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STATE OF PLAY:  
THE POLITICAL ONTOLOGY OF SPORT IN AMAZONIAN PERU

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**Abstract**

Building on the importance of “play” in traditional sociality, organized team sports such as soccer are instrumental in promoting a new moral and political order among Urarina people of Peruvian Amazonia, one grounded in notions of roles, rules, and the abstract individual. As a vehicle of nationalist sentiment, highly amenable to ritualization and bureaucratization, sport is central to the process by which the state expands its territory and influence. Like warfare, but unifying rather than fragmenting in its effects, sport harnesses the energy and vitality of youth and co-opts them for other ends.

**Keywords:**

*play, soccer, state, political ontology, Amazonia*

This article has its origins in one of those defining fieldwork moments, much coveted by anthropologists, in which one's acceptance by a local community suddenly seems all but accomplished. My happy moment took place on Mother's Day, 2006, deep in the Peruvian Amazon, on a muddy playing field painstakingly carved out by hand from the dense surrounding jungle. My Urarina companions and I were visitors at a small celebration organized by a village downstream from ours, which, like most public events in the area, centered on a soccer tournament. Partly blinded by the bright sun in my eyes, I nervously took up my familiar position between the rough-hewn wooden goal posts. Bets had been placed—big piles of shotgun cartridges—and tensions were high as we awaited kickoff. I noticed with some alarm that our opponents' star striker was parading around in studded boots—the only player not barefoot—and I wondered how my brave defenders were going to tackle him and save me from humiliation. Noticing my unease, one of my companions flashed me a smile. “Like a cat! You'll catch everything, eh?” Our team overheard and laughed, as did I, breaking the tension. Though my skills were nothing to write home about, I had managed to earn some respect as a goalkeeper, and my teammates judged my ability to catch the ball more often than not to be unmistakably feline. Not quite fully human in their eyes, then, I admit—but I still felt a small surge of pride at having finally proven my abilities in an activity actually valued by my hosts. I felt part of a team, united in common adversity.

This sense of belonging continued well into the evening of drinking, dancing, and speeches in the school that always followed such matches. I later realized my own experience was probably not unusual: Most of the young men living in my village were “foreigners” of a kind, partial strangers even to each other, having all married in, according to custom, to the matrilineal group. In the still relatively new context of large, sedentary, nucleated communities, group solidarity was weak, and sport offered a way of bringing people together in common activity. Yet group unity has its limits, and the tensions that always simmer just beneath the

smooth surface of social life tend to boil up in the drinking sessions that follow most matches, when inhibitions are down. That Mother's Day, the chief (*curaanaa*) of my host village, an older, charismatic man named Segundo, stormed home early after our children's team lost their match, voicing his anger at a perceived slight by the tournament host and referee, a much younger schoolteacher. While illustrating a propensity for fiery departure over negotiation and a general lack of interest in conflict resolution, his angry exit seemed further to illustrate how "traditional" or "old-style" leaders such as he are increasingly marginalized by a younger generation of educated, bilingual schoolteachers at relative ease with the customs and language of the encompassing Peruvian society.<sup>1</sup> This is the larger context in which these festivals must be understood, namely, an emerging sense of belonging to the imagined community of the nation and the transformation of social and political life that this entails.

Throughout Amazonia today, organized team sports such as soccer and volleyball are a ubiquitous part of everyday life and constitute one of the most enthusiastically embraced of all elements of nonindigenous society. This extraordinary popularity is often simply taken for granted, however, and despite a burgeoning literature on ethno-political movements, citizenship, and identity construction among Amazonian peoples, research into sport is virtually nonexistent. Yet studies in urban Latin America and elsewhere over the past two decades have consistently pointed to the role of sport as a central instrument in the imaginary construction of social and cultural identities at both a local and national level (e.g., Miller 2007:22; Stevenson and Alaug 2000). Soccer in particular has historically offered an arena where ethnic and other groups can integrate themselves into the nation, at the same time functioning as a cultural site for the articulation and negotiation of competing visions of abstract concepts such as "citizenship," "democracy," "equality," and "capitalism." If the challenge of "creating community" or collective identities from autonomous, dispersed households is an important issue for Amazonianist scholars and indigenous peoples alike (e.g.,

Killick 2008), the cohesive effects of sport would seem a promising place to start. While the condition of modernity is often associated with individualization (e.g., Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002), the Urarina are typical of a number of Amazonian peoples whose “traditional” sociality is highly individualistic and for whom the notion of “the collectivity”—and the formation of bounded, categorical identities—is most quintessentially “modern.”<sup>2</sup> At the same time, these new collectivities require individual members, citizens or subjects fashioned in their image.

The historical role of sport in the emergence of civilization has long been a topic of scholarly speculation (see Huizinga 1949). Marcel Granet (1930) explicitly sought to derive Chinese state forms and institutions, including a developed social hierarchy, from an ancient “spirit of competition” that animated sacred contests and “tournaments of dance and song.” In his essay “The Sportive Origin of the State,” José Ortega y Gasset (2002) developed a similar theme, tracing the origin of the state to the creative power inherent in the activity of sport. Earlier anthropological engagements tended to highlight the cultural creativity and resilience at work as sports are adapted to local values or institutions: In perhaps the best-known example, the classic film *Trobriand Cricket* (Leach and Kildea 1974) shows how the English gentleman’s game was transfigured by the Trobrianders in a creative response to, even subversion of, colonial rule. Cricket matches replaced tribal battles and were pervaded by a similar assortment of chants, body paint, and magic spells. More recent approaches, however, have directed attention at the potential of sport to drive projects of nation-building and globalization and suggested important connections to processes of social and political transformation.<sup>3</sup> Roberto Da Matta (2009:115), for example, has associated the institutional development of sport with modern egalitarianism based on universal laws applicable to all, while Will Rollason (2011a, 2011b) has shown how the people of Panopompom (Papua New Guinea) link soccer to a specific political project of development, drawing analogies between

earlier techniques of colonial governance and the ideally orderly and disciplined visual qualities of soccer that help to imbue it with transformative potential.

While the anthropological study of sport appears to be on the rise, few studies have addressed what I take to be one of sport's most interesting and important features, namely, its capacity to transform a universal human propensity for play into a formal system of roles and rules, which, in turn, facilitates the appropriation and redirection of youthful energy and vitality by the state—not to mention, in many parts of the world, co-optation by powerful, often corporate, interests. I explore these themes here in relation to the uptake of soccer by the Peruvian Urarina, in the context of their ongoing incorporation into the state and nation. My approach builds on the tradition of the extended-case method, often associated with the Manchester School (e.g., Gluckman 1940, 1952), in which the analysis of concrete situations or events is used to illuminate broader features of social organization, including, especially, shifting social divisions and internal contradictions in contexts of colonialism, contact, and change.<sup>4</sup> I trace the events of a single community festival, revealing in the process how sport articulates with other elements of modern life, such as formal schooling, whose role in producing or interpellating citizens is much better understood. That playing sport is inherently enjoyable immediately points beyond oppositional models of state–society relations that emphasize coercion and the recalcitrance of local populations in projects of state-building (Nugent 1994). My analysis resonates with recent work seeking to understand the “deeply cultural nature of states” (Sharma 2006:6) while emphasizing that state power may have no institutional or geographical fixity and that state effects never obtain solely through national institutions or in governmental sites (Trouillot 2001). The state is less an apparatus than a set of practices and processes that create new spaces for the exercise of power, and one must therefore look beyond formal governmental institutions to the often-less-visible sites in which such processes may be recognized through their effects. These effects include, in particular, the

production of new boundaries and jurisdictions, along with atomized, individualized subjects, legible and governable, molded into an undifferentiated “public” within which different groups or social classes recognize themselves as essentially the same (Trouillot 2001). In some instances, these processes may challenge deeply held assumptions about the nature of being or of reality itself, requiring closer attention to the ways in which these assumptions frame and organize political practice. I suggest that sport embeds such processes in Amazonian Peru today and is instrumental in the transformation of what may be termed “political ontology” (e.g. Hay 2006): the underlying nature or basis of the constitutive categories of political analysis, including power, identity, the polity, and the subject.

### **A new playing field**

The Urarina language is presently spoken by some four thousand hunter-horticulturalists inhabiting the banks of the Chambira and Uritoyacu rivers and their tributaries in the province and region of Loreto, Peru. Though these people commonly refer to themselves as “Urarina” when speaking in Spanish to outsiders, they otherwise prefer the autonym *cacha*, meaning, roughly, “real people.” At present, Urarina have only a weak sense of ethnic identity, for they are not particularly engaged in the indigenous political movement and were, in fact, one of the last groups in Peru to form a representative political organization. They show, similarly, few signs of participation in a shared indigenous Amazonian identity, although as will become clear below, a new sense of ethnic as well as national Peruvian identity is starting to emerge among them.

Though very few Urarina are practicing Christians, they are no strangers to the presence of missionaries, having first been contacted by the Jesuits in the 17th century. Many were taken to a mission town founded on the banks of the Chambira in 1738, and some thirty years later, by the time the Jesuits were expelled from Peru, San Xavier de Urarinas boasted a population of 600 and was considered one of the most established and potentially successful

missions to fall under Franciscan jurisdiction. Although little is known of life on the missions, it is tempting to speculate that such experiences might have sown the seeds of present-day notions of a rigorously disciplined, rule-bound life as a potential alternative to the more ignorant and disorderly ways of the ancestors, a topic to which I return below. People still recall the benevolence of the earliest priests who “civilized” their ancestors, teaching them to wear clothes, to fish with hooks, and to live in a generally “organized” and peaceful manner in accordance with “the law.” Since the 1960s, a missionary couple from the Summer Institute of Linguistics has been working in Urarina territory and was instrumental in founding the current bilingual education program as well as the first officially recognized Urarina Native Community.

Traditionally seminomadic, the Urarina appear to have lived for the past few centuries in small, autarkic kin-based groups (*lauri*) centered on female consanguines, usually sisters living with their mother, and in-marrying husbands, who quickly establish a productive alliance with their new father-in-law. These relatively ephemeral groups have a fluid composition and porous boundaries, and relations between them were traditionally characterized by mutual suspicion and, often, outright violence, sometimes leading to protracted revenge hostilities. They are also inherently limited in size, because members derive a sense of common identity through sharing food and productive activities. As elsewhere in Amazonia, there is a strong sense in which difference precedes identity and is the ground and possibility of relatedness (see, e.g., Viveiros de Castro 2001). Beginning their lives as utterly “other”—not even fully human, let alone kin—people gradually become more similar to those around them. Yet, at the most fundamental level, individuals remain irreducibly singular and unique. Individual differences are carefully attended to, and there is a very strong sense that no one should presume to know the minds of others or speak on their behalf. This corresponds to a



tremendous respect for and emphasis on personal autonomy, leading in practice to a distinctive form of egalitarianism (see Walker 2013).

Such principles also lie at the heart of political life. Traditional or old-style chiefs (curaanaa) are charismatic men of influence who might attract followers through their wise words and exemplary deeds but do not purport to represent anyone. They inspire rather than command, for political power is not coercive, and they do little by way of political unification. A good chief displays key personal qualities such as generosity, initiative, and skill and is expected to take charge of his followers' interests and security; although he may enjoy social standing, he has no clearly defined powers or publicly recognized authority and lacks sovereignty (cf. Lévi-Strauss 1992:307–310; Lowie 1948:15). People vote with their feet, and the authority of chiefs lasts only as long as people choose to follow them. As Joanna Overing (2003) has emphasized, following Pierre Clastres (1987), power rarely carries with it the weight of what we might call a “collectivity,” tending instead to be a personal matter; human power refers to the potency of the individual being. The “collectivity” envisioned in Western social theory as a coercive force, especially insofar as it is expressed through social structural imperatives such as roles, statuses, and juridical rules, is far removed from Urarina understanding of community. For in this fluid, fragmented sociality, characterized by face-to-face interactions between kin and hostility toward strangers, there is little emphasis on notions of status or role. “The social,” as expressed through daily interaction of a personal sort, is, instead, understood as a means through which people can actively work against the development of relations of coercion (Overing 2003).<sup>5</sup>

This orientation is consistent with the predominance of relational modes of identification and a relative lack of objectification. There is little privacy, and people get to know each other intimately; everyday social relationships are typically characterized by a kind of phenomenological immediacy, insofar as one responds directly to the vivid presence of the

other, experiencing him or her “in person” rather than as type, unimpeded by mediating structures and typificatory schemes (Bird-David 1994). Social action is generally predicated on one’s particular identity (as a specific person’s mother, husband, or brother-in-law) and not on whether one is female or male. Similarly, the dichotomy between children and adults has little salience in social interaction; instead, it is the egocentric relativities of “older” and “younger” that inform social action. In other words, identities tend to be individual rather than collective and processual rather than categorical (see Minnegal and Dwyer 1999). Common interests are generated in processes of actual everyday interaction; as soon as they cease, the basis for common action vanishes (see also Rosengren 2003:224). The emphasis in social life is on the informal and the intimate rather than the rule and its obedience (Overing 2003).

This has begun to change since the introduction, in 1974, of the Law of Native Communities, which required Peru’s indigenous inhabitants to register with the state to gain political recognition and official title to lands, thereafter to be held communally.<sup>6</sup> As well as enforcing a process of nucleation into large, sedentary communities,<sup>7</sup> this law imposed a standardized form of social and political organization, complete with new laws and governing institutions: a kind of “one-size-fits-all” model for Peru’s entire rural indigenous population that presupposed a communal, village-type organization mostly modeled on highland communities and inapplicable in the lowlands (Veber 1998:394; see also Gow 1991:205–228). Unsurprisingly, the Law of Native Communities conflicts with earlier practices in a number of ways. The concepts of communal organization and secular, elected leadership are foreign and unfamiliar (Vickers 1989:59); some studies suggest that their introduction has often produced unintended confusion, factionalism, or ineffective leadership (e.g., Rosengren 1987). One reason for these results is that the “elected” leaders are often younger men or marginal adults whose “authority” derives from distant and poorly understood state practices and institutions rather than the wisdom and esteemed personal qualities outlined above. Such elected positions

of authority may exist de jure though not de facto, with communities duly electing officials even though many of their inhabitants continue to defer to older systems of representation, participation, and authority.<sup>8</sup>

Communal ownership of large, bounded parcels of land is, similarly, quite foreign to the process by which individuals create de facto ownership through use and occupation of land conceived in terms of particular places, paths, and landmarks. Moreover, the Native Community model corresponds to a view of ethnic groups themselves as similarly discrete, fixed, bounded categories, a view based on an assumption of an organic bond between people, place, and language. This might be referred to as the vertical, “tree,” or “taproot” model of ethnicity, and it stresses origin as unique and culture as identified with ethnicity; native peoples themselves, by contrast, tend to employ a horizontal, “rhizomic” model in which identity is open and multicentered, with multiple points of rooting (Rosengren 2003:223; see also Ingold 2000:426).

In short, formal belonging to a “community” is at odds with relational and action-based modes of identification such as those grounded in kinship. Despite appearances, there is little solidarity at the scale of Native Communities, and the smaller kinship-based groups persist beneath the surface as largely autonomous parties in a mercurial system of alliances that quickly gives rise to bitter factionalism. When tempers flare, there are few avenues for resolving disputes other than departure and relocation, which people find increasingly inconvenient. The key challenge facing a would-be reformer, such as a schoolteacher or aspiring young leader, is thus to legitimize the new forms of authority and at the same time generate larger and more abstract communal identities and loyalties, whether at the level of the Native Community, the ethnic group, the nation, or all three at once. And, here, sport comes into its own.

The task of integration is not exactly easy. Urarina territory is low-lying and swampy, not easily accessed from urban centers or neighboring river systems. There are no roads, no airstrips, and, aside from the schools, few signs of the presence of the state. Very few, if any, communities have generators or television sets, let alone access to printed media. Some people lament what they perceive as a frustrating lack of progress and bitterly point out, for example, that their erstwhile enemies, the neighboring Candoshi, have struck ahead to become skilled “professionals” (*profesionales*) who (so Urarina claim) now work for a wage. Most contact with outsiders today is with the itinerant fluvial traders who periodically exchange small quantities of manufactured goods such as salt, kerosene, fishhooks, and clothing for palm hearts, animal skins, and other forest products. Few Urarina use cash money, and the majority are illiterate. Most men speak Spanish to a limited extent, and a few are fully bilingual, although women generally speak no Spanish. Most people I knew possessed no form of identity documents and so tended to be entirely overlooked by regional politicians, who preferred to concentrate on their registered, voting constituency. Yet Urarina have their own ways of envisioning citizenship.

### **Come on, let’s play!**

Soccer has been a much-loved part of everyday life in Urarina Native Communities for at least two decades. On any given day, once school has finished or during recess, young boys run around and play spontaneous games of “keepings off,” trying to keep the ball away from one of the players, laughing among themselves while the older lads are still out working in the forest or the gardens (see Figure 1). Then, when the heat of the day begins to dissipate in the late afternoon, a cry rings out: “Come on, let’s play!” [*Chajao necoatiijiacha*]. The older boys, returned from their work, start kicking the ball among themselves, and gradually others drift over to join them. People often simply sort themselves into teams, though, sometimes, captains are elected and take turns selecting their team members.<sup>9</sup> Most people play barefoot, and play

continues until it grows too dark to see the ball. Scoring is relative rather than absolute, such that, for example, three goals to two is represented as “one.” This lends the games a kind of unmeasured, almost timeless, quality. Often, people seemed happy to finish playing when the teams were “even” (*empate*); this often went against my own competitive tendencies, clearly the product of a different kind of upbringing, to push until there was a definite “winner” and “loser.” There is a distinctive fluidity to Amazonian soccer, only partly due to environmental conditions: the heat and humidity, the heavy rains, the uneven surface. Players follow the ball rather than playing positions or marking opponents, and conventional “team tactics” are generally nonexistent. Despite the best efforts of local schoolteachers—who also act as coaches—there is little passing in midfield and little coordination between midfield and defense.<sup>10</sup> In fact, collective principles of play are mostly absent, resulting in an impression of chaos for an observer more accustomed to the disciplined European style. Despite ideals to the contrary, then, the “team” is very much a collection of individuals, each largely self-sufficient and only loosely coordinated with his fellows, much like the Native Community itself.

Playing soccer on this basis is great fun, and there is much pleasure to be had in exerting oneself physically. Yet this exertion rarely crosses over into strain. Young Urarina men in their prime have excellent stamina and can easily play for hours at a stretch, often laughing while they play. Older people acknowledge and appreciate this youthful vitality and contrast the firm, muscular bodies of young men with their own frail frames. For a man to be old (*biina*) has connotations of softness and lack of virility, epitomized by the playful image of a penis like a soft banana. When referring to soccer, Urarina usually use the verb *necoatijiaa*, which can mean either “to play” or “to dance.” The importance of “play” in general in Urarina society would be difficult to exaggerate, and most people I knew took great delight in the ludic side of life.<sup>11</sup> Unlike some other Amazonian peoples, the Urarina do not play volleyball, and aside from soccer there is next to nothing by way of organized games with delineated rules and

participant roles. Children play with makeshift, homemade toys and with each other, but this type of play is generally spontaneous and disorganized, much like the dancing that takes place at festivals after sufficient manioc beer has been consumed. Spontaneous, provocative jokes and linguistic puns are an integral part of social interaction and draw people closer together, and drinking songs humorously invite listeners to “play” or “dance” with the singer of the song.

People learn to “play” early in life; it could be said that “playing” is one of the very first things they learn. Newborn babies spend much of their time in tiny string hammocks, to which are strung bundles of seeds and gourds along with tiny wooden toys carved by their mothers, described as “companions” for the baby’s shadow-soul (*corii*) to “play” with. Such play is considered essential to the child’s development, health, and well-being, and yet the location of these toys behind the baby’s head and well out of reach suggests that such play is not conceived in a straightforward physical manner or as a simple relationship between an agent and a patient or subject and object (see Walker 2009). Similarly, after a person’s death, his or her closest personal possessions, such as clothing or jewelry, are buried with the body, for the person’s soul to “play” with. This is said to safeguard against the soul’s restlessness and discontent. In short, play keeps people happy and content and is an essential part of life.

Consider now another important context in which the notion of “play” (*necoatijiaa*) figures extensively: the interaction between a shaman, or drinker of hallucinogenic preparations, and the spirit “mother” of the psychotropic plant he has consumed, who acts as a guide and teacher. One man told me the shaman asks the psychotropic drink to “play” with him, to “pass over” him and “visit from above” so that he will stay put, peacefully hallucinating rather than wandering around or “flipping out.” The shaman is empowered as he plays with the spirit and becomes more knowledgeable. The shaman is overwhelmed within the play, and the direction it takes is always slightly outside his control.

There is a sense, then, that play ideally subsumes the players into it; it precedes and transforms its participants while it generates feelings of affective closeness. The connection to dance is clear: Play, like dance, has a temporal and medial structure and an internal logic of its own. The fact that people do not say to each other, “Let’s play soccer,” but simply, “Let’s play,” is significant, for it further implies that “to play” does not mean primarily to play with something or someone in particular but, rather, to enter into a particular mode of being that necessarily involves others, a participation, perhaps, in the existence of others. Play is not in essence something one does, a disposition or attitude in the player or a subject behaving “playfully” as opposed to seriously. As Hans-Georg Gadamer (2006:104) points out, when we speak of the play of colors or of light or the play of waves, this is not a metaphorical extension of the concept of “play” but its essence; we can say that humans also play. We allow ourselves to be moved by play and take part for a time, as when we hear a musical work and are inexplicably invited to hum along or tap our feet—this is play as dance and dance as play. Gadamer stresses the primacy of play over the consciousness of the player, writing that “the structure of play absorbs the player into itself, and thus frees him from the burden of taking the initiative, which constitutes the actual strain of existence” (2006:105). Play is characterized by a certain ease, which does not mean an absence of effort but refers phenomenologically to the absence of strain, experienced subjectively as relaxation. The true experience of play is a “being drawn into.” The movement of playing has no goal that brings it to an end; rather, it renews itself in constant repetition.

### **From play to game**

When men play soccer in their villages in the evenings, the game partakes heavily of all these qualities. Yet soccer, as people point out, is also “organized” (*organizado*), and this partly accounts for its transformative potential. The singular appeal and interest of soccer may well be that it enfolds these primal qualities of play while also being particularly amenable to

appropriation for various other ends. To understand this further, we might begin with George Herbert Mead's well-known analysis of "play" and "game." It was developed as a central ingredient in his theory of child socialization, though I propose it can instead be read in terms of contrastive modes of self-objectification. According to Mead (1967), humans begin their understanding of the social world through "play" and "game." The play stage, which comes first in the child's development, is characterized by few or no rules and may involve simple role playing, in which the child plays at being a teacher, or a mother, or a hunter, or whatever. As a result of such play, the child learns to identify with specific others, to become both subject and object and gradually begins to construct a self. However, because the child can only realize the perspective of distinct and separate others, he or she still lacks the more general and organized sense of self that comes in the next stage, the game stage. Here, the child must internalize the roles of all others involved in the game. Furthermore, these roles must have a definite relationship to one another; they are organized and rule governed. Mead used the example of baseball to illustrate the game stage (though, of course, soccer would have been just as appropriate); the player of such a game, he wrote,

must have the responses of each position involved in his own position. He must know what everyone else is going to do in order to carry out his own play. He has to take all of these roles. They do not all have to be present in consciousness at the same time, but at some moments he has to have three or four individuals present in his own attitude, such as the one who is going to throw the ball, the one who is going to catch it and so on. These responses must be, in some degree, present in his own make-up. In the game, then, there is a set of responses of such others so organized that the attitude of one calls out the appropriate attitudes of the other.

[Mead 1967:151]



The game stage is associated with what Mead describes as the child's first encounter with the "generalized other," through which he or she understands a given activity from the perspective of all those engaged in it. Through this generalized exchange of perspectives or social positions, one comes to appreciate what kinds of behavior are expected and appropriate in different social settings. In this way, the game stage marks the child's achievement of an implicit understanding of, and complicity with, the control exerted by society on the individual.

Mead himself was not particularly interested in the cross-cultural applicability of his model. He did not consider that some peoples lack any equivalent of organized team sports such as baseball, and he similarly took it for granted that the collectivity exerted a constraining or controlling influence over its members. As discussed above, at least prior to the formation of Native Communities, I do not think this kind of influence generally existed for the Urarina or for a number of other Amazonian peoples. Hence, rather than articulating a general temporal model of child socialization that is universally applicable, Mead's analysis might alternatively be read as describing a particular mode of subject formation that institutes a definite, objectified, reflexive sense of self in relation to a definite collectivity of which that self is a member. This collectivity is composed of people playing distinct roles, even though they are all socialized in the same way: Underneath their roles, they are essentially "the same."

We can therefore begin to see why soccer is such an important ingredient in the process of imagining and instituting a new mode of sociality, one requiring new forms of cooperation and a different kind of relation to the collectivity. Soccer incorporates elements of both "play" and "game." As play, soccer is a structure of participation that generates affective closeness, linking people together in common activity, allowing them to participate in each other's existence. As game, soccer is a system of rules and roles that amount to a distinct form of socialization, corresponding to a new mode of social existence that is the ideal of the modern Native Community, and it has its ultimate basis in the logic of the state. Yet its propensity to be

formalized and ritualized means soccer also lends itself to a different kind of purpose, as a vehicle of strong moral sentiments and even wider forms of belonging, instrumental in the process of incorporation into the state and nation.

### **Good brothers and neighbors**

Early one morning as I was relaxing in my hammock, two young men arrived in a small canoe from the downstream community of Santa Teresa, about three hours away if paddling against the current. A crowd quickly assembled and watched with interest as they climbed the steep grassy banks, proceeding directly to the house of Martín, the local Urarina schoolteacher, to whom they wordlessly passed a compactly folded sheet of lined paper. Martín's name in Spanish was clearly visible in blue biro on the upper face. With due ceremony, the paper was unfolded and the handwritten message, entirely in Spanish, was read aloud, twice, to the assembled onlookers. It is difficult to do justice, in translation, to the idiosyncratic but distinctly formal and bureaucratic language of the original, all the more striking for its contrast with the colloquial Spanish usually spoken with fluvial traders and other outsiders:

YEAR OF DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION  
Santa Teresa, 5th of October, 2006  
Official Document: No001-2006 OF THE\_IEPM No602356

SIR: Director of the IEPM of Nueva Unión

RE: Invitation to a lightning mini soccer tournament for the purpose of celebrating the anniversary of the Community of Santa Teresa.

I am pleased to have to address you to Greet You Warmly and affectionately on behalf of the I.E.P.M. No 602356 of Santa Teresa and also to convey an invitation to your person and to the student body of the I.E. which you direct.

The event will be held on Tuesday, October 24 at 9:00 in the morning on the field of our community. Registration will be the sum of 25.00 soles, each I.E. team may enter a maximum of 10 players and a minimum of 8 players.

During the day, you will be served with drinks and food, you are asked kindly to send the total sum of the participants of the I.E. and at night you and all the children are invited. Where we will be appreciating a literary Evening, at the conclusion of

all this begins the great dance party where we will enjoy the typical drink of the region and so in this way be exchanging ties of friendship as good brothers and neighbors of the same institution. The opportunity is propitious to give you samples of our special consideration and hoping to rely on you.

Sincerely,

Rogelio Macusi Inuma  
President, APAFA

Clever Fartari Romero  
Director, IEPM, No 601456

Invitations such as these are regularly sent out by a host community, represented by the teacher, to its closest upstream and downstream neighbors to invite them to a festival, which usually doubles as a round-robin-style soccer tournament. There is no Urarina soccer league or organized competition, and so the festival is the main forum for intercommunity matches. Over the course of a couple of years, I realized that invitations like that above are rarely composed anew but, rather, copied and reassembled from fragments of earlier invitations. Everyone had a keen sense of how the documents “should” look (or, rather, sound, as they are usually read aloud), and illiterate men would judge them by how closely they approached this ideal.<sup>12</sup> That the invitations were in Spanish rather than Urarina reflects a strong sense that Spanish is the language of writing and, by implication, civilization and the nation. As noted, few Urarina people are entirely comfortable speaking Spanish, let alone writing it, and there are strong gender implications here too, given that Spanish is spoken almost exclusively by men.

Documents such as these are among the most important ways in which the state becomes manifest in people’s everyday lives. In them, liberal use is made of the formal categories of state bureaucracy, such as the official designation of the year and a document number (001-2006).<sup>13</sup> They evoke the Native Community as well as the mode of sociality it is supposed to embody, based no longer on mutual suspicion and antagonism between domestic groups but, rather, on “ties of friendship” between “good neighbors” and “good brothers” united through the school, a symbol of the fatherland. Here, as elsewhere, the discourse of

brotherhood is intended to imply a form of cohesion and loyalty, conveying a sense of emotional and practical commitment. This vision of fraternal equality, common in Peruvian nationalist as well as indigenous ethno-political discourse, underscores the cultural and political intentions of the festivals.<sup>14</sup>

A similar kind of language is often used by schoolteachers when addressing people during community meetings. As noted above, the authority or influence of the teacher, who is usually (but not always) Urarina, is grounded in a different domain of specialized knowledge than that of the old-style chief, and it is expressed and imparted in different ways. For example, the teacher often instructs people directly on correct conduct, rather than merely leading by example. Shortly before one school festival, I heard the teacher deliver a lengthy sermon on appropriate forms of behavior while his audience listened in respectful silence. He spoke (in Urarina) as follows:

Our grandparents, before, were always fighting with their neighbors. That's not how to be, we have to put ourselves like real people, like good Peruvians. In the evening, you have to dance. All the women, when someone asks you to dance, you should dance. Everyone should dance, not just sit there silently, like our grandparents. We shouldn't be embarrassed like our grandparents. We have to make an example for the others. Even if we lose, we have to be happy.

The normative speech of the schoolteacher echoes the language of the written invitation, and together they offer a vision of social life explicitly counterposed to that of the ancestors, which by implication was characterized by ignorance, violence, and chaos. The new vision is linked instead to the notion of the "good Peruvian" and the state of being "organized" (*organizado*), which further corresponds to a vision of formal equality with, in place of exploitation by, mestizos. In this way, the joy of play, characterized by common involvement in a dancelike, to-and-fro movement that precedes and transcends the individual players, is

already being turned by Martín and others into a kind of moral duty, a normative exercise harnessed to a “higher” social cause.

### **Winning by the rules**

A day after receiving his invitation to the festival, Martín called a meeting in the school, though less to moralize than to ascertain which of the children would be able to raise their shares of the total of 25 nuevos soles (around US\$9) required for the inscription of a team. These “bets” would be pooled to form a prize for the winning team. On this occasion, the adult team was not invited, but adults usually have a separate fee for inscription, double that for children. Because most Urarina do not use money, bets are supplied in the equivalent value of commodities advanced by traders, whose prices are standardized and well-known. Yet not all bets are equal; shotgun cartridges are easily the most prestigious, perhaps reinforcing an association with masculinity.<sup>15</sup> Yet, if betting is partly an act of male bravado, it is also important in effecting the transition from “play” to “game” by incentivizing people to win, militating against any inclination to play to a draw, and instilling in people a competitive spirit. The bets adds “depth,” to use Geertz’s (1973) expression, imbuing the match with additional meaning and relevance as a kind of metasocial commentary. At the same time, betting is linked to a new kind of assertive egalitarianism.<sup>16</sup> People wager especially aggressively on impromptu matches against visiting mestizos, such as the young crews who man the boats of traders. This always surprised and dismayed me, for Urarina almost invariably lose such matches and their meager possessions, being unable to compete against the superior skills, not to mention footwear, of their mestizo opponents. Yet their very fearlessness suggests a logic that is not strictly economic and might better be seen as an assertion of pride in their newfound formal equality, as joint participants in the cultural life of the nation. Equality of outcome, grounded in the recognition of individual autonomy and difference and a sharing economy in which wealth is continually subject to redistribution, is thus subordinated to a supposed equality of

opportunity, based on common membership in an imagined national community and homogenization of the citizenry in which class divisions are suppressed.

Soccer in Peru has in fact been closely tied to national identity since the early 20th century, when it was first appropriated by the working class in Lima from the largely British expatriate community (Panfichi and Thieroldt 2007:144).<sup>17</sup> Observers have long pointed to soccer as an integral part of the nation's cultural landscape and as a means of forging identities and facilitating associations between formerly antagonistic sectors of national society, including diverse ethnic and social groups who were, for the first time, presented with a forum governed by egalitarian rules of competition.<sup>18</sup> This ideal of a level playing field is nowhere better expressed than in the informal matches between Urarina and mestizo teams. Away from the soccer field, I would sometimes hear people say things like, "Before, we were always exploited by the mestizos, they did what they liked with us. But now, we have the law, we're protected. We're equal." Yet, while citizenship has undoubtedly conferred a number of benefits, such equality is quite restricted in scope and usually more imagined than real, as attested by the fact that when indigenous peoples such as the Urarina enter wage labor markets, they almost invariably do so at the very lowest rung and are often destined for a life of poverty.

When we piled into Martín the teacher's large canoe to make our way downstream to the festival, some three days after his meeting in the school, our statement of purpose could not have been clearer. A young boy sat in the prow, clutching the school's long wooden flagpole, with the Peruvian flag flying proudly above us the entire journey. When we arrived at the host community of Santa Teresa, four more Peruvian flags stood there to greet us, as though pointing the way past old habits of intergroup resentments and hostilities. From the freshly cut grass on the riverbank, we walked across the empty soccer field to the brightly painted school that stood opposite, past a makeshift desk for the match officials, comprising the Santa Teresa schoolteacher and the lieutenant governor, where Martín registered our children's team and

deposited our bag of shotgun cartridges. Hosts and guests alike stared blankly at us as we passed, even though many knew us well, for until recently Urarina rarely employed any form of greeting and renewing sociability after an absence takes time. Ignoring the stares, my travel companions went directly to the houses of their kin, where they were received with bowls of manioc beer, and conversation soon filled the silence.

The sport started before long, children's matches followed by adults', each team representing a Native Community. Those not playing sat around the ground watching or chatting in the houses circling the field or in the school, mostly segregated by gender. No one was cheering except the mestizo schoolteacher of a neighboring community, who was trying, mostly unsuccessfully, to raise people's passions. In contrast to the games played at home in the evenings, these matches were fiercely contested, and the players were determined (see Figure 2). Though people rarely called for the ball, I noticed that, when they did address each other on the field, they tended to use people's Spanish names rather than the Urarina nicknames they used off the field.<sup>19</sup> The referee was a passing trader, and he did not hesitate to call out fouls or impose rules, such as offside, that were rarely if ever observed in the home community. Yet, even if their faces showed disappointment, players accepted his decisions unquestioningly. Mestizos are often made referees, precisely because they "know the rules." Under the influence of these referees, and of the schoolteachers and the other new-style leaders, the spirit of the game seemed somewhat different in the context of the tournament than it did at home. There was more rigidity, more determination, less spontaneous fun and laughter. People played to win; they showed real aspiration. At the same time, each and every rule was carefully adhered to.

Much as Rollason (2011a) observed in a Melanesian context, it was my impression that, except in a few idiosyncratic respects, Urarina do not really seek to adapt or "domesticate" soccer to their own cultural frame. On the contrary, they see playing soccer as unequivocally

“civilized” (*civilizado*), modern and universal, and as such a strategy for development. Soccer is “organized” and full of “law,” like the ideal Native Community, which manifests its organization through its clean, orderly appearance, knowledgeable leaders, and peaceful ambience. This is not to say that at least some people, some of the time, do not “disorganize” soccer (and related social activities) in ways that could be read as undermining or subverting the values most closely associated with capitalism and the state. Nevertheless, people acknowledge that soccer players relate to each other on the basis of inflexible, universal rules that supervene on the moral obligations of kinship. This is, for the most part, encouraged: hence, the absolute precision with which time is controlled. Timekeeping is taken very seriously, and the failure by a “controller” (*controlador*) to stop play at the appropriate moment was the cause of the only physical fight I ever saw during my stay. Most Urarina I knew did not own watches or know how to read them, but when men did acquire (usually analogue) watches, they tended to insist on reading them to the minute or even second; similarly, men without watches would frequently ask me the time and grow impatient if I replied with approximations such as “four thirty” or “quarter to five.” I remember well the day my companion Rebasi purchased a watch; while I was helping his small work group extract timber from the forest, he soon began proposing for us precise and inflexible work routines, complete with rest breaks and knock-off times, as though mimicking the strict time regulation of capitalism.<sup>20</sup> Soccer festivals exemplify this control of time and modern temporality. Their staging throughout the year further serves to mark time in a radically new way: Unlike customary rituals or events of significance, they are not tied to changing seasons or the developing human body. Instead, they are linked to national days of celebration (such as Mother’s Day, Carnival, or San Juan), anniversaries of the Native Communities, and the school calendar.<sup>21</sup>



Though the boys on our team played well and fought valiantly, they did not prevail in Santa Teresa that day. This did not surprise me; ours was a more isolated and, in some ways, more “traditional” community than its downstream neighbors, with fewer people and fewer visible signs of the influence of Peruvian society. Compared to that of some of the other teams, our style of play was particularly fluid and relatively relaxed; despite Martín’s best efforts at encouraging teamwork, the emphasis was on individual skill and flair, and people’s hopes seemed to rest on individual feats of brilliance by our “star” players. Indeed, what everyone seemed to enjoy most were spectacular displays of skill, exuberance, and vitality and clashes between players. Again, it is tempting to construe this as a form of resistance to the values embedded in modern team sports: a reluctance, perhaps, to allow soccer to cross over from “play” into “game.” It is, indeed, likely that something of this kind is at work, an attempt to subvert the dominant order, perhaps somewhat akin to modern forms of hooliganism. At the same time, however, it must be acknowledged that in the context of the tournament, people have a strong desire to win, not least because they have been more or less obliged to stake their own earnings on the outcome of the match. It is here that the competitive element of sport begins to encourage an adherence to its own inner logic: To play well, and to win, one must embody the rules and conform to a particular kind of orthodoxy.

The winners that day were from the large downstream community of San Miguel, whose style of play was indeed impressively organized and disciplined. People played positions, they had roles to play on the field, and partly as a result of these roles, they were able to anticipate well the actions of their teammates. They somewhat resembled a well-oiled machine, grinding down the fluid individualism and the hopeful flamboyance of their opponents. Perhaps their greatest triumph was their visual appearance, for they possessed not only boots but also a complete set of matching uniforms, the result, I was told, of a successful written request to local government officials. Their victory seemed fitting, if not inevitable, for

it summed up nearly two decades of a steady but dramatic concentration of power. San Miguel was the first officially registered Native Community—a result of the missionary presence there since the 1960s—as well as the first community to receive formal schooling. Its members remain the most competent speakers of Spanish, an advantage they have successfully converted into political influence through their role as gatekeepers of the region. People from other settlements would tell me that the folk from San Miguel were *sabidos*, “knowledgeable people,” while remaining clearly mistrustful of their excessive influence. To the extent that formal education has managed to consolidate groups and group identities, it has also introduced new hierarchies between them, as part of a shift away from individualism. The importance placed on new kinds of knowledge has led to the emergence of legal and bureaucratic forms of authority, which are at their most visible during the speeches that follow the sport at festivals.

**“Neither the first nor the last time”**

A short while after the matches had finished, an announcement was made that food would be served and that all should assemble in front of the school. The host schoolteacher had prepared a long list of names, all in Spanish, which he used to call forth the assembled masses one by one to receive their bowls of food. After eating, everyone entered the school and took a seat on the floor. Sex segregation was strong: The men took up most of the available space and spread out comfortably, and the women huddled closely together at the very back of the room, facing the back wall. The schoolteacher once again took the stage and kicked things off by leading everyone through the national anthem. The pace was slow, and most of the voices dropped out before the end, at which point the teacher cried out, “Viva Peru!” Everyone livened up, calling out “Viva!” in unison and applauding cheerfully. The teacher launched into a long, formal speech in Spanish in which he repeatedly greeted the various visiting communities, noted the importance of the event (the 13th anniversary of the founding of the

host community), and emphasized the happiness of the occasion, proclaiming that it should be “neither the first nor the last time” to celebrate together in such a manner. He then announced that the various authorities of the visiting communities would each “give their words” and that this would be followed by cultural performances by the children.

As promised, a string of people holding various positions of formal authority took to the stage one by one, addressing the crowd with a similar selection of formulaic expressions. These included, from each community, the lieutenant governor (*teniente gobernador*), the communal chief (*jefe comunal*), the municipal clerk (*agente municipal*), and the president (*presidente*) of the Parent–Teacher Association (*Asociación de Padres de Familia*). Of course, though each had an official function within the formal structure of the Native Community, this only sometimes corresponded to real power or influence. All spoke entirely in Spanish except one man, whose lack of facility soon obliged him to switch to Urarina. When I once asked if people always spoke in Spanish at tournaments, I was told that they did not necessarily do so but always would if they could. This is significant, because, as the language of colonial administration, governance, and hierarchy, Spanish connotes certain kinds of social relationships.<sup>22</sup> Language also goes a long way in defining ethnic groups in Amazonia today, and, by extension, the nation as a whole, even though this is itself largely the consequence of the nonnative, “taproot” model of identity discussed above. Moreover, linguistic abilities have long correlated with power and leadership potential (e.g., Clastres 1987:151–154; Hendricks 1988:223), and the convention effectively publicizes exactly who does or does not speak Spanish to an acceptable degree of fluency and who, therefore, has a legitimate claim to new-style leadership.

Formal speeches such as these effectively outline the bureaucratic makeup of the Native Community and its basis in formal roles and rules. Speaking “for” someone else, as the principles of representative democracy require, is itself foreign to many egalitarian societies,

Urarina included.<sup>23</sup> Yet as Webb Keane notes, formality may open up new possibilities by making salient what might otherwise have remained tacit, with the result that, as he puts it, “it is the most public events that are most likely to be the locus of transformations ... When the central issue is defining and affirming group identities and relations, or asserting their value, speech performance may be not merely a means to but itself a part of the outcome” (1991:313). In terms of speaking style, formalization has the effect of removing the authority and the event from the individual speaker, so that a man, for example, speaks “less and less for himself, and more and more for his role” (Bloch 1975:16). Formal occasions tend to invoke public, positional identities rather than the personal identities that emerge through an individual’s particular history of interactions; they place an emphasis on social distance as opposed to intimacy and respect for an established order of social positions and identities (Irvine 1979). Formality can often connote a social order, or forms of social action, that is publicly recognized and considered legitimate, regardless of the extent to which political power actually operates through that public, formal social order. The organization of the speeches at the festival therefore reflects a political ideology, if not a political actuality. While some important earlier writing on the political dimensions of formal language explicitly associated it with “traditional” (in the Weberian sense) forms of authority (Bloch 1975),<sup>24</sup> it would appear that the soccer tournament and its speeches are, on the whole, more concerned with bringing into existence a new and distinctly bureaucratic mode of authority, based in legal or formal roles and offices rather than claims to traditional knowledge, charisma, or emergent status based on performance.<sup>25</sup> They hint at a shift from achieved to ascribed authority, offering a model of the latter as an essential ingredient of modern, “civilized,” “organized” society. Together with the less formal but moralizing and normative sermons of teachers, the language of festival invitations and speeches is part of a broader move away from immediacy and toward an

objectification of roles, rules, and social relationships. And this is, of course, what soccer as “game” rather than “play” is all about.

### **“A little bird so pretty”**

Once all the adult officials had spoken, the teacher introduced the next phase of the program: a “literary evening” comprising songs and poetry recitals learned in school by the local children. This part of the program—again entirely in Spanish—was always more or less excruciating for everyone present, especially the poor children, who appeared downright terrified and often required insistent persuasion to appear at all.<sup>26</sup> A brave young boy named Roldan began by reading out a short, prepared speech greeting the audience then recited a poem about an origami bird, which the poet imagines, rather longingly, transforming into a real bird and flying away in freedom into the sky. Three boys from third grade sang a song about the rights of children (listed as food and shelter, recreation, and education); a young boy sang a short song about the wind, then another recited a poem about a lemon (not a fruit grown by Urarina). The teacher apologized that several other children due to perform had to bow out because of illness, and, again in an idiom of universal brotherhood, he invited all present to help polish off the “exquisite” manioc beer already laid out, which he described as “foamy and frothy like Inca Cola,” the Peruvian national soft drink. With the literary phase now concluded, two youths began serving out bowls of inebriating manioc beer to the adults present. The stereo played Peruvian *cumbia*, and, though people were mostly too embarrassed to dance, the authorities (and their dutiful wives) tried to lead by example. Eventually, drunkenness descended on everyone, unraveling much of the day’s carefully crafted order.<sup>27</sup>

The “literary evening” was, of course, intended as a celebration of the possibilities of the school, already held in high regard. Though there is insufficient space to explore here the many close ties between formal schooling and organized team sports, I should note that along with deference toward the teacher himself, techniques of grooming and bodily discipline are

central ingredients of the school curriculum (see Rival 2000). These include skills such as wetting and combing the hair, standing at attention, saluting the flag, singing the national anthem, and reciting poetry (see Figure 3). Roles like class president, flag monitor, and so on, mimic the formal authority on display at the festivals. Inside one classroom I visited, a series of six colorful cardboard cut-out characters hung from the rafters, each cheerfully representing a “typical” urban occupation: nurse, policeman, plumber, fireman, priest, and school pupil. During the recess soon afterward, the teacher played soccer with the children outside, instructing them how to play the various positions on the field—defender, midfielder, winger, striker, and so on—that amount to functional interdependence within the team: in other words, an embodiment of the same organic solidarity, or advanced division of labor, promoted by the colorful posters.

Yet, at a deeper level, the very idea of taking up a role or occupation that renders one qualitatively different from others presupposes a sense that we are all, on some basic level, “the same.” The more emphasis that is placed on the conceptual possibility of “playing,” “acting,” or “filling” a role, the more this entails, as a prerequisite, a notion of the abstract individual—of the human being, equipped with a given set of needs and capacities, such as that invoked in the discourse of “human rights” (and, of course, by extension in songs about the “rights of children”). It is this individual that underwrites the modern egalitarian position that, however obvious the differences in power and wealth, all people are, in principle, equal in the eyes of the law and that one person’s vote is as good as another’s. The liberal tenet that everyone is equal is, of course, nevertheless, an important explanation for real inequalities, because unequal outcomes are tolerable so long as the fiction of the level playing field is maintained. Inequality is based not on biology but on merit, insofar as everyone has the same inalienable rights and same basic potential (see Taylor 2004).

The kinds of activities and events I describe above are the basis of the cultural production of the modern citizen, something that acquires meaning, above all, through embodied experience. National unity is, of course, often maintained and produced by a daily routine that involves bodily disciplining, especially of pupils in schools, alongside a series of broader emotional and sensory engagements that produce visceral senses of belonging in a variety of ways (Bénéï 2008). Yet, if the school and playing field are privileged sites for the ideological production of the community, the ethnies, and the nation, the process is not a simple top-down one, imposed from above, and it would not gain traction if it did not resonate with a range of existing goals and values. While modern festivals may parallel older ritual events in some ways (e.g., Gow 2001), an emphasis on continuity with tradition may be problematic in this case inasmuch as a key goal of these festivals, so far as many of the participants themselves are concerned and as emphasized in the speeches of teachers and other officials, is precisely to make a break with the past in bringing about a new social order. In some ways, sporting tournaments resemble the highly routinized, doctrinal Christian rituals that Harvey Whitehouse (1998) has argued enable identification with a large, imagined community of anonymous others on the basis of presumed commonalities. Such rituals promote the acquisition of general schemas or ideal models for the performance of different types of activity, and, according to Whitehouse, were a necessary condition for the development of “micronationalist” movements in Papua New Guinea and the overcoming of localism, particularism, and fragmentation. Yet, so far as most Urarina are concerned, playing football is considerably more fun than the church services of the missionaries, or going to school, for that matter, and, of course, this is largely what makes sport so pervasive. On the upper Chambira River today, it is membership in a national sporting community, more than in a Christian community, that is driving the modernizing project.

## **Conclusion**

I have argued that the strong appeal of soccer, for the Urarina, lies in the first instance in its basis in “play,” which they readily proclaim an indispensable ingredient for living well with others. In its original sense, epitomized by dance, playing means giving oneself over to a joyful to-and-fro movement without fixed beginning or end. Yet soccer also boasts another side as a game, a repertoire of participant roles and rules for playing. Games of this sort were absent in the past and so too was the particular mode of sociality, and corresponding form of selfhood, that they epitomize. As well as submission to abstract rules that transcend the moral ties of kinship, in which loyalties are gradually built up through concrete acts of sharing, these entail a constant modification of behavior by anticipating the responses of diversely situated others in a way that generates a sense of the collectivity as constraining. This new form of sociality is closely tied to the nation-state, whose presence at festivals is always conspicuous, as well as to a new political order in which power ideally resides, not in the inherent capacities of the individual human being but in formal, bureaucratic roles, typically legitimized with reference to the state. Sporting matches and their attendant festivals thus lend themselves to a steady process of formalization and ritualization, where we might say that what is ultimately being ritualized is modernity itself.

When people play in local tournaments, enjoyment takes a back seat, and they strive to win. They aspire to success, reflecting their emerging aspirations to also become “professionals,” like their neighbors and former enemies. Yet to win, one must play by the rules of the game. Interestingly, the idea of submission to rules as a method of self-improvement is not an altogether alien concept. A subjection to disciplinary regimes as a way of increasing knowledge and power is deeply embedded in Urarina culture; acquisition of shamanic knowledge in particular demands a submission to arduous regimes of dieting and sexual abstinence, which finds echoes in certain taboos and magical remedies on the soccer



field, such as the prolific use of garlic and an insistence that urinating before a game would dissipate energy and bring bad luck. Such ideas also resonate with earlier historical experiences, and repeated demands by teachers, traders, and missionaries over a century of contact that Urarina present themselves as disciplined and obedient may well have similarly appeared to them as a new technology of personhood (Rollason 2011a), one that translates particularly well to the soccer field.

In ritualizing the modern condition, the tournament lends a sense of concrete direction to an abstract political project, one that envisages, but certainly does not produce, an equality for all. In this new vision, in which all people are ostensibly equal before the law, categorical identities replace relational ones: Hence, alongside the new bounded units of “Native Community,” “Urarina,” or “Peruvian,” we find clear hierarchical oppositions between “adults” and “children,” “men” and “women,” “office-holders” and “commoners.” Underlying all these is a view of the generic, “modern” individual, available for ascription to roles and categories. As Steven Rubenstein (2001) has argued, ethnic boundaries are but one example of many kinds of boundaries formed through the colonial process, in which relationships are reorganized hierarchically in terms of degrees of inclusion and exclusion. The sense of a common essence, a basic humanity shared by Urarina and mestizos alike, binding them together as citizens even as they are individualized, is one of the most recognizable of state effects. Not everyone buys into this new political vision, and in this new game of politics there must inevitably be winners and losers; and yet even old-style leaders, who would apparently have much to lose, seem more or less comfortable with the grand narrative of progress. Yet there is an important gendered dimension here also, which I have scarcely touched on, for gendered subordination is often maintained or reinforced through masculine engagements with, and appropriations of, modernity (Knauff 1997). Urarina society is traditionally uxorilocal, such that groups of female kin—sisters and their mothers—literally and symbolically lie at the

heart of the local group. Soccer offers an alternative model. Women are excluded from this quintessentially modern activity, and, moreover, it is now men who represent the community in the public forum, who constitute its symbolic core. In this sense, and whatever else it may be, soccer is counter-ruxorilocal.

The few anthropologists who have discussed soccer or other forms of sport among native Amazonian peoples, usually in passing, have tended to regard it as a kind of ritualized warfare or domesticated violence (e.g., Acuña Delgado 2010; Rosengren 1987:349), and, in fact, the analogy between sport and violence generally has become something of a cliché. Amazonia is, of course, a region famous for its endemic warfare, and sporting tournaments might well in some senses be understood as a continuation of older conflictive relations with outsiders. Nevertheless, I hesitate to endorse the analogy, because it misses a crucial sense in which the political implications of warfare and sport are utterly distinct, even opposing. As Clastres argued long ago, the overall function and consequence of Amazonian warfare is fragmentation, the promotion of dispersal and multiplicity through a negation of reciprocity. It is the political counterpart of a perspectival cosmology, a celebration of multiplicity, a cosmic politics grounded in the irreducible difference of viewpoints over and against any unifying tendency (Viveiros de Castro 2010). Sporting tournaments, by contrast, are precisely a mode of generalized reciprocity, with an overall drive toward centralization and unification. Sport consolidates in a way that warfare does not; it links up groups and constitutes them as parts of a larger whole. Here the collectivity takes on a coercive character, and power is legitimized by recourse to roles and rules that depend exclusively for their existence on collective intentionality or common agreement. The so-called constitutive rules that characterize games such as soccer, which create the possibility of an activity (as opposed to regulative rules, that is, those that merely regulate a pre-existing activity whose existence is independent of them) are commonly invoked by philosophers wishing to demonstrate the general character of

“institutional facts” or “social reality” as opposed to the “brute facts” or given “background” that we sometimes refer to as “nature” (e.g., Searle 2010). This is, of course, the inverse of Amerindian perspectival ontology, which advocates the universality of “culture” and the contingency and particularity of “nature.” (Viveiros de Castro 2004:473–474). Sports and games epitomize Western political ontology because they exemplify the logic of the state, the ontology of the One, of sovereignty, unification, and control over and against anarchic multiplicity.

I argue that a study of sport can help us to understand how the state expands its territory and influence, shaping its own conditions of possibility and, in the process, transforming the nature of the polity. This process is clearly not restricted to native Amazonia: Virtually everywhere, there is a tendency for “play” to turn into “game” and “game” into “spectacle,” allowing the energy and vitality of youth to be appropriated by others, yoking them to a political project. If sport is like war, it is here that we might start exploring the link, not in the violence per se but, rather, in the way both sport and war seek to harness the strength and energy of young men to serve the interests of their elders.

It would seem fitting to end with a reflection on Lévi-Strauss’s (1966:32) well-known formulation of the difference between a ritual and a game. Simply put, rituals conjoin, or bring about a union, between two initially separate groups; games, by contrast, have a disjunctive effect: They establish a difference between individual players or teams—through the creation of winners versus losers—from an original premise of equality and sameness. Sporting tournaments arguably do both these things, and yet an overall shift from “ritual” to “game” as the organizing paradigm for public events in Amazonia today would seem consistent with the other kinds of changes described here: Above all, superimposed on an earlier view that all people are irreducibly different from each other, leading to great respect for the autonomy of the concrete individual, we find the outlines of a new vision of all people everywhere as

essentially the same. This latter view entails respect for the rights of the abstract individual, the modern subject, and assumes that people who are equal in principle are gradually made different through objectification, paving the way for the development of real inequality and hierarchy. The popular embrace of sport lies at the very heart of a shift from an ontology of difference to an ontology of sameness: differently put, from equality in practice to equality in theory.

## Notes

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1. I use the term *traditional* here loosely to refer to the era prior to the establishment of Native Communities in 1974 (described further in the text) and in full recognition of its “invented” character (cf. Hobsbawn and Ranger 1983).
2. While my analysis is focused on the particular case of the Urarina, I expect the basic argument to be applicable, at least in broad outline, to many other parts of the region, but especially those whose inhabitants do not employ a descent construct or other principle of recruitment to corporate groups, such as western Amazonia and the Guianas.

3. The literature is vast, but see Besnier and Brownell 2012 for a recent overview. For alternative, critical readings of Trobriand cricket, see Foster 2006 and Geiger 2006.
4. As in Clifford Geertz's (1973) celebrated interpretation of the Balinese cockfight, presented as a "paradigmatic event," the macro may be revealed in the micro, the general in the particular.
5. As Overing and Alan Passes have elsewhere put it, "Amazonian peoples ... have ... an antipathy to rules and regulations, hierarchical structures and coercive constraints; in other words, they tend to be short on anything Western theory might deem as 'societal structure', or even 'social structure' or formal jural groupings" (2000:2). While attempts have been made to utilize concepts of role-play to describe certain Amazonian societies, notably, the central Brazilian Mehinaku (Gregor 1977), such an approach would seem in some ways to run against the grain of Urarina social life, and roles are in any case rarely formalized in terms of a set of expectations or moral obligations that society imposes on an individual. As Overing and Passes (2000:24) point out, this is not to say that Amazonian peoples do not envision categorical ways of behaving but that behavior is always subject to the particularities of situation and context, personal choice, and the affective state of relationships and judgments about them.
6. While land title is the official rationale for the Native Community law, this was rarely a serious concern for Urarina themselves. If anything, the artificial ways in which land is now demarcated have generated the potential for conflicts among people unaccustomed to such forms of boundary making. Instead, when I questioned people about their memories of Native Community formation, several mentioned the economic incentives then offered by the Fujimori government, typically in the form of cash handouts, as the principal motivation for forming a Community.
7. Despite appearances to the contrary, it would not really be accurate to describe the Urarina inhabitants of Native Communities as entirely "sedentary," for, while the sites of the

communities themselves are now more or less fixed, there remains a very high degree of movement of individuals both within and between them.

8. See Hendricks 1988 for a detailed discussion of similar transformations among the Ecuadorian Shuar.

9.. Unlike women in some other parts of Amazonia (e.g., Gow 1991:222; Johnson 1999:76), Urarina women do not play soccer, with some important gendered consequences that I return to in the main text.

10. Similarly, Allen Johnson (1999:145) notes a connection between the Peruvian Matsigenka's strong ethos of individualism and their reluctance to pass the ball or collaborate in strategy. See also Da Matta 2009 for reflections on individualization and collectivization in a Brazilian (national) context.

11. Overing (2000) has also emphasized that a number of Amazonian peoples consider creative, ludic play, including joking and laughter, integral to many aspects of living successfully with others.

12. In this case, the first of the two signatories, the president of the Parent–Teacher Association (Asociación de Padres de Familia), had signed with a fingerprint. The second signatory was the Santa Teresa schoolteacher, or, rather, the director of the Institute for the Primary Education of Minors (IEPM), who had clearly composed and handwritten the invitation. This young man was also a relative of Martín, the teacher to whom the letter was addressed. That is no surprise, for as discussed subsequently in the text, most of the bilingual teachers in Urarina communities hail from the downstream community of San Miguel, where Summer Institute of Linguistics missionaries, who were responsible for the establishment of the bilingual education program, lived intermittently over the course of four decades.

13. The year designation is determined by the Presidency of the Council of Ministers (Presidencia del Consejo de Ministros) and ostensibly reflects its political priorities. As Peter

Gow (1991:225) points out, many of the key symbols of the festival are quite deliberately drawn from “outside,” *afuera*.

14. Producing a sense of national belonging is, of course, often mediated by a vocabulary of kinship (e.g., Bénéï 2008:89), which is used as a moral trope for articulating belonging to the “family community” of the nation.

15. Raising a bet comprising soap or sewing thread would be perfectly possible but also perhaps a cause for mild embarrassment. People also bet eagerly on impromptu, informal matches, creating an extra sense of excitement and urgency, and young boys often improvise playful punishments for the losers, such as a certain number of “frog jumps,” in lieu of material goods for the winners.

16. It could also be argued that, like gambling more generally, betting works to undermine hierarchies (see, e.g., Mitchell 1988) and may be related to the strains caused by the introduction of imported commodities into traditional exchange networks. The gifts I made to people of small items like batteries or fishhooks were immediately redistributed through betting on the sporting field. Roberto Da Matta (2009) also points out that soccer allows for an experience of equality closely associated with obedience to legitimate laws.

17. Despite some suggestions that indigenous societies in the Americas may have played a form of soccer, including sporadic references to games using balls of wild rubber or other natural materials (e.g., Lévi-Strauss 1992:311), there seems to be general agreement that British sailors and immigrants introduced the modern game of soccer to South America in the final quarter of the 19th century (see Miller 2007:3).

18. David Wood (2007) notes that the populist president Augusto Leguía (1919–30) used soccer extensively to promote his regime as modern and cosmopolitan, forming a national team that first appeared on the world stage in 1927. In his words, “Football ... served to bind

together notions of the popular, modernity and a sense of the nation as an imagined community constructed for the first time by the mass media” (Wood 2007:129).

19. Most Urarina people have at least three names: a “real” Urarina name bestowed by a drinker of psychotropics; an Urarina nickname, often used in lieu of a kin term; and a Spanish name, usually used in dealings with outsiders and in written communication.

20. It is tempting to draw a parallel here with Claude Lévi-Strauss’s (1992) infamous “writing lesson,” in which the Nambikwara chief, without understanding the technology of writing, immediately and intuitively grasped its social and political function as an instrument of alienation and oppression.

21. Time regulation is, of course, a central feature of capitalism and almost certainly linked to the subjugation of indigenous peoples. As Max Gilson points out, “The control of time and representations of temporality, and of the very experience of forms of time is vital to any kind of domination. The more ‘imposed’ time is perceived and felt as part of a natural universe and of an unquestioned reality the more domination is strengthened” (1986:26).

22. See Bloch 1998:193–195 for a similar account of the use of French by Malagasy.

23. This might be partly because, as Tim Ingold suggests, “the way people speak is the way they are” (2005:171). That is to say, spoken words are not seen as simply detachable from the speaker, as objects that carry one’s thoughts or recollections but, rather, “belong to the person’s very being as it makes its way in the world” (Ingold 2005:171).

24. According to Maurice Bloch (1975), formalizing a social occasion reduces the political freedom of its participants and is positively correlated with political coercion.

25. This would distinguish such formal discourse from the “empty speech” of Clastres’s (1987:154) Amazonian chief, who endlessly repeats the norms of traditional life while people feign a lack of attention. As Gow (1991:227–228) points out, the “good speech” associated with the Native Community and its festivals has an important aesthetic value and refers less to



the shared values of the group than to its fragile attainment: The group's very existence is itself a product of the speech of leaders reminding people why they live together.

26. In the communities in which I lived, all boys attended school and around half of the girls. Yet girls never perform during literary evenings, nor do they play soccer.

27. Gow describes how the Native Community identities and oppositions built up during the day are then broken down in the evening, as "stiff formality gives way to wild drunkenness" (1991:222).

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#### Figure captions

Figure 1. Two boys enjoy free play with the soccer ball late one afternoon in Nueva Unión, Peru. Photo by Harry Walker, September 2006.

Figure 2. A crowd gathers for a penalty shootout during the soccer tournament held in celebration of the anniversary of the Peruvian Native Community of Santa Teresa, October 24, 2006. Photo by Harry Walker.

Figure 3. Children with neatly wetted and combed hair stand at attention next to the school in Nueva Unión, Peru, awaiting further instruction from their teacher, Martín. Photo by Harry Walker, October 2006.