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TOY DESIGN: REFLECTIONS OF AN ANTHROPOLOGIST

by Jean-Pierre Rossie, Belgium

Researching in a broader perspective on the topic of “Toys, Culture and Society” I started, in view of the Workshop on Toy Design at NCFL, Halmstad University, Sweden, 26-28 August 1997, and of the Fifth Unesco Workshop and Symposium “Toys for Children’s Rehabilitation, Hipolstein, Germany, 20 September-5 October 1997, to reflect on toy design in a cross-cultural perspective, especially from my own background as socio-cultural anthropologist specialized in African childhood, play activities, games and toys.

In this overview I propose a tentative analysis of some relationships between toys, toy design and the sociocultural environment. Therefore, I shall place the Barbie doll and the Brownie or gnome doll in a Saharan and North African context followed by some reflexions on the aspect of security in toy design, on sociocultural reproduction and continuity through toys and on creativity through toys.

For the 32 illustrations, the notes and the bibliographical references related to this text please look for the extended version of this summary at the NCFL library or at the library of ‘Fördern durch Spielmittel - Spielzeug für behinderte Kinder e.v.’, Immanuelkirchstrasse 24, 10405 Berlin, Germany.

Who is Barbie?

In the actual Western context Barbie is an idealized model for young girls as well as boys of all classes of how a young woman should look like, what she should strive after and how she should behave.

Except among the upper class, most men and women of the present day Saharan and North African communities have a totally different viewpoint on the same Barbie. The ideal female model there is a decently dressed well fed, even corpulent, young woman as symbolized in the female dolls made by the girls of these regions. In Morocco, a Barbie-like woman is seen as ‘une squelette vivante’, a ‘living skeleton’, a woman whose appearance is to be attributed to one of the following pitiful conditions: poorness, sickness, having problems. So it is not surprising that some women take pills to thicken, just as they do it in the West to grow lean.

Nevertheless, a thin female doll with a locally crocheted Andalusian flamenco dress is finding its way into the Moroccan houses. But these
dolls are only used as house decorations, especially on television sets. However, it is possible that in a more or less near future the Barbie model could surpass the traditional model as it has already succeeded to do among the upper class.

Who is Brownie the gnome?

The second example of the direct relationship between toys and the sociocultural environment in which they are made or introduced, comes from my personal experience in the Tunisian Sahara. When I did research among the seminomadic Ghrib in the Spring of 1975, I received some female dolls from several girls. When I returned there for a second research period the same year, I brought with me several dolls made by my wife. She thought that such a Brownie doll, a gnome-like doll or a more or less similar female doll, would be a nice personalized gift for those girls who gave me their own doll. When I handed over these dolls to the girls in question they seemed pleased, although somewhat astonished. However, what happened then with these dolls is still a secret to me. Once the girls returned home with their doll, I never did see them again nor did anybody mention their existence anymore. But even if I do not know what really happened to these Brownies, the informations I found since then on foreign dolls imported in more or less isolated Saharan and North African traditional communities point in the same direction. Such strange dolls were viewed with much suspicion and felt to be possibly dangerous especially for pregnant women and babies. Pregnant women who would look at these deformed figures could have deformed babies, a popular belief that also existed in Europe decades ago.

These two examples, of Barbie and Brownie, underline the fact that without situating the toys, games and play activities into a particular sociocultural context it becomes almost impossible to describe and to understand them, to see their significance and to feel their influence and importance.

Toy design with natural materials

Without trying to give an exhaustive list of the natural materials used for making toys taken from the local environment, these items can be grouped as follows:

materials of mineral origin (sand, clay, paint, stones, pebbles...), material of vegetal origin (cactus, flowers, leaves, palm, branches, reed, bark, sap, glue, paint, ear of maize, nuts, dates, courgettes, potatoes...), material of animal origin (bones, horns, hair, skin, entestines, dung...), material of human origin (hair, parts of the body or the whole body).

Through making toys and playing with them the children experience and learn a lot about materials, techniques and structures.
**Toy design with waste materials**

Children are masters in the re-utilization of waste materials and they use them a lot in making toys. An incomplete list contains the following items:

earthenware material (pieces of pottery, pearls, buttons...), glass material (pieces of glass utensils, bottles, pearls...), wooden material (pieces of timberwood, spoons...), fibrous material (cotton, woolen or synthetic threads and rags, pieces of carpets...), metallic material (pieces of iron, aluminium, copper and tin, wires, tins, cans, nails, needles, safety pins, parts of bycicles and cars...), plastic and rubber material (tubes, tires, pipes, flasks, cans, bottles bottle stoppers...), paper material (paper, pasteboard, cardboard...), other material (pencils, ballpoints, ink, paint, glue, candle, make up products...). Imported materials, new or recuperation, are also used by the children.

As different materials are often used in combination, the same toy can exemplify the use of natural materials of different origin as well as the use of different kinds of waste materials.

**Toy design and security**

There can be no doubt about it that the making of dolls and other toys with natural and waste materials by the Saharan and North African children represents some physical danger for these toymakers. Although I do not know of any study of eventual accidents and injuries that happened to these toymaking children and even if I never witnessed such events or was told about them, they surely must happen.

At least one attitude towards making toys with natural and waste materials in these societies I can think of, could partially explain the fact that I never was told about injuries caused to children while making toys. Parents and other adults as well as the children themselves find it so obvious that toys are made by children with these materials that minor injuries are seen as insignificant events and so as quickly forgotten as they can happen.

One can also argue that to a certain extent the making of toys by the children learns them to become careful in the handling of potentially dangerous objects and tools.

Another possibility is that making toys most of the time is a collective activity so that older girls or boys have some preventing influence on younger children trying to manipulate objects they do not master yet. However, these young children can at the same time have access to objects used by the older ones they otherwise would not have at their disposal.
These few remarks bring to the foreground the question of security and insecurity of making toys in such situations. Surely a very problematic question as a discussion on these topics will reveal opposing viewpoints: the ones stressing the creativity and developmental advantages of selfmade toys, the others underlining the inherent danger of doing so and arguing for actions in this respect, e.g. by warning parents and teachers possibly through radio and television programmes.

So, there is an urgent need for case studies relevant to the problems of toy-security in communities where children still make their toys themselves so that, at the one hand, the developmental benefits of creating toys would not be sacrificed for fear of possible injuries and, on the other hand, the major risks might be prevented through an adapted sensibilization.

**Sociocultural reproduction and continuity through toys**

An African example of continuity in toy design is offered by the spatial and temporal distribution of toy-animals in clay, especially of a special type of toy-animal modelled with the two front legs assembled in one leg. In the collection of Saharan and North African toys of the Musée de l’Homme I found some three-legged toy-animals made in the 1930ies by the female servants of the Moors of Oualata, a small town in the Mauritanian Sahara.

In a publication describing another collection of the Musée de l’Homme on archeological objects found in 1904 at the borders of the Niger river in Mali, I found the same type of toy-animals (Lebeuf et Pâques, 1970 : 53-54) Yet, in two articles on the archeological excavations of the oldest West African city, the ancient town of Jenné-jeno in the Niger Delta in Mali, are shown some toy-animals, once more in clay, that date back to more or less two thousand years. Susan and Roderick McIntosh, the archeologists leading these excavations, wrote: “Toys made from river mud, miniature clay animals and cattle are a common sight in modern Jenné. Broken pieces of clay - still recognizable as cows, sheep and a Niger-dwelling manatee - found at the ancient Jenné were immediately identified by the workmen as toys (1982 : 407, 410, 413). One of these toy-animals used by the children of Jenné-jeno, figuring among other toy-animals from the same excavation on the cover of The Unesco Courier of May 1984, seems to indicate that it only has one front leg, just as the toy-animals found in 1904 at the border of the Niger river in Mali or the toy animals of the children of the Moors of Oualata in the Mauritanian Sahara. But even if these toy-animals would have two front legs, they still strongly resemble in their general aspect the toy-animals in clay made by the Saharan and North African children of the twentieth century.

This continuity in toy design and in the material used to create the toy-animals is not so surprising if one bears in mind the striking similarity
between some ancient Egyptian or Greek toys and some modern toys such as dolls, toy-animals, knucklebones, marbles...

In the more or less traditional milieus of North Africa and the Sahara, the dolls and doll-play reflect the social and cultural realities of the community in which the children grow up. As far as I have been able to verify this, they only refer to adult life, a few exceptions left aside. The girls' dolls and those of the boys are not isolated objects but serve for games in which an imitation of female or male life is enacted. The female doll becomes a bride, a spouse, a mother, even a divorced or an old woman. The male doll becomes a bridegroom, a herdsman, a notable man, a warrior, a horseman, a dromedarist, a mule-driver.

In his doll-play the child very often anticipates the life it will have as an adult and with few exceptions, the dolls themselves and the play activities in which they figure, represent socially valued characters and activities. The dolls of those regions and periods 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 adult model to which the child should identify.

Another anthropologist, Mario L. Aguilar, speaking of the children of a Kenyan population wrote: "they could begin playing and therefore learning how to become a Waso Boorana" (1994: 35). Although this is a correct statement, what is at stake is the interpretation by the Saharan and North African children of the adult world through their dolls and doll-play, not just a simple and clear imitation of it.

Creativity through toys

A somewhat unusual creative action was surely undertaken in 1975 by a few Grib boys who designed facial features on their sisters' dolls that traditionally did not have facial features, a custom still honoured by the girls at that moment although some of these girls clumsily tried to imitate their brothers. Later on, in 1991, Grib girls of the following generation made a creative use of a waste product of the consumptive society, a plastic flask, to give a new head to their dolls at the same time designing well elaborated facial features on it.

Generally speaking, one would feel inclined to stress the collective and standardized aspect of doll-play in these regions. However, the more I have the possibility to observe and to be informed on the doll-play in Morocco, the more I become aware of the possibility that, beneath this apparent uniformity of the types of dolls and of the themes in the doll-play particular of each ethnic group or region, individual variations proper to each child or small playgroup are hidden. A striking example is given through the analysis of the dolls and doll-play of the three Laabib sisters from Ksar Assaka in Morocco who played within a small
playgroup and with some years of difference between 1975 and 1985 near the same paternal home.

A truly individual creativity comes to the foreground in the case of a 12 year old girl of a poor quarter of Marrakech in Morocco who made out of an undressed plastic doll, made in China, a beautiful bride doll of Marrakech and in the case of a 13 year-old boy from the small village Ignern in Morocco making a nice tractor with nothing more than pieces of cactus, little branches, pieces of rubber and plastic bottle stoppers.

These and other examples exemplify the children’s inventiveness combined with their skillful manipulation of natural and waste materials in the making of toys.

With regard to North African and Saharan toy making children, the following statement remains entirely adequate: “The play environment permits children to openly express their personality, engage in different roles, and develop their views of the world.” (Bathiche and Derevensky, 1955: 53).