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How rounders goes around the world

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By most accounts the English game of rounders travelled to the USA where it was transformed into baseball and played so widely during the American Civil War that it became what was, by the 1870s, referred to as America's national game. Baseball, which is now extremely popular in Canada, Central and South America, and in many Asian countries, it is currently cited as *the* 'national' game not only in the USA (Ivor-Campbell, 2002), but also Dominica (Klein, 2007), Japan (Roden, 1980), and Taiwan (Hsieh and Hsieh, 2003; Yu and Gorden, 2006). We use this intriguing case of simultaneous internationalisation and national appropriation to compare ways of conceptualising the global diffusion of practice.

One dominant interpretation is that baseball, and other forms of organised sport, like cricket, have been simply carried from one country to another often by colonising powers – and it is true, trajectories frequently follow this pattern. Having crossed the Atlantic and become established as a distinct entity, baseball was exported to Japan in the 1850s by American soldiers and teachers, and especially by those based in coastal ports where extraterritorial authority was granted (Roden, 1980). Within a few decades, and partly in keeping with the westernising ambitions of the Meiji restoration, baseball was established across the Japanese state school system. When Japan colonised Taiwan in 1895, the Japanese took baseball with them, again introducing it into schools but this time as part of a deliberate project of assimilation, and as a means of 'civilising' the native 'barbarians' (Yu and Godern, 2006). Baseball has not been unscathed by these movements from the UK to the USA, from the USA to Japan or from Japan to Taiwan.

Carrying is never that simple and the meaning of the game is evidently dynamic. To begin with, playing baseball in Japan symbolised some kind of privileged, western and specifically American identity but later, and as a Japanese export to Taiwan at the end of the 19th century, it expressed and reproduced the new '*bushido*' or '*samurai*', core values of the Japanese warrior and a traditional spirit of "blood and guts" (Roden, 1980; Kelly, 1998). Yet this is also not a simple narrative of appropriation. Unlike Trobriand Island 'cricket'¹ elements of baseball have remained sufficiently intact to allow 'the game', as an internationally recognised entity, to develop and extend into new territory.

Alongside accounts of diffusion and appropriation we explore the parallel possibility that always localised reproductions of practices like baseball commonly sustain standardised 'elements' (including rules, competences, and material infrastructures) that constitute the necessary conditions and ingredients of their expansion and global circulation.

¹ This is a unique form in which dancing, magic and cricket as introduced by missionaries in the 1930s (Leach 1975), combine to produce a distinctive practice involving an unlimited numbers of players and rules that ensure the home team always wins.

This works in different ways. We have already noticed contested interpretations of the sport as it is positioned in relation to an existing complex of meanings (Holt 1995). Although people in Taiwan were initially suspicious of Japanese colonisers' attempts to impose baseball, many enjoyed the experience of playing and those who were very good particularly enjoyed beating the Japanese at their 'own' game (Hsieh and Hsieh, 2003). Along with many other experiences associated with Japanese colonisation, baseball gave Taiwanese islanders, who had not until then thought of themselves as a unified group, a common point of reference. In this context, the meaning of baseball was in effect captured, reconfigured and reproduced (but, crucially, still with the same rules, forms of competence and material equipment) as an integral part of generating an emergent 'national' identity.

The role of baseball became still more complex when the Republic of China took over Taiwan in 1945, when the island was governed by Nationalist troops (also known as the Kuo-Min-Tung, the KMT), and when immigrants from mainland China became the island's new elite. Partly because baseball was so strongly associated with the former Japanese rulers, it was actively discouraged by the KMT. If anything, this strengthened its importance as part of a shared memory for those Taiwanese islanders who had experienced Japanese rule. In the first decades of the KMT's rule (Gates, 1981), watching baseball was one of the few occasions where native Taiwanese could be themselves, dressing in shorts and slippers, chewing betel nuts and eating from Japanese-style lunch boxes, - reproducing a way of life they took to be comfortable and normal, but that was denigrated as vulgar by the new middle class elite from mainland China. From this we highlight the further point that baseball is also not only a site of symbolic expression: it is also actively implicated in making national and ethnic identities.

Despite discouragement by the state, and despite Taiwan losing its status as a member of the United Nations (in 1971) and international recognition in subsequent years, Taiwan's baseball teams kept winning titles in *international* tournaments. Middle aged people in Taiwan, whether of native origin or immigrants from mainland China, consequently share the collective experience and excitement of staying up late to watch baseball games held in the USA, and of welcoming teams as 'national' heroes when they returned home with trophies. Baseball once again seems to have done some 'capturing' work of its own, crossing ethnic and cultural divides by becoming popular among Chinese mainlanders in Taiwan. From this perspective, it seems that recruitment to baseball – whether as player or supporter - is relevant in redefining differences not only between Japan and Taiwan but also within Taiwanese society. In the constant redefinition of ethnic boundaries and imagined communities, baseball has been an embedded and also constitutive element. This is so for spectators as for players.

Taiwanese baseball has shaped and is shaped by a confluence of multiple national and ethnic histories and by processes of local adaptation. Ironically, baseball has been capable of carrying and reproducing these diverse cultural forms precisely because key elements, like the rules, the equipment and the competences involved have remained relatively stable. Yet this 'stability' is obviously not total. Under Japanese colonial rule, baseball was typically played by members of an educated elite who had access to proper facilities and equipment. In becoming a sport for all in post war Taiwan (Hsieh and Hsieh, 2003) material compromises were required. Prior to the 1970s, poorly funded community teams used rubber balls and improvised with hand made gloves of folded paper, both innovations being important in turning baseball into a game that could be played almost anywhere and by almost anyone – not only by male athletes but also by women,

children and older people too.

What does this brief account of baseball's career, especially in Taiwan, reveal about the globalisation of practice? Baseball is played in many countries and when they come together in international competition, players compete on formally equal terms. It seems that the standardising infrastructure of rules defining the field, the method of play and the (ideal) bat and ball have enabled its circulation. Most obviously, rules permit competitions, which when played at the international level, arouse and provide a focus for nationalistic passion and association. Less obvious, it is because the game is defined by certain minimum requirements that core elements of playing can travel: likewise, it is because baseball exists as a provisional but still recognisable entity in its own right, that it can be given and that it can carry meaning.

Does this mean that globalisation of baseball is made possible as the result of creeping or sometimes enforced diffusion? Shove and Pantzar (2005) argue that the reproduction of practice is an unavoidably situated process, consisting as it does of the active integration of new and existing elements of image, meaning, material and competence. Accordingly, traces of colonialism, ethnicity, class and nationalism are inextricably embedded in Taiwanese baseball and are so in ways that are reproduced through and as the game is played today. To an extent, we go along with this argument and agree, the playing fields are definitely not identical.

This leads to the somewhat puzzling conclusion that when teams compete in international leagues, they are not, in fact, playing exactly the same game. In making sense of this seemingly paradoxical situation, we have suggested that it is the relative stabilisation of certain elements of the game (field, bat, ball, rules) that allows it to move in some recognisable way, and that allows it to intervene in, and to acquire multiple characteristics as a multiply localised practice. This analysis leads us to reject one-way accounts of diffusion and colonisation that position baseball players as victims of some sort of global invasion. It also challenges the view that seemingly global trends are outcomes of entirely local reproduction. Instead, we have pointed to mediating tensions and dynamics including those that simultaneously sustain the possibility of international competition, the concept of a 'national' game; and the more complex ways in which participation in baseball – whether as player or fan – is directly and actively part of reproducing and also transforming shared memories, excitement, talent and cultural and ethnic identities.

We therefore argue for an approach that deals equally with two related processes: one being the circulation of constitutive elements – including rules and equipment however approximately defined - the other being their situated and very active integration along with other ingredients like those of cultural significance and accumulated competence. Our conclusion, then, is that seemingly global practices are formed of multiple and successive integrations of the old and the new, the native and the foreign, the customised and the standardised – and that it is by these means that rounders goes around.

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