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Toys in changing North African educational and socio-cultural contexts

Jean-Pierre Rossie

Introduction

When speaking of toys, and the games in which they are used, in North Africa and the Sahara an enormous territory as well as a complex socio-cultural area are evoked. So one should beware of hurried generalizations. One reason for this lies in the diversity of physical, economic, social and cultural environments that create a big difference between a small Berber-speaking semi-nomadic Saharan settlement and an Arabic-speaking large Moroccan town with an old urban tradition. Another reason to be suspicious of general statements is found in the lack of as well previous as contemporary research on play, games and toys in this region. In my recently published quite exhaustive *Bibliography on play, games and toys in North Africa and the Sahara* (1993) only some 150 titles of books and articles are mentioned and in a lot of these publications these themes are only marginally touched upon.

Referring to the focus of the conference on the significance of toys as a reflection of a changing society, the first topic discussed analyses the relationship between toys and the evolution of North African and Saharan societies. Here I shall give some examples of toys from the Tunisian Sahara and from Morocco in the light of their evolution from tradition to modernity. These examples, based on my own research\(^1\), will propose some changes in the dolls and in the toys imitating means of transport and technology. As a second topic the role of toys and ludic activities in the changing educational context of Morocco will be questioned by reviewing the efforts for pedagogical renewal in the preschool system made by the “Groupe Atfale” of the University Mohamed V and by the Ministry of Education both located in Rabat.

\(^1\) This research has been subventioned by the Belgian National Foundation for Scientific Research from 1975 till 1992.
other non-verbal communication, through gesture and dancing, and verbal communication, through dialogues and songs, play an important part in it.

Saharan and North African children’s dolls represent, with very few exceptions, young adult women or men. Although these children generally refer in their doll-play to an idealized or socio-culturally esteemed vision of adult roles and situations, this does not mean that they only passively come into contact with these roles and situations. What is taking place in children is 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.

My first example of the evolution of female dolls, largely the most common dolls in the region, comes from the Ghrib, a population of some 5,000 people in 1975 living in the Tunisian Sahara. This Ghrib community, which changed from a nomadic way of life before 1960 to a semi-nomadic lifestyle in the seventies, has nowadays completely settled down3.

The evolution of the girls’ female dolls took place in a period of fifteen years, between 1975 and 1990. The traditional dolls represent a bride and have a stereotype frame of two crossed sticks. They are individualized by their clothes, made of all kinds of rags. The jewels they wear are a replication of those a girl receives from her future husband but they are made out of iron wire, pieces of tin cans and aluminum fragments. Finally, the dolls wear two plaits of goat-hair, which hang before the ears, just as married women have, and one or more pieces of clothes serve as a handkerchief (fig. 1).

In the oasis of El Faouar where most Ghrib have settled down, some brothers going to the primary school designed in 1977 facial features on the dolls their illiterate sisters had made (fig. 2). Traditionally, these dolls do not have such features and the Ghrib girls respected this norm (fig. 3, doll on the right). Nevertheless, the girls did not oppose their

3 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 now he has remained into close contact with this population.
brothers' spontaneous action and some girls even tried clumsily to do the same (fig. 3, doll on the left).

Some fifteen years later, in 1991, the facial features now designed by the school girls themselves are well elaborated. Moreover, these last years another innovation in the making of female dolls did arise. Therefore the Ghrib 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 4. My friend and colleague dr. Gilbert J. M. Claus, who photographed this new type of dolls, told me that the Ghrib girls actually also make doll heads cut out in a piece of cardboard or whole dolls with textile fabrics.

The second example of the slow but inevitable evolution of female dolls is located in the city of Marrakech in Southern Morocco. In Marrakech girls of all social milieus commonly made, until the second world war, the traditional doll with a frame of reed. A doll that, as everywhere in North Africa and the Sahara, almost always represents a bride. The traditional doll, shown on figure 5, was made at the beginning of the 1960s, but this type of doll remained common during the 1970s.

Although in 1993 some young women of two popular quarters of Marrakech were convinced that the traditional doll was not made anymore nowadays, an assistant-professor of the University of Marrakech (Youssef Aït Ammou) said that it was still possible to see here or there in popular quarters a girl playing with a female doll made of reed. Nevertheless, the evolution of the traditional doll, with an armature of reed and made by the girls themselves, towards the plastic doll, nowadays purchased in the local markets or little shops for about 6 dirham (4.5 SEK, 3.5 FF or 0.7 $), seems to have started several decades ago, probably after the second world war, at least in the important towns.

In the more or less better off milieus in Marrakech, the traditional doll became rare after 1950. In the beginning of the 1960s, the daughters of a primary schoolmistress (Mme. Skouri, school Kbour Chou Essmara) played with imported dolls they dressed with the clothes of a small child

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4 My research in Morocco started in February 1992 and is directed towards children’s games and toys in rural areas and in popular quarters of towns.
or those their mother or they themselves made. According to the necessities of their fantasy play, the doll was dressed as a baby, a young girl or a woman and she listened to the name Sofia or Yasmina (fig. 6).

In the popular quarters of Marrakech, the doll with a frame of reed and without facial features survived much longer. In a really poor quarter of the city (Douar Akioud) most of the girls still played with this traditional doll around 1980. But a young woman of 21 years in 1992 and living in the same quarter already played at the end of the 1970s with a plastic doll (fig. 7). This woman (Fatima Kader), now skilled in the embellishment of hands and feet with traditional henna-designs, was kind to show me how she transformed, as a girl of nine years, the doll from Hong Kong, China or elsewhere, into a bride of Marrakech (fig. 8).

Nowadays, one finds everywhere in Morocco Barbie-like dolls dressed with a locally crocheted Andalusian dancing dress (fig. 9). However, these dolls do not often function as toys for young Moroccan girls. They are used as house decoration, especially on television sets.

It seems that the modernization of 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 toys representing means of transport and technology

The evolution of North African and Saharan dolls refer to the ludic activities of girls in these regions, as boys only rarely make dolls. The evolution of toys representing means of transport and technology on the contrary belongs to the sphere of ludic activities of the boys.

In the 1970s when the Ghrib lived a more or less semi-nomadic life, their boys liked to play with and to make a sometimes mounted toy-

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dromedary (fig. 10). But for a toddler just a piece of wood would do to represent the symbiosis that existed over centuries between the Ghrib and their dromedaries of which they were renowned breeders (fig. 11).

In the second half of the 1970s it was obvious that different toys and games of the Ghrib boys were influenced by the evolution of their community from nomadism to sedentariness, such as playing at being a village merchant or at irrigating a miniature oasis garden. This evolution, however, was very clear in the case of toys representing means of transport, for example in the making of miniature carts with a toy-mule as draught-animal typical for a sedentarized way of life (fig. 12). There were also some self-made toys, called bicycles, with which their owners run over the sand dunes (fig. 13, 14). However, more popular were the toy-cars as in the case of the Peugeot collective taxi made with wet sand (fig. 15). Young boys identified so much with this prestigious item of modernity that they themselves became a living car (fig. 16).

Now that the oasis of El Faouar, where most Ghrib have settled down, has grown out to be an important administrative and urbanized center, it becomes possible to buy a number of small plastic toys in its shops, especially during festivities. When this toy selling expands, it will certainly cause a regression of toy making by the Ghrib children themselves.

A truly important consequence of the impact of sedentarization and modernization on Ghrib families is the development of a new gender differentiation in children’s play activities. It is not because of a personal choice or sheer chance that the toys representing modern means of transport were only made by the Ghrib boys but it reflects the reality of children’s games and toys among the Ghrib in the second half of the 1970s when only boys seemed to be affected by the recent introduction in their society of modern technology and new ways of life. In contrast to the boys, Ghrib girls stacked to traditional games and toys, thus remaining much more than their brothers under the impact of the traditional way of life. Moreover, this gender based distinction was not restricted to the sphere of ludic activities. In the primary school of El

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Faouar, which was established in 1960, there were no Ghrib girls attending the lessons during the school year of 1974-1975. Gilbert Claus wrote in 1983 "Actually, the Ghrib parents do not care much about a school education of their children, and giving a school education to girls is in their viewpoint still an incomprehensible act" (p. 137-138).

This distinction between the ludic activities of boys and girls among the Ghrib reflected a growing disparity between the childhood of boys and girls and consequently between the male and female living conditions. Indeed, Ghrib boys could find the opportunity to prepare themselves for their insertion onto the modern educational, economic, social and other structures of the Tunisian state. However, Ghrib girls remained in their play activities and in their growing up within the traditional way of life. Nevertheless, since the second half of the 1980s, there has been a major change in the attitude towards the schooling of girls among Ghrib families. As a result, nowadays, many Ghrib girls are attending the primary school of El Faouar. In this way, the upbringing of girls will surely be affected by the Western type of school system, a system which will, among other factors, influence the play activities, games and toys of these girls.

In the Moroccan countryside and small towns one can see boys making toy-animals with local material such as palm-leaves, reed, wood, summer squash or clay. Two little boys of five and seven years (fig. 17) living in Goulmima, a small town in Central Morocco, made in September 1994 some toys in clay, among which a mule, a snake, a bird, a cat and a lizard (fig. 18).

In October 1992 an eleven-year-old boy of the little village Aït Ighemour, located in the mountains of the Ouarzazate province in Central Morocco, showed me how he made a rather unique kind of mule-driver and his mule with some sticks and two summer squashes. In the summer squash serving as the trunk of the animal four sticks were fixed and a smaller summer squash, representing the head, was fixed to the trunk with a little stick. The driver was made in the same way, but two pieces of potato fixed on the two sticks serving as legs were his feet.

Although locally made or imported plastic toy-animals (fig. 19), often of bad quality, have invaded North Africa decades ago, children still

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make traditional toy-animals here and there. In the more important city shops plastic animals for children to ride on can be bought but they are also imported from Europe as a present by migrants visiting their family (fig. 20). The same can be said of other toys as for example toy-weapons. In this context I would like to stress the importance of the influence of North African emigrants, an influence that also can be observed in the case of children’s toys. When these emigrants return to visit their family they do not bring with them useful presents only but also prestige presents, among which European dolls, toy-animals, toy-weapons, bicycles etc.

As among the Ghrib, cars and trucks fascinate Moroccan boys, those of the cities as well as those of remote areas. A young shepherd did run in June 1994 with his elaborated toy-car over the road from Tiznit to Tafraoute in Southern Morocco (fig. 21). This car uses as wheels two floaters of a fishing-net.

That one should be careful not to generalize specific information is stressed by the following example of the “motor ne-ramdan” of Ksar Assaka, a small village near the little town of Midelt in Central Morocco. During the fasting month of Ramadan in February 1995, I saw the boys playing with a toy-motor. Of their motor only the handle-bar and the headlight is constructed, the rest of the motor being the boy himself (fig. 22). At that moment, I noted this as a typical boyis game. However, somewhat later, Souad Labib, the 28 year old mother of Si Mohamed, the seven-year-old boy on the photograph, told me that she and other girls of the village also played with this “motor ne-ramdan” some sixteen years ago and this together with the boys.

In the same village and at the same time, I witnessed how toys can change in response to new experiences. Up till then, the boys made a truck with an oil can, four wheels cut out of a tire, a steering wheel of wire and so on. However, as they observed during the construction of the irrigation system how a concrete mixer was filled with a lifting tray attached to the mixer, they invented a way to attach a lifting tray at their toy-truck using a small plastic tray and a long wire attached to the steering wheel. When pulling the wire the sand or stones accumulated in the tray are thrown into the truck.

A final example of the influence of the modernization of North African and Saharan societies on toys and games refers to the use of
telephones. In 1977 when no Ghrib family living in the oasis of El Faouar in the Northwestern Tunisian Sahara had a telephone, boys created their own telephone, in this way anticipating the role telephone communications would play in their own adult life (fig. 23-24). The same situation occurred at the end of the 1970s in the above mentioned village Ksar Assaka where boys and girls had their own telephone lines using a long wire to which at both ends a little plastic pot was fixed. But even nowadays when the use of telephones has become much more frequent, Moroccan children do not only play with plastic telephones. Sometimes they still make their telephone themselves as in the case of the five-year-old boy from Goulmima playing with clay (fig. 25).

**Toys in changing North African educational contexts**

It is no exaggeration, I think, to say that, in the traditional Koran schools for young children as well as in the modern official primary schools of North Africa, the theme of toys and play has until now almost no place in the educational curriculum of young girls and boys. The general attitude of teachers and parents is quite negative to the possible role of play activities and the creation of toys within both school systems. This is even so when the private preschool classes which are paid for are concerned. Yet, something is slowly changing as for example in Morocco.

In Morocco, an attempt of a structural valorization of the ludic heritage could be realized through the collaboration of two projects financially supported by the Bernard van Leer Foundation, an international foundation that centers its efforts on the development of low cost initiatives integrating the participation of the local community and directed towards the well-being of children between 0 and 8 years and the education of socially and culturally disadvantaged children. One project is the “Alliance de Travail dans la Formation et de l’Action pour l’Enfance”, “ATFALE” or ‘children’ in Arabic, based at the University Mohamed V in Rabat. The other project of the Ministry of Education concerns the 34,000 ‘kouttab’ or Koran preschool institutions that take care of some 700,000 children between two and six years. Those two projects work together to give training in the job for teachers of these
kouttab, untrained as they are for dealing with this age group and for whom no training existed before. During this training, given by members of ATFALE, the attention is directed towards several themes such as language, health, mathematics, pedagogical methods and school organization, but also towards the theme of play activities. Therefore a brochure has been edited on play and toys in the preschool (ATFALE, 1990).

However, the question remains if this training promotes, next to modern pedagogical toys or games, the interest for the ludic heritage of Morocco. So I was glad to notice that this is already more or less the case when finding in a classroom used to show new approaches to preschoolers of the “Centre de Ressources” for preschool pedagogy of Kenitra, an important town just north of Rabat, some female dolls with a frame of reed made by preschool mistresses.

During the academic year 1994-1995, the Faculty of Education of the University Mohamed V in Rabat started with a first year of a planned two year program on preschool pedagogy in Morocco. When asked to give some lectures on play and socialization to a group of some twenty-five students, I observed that the students, up to then unprepared for these topics, were really interested in the way local toys and play activities can help to learn more about children and their environment and how they can be useful in informal and formal learning. However, the continuation of this program on preschool pedagogy seemed to be quite unclear at the end of 1995.

**Conclusion**

As we could see, changes in the toys and games of North African children do not mainly come from foreign imports as in the case of Asian or European toys. On the contrary, it is interesting to notice that changes occur most of the time by two ways: by using traditional material and techniques to create toys referring to new items, or by using new material and techniques to produce traditional toys.

According to Juliette Grange, children’s toys and games have an inertia for changes and conserve old customs (1979, p. 234). Although this seems to be true for North African toys and games, one should never
forget that the technological, economic and socio-cultural evolution of 
the societies in this region have influenced their ludic heritages. 
However, it is clear that the play activities of the girls remain longer 
within the sphere of tradition than those of the boys who willingly find 
inspiration in technological innovations and socio-cultural changes. But 
how to foresee the short-term and long-term influence on the girls of 
schooling and television that nowadays have found their way into 
isolated areas.

Through imitative or fantasy games, children do not only react to 
changing situations in their material and social environment but they can 
also foresee them, a phenomenon that Alain Polcz called “anticipating 
play” (1987, p. 1). The playing of the Ghrib and Moroccan boys with 
imitation cars, motors and telephones, in a period when these 
technological items are still seldom, certainly makes these boys better 
acquainted with them.

Although the theme of games and toys, on a scientific as well as on a 
practical level, only receives little attention in North Africa, it is sure 
that the development of preschool education will necessitate the taking 
into account of the play activities of children. Until then, my research on 
North African and Saharan games and toys and their evolution seems to 
be a quite solitary occupation.

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**Figures**

The listed figures can be found in my publications, *Toys, Play; Culture and Society* (2003), and *Children’s Dolls and Doll Play* (2003), available in the section Publications on SITREC’s website: [http://www.sitrec.kth.se](http://www.sitrec.kth.se). All photographs were made by the author, except photo 4 that was made by dr. Gilbert J.M. Claus in August 1991. Slides were used during this lecture.

Fig 1. Ghrib girl’s female doll, H 19 cm, Tunisian Sahara, 1975.
Fig 2. Ghrib girl’s female doll with facial features designed by a boy, H 18 cm, Tunisian Sahara, 1977.
Fig 3. Female dolls of two Ghrib girls. The left doll has clumsily designed facial features made by the girl who holds the doll, H 17 and 16 cm, Tunisian Sahara, 1977.
Fig 4. Ghrib girl’s female doll with a plastic flask as head, H 25 cm, Tunisian Sahara, 1991.
Fig 5. Traditional doll made by a girl from Marrakech, H 24 cm, Morocco, 1961 or 1962.
The original photographs of the illustrations mentioned in this article have been added hereafter.