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A social semiotic approach to North African and Saharan toys

Jean-Pierre Rossie

Introduction

This analysis of North African and Saharan toys uses the methodological approach developed by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen as described in their book Reading Images - The Grammar of Visual Design (1996) and in Theo van Leeuwen’s paper Kinetic Toy Design - A Semiotic Exploration (1997). Stimulated by these readings, I made an attempt to look at the toys from these regions, especially the self-made dolls of the girls, from a social semiotic point of view.

According to these authors, “Social semiotics is an attempt to describe and understand how people produce and communicate meaning in specific social settings, be they ‘micro’ settings such as the family or settings in which sign-making is well institutionalized and hemmed in by habits, conventions and rules... social semiotics (is) sign-making in society...” (1996, p. 264).

Reference is constantly made to photographs and designs illustrating the toys and play activities of North African and Saharan children. As slides are used during the lecture, the numbers of the figures mentioned in the text refer to those in Rossie JP, 2003, Toys, Play, Culture and Society. An Anthropological Approach with Reference to North Africa and the Sahara. Yet, the reader can see these illustrations on the Internet by looking for this publication on the WWW-page of Sitrec: http://www.sitrec.kth.se. More photographs or designs of North African and Saharan toys and play can be found in my above mentioned book and in Rossie JP. 2003, Saharan and North African Toy and Play Cultures. Children’s Dolls and Doll Play (also published in French).
The materiality of North African and Saharan toys

The materiality of self-made toys came to the foreground when I was searching for relevant semiotic features in my information on North African and Saharan toys. Within this aspect of materiality, the following topics will be discussed:

- the use of natural and waste material in relation to the environment and socio-economic situation of the toy making children,
- the non-durability versus the durability of self-made toys and imported toys,
- these toys are often made from different parts, yet once they are assembled they are not taken apart again, e.g. for changing a doll's dress or a car's wheels,
- the representational meaning of specific material or how children choose specific material to represent specific features of their toys.

A fundamental aspect of self-made toys is the material used by children to create them. In a North African and Saharan context, these material items are those easily available in a familial setting in rural areas or popular quarters of towns and as such reflect the environment and the socio-economic situation of the children’s habitat and social group.

The children almost always use natural and waste material. Without trying to give an exhaustive list of the natural materials taken from the local environment and used to make toys, these items can be grouped as follows:

- material of mineral origin: sand, clay, paint, stones, pebbles..., 
- material of vegetal origin: cactus, flowers, palm or read leaves, reed, sticks and branches, bark of cork-oak, sap, glue, paint, ear of maize, nuts, dates, courgettes or summer squash, potatoes..., 
- material of animal origin: bones, horns, hair, skin, intestines, dung..., 
- material of human origin: hair, parts of the body or the whole body.

Children are masters in the reutilization of waste material they find in their human environment. So it is obvious that they also use this material for elaborating 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 timber wood, spoons....
• fibrous material: cotton, woolen or synthetic threads and rags, pieces of carpets....
• metallic material: pieces of iron, aluminum, copper and tin, wires, tins, cans, bottle caps, nails, needles, safety pins, parts of bicycles and cars....
• paper material: paper, pasteboard, cardboard....
• plastic and rubber material: tubes, tires, pipes, flasks, cans, bottles, bottle stoppers, plastic toys or parts of it....
• other material: pencils, ballpoints, ink, paint, glue, candle, make up products....

However, as different material is often used in combination, the same toy often exemplifies the use of natural material of different origin as well as the use of different kinds of waste material.

There is no doubt about the importance of materiality both in creating toys as in analyzing these toys from a social semiotic point of view. Yet, within the actual level of information and my restricted knowledge of social semiotics, it is difficult to bestow semiotic meaning on the children’s choices of the materials they use to make toys, except the meaning of conformity with the ecological and sociocultural environment in which they live.

But, even if an answer seems hard to find, Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen's question “What, then, is the meaning of material?” (1996, p. 240) still holds. Can one stick to the idea that almost all the toys of the North African and Saharan children are made with non-durable material just by accident? Or is it not more so that at the basis of this fact lies the common practice of making each time a new toy whenever the children need one for their play activities. This practice certainly is fundamental as even when the toys easily do last for some time they only seldom are used again for a next play activity. Instead, they are often deliberately left behind or even destroyed, the making of a new toy being one of the funs of the play activity.

Theo van Leeuwen wrote to me “The emphasis on non-durability is semiotically very interesting. Despite our propensity for artifacts we still
retain something of it, for instance in our appreciation of theater, which is a non-durable semiotic production. But clearly for the cultures that make new dolls for every instance of play it is foregrounded more. There is cultural investment in such material characteristics as non-durability, hardness or softness, etc.” (van Leeuwen T, 1998, June 14th).

The non-durability of for example self-made dolls contrasts with the greater durability of imported dolls, mostly plastic. The few examples, I know of, that a Moroccan girl had an imported plastic doll, she had it for at least some time, possibly using it further on when a leg or arm was missing or when she had to give it a self-made dress to replace the original one (fig. 34). But can one conclude from the difference between the short living self-made traditional doll and the longer living imported plastic doll that for the girls themselves the last one is more important than the first one? I do not think so, especially when looking at the play activity itself in which a traditional doll more adequately represents the bride, the central figure of most doll play.

Nevertheless, the imported plastic doll is gaining importance through factors lying outside the girls’ play activities: because it is purchased and as such has a financial value, because it is imported and thus belongs to the outside world, because it still is a rare item in rural areas and among children from popular milieus and therefore brings prestige to those who have it and longing to those who do not have it. Slowly, to make a doll oneself becomes an activity for poor, rural girls (backward girls they say in town), something urban girls do not want to do or should not do.

Except when made of wet sand or clay (fig. 93, 95), self-made toys are mostly constructed from different parts, such as the frame, the clothes, the hair, some ornaments in the case of a doll; the cabin, the steering wheel, the axes, the wheels in the case of a toy-car; the pickets, the threads, the shuttle in the case of a toy-weaving loom. Yet, once they have been assembled they are not taken apart again, e.g. for changing the doll’s dress or the hair. This is an interesting aspect, as nothing in the elaboration of the dolls would have prevented the girls to change the dolls’ dress or the hair, a doll play popular among Western European girls. Could this be somehow attributed to the stability of the role the doll plays, being most of the time a bride or is it the already mentioned ease with which the Saharan and North African girls make each time a
new doll that is at stake? There where the available information shows that a doll can represent different types of women, as among the Teda of Tibesti in the Chadian Sahara (fig. 55), this difference is expressed through a series of dolls with each their own dress and ornaments (see Rossie JP, 2003, *Children’s Dolls and Doll Play*, 2.7. Female Dolls of the Teda).

Because of the use of natural and waste material the dolls often have a lot of colors with many nuances. The doll’s facial features, being as good as the only part of the dolls that is sometimes painted, show a combination of naturalistic and non-naturalistic colors based on conventions and available painting material, such as tar, natural or chemical paints, nail varnish, beauty products.

Theo van Leeuwen stresses the importance of materiality when writing: “It is interesting that you foreground the semiotic role of materiality. This is an issue I am trying to take further and your work is full of fascinating examples. I was wondering whether the people who, you say, mainly use conventional materials from their environment would nevertheless see their choice of materials as meaningful, and if so what kinds of meanings they would attach to it, or, more broadly, what kind of reasons they would give for choosing this or that kind of material. After all, as soon as there is choice, there usually is meaning, even though of course many meanings are never explicitly articulated by those whose meanings they are. And it would seem that the meanings of materiality in the toy-making practices you describe are not only on the level of broad cultural values, as maybe in the case of a preference for the non-durable, but also on the level of representational meaning, as in the case of the use of excrement you describe.” (used to give large buttocks to a Tuareg doll, fig. 58) (van Leeuwen T, 1998, June 14th).

When looking more closely to the topic of how specific material has been chosen to represent specific features of dolls, I have found some clear examples. A good example of the representational meaning of specific material can be found among the girls of the Moroccan village of Tabennatout near Midelt. In November 1997, I saw these girls making a doll with exceptionally long hair, hair three to four times as long as the doll itself. In order to represent the highly valued very long hair of a woman, the girls intentionally look for the upper part of a reed with long
green leaves, leaves they split with their fingernails into small strips (fig. 65).

To continue with the use of particular material for representing hair on Moroccan dolls, reed leaves have intentionally been selected to give a traditional hairdo (fig. 52 left), hemp to create long locks of hair (fig. 52 right), the beard of an ear of maize to give long hair (fig. 51, 66). Tuareg children did choose colored cotton threads to give their male dolls the typical male hairdo (fig. 56).

In order to create a relief for the nose Tunisian doll makers did put a grain at that place under the fabric (fig. 5) as was done by some Moroccan girls from Fèz and the region of Moulay Idriss. Other examples of doll making children choosing special material or objects in view of a specific representational meaning are the use of rags with brilliant motifs as festive attire (fig. 47, 49, 86), a fresh unpitted date as head (fig. 55), courgettes or summer squash for the body and head or pieces of potatoes for the feet (fig. 96), and even a shampoo flask as head for some recent Ghrib girls’ dolls (fig. 85).

This intentional use of materials and objects is not limited to making dolls. It is also important in the creation of other toys, for example when the jaw-bone of a goat or a sheep is used to represent a dromedary (fig. 87) or when children use all kinds of round, cylindrical and oval objects to make wheels for their toy-carts (fig. 90), bicycles (fig. 91, 92), cars (fig. 99), trucks (fig. 100, 102) and tractors (fig. 53).

Although it is sometimes possible, as in the examples above, to relate the choice of a particular material or object to a specific representational meaning, this will be much more difficult if not impossible in other cases. What is the reason for using reed, sticks or little branches for most Saharan and North African dolls in a standing position? It surely is not because the brides are always staying upright during the wedding ceremonies whereas the female dolls of the Tuareg (fig. 1, 2, 57, 58) and the Moors (fig. 3, 59) are designed in a sitting position, representing women sitting in the tent, and therefore need to have buttocks shaped with more plastic or round materials such as clay or dromedary excrement.

It certainly would be interesting to ask children why they prefer to use one kind of material instead of other kinds; yet, they probably quite often will find this a ‘stupid’ or ‘nonsense’ question. So, the answer to
Theo van Leeuwen’s question “What kind of things would they say, if anything, when asked why they have chosen this or that material?” (van Leeuwen T, 1998, June 14th) could just be ‘it was always like that’, ‘everybody does it this way’, ‘that is the way we learned to do it’ or ‘that is what we can use’. But even such general and evasive answers can be revealing.

The technology of North African and Saharan toys

Three aspects are discussed:

- the use of technologies of the hand,
- toys without and with movable parts,
- toys that can move.

Next to the material used by children to make toys, the used technology is also important. The North African and Saharan children are restricted to what Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen call the “technologies of the hand, technologies in which representations are, in all their aspects, articulated by the human hand, aided by hand tools.” (1996, p. 233). For the children of these regions the hand tools are more often than not objects they find themselves, not tools of adults, such as stones or other heavy objects to hit, the child’s own teeth or other sharp objects to cut or make holes, etc.

One technological aspect to be solved by toy making children is movement, movement of parts of the toy or movement of the whole toy. Some North African and Saharan toys such as windmills and toy-weapons have movable parts, but I have not found yet a self-made doll with movable parts, this in contrast with the imported dolls. However, the fact that the North African and Saharan self-made dolls are not articulated should not be attributed to a lack of technical know-how as other toys have movable parts. So the girls could have given movable arms or legs to their dolls if they wanted. A simple explanation for this situation would possibly stress the fact that in the eyes of the girls there is no necessity to do this as they themselves are assuring the mobility of the doll through their manipulation of it and because it is a very short
living doll. An ideological explanation might be found in the argument that a doll with moving arms and legs is more like a human being than a rigid doll, this way possibly falling more directly under the Islamic prohibition of creating images of living beings (Rosenthal, 1982, p. 616).

The movement of the rigid doll is under the direct control of the child who manipulates it. The doll’s movements are not naturalistic but conventional and based on a simplification of reality, on movements that the playgroup members find adequate to symbolize the necessary spatial displacement. What is important is the meaningfulness of the movements, not their realism.

Three sisters from Ksar Assaka in Central Morocco, explained that they and the other girls from their play groups moved a doll by holding it at the lower end of the reed and making with the doll held upright back and forward, left to right and up and down movements. The doll was also twisted around especially while singing and imitating the wedding dances. When moving the doll this was clearly done at eye level, which according to Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen reflects a relation of equality between the ‘bride’ and the playing girls. An argument for the plausibility of this interpretation can be found in the fact that when the same girls used another doll for a ritual to obtain rain, the special status of this representational figure, once a North African female deity, became visible because the girl wearing this doll held it high up above her head while walking around the village (see Rossie JP, 2003, Children’s Dolls and Doll Play, 2.13. Female Dolls from Morocco).

I mentioned that several North African and Saharan toys can move. So let us look at some examples of different technological solutions used by children to give a possibility of movement to their toys by using wheels and axes:

- an axe made of a little branch with a wheel cut out of a piece of rubber (fig. 53),
- an axe of a tin can with a wheel consisting of several sardine tins tightened around it (fig. 91),
- an axe and wheels made out of one piece of iron wire (fig. 102).
The elaboration of such axes and wheels certainly necessitates a specific technological apprenticeship whereby older children serve as teachers for the younger ones.

But the children's technological inventiveness is not limited to making toy-vehicles. Another example is made with sand, sand in different qualities: very fine dry powder sand and heavier wet sand. With these two kinds of sand only, Ghrib children from the Tunisian Sahara could make a fine miniature oasis-house (fig. 9, 10, 11, 12). Through this at first simple play activity children learn a lot about the specific characteristics of sand because if the dry sand is not fine enough it will not slide out through the opening in the front wall of the house and if the sand used for the roof is too wet or not wet enough the roof will fall down. Moreover, one should be attentive not to tamp the sand too hard or too light, or the roof will not last also. A lot of experience is needed to make such a nice house and even then it is not always a success.

An example from India, mentioned to me by Sudarshan Khanna, points in the same direction and even if the material used is limited to wet sand a lot is to be tried out before a child is able to create a dome-house in the following way. To make such a dome-house one puts his naked foot on the sand and then covers it with wet sand, then this sand must be tamped in the right way so that it clings together. When the foot is slowly and carefully removed, the dome will not fall down and it may be possible to make the inner space larger by pulling out some sand. In a quite different environment, the North of Sweden, children use the same technique for making a dome-house but this time with snow.

**Cognitive and emotional aspects of North African and Saharan toys**

The following cognitive and emotional aspects are mentioned:

- the spatial situation of the toys in their play settings,
- self-made toys are three-dimensional objects in which symbolic visualizations are emphasized,
- these toys can be qualified as analytical rather than naturalistic structures,
• the importance of these toys for the children and the affective relationship they have with their self-made toys,
• this in contrast with the carelessness for these toys once they have been used in play activities,
• children's semiotic reinterpretation of imported toys.

When looking at the setting in which the North African and Saharan dolls are exposed one observes that they are almost invariably put in a doll’s house or possibly a doll’s tent (fig. 68). These are a more or less schematic version of the real model. The doll’s house is mostly a space delimited by stones and/or small earthen walls, divided into a kitchen, a guestroom and an entrance. Sometimes there is also a bedroom. This small house can also be used to play household or at having a tea party (fig. 28, 29, 30, 31). In the case of the dolls’ houses of the wealthier girls of the Moors of Oualata in the Mauritanian Sahara, they are detailed miniature houses in clay copying the real Oualata houses (fig. 60).

In the doll play of the girls of Ksar Assaka in Central Morocco, the doll is sometimes laid down or put upright against a stone. The place of the doll is situated in a corner at the back of the doll’s house so that it is not in the way for other play activities related to the imitation of a wedding. The displacements and movements of the doll are related to the enacted story.

The North African and Saharan toys are three-dimensional objects, freestanding and worked out from all sides. Nevertheless, when looking at dolls the front side is the one that is the most detailed and bearing the most symbolic visualizations. A particular exception however is to be found in the female dolls of the Tuareg and the Moors who have very developed buttocks signifying health, beauty and wealth (fig. 1, 2, 3). With the exception of the head, and seldom also of the buttocks or the breasts (fig. 2), there is little emphasis on the distinctness of the parts of the human body.

The cross-shaped structure, a very common type of doll’s frame, is not seen so much as a representation of the arms and hands as something to drape the clothes on. Furthermore, I can only document on three cases in which the doll's legs are distinctively worked out: the Teda dolls (fig. 55), a Moroccan doll of Moulay Idriss (fig. 63) and the dolls of the girls of the region of Hmar near Taroudannt in Morocco (fig. 64). The other
details - facial features, hair dress, clothes, belt, and ornaments - are sometimes naturalistic and sometimes simplified abstractions.

The self-made dolls of the North African and Saharan girls can be qualified as analytical structures rather than naturalistic ones. They have been designed to show significant attributes and characteristics of the model they represent. Their makers are not interested in representing an individual living example of that model but in making a symbolic representation of a sociocultural role.

Yet, the self-made doll itself, as bearer of the individual and social meanings, is treated with a lot of indiffERENCE once the play activity is over. Could this be the reason why my Moroccan female informants of Ksar Assaka stressed that an individual name is not given to the bride dolls, that such an individual name was almost never mentioned to me by other informants from Morocco or the Tunisian Sahara or that not one bibliographical document has mentioned an individual name for a traditional doll?

The only examples of giving a name to a doll come from Morocco. The first one was mentioned to me in relation to an imported European doll used in the beginning of the 1960s by the daughters of a primary school headmistress in Marrakech (fig. 67). The second example came to the foreground when talking about their doll play with the three sisters from Ksar Assaka near Midelt. The older sister, born in 1968, says she only played with a bride doll, called ‘tislit’ the general Berber word for bride. This bride doll did not receive an individual name and according to this sister it was not done because the bride doll's status would then degrade to that of a simple girl. In contrast to what is done with the self-made bride doll, the girls usually give an individual name to the plastic doll.

The two younger sisters, born in 1971 and in 1973, claim to have played not only with the same bride doll but also with a little girl doll with simpler clothes, called ‘terbètinu’ ‘my little girl’. This little girl doll receives an individual name, especially some old name such as Beha, Etto or Yenna. Moreover, they spoke directly to this doll, saying for example ‘my little girl you have fever, I shall bring you to the hospital’ or ‘I shall go with you to the hammam’, something that was not done with a bride doll. When all these sisters and their playmates were talking
or singing during their play with a bride doll these actions related directly to playing a wedding ceremony.

The relationship between the members of a playgroup is one of near closeness. This can be expected as the playmates are siblings, close relatives and/or neighbors, in every case children who are part of a daily interacting microcosmic social group. In the case of dolls, the identification with the represented familiar models, the bride and the mother, is very strong and actively promoted by the adults. The girls' affective relation seems to be directed towards the representational concept, the represented model, rather than to the doll, the material realization of the concept or model that is used as a means and only valuable as long as the play activity goes on. One might say that the function of such a doll is limited to the game; it only comes to 'life' when the player manipulates it, when it becomes part of a series of interactive relations mutually accepted and enacted by the members of the play group. When the play activity is interrupted or stopped, the doll becomes an object, a material item that can be left on the spot or thrown away. It certainly does not become the substitute companion doll Brian Sutton-Smith describes in relation to recent North American childhood (1986, 46, 126).

Theo van Leeuwen, stresses the following topic in my analysis: "A further aspect that I find semiotically interesting is the way in which your research provides great examples of semiotic re-contextualization or re-interpretation, as when western plastic dolls become brides (and in the process lose the movement of their limbs by the look of it)." (van Leeuwen T, 1998 June 14th).

Two of these examples of re-contextualization or re-interpretation are related to imported plastic dolls. In a really poor quarter of Marrakech (Douar Akioud) most of the girls still played about 1980 with the traditional self-made doll having a frame of reed. But a girl living in the same quarter already played at the end of the 1970s with an imported plastic doll (fig. 32). This girl (Fatima Kader), now a woman skilled in the embellishment of hands and feet with traditional henna-designs, was so kind to show me how she transformed, when she was about nine-years-old, the plastic doll from Hong Kong, China or elsewhere, into a real bride of Marrakech (fig. 33).
Another example comes from Iqern, a small Moroccan village. There one finds today as well the self-made doll as the imported plastic doll, a plastic doll sometimes adapted to local ways by giving it a self-made dress (fig. 34). The girls join in the house of one of them with the purpose to sew by hand trousers and a long shirt for such dolls.

As far as the gathered information reaches, the girls’ dolls are used for acting out stories, for representing events, e.g. marriage, giving birth, bringing up children, or, as said in semiotics, for narrative action. The conceptual action is to be found in the bestowing of social identities to the dolls, e.g. the bride, the mother.

Dolls, and toys in general, are pictorial structures and according to Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen “Pictorial structures do not simply reproduce images of reality. On the contrary, they produce images of reality, which are bound up with the interests of the social institutions within which the pictures are produced, circulated and read. They are ideological.” (1996, p. 45).

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