




Culture Born in Play



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KEYWORDS

- *play*
- *cultural memory*
- *ceremonial communication*
- *knowledge transfer*
- *sanctified space and time*
- *rites*
- *myths*
- *initiation*

KULCSSZAVAK

- *játék*
- *kulturális emlékezet*
- *rituális kommunikáció*
- *tudástranszfer*
- *megszentelt tér és idő*
- *ritusok*
- *mítoszok*
- *beavatás*

ABSTRACT

How can we interpret that culture was born in play? What do we mean by the idea that culture has been played from the beginning? How has play served a culture-creating function since early societies? What role do holidays, rites, and myths play in creating the connective structure of culture and preserving cultural memory? What did this sanctified space and time mean to humanity? How and why did humans replay the act of creating their cosmos and their community's mythical past in sanctified time and space? How are ceremonial communication channels the most ancient form of knowledge transfer, and what is the role of play in this? This study explores the answers to these questions.

ABSZTRAKT

Játékban született kultúra | Hogyan értelmezhetjük azt a ténymegállapítást, hogy a kultúra játékban született? Mit értünk azalatt, hogy a kultúrát kezdetől fogva játszották? Hogyan valósult meg a játék kultúrateremtő funkciója a korai társadalmaktól kezdve? Milyen szerepet játszanak az ünnepek, rítusok és mítoszok a kultúra konnektív struktúrájának kialakulásában és a kulturális emlékezet megőrzésében? Mit jelentett az ember számára a megszentelt tér és idő? Miért és hogyan játszották újra az ember az univerzuma és a közössége mitikus múltját a megszentelt térben és időben? Hogyan váltak az ünnepek és a szertartások a rituális kommunikáció eszközeivé és a tudástranszfer legősibb formáivá? Milyen szerepe van mindebben a játéknak? Ezekre a kérdésekre ad választ ez a tanulmány.

Play as a cultural phenomenon

Huizinga (2007) interprets play as a cultural phenomenon. He expresses his conviction that human culture began and developed through play, as play itself. He also believes play is part of animal behavior and predates culture. By examining various areas of human culture, he finds play weaving through the vital activities of human communities, particularly in speech, where we use abstract concepts and metaphors, or in myths, which Huizinga considers as representations of human existence. Play is also evident in cultic actions, sacrifices, and initiation rites.

The characteristic features with which Huizinga describes play are also crucial for our understanding. He lists several key aspects: play is a free action, not

ordered; it provides pleasure and is used to spend free time; it is not a task, but something we engage in as much as we desire. Play is distinct from real, ordinary life. It is marked by spatial and temporal separation, with a closed and delimited location and duration. It has its own internal order and harmony, which bring perfection to an imperfect world. The slightest deviation from the rules spoils play.

Play is indispensable for the individual. It is also essential for the community due to its content and power to build social and spiritual relationships. According to Huizinga, human play realizes the ideal of expression and coexistence, going beyond the biological functions of self-preservation and the survival of the species. Play is shrouded in mystery. In its higher form, it belongs to the sphere of holidays, cults, and the sacred. Within the game, the rules of everyday life do not apply. We have several examples of suspending the usual social order for sacred playtime. During the initiation ceremony, when a young man becomes a member of the male community, he is freed from laws and rules. We can also think of customs related to the Saturnalia, the carnival, or the Panhellenic Games. During the Saturnalia, roles were reversed, and warfare was suspended during the Panhellenic Games.

The culture-creating function of play

When Huizinga writes that play has a culture-creating function, he clarifies that he does not mean that culture comes from the game, nor that what was once a game transforms into culture through some developmental process. Rather, he suggests that culture was initially played. The community communicated and expressed its perception of life and the world through games. Sacred performances and ceremonial competitive games are the recurring forms in which culture was created and developed further through play, as play.

In his book on ancient China, Marcel Granet (1968) writes about the culture-creating effect of festive competition. Archaic communities did everything possible to ensure that holidays and competitions were well organized and that competition was won because the community had an elementary interest in this. Holiday and sacred games were believed to bring blessings and prosperity to the whole community. Ritual actions like crossing a river, climbing a mountain, cutting wood, or picking flowers are similar to ritualistic competitive games. A typical example of the attainment of royal power is when the heroic prince proves his superiority over his opponent through a miraculous test of strength. This kind of duel often ended with the death of the vanquished. Such duels occur in many parts of the world during seasonal celebrations. Granet notes that these games also include competitions between the sexes, often manifested in paired songs and question-and-answer games.

The *agon* in the classical Greco-Roman concept of games

The *agon*, the spirit of competition, and continuous match permeated ancient Greek culture and were always connected to sacredness. Here, we can think of Greek war games, the Olympic, Isthmian, Delphi, Nemean games, or even the *Panathenaia*. On the occasion of the Theseus holiday, a beauty contest was even organized for men. During the *symposia*, the participants measured their skills and competed with each other in songs, riddles, logical reasoning, and the art of eloquence. We can also find mockery competitions related to ceremonies in the ancient Greek tradition. The origin of the *Jambos*, which originally meant a joke and were performed on the occasion of the Demeter or Dionysus festivals, traces back to them. During the festivals of Demeter and Apollo, men and women sang mocking songs to each other. The basis of everything was the sacred game in the form of a competition (Huizinga, 2007).

The *agon* character was also present in Roman culture. Among other things, it took shape in gladiatorial games, animal fights, and chariot races. However, as Huizinga (2007) specifies, it changed from active action to observation. Slaves fought in the battles. According to Huizinga, substitution with slaves came about because the Romans had a strong sacred character of fighting, and the cult allowed for substitution. In addition to the holidays connected to the date, *ludi votive-votive* games in honor of deceased people or to ward off the wrath of the gods-were held in Rome. In this case, the slightest violation of the rite or an accidental disturbance invalidated the celebration, thus revealing the sanctified nature of the action.

Linguistic approach in the interpretation of the classical Greco-Roman concept of games

Today's research illuminates new connections regarding the peculiarities of classical ancient Greco-Roman game concepts. Stephen Kidd's (2021) philological approach and linguistic analysis support the fact that linguistics contributes much to understanding culture. A thorough study of the vocabulary of the Greek and Latin languages proves that the meaning of "game" in Greco-Roman culture goes far beyond the association of *pais* (child) and *paizein* (to play). In a way significantly different from today's perception, it primarily reflects a positive emotional state that makes it possible to perform or engage in playful activities. This emotional state is the pleasure the sight of something with a high aesthetic value or even a smell can induce in a person. Accordingly, the Greeks referred to delicious food, tempting jewelry, or charming flowers as *paignia* or *athrymata*, thus reinterpreting our understanding of ancient games. For the Greeks, games designated

a feeling of connectedness to the world of the senses, a pleasant feeling, or the thing that causes it. The verb *paizein* also appears in other contexts.

Anton Bierl (2021) draws attention to the fact that the verb *paizein* was used by the ancient Greeks in connection with dance performances, especially in cases where the chorus also sang. The verb *paizein* expresses regular movements in the rhythm of the ritual dance. The personification of this playful ritual activity, *Paidia*, is depicted in several vase images from the end of the fifth century. The young goddess appears in these depictions, performing light ritualistic dance movements, personifying youthful energy, seduction, and pleasure. Bierl proves that the meaning of the Greek verb *paizein* is simultaneously connected to children's play, to the beauty expressed in the movements of the choral dance, to the posture, to the reinforcement of the gender role of young people, and thus to education. At the festivities, young people could display their attractiveness through cult dances and dramatized mythical stories, providing them the means to deepen their identity.

The role of ritual and celebration in the preservation of cultural memory

Jan Assmann (2011), who posits human memory as the basis of cultural learning, deals primarily with rituals. His research examines the connection between the trinity of memory (as a relationship to the past), identity (as political imagination), and cultural continuity (as the creation of tradition). He gives an example of the importance of cultural memory related to the Pentateuch, which contains several calls for the child to be enlightened about the meaning of rites and laws. At the Seder, the questioning child learns the meaning of “we” by being initiated into a story and memory that fills it with content. He explains that every culture creates its connective structure, i.e., it has a dual effect by connecting and engaging two planes—the social plane and the time dimension plane. Part of the connective structure of the given culture creates a symbolic world of meaning and a shared space of experience, expectation, and action. It offers a norm and a narrative by connecting the past and the present. It creates and preserves defining memories and experiences. All these characteristics of culture, including the normative and narrative aspects, provide the individual with a sense of belonging and identity, allowing an individual to use the “we” category. These aspects form the basis of mythical and historical narratives.

The concept of cultural memory refers to the external dimension of human memory. The seat of memory is the individual's mind, so it can be considered an internal phenomenon. However, the contents stored in the memory, their

organization, and retrievability also have social and cultural aspects. Among the external dimensions of memory, Assmann primarily includes mimetic memory, which helps us learn actions through imitation. Secondly, it involves the memory of objects, the material world surrounding our lives, and the different layers of the present and past. Thirdly, it lists communicative memory, which is vital because consciousness and memory only form in humans through social interactions. Finally, he lists cultural memory, which relates to the meaning attached to things. If routine mimetic actions no longer only serve expediency but also have additional meaning attached to them, they become rituals. Rites belong to the sphere of cultural memory. All rites exhibit the duality of repetition and display. The more strictly individuals follow the fixed order, the more repetition prevails in them. The more freedom you give on certain occasions, the more the display aspect comes to the fore.

In preliterate societies, human memory was the only way to store knowledge to ensure group identity. Community knowledge had to be storable, retrievable, and communicable. According to Assmann, storability was provided by poetic composition, retrievability by ritual display, and communicability by community participation. In this way, sound, rhythm, movement, dance, mimicry, gestures, and ritual actions became the mediating means of knowledge that ensured identity. How did community members share this knowledge? Through participation in meetings and personal presence. Without personal presence, it was impossible to participate in the collective memory. For this reason, holidays and rituals played a vital role in maintaining collective memory. With their regular repetition and return, they ensured the transmission and further perpetuation of identity-assuring knowledge. They sustained the group's identity system and provided community members with the knowledge needed for self-identity. Their ritual repetition guaranteed spatial and temporal community cohesion. Rites created, maintained, and renewed order in archaic societies.

Balandier (1988) claims that order was not a given for archaic societies. It required ritual staging and mythical representation. Myths played a crucial role in creating cosmic order. Assmann defines myth as the past compressed into a story. In connection with the latter, he emphasizes that it carries the mythical prehistory of the community with symbolic fixation. Festivals and rites are ceremonial communication channels through which myths are passed down. In this way, the ritual constitutes the most ancient form of knowledge transfer, giving rise to "the writing of societies without writing." Assmann considers symbolically coded religious acts and actions to be the same cultural units as texts. We have to interpret them to gain information about the community and society to which they belong.

The myth as a means of actualization of the past

Malinowski (1995) and Durkheim (1982) found a close connection between myth, rite, and education (as an action that shapes personality), and from the field of general anthropology and comparative religion, Eliade (1991), Caillois (1989, 1996), Cassirer (1996) and Huizinga (2007) investigated the relationship between myth, ritual, and art (as creative action).

Concerning the original sense of myth, Otálora emphasizes that in traditional societies, it played the role that education plays today (Otálora, 2011). Myth is not merely used to satisfy the need to explain what happened in early times but also actualizes or revives the earlier reality, elevating it to the source of community life and holding community members accountable for stability, well-being, and fertility.

In this regard, Cassirer (1996) mentions that being in the primitive world is more related to the experience of action than abstraction. The holiday is “the place of all metamorphosis and miracles.” Based on the study of the rituals of primitive communities, Caillois (1996) uses the concept of sacred transgression. Van Gennep (2008), Turner (2002), and Wulf (2007) employ the concept of liminality in rites of passage. In these approaches, transgression means that the usual canon is relativized, and the principle of alignment with the external norm is overturned. In traditional societies, holidays are occasions par excellence for breaking with the existing order. The holiday is a return to the original and first age, “the place of every metamorphosis, every miracle. Nothing had been stabilized yet, no rules had been announced, and no form had been fixed. What became impossible since then was still feasible (...). The whole universe was plastic, malleable, and inexhaustible” (Caillois, 1996:117).

Sacral transgression and liminality

Caillois interprets transgression as a call for procreation, health, abundance, and rebirth. This is the practice that allows periodic rejuvenation. Liminality is the intermediate state of young initiates in rites of passage, between separation and returns to the community, as described by Van Gennep (2008). Each initiate must undergo three stages: separation from the community, crossing the transition threshold, and returning to the community in a new state of being. In the transition ritual, the individual is an undifferentiated whole, within which he experiences the reduction of personal will to benefit the group. Liminal, transitory subjects have no status and are unclassifiable and undefinable; they can be shaped and shaped by the instructor or the other group members, but at the same time, they

are before the community experience. Egalitarianism, homogenization, humility, and a sense of community develop among neophytes in their experience of the sacred (Turner, 2002).

The man of the archaic age, the “homo religiosus”

Religiosity deeply defined and permeated the life and everyday lives of archaic people. Religion historian Mircea Eliade (2022) refers to archaic people as *homo religiosus*; people who feared and respected the gods. This religious experience is the basis of humanity’s relationship to divine power, about which it tries to define itself. While writing about the relationship between the sacred and the profane, Eliade explains that archaic societies attached religious significance to their world. Under the influence of the experience of divine power, the people of prehistoric societies wanted to draw as close as possible to the holy and wanted to live near the places of the holy manifestation. For the saint, it was synonymous with being saturated with energy and vitality. In the beginning, therefore, he sanctified his surroundings and, in a later phase, his daily actions, which helped him maintain his existence and stay alive.

András Németh (2010) notes that the life of archaic communities was determined by the sky bending over people, the rites developed in the community, the myths that tell the story of prehistory, the magic that is part of religiosity, and the associated system of symbols and rules, which at the same time, determined humanity’s place in the world. The repetition of rites, prehistoric history, and the great deeds of mythical heroes condensed into symbolic religious actions, ensuring predictability for the community, full compliance with the rules, and the maintenance of social order. “This relation to the heavenly, divine pattern connects man with divinity. Individual human activities gain meaning and approval as far as they are part of the sacred and follow the ancient rites established “at the beginning of time.” The effort to conform to the deity was more important for the community than anything else. Balance was guaranteed in people’s lives by gaining the benevolence and support of the deity. The loss of divine support threatened people of the archaic age with the fear that their existence would “fall back” into “primordial chaos” (Németh, 2010:15-17).

Sacred and profane time

The sacred and the profane are two ways of being in the world. Eliade distinguishes between profane and sacred time, as well as profane and sacred space. He defines pre-modern times as until the end of the Middle Ages for Europe, and the First World War for the rest of the world. In pre-modern times, god-fearing *homo religiosus* experienced profane time as everyday life filled with everyday actions lacking religious significance.

Holidays disrupted the continuity of profane time in pre-modern times. Pre-modern people had the opportunity to cross over into sacred time. Crossing over occurred through rites. There is a sharp contrast between the two types of time: sacred time is a mythical ancient time reversible by its very nature, which the religious person makes present again. Religious holidays and the liturgical time spent on them serve to make present some sacred events that happened in the mythical past. Participating in holidays this way guaranteed that people left profane time and entered mythical time, which manifested again through holidays.

A characteristic of sacred time is that it does not “pass” linearly but moves forward and does not represent an irreversible period or duration. Festivals and holidays revive the actions the gods performed and sanctified when they created the world. Holidays or festivals revisit the first appearance of sacred time, where *ab origine* and *in illo tempore* appeared. The gods sanctified time by creating the elements of reality in our world. At the same time, the gods also created sacred time, which is of the same age as creation, sanctified by the presence and actions of the gods. Of the two types of time, sacred time is circular, reversible, and recoverable. It appears as a hereditary, mythical presence, ensuring participatory rites for *homo religiosus*. This sacred time is, in some ways, related to eternity. *Homo religiosus* did not live in a historical time, in the historical present, but worked to benefit from the sacred time.

In Eliade’s definition, the most significant difference in the perception of time between secular and religious people is that the religious perceive liturgical time as possessing a supernatural quality. Secular people also perceive the rhythm of alternating periods—such as the alternation of time spent at work and periods of free time spent having fun—but experience no break in time. It is perpetually linearly advancing time, bound to human existence, which begins with birth and ends with death. Its rhythm can be of different intensity, but *homo nonreligiosus* experiences it as purely human, unconnected to any divine presence or supernatural quality. There is no secret of this time, into which one could gain initiation through obscure rites, where one would have to return to mythical times in order—even for a limited time interval—to be connected to the divine, the supernatural, the eternal. In the case of *homo religiosus*, sacred time does not belong to the historical

present so much that it almost stops the duration of profane time at specific periods. Time in pre-Christian religions is a sacred, mythical time that reappears occasionally. A primeval time not found in the historical past. Nothing else preceded it; nothing else existed before the narration of the reality narrated in the myth, which arose all at once.

Sacred and profane space

According to Eliade, creating sacred space relates to sacralizing the world and making it holy. For *homo religiosus*, space is not homogeneous. Sacred spaces charged with power contrast with non-sacred spaces and formless spatial domains. For *homo religiosus*, the inhomogeneity of space means that sacred space is the only real space, representing a solid point in the world, a central axis from which all orientation starts. In a boundless, homogenous space lacking identifiers and orientation possibilities, the *hierophany*- the manifestation of the holy and divine-reveals a solid point and center. The discovery and projection of this solid point, the center of the world, is identified with the creation of the world and is very significant in ritual orientation and living one's existence. Evidence that *homo religiosus* experienced the continuity of space as divided exists in examples like thresholds or doors, which fulfilled ritual functions by concretely marking the cessation of spatial continuity.

Crossing the threshold was followed by many rites. For example, in old Eastern cultures, judgments were announced on thresholds, which housed guardian spirits, etc. Every sacred space is associated with *hierophany*- the manifestation and revelation of a god's presence. Through this, holiness breaks through, highlighting a specific area from the cosmic and otherwise chaotic environment and qualitatively changing it. The center of the world is where the *hierophany* broke through the planes and where the three cosmic planes-earth, sky, and underworld-come into contact with each other. The cosmic pillar that maintains the connection between the three planes stands in the center of the world, and the habitable world forms around it. Many myths, rites, and religious ideas are based on this traditional world system. The world can be understood as the world of *homo religiosus* as far as it has been sanctified, as far as it manifests itself as a holy world. *Hierophanies* and the sanctification of space have a cosmogonic significance for *homo religiosus*. Settling somewhere, choosing, and creating a place of residence means repeating the cosmogony and imitating the work of the gods. Therefore, the decision to create a residence is religious for *homo religiosus*. A religious person feels homesick for the divine world. This religious desire expresses that the cosmos in which he lives should be as pure and holy as it was

when god created it. How are the sacredness of time and space connected? The experience of living the sacred time allows the *homo religiosus* to occasionally find his way back to the first moment of creation, *in principio*.

Initiation rites – repetition of the initial divine acts by imitation

This religious, *numinosus* (Otto, 1997) worldview of archaic people led to the development of initiation ceremonies, where the initiates repeated the initial divine actions from the time of the creation of the world, on the model of gods or divine heroes, thus sanctifying their world and transferring and receiving all that knowledge to the mythical about heroes and the beginning of the world, knowing which they could now assume responsibility for their community (Eliade, 2022).

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