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Of Games and Civilizations: W. Jones, H. Cox, and J. Mill on the Indian Origins of Chess*

Philippe Borret

The article focuses on the ambivalent role that chess played in discourses on "the Orient," around the beginning of the 19th century. Chess was often seen as a "pure rational game" stemming from an idealized and "pure Orient." We find this position in discourses of classical "Orientalists" such as William Jones ("On the Indian Game of Chess," 1790). However, other authors argued that the Indian chess was "originally" played with dice, implying the intervention of chance in the game, itself perceived as the hallmark of moral or civilizational inferiority. This theory is argued, for example, by James Cox ("On the Burmha Game of Chess," 1801). Yet another position is to be found among Utilitarian authors, such as James Mill (*History of British India*, 1817). Board games are seen here as characteristic of societies which were not yet able to develop adequate conditions for work. Contrasting those perspectives, we will finally reflect on the cultural evaluation of different types of games (in particular, those involving chance or not) as well as on the processes of the European reappropriation of an Asian game.

1. Chess, "Chance" and Gambling Bishops

In an ecclesiastical correspondence dated from 1061, we read the following curious story:

Once when I was his [of the Bishop of Florence] companion on a journey, and had arrived at our lodgings for the night, I withdrew myself to a priest's hut, but he sat down in the spacious house with a crowd of travelers. Next morning, however, I was told by my groom that the aforesaid Bishop had taken the lead in chess. [...] I went up to the man and attacked him bitterly, I said: "Was it your duty at evening to take part in the vanity of chess and defile your hands, which offer the Lord's body, and your tongue, which is devoted to prayer, by the contamination of an impious sport, especially when canonic authority decrees that *aleatoris Episcopi* are to be deposed?" [...] The Bishop tried to argue on the difference that he believed to exist between *alea* and chess. "The authority forbade *alea* but its silence permitted chess." To which I answered: "the decree does not mention chess but

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includes under *alea* the class of either game." The shortest expedient was to expiate the fault, and to receive the penitence that the holy Cardinal would give to him, which was to recite three times the Psalter and to wash the feet of twelve poor people, giving at the same time one piece of money to each of them, so that, by this exercise of piety and charity, the stains which had defiled the tongue and the hands would be washed away.¹

This story touches on an idea that I want to develop further in the present contribution: namely, the question of the link between chess and "chance." The bishop's unsuccessful argument implies that he viewed chess as a game that does typically not involve "chance," and which therefore does not fall under the religiously prohibited category of "gambling." The cardinal, on his part, did not care about such a distinction, and recalled that the prohibited activity included "all kinds of games," as seems clear from the context of the passage which equally condemns hunting. This text was much discussed, notably by the chess historian Harold James Ruthven Murray, who in his monumental *History of Chess* tried to show that at the time of the text's redaction, the wording implied the presence of a kind of chess played with a die.

I will not take sides in this debate and will limit myself to argue that the cultural evaluation of those different elements—and in particular, the opposition of chess to "gambling," or the dismissal of the very action of playing altogether—has not only been linked to views on the evolution of civilizations and religions in a more global perspective but also influenced the formulation of early theories related to the Indian origins of the game. The story cited above is set close to the first attestations of the European reception of the game from the East (possibly introduced by Silk Road merchants or crusaders), around the beginning of the 11th century. Later on, the game is adopted as a genuine European game and its oriental origin becomes a remote idea. Indeed, the pieces have been "Europeanized" (for example, the "queen" came to replace the Arab "firz" or "vizir"),² and the church itself eventually accepted the argument put forward by the bishop: contrary to more popular games, chess is permitted as long as it does not involve "chance," *alea*.

1 Damiani, *Epîtres au pape Alexandre II*, Epist. 10, translated in Murray 1913: *A History of Chess*, 408–410 (modified). A slightly different version appears in Thiers 1686: *Traité des jeux et des divertissements*, 355–356.

2 Murray 1913, 423. See Murray 1913, 791 for a discussion of the pieces' names.

Moreover, ever since it arrived in Europe, the game was given European mythical origins; its invention has been attributed to figures such as Aristotle, King Solomon, or Palamedes, a Greek hero in the Iliad. The reconstruction of a "European mythology" about the invention of the game is particularly striking in a famous poem on chess from the Renaissance, namely the "*Scaccia Ludus*" by Marco Girolamo Vida (1485–1566),³ bishop of Alba, a town in northern Italy. The poem was published in 1527, but Vida had been working on it already from 1507, before he was ordained priest. Alluding to Hesiod's *Theogony*, the poem narrates the celebration of the marriage of Oceanus and Terra (*sic*), at the court of King Memnon in Ethiopia. At the end of the banquet, Oceanus brings out a board and explains the rules of the game to all present guests. He picks Apollo and Mercury as volunteers to perform a demonstration in front of the other guests. The poem then follows the different strategies of the divine players, and finally the victory is granted to Mercury.

When we read about the first ecclesiastical reactions to chess, Vida's eulogy of the game can surprise, especially the way he uses Roman gods when narrating the scene of its invention.⁴ But by Vida's time, the game had been adopted as a genuinely European game, and had even been used by the church as a means of teaching Christian ethics.⁵ From that time on, the game made its way into a European intellectual elite, becoming part of a typical curriculum in "liberal arts." Practicing chess, it was believed, enhanced the rational skills of the players.⁶

In this history of the European reception of chess, it appears that the Indian (or at least, oriental) roots of the game have not only been forgotten but also actively been erased. New narratives about its European origins were created; not surprisingly for the Renaissance time period, Greek (Hesiodic and Homeric) mythological themes played a major role in the reconstruction of this genealogy of substitution.

3 On Vida, see Di Cesare 1975: *Game of Chess*. Vida's poem has been translated into English in 1736: Vida 1736: *Scaccia Ludus*.

4 Murray 1913, 353–354.

5 The classic example is the *Liber de moribus hominum et officis nobilium sive super ludum sacchorum* of the Dominican Jacques de Cessoles, composed between 1259 and 1273.

6 Cf. Alsted 1630: *Encyclopaedia*, in which it is asserted that "ludus scacchiae imprimis acuit ingenium; et proinde liberalibus convenit ingentis."

From the 11th century of our initial story and the 15th century of Vida's poem, let us now fast forward a bit to the time when the first European accounts of the Indian origins of the game began to appear. Thomas Hyde's famous *De ludis orientibus* was published in 1694,⁷ and it was followed by other attempts to find the origins of the game in the 18th and 19th centuries. As learned as they were, many of those theories were not devoid of ideological interests. In some way or the other, they mirror the intricate and changing character of Western attitudes toward the East.

2. British Chess-Playing Nymphs

First I want to focus on Sir William Jones (1746–1794), who has left two contributions dealing with chess: a poem entitled "Caïssa," composed in 1763, and an article on the historical origins of the game, written 27 years later.

Like other authors of chess poems before him, such as Alexander Pope, Jones found the inspiration for his poem in Vida's piece. By that time, at the age of 17, Jones was about to complete classical studies at Harrow College, a highly respected institution in the area of London putting much emphasis on the study of classical authors.⁸ While imitating parts of Vida's text, Jones was also displaying a precocious taste for themes which would later be seen as typically romantic.⁹ The poem narrates the love of the god Mars for the Thracian nymph Caïssa. First unsuccessful at seducing Caïssa, Mars is told to seek help from the god Sport. Willing to help, Sport invents the game of chess, gives it to Mars, who will in turn offer it to Caïssa to win her love. Mars and Caïssa then play chess—in the middle of wild Thracian forests—and Caïssa eventually wins. In suggestive ways, the poem emphasizes the mixture of modern and ancient as well as of East and West, even if, it must be noted, Thrace is a European place. In the same vein and in a mixture of classical and British motives, Jones portrays the picturesque scene of British nymphs playing chess next to the River Thames:

7 Hyde 1694: *Historia Shahiudi*. Of course, Al Bīrūnī (11th century) had written extensively on it much before, but was himself "rediscovered" only in the late 19th century (see below, p. 67, fn. 22).

8 Cannon 1990: *Life and Mind of Oriental Jones*, 5 remarks "just becoming a leading school under Thomas Thackeray, Harrow served gentlemen and also provided education for thirty poor boys of the parish. Jones thus would be associating with boys likely to have distinguished careers."

9 Jones himself is not usually considered as a "romantic" (cf. Mukherjee 1969: *Sir William Jones*, 42–45).

No mortal hand the wondrous sport contriv'd,
By gods invents, and from gods deriv'd;
From them the British nymphs receiv'd the game,
And play each morn beneath the crystal Thame.¹⁰

The poem was published in 1773, in a collection entitled *Poems, Consisting Chiefly of Translations from the Asiatick Languages*.¹¹ Even if the title is somewhat misleading—only 4 of the 9 poems deal with "oriental themes," and two only are actual translations¹²—Jones's goal in publishing the volume was to suggest that oriental literature could provide new ideas for reshaping European poetry.¹³ However, as Jones warns in the preface,

[I]t must not be supposed, from my zeal for the literature of Asia, that I mean to place it in competition with the beautiful productions of the *Greeks* and *Romans*; for I am convinced, that, whatever changes we make in our opinions, we always return to the writing of the ancients, as to the *standard of true taste*.¹⁴

In its own way, the poem on chess illustrates this concern to preserve the supremacy of the ancients in the conception of art. The fact that this needed to be formulated, however, is revelatory of the changing times. As a matter of fact, around the turn of the 18th century, an unprecedented enthusiasm for oriental themes—what Raymond Schwab, borrowing an expression of Edgar Quinet, called the "Oriental Renaissance"¹⁵—aroused intellectual circles throughout all Europe. As is well known, Jones would play a major role in that process, assigning to himself the two tasks of familiarizing a British (and Western) audience with oriental cultures and literature, and dislodging the origins of civilization from Palestine and locating them further East, in Persia or India. This is, I think, perceptible in his second work on chess, the article on the history of the game, published in 1790. Jones expressed historical considerations on the game which, I contend,

10 Jones 1772a: Caïssa, 158.

11 *Op. cit.* 149–170.

12 "A Persian Song of Hafez" and "A Turkish Ode on the Spring" (Jones 1772b: *Poems*, 59–64 and 88–93).

13 Cf. Cannon 1990, 48.

14 Jones 1772b, xiii–xiv (emphasis mine).

15 Schwab 1950: *La renaissance orientale*, 74, who situates its beginning with the publication of Anquetil Duperron's *Zend-Avesta* in 1771. Halbfass has the process started with Jones rather than Anquetil Duperron: Halbfass 1988: *India and Europe*, 68.

only an *appearance*, he attempts to rationalize the use of a die, arguing that the game is thus closer to a metaphorical representation of war "in which *fortune* has unquestionably a great share."²³ But ultimately, he is forced to admit that "the moves in the game described by Vyāsa were to a certain degree regulated by *chance*."²⁴ In order to resolve this issue, Jones speculates that the game is a later version of a more primitive two-handed game of (West-)Indian origin, mentioned in Persian and Arab documents²⁵ and played *without* dice, the *caturanga* proper (in his terminology).

However, taking seriously the mention of Vyāsa, Jones remains visibly puzzled by the problem that a game where "chance" plays a significant role could not have been invented by Vyāsa, supposedly the venerable author of ancient Indian law codes. The essay ends on the paradox that "all games of *hazard* are positively forbidden by *Manu* [the *Laws of Manu*, *Mānava Dharmasāstra*], yet the game of *Chaturanga*, in which a dice is used, is taught by the great Vyāsa himself."²⁶ Leaving aside the naive endorsement of traditional authorial attributions, it remains that the element of "chance" seems to have bothered Jones. In order to understand why, we need to recall some elements of the view on history embedded in Jones's works.

In his famous essay on the gods of Greece, Italy and India, Jones maintained that a natural and rational religion had been revealed in the remote past.²⁷ He speculated that this had happened somewhere in India or Persia, before spreading to different parts of the world.²⁸ It is in that setting that all kinds of arts, sciences etc. had first originated. Following what would later be a typically romantic scheme, he argued that a progressive degradation from this original condition had ensued, at different paces among different nations. By this standard, India was displaying a degree of degradation but

23 *Ibid.*

24 *Ibid.*

25 See *Ātranga nāmaka* (7th century), al-Mas'ūdī's (890–956) *Muruj al-dhahab* and Firdausī's (934–1021) *Šāh-nāme*, which refer to an Indian two-handed game, played without die.

26 *Op. cit.* 165. Jones emphasized the old age of the *Mānava Dharmasāstra* (see the preface to his translation: "it is really one of the oldest compositions existing"; Jones 1796: *Institutes of Hindu Law*, xii).

27 Jones 1787b: On the Gods of Greece, Italy and India, 221–222.

28 Jones 1790b: Sixth Anniversary Discourse, 43–66. For a discussion of this account of the origins of civilization in relation with the tripartite division of "Hindu/Persians," "Arabians" and "Tartars," see Lincoln 2002: Isaac Newton and Oriental Jones, 12.

had once known a glorious past. As such, it is perfectly understandable that the element of "chance" does not fit the picture. Chess cannot have been, originally, a way to "play with destiny"; it had been, from its beginning, a "rational" game invented "by one effort of some great genius."²⁹ The dice-chess could only be a later, more modern game than the one played *without* a die. The same was also suggested by the prohibitions of gambling that Jones found in traditional legal codes.³⁰ The element of "chance" was thus a clear sign of degeneration.

Concomitantly with this convoluted thesis of "rational origins," Jones emphasized the idea that the "original" Indian chess had much in common with its British offspring. This was even clear in the terminology, since the very name of *caturanga* would (according to his etymological analysis) give the Latin *scacchi*, the French *échecs*, and even — "by a whimsical concurrence of circumstances" — the English *Échiquier*, a key component of the British government.³¹ In doing so, Jones was trying to establish a close tie between two kinds of game: one that originated in an idealized original and rational India, and the same game played in contemporary Britain.

We can summarize Jones's argument with the chart found on page 70.

4. Irrational and Useless Characteristics of Indian Chess: Cox and Mill

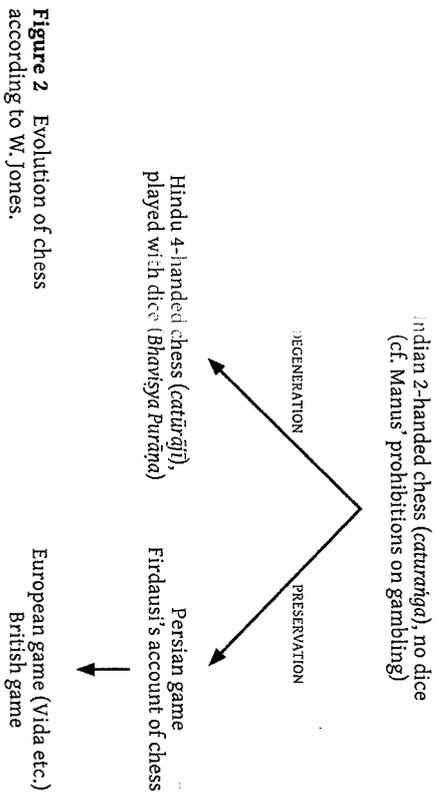
Jones's views were discussed and criticized as early as 1799 by Hiram Cox (1760–?), a captain in the Bengal army who illustrated himself in military campaigns in Burma.³² In an article entitled "On the Burmha Game of Chess," also published in the *Asiatick Researches*, Cox inverted the historical scheme put forward by Jones, arguing that the four-handed dice-chess antedated the two-handed chess. Cox based his argument on a comparison of the respective characteristics of different types of chess, and, as we will see, on philosophical statements. He begins his criticism by showing that Jones does not produce any positive evidence in favor of an Indian invention of

29 Jones 1790a, 160.

30 Cf. *Mānava Dharmasāstra* 9.221–227. However, other legal treatises such as *Āpastamba Dharmasūtra* (2.25.12–14) allow gambling, provided that it is practiced in a controlled way, by members of the 3 higher *varṇa* exclusively.

31 Jones 1790a, 159.

32 Cf. Forbes 1860: *History of Chess*, 284–310 for a discussion of Jones's and Cox's respective views.



a two-handed game; all the existing evidence only seems to demonstrate that a certain type of chess—chess played with a die—had been known for a long time in India.

Further, the captain notes that it is unlikely for the game to have been “invented,” “in one trait of genius,” as Jones had it. Indeed, “all great efforts are violations of the habit of nature, and, as such, are rather to be deprecated than admired. In common language, they are called convulsions, and I confess myself opposed to convulsions of every kind.”³³ Cox seems to have in mind here a linear view of evolution, as a natural and progressive process, as he makes clear in the following observation:

As far as record is admitted in evidence, the first, or Hindū game, above described, is the most ancient, and to my apprehension, it has great internal marks of antiquity, namely, the imperfections incident to rudimental science.³⁴

The intervention of “chance” is precisely one of those “marks of antiquity.”³⁵ After a lengthy discussion of the respective characteristics of “Hindu,” “Chinese,” “Burmese,” and “English” types of chess, and without bringing any further textual evidence than Jones, Cox reaches the conclusion that

33 Cox 1801, 482.

34 *Op. cit.* 495.

35 *Ibid.*: “But if the battalia were as perfect as in the European game, the circumstance of using a dice, to determine the moves is fatal to the claim of pre-eminence, or of science, which attaches to the European game, and places the ancient Hindoo game on a level with back-gammon, in which we often see the most consummate abilities defeated by chance.”

the game had evolved precisely in that order, with a decisive change arising in the Burmese game: “In the Burma game the first dawn of perfection appears, while [some features of the ancient Hindoo game] are retained [...] and chance rejected.”³⁶ Of course, on a purely historical level, Cox’s reconstruction is not less speculative than Jones’s.

Such a scheme can be described as “proto-evolutionary,” in so far as it implies a linear view of history in which the “chance-element” is conceived as a mark of antiquity.³⁷ Arguably, this view is quite parallel to David Hume’s (1711–1776) arguments on the development of religious ideas, which similarly evolve in a linear way from polytheism to monotheism, toward more and more “rational” ideas. We can also suggest that the “rejection of chance” in the Burmese game, as depicted by Cox, is an early occurrence of the opposition between an irrational Hindu polytheism on the one hand and a rational Buddhism on the other.³⁸ Cox adds:

I have placed the Chinese game the second in the series, because there is a record of its relative antiquity; but not from conviction, for the next improvement for the ancient Hindoo game appears to me to be that which at present obtains amongst the Burmahs, who are Hindoos of the Pali tribe, and derive all their literature and science from the common source.³⁹

36 *Op. cit.* 496–497.

37 The notion of placing different types of games on an evolutionary scale is not an invention of the 18th century. Already in the 13th century, the author of the *De Venia* was speculating about an evolution beginning with pure “chance” games (dice, etc.), developing them into intermediary games, involving both chance and strategy (such as “trictac”), evolving toward purely strategic games (but using figures, such as chess), reaching finally the stage of non figurative and “purely rational” games (such as “rythmonachy”). For the later use of similar patterns, see Schädel 1999: Vom 20 Felder-Spiel zum Würfelviereck?, 145, who shows that Antonius van der Linde (1833–1897) considered the “dice game” as some kind of popular game and could not accept that a “dumme Würfelschach” could antedate a “rational chess.”

38 On the rational features of Buddhism as perceived by the British, see Almond 1988: *British Discovery of Buddhism*, 57 and Cho 2002: The Rationalist Tendency in Modern Buddhist Scholarship, 429–430. Buddhism as a distinct religion began to appear at the turn of the 19th century. The article of Buchanan 1799: On the Religion and Literature of the Burmese, published in a previous issue of the *Asiatick Researches*, was a milestone in the conceptualization of Buddhism as an independent religion.

39 Cox 1801, 496.

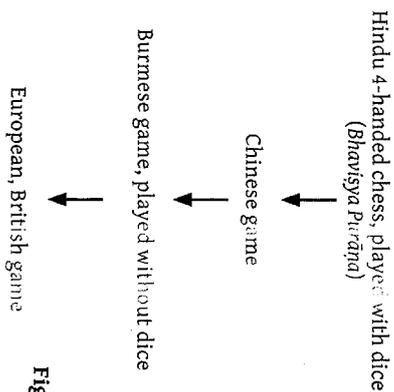


Figure 3 Evolution of chess according to H. Cox.

In a footnote the author adds that “the chess men” he met in Burma were all of “the sect of Buddha.”⁴⁰ The religious affiliation of the Burmese players thus seems to correlate with the superior nature of their game. In any case, Cox’s views can be schematized in the way shown above (fig. 3).

A less well-argued, and more extreme criticism of Jones’ views was put forward by James Mill (1773–1836), the father of the better-known John Stuart Mill, in his *History of British India* (1817–1818). This work, famous (or rather, infamous) for its colonial background,⁴¹ is the result of Mill’s application of his utilitarian views to India. Even if basing his work on a rich documentation, Mill never lived in nor traveled to India—he felt that this would compromise his “objectivity.”⁴² In his *History*, Mill devotes several pages to the question of games in general and chess in particular. The discussion on chess takes place in the section on “Indian art.” The main point of the section is to prove that “[i]n the province of genius and taste, nothing but indications of rudeness appear.”⁴³ While chess may seem to be a rather secondary issue in the wider project of the work, it still plays a significant role, since, as Mill puts it, “it has been rated high among the proofs of the supposed civilization of the Hindus.”⁴⁴ It was exactly Jones’s position whom Mill quotes—as often in his entire work—in a critical and derisory tone:

40 *Ibid.*

41 See Inden 1990: *Imagining India*, 45, on the *History* as the “hegemonic textbook of Indian history” *par excellence*. See also Bearce 1961: *British Attitudes*, 65–78.

42 See his introduction, Mill 1826: *History of British India*, vol. 1, xii.

43 Mill 1826, vol. 2, 40.

44 *Ibid.*

Sir William Jones, in pompous terms, remarks: “The Hindus are said to have boasted of three inventions, all of which indeed are admirable; the method of instructing by apologues; the decimal scale; and the game of chess, on which they have some curious treatises.”⁴⁵

Mill objects that chess might as well have been invented in places other than India. To be sure, we find similar games in extremely different and distant countries—China, Scandinavia, or even among the Araucanians in South America, that is, people from Chili (!).⁴⁶ The extract from Juan Ignatius Molina’s *Geographical, Natural and Civil History of Chili* (1809) quoted by Mill does depict a game strikingly similar to chess.⁴⁷ Here as well as in other instances in the *History*, the South Americans are brought into conflict with the Hindus. In this *reductio ad absurdum* about the origins of the game, Mill’s presupposition is that the Peruvian or Chilean societies were at that time at a very early stage of development. If “great achievements”—the invention of chess, the construction of imposing buildings—are to be found in those societies, this certainly proves (according to Mill’s reasoning) that those achievements are not all that great, or at least, that they do not reflect an advanced stage of civilization.

Mill goes even further and challenges the views of Jones by criticizing the values associated with games in general. He argues that the very activity of play is characteristic of specific societies:

The invention of ingenious games is a feat most commonly displayed by nations in their rude condition. It is prior to the birth of industry, that men have the strongest need for games, to relieve them from the pain of idleness. [...] It is, in fact, the natural occupation and resource of a rude mind, whenever destitute of the motives to industry.⁴⁸

Ingenious games are thus likely to flourish *before* the appearance of “motives to industry.” Thus, in another section of the *History* devoted to “Hindu manners,” we are told that this *uselessness* perfectly matches the *idleness*

45 *Ibid.* The quotation of Jones is drawn from Jones 1787a, 429.

46 See the fierce criticism of Forbes 1860, liv–lxix and the commentary of the British Indologist H.H. Wilson on the 3rd edition of the *History*, *ad loc.*, who underlines Mill’s errors.

47 Molina 1809: *Geographical, Natural and Civil History of Chili*, vol. 2, 125: “Their [of the Araucanians] games are very numerous and for the most part very ingenious; they are divided into the sedentary and the gymnastic. It is a curious fact, and worthy of notice, that among the first is the game of chess, which they call *comican*, and which has been known to them from time immemorial.”

48 Mill 1826, vol. 2, 40.

of the local people: "The languid and slothful habits of the Hindu appear to have prescribed even his amusements and diversions. They are almost all of the sedentary and inactive kind."⁴⁹ Noteworthy is the categorization of games as "sedentary"—in association with the adjectives "inactive," "languid"—to which is opposed the category of "active" or "gymnastic" games (such as hunt or various ball games). If Mill's argument is hostile to game and games in general, we can certainly suspect that the "sedentary," rather than the "gymnastic" category of games is most characteristic of uselessness. We can refer here to the contemporary development of rigorous team sport—cricket, for example—at British public schools.⁵⁰

Even if he was not himself religiously minded, Mill was borrowing here (as elsewhere in his *History*) evidence to the *Indian Recreations* of Rev. William Tennant, chaplain of the British army in India from 1796 to 1800. In his section entitled "On the sports and diversions of the natives of Hindostan," Tennant describes a local game, which he finds similar to chess:

The game of pauchness, which bears a resemblance to chess and drafts, and is played by two natives, reclining on their sides, with a small chequered carpet placed between them, is the general entertainment of the idle, when not overpowered with sleep or intoxication. Whole days are spent in watching the movements of the adversary's tesserae, or in planning evolutions on their own.⁵¹

Mill quotes exactly this passage, but modifies the end in the following way: "[this game is] the favorite amusement of this indolent race. Wonderful is the patience and interest with which, we are told, they watch and plan the evolutions of this languid game." Altered and radicalized, the quotation is also incomplete, since Mill neglects to cite the sentence directly preceding this passage, which reads as follows: "The amusements and diversions, both of the Hindoos and Mussulmans in this country, are strongly characteristic of that lifeless inactivity which so generally prevails in all hot climates."⁵² In doing so, Mill restricts his observations to the Hindus, avoiding an uneasy discussion on the distinctions between Indian "Hindus" and "Muslims" on their respective attitudes toward play.

49 *Op. cit.* vol. 1, 414.

50 See, for example, Guttmann 1996: *Games and Empires*, 15–17 (on the development of cricket at the beginning of the 19th century).

51 Tennant 1804: *Indian Recreations*, vol. 1, 366.

52 *Ibid.*

Mill also takes his distances from Tennant's Hippocratic or Montesquieu argument about the relation between the climate and cultural practices. Opposed to any kind of cultural relativism, he argues, on the contrary, that the "gaming" stems, in last analysis, from the absence of "working motives." In turn, this condition is linked to governments unfavorable to the emergence of a stable system of work, such as Indian kingdoms which are constantly at war. The same theory also explains why so many similarities can be observed between the "Hindu society" and medieval European societies, which are replete with "tumbler and jugglers":⁵³ according to Mill, both share the feature of unfavorable conditions for work, which eventually gives rise to the development of useless distractions. For Mill, the fact that the "useless chess" may have originated in India is thus only a witness of conditions adverse to the development of appropriate "working motives" (see fig. 4).

Such a theory is quite typical of the utilitarian views on games which were developed further in the course of the 19th century and against which Huizinga was arguably reacting. Undeniably, Huizinga contends that utilitarianism was one factor in the decline of interest for the "play element" in the 19th century,⁵⁴ and we can certainly suggest that it is not entirely coincidental that he found his objects of interest in India and medieval Europe, and focused on the "play element" therein.⁵⁵

5. Conclusions

After this survey of different sets of ideas on the origins of chess as an "oriental" game, we can summarize our results on two levels: (1) on the question of how the topic of the origins of chess was inserted into more global narratives; and (2) on the notion of game classifications.

53 Mill 1826, vol. 1, 414: "A fondness for those surprising feats of bodily agility and dexterity which form the arts of the tumbler and the juggler, is a feature in the character of the Hindu. It is a passive enjoyment which corresponds with the passiveness of his temper; and it seems in general to be adapted to the taste of all men in a similar state of society. Our Saxon ancestors were much addicted to this species of amusement; and their tumblers and jugglers had arrived at great proficiency" (emphasis added).

54 Cf. Huizinga 1949: *Homo Ludens*, 191–192.

55 Huizinga's doctoral dissertation was precisely a study of the figure of the *vidyadaka*—a kind of "jester"—in Sanskrit theater. See Huizinga 1897: *De Vidyadaka in het indisch rooneel*.

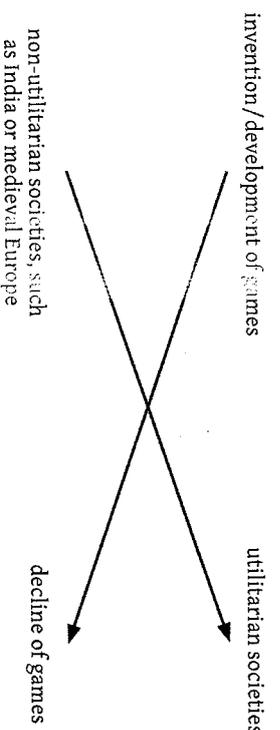


Figure 4 Evolution of games and civilizations according to J. Mill.

Regarding the first point, we saw that discourses on the origins of chess were associated to different meta-narratives. The fact that the game was connected to the idea of "rationality" in European elitist circles certainly gave some additional weight to the question of its origins. When its Indian roots were "rediscovered," the game of chess was one element of etiological narratives about the relations between East and West. Although those narratives were more elaborated than earlier attributions of the game's invention to mythical figures, they were no less mythological in that they speculated about historical origins for asserting a theory of civilization corresponding to present philosophical or ideological interests.

Thus, even if his observations were based on serious research, Jones asserted the idea of an original "rational chess," which matched his conception of an equally rational civilization or religion followed by a subsequent degeneration in specific "nations." In opposition to this view, Cox proposed a proto-evolutionist approach, in which the element of "chance" was (as for Jones) indicative of "rudimentary science," which was in turn (unlike Jones) a hint for the game's antiquity. On the other hand, Mill stated that chess was nothing else than an "ingenious game," which itself was the hallmark of inefficient societies. It was not surprising, then, that it could have originated in India. The divergence between Jones and Mill can probably be seen as a typical example of the two attitudes that Trautmann identifies in British discourses on India: "Indo-mania" and "Indo-phobia" respectively.⁵⁶

In this sense, recounting the history of the origins of chess, taking into account the element of chance, was also a way of comparing the civilizations of India and Europe. It would be of considerable interest to contrast

56 Trautmann 1997: *Aryans and British India*.

how cricket came from Britain to India as opposed to chess coming from India to Britain, along with the respective "strategies of appropriation" deployed in each case.⁵⁷

On a more abstract level, we can now reach conclusions about our second point: the classification of games. The distinction between "strategic competition" (*agon*)—associated to modern chess—and "chance" (*alea*)⁵⁸—associated to dice games⁵⁹—has been influential in discourses on the origins of chess, with attempts to link each category to civilizations at particular times.⁶⁰ The element of "chance" has been consistently considered as morally inferior or indicative of a lesser degree of evolution, and therefore contradictory with scientific and religious projects alike.

We may wonder whether this distinction is, in the end, really heuristically fruitful, at least for research on the function of games. Provided that some unpredictability is present in most games, is the relation to "chance" a good way to distinguish between different types of game? In which measure is "chance" (in a way similar to religious uses of the concept of "magic") a conceptual construction by which religious leaders tried to devaluate and discredit what they perceived as an improper (and concurrent!) use of supernatural forces?

57 On the Indian appropriation of cricket, see among others Appadurai 1996: *Modernity at Large*, 89–113.

58 Those categories are of course two of the four types of games identified by Calliois 1979: *Man, Play and Games*, 17.

59 This association is not as self-evident as it could first appear. See, for example, the thesis of Liders 1905: *Würfelspiel im alten Indien*, who shows many examples of Indian games where the use of dice is not related to a chance game but rather to a skill game.

60 The research on the history of chess has been divided in two precisely on this question. Thus, Duncan Forbes (Forbes 1860) sided with Cox in the idea of an original "dice-chess," as did M. Ghosh, the editor of the *Carurangadipikā*. A. Weber (1872), A. Van der Linde (1874), P. Thieme (1962) and R. Syed (1995) (among others) contended for the opposite position. Murray had a more cautious approach, claiming that both types of games can very well have coexisted (cf. Bock-Raming 1996, 4). On the difficulties to determine an "evolution" on that question, see Schädlér 1999, 146: "Aus den schriftlichen und archäologischen Quellen geht also nicht eindeutig hervor, ob das Zweischach dem Vierschach vorausging oder umgekehrt." The virulent character of the divergence between the two positions can certainly be explained by the fact that they ultimately rely on opposed theories about the evolution of civilizations.

Furthermore, the category of "sedentary game" has been used to qualify games perceived as useless. It was opposed to "gymnastic games," which describes games deemed more useful, such as collective sport games. In this utilitarian perspective, whereas "sedentary games" are associated with societies which did not yet develop an efficient framework for work, "gymnastic games" are recognized as potentially valuable for the shaping of an efficient society. The importance of sedentary games in a given society—being a practical obstacle to progress—is thus negatively mirroring its place on the utilitarian scale of progress.

In conclusion, those different examples remind us that the very operation of game classification, in a way quite similar to the classification of "religions," is no neutral enterprise and can involve, or be linked to, bold and more or less explicit statements on cultural differences and cultural interactions.⁶¹

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- 61 On the use of similar arguments (on the origins of games) in the context of Hindu nationalism, see Ray 2005: Sedentary Games and the Nationalist Project, 703–704. A good example of an *ad hoc* argument about the origins of chess linked to the praise of a civilization (China, in this case) is Needham 1962: *Science and Civilization in China*, vol. 4, part I, 314–334.
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