

# STADION

*Internationale Zeitschrift für Geschichte des Sports*  
*International Journal of the History of Sport*  
*Revue Internationale d'Histoire du Sport*

42

ACADEMIA VERLAG  SANKT AUGUSTIN  
2016

Dear readers,

the issues STADION 41(2015) and 42(2016) are smaller than the previous issues. The price will thus be reduced to EUR 26 plus postage and packaging. Please find the abstracts of the articles of both issues at the end of issue 42.

Thank you!

The editors

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# GAMES, FOLK AND SHAMANIC ENERGY IN EASTERN ETHNOSPORT

BY

HENNING EICHBERG

“To understand the spirit of a nation, one should visit its national festival”<sup>1</sup> – with these words, a website from Buryatia advertises the *Surkharban*, the Buryat-Mongolian festival of the Republic. The relation between folk festivity and identity is, however, much more than just a matter of an advert for tourism – this is what an anthropological doctoral dissertation from the University of Alaska Fairbanks shows.

## *Buryats and the Three Games of Men*

The Buryats are the largest ethnic group in Siberia and culturally connected with Mongolia. The Buryat political structure has shifted again and again – from tribal chieftains to Tsarist rule, to Soviet control, which changed from limited recognition to Stalinist suppression, to early post-Soviet liberality and Putinist neo-Russianism. All in all, this made the Buryats finally a minority in their own country. Other cultural shifts have marked the religious affiliations of the Buryat people, too: from Siberian shamanism and Tibetan Buddhism to Soviet communist *ersatz religion* and to post-Soviet shamanist and Buddhist revivals. All these changes became and become manifest in the Buryat culture of play and games, especially in the traditional “three games of men”: wrestling, archery, and horse racing.

This connection is described and analyzed in very detail by the Austrian ethnologist Stefan Krist. Krist began his studies at the University of Vienna, continued Mongolian studies at the University of Budapest, and lectured in both places in 2005-2010, before finishing his PhD dissertation at Fairbanks.<sup>2</sup>

The first two chapters of the dissertation begin by reflecting the anthropology of sport more generally and reconstructing the history of the Buryats between East and West. Chapters 3-5 describe the history and practice of Buryat wrestling, archery, and horse racing. Chapter 6 presents the “three games of men” in their historically changing framework, the traditional sports holiday

*Surkharban* with its contradictory and yet interwoven tendencies of tradition, sportification, re-traditionalisation, tourism, ethnicity building, Russification, religious awakening, and pop-cultural entertainment. The final discussion sums up, how the games can be read both as a mirror of societal change and as social functions.

### *Russian Ethnosport Philosophy*

The Buryat games are part of a much larger world of ethnic events, movement cultures, competitions, and festivities in the East. In the Irkutsk region for instance, people gather at the ethno-cultural *Yordoyñ nadaan*, the Games of the Mountain Yord, which is a traditional festival of Siberian nomads. Alongside shamanic prayers, the games include wrestling competitions, stone throwing, archery, and horse races. The competitions are accompanied by dances, songs, and storytelling. The culmination of the festival is a large ritual circle dance, called *Yokhor*. Holding hands, the people dance in a long chain around a round the mountain. This requires several hundreds of dancers in order to keep the chain unbroken – and is believed to bring luck.

Stories of this type are presented by the Russian cultural anthropologist Alexey Kylasov in his book about ethnosport, which shows the rich global diversity of “ethnic sports”. The book casts light on the connections between popular culture – ethnic groups, folk, people – on one hand, and body culture – sports, dances, play and games, festivities – on the other. This contrasts current mainstream approaches, which tend to present sport as an abstract concept that is connected with further abstractions such as “societal factors”, “modernity”, “individual”, “education”, “technology”, and “function”, but remains unrelated to cultural patterns, and which fail to acknowledge cultural history and relativity.

It is at this point that the Russian development of an “ethnosport theory” deserves broader theoretical attention. The anthropologist Alexey Kylasov published in 2012 in Moscow his book, which in 2015 was published in English by the German publisher Lit. The book tells about the renaissance of old popular games in Russia among Kalmyk, Tatars, Buryats, Moldavians, Cossacks, and other ethnic groups, but also in other countries all over the world. It is about a cultural revival of folk-sports, and the anthropological reflections which underline the significance of cultural diversity, identity, and tradition.

This can be read as a striking contrast to the Anglo-Saxon perspective, which dominates Western sport theory. Here, one derives sport from either *Ancient Greek athletics* or from *English sport*, and constructs on this basis an abstract universal image of sport as a system beyond time, space, and cultures. Kylasov, however, opens the view towards a richer world of sports, play,

games, competitions, rituals, and festivities and their diverse ethnic connections.

Kylasov places his material in a philosophical framework, which refers to European philosophy and humanist sport research. There is more than the *one* sport of the Anglo Saxon and Hellenic type, with its consequences of doping and genetic manipulation, and with its functionalist agenda. Between Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, Norbert Elias, and Pierre Bourdieu, Kylasov searches for elements and references for a more embracing theory of ethnosport. This quest has a critical view of the Soviet system, which once was striving towards “the New Man” and towards what was called “anthropomaximology”, the use of top-level standard sport to enhance and advance the human being.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, Kylasov holds a critical stance against liberal capitalism and the current ecological devastation in the North.

By its rehabilitation of cultural diversity, the ethnosport theory is in line with recent attempts, which have been undertaken within the framework of UNESCO to reappraise traditional games and identity, especially concerning the “minor” people in the world and their indigenous cultures.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, ethnosport theory connects the cultural question with the question of democracy – challenging those hierarchies, bureaucracies, and oligarchies, which did not at all disappear with the break-down of the Soviet system, but are alive both in post-Soviet and in international top sport. Against the sporting cult of the super-human, Kylasov sets the word of Jean-Paul Sartre that “only man himself is the future of man”.

### *Critical Considerations and Recent Controversies about Ethnosport*

The book on Russian ethnosport philosophy has some undertones of “traditionalism”, which may be characteristic for certain parts of Russian intellectual life. Tradition has sometimes been written with large “T”, when following the French esoteric “metaphysician” René Guénon, who had a special appeal in the East and is also among Kylasov’s references. This could be discussed critically, but it deserves first of all attention concerning the cultural climate in Putin’s Russia.

Furthermore, it would be enlightening to study the Russian ethnosport theory closer in the light of the former Soviet ethno research. It was somewhat surprising, that the research of ethno cultures developed under the umbrella of Marxist ideology – be it as part of colonisation or as awareness of an actual diversity in the Soviet empire. This has, however, remained mostly unknown in Western literature or was just marginally noted.<sup>5</sup> The Soviet study of ethno-cultures can

to some part be seen in connection with the Great-Russian policy of ethnic repression and – under Stalinism since the mid-1930s – of deportation and extermination of whole ethnics such as the Koreans, the Crimea Tartars, the Volga Germans, the Kalmyk, the Karelian, and the Chechen people.<sup>6</sup> But the study of ethno-cultures was also an attempt, to deepen understanding of the powerful ethnic realities of the empire. This research developed in spite of the dominant Marxist ideology, which officially refrained from taking national ethnic realities seriously. There were, however, some exceptions and remarkable outsiders in the field of this theory, such as the Ukrainian Marxist Roman Rodolsky<sup>7</sup>.

One can also critically discuss the concept of “ethnosport” itself. How does the concept of “sport”, which has Western roots in industrial culture, fit to the rich world of Eastern ethnic activities, festivities and games?

Another point of critique could be the underlying: dualism between East and West. It can be understood in the particular Russian tradition of tensions between the so-called Slavophiles and the West since the nineteenth century, among the former Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, among the latter the Bolsheviks. Is there any analytical basis for this dualism?

Pointing towards further regions of the world – Africa, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and the Americas – where similar phenomena of ethnosport awareness have developed, Kylasov’s “ethnosport theory” could give new impulses to sport studies. This theory can be read as an important contribution to bodily democracy, understood as people’s self-determination in bodily practice.

The connection between ethnosport and democracy is, however, not simple. Contradictions and controversies arose especially, again and again, when games were used as political instruments and arranged on a trans-ethnic level. This was the case with the *Islamic Solidarity Games*, which started in Saudi Arabia 2005 and repeated in Indonesia 2013 and in Azerbaijan 2017. Bilal Erdogan, the son of the Turkish ruler, sponsored the *Turkic World Games*, and after their failure the *World Nomad Games*, starting in Kyrgyzstan 2014. This is to promote the pan-Turkic ambitions of his father – but obtains also, as it seems, some support from the Putin-party “United Russia”.<sup>8</sup> And in 2015, Brazil authorities launched the *World Indigenous Games*, probably in order to remove social tension at the eve of the 2016 Olympics.<sup>9</sup> The common denominator of these initiatives was that they mixed traditional games from different ethnic cultures and standardized them after Olympic patterns, ranking the results with points and medals. This reminded in some way of the so-called “Anthropology Days” of the 1904 Olympics in St. Louis, a controversial project of colonial entertainment.<sup>10</sup> By this type of internationalisation, the particular atmosphere of the ethnic festival disappeared, and the competitions were subordinated to a framework of political power interests and money investment in great style. These transformations caused some dissent among the proponents of ethnosport.



## *Bodily Democracy and the Recognition of Otherness*

Sport versus play and games, East versus West, democracy versus dictatorship – dualistic constructions of this type are problematic instruments to grasp the diversity of cultures. It is here that the ethnosport theory obtains a deeper significance for understanding democracy and culture. Japanese and African scholars have started a cross-cultural dialogue of ethnophilosophy, too.<sup>11</sup> Play and games seem to be an appropriate entrance to this field. The common denominator is the recognition of diversity. Three cases may show the complexity.

Russia appears in the Buryat case as a Tsarist colonial power, which was challenged, but also continued by the Bolshevik dictatorship. The Bolshevik theory followed the Marxist line, which referred to Jacobin revolutionary centralism from 1789. But as mentioned, Soviet ethno-politics took a more differentiated stance, historically changing between controlled recognition of ethnic otherness inside a federal union of “republics”, and the ethnic exterminations and deportations under Stalin and Berija, which were not unlike Nazi ethnic cleansings. In the Buryat case, the ruling system fought against “Mongolian nationalism”.

The French revolutionary centralism from 1789, which served as a model for the Russian Bolsheviks, originated, however, in a framework of democracy, which is still regarded as model for democratic systems. The democratic slogan *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité* aimed at equal conditions for all. Soon, however, this showed a problematical side, when the Jacobins suppressed the folk languages of the Bretons, Basques, Corsicans, Occitans, and German Alsatians. Recently, I personally met this attitude, when a young French sports researcher, facing the Danish sport policy, naively and with best intentions declared: We are not for difference! One republic, one language, one sport organization – this means equality as uniformity.<sup>12</sup> The French “equality” had bloody consequences of colonial suppression, when Algeria was declared to be a French province, which resulted in the war of Algerian Arab liberation 1954-1962. The recent mass immigration challenges the democratic model of equality anew, as the French prohibition of Burka and Burkini demonstrate.

Denmark, though referring to similar roots of democracy, shows a different relation to recognition of organised difference. There is no unitary sport organization existing in Denmark, but an Olympic sport federation (DIF) side by side with a federation for “folk” gymnastics (DGI), which in the later decades has turned towards health and Sport for all, and a federation for corporation sport (DFIF). The interplay of this multiplicity is organized in the framework of the Scandinavian welfare state. This solves some problems of recognition, but

by far not all. The current immigration challenges also this system: What about non-organised and non-recognised differences?

### *Ludo-diversity, Ethno-diversity, Demo-diversity*

The problems of ethnicity and recognition obtain new actuality under the conditions of mass migration and the need for integration and inclusion. But academic knowledge seems rarely to be ready for this challenge. Recent Danish studies have shown the limits and the fumbling of approaches to sport, ethnicity, and integration.<sup>13</sup> Case studies have presented very different perspectives, some more cultural and historical, some more quantitative sociological, the overall tendency being critical against the top-down strategies and programs of welfare policy. Beyond these suitable conditions, however, a reflection about central concepts such as “the ethnic” and “identity” has remained absent, and the curiosity about the “other” of immigrants remained marginal. This empty space was often filled by the management language of welfare society and its abstract discourse about “barriers” and “welfare parameters”, “data” and “models”, “explanations” (where understanding is demanded) and “definitions” (of human relations that cannot be defined), “factors” (instead of connections, influences and relations) and “individuals” (instead of human beings and cultural identities). This language, which is derived from physics and bureaucracy, tends to obscure the central points of humanist and cultural studies.

Thus, while Scandinavian welfare society has achieved a lot in the fields of democracy and practical integration, knowledge lags behind. It seems that much could be learned from Eastern ethnosport theory.

Who is the folk of folk sports? This is what ethnosport theory asks (rather than: How can we integrate “the others”). Two approaches become visible. Analytically, awareness is directed towards historical change, differentiation, and contradictions, and emphatically, there are undertones of “we”-identity. Recognition between the two and the recognition of “the other” implies the recognition of one’s own – and vice versa.

For this recognition, which has intellectual as well as political character, some studies of traditional games have forwarded the concept of ludo-diversity. Indeed, this concept opens the eyes for a deeper dimension, for ethno-diversity. And as the ethnos-folk of cultural togetherness in some way is related to the demos-folk of democracy, the question of demo-diversity arises: Just like play and games, democracy is not only one single phenomenon all over the world. However, the way from the diversity of play and games to the diversity of identities and further to the diversity of democracy as a life form is not at all simple. It challenges our knowledge.

The studies of Eastern ethnosport and traditional games show, that there is something important going on beneath the superstructure of ideas and power. Traditional games and ethnic identities are both based on and contribute to a certain “human energy”. But what is this energy?

### *Shamans on the Sports Ground*

When questioning the energy of play, games, dances, and festivities, the shamanic dimension appears as significant for Eastern ethnosport. It may also enlighten our knowledge about Western sport.

Krist shows for the concrete case of Buryatia, how shamans represent more than just a framework and ornamentation of the three traditional “games of men”. But while the study describes the traditional games in their very details, the practice and role of the shamans and the Buddhist Lamas remains in the background. This is not a specific limitation of this specific study, but indeed, we lack intellectual instruments for a deeper analysis of the shamanic connection. Especially Western traditions of abstract thinking about “sport” and “religion” have so far hindered a deeper understanding of shamanic phenomena.

“Sport” is generally regarded as a “rational” (whatever this may be) or economic competition of physical character. In this perspective, the shaman has no place. Western sport studies normally focus on techniques, rules, instruments, and organisation. This is illustrative for the craftsmanship of the games, and indeed, play and craft are related to each other on a deeper level.<sup>14</sup> But what is concretely the contribution of the shamans and the Buddhist Lamas to *Surkharban*, and what is their existential significance for the event?

Krist contributes with some important observations.<sup>15</sup> The victorious wrestlers use to dance the *devekh* or eagle dance in *Surkharban* as a form of sympathetic magic, and wrestling is connected with shamanistic prayer ceremonies for rain. Shamans use arrows for scaring away evil spirits, and believe that by the arrow’s flight they can foresee the future, and in general treat arrows as holy objects. During their ecstatic séances, shamans travel on horse to the other world, using a stick with a horse head, and Buddhist “wind horses”, small white flags with a blue horse in the center, wave on the roofs of the houses or on trees to bring luck, together with certain mantras. These and further details can challenge us to dig deeper into a phenomenology of shamanism. Across cultures the connection of shamanism with martial arts, especially with wrestling, is conspicuous – why is this? Shamanist practice is work on human energy, but how is this?

In a similar way, “religion” from a Western perspective generally and especially theologically understood as an intellectual superstructure. Religion is equated with “belief”, i.e. a more or less abstract set of ideas and imaginations in human mind, often codified in a book. The shaman, however, is basically

practitioner led. Shamans practice by singing and drumming, by chanting and dancing. Shamans contribute with prayers and other rituals of intonation and bodily movement. They use holy objects (*fetishes*) and masks, and they apply their practical knowledge of holy places and holy times. By ecstasy and trance techniques, they may obtain altered states of conscience, thus experiencing the “flying” of the soul. They apply these practices for healing as well as for divination, for prophecy and oracles. In this respect, the shaman is an expert of questioning, a medium by which people can ask the world. Last but not least, the shamanic experience is part of folk festivity, of social togetherness.

All these practices combine, in a complex way, repetition with surprise. The repetition of tradition from “ever since” is interwoven with the startling and creative charisma of artistic poetry. This shamanic rhythm is fundamentally sub-religious. By repetition and surprise, the shaman works on human energy – somewhere between horror and laughter. Far more than being just experts of technical manipulation and para-medical cunning, shamans create certain atmospheres, which in Danish are called *stemming*, in German *Stimmung* (derived from *Stimme*, voice). Shamans are experts of voicing.<sup>16</sup>

The Western *reification* of “sport” and “religion” as distinct “objects” or “fields” has hindered the understanding of shamanic energy, which is working in the intermediary space. The *Surkharban festival* of Buryatia constitutes a living case of this energetic connection, having survived multiple suppressions and at the same time changing again and again.

### *No Normality in Shamanism – no Normality in Culture*

The study of shamanism was for a considerable time an isolated topic inside specialized ethnography. It had undertones of “progressive” differentiation into: “others” which includes shamans, who do strange primitive rites, while we are modern and “developed”.

This changed with the ground-breaking studies of Mircea Eliade<sup>17</sup>, Carlo Ginzburg<sup>18</sup>, and Hans-Peter Duerr<sup>19</sup>. They opened the view towards a broader and existential significance of shamanic phenomena. However, shaman studies were soon – again and again – readapted to the established Western paradigms: Shamanism was reduced to something on the level of myths and symbols. Shamanism was treated as religion, which in the Western tradition equals with belief, with a form of thinking rather than (ritual) doing. Shamanism was individualized and integrated into psychological counselling for “better life”. There even developed a subculture of what critically was called “plastic shamanism”, offering courses of self-development in order to “become one’s own shaman”.

These tendencies refrained from taking the cultural diversity of shamanism seriously. However, the *sikerei* of the *Indonesian Mentawaians*<sup>20</sup> are not the same as the *Shinto priests* in Japan or the *Tibetan Lamas*. The *Buryat shamans*,

## GOUREN, THE BRETON WAY TO WRESTLE

BY

DARIO NARDINI

### *The Ethnography of a “Passion”<sup>1</sup>*

This essay is the result of a deep ethnographic experience on a subject that is of paramount importance to me. Indeed, I have been practicing judo since I was a child, and when I learned about the existence of some “traditional” styles of wrestling in Europe, I decided to combine my passion for such practices with my anthropological interests.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, this report is an inquiry on the different ways through which people differently live the same (or a similar) “passion”, as defined by Christian Bromberger.<sup>3</sup> It is an ethnographic encounter in a shared field of gestural practices that might be seen and understood in different ways.

The analysis starts from the assumption that sporting practices are not only a series of bio-mechanical actions; they are also cultural gestures, that is to say gestures which make sense, *techniques du corps*<sup>4</sup>. The learning of a body knowledge is the transmission of a set of actions, but also of a system of values and “dispositions”<sup>5</sup>, that can often overflow the time/space banks of the practice. As such, a “traditional” wrestling style can represent more than a physical activity. It can express, define and transmit a real “sport culture”<sup>6</sup>, as well as a localised cultural identity, in the context of globalised modernity. It also represents a cultural, ritual and regulated way to enact the physical confrontation between (wo)men, explicitly or implicitly linked to the social representations of fundamental cultural features, like violence, strength, masculinity, touch, proxemics.

Following the inspiration of Loïc Wacquant,<sup>7</sup> and using the classical instruments of ethnographic inquiry (observation, notes, interviews, press, archive, and web or printed material analysis...), I carried out a fieldwork on Breton wrestling, making good use of my judo expertise in order to wear the Breton wrestlers’ clothes (the *roched*, a white shirt, and the *bragou*, dark trousers) and to be actively involved both in the training and competition activities on a daily basis, getting deeply into an “observant participation”<sup>8</sup>.

## *Gouren: The Breton Wrestling*

Breton wrestling (*gouren* in Breton language) is a local style of stand-up wrestling based on throwing techniques. The main purpose is to throw the opponent on the ground, by grasping on his/her jacket, above the belt. Any kind of boxing or kicking technique is forbidden, as is any kind of ground fighting. The perfect score (*lamm*) determines the immediate victory of the match (like the *ippon* in judo), and is obtained when the opponent's shoulder blades touch the ground before any other part of the his or her body. The rules also include some lower scores and penalties, which may determine the victory by the end of the match time.

*Gouren* is practiced almost exclusively in the actual territory of Brittany, France. A few not so convincing historical sources, such as some illustrations and bas-reliefs from the fourteenth and fifteenth century<sup>9</sup> and especially some catholic parish registers from the sixteenth century which testify of wrestling competitions in the context of religious popular festivals (the *pardons*)<sup>10</sup>, show it probably has more ancient roots in this area. However, as Epron states<sup>11</sup>, such early sources are not so clear, and it is difficult to certainly affirm that it was the same style of wrestling, or even an “ancestor” of the contemporary one. Nevertheless, *gouren* is assumed to have a longer tradition, and its historical narratives are largely based on an extensive idealization of the past,<sup>12</sup> which places the origins of the practice in two historical ages that also represent the main symbolical references for the definition of Breton identity: the ancient Celtic heritage on one hand, and the more recent pre-industrial peasantry tradition on the other.<sup>13</sup>

In the early twentieth century, Breton wrestling was institutionalised and “sportised”<sup>14</sup>, becoming a structured and competitive activity, with its own calendar, no longer dependent on the rhythms of work or religious celebrations. Nowadays, the *gouren* calendar is divided into two seasons. In Winter, from September to May, competitions take place indoor, and the wrestlers are divided by weight category in a knockout tournament played on synthetic mats, like those used for many other wrestling styles. By contrast, in Summer wrestlers compete outdoor, in sawdust arenas, in a peculiar kind of confrontation called *mod kozh* (“old style” in Breton). There are no weight categories, or, at most, a lightweight category and an open category, and the wrestlers themselves can take the initiative and challenge their opponents. In this second form, *gouren* expresses all its symbolic potential, by re-enacting the tradition and the “ancestral values” which are assumed to define its authentic “spirit”.

We can outline the main features of *gouren* through the ethnographic description of a very important tournament, the Saint Kadou, which I attended on August 5th, 2012.

### *The Saint Kadou: The Display of the Breton Wrestlers' Identity*

Every year in August, in the pleasant village of Gouesnac'h, in the Finistère department, the most important *mod kozh* tournament of the season takes place in the name of Saint Kadou, who is considered as the saint patron of wrestlers. Indeed, the sawdust arena is staged just near the church dedicated to the saint. It is an "old-fashioned" tournament, and in fact the feeling is to be far away from the model of modern sport events.

The Church of Saint Kadou is outside of town, in the countryside, and without a GPS it would be difficult to find it. The hand-written road signs indicate *gouren* and help me to find the car park. I arrive way before the beginning of the competition, and I find the most fascinating stage I have ever seen for a wrestling tournament. The stone church is on a little hill and is very typical. Close to the church, in a spacious clearing in the forest, there are four long tables with benches and two food stands. Beyond, just near the forest, there are the six square meters of sawdust where the wrestlers will compete. The sky is clear, with some clouds that rapidly cross it. Some sunbeams filter through the trees, illuminating the arena with an emerald light, creating an evocative atmosphere. Everything looks like a postcard. If I did not know that I am in Brittany, I would probably think that I am in Brittany. In the wrestlers' patron saint day, even the weather seems to point out that we are experiencing to the most representative event of a representative activity. The most Breton of the Breton wrestling days.

As I arrive, I am greeted by some wrestlers I have already met and with whom I have wrestled in a previous *mod kozh* tournament in Scaër, two weeks before. They ask me if I am going to participate to the tournament, but I must tell them not. Today I prefer to observe. The strongest Breton wrestlers (*gou-renerien* in Breton, from the singular form *gourener*) are all here today. They come here with their parents or, more often, with their partners and children. Finally, I take a seat near them to eat a couple of *gallettes blé noir* (buckwheat *gallettes*), one of the most emblematic dishes of the Breton cookery, that cannot be excluded from this public display of "Breton identity". Indeed, as some of the most reliable analysts asserted, Breton identity is made by a sequence of symbolic elements which were coagulated into stereotypes and then transformed into identity marks.<sup>15</sup> These elements range from food to music, from the Breton language to traditional dance, from weather to environmental sensibility, from the Breton flag to *gouren*, and they all come together to shape a "package"<sup>16</sup> that constitutes what is considered as the "Breton culture and character".