

ARMENIAN TRADITIONAL GAMES:  
THEIR STATUS AND DEPENDENCE ON SOCIAL REALITY

by

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## **Introduction**

From ancient times traditional games have cultivated local customs and played a special role in the process of shaping and strengthening a sense of cultural identity. The majority of Armenian traditional games are collective games requiring physical activeness, agility or quick-mindedness, games associated with religious or national celebrations, and games of chance that usually have superstitious or mythological connotations. The origin of the concept of game dates back to the earliest times. It has always been a vital part of both human and animal life. Adult mammals, for example, use play as a way of teaching survival techniques. Similarly, children's games are vital for human development in the ways that they leave their impact on the players. That influence is usually manifested indirectly and can be traced much later in the player's adult reality. But that influence is bidirectional because the collective reality is what determines the essence of the games.

In case of traditional games, the link between the game's characteristics and the surrounding social reality is more pronounced because they are more prone to reflect particular cultural features of a particular nation or a group of people with similar beliefs. In the same way, Armenian traditional games resonate within the Armenian collective reality and vice versa. Currently, there is a unanimous presumption that most of the traditional games ceased to be popular and have been replaced by more internationally-known games. A lot of credible premises suggest the authenticity of this assumption, Industrialization and globalization being among the major ones. But no matter if this assumption is proved right or wrong, a study of the traditional or other popular games in relation to their popularity statuses over time can reveal a lot of direct and indirect ties with various adult life domains such as the socio-political, religious, psychological or many other aspects of the Armenian collective identity.

Unfortunately, in recent decades there has been little if no in-depth study of different local games. By implementing a small-scale survey and analyzing its results this paper is, therefore, aiming to partially fill the gap and restore a relatively wholesome image of the Armenian traditional games' current status in relation to their popularity levels during different periods in time and among different target groups, as well as in relation to other non-traditional also largely played in Armenia.

### **Literature Review**

To understand the concept of game, one general definition is not sufficient. Not only games vary between different cultures, but their general image is so diverse even within one culture that it requires consideration of many paradoxical theories and unresolved questions. In *Childrens' Folk Games as Customs* (1989), Brian S. Smith investigated different historic and social conditions which determined particular games' popularities over other ones gradually resulting in certain games' extinction, reintroduction or invention of new ones. By exploring the paradoxical two-way relationship between games and reality he discerned patterns based on historical events such as Industrialization or WWI and social conditions such as gender-based differences in games' popularities, which altogether determined the status of games in the bigger picture of social life.

A similar kind of study can be conducted locally in Armenia by understanding the relationship between Armenian reality and games popular among Armenians. Since traditionally Armenian games do not cover the whole spectrum of games played by Armenians, it is needed to analyze them on equal grounds with other introduced games, which nevertheless gained popularity and influenced the local field of games. Unfortunately, the literature lacks any study

on Armenian games, except for a voluminous collection by Vard Bdoyan, et al. (1963). In *Hay Joghovrdakan Xagher [Armenian National Games]* they collected descriptions of over one thousand Armenian games and compiled them in order of the regions they originated from. Although they do not provide analytical study on those games, they nevertheless give a rough depiction of the overall tendencies during the end of the nineteenth and at the beginning of the twentieth centuries.

The majority of games included are now less known or even extinct. They do not resonate with the postmodern space of meaning, and are influenced by the industrialized reality and the socio-political and religious conditions prevailing in Armenia. Taking into account the dynamic nature of tradition-inventing, critics believe that it is definitely not a one-way process, but rather a circular mechanism where culture, traditions and games shape collective psychology and where social conditions, in turn, influence games, thus cultural traditions as well.

### **Nation, Traditions and Games**

To determine the role of traditional games in the process of shaping a sense of national belonging and cultural identity, it is important to understand what nation really is and what some specific factors that define it are. In *Imagined Communities* (1983) Benedict Anderson argued that nations are not historically bequeathed and unchangeable but that they are imagined political communities. Because the concept originated in the age of Enlightenment and Revolution when the legitimacy of the hierarchical dynastic realm was being destroyed, the concept of nation became imagined as “both inherently limited and sovereign”. So, nations are not dead-end concepts with static and unchangeable characteristics inherited from the past, but rather they are continuously imagined and shaped by people.

Because cultural traditions function as national ideology reservoirs, such contexts as traditional games play as much importance in the process of nation-building, as the political and economic aspects. Hence, if nations can be imagined and re-imagined by these characteristics of social life, then traditional games must have carried in themselves the resonances of the surrounding world throughout history. Anderson, however, did not reject that nationality and cultural traditions do not always coexist within the same limits.

Traditional games which were played during a certain period in time are used to decode forgotten messages and information concerning nation's cultural ideology. According to Karlen Atoyan's study called *Fizikakan kulturayi yev sporti hnaguyn akunqner Hayastanum* [*The ancient sources of physical culture and sports in Armenia*] (1985), this method of digging out historical roots in different traditional games in Armenia can be even applied to historical times as old as the pre-Christian era. In order to find valid correlations between ancient traditional games and the reigning socio-political condition of the times, Atoyan explores the writings of ancient Armenian chroniclers in search of particular historical figures like Trdat III who had his share in shaping the history of physical culture and sports in Armenia by participating in the Olympic Games as a king. In other words, the creation of role models in the society is viewed as one of the major indicators of a shaped collective thought and national identity.

Creating a cultural and physical ideal becomes one of the main forces in shaping customs and traditions in a particular society, and thus it can have a direct influence on the format of the games that are popular in that certain political or social *Geist*<sup>1</sup>. For example, the outcome of certain traditional games is usually decided by the fact of victory or loss of one of the parties involved. And what exact characteristics and actions determine the winner of the game is directly influenced by a number of specific factors, which sometimes are representative of the nation's

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<sup>1</sup> German for "spirit" of a place or time

collective ideologies. Going back to Anderson's ideas, the invention of traditions, the invention of traditional games in particular, is simultaneously becoming both the shaping stimulus and the end product of the surrounding reality. So, in fact, there is a certain tie between social conventions and the altering image of games in Armenia.

But how is that connection possible to be discerned and analyzed? To make the extremely broad abstraction of games relatively organized, Roger Caillois (1958) proposed a four-rubric classification based on what element is dominant in a particular game: competition, chance, simulation, or vertigo. He named those classifications *agon*, *alea*, *mimicry* and *ilinx*, respectively. However, he agreed that one classification cannot be absolutely accurate and all-inclusive. That is why, his categorizations is applied concurrently within another classification in this paper based on games' relation to their outcomes.

### **Age and Sex Differences in Games**

Not only do games affect the behavioral psychology of the players, but they also impact the players' behaviors and indirectly influence the formation of certain personality traits or even worldviews. The habit of discrimination, like the habit of violence, is formed at an early age. And games, being a huge part of childhood, are important aspects bearing the potential of shaping a certain way of thinking for the participants. As Janet Lever believes, most of the sexual differences and the differences in treatments based on sex are shaped by the level and quality in which children are involved in games (*Sex differences in the complexity of children's plays and games, 1978*).

According to her conclusions, "boys' activities inquire more collaborative and competitive skills, while girls' public activities are not very different from their private activities since they are mainly single-role plays." As a consequence, boys are trained and ready for adult

interpersonal competition and self-control while girls often lack the inner urge to set explicit goals, and as a result they develop more affective and verbal skills, which might not but probably will determine their objectified social roles in adulthood.

Often times, children are the inventors and transformers of games. In a research called *Transforming Cultural Practices: Illustrations from Children's Game Play* Steven R. Guberman and his co-authors explored the ways in which children, in their participation, transform cultural practices. They concentrate their study on several sets of Monopoly games, each time with different target groups. The findings show that having participants of opposite sexes varies the tempo of the game making it more dynamic in relation to same-sex groups. Similarly, having a more experienced player, results the learning levels of the other players, etc. it is a perfect demonstration how, outside the gaming rules and requirements, social norms and interactions as well are altered depending on the players.

## **Research Questions and Methodology**

The purpose of this paper is to explore the relationship between games and reality, particularly in the Armenian context. It doesn't attempt to have a precise and definite answer but it gives a constructive overview in response to the overarching research question, which is, "where do children's games and adult reality merge into each other and where do they separate?" In other words, it seeks to examine practical examples of games influencing or games being influenced by different socio-economic or cultural impulses in order to be able to find repetitive patterns and understand the indirect impact that games have or can have on the collective reality in Armenia.

Once such patterns are defined they are further used to explore the decisive reasons for different games having different survival conditions over time. Hence, the aim of the project is to find an effective way of classifying games and analyzing their individual characteristics in relation to the psychological, social, or cultural *Geist*. Therefore, the research is centered around two different but closely interdependent sub-questions, which are *in what ways does the reality shape the essence of games?* And respectively, *in what ways do games shape the reality of the playing participants*. In addition to analyzing various examples relating to the main question, in the conclusion it also tries to trace back and find the origins of the current state of games in Armenia by not only questioning where but also why do games merge with reality and why do they separate as a result of changing times and transforming societies.

Since there is no recent study on Armenian traditional games, this project mainly bases its analysis on field research and survey results. The survey comprised 66 Armenian participants between the ages of 6 to 83, originally from Musaler, Jrrat, Artimet, Bambakashat, Akhltskha, Moscow, Baku and Tehran, but mostly from Yerevan and Echmiatsin.

The questionnaire involved a list of games, all of them chosen to be representative of the four game types that the paper suggests for structural purposes. The majority of the games are traditionally Armenian but not necessarily all of them because the aim of the paper is to locate Armenian traditional games not separately but inside the international overarching notion of games. Along with the elderly participants' answers and oral interviews, a 1960s unique collection of Armenian traditional games is a primary source, especially for older games known or played before the middle of the twentieth century. But as for the research of games' statuses in the last few decades, the survey remains the fundamental source of information.

Understanding the connection between different socio-political events and the characteristics of certain traditional games enabled to find indirect links to the reasons of disappearance or reintroduction of certain old games. Also, because the concepts of game and tradition are very arbitrary, the paper tries to find the primal origins of these concepts in order to understand what principal influences they tend to have on the process of shaping societies and collective ideologies. Then, applying various game theories to the half-quantitative and half-qualitative survey analysis eventually opens up a space for discussing the games' relationship to reality and vice versa. To sum up, this project followed the subsequent three main steps:

- Research and Data Collection

This project is planning to achieve its aim by doing a comparative analysis on games played before and now. That is why the first step is going to be collection of existing data on traditional games. So far the research shows that most of the valuable Armenian sources on the topic are concentrated on the games played before 1980s. It is planned to find out in this research some of the main and frequently appearing patterns and psychological nuances of the games.

- Field Study

This section includes a research on games that have been popular during the recent few decades in Armenia. Since there has been little academic research on the games' current condition, this project will conduct surveys and interviews with people from different age groups and ideally from different regions of Armenia. The survey for the elder group of people will include questions about the games that the participants played the most in their childhood and games that they remember their ancestors had told about. The survey for the people of the younger age will include similar questions but will also include descriptions

of old traditional games and will seek to find out which of those games are still familiar to the younger generation.

- **Comparative Analysis**

During but mainly after collecting all the possible data on the games' popularity over different time periods, the project is then going to incorporate the relevant literature and scholarly articles to make a comparative analysis. This section is the main part of the project because it is going to target to answer the central research question. After finding out the major patterns of the games' historical development in Armenia it will concentrate on the possible factors that have led to changes of traditional games or that have helped to maintain their popularity. In other words, this section will mix the existing data and the results of the field study in order to be able to draw connections and understand the possible impact that traditional games have had on determining the development of the collective psychology.

## **Research Findings and Analysis**

In Modern Armenian the word *game* (*խաղ* [*khagh*]) has a similar definition as in English. It usually means an activity engaged in for diversion or amusement that often takes a strategic and a competitive form and is played according to rules. From the Middle Ages up until the first half of the twentieth century, however, the Armenian word for *game* used to indicate a broader range of activities. According to Vard Bdoyan et al. (1963, p. 5), alongside its core definition it was also used to refer to children's small theatrical and circus performances, to amateur combat sports, to joke-telling, and to a certain type of playful songs. Therefore, one

thing to keep in mind while studying Armenian games is that the previous more monolithic understanding of different art forms and cultural activities is in comparison with the contemporary view which engages a lot more distinction between the above-mentioned variety of activities.

In a world where sports, circus and theatre are considered to be more independent domains, the notion and the purpose of *games* still remain quite generic. Children's games, in particular, deal with a paradox concerning their relationship with reality. Just like the chicken or the egg paradox, it is arguable whether children's games influence reality more or whether reality influences the creation of the games. In relation to this, play theorist Brian S. Smith (1989, p. 33) pointed out a consistent pattern: the majority of the scientific views developed in the nineteenth century and before considered games to be "the residue of earlier adult cultural customs," while starting from the twentieth century most "theorists emphasized children's creativity through play". So, is it impossible to "reconcile E.B. Tylor's (1878) view that in play all is lost with J. Huizinga's (1949) view that in play all things begin?" (Caillois, 1958, as cited in Smith, 1989)

Any definitive answer to this question is more obscure in the Armenian context than it was in the French (Caillois), in the English (Tylor) and in the Dutch (Huizinga), not because of the invalidity of the question but because of insufficient recent study on traditional and other games, especially those popular among Armenians after 1960s. Even so, however, the existing literature on local games implies a relatively close correspondence to Smith's finding. Taking into account that the few prominent studies on Armenian games are from the early-to-mid-twentieth century, they do prove the first part of Smith's argument right. That is, former

theorists saw games as a reflection of reality, or, as Bdoyan et al. themselves put it, “a reproduction of human labor and adult social activities.” (p. 5)

It clearly follows the ideology that in play all is lost because all is mimicked from existing reality. Meanwhile, however, it does not reject that “in the process of play children are free to employ creative thinking,” which usually results in eliminations, additions or transformations of rules. Therefore, in the middle of the twentieth century games were both considered as dead-end cultural concepts utterly reflecting the existing, and predominantly, adult reality, yet in the meantime they were also beginning to be perceived as an independent platform where children were exposed to a variety of opportunities to shape and reshape their own personalities through play. The latter is exactly what later-to-come modern theorists began to concentrate more on: the power of games to influence individuals and their future behaviors. So, however few the studies on local games, 1960s is the closest to being the turning point in game theory in Armenia when the emphasis of the analyses was gradually shifting from solely traditional and preservative interpretations toward studying the more psychologically complex aspects of games and the individual effects that they can have on different players.

Karlen Atoyán (1985), for example, built his analysis of ancient games around the ways in which those games influenced the shaping of certain individuals. Through historical examples he emphasized the importance of games, especially sports games, in social status determination. Physical education was of collective nature among the upper class youth in Ancient Armenia because it was believed that certain sports and games developed personal traits that of strong and willful leaders. In fact, many of the Armenian kings were known to be active participants, some even winners, in the Olympic Games held in Athens. In the third century AD, for instance, Trdat the Third won the first prize in wrestling, and, according to Atoyán, not only his physical

preparedness but also his strong personality and prominent leadership traits must have been largely influenced by carefully selected childhood games, which at that times in royal households were mostly restricted to combat and other competitive games.

In a word, a chronological examination of the few existing Armenian game theories rightly corresponds to Smith's finding that over the past two centuries theorists have gradually shifted from viewing games as dead-end concepts where reality is to be mimicked and reproduced to a more open-ended analysis where games influence reality through psychological impacts on the players.

At this point it is important to note that although there is a defined chronological pattern consistent with Smith's juxtaposed theories of "in games all is lost" with "in games all things begin", this pattern, nevertheless, can only be applied to the history of game theories rather than to the analysis of the actual games themselves. In other words, just because Bdoyan (1963) and his contemporaries examined games as reproductions of human labor and adult social activities, a platform for teaching children about the adult reality, it doesn't exclude that many games from before 1960s gave room for self-expression through play and influenced the player, thus also having a distant impact on the future adult reality in some or other way.

To avoid confusion, when directly analyzing games rather than their different perceptions throughout time, the validity of the two juxtaposed arguments about the direction of influence should depend on the core structure and type of the specific games rather than on the time in which they were played. That is, in an attempt to understand whether a game is more influenced by the reality than it shapes the latter, its structural characteristics are to be more defining factors than the period in time in which the game is examined. It does not mean denial of any chronological patterns in the history of Armenian games. On the contrary, they can be

classified into groups according to the ‘game vs. reality’ relationship due to different historical and socio-political conditions and, of course, according to their popularity status during the last two centuries at least. But because Tylor and many other former theorists considered games to be a reflection of adult reality, and Huizinga and many other later theorists considered them to be an early shaping force of it, it does not imply that the purpose of all the earlier games was necessarily to mimic reality and that of all the later ones was to influence and reshape it.

These kinds of dualities have always bothered sociologists when it came to analyzing games because it makes any classification ill-defined and uncertain. The concept of game has a variety of applications in real life, and each of them can differ as little from one another as, for instance, long backgammon differs from short backgammon, or as much as Monopoly differs from basketball.

More than that, within it, each game has so many different characteristics that there can be as many approaches to classifying them into certain groups as many those characteristics are. As French intellectual Roger Caillois reasonably noted, “to oppose card games to games of skill, or to oppose parlor games to those played in a stadium is meaningless” (p. 11). So, ideally, games should be dissected and classified according to one specific characteristic at a time. That characteristic can be the implement used in the game, or the number of the players, or the place in which the game is played, or the qualifications required, or many other factors.

Sometimes, however, a classification based on one such very distinct characteristic does not overlap with a classification based on another characteristic within the analysis of the same game. Monopoly and basketball, for example can both be classified as group games necessarily requiring more than one player. But if we take the level of physical engagement as our principle for classification, then they obviously no longer belong to the same category. An additional

overarching complication is that any game in the world will have far more than one of the above-mentioned classifying characteristics, which makes an objective and all-inclusive categorization almost impossible. That is why any classification of games is a self-conscious hesitant attempt of organization and, in fact, a very general conventionality among sociologists.

Having this knowledge in mind and after examining different possibilities I am proposing a conditional division into four main groups based on whether the role of physical development, mental development, chance, or social life portrayal through play is more dominant in the games under consideration. To make it a more rounded analysis, a slightly different four-rubric classification proposed by Caillois is applied concurrently within the sections below.

### **Physical Games**

Games in this group are distinguished by their mandatory requirement of physical engagement and a certain amount of physical skills in order to determine the winner. Combat games and sports, in general, usually belong to this group because their format is to create an artificially equal ground for the players where the factor of chance is supposed to be suppressed to its minimum and the physical capacities of the players are to determine their status in the game results. As it is already known, physical games were quite popular among Armenian authorities in the ancient times (Atoyan, 1985). Some combat sports still remain largely popular among modern Armenians, as well. According to the Ministry of Sport and Youth Affairs formal report (2017), the majority of sports schools in Armenia are specializing in wrestling and boxing.

Sports, however, do not cover all of this big category of physical games. Many traditional games require similar degree of physical engagement. An Armenian traditional game *lakhti* (*լախտի*, literally translated as *whip*), for example, resembles wrestling in multiple ways:

a circular area is drawn on the ground restricting the players to go out of it, and the aim of the game is to beat the opponent by either making him cross the line or scoring more points while playing inside the circle on the ground. But one huge difference is that, as opposed to sports games where the resolution of the game is marked by a visible victory of one player or a group over all the other ones, in children's traditional physical games, the level of formality is decreased, and sometimes to such a degree that the factor of competition almost loses its original purpose.

Another game called *Tagavori esh* (*թագավորի էշ*, literally translated as *King's donkey*, similar to Chicken Fight), for example, is a fighting game with an ongoing alternation between the roles of the king, the servant and the donkey, depending on the physical strength of each player. So, even though, the aim of the game is to compete for the role of the king, who is being carried on the back of the donkey-player, the aim of the overall competition is unclear to the players because there are no universally accepted rules and time restrictions which would determine the ultimate winner. That is why the game may repeat its patterns in an endless loop without coming to a structured end.

As an outcome, in games like these the participants are endowed with a lot more power and freedom to express their creativity through play. In an interview with a survey participant from Echmiatsin who played *Tagavori Esh* in his childhood, he mentioned that they used to invent rules and assign new challenges each time they played the game, “just to make it new”. Even such subtle alterations over time make considerable changes to the overall picture of Armenian games. At least eight different variations of King's Donkey are found in Bdoyan's collection. Some of them are from different regions. It means that the lack of communication at the end of the nineteenth and at beginning of the twentieth centuries could be the reason for

having so many variations of the same game from different parts of the country. But at least two variations of the game are said to be played in the same region of Armavir. In this case it can be concluded that the original game previously played in this region was evolved and transformed into another variation of itself over time and after several generations.

The survey conducted for this paper included both *Lakhti* and *Tagavori esh*, as well as other games belonging to the physical category, such as Hide-and -Seek, Seven Stones (*Знѣрун [Yot Qar]*), *Qarktik* (similar to Knucklebones), *Chlik Dasta* etc. It is worth noting that some of these games are dependent not only on strength necessarily, but also on physical agility and quickness. Knucklebones, for example, is a physical game requiring hand and finger flexibility. In a word, different games in this category are aimed at reaching any kind of physical development through play. The findings reveal a consistent pattern based on age differences. 62 percent of the survey participants above sixty have played at least five out of six games from this category and, without exception, all of them have played at least four. In case of participants between the ages thirty and sixty the percentage is lower, 36 percent. The number gets even lower in the age range between eighteen and thirty, making it 20 percent. And, finally, only 2 percent of the participants who are below eighteen have played five out of the randomly chosen six games requiring physical engagement.

Moreover, the older age group also exceeds the rest by the number of frequency in which they used to play the games. One pattern that repeats in all age groups is the consistent distinction of games' popularities based on the participants' sex differences. The percentage of males who play or used to play games including active physical engagement overweighs the percentage of females.

These statistics successfully adjust within the theory proposing that the purpose of physical games was originally to prepare children for any kind of physical encounter in the adult life. A good demonstration of this is especially found in animal play. As Haykaz Margaryan (2016) explains in his article called *National Traditional Games* “Play existed before mankind. It has always been a part of mammals’ behavior. Animals use play as a way of teaching how to hide and how to attack for a successful hunting.” In the same way, since in Armenia military service is mandatory for male citizens, the high percentage of males engaged in physical games runs a good chance of being a collectively unconscious way of adapting male children to the military requirements awaiting them in adult life.

### **Mental Games**

Games falling under this category are distinguished by their primary function of fostering mental development and strategic thinking through play. Nearly all board games and with some reservation card games too almost entirely cover this section because they usually encourage some kind of mathematical thinking, quick mindedness and strategic planning for success or victory. Unlike some traditional games in which physical engagement is the primary factor, almost all mental games assume a certain ending point objectively pre-acknowledged by the players.

In this section it is difficult to segregate traditionally Armenian games since the majority of board games popular among Armenians are originally ancient games coming from Eastern countries, such as India (chess) and Iraq (backgammon), which in the majority of cases made their way to Armenia through Persia. Culture and tradition, however, are constantly changing, reshaping and living concepts. Sometimes they find their trajectories outside the limits of the abstract concept of nation. On this matter of cultural and national understandings, Benedict

Anderson (1983) argued that “nationalism has to be understood by aligning it, not with self-consciously held political ideologies, but with the large cultural systems that preceded it, out of which — as well as against which — it came into being” (p. 12). Indeed, on a general scale, nation and culture are quite conterminous with each other; however, it does not automatically imply that without exception all the subsidiary aspects of culture are conterminous with those of nation. Even though aligning these two concepts close together, nevertheless, Anderson himself acknowledged the paradox of the ‘political’ power of nationalism versus its philosophical poverty and cultural incoherence. That is why many games originally known to be other than Armenian are being examined in this analysis of traditional games because, outside the national belonging of the games’ origins, they prove to be a fixed part of modern Armenian cultural consciousness.

As already mentioned, unlike many physical games, board and card games are usually more specific about the ending point of the play and in determining an objective winner and an objective loser. On this account, they mostly overlap with sports games from the physical games category, but differ a great deal from many other traditional physical games which, as it was shown, have lost their main purpose of competition. Although games in this section have a great deal of dependence on chance as well, the main decisive factor of the game result is nonetheless the mental skills of the player. Many board games popular among Armenian people share the same requirement of mental concentration and understanding the opponent’s gaming strategy in order to succeed by provisioning the game several steps ahead.

In children’s play, therefore, mental games encourage strategic thinking and mindfulness triggered by the idea of gaining an inevitable status in the rank between victory and loss. Similar to physical games, most of the board and card games attempt to minimize the factor of chance by creating relatively and thus to some extent artificially equal grounds for the adversaries in order to give an incontestable value to the winner’s victory over the other

player(s). Both mental and most of the physical games are therefore distinguished by their well-defined element of competitiveness.

The dominant role of competition in games is what defines a whole category in a four-rubric classification proposed by Caillois (1958). Giving this group of competitive games the generalized name *agón*, he explained

The point of the game is for each player to have his superiority in a given area recognized. That is why the practice of *agón* presupposes sustained attention, appropriate training, assiduous application, and the desire to win. It implies discipline and perseverance. It leaves the champion to his own devices, to evoke the best possible game of which he is capable, and it obliges him to play the game within the fixed limits, and according to the rules applied equally to all, so that in return the victor's superiority will be beyond dispute. (p. 15)

Correspondingly, mental games, especially board games like chess and backgammon presuppose a certain level of acquired knowledge and training for a successful play, even despite the absolutely inconsequential factor of chance. Elimination of chance is impossible, and the reason varies within each game. In chess, for example, the fact of moving first is often an advantage since it helps the player occupy key positions more easily. In backgammon, one of the key implements itself, the usage of dice, implies a reliance on chance. However, despite the fact that, even though as carefully as one tries to make it, absolute equality of chance is not realizable, the majority of sports and mental games are distinguished from other types of games by repressing the role of chance and its influence on the game results to its possible minimum. It is usually achieved by setting fixed limits and rules, unlike many Armenian traditional physical games that

are more flexible and open to the players' creative interpretations of certain rules and their participation in the process of game-inventing and game-reshaping.

So, naturally, in different amounts and intensities, competition is a shared element in both physical and mental games. Maybe that is why many board games nowadays are regarded as sports. Yet what differentiates them into distinct categories in this paper is the difference between the natures of capacities necessarily required from the player for a successful play. Interestingly, the survey answers for mental games gave different results from those for physical games. It appears that, unlike physical games, mental games show most popularity among the age groups younger than thirty. Only 5 percent has never played games like chess and backgammon. In the age group between thirty and sixty 18 percent, and in the age group above sixty, 25 percent haven't played them. Also, approximately 90 percent of the participants who preferred other indoor games, were female. Some of them mentioned that they were not interested in games like chess and backgammon because they didn't have someone willing to teach them the rules and even if they did know the rules, they were initially considered as weak opponents by other male players. Prejudiced gender roles, therefore, can impact the child's experience with games and affect his/her perception of play.

The difference in mental games popularities between elderly and young groups of people can be explained by the introduction of mandatory chess classes in Armenian public schools curricula in the recent years. It also affected the gender gap in relation to the games' popularity. In the age groups older than thirty, almost all male participants frequently play or played either chess or backgammon or various card games while nearly 30 percent of female participants did not have much experience with mental games. But the popularity becomes quite equal among boys and girls born after 1990s. Internet on the other hand offers easy access to

online board games, and not surprisingly the majority of online game users are people of younger ages.

### **Games of Chance**

Chance games are distinguishable by all the other types in that they rely one hundred percent on fate and not on the players' actions during the game. Although these kinds of games are quite usually competitive in their structure, that is, at the end of the game they assume one player's victory over his/her adversaries, they nevertheless do not offer a measure of justification for the outcome of the game, like other competitive physical and mental games do. In other words, in games of chance where the participants do not have any influence on the procedure nor do they have any control over the outcome of the game, an artificial rivalry is still created to make the participants compete for their luck or fortune.

Caillois categorizes such games where the factor of chance is dominant under the term *Alea* (Latin name for the game of dice). According to him,

*Alea* signifies and reveals the favor of destiny. The player is entirely passive; he does not deploy his resources, skill, muscles, or intelligence. All he needs [to] do is [to] wait, in hope and trembling, the cast of the die. He risks his stake. Fair play, also sought but now taking place under ideal conditions, lies in being compensated exactly in proportion to the risk involved. Every device intended to equalize the competitors' chances is here employed to scrupulously equate risk and profit. (p. 17)

A perfect example of a game of chance is the internationally well-known lottery. The word itself derives from the Dutch noun *lot* which means "fate". The nature of the game implies

elimination of the need to train because the outcome is not directly proportional to the players' experience or qualifications. Quite like physical and mental games, games of chance also strive to create equal grounds for the players by neglecting all the differences between them. But if in case of the first two equality is needed for the sake of an objective comparison of the players' physical skills or mental capacities, in the latter equality is created for the sake of something outside the capacities of the players, "the blind verdict of chance". (p. 18)

Money and gambling are other stimuli for competition. However, in the recent decades in Armenia lottery has also been a popular family-gathering game, where the stakes usually either do not compensate the risks, or there are no stakes at all. Therefore, the element of fortune by itself becomes an intrinsic value for which an irrational yet quite an emotional competition is being shaped. As previously mentioned, some of the mental games like backgammon and most card games also contain elements of chance because at some point the player's "power" to influence the outcome of the game is merged with a conscious understanding of his/her voluntary surrender to destiny.

The discussion so far covered games featuring any kind of justified or unjustified competition. However, many Armenian traditions include games of chance which do not imply competition at all. For example, there is an old Armenian wedding tradition for the soon-to-be bride and the bridesmaids. The aim of the game is to tell the fortunes of bachelorettes, based on what items or pieces of writings they pulled out from a jar while blindfolded. It is worth noting, however, that whenever competition is completely eliminated and chance is the determining factor of the outcome, the tradition loosens its ties with the concept of game. It becomes a superstition.

Such superstitious traditions are relatively more popular among the elderly generation in Armenia. Unlike that, games of chance with a competitive element are almost equally popular both among younger and older participants. Only less than one percent of the focus group actually is not interested in competitive games of chance. All the other participants frequently play or used to play lottery and other gambling chance games. Traditional games with superstitious elements largely lag behind competitive ones. In general, however, games of chance are quite favored in Armenia, and, unlike all the other types of games, these ones are exceptional for their ubiquitous popularity among Armenian people despite different age and gender preferences.

### **Social Games**

I call games included in this section social not for the required high level of socializing and interaction between the players during the play, but to imply that social life mimicking is the dominant factor in games falling into this category. If the majority of physical, mental and chance games are characterized by the players' mutual agreement to act by certain rules and under the same theoretically equal conditions, social games are deprived of the need to create equality. Although it does not mean complete elimination of rules, these games certainly do not follow any kind of certain destination throughout the play. Victory and success are, therefore, out of context in social games.

Just like non-competitive traditional games of chance, social games are based on the players' personal interpretation of the rules and their immediate experience I the course of the play. The only big difference is that non-competitive games of chance are anchored in either superstitious or mythological beliefs, while social games create situations in which informal

learning of actual social skills takes place. In other words, “games are more than a listing of their rules; rather, they are richly textured and highly situated instances of social life.” (Hughes, 1991, as cited in Guberman, et al, 1998)

This theory applies to all games since both competitive and non-competitive ones carry an element of learning and provide some kind of social experience, group games especially. But the scope of learning in physical and mental games is very specific and usually targeted toward a certain set of skills thus leading the potential of gaining knowledge about adult social life to secondary importance. In games of chance, the scope of possible social learning is wider since they allow more expression of individualism due to the elimination of artificial equality and due to the diminished pressure on the participant of having to act in certain ways or having to use certain skills to reach success.

So, while all games are authentic sources of professional, mental, physical, emotional, spiritual, or many other different kinds of knowledge, social games are exceptional in that they assume practicing of especially social skills as a primary and mandatory requirement, or else, the game will not be possible since it is originally not established on any other criteria, such as the different forms of comparison between the players’ physical and mental skills or their amounts of fortunateness.

Young children’s toy games like doll houses or spontaneous variations of “mommy and daddy” plays are perfect examples of social games. The biggest motive for such games is children’s innate desire to impersonate adults. They are exceptionally popular among youngsters because not only they get to impersonate adults or other versions of themselves, but they are also free to imaginatively recreate and inventively interact within such adult social life situations and

institutionalized environments, which otherwise they would not be able to do in reality before actually reaching their own adulthoods.

Playing with dolls or different character building games are quite popular among Armenians. More than 90 percent of participants above eighteen reported to have actively played such games regardless of age and sex. Sex- and age-based differences start to occur in the age group below eighteen years old. First of all, the popularity level of games portraying social life mimicking drop from 90 to around 70 percent, especially due to boys' growing disinterest toward character building games. A consistent pattern shows that most of the children who are disinterested in social games find alternative fulfillment in computer games. Here, however, the preferences divert into two different directions, based on sex and gender. Female participants tend to fill the gap of social life mimicry games with their alternative online versions, (e.g., online baking, hospital, fashion, or baby care games), which closely resemble the main principle of social games, only excluding the actual interaction between players and the need for individual inventiveness. Unlike females, however, males disinterested in social games tend to substitute their social experience with online games which most of the time promote superheroism and violence and non-applicable social situations (e.g. GTA, Medal of Honor, Mortal Kombat, etc.).

The link between games and reality is easiest to explore particularly in social games simply because their original purpose is to copy and imaginarily recreate existing reality within the unrealistic realm of games. The influence is bidirectional: reality determines what children want to recreate through games, but also, games influence the way children perceive reality. It is observed that sex differences in games leave their consequences on the personality of the growing child. Unfortunately, we do not know in what forms the effect might be displayed in

adulthood, nevertheless potential patterns are found based on the players' sexes. As Janet Lever (1978) observed, in games "boys experience face-to-face confrontations — often opposing a close friend — and must learn to depersonalize the attack," while typical girls' games offer "far less experience with interpersonal competition... they [girls] often mimic primary human relationships instead of playing formal games... [therefore,] there are probable benefits for their affective and verbal development" (p. 480-481). Applying a similar observation to children who are less interested in social games, the survey findings show that female children in Armenia are more likely to compensate their lack of experience from typical social games with similar online alternatives, while male children prefer the absolute opposite, which is, games potentially offering strategic but not real-life applicable learning to develop their social interaction skills.

An example of a more structured game portraying social norms and cultural traditions is the Armenian game called *akhjik pakhtsnotsi* (*աղջիկ փախցնոց*, literally translated as bride kidnapping). The rules are simple: it is a never-ending game where the participants stand in two rows, each couple holding their hands high up together, creating a long arch for the single player to go through and pick a partner from either row. The name itself shows the game's direct reference to bride kidnapping, which in some cultures is an accepted tradition. However, it is interesting that even though the tradition, the original source of the game, has almost disappeared from the Armenian culture, the game is still popular among approximately 60 percent of the survey participants. So, social games not only reflect the current reality of the kids' surroundings but also serve as containers of social collective memory.

## **Synthesis and Conclusions**

As it may already have been observed, games falling under one of these four categories are not always clearly detached from the other three since they almost always intertwine at some point of analysis. Nearly each game has a complex mixture of at least two of the four determining factors. For example, hide-and-seek games are clearly physical games aiming to develop children's agility and quick-mindedness. But in addition to it, Armenian variations of hide-and-seeks also serve for social purposes. Although they are not publicly recognized as such, Bdoyan proposed that, on an unconscious level, these games are quite possibly aimed at children's preparation for military purposes because they develop good hiding skills in case of unexpected attacks. The conditioned division is only a matter of relative dominance: whether physical, mental, social development or chance is the primary effect of the game. In a nutshell, physical and mental games are dependent on the player and his/her specific capacities respectively required for each game. Theoretically, the players are in full control of the game's outcome. Games of chance, on the contrary, are based on a decision absolutely independent of the player. And last but not least, in many social games a specific outcome is not even a desired part of the play.

## **Limitations and Avenues for Future Research**

This paper explores games and traditions, two genuinely broad and abstract concepts that can be interpreted in multiple different ways in different contexts. Although a loose definition is suggested for each one of them, absolute specificity is impossible because of their multi-faceted

natures. It means that different readers may approach games and traditions differently based on personal experiences and individual understandings of the two notions. In addition to it and in agreement with Benedict Anderson, I also propose that culture and tradition are not always perfectly parallel to the abstraction of nation. So, there is a risk of discrepancy between the perceptions of nationally Armenian and culturally Armenian games.

Another complication is the lack of previous study on games in Armenia. Absolutely no written resource is available to suggest any kind of analysis on the topic. Although there is a voluminous collection of Armenian national games, the book structure is a game by game short descriptions presented independently from each other and without any analytical interpretations. Therefore, for the purposes of this paper a survey was conducted, mainly for quantitative research, which, was afterwards used for qualitative analysis. Despite the fact that the survey included participants of very different ages and from various regions, it, nevertheless, cannot provide an absolutely accurate representation of the bigger picture. So, potential generalization is the main limitation of this study.

Using the suggested four main types of games, the paper explores their relationship to reality. As a result, a lot of connections and consistent patterns are found. But in a lot of cases the current conditions are so detached from their original sources that it becomes very difficult to detect channels for connect them together. For example, research shows that there is a certain influence by games on players' behavior. However, a further research is needed to be able to understand in what exact ways the outcomes of the influence are revealed.

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## Appendices

«Հայկական խաղերի ուսումնասիրություն»  
 Ավարտական աշխատանքի հավելված  
 Լուիզա Կիրակոսյան  
 ԱՀ ֆակուլտետ  
 Հայաստանի Ամերիկյան Համալսարան  
 2017 թ.

Armenian Traditional Games  
 Capstone Project Survey  
 Luiza Kirakosyan  
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 American University of Armenia  
 2017

### Հարցաշար (Questionnaire)

- Իմ տարիքը (My age) \_\_\_\_\_
- Իմ սեռը (My sex) \_\_\_\_\_
- Բնակավայրը (կամ բնակավայրերը), որտեղ անցկացնում/անցկացրել եմ մանկությանս ու պատանեկությանս մեծ մասը (Where I spent most of my childhood and teenage years) \_\_\_\_\_

1. Լրացրո՛ւ աղյուսակը՝ յուրաքանչյուր տողի դիմաց նշելով համապատասխան վանդակը  
 (Fill in the table by ticking the right box on each row)

	Երբևէ չեմ լսել այս խաղի մասին (I have never heard of this game)	Լսել եմ այս խաղի մասին, բայց երբեք չեմ խաղացել (I know this game but I have never played it before)	Մի քանի անգամ եմ խաղացել (I have played it only a few times before)	Հաճախակի խաղում կամ խաղացել եմ (I play/have played it very often)
Պահմտուկ/Պախկվոցի/Խազալո [Pahmtotsi] Hide-and-Seek				
Քարկտիկ [Qarktiki] Knucklebones				
Յոթ քար/Յոթքոնուկ [Yot Qar] Seven Stones				

Շախմատ Chess				
Նարդի Backgammon				
Աղջիկ Փախցնոցի [Akhjik Pakhtsnotsi]				
Կարմիր Կոճակ [Karmir Kojak] Red Button				
Լախտի/Ճլորթի [Lakhti] / [Tjlorti]				
Չըխկլի [Chkhk'li]				
Քյոսագալին/Քոսա Կելին [Qyosagalin]				
Թագավորի էշ [Tagavori esh]				
Քաշոցի [Qashotsi]				
Չիկ դաստա [Chlik Dasta]				
Լոտո Lottery				
Մոնոպոլիա Monopoly				
Տուն-տունիկ, Խանութ- խանութ կամ նման խաղեր Adult Impersonation Games				
Տիկնիկներով խաղեր Doll House Games				
Համակարգչային խաղեր Computer Games				

2. Նշե՛ք ձեր ամենասիրած համակարգչային խաղերից մի քանիսը, եթե խաղում եք համակարգչով (եթե չեք խաղում՝ բաց թողեք այս հարցը)

Name your favorite computer games (If you don't play computer games, leave this question blank)

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3. (\*նշել միայն այն խաղերի դեպքում, որոնք խաղացել եք) Այս խաղը հաճախ խաղում եմ/էի...  
 (\*concerns only those games that you've played) I play/used to play this game...

	Միայն աղջիկների հետ With girls	Միայն տղաների հետ With boys	Թե՛ աղջիկների, թե՛ տղաների հետ With boys and girls	Ծնողներիս կամ մեծահասակ ների հետ With parents/ adults	Մենակ Alone
Պահմտուկ/Պախկվոցի [Pahmtotsi] Hide-and-Seek					
Քարկտիկ [Qarktik] Knucklebones					
Յոթ քար/Յոթքոնուկ [Yot Qar] Seven Stones					
Շախմատ Chess					
Նարդի Backgammon					
Աղջիկ Փախցնոցի [Akhjik Pakhtsnotsi]					
Կարմիր Կոճակ [Karmir Kojak] Red Button					
Լախտի/Ճլորթի [Lakhti] / [Tjlorti]					
Չըխկլի [Chkhk'li]					
Քյոսագալին/Քոսա Կելին [Qyosagalin]					
Թագավորի էշ [Tagavori esh]					
Քաշոցի [Qashotsi]					
Չիկ դաստա [Chlik Dasta]					
Լոտո Lottery					
Մոնոպոլիա Monopoly					
Տուն-տունիկ, Խանութ- խանութ կամ նման խաղեր Adult Impersonation Games					
Տիկնիկներով խաղեր Doll House Games					

Համակարգչային խաղեր Computer Games					
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4. Բացի բոլոր նշված խաղերից, հաճախ նաև խաղում կամ խաղացել եմ հետևյալ խաղերը՝

Aside from the above-mentioned games I also often play/used to play...

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5. Բոլոր ժամանակների իմ ամենասիրած երեք խաղերը հետևյալն են

My all-time favorite three games are...

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

Շնորհակալություն հարցմանը մասնակցելու համար

Thank you for your contribution