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SYMBOLS AND COMMUNICATION THROUGH CHILDREN’S DOLLS EXAMPLES FROM NORTH AFRICA AND THE SAHARA

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Abstract

In this article, I shall try to highlight some symbolic and communicative aspects of Saharan and North African dolls. First an analysis is given of the relative rarity of male and child dolls compared with the profusion of female dolls, followed by a presentation of the symbolic and realistic images of masculinity and femininity in dolls. Thirdly, the symbolic and realistic images of the dolls’ faces are discussed. Finally, in the conclusion, some general statements on the semiotic and communicative aspects of North African and Saharan children’s dolls and doll-play are proposed.

1. Introduction

In the first place, this article refers to my fieldwork among the Ghrib (1975-1977) (1), then sedentarizing nomads living in the North-western Tunisian Sahara, and in Morocco (1992-). Secondly, it results from research on the collection of North African and Saharan toys of the Musée de l’Homme in Paris, and, thirdly, from the analysis of the bibliography on these regions (2).

Only children’s dolls and doll-play are discussed upon (3). Ritual dolls, with curative or prophylactic functions, to threaten or to throw a spell, for getting rain or promoting fertility are left aside. Moreover, I do not discuss souvenir dolls and dolls in national dress.

In general, one could say that the dolls and the doll-play presented here, do belong to children living in communities that, although influenced by modernity
Figure 1: Map with geographic and ethnic references
and the European way of life, still honoured ancestral tradition, especially in the fields of socialization and the intergenerational transmission of norms and values. Therefore, information on children living in urbanized, industrialized and occidentalized centers is almost lacking. Chronologically, the period covered lasts from the beginning of this century up to the end of the seventies. Moreover, some recent information on Morocco and on the Ghrib has been added.

The map on figure 1 should facilitate the localization of the geographic and ethnic terms.

In this article, I shall try to highlight some symbolic and communicative aspects of Saharan and North African dolls. First an analysis is given of the relative rarity of male and child dolls compared with the profusion of female dolls, followed by a presentation of the symbolic and realistic images of masculinity and femininity in dolls. Thirdly, the symbolic and realistic images of the dolls’ faces are discussed. Finally, in the conclusion, some general statements on the semiotic and communicative aspects of North African and Saharan children’s dolls and doll-play are proposed.

2. Symbolic and communicative aspects of saharan and north african dolls

2.1. Female versus male and child dolls

In North Africa and the Sahara one finds as well male dolls as female dolls or child dolls. These dolls are made by the children themselves, sometimes also by a mother or older sister, rarely a female servant or artisan. Notwithstanding new information, boys play with or make female dolls only among the Tuareg and the Chaouia, two Berber groups.

The female dolls are without any doubt a lot more frequent than male or child dolls. Most of these female dolls represent brides. However, they also can be a married woman, a mother, and exceptionally an old or divorced woman.

With an exception for Morocco, I have noticed the existence of male dolls only among the children of populations living in the Sahara, especially the nomads and semi-nomads (e.g. the Tuareg, the Moors and the Ghrib). Those male dolls are made by girls and sometimes by boys, mostly Tuareg boys. They represent dromedarists (fig. 2) (4), horsemen, herdsmen, warriors, notable men or bridegrooms.
Figure 2: Toy dromedary and meharist, Tuareg, H 48 cm

Figure 3: Female doll with baby, Chaouia, H 21 cm
Child dolls seem to be very rare and if they do exist they closely resemble the adult male or female dolls. Nevertheless, the Chaouia mother doll carrying her baby doll on her back is there to show the relativity of every absolute statement (fig. 3) (5).

This rarity of a local doll representing a baby or an infant contrasts with the situation in Western Europe where, until recently and from the beginning of the nineteenth century onwards, the children mostly played with baby or infant dolls (6).

One should keep in mind that the dolls find their cognitive and communicative meaning only within the games played with them. A common sense statement too often forgotten when describing dolls.

In North Africa and the Sahara, such doll-play is a collective event assembling children, mostly girls, of the same family or neighbourhood. Furthermore, these children often use in their doll-play several other toys or play materials. They also integrate in their doll-play some songs, dances, counting and nursery rhymes, storytelling and word-games.

The information at my disposal shows that through their doll-play the children elaborate a personal interpretation of adult life in their community. With few exceptions, the dolls themselves and the play activities in which they figure, represent socially valued characters and activities. Thus, when analysing these dolls and doll-play, it becomes clear that as well the male as the female dolls of this region almost exclusively symbolize an idealized status of an adult man or woman, a man or a woman in a locally enviable situation. Reference is constantly made to the positive, worthy model to which the child should identify (7). Through the collective doll-play, in which often younger children mix with older ones, a lot of non-verbal behaviour, of language, physical and social environmental information, skills, ideas, symbols, norms and values are acquired and developed.

2.2. Symbolic and realistic images of masculinity and femininity in North African and Saharan dolls

Among the two most important nomadic peoples of the Sahara, the Tuareg and the Moors, the most striking difference between a male and a female doll is a standing versus a sitting posture. The male Tuareg doll of figure 4 (8) and the female Tuareg doll of figure 5 (9) illustrate this difference.
Figure 4: Warrior doll, Tuareg, H 20 cm

Figure 5: Female doll, Tuareg, H 16.5 cm
The standing posture of the male dolls seems to be a general feature in the North African and Saharan area and for which I know not a single exception.

The clothes and the ornaments of the male dolls imitate, sometimes unpretendingly but most of the time completely, the dress and ornaments of the Tuareg warriors or notable men. As the noble Tuareg who wears a bandoleer of nobility, most of the male dolls are decorated with woollen or cotton threads crossed on the chest. Some miniature Tuareg wear a turban, others have their head wrapped in the same threads. By winding the threads around the head of the male dolls in this typical way, the children symbolically represent the specific hairdo of a Tuareg man with the plaited hair brought back.

Some Tuareg male dolls carry a sword. The importance that this sword had in the mind of the boy who made the doll of figure 4, can be easily deduced from its length, a sword symbolizing virility and nobility.

About the Tuareg Kel Ahaggar noble boys, Bellin writes: what is at stake is a creative action - the young Targui sets up representations with a turning millstone or with a burning branch. He cuts out and models figurines, men and dromedaries. In their sense for performance and in their artistic creativity dreaming holds an important place (1963 : 100).

It is told about the same and another Tuareg group, the Tuareg Kel Iforas, that the male dolls of the boys are married to the girls’ female dolls in the customary way (Foley, 1930 : 47, Cortier, 1908 : 310).

All the female dolls of the Tuareg children have a sitting posture. Balout notes in this respect that as the Tuareg women traditionally always sit under the tent, the female doll is represented sitting, never standing up, in contrast with the male doll who is always in an upright position and standing near his dromedary (1959 : pl. LXVII).

These female dolls also have very developed buttocks, as shown on the doll in figure 5, because this is a sign of beauty and wealth. So the doll becomes a means to inculcate on the mind of the Tuareg child the ideal of female beauty, just as the Barbie doll does for the American and European child. An ideal of Tuareg female beauty realized in rich young girls by submitting them to a special diet based on rest and on plentiful nourishment, from their twelve or fifteen years onwards (Cortier, 1908 : 310).
Figure 6: Female doll, Tuareg, H 13.5 cm

Figure 7: Female doll, Tuareg
Some Tuareg female dolls show a symbolic representation of the breasts. On the doll of figure 6 (10) one remarks a geometrical pattern elaborated with red cotton threads. Figure 7 shows another geometric pattern figuring the breasts.

A Tuareg Kel Iforas researcher from Kidal in the Sahara of Mali, Ekhya Ag-Albostan, whom I met at the Département d’Afrique Blanche et du Proche Orient of the Musée de l’Homme on the 7th of July 1981, has given me some specific information on these typical dolls. The ’tamet n-meshlan’ dolls, meaning toy-woman, have a body made with an excrement of a donkey wrapped in a piece of fabric. This excrement represents the obese buttocks of a wealthy woman. Two thorns, entwined with varicoloured mercerised cotton threads, are fixed in the excrement. This doll wears clothes of indigo fabrics. The veil does not cover the face. In former times, also pieces of skin or large leaves were used as a dress for these dolls. The hairdo is composed of cotton plaits fixed in the way showed on the design. Sometimes one or more pearls embellish the upper part of the head. Well elaborated dolls have stylized patterns figuring the breasts. These patterns are done with varicoloured cotton threads entwined around little thorns pricked in the excrement. Ekhya Ag-Albostan designed the example seen on figure 7. The simplest form of this type of dolls, consisting of a thorn pricked in an excrement but without clothes or geometric patterns figuring the breasts, represents a young girl.

The miniaturized clay dolls of the girls of the Oualata Moors in Mauritania show the same kind of geometric patterns (fig. 8) (11).

It is the female servants who make these little dolls. They are used, along with miniaturized household utensils, in true copies of the Oualata houses. These doll-houses, as the real houses, are decorated all over with symbolic geometric patterns (12). The female servants model all these toys in clay and paint them.

Except for the geometric symbolization of the breasts on some female dolls of the children of the Tuareg and the Moors, those who wrote on the North African and Saharan dolls and my-self did not notice a realistic representation of the breasts on the dolls of these regions. However, there is one exception that of the Tedda female dolls in the Tibesti area in northern Chad. These Tedda dolls will be presented in the next chapter when discussing the representation of the dolls’ faces.

The female dolls together with the male dolls and the toy-animals of the Tuareg children form, once put in the desert sand, the actors of a little theatrical
Figure 8: female dolls, the Moors, H 3.5/4 cm

Figure 9: female doll, Belbala, H 23 cm
performance through which the children dream of and initiate themselves to adult life. Sometimes the female dolls represent women participating in the 'ahal', in which boys and girls can join from the age of about sixteen years onwards. The word ahal stands for a reunion, a conversation, a gallant meeting. These musical or literary reunions have a more or less specific character depending of their being mixed with 'asri' or not. Asri, meaning literally running with loose reins, indicates a way of living based on very loose manners. The ones who can be in a situation of asri are the nubile girls and boys, the widows and the widowers and the divorced ones of both sexes (Lhote, 1944: 288; see also Claudot-Hawad, 1986).

As a summarizing statement on this point of symbolic and realistic images of masculinity and femininity in North African and Saharan dolls, one could say that they show at the same time a realistic copy of an adult and a symbolic representation of an idealized social status. Both these images are elaborated in a straight figurative way, through posture, hairdo, clothing, ornamentation, and rarely physical characteristics such as the representation of the buttocks on the female dolls of the Tuareg and the Moors or of the breasts on Tedda dolls. On some female dolls of the Tuareg and the Moors the breasts are represented by a geometric design.

2.3. Symbolic and realistic images of the dolls’ faces

Among all the North African and Saharan male dolls I have seen or read about, not one has a face on which the eyes, the nose, the mouth or the ears are represented. These male dolls completely lack facial features, even those modelled in clay.

As the male dolls from all over the area, the female dolls of the children of the Saharan nomads have a symbolic face. Among the Tuareg, the Ghrib and the Moors (13), populations on which a more or less detailed information exists, the dolls have no facial features.

The same cannot be said of the female dolls of the sedentary Saharan populations, as for example the Belbala living in the oasis of Tabelbala in the north western Algerian Sahara. The facial features of these dolls are painted on the upper part of the bone forming the structure of the doll (fig. 9) (14).

Another example, showing the most realistic representation of a female doll’s head, is found among the Mozabites living in the seven cities of the Mzab Valley in the north eastern Algerian Sahara. The Mozabites, who found refuge in this area
Figure 10: Female doll, Mozabites. H 58.5 cm

Figure 11: Female doll, Tedda. H 26 cm
during the XIth century, belong to a puritanic non-orthodox Islamic sect. One of the three types of the girls’ dolls is a doll with a pasteboard head, a head imported by a Mozabite father from the north of Algeria, were almost all are tradesmen. The doll shown on figure 10 (15) was bought in 1934 for the exposition on the Sahara held in the Musée de l’Homme. It wears the dress and the jewels of Ghardaïa women. The make-up and tattoos have been painted on the face of the pasteboard head.

Between a total lack of facial features and their realistic representation, one finds among the Tedda of the Tibesti in the Chadian Sahara a more fancy elaboration of these features (fig. 11) (16).

The body and the limbs of these dolls are made with little acacia branches, two forming the legs and the body and another one for the arms, fixed in the shape of a cross. The Tedda girls model the buttocks of their dolls with sap of the acacia and cover them then with rags. The breasts are made with an unpitted date cut in two, the two halves being heated before they are modelled on the part of the branch serving as chest. The head is also an unpitted date that sticks on the upper part of the two branches forming the body and the neck. The dates used need to be fresh. The features of these dolls are elaborated with little varicoloured pearls encrusted in the heated date and representing in a fancy way the doll’s face.

It seems that the modernization of the North African and Saharan societies pushes the children away from a symbolic representation of the facial features towards a more realistic one. An evolution especially stimulated, as far as the children are concerned, by schooling and the mass-media.

The evolution of the dolls of the Ghrib girls from the Tunisian Sahara clearly exemplifies this. In the oasis of El Faouar where most of the Ghrib have settled, some brothers going to the primary school designed in 1975 facial features on the dolls their sisters had made. Traditionally, these dolls do not have such features and the Ghrib girls respected this norm (fig. 12) (17). Nevertheless, the girls did not oppose their brothers’ spontaneous action and one of them even tried to do the same. These last years another innovation in the making of the female dolls did arise. Therefore the girls have made use of one of the waste products of the consumptive society, a consumptive society that has succeeded in integrating the Ghrib community to an increasing extent. This waste product is an empty plastic flask that serves as the doll’s head by putting it over a vertical stick. An elaborated face has been designed on the flask by the girl who made the doll shown on figure 13 (18).
Conclusion

With regard to the shape and the outlook of the dolls of North African and Saharan children, each population of this area seems to have hold onto not more than a few well defined models. As within each community the children play with the same kind of dolls, their similitude facilitates the elaboration and communication of shared significations. This elaboration and communication of shared significations being strengthened by the fact that most of the children make themselves their dolls. Thus the dolls and the doll-play can be viewed as an efficient communicative tool for the keeping up of the socio-cultural system.

Through dolls and doll-play a lot of symbols, significations, aesthetic, social and moral values are transmitted from one generation to the other and interiorised by the children in a ludic way. In this context, the ludic intergenerational interaction between children and adults on the one hand and between older and younger children on the other hand is of the uttermost importance (19). However, one can ascertain that in North African and Saharan doll-play, it normally being a collective activity not an individual one, the interaction among peers is largely predominant. In their collective doll-play these children from the same family or neighbourhood, enact their interpretation of the adult world, of female and sometimes male activities, of festivities.

The dolls, directly related as they are to the social and cultural background in which they evolve, form part of the visual communication system of the community in which a child grows up and whereby, through conventionalized signs, an exchange between the child and its environment takes place. Or to put it in another way, dolls and other toys belong, as D.S. Clarke jr. would say, to a "set of significant sign elements used to communicate between members of a society" (1987 : 96).

Although this exchange almost always refers to an idealized and socio-culturally esteemed vision of adult roles and situations, this does not mean that the child only passively comes into contact with these roles and situations. What is taking place in children’s doll-play is their interpretation of adult life in their community. The children are not merely undergoing the influence of the proposed models of adult life, they are appropriating, adapting and changing them to their own needs.
Doll-play is not limited to visual communication through the doll, as other non-verbal communication, through gesture and dancing, and verbal communication, through dialogues and songs, play an important role in it.

Jeopardizing the social and cultural differences, one could compare the traditional North African and Saharan dolls to the Barbie and Ken dolls or their imitations, nowadays sold in the cities of this area, all representing young adult women or men. I wonder if it would not be to hazardous to argue that they all serve the same symbolic and communicative function, namely the promoting of the interaction between the world of the child and the adult world.

However it becomes clear that a totally different situation prevails in the area viewed in this article when reading the following statement of Gilles Brougère (1992 : 17) : Barbie is the independant adult, its way of life is far away from the daily experience of most of the children. It is therefore an image bearing no relation to the present and the future of the (Western European) child and it is embarassing for a lot of parents that it permits the child to express its desire of becoming an adult through a way that seems to break away from more acceptable images. In North Africa and the Sahara, even today for most of them, the children have to take part in adult activities from a young age onwards. This way, adult life forms part of their daily experience, especially for the girls. Nothwithstanding recent exceptions, the dolls and the doll-play there do refer to the local reality of as well the children as the parents. These recent exceptions are among other factors caused by the European dolls brought back as a gift for the Moroccan children, and probably the other North African children, by family members living all over Western Europe (20).

Finally, North African doll-play, as well as play in general, can be usefully analysed as a particular strategy and content of communication. In this light, it probably are not the games and the toys themselves who are the most important but what they offer as significations or messages to the child, the adult, the player, the onlooker, the community.

Notes

(1) Since 1975 and up to the present all my research has been subventioned by the Belgian National Foundation for Scientific Research, Brussels.
My research among the Ghrib lasted for three periods of three months in spring and autumn 1975 and in spring 1977. This research was facilitated thanks to the intermediary of my friend and colleague dr. Gilbert J.M. Claus who was already doing research among the Ghrib. Up to know he has remained into close contact with this population.


(3) A detailed comparative analysis of North African and Saharan dolls and doll-play has been published in French. See Jean-Pierre Rossie, 1993. For all information contact the Centre d’Etudes Roland Houdon, 450 rue des Jonquilles, F 45770 Saran, France.

(4) Toy dromedary and meharist doll, Tuareg, Aïr region, Sahara, Niger, collected by A. Bourgeois in March 1974, H 48 cm, collection of the Musée de l’Homme, photograph M. Delaplanche.

(5) Female doll with baby on her back, made by a girl of the Chaouia, Aurès region, north east Algeria, collected by the Germaine Tillion Mission, 1936-1937, H 21 cm, H of baby doll 6 cm, Collection of the Musée de l’Homme, photograph D. Destable.

(6) Brougère Gilles & Manson Michel (1989-1990 : 73) : This type of doll (the adult female doll Barbie)... is in fact the remake of that what the doll has been during the greatest part of its history, before the success of the representations of children and then of babies... The effect of novelty reposes on an interesting historical amnesia : during the XVIIIth century and in the eyes of the educationalists, the doll still was the symbol of female coquetry, and it is only in the XIXth century that it becomes a symbol of maternal instinct. Brougère Gilles (1992 : 16) adds to this : a lot of (French) adults hesitate to call Barbie a doll. The referent to the doll remains for them the representation of a baby and the doll-play refers to mothering.

(7) To a certain extent, the same seems to be true in Western societies as Gilles Brougère states : For the real status of dependance of the child, play offers a compensation, the translation of a desire of independance through positive images of the adult world (1992 : 12).

(9) Female doll, Tuareg, city of Agadez, Air region, Sahara, Niger, collected by Henri Lhote before 1937, H 16,5 cm, collection of the Musée de l’Homme, photograph D. Destable.

(10) Female doll, made by a Tuareg girl, Adrar des Iforas region, Sahara, Mali, H 13,5 cm, Collection of the Musée de l’Homme, photograph M. Delaplanché.


(13) One of the three types of female dolls of the Moors known to me forms an exception. This doll from the urban centre of Boutiliimit in the south west of Mauritania, described by Jean Gabus in 1958, has a face with a small triangular mouth, a nose, eyes and eyebrows. See Rossie Jean-Pierre, 1993: 81, figure 45.

(14) Female doll, made by a Belbala girl, oasis of Tabelbala, north west Algeria, collected by Dominique Champault, 1954, H 23 cm, Collection du Musée de l’Homme, photograph Ch. Lemzaouda.

(15) Female doll, Mozabites, city of Ghardaïa, Sahara, Algeria, collected by Lt. d’Armagnac, 1934, H 58,5 cm, Collection of the Musée de l’Homme, photograph M. Delaplanché.

(16) Female doll, made by a Tedda girl, Tibesti region, Sahara, Tchad, collected by Oleg Lopatinsky, 1963, H 26 cm, Collection of the Musée de l’Homme, photograph D. Destable.

(17) Female doll, made by a Ghrib girl, oasis of El Faouar, Sahara, south west Tunisia, Spring 1975, H 19 cm, collected and photographed by the author.
(18) Female doll, made by a Ghrib girl, oasis of El Faouar, Sahara, south west Tunisia, August 1991, H 25 cm collected and photographed by Gilbert J.M. Claus.

(19) See chapter on "Relationship between Generations in Ludic Activities" in Rossie Jean-Pierre, "Children’s Play, Generations and Gender. With Special Reference to the Ghrib (Tunisian Sahara)", in "Special Issue on Children’s Play", Ethnografica IX, Peloponnesian Folklore Foundation, Athens, in print.

(20) The adult-child communication through the gift of a doll, so common in Western societies, was almost completely lacking in the societies discussed here as the children made themselves their dolls most of the time. And even when a mother, an older sibling or somebody else made the doll, this doll, notwithstanding few exceptions, does not partake in a system of rewarding or of giving a token of affection. Only exceptionally the doll serves as a gift object. This situation stands in clear contrast with that in Western societies, described by Brian Sutton Smith (1992: 7) as follows: the toys are given as a token of the family ties. The parent says "I give you this present to bind you to me, now go to play alone". In order to fill this impression of solitude, some of these presents are soft toys, animals and dolls which the child will treat as imaginary companions.

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