

# The Bornu set and a cultural ecology of chess



Patrick Dillon

Chess Collectors International

20<sup>th</sup> Biennial Congress

Oxford, May 2024

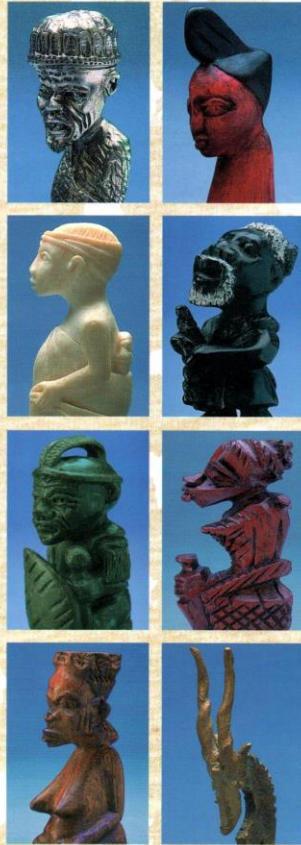






# CULTURES, CHESS & ART

A COLLECTOR'S ODYSSEY ACROSS SEVEN CONTINENTS



BY NED MUNGER

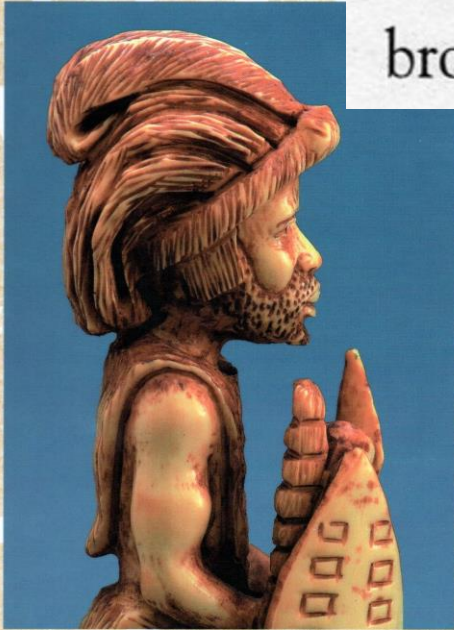
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VOLUME 1 SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA



# CULTURES,

A COLLECTOR'S ODYSSEY



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## THE BORNU SET

In 1925 the British anthropologist C. K. Meek brought three chess sets from Bornu, Nigeria.





Carved wood  
King 16 cm

King wears a  
'robe'

Leather roll-up  
board

British Museum

Af1926,0414.4-36

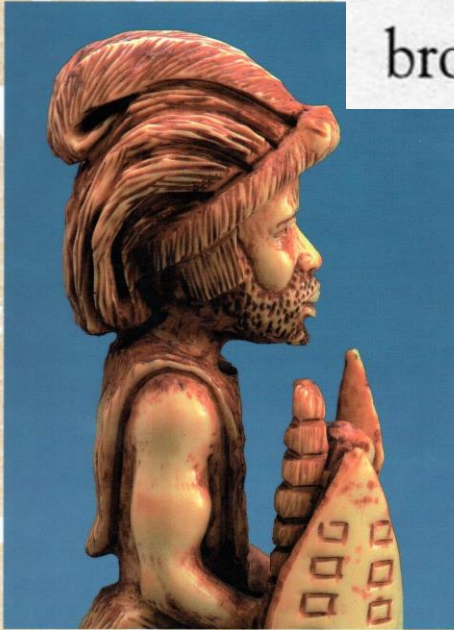
Kanuri People, Bornu, West Africa

C.K. Meek, government anthropologist in north Nigeria

1912-1926

# CULTURES,

A COLLECTOR'S ODYSSEY



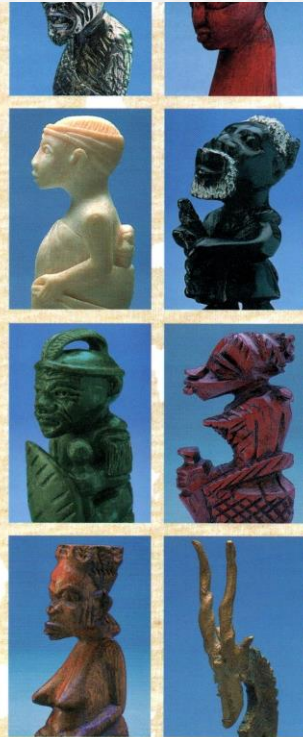
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## THE BORNU SET

In 1925 the British anthropologist C. K. Meek brought three chess sets from Bornu, Nigeria. According to Michael Mark, the always well-informed former editor of *The Chess Collector*, one is in the British Museum of Mankind;<sup>6</sup> another, in the New York Metropolitan; the third, in Grandmaster Lothar Schmidt's collection in Germany.<sup>7</sup>



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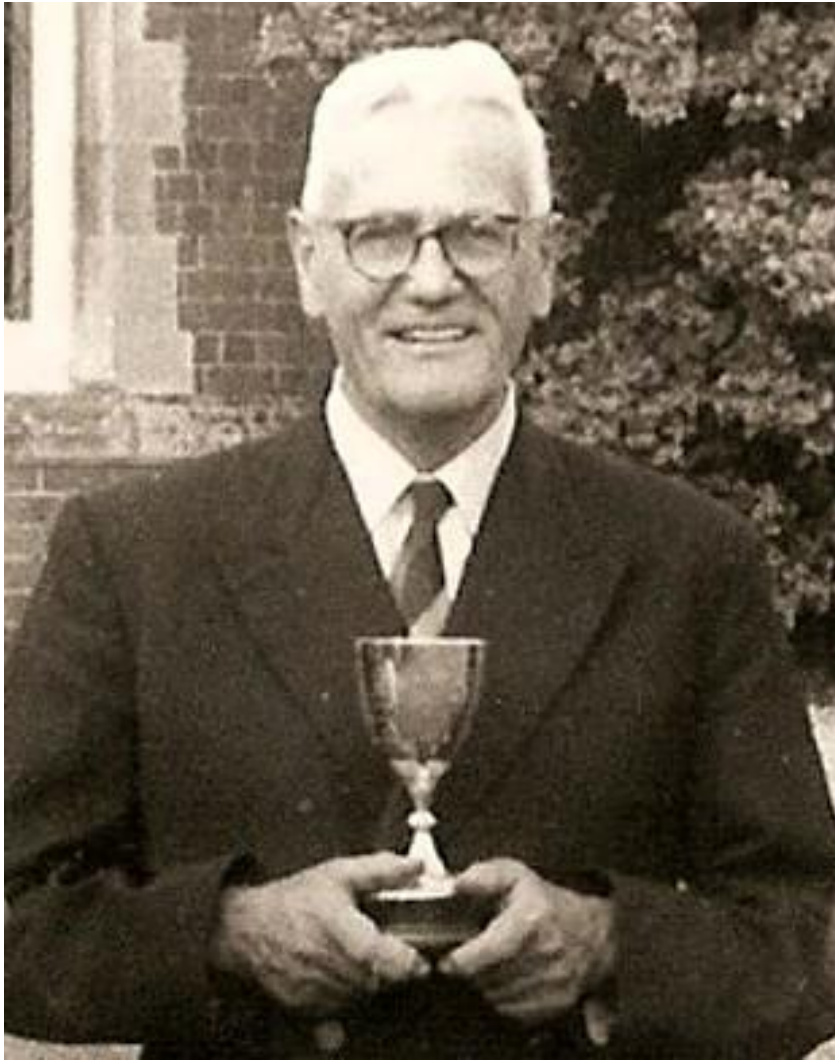
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VOLUME 1 SUB

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There is another Bornu set owned by Guy Betts, a farmer near Oxford. Betts worked in Maiduguri, Bornu and Jos, Nigeria many years ago.







**1969**



**2020s**



# Cultural ecology



1969



2020s





# Cultural ecology



1969



2020s

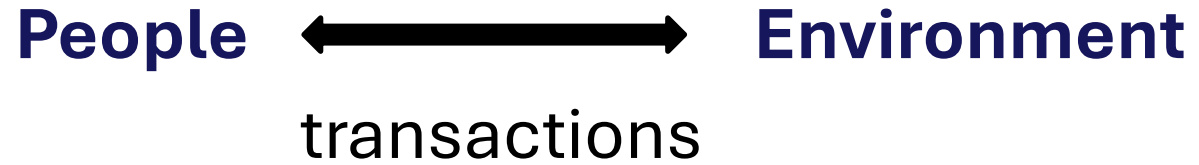


A cultural ecology of games and chess

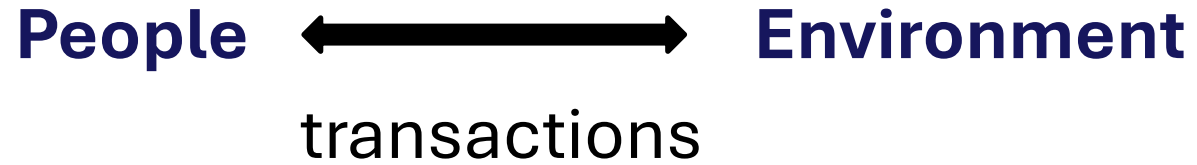
# **Cultural ecology**



# Cultural ecology



# Cultural ecology



**Cultural  
behaviours**

# Cultural ecology

**People**  **Environment**

transactions

Patterns of production and consumption

Language & sign systems

Social and cultural infrastructures

Relationships with nature

Means of exchange

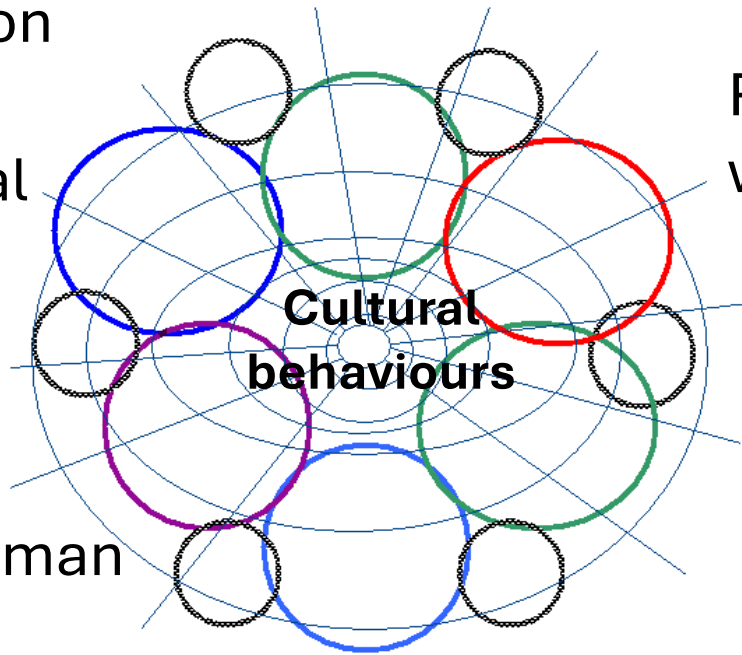
**Cultural behaviours**

Fulfilment of needs

Deployment of human knowledge & skill

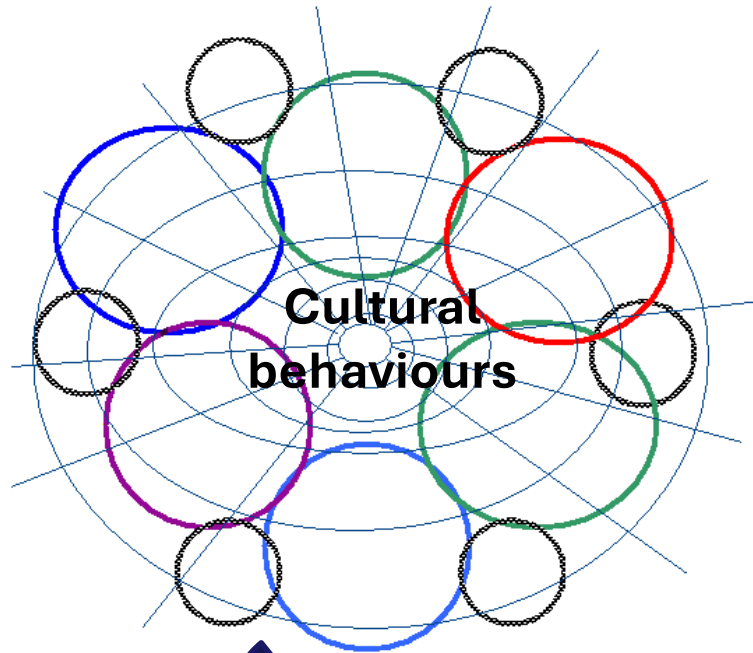
Expressions of beliefs, values, attitudes, etc

Institutional structures





# Cultural ecology



PEOPLE ↔ ENVIRONMENT

How we experience the world and how we come to understand it

# A cultural ecology of games

PEOPLE ↔ ENVIRONMENT

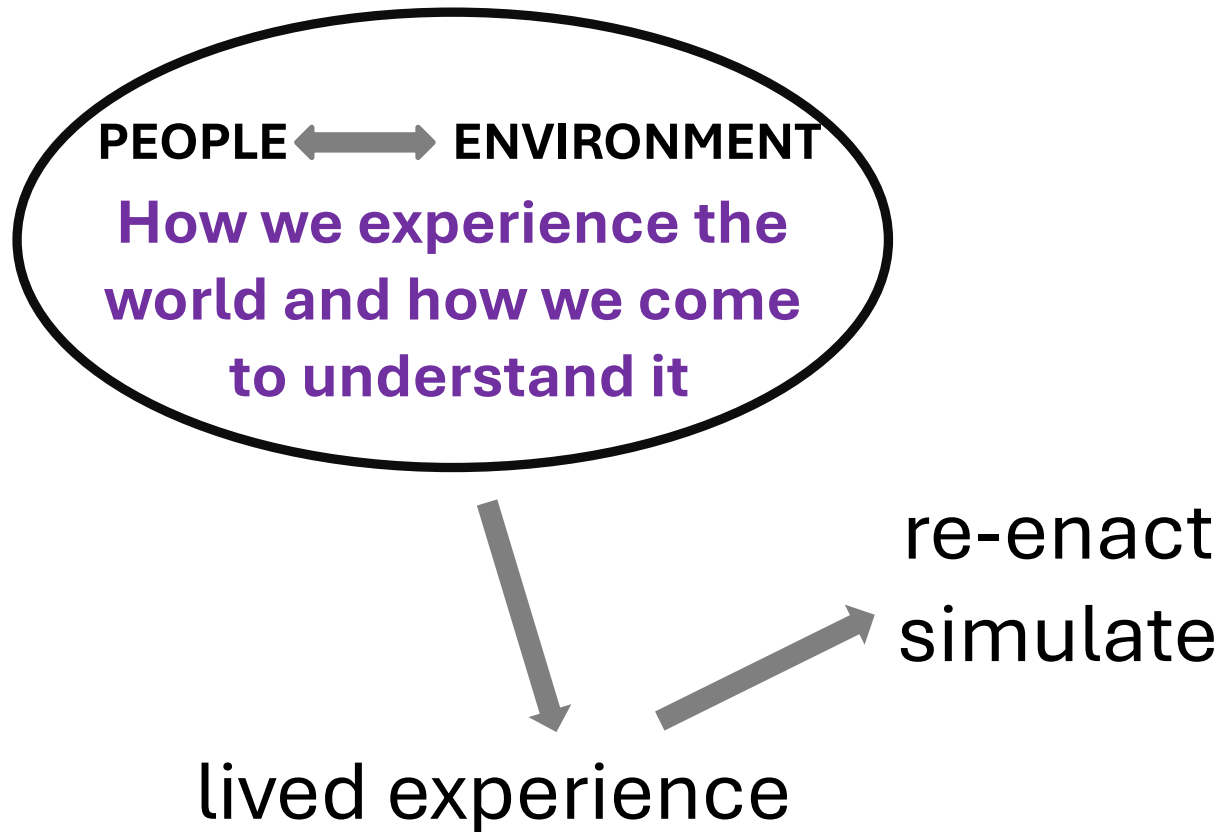
How we experience the  
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# A cultural ecology of games

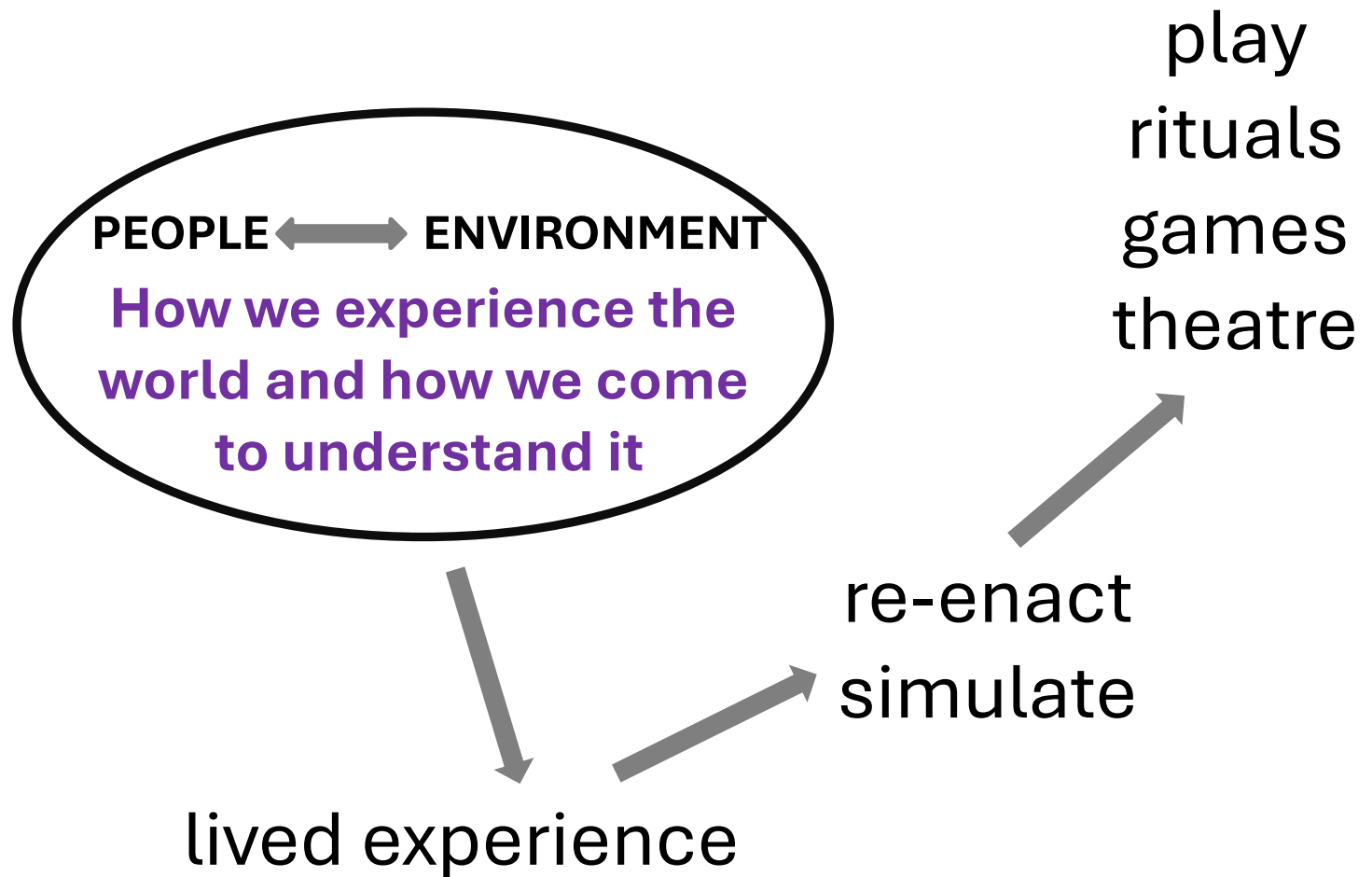




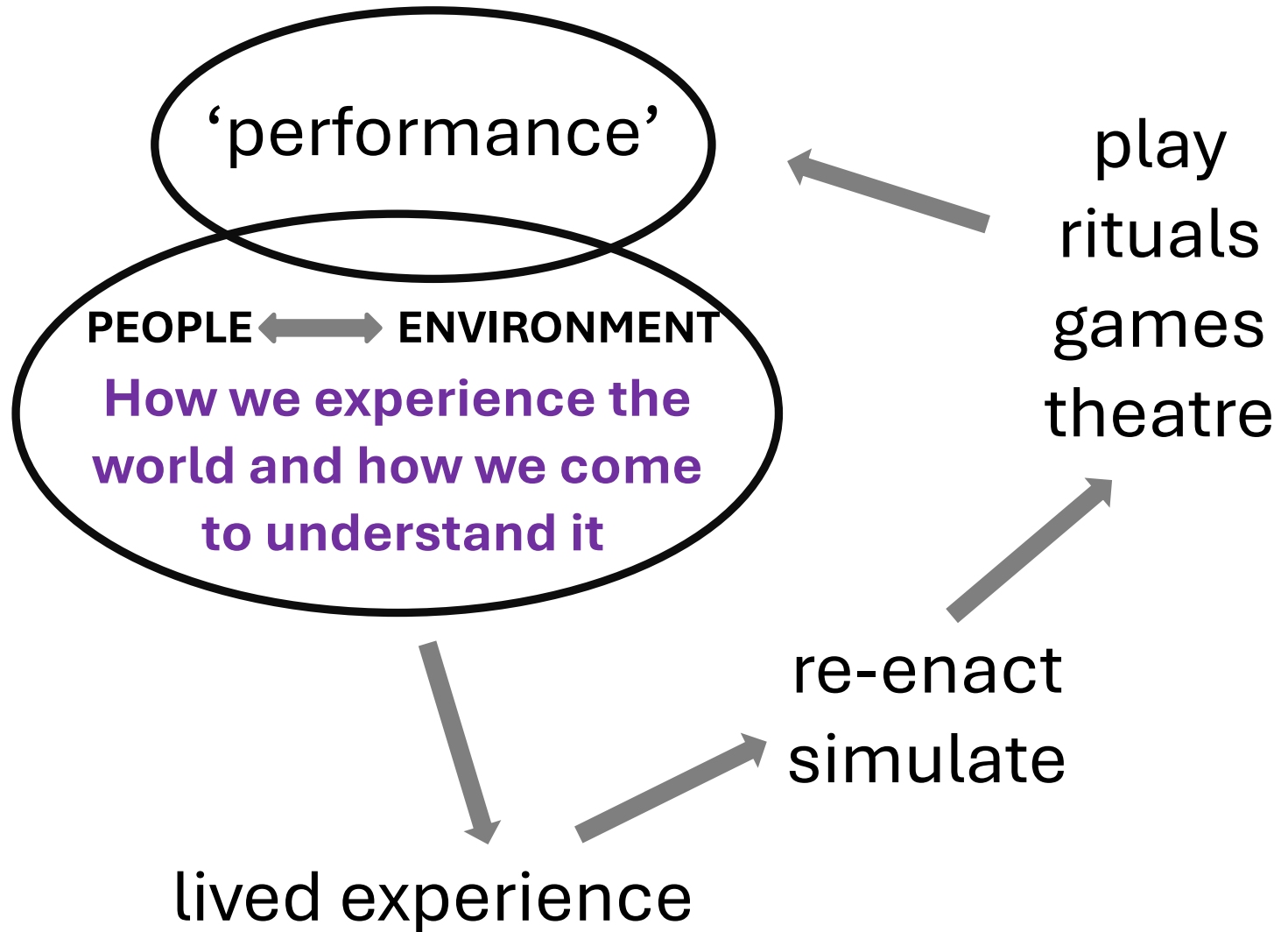
# A cultural ecology of games



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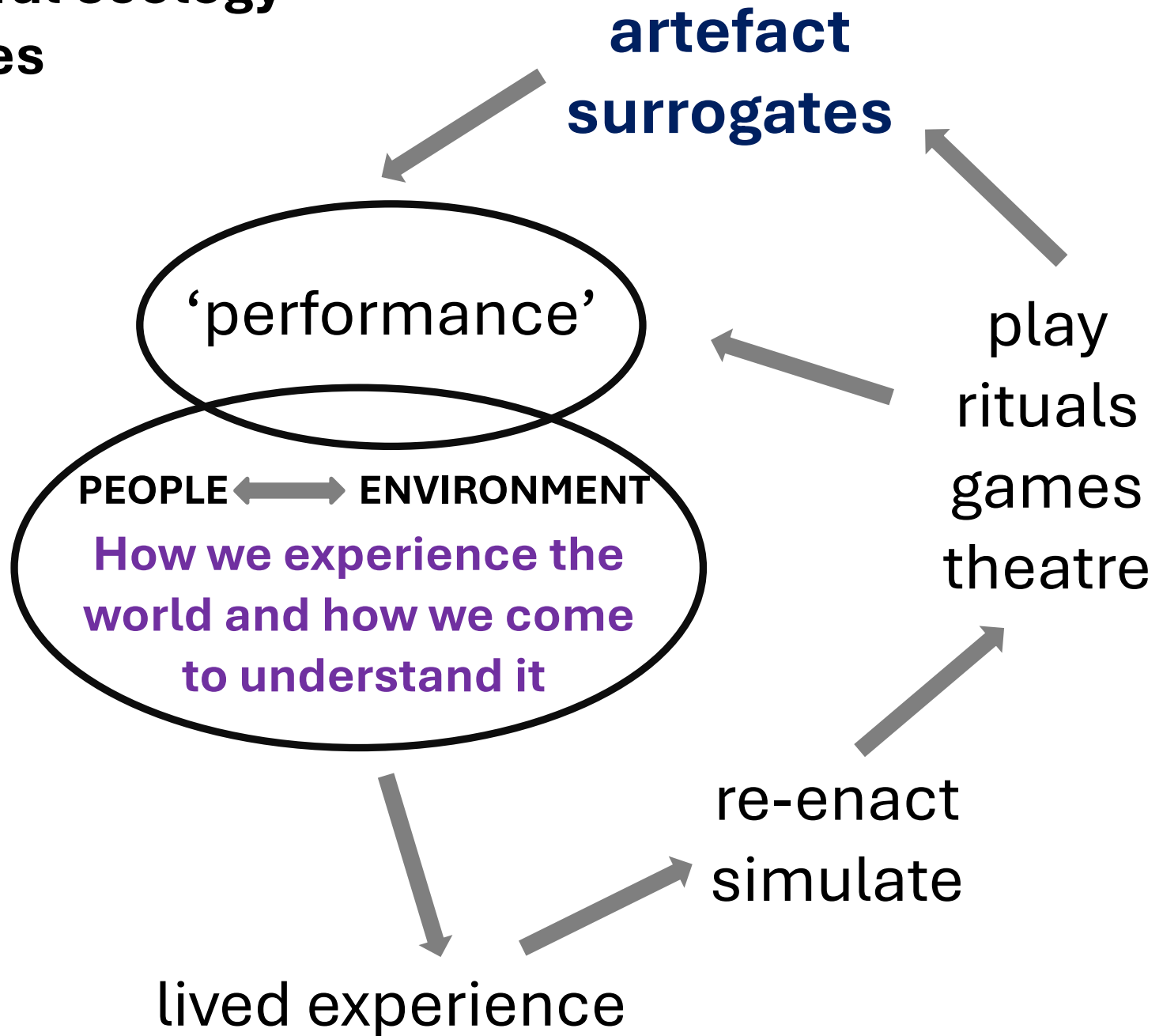


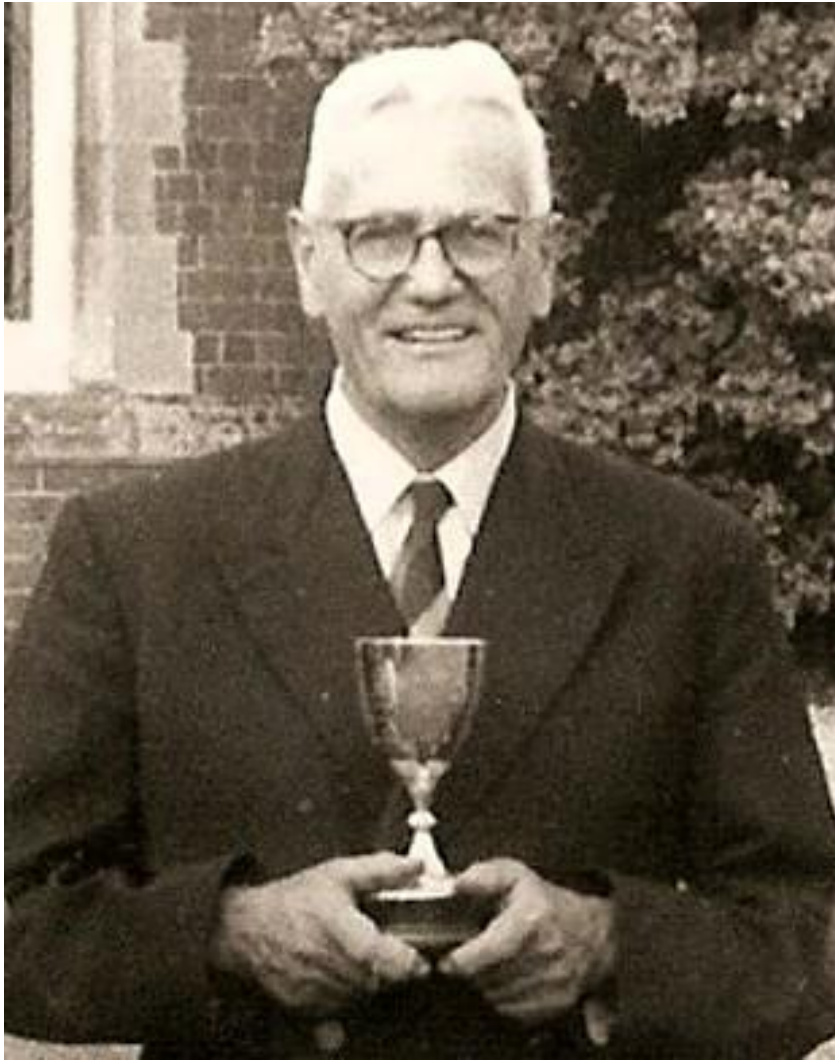
# A cultural ecology of games





# A cultural ecology of games





# Curating the story

now      **-----**      recent past      **-----**      distant past

**testimony  
documentation**

**historical &  
archaeological research**

provenance      **-----**      **????????????????????????????**

# Curating the story

now



recent past



distant past

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**????????????????????**



*tsatsarandi*

No knowledge of when it  
was introduced

Very few people alive in  
the 1930s who knew the  
moves

Betts played one of  
them, a village headman



# Variation in how the game was played



# Variation in how the game was played

*Man. The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*  
1930s



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Meek: conventional moves;  
players could disrupt  
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Betts: some moves  
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# Variation in how the game was played

*Man. The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*  
1930s

Meek: conventional moves;  
players could disrupt  
opponent's attention

Betts: some moves  
conventional; others not

Harris: as Betts except for  
pawn move



Variation in how the  
game was played

# THE CULTURAL ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE



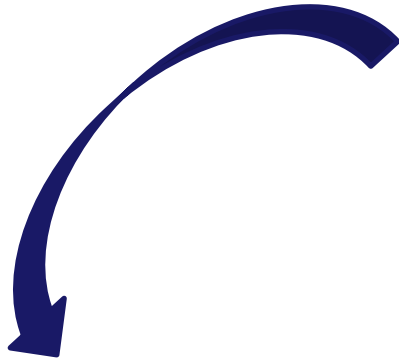
# **A cultural ecology of games**

# **A cultural ecology of games**

re-enacting/simulating  
experience



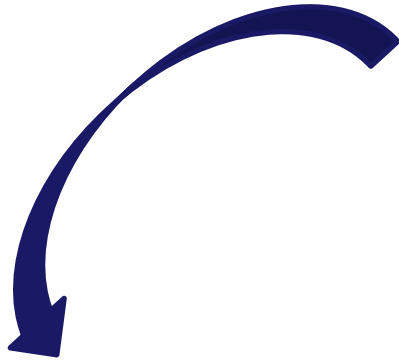
# A cultural ecology of games



re-enacting/simulating  
experience

- aesthetic
- symbolic, ritualistic
- educational
- divination
- reinforce social roles
- enact matters of social, political or cultural significance
- pass cultural mores from generation to generation & place to place

# A cultural ecology of games



re-enacting/simulating  
experience

manual dexterity  
and/or mental skills

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- strategy
- tactical, combinational & sequential thinking
- visualisation
- pattern recognition
- improvisation
- spatial & temporal understandings

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**‘rules of  
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**'rules of  
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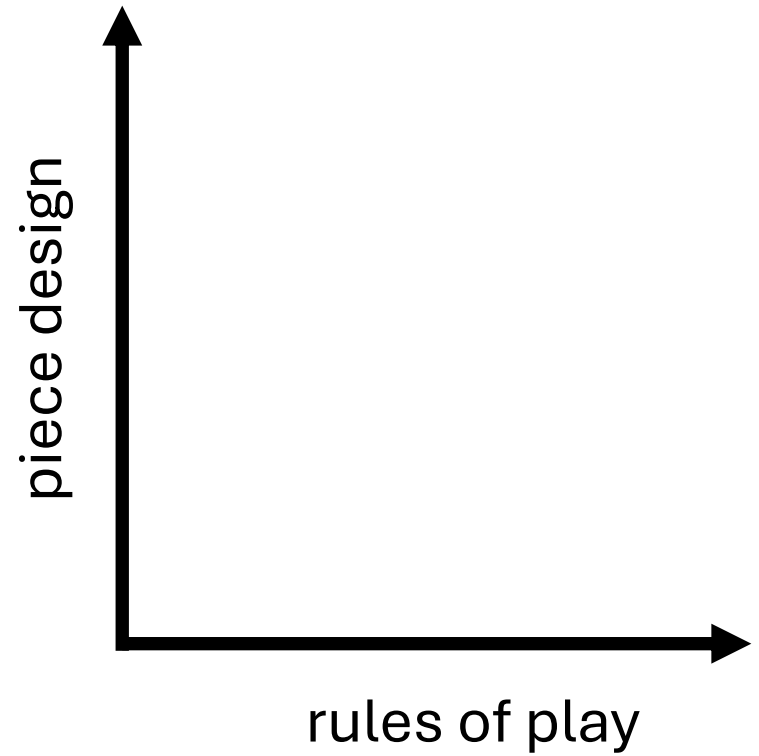
- strategy
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- visualisation
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variation & differentiation

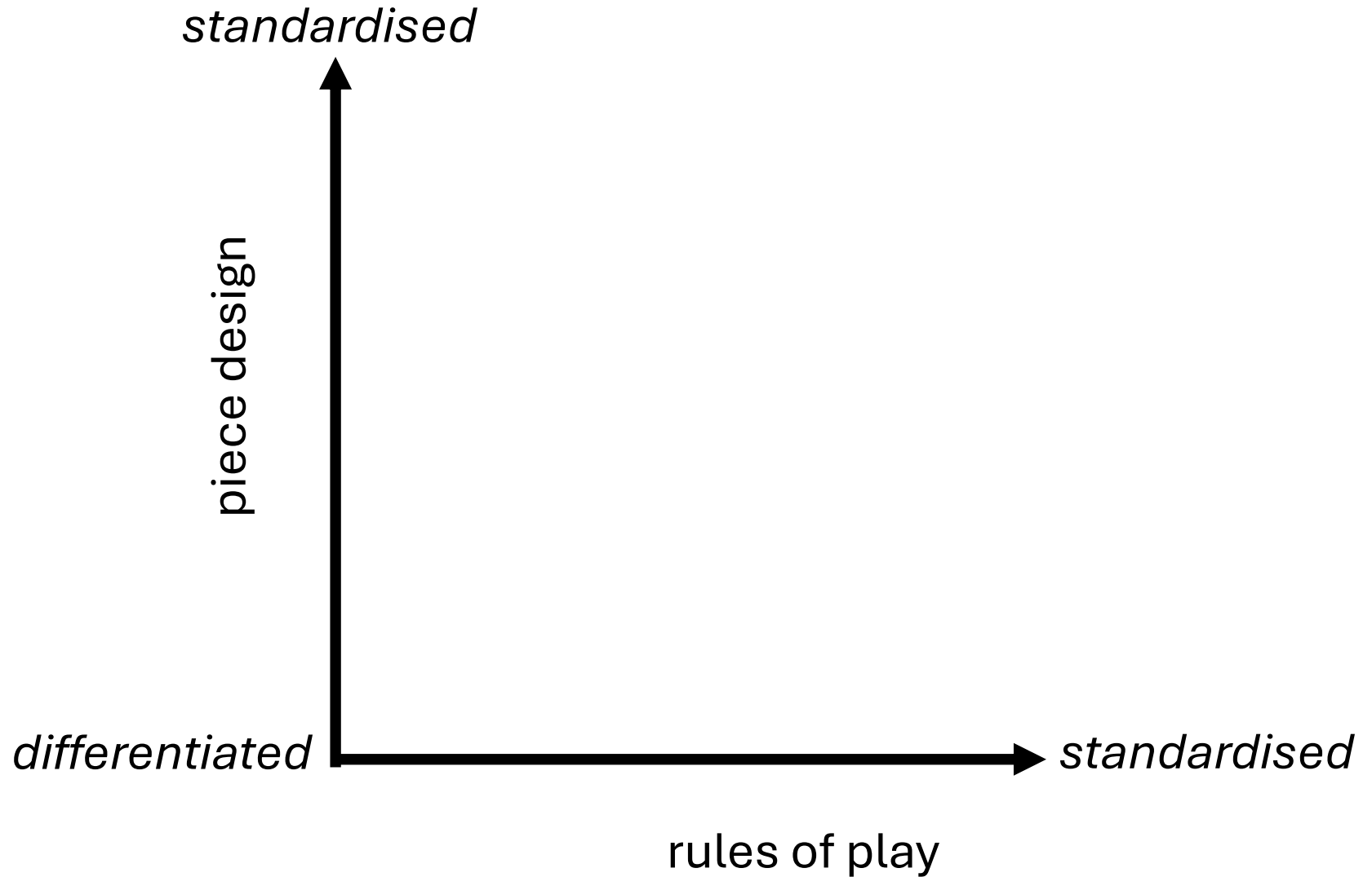




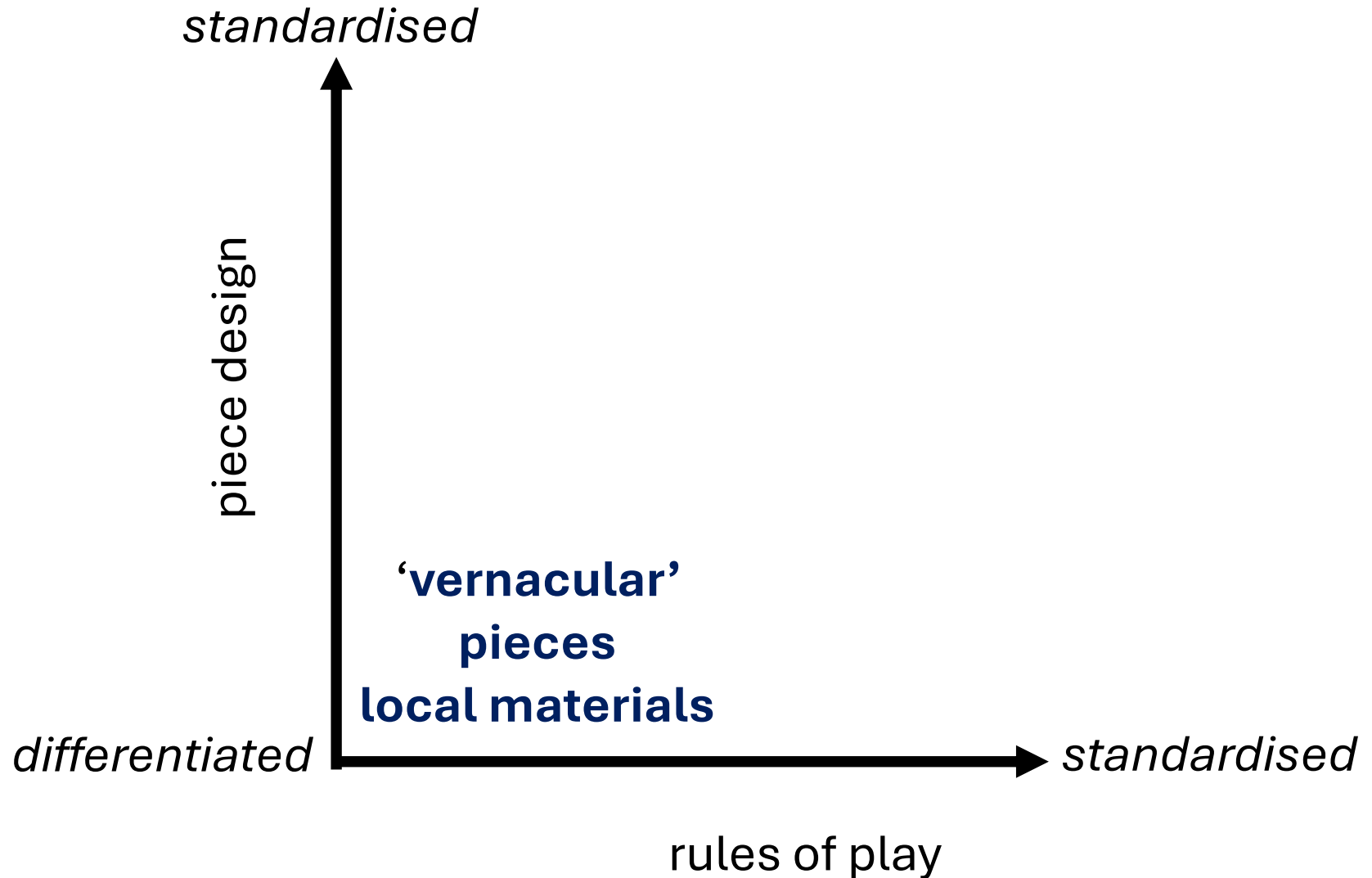
Local differentiation in piece design and rules of play



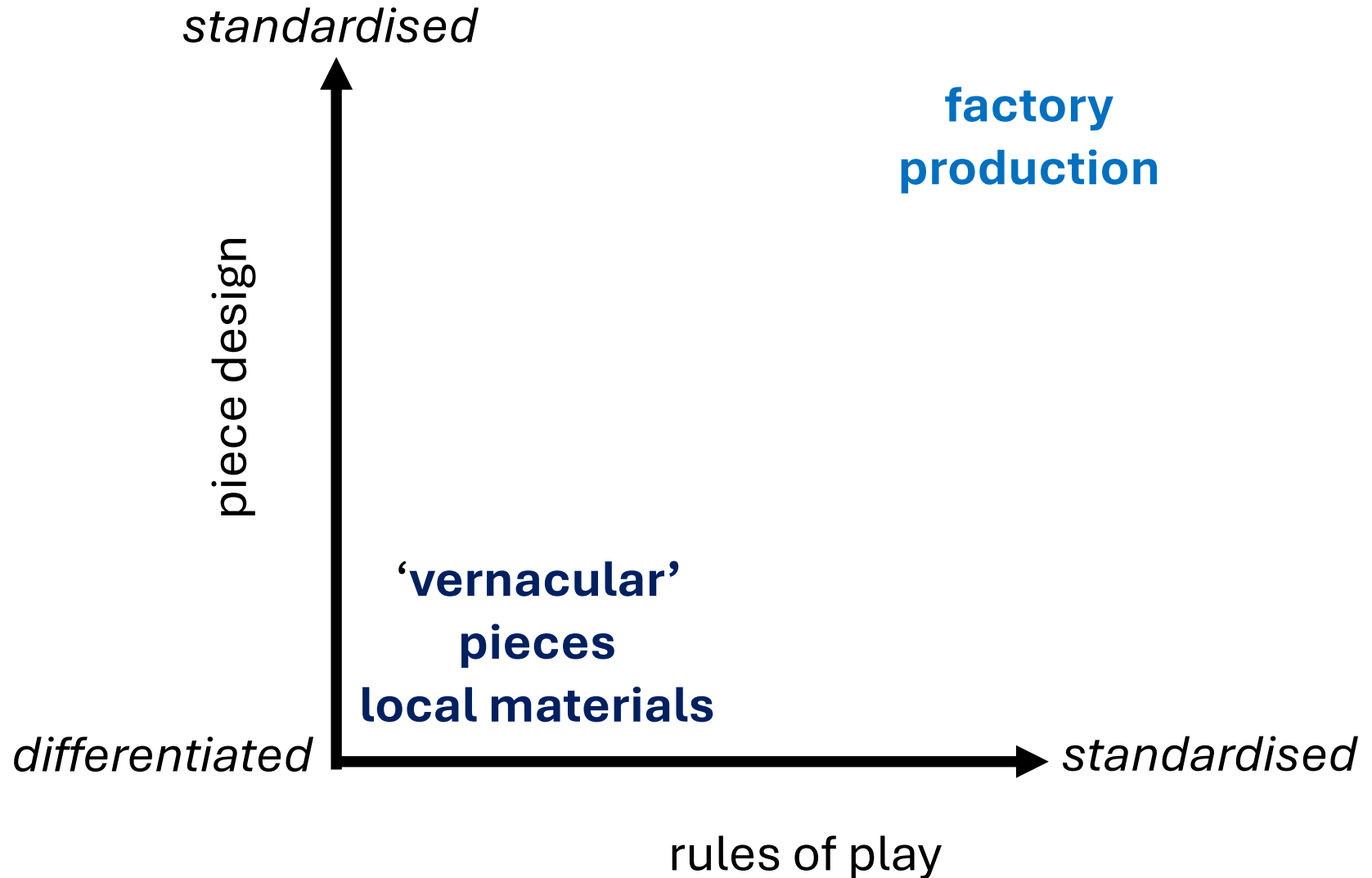
# A cultural ecological matrix of form & function



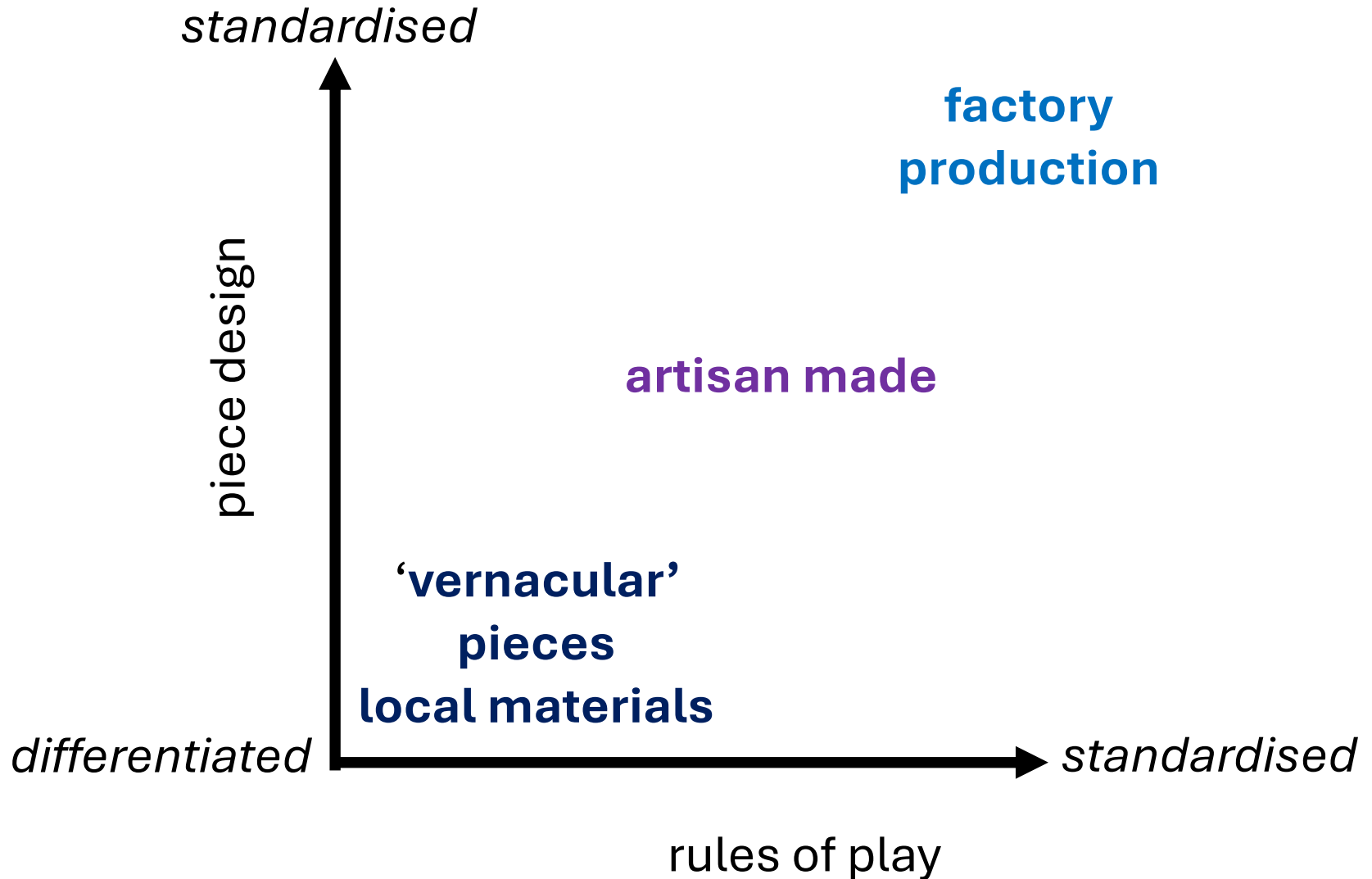
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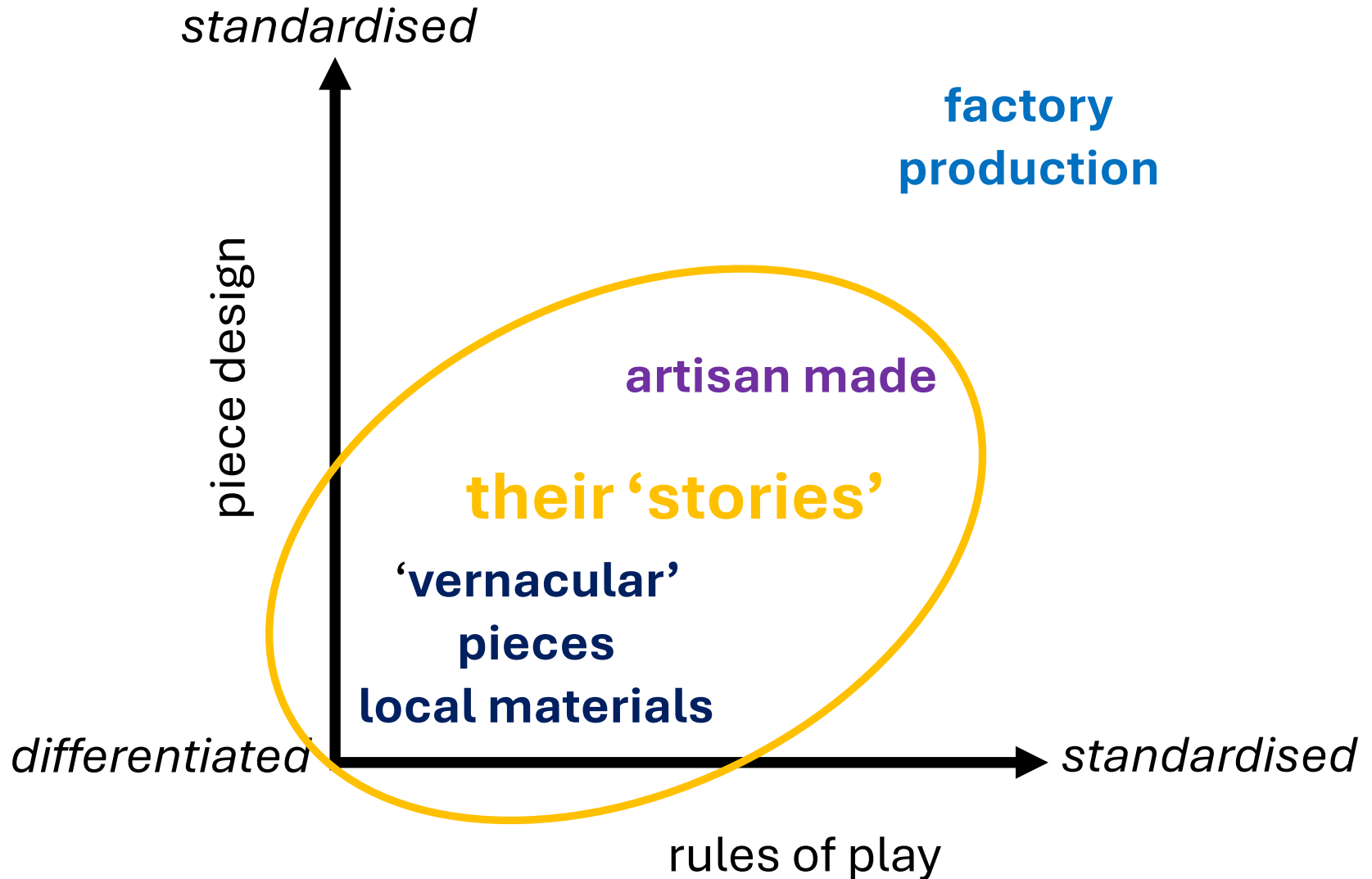


# A cultural ecological matrix of form & function





# A cultural ecological matrix of form & function





**Silja Mustaparta**



**Etusivu**

Osta tuotteita

Silmu-Keramiikka

Ota yhteyttä









Finnish troops on the eastern front, during the Winter War between the Soviet Union and Finland, January 1940

Photo: Hulton Archive

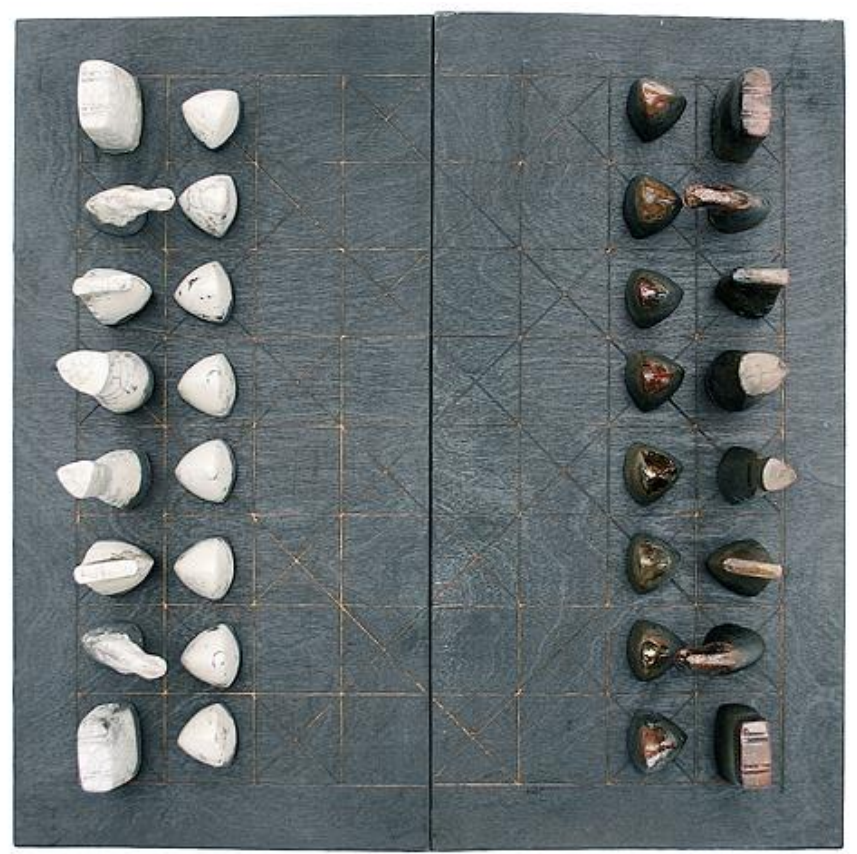
















# Curating the story

now



recent past



distant past

**testimony  
documentation**

**historical &  
archaeological research**

provenance



**????? ?????????????????????**





# Time and Mind

*The Journal of Archaeology, Consciousness and Culture*

ARTICLE



**Artefacts, found objects and early games. A cultural ecological perspective on proto-chess pieces**

Patrick Dillon

College of Social Sciences and International Studies, University of Exeter, Exeter, UK



# **A cultural ecological continuum of gaming artefacts**

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**naturally occurring materials  
with simple shapes**

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**figurines made from stone,  
clay, wood and other materials**

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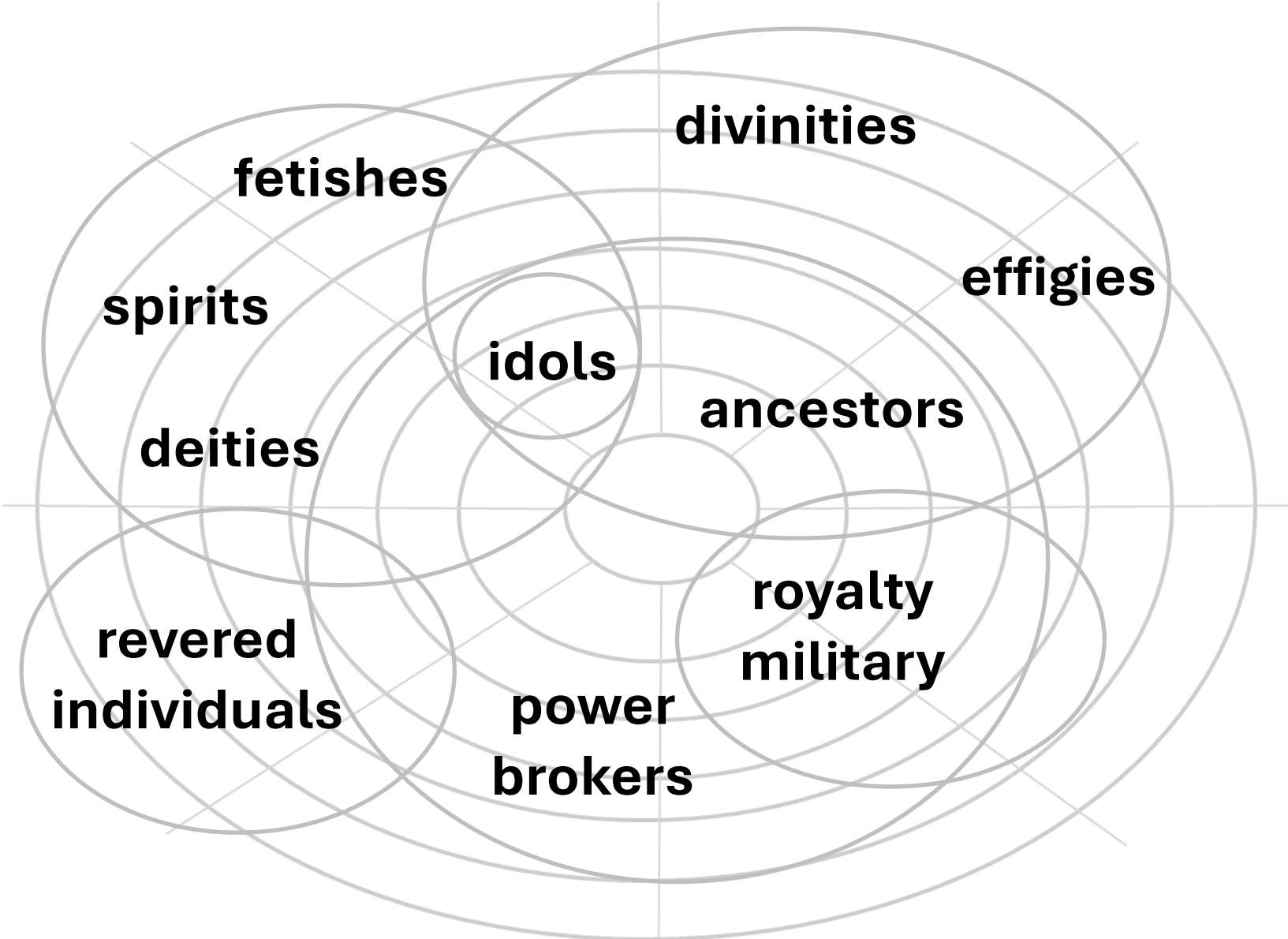
**naturally occurring materials shaped  
and embellished by human hands**

**figurines made from stone,  
clay, wood and other materials**

**proto-chess pieces**



# A cultural ecological of artefact representation



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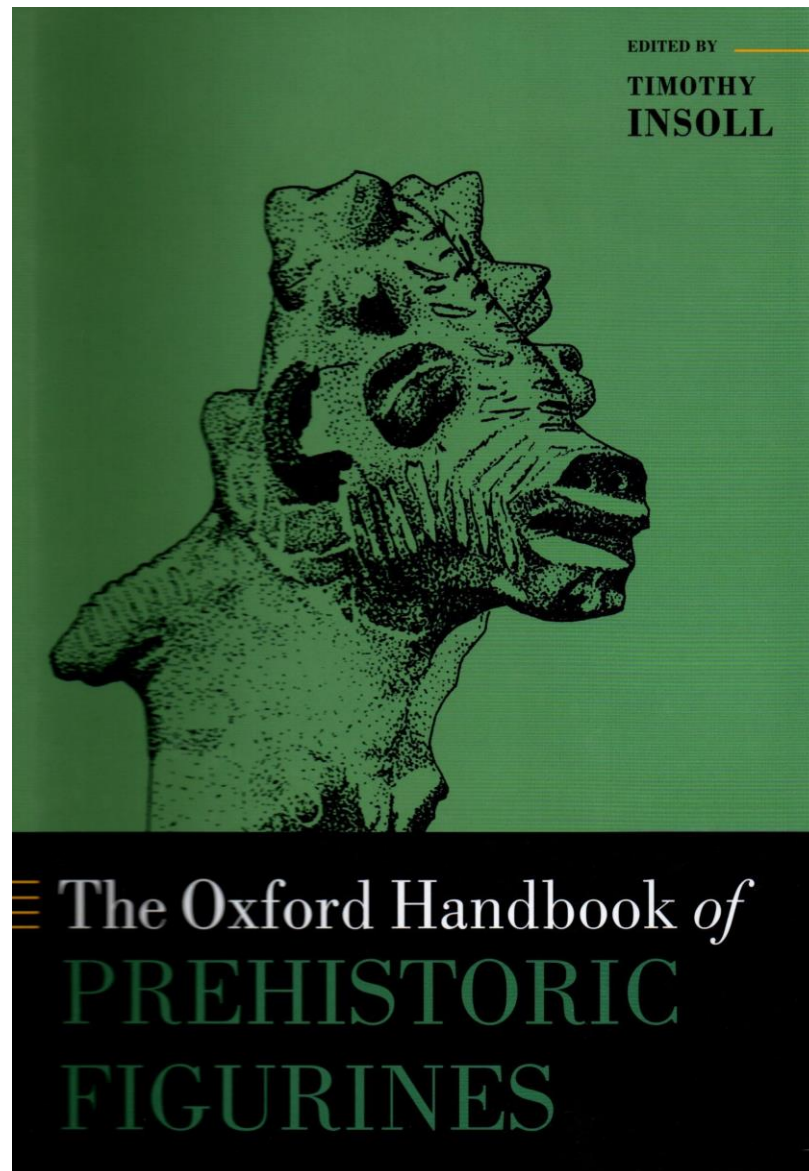
TIMOTHY  
INSOLL



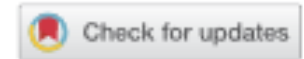
≡ The Oxford Handbook of  
PREHISTORIC  
FIGURINES

## A plea to archaeologists

- site-specific artefact clusters
- associated objects
- spatial distributions
- usage histories
- recurring patterns & connections
- the wider context



ARTICLE



## Artefacts, found objects and early games. A cultural ecological perspective on proto-chess pieces

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**p.j.dillon@exeter.ac.uk**