



Play and Folklore

Editors: June Factor and Gwenda Beed Davey ISSN (printed) 1329-2463 ISSN (web) 1447-5960

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Two issues per year, published by History & Technology Department, Museum Victoria,
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Available on the web at www.museum.vic.gov.au/playfolklore

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January 2006 ISSUE NO. 47

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THE NATIONAL LIBRARY'S CHILDREN'S FOLKLORE PROJECT

The National Library of Australia's Oral History and Folklore Section has begun a project to document children's traditional play. The project will run for four years, and aims to collect sound recordings in primary school playgrounds all round Australia. Work has already begun in Victoria, where three of the Library's experienced interviewers, Geordie Dowell, Graham Dodsworth and Ruth Hazleton, have been working with children's folklorist Judy McKinty to record traditional games and rhymes in Warrandyte and Preston West Primary Schools. Recording will begin at Harcourt West Primary in February 2006. The project is managed by one of Play and Folklore's editors, Gwenda Davey.



FEASTS AND RITUALS IN MOROCCAN CHILDREN'S GAMES AND TOYS

Jean-Pierre Rossie

As with most aspects of family life, social, religious and magic rituals and feasts are used by Moroccan children to create play activities. Eventually, children may perform a real ritual, but in such cases ritual and play easily mix. Information I have gathered refers more to make-believe play, in which children interpret certain rituals and some aspects of festivities than to real ritual games. Among the Ghib of the Tunisian Sahara I found in the 1970s some games directly related to magic and religious life.¹ However, I only have very few examples from Moroccan children. One example comes from a two and a half-year-old girl imitating prayer. I saw another example in a popular quarter of the northern coastal town Kénitra in 1993 when four girls transformed a small child into a corpse, then transported it by its hands and feet, put it on the ground and mourned while shouting "Allah, Allah!"



Moroccan child imitating prayer
Source – Jean-Pierre Rossie

In their doll play Moroccan girls often enact wedding rituals and festivities. This probably is the reason why girls invariably call their female dolls *tislit* or *arûsa* in Amazigh (Berber) or Arabic and their male dolls *isli* or *arîs*. A particular example is found in the doll play of some girls from the Midelt region in Central Morocco, where the ritual of the bride riding a sheep to bring luck is performed with a sheep doll and a bride doll. Although



Sheep doll and bride doll, Midelt region
Source – Jean-Pierre Rossie

weddings are a major theme in doll play, it happens that the bride doll is given a protruding belly by girls from a village near Taroudant, situated at about 80 km inland from Agadir. She is pregnant! Later on the bride will give birth to a little boy or girl, a miniature male or female doll. Such doll play integrates what the girls already know of the customs, rules and protective measures related to pregnancy. In my book *Saharan and North African Toy and Play Cultures: Children's Dolls and Doll Play* I discuss other examples in which Moroccan and other North African girls imitate not only marriage rites but also rites in relation to delivery, birth, circumcision, death and asking for rain.²

Concerning the link between festivities, festive rituals, games and toys, the Ashûra feast comes to the foreground but the Aïd el kebir, the feast of the sacrifice, and the Mûlûd, the commemoration of the birth of Muhammad, also play a role. In Morocco, Ashûra is the most important feast in relation to children because, among other reasons, it is then customary to give them sweets and presents. Ashûra falls on the tenth day of the month Muharram, the first month of the Muslim lunar calendar, and the festivities last for ten days starting at the beginning of the month. In several places, adults used to perform rituals related to the festivities and eventually participated in carnivalesque amusements, as is still done in Goulmima in Central Morocco and in Tiznit near Agadir.

During Ashûra the parents and sometimes other members of the family buy one or more toys for children or give them money. The markets then overflowed with toys – often plastic toys. Water pistols and guns for the boys and beauty sets for the girls seem to be very popular. Most toys come from China and are inexpensive. Yet the locally made toy drums, flutes and string instruments remain in favor.³



Moroccan instruments
Source – Jean-Pierre Rossie

Boys and girls use these traditional musical instruments for their door-to-door begging sometimes organized during Ashûra, and to give rhythm to their singing – especially girls singing in small groups while clapping hands and shouting “youyous”.



Another play activity directly linked to Ashûra is the spraying of water. The data collected on the spraying of water during Ashûra in a village near Midelt refers to three successive generations. The groups of children concerned are those of the 1950s and the 1970s, together with the children of today. The children from the 1950s and those of the 1970s could permit themselves a lot of liberties when throwing water on children and adults. Two anecdotes are revealing in this respect. About 1950, some ten-year-old girls took an older woman and simply plunged her into the water of a small irrigation canal. This woman did not protest against this treatment and other adults did not show any reprobation. Thirty years later, during the Ashûra of 1980, a group of girls and boys of about 11 years entered the mosque, took the pots filled with water for 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 the water on him and his mule. As the man lost control over his mule, the pack of herbs fell on the ground. In this case also, the man did not show bad feelings and the children came down from the roof to help him to put all the herbs back on the mule. Those who told me these two anecdotes said they thought adults would not tolerate today such behavior or that they would react angrily. In Midelt during the 2001 Ashûra, the children's spraying of water has changed into spraying water with a water-pistol or a water-gun bought in the market or in a local shop. Although such water-pistols and water-guns were also sold in Sidi Ifni during the 2003 Ashûra, boys and girls from the Bulalem quarter as well as the town center more often used plastic bottles and especially plastic bags filled with water. These water bags were then used as water bombs during nightly water fights. On the last evening bands of children engaged in a real water battle. The following day everything returned to normal and one could only hear some children accompanying their singing with the sound of small drums.

In Morocco, the toy industry has found in the Ashûra festivities in general, and water spraying in particular, an opportunity to sell toys. In recent years, water-pistols and water-guns have been added to musical toys, toy beauty sets, the toy utensils and toy weapons. Yet the selling of water-pistols is not limited to the Ashûra period, as I have seen mothers giving their daughters such a plastic water-pistol on the occasion of the Aïd el kebir feast in 2000. In April 2005 a five-year-old girl from the southern coastal town of Sidi Ifni received a similar water-pistol from her mother for the feast of the Prophet's birthday.

Ashûra also incorporates rites of fire, as indicated by F. Castells in his *Note sur la Fête de Achoura à Rabat* published in 1916. This author writes that at nightfall and before eating couscous a straw fire is lighted in the middle of the yard of each house. Although I did not find in the consulted bibliography nor in my own data any other reference on Moroccan games linked to fire, my observations in Sidi Ifni show that the relation between Ashûra and games linked to fire still exist. In the evening of the first day of the Muslim new year, corresponding to 5 March 2003, I saw a group of about ten children between five and ten years, with almost as many girls as boys, standing around a small fire encircled with stones. This was observed by a mother standing on her doorstep in a street of the Boulalem quarter. In this fire, kept burning by the children with newspaper pages, they set fire a long piece of Jex, steel wool used to clean pots. Once the end of the piece becomes red hot the child turns it around quickly using his arm like a windmill's sail. When everything goes well, numerous sparks flow around like during fireworks and all those too close jump away. Sometimes a child takes one of the newspaper pages that just starts to burn and runs around with it. I have seen children



playing this game of fire in other parts of the town but certainly less than in the Boulalem popular quarter.

Observing these children again during Ashûra 2004 I was astonished there was no throwing of water bags or lighting of fires in the streets but only children playing drums and singing. Inquiring what happened I was told that the local authorities have forbidden all this because some adults complained about the nuisance. During Ashûra 2005 both play activities resumed timidly. Recently I was told that this Ashûra water throwing and fire lighting also happens in Tiznit. In that town and during the same period a great masquerade goes out for six nights. Local adolescents and men, and sometimes also boys in their early teens, perform as musicians, singers, dancers and masked figures. Large animals such as a giraffe with a very tall neck, a camel walked around by three lads or an elephant, are walked around during parades. Girls participate by chanting and acclaiming the parade.

Especially for the Mûlûd, the feast of the commemoration of the Prophet's birth, the boys of the small towns of Goulmima and Tinejdad in Central Morocco make little windmills. A woman told me that her father also made such windmills for her and her sisters when they were little girls in the 1970s. Sometimes boys make these windmills



Windmills made by boys for the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad,
Midelt, 1999
Source – Jean-Pierre Rossie

to sell them for about 1 dirham (0.1 Euro). As I noticed in Midelt and surrounding villages, boys still make these windmills nowadays. At the time of the Mûlûd of June 2000, I observed a village boy making such a windmill. Another boy from the nearby town Midelt showed me how these windmills are made. In order to make the sail turn the boys run with it very fast. Girls who play with a windmill are not exceptional although it seems that they do not make them. The impression prevails that today fewer children run with a windmill than ten years ago. As happens with other traditional toys, small plastic windmills whose handle is filled with sweets are replacing the self-made windmills or the ones made by adults.

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Interested readers can find more information on Jean-Pierre Rossie's research and publications by his new personal website www.sanatoyplay.org.

Notes

¹ For more details and photos see chapter 8 'Toys, play, rituals and festivities' in my book *Toys, Play, Culture and Society. An Anthropological Approach with Reference to North Africa and the Sahara* (pp.139-148).

² The final 2005 version of this book is published on the CD included in *Toys, Play, Culture and Society*. An earlier version of this book is available on SITREC's website www.sitrec.kth.se (see publications: books/articles).

³ My forthcoming book, *Saharan and North African Toy and Play Cultures. Domestic Life in Play, Games and Toys* contains a chapter on music and dance in play, games and toys.

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Rossie, J-P. (forthcoming). *Saharan and North African Toy and Play Cultures. Domestic Life in Play, Games and Toys.* Stockholm International Toy Research Centre, Stockholm: Royal Institute of Technology, 151 ill. – This book will contain the complete discussion of the topic ritual and festivities in Saharan and North African children's toys and play.

HEY! CAN I PLAY?

John Evans



Playing in Melbourne, 1954 -1955
Source – Australian Children's Folklore Collection,
Museum Victoria

One of life's true delights is to watch children happily playing together, sharing space, sharing toys and equipment, sharing ideas, sharing laughter and generally enjoying each other's company. Play is not just about the chance to acquire and practise motor skills; it is equally about children learning how to make and keep friends. And this is not a simple process. Learning how to "get along" with other children means understanding the need to share with others and learning that you don't always get your own way.

But for some children this doesn't come easily and often they don't know why. It is sad, disturbing even, to watch a youngster who constantly plays alone, who can't seem to make friends easily and whose pleas to play are ignored by other children. The playground at recess and lunch breaks is a time when children make choices about who gets to play and who doesn't. Not being chosen to join your classmates in a game can be a devastating blow to a child who desperately wants to play and be accepted. With the following words I try to



capture the thoughts of a youngster in this situation.

*For reasons that I can't explain
Whenever I ask if I can play
They always look away and say
No way, not today*

*Is it because of how I look
Is it because of who I am
Is it because of what I do
Or is it what I cannot do*

*Is it because of what I say
Is it what I do not say
Am I too fat
Am I too thin
Why is it that I don't fit in
Gee I wish I knew*

*I stand and watch
I look and listen
I wait and hope
For them to call*

*I sometimes bring my bat and ball
And ask the captain if just once
He would let me join a team
And play the game with one and all*

*I learn the rules and want to play
I practice at home every day
They know I know how to play
But still they never come to me and say
Hey, come and join us as we play
Why is that?*

*I asked my mum but she can't say
Why it is they won't let me play
I asked my dad and all he could say
Was practice harder and it will pay
I asked my teacher but all she says is
Boys, please let him play today
But they never do*

*I know I shouldn't
But I just can't help
Not getting angry
When they leave me out
It makes me mad when they say to me
No not today we're full you see*

*I love recess don't get me wrong
But it would be great if I could find
Some friends who just for once would say
Hey John 'would you like to come and play today'?*



Laurie Richards Photographic Collection
Museum Victoria



The playground can be a lonely and frustrating place when you don't have friends. Research (see Bullock 1992, Page et al 1994) shows that children who do not enjoy positive peer relations, who do not seem to "fit in", may encounter academic difficulties as well as social and emotional problems. According to Bullock (1992), not having friends contributes to loneliness and low self-esteem.

In the research literature (see Asher & Coie 1990) a distinction is made between children who are rejected and those who are neglected. The rejected child is one who is actively disliked by his/her peers. On a peer assessment test they receive many negative nominations. By contrast neglected children receive few negative nominations (they are not disliked) but nor do they receive many positive ones. They tend to be quiet and shy and they are often quite content to play by themselves. They may often be seen alone but they are not necessarily lonely.

Rejected children, on the other hand, are unhappy at being alone and excluded and may become angry, frustrated and even disruptive. Their aggressive behaviour further alienates them from their classmates. Intervention programs designed to help these children often aim to teach them how to self-regulate their aggressive behaviour.

Ethnographic studies of rejected children show that it is very difficult to change one's status once a pattern of rejection is in place. This means that such children may not only carry the rejection through primary school but may also have to contend with it in high school (see Merten 1996). Children with low social status may not only be excluded from games but teased and bullied. Not surprisingly school may be a very unhappy place and the truancy rate amongst these children can be quite high.

The playground occupies a significant place in children's school life and being able to make friends is a crucial factor in being happy and successful. For most children the recess and lunchtime breaks are the best part of the school day. It is not only that they are escaping from the confining classroom and the rigors of class work but, in the playground, they get to make choices about what, where and with whom to play. They get the opportunity to not only play with classmates but also friends from other grade levels.

Andrew Sluckin's wonderful 1981 study of how children grow up in the playground gave us an insight into the subtle art of joining a game, and that there are rules which need to be followed. For example, he was told that you first have to find out who "owns" the game and then seek their permission to join. You can't just rush up and announce "I'm playing" unless you are a very good friend. Generally you have to ask 'can I play' or "can I play please". You may even have to wait on the sidelines and watch a while as an indication that you would like to play. You hope the group will then ask "do you want to play?"

Sluckin found that excluding children from a game was also a well-practiced art. If it was someone the group didn't want playing it would be a simple "no" or "no, get lost" but if it was someone they liked but still could not fit into their game the refusal often came with an explanation such as "you can't play, we're in the middle of a game" or "no we've already got too many".

Unpopular children were often excluded from games. Their request to play was turned down with a blunt "no, clear off". What seemed to characterise these children was

