

Power and Identity: Indian Clubs as a Vehicle for Comprehending Material Culture

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Abstract

People assign meaning to objects, or accept meaning provided to them by others. Using the history of Indian clubs as a vehicle, an analysis model is developed and applied with the goal of uncovering what creates and changes the meaning and actions associated with a material object, and examines two opposing artefacts as evidence of the model's viability.

Material culture is an interdisciplinary academic field that explores how matter produces human meaning (by constituting and influencing beliefs and values) and action (on those beliefs and values, which are often grounded in social, political and economic systems).¹ Physical culture was a term coined in the nineteenth century which generally encompassed any reference to a specific group's fitness ideals and methods.² Fitness implements like Indian clubs are not only a part of a group's physical culture but its material culture as well because they are crafted objects that produce meaning and create action. In order to understand just what meaning and actions were brought about by the clubs requires a brief knowledge of their history.

As Lemaire wrote, '[t]hat the club is the most ancient weapon nobody can deny; it is also the most natural and handy that could be found, and consequently the first used by man, for we find that Cain slew Abel with a club'.³ Hindu art often depicts a club in the hands of deities like Vishnu and Hanuman, where it symbolized both spiritual and physical strength (Figure 1).⁴

¹ See 'What is Material Culture?', University of Delaware – Center for Material Culture Studies, <<https://sites.udel.edu/materialculture/about/what-is-material-culture/>> [accessed 1 March 2015]. See also Sophie Woodward, 'Material Culture' in Oxford Bibliographies, <<http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199766567/obo-9780199766567-0085.xml.p>> [accessed 1 March 2015].

² See Joseph Alter, 'Indian Clubs and Colonialism: Hindu Masculinity and Muscular Christianity', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (2004), pp. 497-534. See also Sim Kehoe, *The Indian Club Exercise* (New York: Peck & Snyder, 1866), <<https://archive.org/details/indianclubexerci00keho>> [accessed 1 March 2015].

³ E. Ferdinand Lemaire, *Indian Clubs and How To Use Them* (London: Iliffe and Son, 1889), p. 7, <<https://archive.org/details/indianclubshowto00lemaiala>> [accessed 1 March 2015].

⁴ For a concise but non-academic overview, see 'Gada Mace Mysticism', <<http://www.indianclubs.com.au/gada-mace/gada-mace-mysticism/>> [accessed 22 March 2015].



Figure 1: Vishnu as Vishvarupa (cosmic or universal man), watercolour on paper, c.1800-1820. From John Guy, 'Indian Temple Sculpture', London V & A Publication, 2007, p.70. pl.76. ISBN 971851775095. Victoria and Albert Museum, Licensed under Creative Commons.

According to Hoffman's 1990 correspondence with N. L. Nigam, Director of the Salarjung Museum in India:

The Indian club can be traced [to] the war club, or *gada*, a symbol of invincible physical prowess and worldly power. Through the Islamic period, Rajput rulers and Muslim sultans favored the *gada* as the preferred weapon of combat. It was considered a great honor for a warrior to be trained in the use of the battle club. Through the ages, the war club changed in both name and form.⁵

Todd asserts that primitive cultures valued swinging big clubs,⁶ and at some point this value doubled when the club moved from weapon to strength implement and gained a second utilitarian purpose. Soldiers in Moghul armies allegedly 'paid the minutest attention' to individual training, which included daily exercises with *mugdars* (Indian) clubs.⁷ By the time the British had colonized India, club swinging was observed to have been practiced for physical conditioning: '[t]he exercise is in great repute among the native soldiery, police and others whose caste renders them liable to emergencies where great strength of muscle is desirable'.⁸ After adopting a less strenuous routine for military drill, the British brought the clubs back to Europe, where Germans and Czechs incorporated club swinging into their own physical cultures.⁹ When the failure of the 1848 revolution prompted the migration of Germans to the United States they brought the clubs to America,¹⁰ where the art was assimilated into U.S. military drill in the late nineteenth century.¹¹

⁵Alice Hoffman, *Indian Clubs* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996), p. 6.

⁶ Jan Todd, 'From Milo to Milo: A History of Barbells, Dumbbells and Indian Clubs', *Iron Game History*, Vol. 3, No. 6 (April 1995), p. 8, < <https://library.la84.org/SportsLibrary/IGH/IGH0306/IGH0306c.pdf>> [accessed 1 March 2015].

⁷ William Irvine, *The Army of the Indian Moghuls: Its Organization and Administration* (London: Luzac, 1903), 185, <https://books.google.com/books?id=gRsoAAAAAYAAJ&pg=PR1&dq=lezam+bow&source=gbs_selected_pages&cad=2#v=onepage&q=lezam%20bow&f=false> [accessed 1 March 2015].

⁸ Kehoe, p. 8.

⁹ Russell Ogata et al., 'Indian Club Swinging', *The Kettlebell Guide*, p. 27, <http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CCAQFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.indianclubswinging.co.uk%2Fnewsletters%2FKB6IndianClubs.pdf&ei=6vTzVIXSO9HCsASTu4CYBw&usg=AFQjCNHjI-ZBW_inlhdV6jOhDJoIgfMTTQ&bvm=bv.87269000,d.cWc> [accessed 1 March 2015].

¹⁰ Thomas, *Tae Kwon Do Times*.

¹¹ Thomas, *Tae Kwon Do Times*.

By the early twentieth century, the clubs had already taken hold of the civilian population in Great Britain and the United States as one of the first fitness crazes of modern times,¹² with Queen Victoria endorsing their use¹³ and American entrepreneurs commercializing their availability to the average person.¹⁴ In many Western societies, this was a period where sedentariness was replacing manual labour in the workforce as the world fashioned by the Industrial Revolution achieved permanence; gymnasiums opened in cities and the Indian club was a key fitness implement.¹⁵ The clubs became a 'national pastime',¹⁶ and an instructional manual of the day claimed that 'no home is properly furnished without at least a pair'.¹⁷ Colleges and social bodies transformed club swinging into synchronized group activities,¹⁸ and the clubs were Olympic events in 1904 and 1932.¹⁹ However, when society relaxed during the 1920s and 1930s, Indian clubs were identified with the stifling Victorian morals of an earlier time,²⁰ and eventually became obsolete as individual development was replaced by competitive sports in Western physical culture.²¹

Although Indian clubs began as weapons and then evolved into fitness implements, over time they were also inculcated with other connotations. Clubs have often been associated with masculinity:

The ordinary weapon of the athletic god Hercules was a club [...] In ancient times, both in Greece and Rome [...] the strongest athletes were fond of brandishing clubs, believing themselves to be representatives of Hercules.²²

In 1834, Donald Walker authored a book entitled *British Manly Exercises*, wherein club swinging figured prominently; later, Walker followed up with another text called *Exercises for Ladies Calculated to Preserve and Improve Beauty*, in which he introduced the Indian sceptre (a lightweight version of the Indian club) that used many of the same movements in club swinging.²³ Other authors also introduced books aimed at teaching women the art,²⁴ and the clubs gained an association with femininity while also remaining steadfastly masculine. Although similar in their respective fitness aims, these gender associations markedly differed once they acquired nationalistic connotations: the image of the club can epitomise the manly protector and defender of the tribe (i.e. Hercules and Indian warriors), yet club swinging by women (as a means to health) was promoted in America during the late nineteenth century as a way to populate the country with native offspring rather than immigrants.²⁵ Lastly, the nineteenth century saw the rise of the Muscular Christianity movement, where the notion that 'the male body reflected moral character, and that strong, healthy men made up a healthy nation'²⁶ merged nationalism and religion into a vehicle for spiritual and physical strength, and which call back to the club's more ancient Hindu symbolism.

¹² Hoffman, p. 9.

¹³ Hoffman, p. 6. See also Bishop quoted in 'War Clubs' by the Iowa Health and Physical Readiness Alliance, <http://www.ihpra.org/war_clubs.htm> [accessed 1 March 2015].

¹⁴ Hoffman, p. 27. See also Alter, p. 512. Although clubs were eventually sold by many vendors, both authors credit Kehoe with establishing Indian clubs as a mass exercise routine in the United States.

¹⁵ Wisconsin Historical Society, 'Indian Clubs for Physical Exercise' (2008), <<http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Content.aspx?dsNav=N:42949638284294963805&dsRecordDetailS=R:CS2625>> [accessed 1 March 2015]. See also Hoffman, p. 9.

¹⁶ Wisconsin Historical Society 'Indian Clubs for Physical Exercise'.

¹⁷ J.H. Dougherty, *Indian Clubs and Dumb Bells* (New York: American Sports Publishing Company, 1901), p. 3.

¹⁸ Hoffman, pp. 12, 16; and Alter, p. 522.

¹⁹ Thomas, *Tae Kwon Do Times*.

²⁰ Hoffman, p. 16.

²¹ Alter, p. 503.

²² Lemaire, p. 7.

²³ Todd, pp. 8-9.

²⁴ See Hoffman, p. 13.

²⁵ Alter, p. 519. See also Wisconsin Historical Society 'Indian Clubs for Physical Exercise'.

²⁶ Alter, p. 516.

Thus, a limited analysis of the history surrounding Indian clubs seems to reveal a basic grouping of like functions and effects, as depicted below (Figure 2):

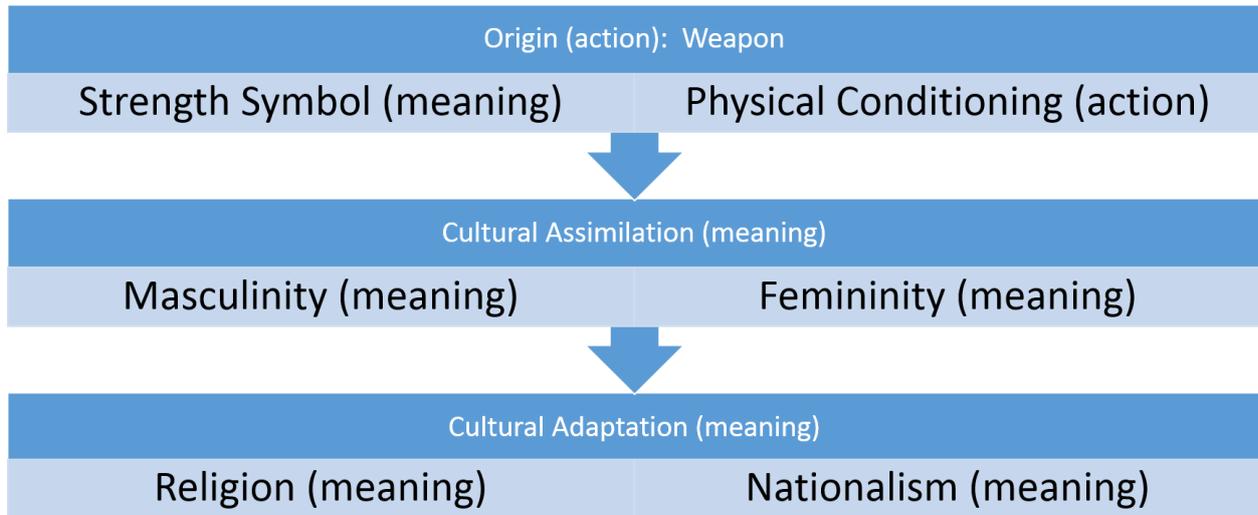


Figure 2: Indian Club Outcome Categories. Design by the author.

The chart's underlying premise is that an object's original purpose precedes its subsequent meanings, and any actions from those meanings. The club originated as a weapon for action, and this function could be termed its First Order use. Following its origin, as the club became a fitness implement it still retained its original purpose for action but gained an associated purpose as well, which can be called its Second Order use. Later, these uses – either singly or together – symbolised strength; because this symbolism is representative of these uses rather than a separate function or effect, it too is within the Second Order. As these uses became assimilated into existing culture, the original purpose for action ceased; new meanings arose which seemingly aligned with accepted gender norms and thus established a Third Order use in promoting masculinity and femininity, albeit in very different ways. Finally, masculine and feminine uses were adapted to serve other purposes (nationalism and religion), and therefore constitute a Fourth Order use. Depending on additional repurposing, further orders (e.g. Fifth Order, Sixth Order, etc.) could conceivably exist.

At least as it pertains to Indian clubs, the functions depicted on the chart imply that the basic quality which created and influenced this object's meaning (and actions based upon this and subsequent meanings) is power: power, through the body, to conquer and defend; power to build and preserve national identity; and power to transcend opposing forces, and perhaps even human existence. As such, power can be rightfully termed the *use outcome* of the object, due to its original purposes for action (as a weapon, and later a fitness implement); the lesser order functions and effects (in this case masculinity, femininity, nationalism, and religion) essentially involve changes in meaning on which proceeding actions occur, and are properly called *derived outcomes*, since they are derived from the original purpose of the item but are only related to this purpose through the use outcome. Interestingly, in the case of Indian clubs all of the derived outcomes centre on defining concepts of identity, which is itself a form of power, particularly in groups.²⁷

In testing any hypothesis, the key consideration is not how a theory holds against positive results but against negative ones. As evidence of the potential viability of exploring material culture through a use-outcome model of analysis, what follows is an examination of two artefacts involving Indian clubs that are diametrically opposed in

²⁷ See also Hoffman, pp. 30-41 for examples of Indian clubs personalized with decoration by and/or for individuals as a non-group exemplar of identity.

their connection with physical conditioning: an eighteenth century drawing of Indian clubs as part of a contemporary wrestler's routine, and the front endpaper of a nineteenth century Indian club swinging manual published for the population at large.

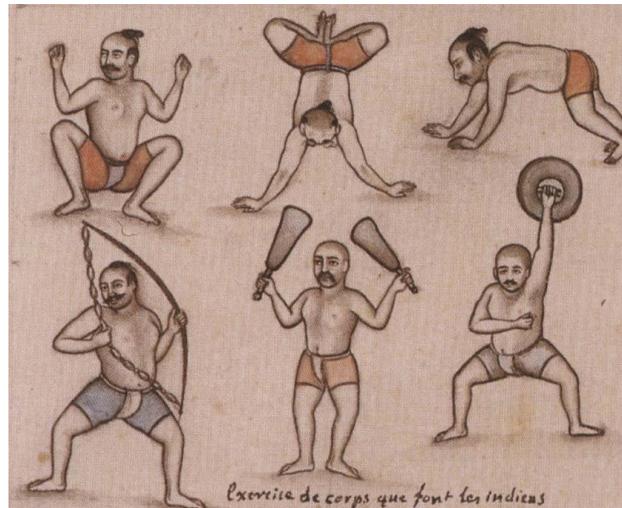


Figure 3: Indian Body Exercises,
unknown artist and medium, c. 1770.
© The British Library Board.

This drawing by an unknown artist (Figure 3) clearly conveys the physical conditioning purpose of the clubs, and as such may be an early and accurate example of historical club swinging from a range of images that usually employ Hindu religious art devoid of combat and fitness meanings. The image bears a caption in French (roughly translated as 'Indian body exercises'), and was perhaps prepared for display to non-indigenous cultures.²⁸ It most likely belongs to a set of similar pictures in the same style and colouration, which shows the activities of Kabul-based wrestlers,²⁹ illustrates a training regimen that included calisthenics and fitness devices unique to Indian physical culture, and specifically showcases Indian clubs.

The drawing is documentary and typological in nature, and seems to lack overt political, religious or social messages, although its probable French origin establishes an external viewpoint. The image engages the senses with a dynamic impression, and conveys a thoroughness about the regimen while emphasizing its cultural heritage (as explicitly shown through race and attire, and implicitly hinted at via the absence of dumbbells, which were in widespread use on the Continent by the late eighteenth century).³⁰ Its perspective efficiently portrays a full complement of exercises on a single page, and strongly suggests that the artist had observed (or received a detailed description from someone who had personally witnessed) the exercises and apparatus performed and used, at least in part due to the accuracy of their biomechanical form and uniqueness of the implements.

At base, the drawing is about physical power: how to develop it, as well as the hallmarks of being able to demonstrate it. The drawing is squarely placed in the Second Order (as a fitness implement, and indicative of symbolic strength and masculinity), which is precisely what it was meant to represent. It is not hard to imagine that those who saw it

²⁸ At that time, the French East India Company was coming to the end of its involvement in the Carnatic Wars, which left the British East India Company in control of the subcontinent. See 'Carnatic Wars', Encyclopedia Britannica (2015), <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/96274/Carnatic-Wars>> [accessed 1 March 2015].

²⁹ 'Indian wrestlers', <<http://www.pahelwani.com/communities/8/004/008/170/048/images/4538121060.jpg>> [accessed 1 March 2015].

³⁰ Todd, pp. 5-6.

in its day were left with a feeling of authenticity about the purpose of Indian clubs and the practices and prowess of foreigners, or that those who might look at it now feel a similar authenticity which has since been buttressed by the authority of time. During the close of the eighteenth century, apparently someone thought that the conditioning regimen employed by Indian wrestlers was to be acknowledged, admired, or even feared, and was interesting enough to be at least memorialised if not further disseminated. What is left unanswered by the drawing is why such an intense training regimen was necessary or specifically how the clubs were used in the routine, but the image leaves no doubt that the clubs were an important part of Indian physical culture.

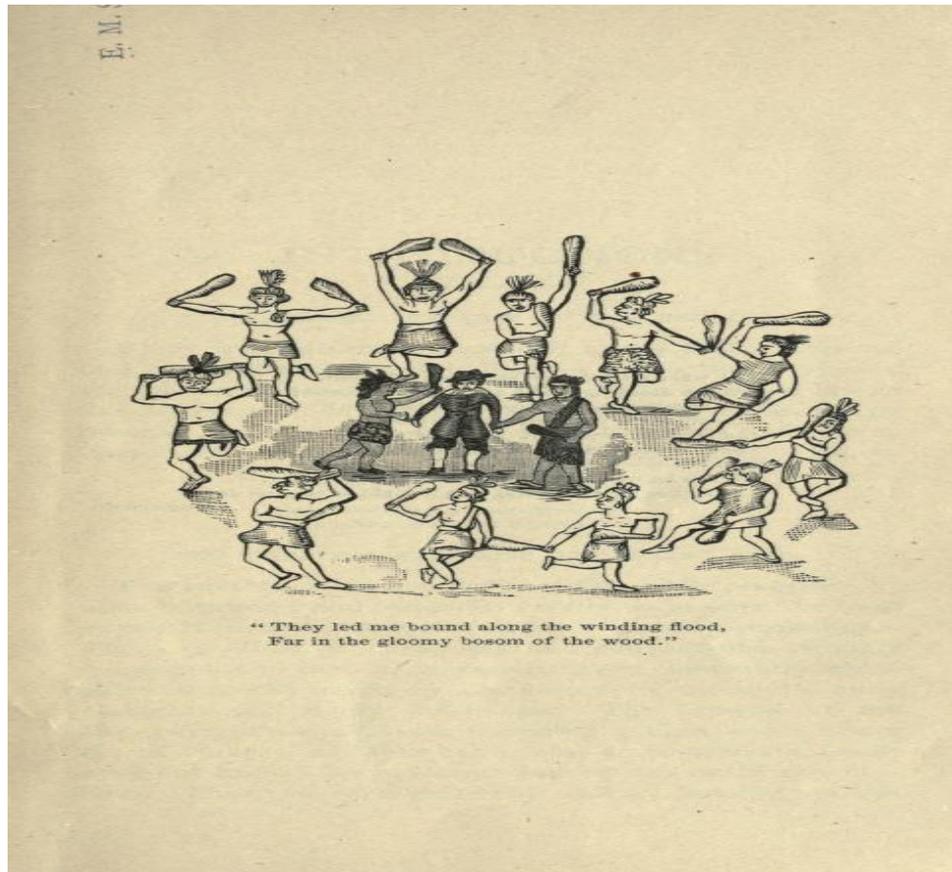


Figure 4. Endpaper for Gardiner's *Indian Club Swinging by an Amateur*

(Providence: Freeman & Company, 1884), Library of Congress.

Rather than convey authenticity of purpose, as Hoffman identified, the front endpaper of Benjamin Gardiner's 1884 book *Indian Club Swinging by an Amateur* depicts an image by an unknown artist (Figure 4) which should have no relationship to clubs used for physical conditioning: that of a colonist captured and encircled by Native Americans who are waiving them in both hands in a menacing manner.³¹

Its caption reads 'They led me bound along the winding flood, Far in the gloomy bosom of the wood', and may have originated from an 1849 volume that recounted border skirmishes decades prior in Tryon County, New York during the American Revolutionary War.³² According to *Potter's American Monthly*, the depicted colonist was Dr Moses Younglove, a surgeon with the colonial militia who was taken prisoner in 1777 and upon release allegedly penned the poem that contained the caption and which described horrific acts performed by the Indians.³³

³¹ Hoffman, p. 44.

³² See 'Note E' to Campbell's *Border Warfare of New York During the Revolution* (1849), p. 273, <<https://archive.org/details/borderwarfareofn00camp>> [accessed 22 March 2015].

³³ *The American Historical Record, and Repertory of Notes and Queries* (Philadelphia: John Potter

The image looks like something earlier than the scene described in the caption's 1849 printing (itself repurposed for Gardiner's 1884 book) since it resembles an artistic style common during colonial times half of a century earlier (note that the attire of the captive is consistent with colonial dress).³⁴ Rather than coming across as documentary, it conveys more of a narrative sense by telling a story charged with emotions that harken captive and captor, god-fearing and heathen, the primitive and the contemporary. The image and caption combined signal that it was made for Western audiences (through the use of English), and from this starting point it engages the viewer by connecting to the colonist's perspective within the larger context of the civilised at the hands of the wild (not just visually through the images of the Native American Indians, but also in a literary manner through the language of a 'foreboding forest'). It is doubtful that the scene was personally witnessed and was more likely conjured from the artist's imagination due to its one dimensionality, missing asymmetry, lack of environmental anchors, and absence of any tale that would provide an explanation for the artist having survived being near the ordeal.

In the end, this image is also about power: those who viewed it in its day might have been scared or angry, since it embodies the power of the enemy to threaten, the fear of the 'other', and perhaps the power of the enemy's action to incite retaliation from the aggrieved. Like the 1770 drawing it clearly conveys the practices and prowess of foreigners, yet completely lacks any authenticity about the use of Indian clubs for physical conditioning. Instead, the image immediately taps into the First Order use of the club as a weapon, incorporates Second Order symbolic strength, displays Third Order masculinity, and portrays Fourth Order nationalism in a 'them versus us' manner. What is fascinating about this single artefact is that it illustrates the spectrum of changing meanings associated with Indian clubs, but lacks any direct connection to physical conditioning and thus the very contents of the book it represents; it signifies an object that has been repurposed many times over prior to its current depiction. However, despite no direct representation of physical conditioning, this image squarely rests within the use-outcome model's findings with respect to the original purpose and changing meanings associated with Indian clubs (including the fact that while the image is not a direct representation, the contents of the book upon which it is affixed are), and thereby supports the potential viability of that model to develop insights into material culture.

MacAloon posited the idea of sports as 'empty forms': constructs which have lost their 'cultural and historical content that characterized them in their original context [and] have become an intercultural space to be refilled with diverse meanings'.³⁵ As far as Indian clubs are concerned, First and Second Order functions seem to be the most important factors in governing cultural repurposing, or derived use. Brownell argues that MacAloon is incorrect because for at least a portion of the population some original meaning is retained.³⁶ However, Indian club use-outcome analysis suggests that MacAloon and Brownell are both correct; though First and Second Order functions initially create meaning and can be returned to occasionally (such as when British suffragettes deployed Indian clubs as weapons,³⁷ or the late twentieth and early twenty-

& Company), Vol. 3 (1874), p. 123,

<https://books.google.com/books?id=n839hSdO2_AC&pg=PA122&lpg=PA122&dq=annals+of+tryon+county+dr+younglove&source=bl&ots=vhmhWR1eAm&sig=YnVzT4lrz9QOybTXiq2wy3O08&hl=en&sa=X&ei=u67jVNi6LozEggTI-YCQAg&ved=0CEQQ6AEwCA#v=onepage&q&f=false> [accessed 1 March 2015].

³⁴ See 'A Colonial Gentleman's Clothing', <<http://www.history.org/history/clothing/men/mglossary.cfm>> [accessed 1 March 2015].

³⁵ MacAloon, quoted by Susan Brownell in *Beijing's Games: What the Olympics Mean to China* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), p. 56,

<https://books.google.com/books?id=u_j2xpy25lgC&pg=PA56&dq=macaloon+empty+form&hl=en&sa=X&ei=k_XzVLS7F8OegwSkj4HYDQ&ved=0CCAQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=macaloon%20empty%20form&f=false> [accessed 1 March 2015].

See also Alter, p. 501.

³⁶ Brownell, p. 56.

³⁷ Anita Anand, *Princess, Suffragette, Revolutionary* (Bloomsbury, 2015), pp. 297-298,

<<https://books.google.com/books?id=Cd4yBgAAQBAJ&pg=PA297&lpg=PA297&dq=Suffragette+indian+clubs&>

first century re-emergence of Indian clubs as fitness implements),³⁸ derived outcomes are subsequently established that change meaning and action, yet still serve the same use outcome.

MacAloon also defined culture as 'the inherited codes and contexts through which human groups constitute their social worlds and proceed to experience them as more or less comprehensible, meaningful, and actionable'.³⁹ During the early twentieth century, Indian clubs fell out of fashion as fitness implements in the West. As Wertkin commented:

Ultimately the things around which we organize the various aspects of our lives, along with the knowledge of how we came to acquire them, how they were used, and why we cared about them are discarded or lost. This is especially true of objects that no longer seem to serve a useful purpose.⁴⁰

A recent Pottery Barn catalogue displayed a pair of Indian clubs atop a home office suite as decoration.⁴¹ There is meaning attached to those clubs, but it is probably incomprehensible by most who thumb through the catalogue's pages. What is left are numerous connotations – some articulable, some lost – that nonetheless operate on us as human beings, and intangibly keep the clubs as something that no home is properly furnished without. Although it requires further scrutiny, a use-outcome model of analysis may be a helpful tool in deciphering what creates and changes meaning and action associated with a material object.

source=bl&ots=hE69_Et5Pp&sig=7j79M6xk8jFQZjhGEUvgXUGQ1r4&hl=en&sa=X&ei=SvXzVOuQFcyHsQTKpIKoBw&ved=0CEoQ6AEwBg#v=onepage&q=Suffragette%20indian%20clubs&f=false> [accessed 1 March 2015].

³⁸ Alter, p. 512, with respect to Thomas.

³⁹ John MacAloon, 'Humanism as Political Necessity? Reflections on the Pathos of Anthropological Science in Olympic Contexts', *Quest*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (1996), p. 73.

⁴⁰ Hoffman, p. 4.

⁴¹ Pottery Barn, 'Design Trend Indigo' catalogue, (February 2015), p. 13.

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Figure 1. *Vishnu as Vishvarupa* (cosmic or universal man), watercolour on paper, c.1800-1820. From John Guy, 'Indian Temple Sculpture', London V & A Publication, 2007, p.70. pl.76. ISBN 971851775095, Victoria and Albert Museum, Licensed under Creative Commons. <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:WLA_vanda_Vishnu_as_the_Cosmic_Man.jpg> [accessed 21 March 2015]

Figure 3. 'Indian Body Exercises', © The British Library Board, ADD. OR. 4039 f21r., <<http://www.pahelwani.com/akhara-training-page-4/4544811292>> [accessed 1 March 2015]

Figure 4. Endpaper for Gardiner's *Indian Club Swinging by an Amateur* (Providence: Freeman & Company, 1884), Library of Congress, <<https://archive.org/details/indianclubswingi00gardrich>> [accessed 1 March 2015]