nothing to do with their initial function. Turner's "playing" involves much more than the playing of an actual game. It involves a symbolic reshaping of one's cultural surroundings for as long as a game takes place.

Our approach also makes three significant conceptual distinctions. First we distinguish between sports and games played in teams and those played individually. When individuals synergistically strive towards a common goal, one can more readily observe and record elements of the local cultural logic. Second, we differentiate

between ball games and other games that do not involve a ball—whether it is round, oval, small, bouncy, soft, or hard (Kirsch 1989: 4). The reason is mainly that many ball sports share a conceptualisation of the ball as a cognizant object. The ball may be controlled and used to attain one's goals, but it also has an agency beyond the user's control that makes its behaviour unpredictable and almost whimsical. This characterisation sets ball games and sports apart from other sports. Lastly, we make a distinction between games and sports. Although the two words are used interchangeably, they may be distinguished by a relational definition. Games have a fluid structure, general rules that are negotiated and agreed upon, and arbitration of in-game disputes by the participants. Additionally, specific games depend on local contexts, such as time, space, and the group of players, with the result that the same game may have many variations at different localities. In contrast, sports are the crystallised and formal version of a specific variation. A higher authority sets out to standardise that game, and the participants agree to definite rules and to the presence of a referee, as a third party, to resolve disputes and enforce rules.

Despite the structural standardisation of a game into a sport, the element of play is left unimpeded and allows for cultural creativity. Games may become sports but sports may be reconfigured into games to fit the cultural logic of a local context. As we will see, this process is exemplified by Russian *lapta*, today a sport with its own federation, and its distant relationship with Aleut baseball. This approach can offer invaluable insights into how sports are experienced by connecting local, regional, national, and global perceptions and by explicating their mutual relationship through the element of play. These cultural intricacies, often overlooked, are very important in making a sport or game what it is.

"Playing ball" the Aleut way

"Playing ball" almost always means Aleut baseball in Nanwalek and in other Sugpiat communities. The expression is used by Mary Peterson when describing the game in the village of Akhiok on Kodiak Island:

> And Easter! Easter Sunday, they'd start playing ball. They called it 'Miatzic'. It's a one-base game, like baseball, only you run one way and then back. There were two sides, half the bunch out there in the field watching for the ball and the other half batting. The ones that batted the most would win" (in Mulcahy 2001: 8)

The word *miatzic*, from the Russian word for ball (*мяч*), is a clear connection to the Russian colonial era, signifying that Aleut baseball is yet another one of the many customs Sugpiaq people have adopted and transformed to fit their cultural and physical landscape. Lydia Black (2001: 5) suggests that such games as *miachiq*, along with songs, storytelling, and cooking recipes, were probably passed down through interactions between generations of a family, even a village, thus emphasising the human relationships between Russians and Alaska Native peoples in the context of "crossing boundaries" and the "meeting of frontiers."

Aleut baseball is intimately linked to celebrations, in particular to Easter Sunday. In 1975 Peter Ukatish (1975: 18) wrote in a school newsletter that "[…] Aleut baseball is played by kids and adults during Easter," while Roberta Kvasnikoff (1982: 12) remarked seven years later that "in the morning after church [Easter services] around 4:00 am, we kids and some adults go play baseball." Playing Aleut baseball after Easter service is a long-standing tradition in Nanwalek, which is connected just as much to the celebration of the feast as to the preceding period of Great Lent, when playing any kind of game is forbidden. According to elders and adults, all of the people, from the youngest to the oldest, used to go down to the runway immediately following the church service on Easter Sunday to play a game of Aleut baseball by the light of dawn. After Easter Sunday, the Aleut baseball season was "open," and people could play whenever they wished.

Today, playing ball is less popular than it was in the 1970s and 1980s. Yet Aleut baseball is still rigorously practised on Easter Sunday as a symbolic enactment of the Sugpiat way of celebrating *Paskaq* (Easter). In the past five years (2005-2010), however, people have often waited until late morning or early afternoon to play ball. Nowadays, children and adults will come together for a random game of Aleut baseball on the airstrip, although no longer every day, as John Kvasnikoff (1974: 6) had chronicled in a 1974 school newsletter: "After Easter we play Aleut baseball. It is fun. We play after school at the airport. When planes come we move and when the plane leaves we play again."

Despite the lack of interest in playing Aleut baseball on a daily basis, the game and its significance in the Sugpiaq cultural milieu is not diminished. Quite the contrary; children use the principles of Aleut baseball when playing kickball in school during recess and physical education class every single day. While kickball is never referred to as "Aleut kickball," or directly connected to Aleut baseball, the basic organisation, gameplay, and rules are the same, except that batting a ball is replaced by kicking a larger soccer-ball-sized rubber ball and the playing field is shortened to the size of the school's gym. The playing field is thus re-imagined at a new location and adapted to indoor circumstances while maintaining the most significant elements of the game. Children learn the general concepts of Aleut baseball early, such as cooperating by lightly rolling the ball to the kicker or letting everyone who wants to play to participate. There is no limit to the number of players as long as both sides are equal. An adult is always present to enforce the rules and to settle disputes, yet the need for such refereeing is hardly ever needed in the higher grades.

A game of Aleut baseball usually has no umpires or referees, as people rarely get into arguments over the game. In this regard, Lathrop's (1969: 10) remark on *anauligatuk*, an Inuit batting game played across Canada, can be applied to Aleut baseball: "there is a lot of yelling and laughing, but little argument over rules and ambiguous plays." Similarly to *anauligatuk*, also referred to as *anau* in Kangiqsujuaq, Canada (Daveluy 2000), Aleut baseball is played according to local variations, which not only reflect a specific landscape, but also fit the players' conceptualisation of *their*

game. Thus, in terms of cultural significance, Aleut baseball and *anau* (*ibid.*) are similar. Both are considered to be games of their own, an original creation that is played according to one's own cultural values.

The above information suggests that many similarities exist between Aleut baseball, American baseball, *anau*, and Russian *lapta*. Yet all these games and sports are believed to be very different by the people who play them and indeed are fervently protected as cultural markers of identity[2] (Appadurai 1996: 111; Kaufman and Patterson 2005: 105; Weiner 1977: 506). For the Sugpiat, it is the game's internalisation into everyday life that matters. Aleut baseball is organised, carried out, and interpreted by the people. It generates specific meaning, values, and opportunities for cultural identification and expressions that are significant in their particular context.

Thus, despite similarities, people focus on the differences that make each variation of baseball unique. This exemplifies the playful process that can transform a game into a sport and a sport into a game. Russian *lapta*, American baseball, *anau*, and Aleut baseball are just variations of the batting of a ball. The first two variations have been crystallised into a sport, when their respective federations decided to consolidate the rules and appoint third parties to arbitrate disputes. However, the basic idea of batting the ball is still open to interpretation and appropriation, and therein lays the playfulness. People "play," innovate, and make the game their own. It is not surprising then that variations of this idea will exist to fit a particular context, even when the game has been standardised as a sport. Aleut baseball is such a case.

Some of the similarities between *lapta* and Aleut baseball are the number of bases (defined by horizontal lines), the style of batting and pitching, and the ability of players to throw the ball to each other. A visible difference between American and Aleut baseball is the number of bases and the physical direction of the game. Aleut baseball has one base and a home plate (marked by horizontal lines), which are located across from one another in the playing field. There are two teams, in this particular case the Port Graham (PG) team and the Nanwalek (N) team, and each team takes turns scoring points, which the opposing team tries to prevent. Usually the game has no time limit; instead, the teams play until they reach a certain score, in this case 60 points.

At the beginning of the game, team N is in the scoring position. Its players are lined up behind the first line, which provides a "safe" area for them. They have a similar safe area beyond line 2 on the other side of the "field." PG's players are spread out on the playing field between the two lines, except for their pitcher, who stands in front of line 1 (Figure 1) and proceeds to gently toss the ball to N's batters. N's players take turns batting and whenever a good ball is hit, anyone from N can make a run across the field to line 2. Their goal is to reach the safe area beyond line 2 without being hit by the ball. Meanwhile PG's players find the ball and pass it along to the

2 In the 1950s, the mere insinuation that American baseball originated from Russian *lapta* sparked an international debate that became part of Cold War propaganda between the two superpowers (Keller 1987: 2; Marcisz 2008: 2; Schreck 2003: 1-2).

person who is best positioned to throw and hit N's running players. If N's players make it to line 2 without being tagged, they can either stay there for a while and wait for an opportunity to run back to line 1 or, if the circumstances seem favourable, turn right around and head for the safety of line 1. One point is awarded to each team for a complete run from line 1 to line 2 and back again. There can be multiple runners at one time, and they each gain points for their teams. If a runner is hit by the ball, the teams switch sides. In this case, PG would have the opportunity to make points. The teams also switch sides when a player out in the field catches the ball in flight before it hits the ground and bounces.

Certain details of Aleut baseball deserve comment. First of all, the style of pitching is different from that of American baseball. It is not in the interest of either team to pitch a ball that is difficult to hit. Rather, the pitchers try to throw balls that are easy to hit and result in a strike. If no ball is hit, there is no game, and the game becomes boring instead of entertaining. Consequently, there is no real need for a catcher—although sometimes people beyond line 1, ergo, in the batter's own team, fulfil this role for the sake of saving time in locating a missed ball.

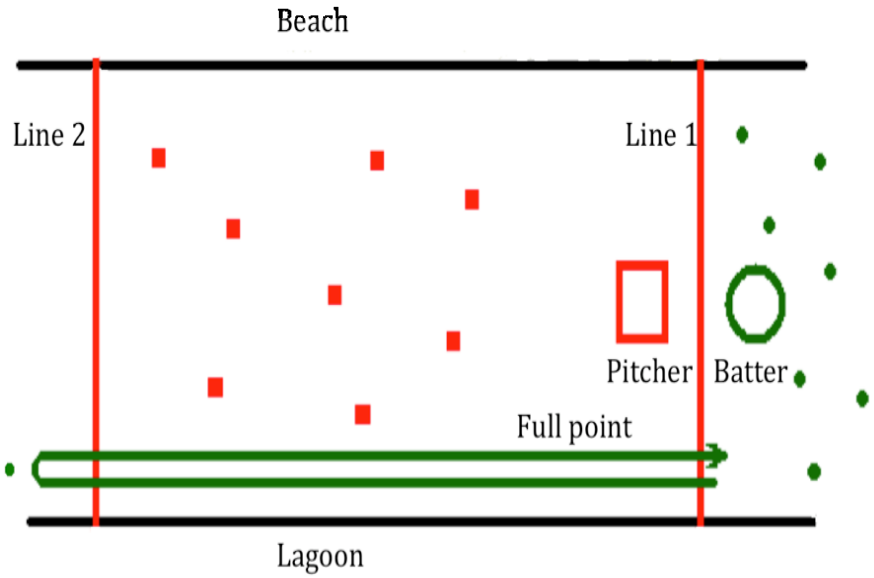

Figure 1. Outline of the playing field and positions of the players in Aleut baseball.

Secondly, batting is equally different from that of regular baseball. While both games have multiple batters, regular baseball allows each player only three unsuccessful attempts before "striking out." In contrast, Aleut baseball has no such limit; batters can and do try to hit the ball multiple times until they either succeed or give up and let a fellow player take over. A good ball is not necessarily one that goes the farthest. It can also be high enough to give several players time to make a run for

the safety lines, or aimed at the edges of the playing field where it is difficult to locate amid the beach grass.

Nonetheless, the players of the opposing team can grab the ball and aim it at the runners, in order to "put them out" of the game. The two lines are far apart, and the players running in-between may be intercepted by throwing the ball at them. Thus, the runners often "zigzag" between the safe areas instead of completing a straight run, thereby providing a diversion for their fellow teammates to run and gain additional points. Being hit by the ball does not automatically make the teams switch sides either; a hit runner can pick the ball up and throw it back at the attackers, thus putting himself or herself "back in" the game and ensuring the continuation of his or her team's scoring position.

During the game between Port Graham and Nanwalek on August 26, 2007, when spectators were asked about the reason for the tournament, most of them concluded that some of the players must have been looking for something to do, as the summer fishing and subsistence activities were drawing to an end. As the final game of the tournament took place in Nanwalek, the Port Graham players arrived in several groups; some by airplane, and some by boat. As usual, the game lasted many hours, and sundown forced the players to quit before the designated winning score. Some of the Port Graham players flew home in a small aircraft at the last light of day, while others settled in with family in Nanwalek, making use of this opportunity to visit relatives and catch up with friends. Interestingly, the following day nobody really knew the final score, and most people could not identify the winning team either. What everybody did recall was, however, the wonderful time they had at the game: visiting with friends, eating different foods, seeing the various skill levels of the players, or experiencing a particularly exciting moment. People also remarked that who wins and who loses mattered little to them, as long as they could enjoy cheering their team along, and sharing the togetherness and enjoyment of "playing ball" with others.

Adapting the game through cultural creation and innovation

As a community event, Aleut baseball has both physical and symbolic dimensions. On this airstrip, temporarily turned into a playing field, one can observe a feeling of togetherness, which participants—players and spectators alike—share. For the Sugpiat of Nanwalek, "playing ball" refers not only to playing the game but also to the social activity associated with the game, as formulated by players and spectators alike. Spectators are not inactive; rather, they participate by verbal encouragement, physical presence, and emotional investment, thus contributing to the overall experience and creating the ambience local people associate with Aleut baseball (Goffman 1961: 7-8). For instance, it is expected that spectators can walk on to the field during the less intense segments to chat with players. The cultural arrangement of the playing field itself allows for such interaction. Game lines are not always physically marked, and player and spectator areas are not rigidly compartmentalised. In short, the space of the game engenders Sugpiat's symbolic expressions, as formulated by social interaction.

Within the physical and symbolic space of a game of Aleut baseball, a community has the opportunity to "play," that is innovate, experiment, joke, and renegotiate as long as participants comply with the local cultural logic. To teach the younger generations, when adults are playing with children, a grown-up player on one team can be balanced against two little ones on the other. Better players are always expected to help out less experienced ones, and people feel free to teach Aleut baseball to those community members who are not ethnically Sugpiaq. For this reason, the rules are flexible and constantly changing to accommodate idiosyncratic interpretations.

In sports, though still existent, togetherness is subject to shared consideration of rigid rules laid down by a regulatory higher authority. One of the first endeavours of sports federations has been to solidify the playing space of a sport into distinct compartments, thus separating players from spectators. In part, the reason is to control the kind of social interaction that we describe in Aleut baseball. This is not to say that there is no room for playfulness; rather, the element of control makes it different in scope and quality.

The relation between games and sports may also be illustrated by *lapta*, which was played in various Russian communities according to local variations and rules. However, it became a nationally recognised sport with its own association, thus acquiring official regulations and rules. Naturally, *lapta* also continued to be played in local contexts beyond the association's reach. At some point in history, *lapta* came to Alaska, where it had always been played as a game. It was adopted by local people and adapted to local realities, in the process emerging as a new game, not merely as a local variation, but rather as a culture-specific activity. Aleut baseball, regarded as a genuine expression of Sugpiaq cultural creativity, came to articulate ethnic identity and group membership. Sugpiat choose to play Aleut baseball while fully knowing and being able to play American baseball, thereby emphasising their Sugpiaq heritage and expressing their identity as Sugpiaq.

Consequently, all regional and local games carry the potential to become national or even global sports.[3] Concurrently, all sports can become games, when locally played and interpreted to fit specific cultural realities. The transformation from sports to games and from games to sports is linked together by the Turnerian notion of play, which allows for cultural innovation. In games, the basic elements that help internalise a sport and transform it into a game are adopted and adapted by the everyday people who play it. The *raison d'être* for the game, the cultural logic, and the expectations and values of the group are all acted out in the locally specific variation. Such cultural innovation and the process of making it one's own realises its full potential and is an ethnographic gem for researchers to observe.

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3 E.g., standardisation was necessary in the case of *anau*, in order for several Inuit communities to be able to play together in a tournament in Nunavut. According to Daveluy (2000), people came together in Halifax (Nova Scotia, Canada) in 1997 and drew up a common set of rules for *anau.* Yet, on the community level, the game is still played according to local variations.

In the specific case of Aleut baseball, cultural innovation through internalisation is discernible through several characteristics of the gameplay. One of the interesting aspects of Aleut baseball is the lack of official regulation of the game. Despite the complexities, there are no referees, only, perhaps, scorekeepers. Although teasing and joking, often associated with Alaskan Native and Inuit social interaction (Briggs 1974: 268), is often part of the gameplay, serious anger and violence are not. Conflict avoidance, which "works largely by innuendo" (Briggs 1991: 261), is an indirect way to resolve controversial situations without engaging in direct arguments.

This aspect of Sugpiaq social behaviour influences the gameplay of Aleut baseball, especially when there are less experienced players (Slobodin 1962, 1969), who might prove to be more of a liability than an asset to the team. For instance, nobody will directly tell unsuccessful batters to leave just because they are having difficulties hitting the ball, but nobody will particularly encourage them to participate either. Other authors have discussed the idea that sports and games emulate specific cultural values and social concepts of the participants' society (Geertz 2000: 420-421; Leach and Kildea 1973; Voigt 1976: 1), the "constructive potential of sports" (Grasmuck 2005: 194), and the historicity of internalising certain games and sports into a new cultural context (Daveluy 2000; Szymanski and Zimbalist 2005: 2-3).

Despite the relaxed pace of Aleut baseball, it still requires skill and may involve injury. Partly for this reason, all participants always need to be aware of their own physical location and actions, their teammates', their opponents', and the spectators'. Briggs (1991: 259, 261) notes the similarities with the characteristics needed to cope with natural disasters in a small, compact Inuit society and the social distress that she describes as "a constant maintenance of a state of alert." The abilities and strategies needed to play Aleut baseball are very similar to those of coping with distress in the social or natural environment. Such an effort requires not only constant readiness and flexibility, but also specific skills and attitudes in order to cope with ever changing circumstances (*ibid.*: 266).

Long periods of waiting combined with sudden outburst of activity and a need to always be ready (Barker and Barker 1993) is an aspect of life in Nanwalek that is also exhibited in Aleut baseball. In the gameplay it is essential to have the ability to realise an opportunity, the skill to act on it, and the readiness to cope with the unexpected turn of events (Shannon 2003). For instance, players behind line 1 may be chatting or smoking, seemingly not paying attention to the game, but when their batter hits a good ball, they immediately get into action and seize the opportunity to make a successful run. This pattern of behaviour repeats itself in countless situations. It is a system of culturally constructed coping mechanism that covers every imaginable aspect of life and carefully balances waiting and acting.

Knowing one's own abilities, the cultural environment, and the physical setting of the game, one's own teammates' strengths and weaknesses, and those of the players of the opposing team are not the only social skills that create a sense of togetherness. There is also the element of playfulness combined with the Sugpiaq cultural context,

which provides opportunities for cultural innovation and the active involvement of the entire community. Playfulness, carried out within the boundaries of culturally appropriate behaviour, allows participants to create excitement, thereby making Aleut baseball not strictly about winning or losing, but also about delivering an entertaining performance while participating in an enjoyable activity. In general, this aspect makes the game different from regular baseball, which emphasises winning over playing (Whiting 1977: 41).

It is not that Aleut baseball players do not want to win; rather, they are aware of their involvement as performers who provide their fellow community members with entertainment and thus incorporate them into the gameplay. Spectators constantly contribute to the game by encouraging or voicing their opinions on what the players should do (or should have done). In this sense, it is a focused gathering, "a natural unit of social organization in which focused interaction occurs" (Goffman 1961: 8). Similarly to baseball (Grasmuck 2005: 194), the long stretches of waiting for something exciting to happen provide opportunities for socialising, while the sudden activity of the gameplay draws the community back into the game.

For the "unfocused" time of this game between Port Graham and Nanwalek, the spectators also organised a cookout with the traditional baseball food of hot dogs and hamburgers and with local delicacies such as barbecued seal and freshly caught fish. About halfway through the game, a local band put on an impromptu performance at the edge of the playing field, providing music and an additional level of amusement. Throughout the game, people came and went, stopping by to partake of some of the food, or to follow an exhilarating action. The players themselves were not constant either. Some just wanted to try their ability at batting without any inclination to score points, while others clearly intended to make a run should an opportunity arise. While the game was mostly played by adults, small children randomly scurried in and out of the playing field without any apparent displeasure from the players or the spectators, and sometimes even imitated the gameplay by running back and forth between imagined "bases" along the airstrip.

People shared a certain mood, characterised by spontaneity and moments of togetherness, which Turner (1969: 96) summarises in the concept of communitas. Not unlike more formal social gatherings, such as church services, meetings, or celebration of calendar rites, Aleut baseball created a shared experience that bounded all who were present into a momentary feeling of belonging and solidarity. Yet, playing ball was also very different since it was largely spontaneous. Although arrangements were made in advance to play at a more or less set time, and food was brought down to the airport and prepared on site, nobody really knew whether anyone would actually come, and the social success of the event developed alongside the game. In a sense, the players, with their performance, and the spectators, with their active presence, together created the feeling of communitas, the mood of the event. Simultaneously, they were also feeding off this energy of camaraderie in perpetuating and continuing the social aspect of the game.

Participants do not only play Aleut baseball, but also perform a social act: the generation of synergy and creativeness that is made possible by team sports and games. In the specific space of a playing field, both players and spectators are active participants in the innovative process, mutually relying on one another to deconstruct and reconstruct meaning in accordance with the notion of playfulness. For these reasons, we propose regarding sporting events as socialities with no strict distinction between spectatorship and participation as a player, because the social aspect brings all people present together in a shared experience of camaraderie. Consequently, such an event provides a specific space for spontaneous cultural experimentation and innovation.

In the case of Aleut baseball, local people create this space by symbolically expressing their understanding and expectations of "playing ball," which are projected on to the local physical and social landscape. The game is adapted to the social-cultural milieu and to the physical idiosyncrasies of the playing field, as for example by purposefully hitting the ball to the tall beach grass to gain time. Such characteristics make this ballgame thoroughly Sugpiaq. Aleut baseball is not a foreign sporting activity, but an integral part of "Sugpiaqness." It is interpreted, understood, carried out, and "played" in a way that makes sense to people. Due to the spontaneity and playfulness involved in sports and games, playing Aleut baseball allows room for cultural innovation, which feeds back to the community. The game has thus become specifically Sugpiaq, a venue for expressing, renegotiating, and strengthening group identity through the constant application of local cultural logic.

Conclusion

Aleut baseball has been an important marker of identity for the Sugpiat Alutiit of Nanwalek and Port Graham. As a game, it expresses the inherent cultural logic of the Sugpiaq by providing a stage where expectations, values, and morals can be presented and reinforced. At the same time, however, this stage also provides a framework within which these same values may be experimented with and renegotiated. As such, adapting the game to new circumstances becomes integral to cultural change. In this article we have argued that through internalising and playing Aleut baseball the Sugpiat of Nanwalek and Port Graham recreate their cultural surroundings. This process can be observed in the way these communities symbolically constitute a playing field. During a game of Aleut baseball, an airstrip becomes a space where the community as a whole can temporarily step away from normative standards and play with various aspects of everyday life, experimenting with new socio-cultural arrangements, reinterpreting meaning, and renegotiating identities. Using Turner's notion of play it is not merely Aleut baseball that is being played; rather, a larger cultural context is momentarily reconfigured, thus influencing, in turn, Sugpiaq reality.

The distinctions made at the beginning of this paper are tentative but important: sports researchers need to distance themselves from the habitual ambiguity surrounding past categories, one of them being the treatment of sports and games as one. We gain analytically by placing sports and games on a continuum on which a sport epitomises

the standardised version of a game. Popular world sports were once games in the most local of contexts. Even when sports have become global phenomena, they have influenced—and been influenced by—localities. The notion of playfulness, present in both sports and games, provides a link for constant reinterpretation.

This process is exemplified by Aleut baseball and its connection to Russian *lapta*. Such idiosyncratic ethnographic examples are not simply captivating yet somewhat obscure pieces of cultural history. Rather, they lucidly show the connections between sports and games and the creation of group identity through the appropriation, interpretation, and internalisation of ball games to specific cultural milieux. The example of Aleut baseball gives insight to the process that allows the creation of new ideas and specific meanings through sporting events, as well as reveals the significance of play in the Turnerian sense: the channelling of cultural experimentation and innovations. Consequently, it underscores the capacity of sports and games to link global perceptions with local realities.

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