Communicating through play, Interacting through games

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This session, organized by Céline Petit and chaired by Roberte Hamayon, École pratique des hautes études (EPHE), aimed to explore the significance of play activities and playful relationships in daily life and during festivities among peoples of the Eskaleut area. In comparative perspective, three case studies showed how games play a central role in different areas of the North (Canada, Alaska, Chukotka). The session ended with the performance of several Inuit games, including throat-singing by Lucy Tulugarjuk, a well-known artist from Iglulik (Nunavut, Canada).

Roberte Hamayon has shown that, in the Mongolian and Siberian context, the "notion of play/games is omnipresent in the ritual vocabulary" (HAMAYON 1999-2000: 11) [1]. The significance of play activities and playful relationships has often been noted, as well, in

[1] Our translation.

studies of Inuit societies (for instance, see BRIGGS 1979 and 1998; LAUGRAND & OOSTEN 2002; OOSTEN 2001; RASMUSSEN 1929). However, the forms of expression, oral and symbolic, attached to various Inuit games have not yet been examined in detail, especially in their contemporary aspects. In particular, the efficiency of play as a polysemic and ambiguous form of interaction (between individuals as well as between humans and non-humans) needs to be investigated further. Therefore, this session invited contributions based on ethnographic and ethno-linguistic research in the Eskaleut area (in a broad sense), focusing on the practice of games (its modes and contexts) as well as on the discourse (expressing the vernacular concepts) linked to these games.

The first paper, "Structuring and Nurturing Partnerships Through Competitive Games", given by Céline Petit, examined two competitive partnerships known in the Iglulik area (Canada): the *illuriik* (partners and opponents in duels) and the *mangaariik* (joking fellows). C. Petit analysed these two institutions as means of achieving social cohesion in different ways.

The competitions between *illuriik* – which included fisticuffs, wrestling and song dueling – involved chiefly unrelated, non-kindred men, who originated from different camps or areas of the Central Canadian Arctic. C. Petit shows that, up to the first decade of the 20th century, these games were at the core of building long-term relationships between men who met for the first time: getting involved in these dual competitions was a compulsory first step towards activating exchanges (of goods, services and women) and alliances with the opponent and partner in the game. Reflection on the mode of institution of the *illuriik* relationship suggests further that this partnership was set up to deal with potential antagonism. For the protagonists involved (who happened to meet from time to time), these games constituted a valid and relatively secure frame allowing the expression of rivalry: the men could do and say things that were unacceptable in other contexts. The *illuriik* institution represented thus a significant key for conflict management between individuals – and family groups – living in different camps within neighbouring areas (primarily Iglulingmiut, Aivilingmiut and Nattilingmiut). For a man, taking part in these duels was also a way to gain prestige and assert oneself as an *inummarik* ("an accomplished man"), while integrating further alliance networks. Always held in public, these competitions obviously had collective cathartic effects, as they tended to nurture a cheerful spirit and arouse laughter among the audience.

Still being practiced to some extent, the *mangaariik* relationship involves two individuals who regularly compete either by teasing and ridiculing each other or by wrestling playfully (or pretending to fight), "without ever getting serious". *Mangaariik* are usually people from the same area and from the same generation. In the Iglulik area, it is men in their sixties or seventies who are the most active in this kind of relationship nowadays. This partnership is especially well developed between men who, at some time,

lived together in a camp. Common hunting experiences, especially, provide favorable conditions for the development of this joking partnership. As in the case of the *illuriik* relation, this relationship entails mutual assistance, especially with regard to the exchange of goods and services. Although present in playful confrontations, "borrowing" the partner's wife is, in this case, restricted to the symbolic level of joking (being only pretended or playfully claimed). Relationships of this type can find expression within private contexts, for example in invitations. But as a general rule, the interactions between *mangaariik* are meant to be witnessed by a large audience. The value that these interactions have for collective rejoicing is often emphasized, and community members are quick to take advantage of opportunities to watch joking partners when they happen to meet.

It can also be noted that some of the dual competitions that were included among the games played between *illuriik* (and between Iglulingmiut living in the same camp) have been introduced in schools during the last two decades. Several strength games (such as wrestling or arm-pull) are now practiced in Iglulik by male teenagers, who train together (and confront each other) with the aim of taking part in Inuit games tournaments, which are held at regional (Baffin Games) and territorial or circumpolar (Arctic Winter Games) levels. Among some Iglulingmiut teenagers, frequent involvement in these competitions seems to create bonds, which find expression in mutual assistance in everyday life.

The second paper, *Mynergav*, "Let's compete, let's show ourselves"! Some aspects of games and competition among the Chukchis, presented by Virginie Vaté, sought to demonstrate that among the Chukchi reindeer herders of Chukotka (North-Eastern Russia), games play a central role in rituals. V. Vaté examined two aspects of these games. First, she argued that participation in these ritual games is directed more towards gaining symbolic status than towards winning material prizes. Then, she suggested that competition, present in these games but also in everyday life, is crucial in establishing social relations.

In the Chukotkan tundra, most of the regular herding rituals include the organization of games. Furthermore, even when it is not part of a regular seasonal ritual, the organization of games entails some ritual performances, including feeding spirits. In the past, a great variety of games were practiced (different kinds of pulling games, wrestling, etc.), but, in recent years V. Vaté could observe only foot races and races with reindeer sleds. These races may be organized by one family or by several families, simultaneously. Each organizer gives prizes. There are bigger and smaller prizes, but they are not distributed according to rank. The winner decides what he/she is more interested in. But V. Vaté has shown that winning is not the ultimate goal of these rituals.

On the basis on her fieldwork materials, V. Vaté has made clear that, in these competitions, the aim is not so much to gain something material as to lose something immaterial, expressed in terms of a kind of "heaviness" (*tiazhest'*, in Russian) that people accumulate all through the year. Herdsmen, in particular, may get this sort of "heaviness" during summer transhumances, when they are away with the herd – which is a particularly difficult and tiring time for them. In Chukchi, the term to designate this heaviness is *kêly*, a category of spirits that people usually fear. More precisely, when Chukchis speak about *kêly*, they refer to spiritual entities belonging to a kind of otherness, symbolically located outside the influence of the domestic space (see also VATÉ 2007); and, as a matter of fact, encounters with *kêly* are very likely to occur during transhumances, far from the domestic hearth. Feeding the spirits, having races and distributing prizes in the context of rituals help get rid of the accumulated *kêly*/heaviness.

However, if winning is not the main goal of games and competitions, showing ones strength is central. By taking part in games, people show their skills and evaluate each other. This is why games used to be present at collective gatherings and meetings, such as, for instance, the ones uniting sea-mammal hunters and reindeer herders for exchanges of their respective products. Competitions here, as in the Canadian Arctic example, seemed to be conducive to building social relationships. Competition is also present in everyday life at the level of "who tanned more skins", "who catches the reindeer with the lasso at best", etc. – abilities that are highly respected in the community. Thus, living together in the Chukchi way implies a permanent evaluation of each other, which is necessary both for developing good partnerships and also for promoting solidarity with the ones who may need your help.

The last paper, "Dealing with the Devil": Perspectives on some Aleut Games by Marie-Amélie Salabelle, analysed a set of practices, referred in English as "games", in a Central Aleutian community (Alaska), the members of which converted to Russian Orthodoxy in the late 18th century. M.-A. Salabelle showed that these games, in which several layers of representations are embedded, give form to a peculiar mode of relation to the past, serving in part to mediate the pre-conversion shamanic heritage and the current adherence to the Russian Orthodox Church.

Games (mostly cards and gambling games such as bingo), which represent an important part of daily social life, are not supposed to be practiced by the Aleut residents of Atka Island during the most important religious celebrations of the Russian Orthodox calendar that is in use within the community. However, some peculiar "games" may, on the contrary, take place only on the eve of Epiphany, which, for members of the Russian Orthodox Church, commemorates the baptism of Christ in the River Jordan and when water is consecrated for use as Holy water. The night following the feast of Epiphany, celebrated on January 18th, constitutes a very particular time of the year, when the Devil

roams the earth, gathering people. That night is also said to be the time of an unusual phenomenon, with the creek flowing backwards from where people are supposed to drink a mouthful of water and where whoever wore a mask on Halloween must wash his/her face at midnight. Before midnight, some specific "games", requiring secrecy to ensure their efficiency and involving the Devil as an implicit partner, may take place. These games played during that night may be divided among two categories: divinatory games (such as guessing who will be your future mate or when you will die) and practices that are meant to enable people to gain immediately a certain kind of knowledge (such as mastering a musical instrument or, knowing the Bible by heart, etc.)

Through the examination of various materials, M.-A. Salabelle intended to demonstrate that, in these practices, the figure of the Devil, or of daemons, seems closely connected with the figure of the shaman and his auxiliary spirits and with the representations associated with the masks. She argued that one can understand these games as a medium for Atkans to articulate pre-Christian memories in relation to Russian Orthodoxy in order to assert a coherent identity through time.

To conclude, these three papers and the ensuing discussion (including the comments of Roberte Hamayon, the chair) – all of which was accompanied nicely by the performance of Lucie Tulugarjuk – opened interesting comparative perspectives regarding the role and the significance of games and playful activities not only within societies of the Eskaleut area but also in the Siberian Arctic.

Several important aspects have emerged from the three cases presented: 1) The papers have stressed that in some cases these games are connected with representations of spiritual entities, conceived as ambivalent but generally feared; 2) they have pointed to the integrative dynamics of game festivities and to related discourses (values of happiness and sharing; assertion of a local identity or a community); 3) some of them have shown that taking part in competitive – and even agonistic – games can lead to building ambivalent partnerships (based on both cooperation and rivalry) that fulfill major roles, from preventing conflict to nurturing further exchanges.

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