Chapter 5

Children’s Play and Toys in Changing Moroccan Communities

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INTRODUCTION

First, I want to stress that it is impossible to claim any representativeness and completeness of the gathered information on Moroccan children’s play and toys. The information describes existing play activities and toys but cannot be used to prove the non-existence of other games and toys. The research fields and the involved families have mostly been found through the chance of fortunate contacts and I here want to express my sincere thanks for the hospitality and collaboration received from many families and individuals, especially primary and secondary school teachers.

Before analyzing Moroccan children’s play activities and toys, the reader may find some usefulness in the following notes on my scientific work, sources of information and research methods. During my earlier studies my major topic of interest has been childhood and socialization. Between 1975 and 1977, I did fieldwork among the semi nomadic Ghrib from the Tunisian Sahara. It is during my first field trip that I experienced the advantage and usefulness of participating in children’s playgroups. So I decided to concentrate on children’s play activities and toys in the first place (Rossie, 1993). Having elaborated a quite complete analysis of the Ghrib children’s play activities and toys, I looked for information on Saharan and North African play, games and toys in the related literature and in the Musée de l’Homme in Paris where I found an important collection of toys from these regions. Since 1992 I have been conducting yearly research periods in Morocco, especially in rural areas and popular quarters of towns.

Trained first as a social worker and then as an Africanist, my research methods belong first of all to the ethnographic research tradition based on participant observation, informal observation, informal talks, open interviews, use of informants and interpreters, making slides and doing some ethnographic filming. Moreover, I am using a detailed descriptive approach with a qualitative perspective when analyzing specific children’s play activities and toys, and the
sociocultural context in which these take place. Afterwards, the data of my own research, the information gathered from the relevant bibliography, and analysis of the toy collection in the Musée de l’Homme are used for a comparative analysis. Finally, I try to build a comprehensive description of the play activities and toys of the Saharan and North African children. Yet, this description should by no means be seen as a finished study. On the contrary, it is only when other scholars will verify and supplement my data and the interpretations I have elaborated, that a more objective and representative view can be worked out. Since Theo van Leeuwen introduced me to social semiotics in 1997, I try to apply this approach to my data.²

My play and toy research is available on the website of the Stockholm International Toy Research Centre (http://www.sitrec.kth.se - see Publications: Books/Articles), in the more general book, Toys, Culture and Society: An Anthropological Approach with Reference to North Africa and the Sahara (1999), and in the descriptive series, Saharan and North African Lutie Heritages along with Children’s Dolls and Doll Play (1999). Also available at the website are Commented Bibliography on Play, Games and Toys (2003a), The Animal in Play, Games and Toys (2003b), The Domestic Life in Play, Games and Toys (2004, 130), and to be available with projected publication dates are The Games of Skill (2005) and Traditional and Modern Techniques in Play, Games and Toys (2006).³

MAJOR TOPICS OF CROSS-CULTURAL ANALYSIS

In addition to the descriptive approach, I am using my data to work out a cross-cultural analysis of the relationship between toys and play, on the one hand, and, on the other, child-child or adult-child relations, gender, rituals, festivities, creativity, change, and signs and meanings. Due to editorial limitations it is impossible to offer a detailed description and analysis of the aforementioned-play activities and toys or to include photographs. I therefore refer the reader to my recent publications available on the Internet and showing many photographs and designs.

In Morocco my research has since 1992 and up to now been limited to central and southern regions. This vast area is composed of some northwestern plains, the mountain chains of the Moyen Atlas, Haut Atlas and Anti-Atlas, and the Pre-Sahara. All the children whose play activities and toys I have studied belong to sedentary communities and more or less popular families. With the exception of the two larger cities of Marrakech and Kenitra, these children live in villages and rural centers. Most of the information, especially that which comes from rural areas, refers to Berber-speaking children. But in other places and especially in towns, with the exception of Goulmima and Midelt, it concerns Arabic-speaking children.

Child-child and adult-child relations in play and toys

A few times I have seen Moroccan children playing alone, so it probably is not that exceptional. Yet, I have only observed such solitary play among small
Children as in the case of a three-year-old boy from the Moyen Atlas village Amellago playing in a small irrigation channel, making the little walls of his garage with mud bricks and using an old sandal as truck, or a five-year-old girl from Midelt playing before her house door with wet sand and a plastic kitchen utensil. Still, children's play activities in these regions are mostly collective and outdoor activities. Playgroups are hereby the basic social organizations. After the age of seven years they consist of only girls or only boys, seldom of boys and girls together. When girls and boys form a playgroup together they are toddlers or somewhat older children, possibly under the direction of an older girl, eventually also an older boy. The factors for choosing playmates are primarily based on ties of kinship and neighborhood and this certainly strengthens the cohesion of the playgroup and the bonds between the children. Among older children schoolmates or other unrelated children can be part of the playgroup.

As far as I could observe this, the playgroups are organized by the children themselves and on their own initiative, but this does not mean that there are no leaders, no girls or boys who take more initiatives than others when play activities are concerned. When an older child plays with younger ones leadership comes naturally to the foreground, but when peers play together decisions on what to play and how to play are prevalent. Much information on how to play and make toys, but also on the environment, on cultural topics and on social relations, is observed or learned through playgroup interactions. It should also be stressed that these children create most play situations and toys to communicate with other children, whereas most toys and many games in Western communities are cultural messages created by adults for children.

In general, children's playgroups enjoy a lot of autonomy and freedom as in most cases adults do not take part in children's play, except when playing occasionally with a tot or a toddler. Intervention of adults in children's play seems rare and is mostly limited to insisting on taking care of little children, to intervene when play situations runs out of hand seriously, to ask for help from a child, especially a girl, or to react when the children's play disturbs an activity or a possession of an adult. So, most play and toy making activities I have found until now do not involve adults. Yet, I have seen or heard of Moroccan women and men playing with or making toys not only for a little child but also older ones. Some examples show a mother or a father making a toy-musical instrument or a toy-windmill especially for feasts. Artisans also make a small number of different toys that children receive at the same occasions. It also happens that a parent or adult sibling brings back from a trip to the weekly market a little present for a small child, often some cheap plastic toy imported from China. Nevertheless, the gift of toys so important in societies more oriented towards consumer goods remains exceptional. If it is not the child himself or herself who makes the toy, it can be his or her brother, sister or cousin. And even when adults make toys, these toys do not seem to fit into a system of rewards and tokens of affection.

The available information suggests that Moroccan children's pretend play, as exemplified in doll play, household play and play connected to the relationship between humans and animals, only shows locally valued situations and
positive adult models the child identifies with. However, to see these children rigidly set to passive attitudes regarding the models of adult life would be erroneous. On the contrary, they appropriate, adapt and change these models according to their own needs.

**Gender in play and toys**

Moroccan toddlers are seen playing in heterogeneous as well as homogeneous groups. Yet, lacking any statistical data I would not dare to guess what is most common. A lot probably depends on the availability of playmates of the opposite sex. I also observed now and then young boys and girls of seven or eight years playing together. In three examples from 1999 the children use a small house. In Midelt two boys and a girl use a demolished van as small house and in a Moyen Atlas village near Amellage three girls and two boys between six and eight years play together in an elaborated small house delimited by stones and containing a large series of sun dried clay utensils. In a nearby village four girls and one boy of about seven years play at wedding in their doll's house.

In Moroccan children's playgroups and from the age of about six years onwards, gender differentiation becomes stronger. At that age, boys and girls create their own playgroups from which the other sex normally is excluded. Boys enjoy more freedom in their playgroups than girls in theirs, at least as long as norms are not too overtly transgressed. They also have the opportunity to go further away from their homes, the distance broadening as the boys become older as in the case of a Moroccan group of boys playing in the sea at two hours walking distance from their village. This way the boys can escape the direct control exerted by their parents or other adults. The girls on the contrary are not allowed to go far away alone. They must also stay near their mothers to help them in the household or because they have to look after some small children. When looking after these small children girls certainly do find occasions to play. Yet, the boundary between the task of amusing and occupying the little ones and the possibility to amuse oneself is difficult to draw.

Another clear difference between boys and girls is the time they have to play and this because of the girls' greater integration into household activities especially from the age of about eight years onwards. A striking example of this more limited time to play and more important integration of girls in household tasks is exemplified by an observation session of one and a half hour which I carried out in a small valley, serving among others as play area and situated between two popular quarters of Midelt. One summer morning in 1999 and during the time of the observation, I noted three playgroups made up by some boys and lasting between fifteen and thirty minutes. During the same observation time I found no girls playing, neither alone nor in groups. Instead, I saw one six-year-old girl cleaning the space before her house, another somewhat older girl passing by with a plate of biscuits on her head taking them to the oven and two girls doing errands. A fifth girl of about ten years was taking care of a group of little girls and boys.
As in other circumstances, one should always be careful generalizing statements such as the strict separation of older boys and girls in play because there are indications that this separation is not insurmountable, as the observation of play and toy making situations sometimes shows. Moreover, a few of my Moroccan female informants also stressed that as a child they liked to play with their brothers, cousins and other boys from the neighborhood, for example playing football or climbing trees. This makes it clear that the cultural norms of these regions are not the only determining factor in children’s play activities and that the personality and the wishes of the players must be taken into account.

**Rituals and feasts in play and toys**

Some Moroccan children’s play activities and toys refer to rituals and festivities, and some feasts are linked to specific games and toys. The girls’ doll play offers a prominent example as it almost always represents wedding ceremonies. The representation is not limited to discussions for asking a girl in marriage, to dinner parties, singing and dancing. Specific rites strongly embedded in local beliefs are also acted out, rites such as the application of henna, replaced by wet sand, the mounting of the bride on a sheep to favor good life or the verification of the proof of the bride’s virginity, a white rag on which red saffron has created blood-stains. The female doll invariably is called ‘bride,’ as well by the Arabic-speaking as the Berber-speaking girls, and the occasional male doll ‘bridegroom.’

A burial rite can also arise all of a sudden in the imagination of Moroccan children, as I witnessed in a popular quarter of Kenitra. There I saw how a little child caught by four girls suddenly changes into a dead child that is transported at hands and feet, put on the ground and mourned by the girls shouting “Allah, Allah.”

Looking for relationships between festivities, games and toys in Morocco, Ashura, celebrated at the beginning of the Islamic year, certainly is the most important festive period because it is customary to give sweets and presents to children. At that time the markets are overflowing with toys. Often they are cheap plastic toys. These last years, water pistols have been added to the musical toys, toy-beauty sets, toy-utensils, toy-vehicles and toy-weapons. However, there still are next to the plastic musical instruments also those made locally. The boys groups and girls groups use these musical instruments to accompany their singing when they walk from door to door to get sweets or some money. A drum with a skin tightened at both sides of a small cylinder is also given to the boys but an old plastic oil can replaces it adequately. The same oil can drum was used by Goulmima pupils for the Feast of the Dynasty in 1996.

An important ritual and long-standing playful aspect of Ashura is linked to the old water throwing custom. Children of earlier generations could permit themselves a lot of liberties when throwing water on children and adults. During the 1979 Ashura a group of girls and boys of about eleven years entered the mosque of Ksar Assalca near Mibelt, took the pots filled with water used to perform the ablutions before praying and went on the flat roof. There they
waited until someone passed by. A few minutes later, a man arrived with his mule loaded with a huge pack of herbs. The moment he passed before the mosque, the children threw all the water on him and his mule. As the man lost control over his mule, the pack of herbs fell on the ground. Yet, the man did not show hard feelings and the children came down from the roof to help him put all the herbs back in place. Those who told me this and similar anecdotes said that they thought that today the adults would not tolerate such behavior or that they would react angrily. In Midelt and during Ashura of April 2001 it became evident that water pistols and water guns have replaced former ways of throwing water.

Certainly in the regions of Goulmima and Midelt, the feast of the birthday of the Prophet Mohammed, for boys, a specific type of windmill characterizes the Mulud. In order to make the sail of their windmill turn quickly, the boys, and more rarely a girl, run with it very fast. Sometimes boys make these windmills to sell for about 1 dirham (0.1 Euro). In Midelt and some surrounding villages, I saw that the boys still make such windmills during the Mulud of June 2000. Yet, in one village I did not see these windmills and a few adults told me that the children of their village did not play with them anymore. However, in the afternoon of the same Mulud some children were running over the Midelt streets with a windmill bought from a hawker. One of these hawkers told me that an old man made them.

Two examples related to the Aïd el Kebir, the feast of the sacrifice, show how a mother and a father from the Midelt region make a little tambourine for their daughters. In the first instance and during the 1970s, a mother usually made a tambourine with the skin of a small sheep, sacrificed for this feast, to give it to her daughters. In the second instance and in 2000 a father made a little tambourine for his two and a half-year-old daughter. The girls use this tambourine when singing and dancing.

Swinging seems linked to the Aïd el Fitr, the feast at the end of the fasting month Ramadan. In a popular quarter of Kenitra I saw how children used the ropes attached to trees as swings for this purpose, perhaps referring in this way to old playful agricultural rituals in relation to the changing of seasons, just as in the case of traditional ball games.

Creativity in play and toys

Every toy made by a child and every play activity certainly is a creation, an original act resulting from the child’s personality combined with the influences from the physical and human environment in which the child lives. A few years ago the Fourth Nordic Conference on Children’s Play invited me to discuss this topic much more in detail (Rossie, 2001b). The play activities and toys mentioned here only represent some specific examples of Moroccan children’s creativity.

My own view on the concept of creativity in relation to toys and play refers to the idea of making something, for example a toy, or working out a play, possibly a pretend play. I would also include the idea of doing something unusual, something original or even something classified as aesthetic and
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Artistic. However, by including these ideas I am provoking a real difficulty and this because it will be necessary to oppose what is locally seen as unusual, original, aesthetic or artistic by insiders, the members of a given child's community, and what is externally seen as unusual, original, aesthetic or artistic by outsiders, the non-members of a given child's community.

Because of the primordial importance of playgroups, I want to put forward the hypothesis that Moroccan children's creativity in playing and making toys might more often be expressed, and if so should be investigated, in the children's interactions within their playgroups rather than in the case of isolated players. Moreover, If one is looking for purely individual solitary creativity among children, in the sense of a child making a toy or realizing a play event not only alone but also in a strictly original way, it will be difficult for me and probably also for other researchers to find instances of this among North African children even today. Moreover, I think that such a solitary individual creativity — although existing among Moroccan children as will be shown later on—is only one of the possible forms of creativity. After all, it could be that it is not so important or even impossible to know if and in how far a child has 'invented' a toy. Take for instance the creation by an eleven-year-old Central Moroccan boy of his own copy of a local musical instrument completely made with waste material. Although I have not seen another such toy-instrument, one cannot know if it is a personal invention of this boy except through the boy's own affirmation that it is so. Yet, even in this case it still is possible that others have more or less consciously influenced the boy. Nevertheless, if it is not this boy who has created such an instrument first, it is another one from his community who did it as in Morocco examples of self-made toys are not shown on television or in other media and, an eventual exception left aside, neither are proposed in schools or youth houses.

Children's inventiveness in the use of natural material of mineral, vegetal, animal and even human origin is omnipresent in North Africa. Four Moroccan examples, two of girls and two of boys, will illustrate this. At the same time some of these examples show how specific material is chosen to serve specific purposes. I have found a clever use of reed-leaves to create the hair of their dolls by the girls of a village near Midelt. To give their dolls the much-valued very long hair, these girls look for the upper part of a reed with long green leaves, leaves they split with their fingernails into small strips. A girl from a village near Khemisset uses stones not only to delimit her doll house but also transforms one of her three undistinguishable dolls into a bridgroom doll by putting a little stone serving as head in the upper part of the dress. Moroccan boys from a High Atlas village use summer squash, pieces of potatoes and sticks to make human and animal figurines, such as a mule and its driver. Moreover, I found on a road in southern Morocco a boy running with a self-made car for which he used two floaters of fishing net as wheels.

The children's creative use of material certainly is not limited to natural material as they also excel in re-utilizing waste material. A similar series of examples as for the use of natural material is offered here. When Moroccan girls play household they use whatever kind of waste material they can lay hands on and suiting their needs. Waste material is also used when girls make dolls as in
the case of the bride doll mounting a toy-sheep. The making of this toy-sheep seems to be an original creation of the girl herself or at least of her playgroup as the sisters of that girl firmly stated that they never have made or seen among other girls such a toy-sheep. The toy-cars and toy-trucks of the Moroccan boys show the great variety of waste material used to make them, among others old oil filters and ball bearings for the wheels. Some years ago, I saw a thirteen-year-old herds boy sitting at the side of a road in the Middle Atlas while playing on a self-made violin. Members of the boy’s family and some of his neighbors said that they knew of no other boy from the region doing the same. Yet, two men from Midelt told me that they also made a violin when they were older boys.

For a very common play activity Amal and Leila, two eight-year-old girls living in a Central Moroccan village in 1999, use really original toys. As Amal’s mother forbids her daughter to play outside in the ‘dirt,’ this girl makes a dollhouse out of a cardboard box. Once the upper side of the box is cut off, windows and a door are made in the vertical sides in such a way that they can open and close. The interior side of the windows and the door are decorated with a curtain. There are a few self-made cushions and large or small rags serve as carpets and blankets. Leila has the same doll’s house and together they play at the wedding of their bride doll. This bride doll is as special as is the doll’s house. It is a Barbie-like imported plastic doll one can buy in local shops but that normally is only used as a decorative object once an older girl or a woman has crocheted an Andalusian dress for it. The two girls have both the same doll and they have sewed a dress for it. Looking more closely at Amal’s doll one sees that the missing arms are replaced by a piece of reed, relying on the way traditional dolls are made.

Transferring new experiences to common toys is another way to be creative. A fine example of this creative process was shown to me in a village near Midelt. Until 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 reconstruction 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 to their toy-truck using a small tin can tray and a long wire fixed to the steering wheel. When pulling the wire the sand or stones accumulated in the tray are thrown into the truck.

Self-made toys can be very simple but regularly they show a more complex elaboration, sometimes becoming a clever combination of many elements, as is the case of many dolls of the girls or of the toy-tractor of a High Atlas Mountain village boy, made with a piece of cactus as chassis and pieces of rubber as wheels and exhaust pipe.

One could wonder how it comes that Moroccan children from the 1990s and Tunisian Sahara children from the 1970s, living in non-industrial communities, playing games and making toys that reflect local situations, are so creative, with creativity being defined here as performing or creating something personally and independently from adult interference. In this context and looking at the way in which they grow up to become responsible members of
their family and community, I would put forward the role of these children's own initiative in observing and in playing.

**Change in play and toys**

In Moroccan towns like Marrakech, Kenitra, Goulimima, Ifni, Khemisset and Midelt, imported plastic dolls have replaced the self-made doll. In Ifni, a small southern coastal town, girls still played about 1985 with self-made dolls having a frame of reed but nowadays the girls play with plastic dolls. But even if a six-year-old Ifni girl plays with a plastic doll, the other items used in her doll play remain unchanged. So, she places her plastic doll in a doll’s house, the little square of paving stones before the door, and as utensils she uses a miniature wooden table with on top a few oil can stoppers filled with water and figuring cups of tea. Moreover, when making a first video on doll play in Sidi Ifni in January 2002 a young girl playing with her little brother used not only plastic dolls but also made herself the traditional dolls with a cross-shaped frame of reed (Rossie and Daoumani, 2003). In several Moroccan villages one finds today as well the self-made doll as the plastic doll, a plastic doll sometimes adapted to local ways by giving it a self-made dress.

Toys made by the children themselves are often very short-lived play objects. So they are remade again and again, this way offering possibilities for change through internal and external influences. Change, or maybe more correct progress, due to ameliorated skills because of exercise and the child’s own development, whereby the toy becomes better adapted to the ludic functions it should have according to the child. Change because of environmental influences, such as new material, learning from others how to do, shifts in interest promoted by social and economic change, influence from Western visual communication systems and global toy marketing.

Changes in toys and games do not mainly come from abroad, as in the case of Asian or European toys. On the contrary, it is interesting to notice that changes often occur in two ways: by using local material and techniques to create toys referring to new items, for example a clay telephone, and by using new material and techniques to produce toys referring to local themes, for example a cardboard box doll house.

Self-made toy-animals certainly do not have the function of teddies and other soft toy-animals. Still, such teddies and possibly also the affective relationship with this kind of toy-animals, are finding their way into popular households. At the end of 1994, I have noticed for the first time a teddy in a house in Midelt. This teddy was bought on a market with smuggled goods near the Spanish town of Melilla in the North of Morocco. It certainly was not intended for a baby or toddler but exposed on the television set as a decorative object. Nevertheless, a three-year-old girl stood four years later in the doorway of her house in Midelt holding a teddy in her arms and in 2002 a Sidi Ifni toddler walked around with his teddy and told me that it could not speak because it lacked a suggestion of a mouth.

Locally made or imported plastic toys, often of poor quality, can be bought in shops and markets. However, even when playing with plastic toys, the skills
learned by making toys can still be important as in the case of a plastic toy-truck with a broken axle that a six-year-old Moroccan village boy repaired with a stick.

When analyzing the evolution of children’s toys and games in North African countries, the influence of the emigrants must also be taken into account. When these emigrants return to visit their family they do not bring with them useful presents only but also prestige presents, among which may be dolls, toy-animals, toy-weapons, or bicycles.

The development of tourism also affects children’s toys. Today in the east of Morocco, where tourists come to admire the sand dunes of Merzouga, some young girls make their traditional dolls with a frame of reed not so much any longer to play with them, although they still use them for their doll play, but for selling them to tourists. This way these dolls change from children’s toys to touristic objects. The same evolution, but more likely referring to the toy-animals and toy-cars made by boys, can be observed in other Moroccan and African tourist places, possibly changing a child’s play into child labor.

As the evolution towards a consumptive society is slowly but surely moving on, many children whose parents cannot afford to buy good quality toys and therefore often buy uncompleted, damaged or poor quality second hand toys, not only will feel frustrated but at the same time they become less motivated to make themselves the toys they usually play with. These cheap toys can be dangerous for children because safety control for toys is lacking in the region. This commercialization of toys also stimulates the attitude of looking at toys as gifts from adults to children, an attitude that until recently was as good as non-existent.

In general, one can claim that the self-made toys are quite quickly declining in the cities, a few exceptions left aside, such as toy-cars or toy-weapons made by boys. Moreover, the traditional self-made doll seems as good as forgotten in these cities. In any case, I only have found one Moroccan city girl still making dolls herself. Nevertheless, many children, largely but not exclusively in rural areas, still have much fun in creating their own toys. Yet, the availability of new material, for example plasticine that now can be bought in the little grocery shops, combined with the influence of schooling and television programs might stimulate a child to create something completely new such as a miniature toy-dinosaur made by an eight-year-old boy. Another example is the use of the packaging of a liquid that after freezing becomes a lollipop. This plastic packaging is about 19 cm long and 3.5 cm wide. Once the lollipop has been eaten, the child blows up the packaging, rolls it up starting with the open end, keeps it rolled up in his hand with the rolled part between thumb and index, and then suddenly releases the rolled part near the cheek of another child. If done by surprise and in the correct way, the viewed child jumps up and everybody starts to laugh. The fun of the game is to be able to do it by surprise as the children all keep this packaging with them.

The influence of the commercial amusement and toy industry brings about important changes in the play activities of especially teenage boys from urban areas. Even in small Moroccan towns one finds today several playrooms, organized in a garage or a small café, offering for some money games such as
billiards, table football and pinball. Electronic toys are also finding their way into small towns like Midelt. There I witnessed in 1999 the craze of three twelve-year-old boys for a simple electronic toy with twelve game possibilities. This electronic toy had already been handed over between two or three friends before it came into the hands of the actual owner and it was certainly to be given to other boys of the peer group when the boy using it has tried it out. Shortly before writing this article an eleven-year-old boy told me of a remarkable and as far as I know unique example of the influence of television on the play behavior of Moroccan children from a popular milieu, namely the craze of Midelt's younger children for all that refers to Pokemon provoked by an Arabic spoken version of the Pokemon animation films broadcasted by the Moroccan television since the beginning of 2001.

It is clear that the ludic activities of the girls remain longer within the sphere of tradition than those of the boys who willingly find inspiration in technological innovations and sociocultural 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.

**Signs and meanings in dolls and doll play**

Although my analysis of signs and meanings in Saharan and North African children's toys and play activities directly is influenced by social semiotics, I do not use this scientific label anymore because my approach is limited to the descriptive level without developing the theoretical approach typical of social semiotics. According to Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, "Social semiotics is an attempt to describe and understand how people produce and communicate meaning in specific social settings. . . . Social semiotics is sign-making in society" (1996, p. 264). Adopting this point of view I shall discuss the materiality of Moroccan dolls, the related technology and some cognitive and emotional aspects of Moroccan children's dolls and doll play.

There is no doubt about the importance of materiality both in creating toys as in analyzing their signs and meanings. Yet, it is difficult to bestow meaning on the children's choices of the material they use to make toys, except the meaning of conformity with the ecological and sociocultural environment in which they live. However, 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 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, for the making of a new toy is part of the fun of the play activity.

The non-durability of self-made dolls contrasts with the greater durability of imported dolls, mostly plastic dolls. 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. But can one conclude from
the difference between the short lived, self-made traditional doll and the longer living plastic doll that for the girls themselves the plastic doll is more important? I don't think so, especially when looking at the play activity itself in which a traditional doll more adequately represents the bride, which is 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; it is imported and thus belongs to the outside world; 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 don't have it. To make a doll oneself becomes a slow activity for poor, rural girls, “backward girls” they say in town, and is something urban girls do not want or should not do.

A few examples of the representational meaning of specific material when making dolls have been given when talking of the creative use of natural material. However, this intentional use of material and objects is not limited to making dolls. It is also important in the creation of other toys, for example when children use all kinds of round, cylindrical and oval objects to make wheels for their carts, bicycles, cars, trucks and tractors.

When making their own toys the Moroccan children are restricted to what is called the “technologies of the hand.” The hand tools are mostly objects they find themselves, not tools of adults, objects such as stones or other heavy objects to hit, the child's own teeth or other sharp objects to cut or make holes. 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 toys such as windmills, toy-vehicles and toy-weapons have movable parts. In contrast with the imported dolls, the self-made dolls I know of have no movable parts. Yet, the fact that they 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-lived 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.

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. What is important is the meaningfulness of the movements not their realism. Three sisters from Ksar Assaka, a village close to Midelt, explained that they and the other girls of their playgroups moved a doll by holding it at the lower end of the reed, 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, what according to Gunther Kress and Theo-van Leeuwen reflects a relation of equality between the bride doll 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,
one 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.

The self-made dolls of the region 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 individual and social meanings, is nevertheless treated with a
lot of indifference once the play activity is over. Could this be the reason why
an individual name for a doll was almost never mentioned to me by my
informants from Morocco or the Tunisian Sahara or that not one bibliographical
document has mentioned an individual name for a traditional doll?

The girls’ affective relation seems to be directed towards the representa-
tional 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 playgroup. 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 (1986) describes in relation to recent North American
childhood.

When commenting on my analysis, Theo van Leeuwen stressed that the
way in which my research provides great examples of semiotic recontextualiza-
tion or re-interpretation is semiotically interesting, for example when Western
plastic dolls become Moroccan brides. Two of these examples of recontextual-
ization or re-interpretation are related to imported plastic dolls. The first example
is a cheap imitation of a Barbie doll used by the above-mentioned girl who
created a cardboard dollhouse. The second example is located in a really poor
quarter of Marrakech where 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 then already played with an imported doll. This girl, now a woman
skilled in the embellishment of hands and feet with henna-designs, transformed
a cheap plastic doll into a wonderful bride of Marrakech.

Play activities and toys are strong signs pointing to the interests of the
children. At this level, a striking difference between girls and boys is found, the
girls being often engaged in doll play, household play and dinner party play,
and in making the toys related to these games, whereas the boys are much more
engaged in play related to transport and technology and in games of skill
(Rossie, 2001a), and in making the toys used in these games.
NOTES

1. From 1975 - 1992 my research has been subventioned by the Belgian National Foundation for Scientific Research, Brussels.

2. Next to a scientific approach, I also use my information for some pedagogical and sociocultural activities to promote cross-cultural understanding and peace. A description of these activities is given in Rossie, 2003 (see Perspectives) and in Rossie, 2001b.

3. The NCFL center closed in 2001, and in 2002 was reestablished as the Stockholm International Toy Research Centre at The Royal Institute of Technology (SITREC). One should consult the publications formerly on NCFL’s website on SITREC’s website: http://www.sitrec.kth.se. When problems arise in consulting these publications please contact the author by e-mail: jprossie@hotmail.com.

REFERENCES


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