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On cover: Drawing by Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) - Study of the human FACE.
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An anthropological approach to children’s play and toy culture with reference to North Africa and the Sahara

This article is a short overview of my lifelong research on Saharan and North African children’s play, games and toys. The concrete examples come from my fieldwork in the Tunisian Sahara and Morocco. After a short discussion of the research sources and methods, follows an analysis of some cultural and social aspects such as the relationship between play activities and toys, on the one hand, and materiality and design, rituals and festivities, sexual differentiation, and change, on the other hand. Finally, I have integrated at the end of this article a pragmatic approach through which I try to promote the use of this playful heritage.

Introduction

This article is based on some chapters of my book *Toys, play, culture and society. An anthropological approach with reference to North Africa and the Sahara* (2005). This book was written to offer a more synthetic overview and to relate the information on Saharan and North African children to the Western debate on children’s toys and play. The detailed description of the play, games and toys of Saharan and North African children is found in the volumes of the collection: *Saharan and North African Toy and Play Cultures*. However, the level of theory building is not reached and I believe this will necessitate the involvement of local scholars with a clear interest in childhood and children’s culture. Yet, such scholars have not come forward as far as I know.

The main purpose of this research is fourfold:

- To assemble the information found in bibliographical and museographical sources and to engage in fieldwork on Saharan and North African children’s play activities and toys, several of these quite quickly becoming obsolete or forgotten.
- To make this information on play and toys and the sociocultural context in which they occur available to those interested in the field of childhood and children’s culture from a scientific and/or a pragmatic perspective.
- To create a bibliographical, visual and museographical documentation on Saharan and North African children’s play and toys.
- To promote an interest in children’s culture, especially the play and toy culture, in Saharan and North African countries.
So that this documentation remains available for scholars and practitioners it is donated to the Musée du Jouet of Moirans-en-Montagne (www.musee-du-jouet.fr), along with my collection of 641 Moroccan toys (1992-2005) and 29 Ghrib toys (1975).

Sources and methods

The data on North African and Saharan children refer to the 20th century and the very beginning of the 21st century. The geographic area is delimited by the Mediterranean Sea to the North, the Sahel to the South, the Atlantic Ocean to the West, Libya and Chad to the East. The information gathered speaks of children between three and fifteen years living in rural areas and popular quarters of towns. Most often children are the source of information but sometimes I have relied on the memories of adolescents, adults and older people.

Four sources of information lay at the basis of my research:

- Ethnographic fieldwork on the Ghrib children from the Tunisian Sahara between 1975 and 1977, with some additional information given by Dr. Gilbert J.M. Claus.
- Ongoing ethnographic fieldwork in Morocco since 1992.
- The ethnographic, linguistic and other bibliography of the geographic area concerned which is analysed in a commented bibliography (Rossie, 2005).

The used research methods belong first of all to the ethnographic research tradition based on a participant approach with participation in children’s playgroups, observation, informal talks, open interviews, use of informants and interpreters, making photos and doing some filming. Additionally the human ethological method was used in the Tunisian Sahara, especially the minute-to-minute recording of longer observation periods.

It will be clear, I think, that I am using a detailed descriptive approach with a qualitative perspective when analysing specific children’s play activities and toys, and the socio-cultural context in which these take place. Afterwards, the data of my own research and the information gathered from the relevant bibliography and from the study of the toy collection are used for a comparative analysis. Finally, I try to build a comprehensive description of the play, games and toys of 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 that I have elaborated, that a more objective and representative view can be worked out.

My research moved from a micro level, the analysis of the play activities and toys of the Ghrib children living in Southern Tunisia, to the macro level of collecting informa-
tion on children’s play and toys in North Africa and the Sahara. At the same time, my research direction changed from detailed recording within a well defined area to collecting disparate information over a huge territory and a period of time stretching out from the end of the nineteenth century till today. My research in Morocco between 1992 and 2000 stood in direct relation to the macro approach. The change of living places and my trips around the country served to verify and complement the data I already had collected. The decision to finally settle down in a particular Moroccan region is related to my wish of returning to the micro level. When I felt the need to return to a detailed description and analysis of specific play activities I settled down in the coastal town Sidi Ifni south of Agadir where I can rely on the help of Boubaker Daoumani and Khaliija Jariaa.

Although I do not want to oppose a local perspective to an approach directly linked to Western cultural, psychological and sociological theories on play, toys, childhood and socialization, I have tried during my fieldwork and in the analysis of the data not to rely on presuppositions and to avoid a Western biased approach.

It must be stressed that it is impossible to claim any representativeness and completeness of the information on Saharan and North African children’s toys and play as it has been gathered through my own and other scholars’ chance contacts with families and children. Much more interdisciplinary research will be necessary before a representative overview can be given on this topic.

Some limitations influence the gathering and interpretation of the data. When speaking of North Africa and the Sahara an enormous territory is evoked as well as a complex socio-cultural area with a great diversity of physical, economic, social and cultural environments. For example there is a real difference between a small Amazigh-speaking semi-nomadic Saharan settlement and an Arabic-speaking large Moroccan town with an old urban tradition.

There is an almost total lack of previous as well as of contemporary research on play, games and toys done by foreigners or by those that have lived their childhood in the concerned regions.

The bibliographical and museographical sources must be handled carefully as the authors and collectors do not always offer adequate information and as the toys are too frequently described as objects and not as instruments of play.

The information on babies and tots is lacking because it is difficult for a man to enter the female world in which the very young child grows up and being a sociocultural anthropologist my research offers little information on the development of children’s personality or on individual differences between them.
Toys: their material, design and meaning

The first two chapters of the mentioned book analyse the material and design aspects of Saharan and North African children’s toys and their meanings in the concerned sociocultural contexts.

To create play objects these children use a great variety of natural material of mineral origin (sand, clay, paint, stones...), vegetal origin (cactus, flowers, leaves, sticks, bark, ears of maize, nuts, dates, summer squash, potatoes...), animal origin (bones, horns, snail shells, hair, skin, intestines, dung...) and human origin (hair). These children are also masters in the re-utilization of waste material (earthenware, glass, wooden, fibrous, metallic, paper, plastic, rubber material...). Moreover, natural and waste material are often combined 1. By experimenting with all this material the children learn in an active way the basic conditions of their natural and human environment and develop all their senses.

Some specific meanings are related to the material itself for example when a piece of tin with a text is used as screen for a self-made mobile phone (fig. 1). Children also use specific shapes and colours to express particular meanings as when Moroccan girls use rags with brilliant motifs to make female dolls for festive pretend games like playing at weddings (fig. 2).

The non-durability of most self-made toys versus the durability of toys made by professional artisans or by industry is not only the result of the toy making process but it also reflects the common practice of making each time a new toy whenever a child needs one for its play activities. So, even when the self-made toys easily do last for some time they only seldom are used again for a next play activity. Instead, Ghrib and Moroccan children I observed often deliberately leave behind or even destroy these toys for fun.

Not only the material aspects but also the technical, cognitive and emotional aspects of making and using toys should be taken into account. 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 with, 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. In relation to dolls I have not found yet a self-made doll with movable parts; this in contrast to the imported dolls. However, the fact that the self-made dolls and toy animals do not have movable parts should not be attributed to a lack of technical know-how as the North African and Saharan children undoubtedly demonstrate this know-how when making all kinds of toy vehicles (fig. 3). A partial explanation can be found in the fact that the children see no need to do this as they themselves are assuring the mobility of the doll or toy animal through their manipulation of it and because it is a very short living toy.

Within the topic ‘cognitive and emotional aspects’ the discussed themes are the expression of femininity and masculinity in self-made dolls, the simple, schematic or
elaborated shape of self-made toy animals, the analytical character of anthropomorphic or zoomorphic figurines, the children’s semiotic reinterpretation of some toys and children’s relationships to their toys. Only two of these aspects are mentioned here.

The expression of femininity and masculinity in self-made dolls is analysed by referring to such characteristics as the doll’s clothes and ornaments, its hairdo, face and posture found in both female and male dolls and two other characteristics particular to female dolls namely the representation of the breasts and the haunches or buttocks. The following example refers to female dolls, by large the most common dolls in North Africa and the Sahara, male dolls and child dolls being seldom.
Looking at all the Saharan and North African self-made female dolls I know, the most important visual representation of femininity is expressed through their elaborate clothing and hairdo (fig. 4). Yet, this does not mean that there are no simple dressed female dolls or female dolls without a hairdo. Between a total lack of facial features and their more or less realistic representation, one finds among the Teda of the southeastern Sahara a fancy elaboration of a face with small pearls put in the date serving as head. My data on Moroccan female dolls do not permit to say that dolls without facial features are more traditional than those with facial features and this applies to the female dolls of former times as well as those made by girls since 1992.

Children's relationship to their toys seems to be double sided. In contrast to their enthusiasm in making toys many Ghrib and Moroccan children show a real indifference to these toys once they have finished to play with them. With the exception of toys for games of skill, these children use most other toys for enacting play activities related to adult activities and relationships. The girls' affective relation to their dolls seems to be directed towards the represented model rather than to the doll itself and it certainly does not become a substitute companion doll. The same is true for the toy animals that do not play the role teddies have for European and North American children. An individual name is seldom given to self-made dolls but Moroccan girls more easily give an individual name to their plastic doll.

After all these comments on toys one should not forget that it is not the finished toy itself that is most important but, on the one hand, the process of searching for the material and of creating the toy and, on the other hand, the play activities in which these toys are used.

Fig. 4. Girl holding the dolls she made, Igisel village, 2005.
Play, toys, rituals and festivities

This chapter refers to what is written in my book *Toys, play, culture and society* (p. 139-148) and to the more developed chapter “Rituals and feasts in play, games and toys” in my forthcoming book *Saharan and North African Toy and Play Cultures. Domestic life in play, games and toys* (2008).

As with most aspects of family life, social, religious and magic rituals and feasts are claimed by Saharan and North African children to create play activities. During my research among the Ghrib of the Tunisian Sahara I found some games related to magical and religious life. So, when the Ghrib children of the 1970s needed to trace a circle for one of their collective games, e.g. the game of hide and seek, they often imitated a magic ritual for the protection of goods. Tracing a circle around one’s goods to protect them is something children as well as adults did. There is also the Ghrib children’s divination. A boy or a girl playing the role of the male or female soothsayer rolls up a piece of woollen yarn between both palms as when making a little ball of clay. If one of the players asks information about an adult of his family then once the yarn is well rolled up, the soothsayer says: “Oh little yarn, oh frizzy! When will the master of the house come home?” Then, the soothsayer puts the rolled up yarn on the ground to unroll. If the yarn’s end points to the east this is interpreted as an indication that the concerned adult will come home the same day. But if the yarn’s end points to another direction it means that this adult will stay away for some time.

Girls often integrate in their doll play certain marriage rites, but also rites in relation to delivery and birth (see Rossie, *Saharan and North African Toy and Play Cultures. Children’s Dolls and Doll Play*, 2005: 114-200). Some games of skill, such as ball games and swing games, were related to rites of attracting rain.

About 1982 and in a Central Moroccan village girls still performed on adults’ demand a ritual for obtaining rain using a doll made with a wooden ladle. This is a ritual that has been described since the beginning of the 20th century and was often performed by adults. In 2006 Khalija Jaria observed in two Anti-Atlas villages, one at the outskirts of Tiznit and the other in the Tafraoute region, how a group of several girls and boys between three and thirteen years enjoy celebrating the ritual for obtaining rain. While walking around a doll the children sing their version of the appropriate song. The first group of children sang: “Belghenja, belghenja. May God send us rainwater. So that the earth can drink and flower, that the cows and sheep can eat, and that the chickens and babies may drink”. Both groups made their belghenja doll but the one of the second group is the more typical doll (fig. 5).

Burial rites can also serve for creating playful activities as I observed in a street of a popular quarter in a northern Moroccan town. There all of a sudden a little child was taken by four girls who change it into a dead corpse that is transported by hands and feet, put on the ground and mourned by the girls shouting “Allah, Allah”.

Concerning the link between festivities, games and toys, the Ashura feast comes to
the foreground but the Aïd el Kebir, the feast of the sacrifice, and the Mûlûd, the commemoration of the birth of the Prophet, also play a role. In the context of games and toys in Morocco, the Ashûra feast is the most important one and it is then customary to give sweets and presents to children. In several places, adults used to perform rites and eventually participated in carnavalesque amusements, as nowadays still is done in Tiznit near Agadir.

During Ashûra a play activity for boys and girls is making music and singing, whereby they clap hands or use small local drums to rhythm their singing. Observation in today’s Sidi Ifni and Tiznit and information from the Midelt region in the 1970’s shows that this is an important aspect of children’s participation in Ashûra. Music making and singing is also regularly combined with a door-to-door quest. In a village near Midelt and in the 1970s girls and boys used to go in separate groups from door to door to ask for small presents in kind or in money. The children try to enter quietly in a home to surprise the occupants with an unexpected and noisy appearance. For example a boy wears a beard cut from a sheep or goatskin and puts a cushion or a blanket under his clothes to have a protruded belly.

Another play activity directly linked to the Ashûra feast is the spraying of water. One anecdote refers to the Ashûra of 1979. A group of girls and boys of about eleven years entered the mosque, took the pots filled with water serving to perform the ablutions before praying and went on the flat roof. 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 throw 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 bad feelings and the children came down from the roof to help him to put all the herbs back on the mule. During recent Ashûra feasts I saw in Sidi Ifni boys and girls using plastic bottles and bags

Fig.5. Doll for game asking for rain, Imjâd village, 2006.
Fig.6. Boys participating in the Ashûra masquerade, Tiznit, 2007.
Fig.7. Windmill for the feast of the Prophet’s birthday, Midelt, 2000.
filled with water as water bombs during their water fights in the evening. But, imported water-pistols and water-guns are becoming popular.

Ashūra also incorporates rites of fire as already mentioned in 1916 (Castells). My observations in Sidi Ifni show that play activities with fire still exist during Ashūra. For example during the first evening of Ashūra in 2003 I saw a group of about ten children between five and ten years and with almost as many girls as boys staying around a small fire. In this fire kept burning with newspaper pages they set on fire their own long piece of 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 mill’s sail. When everything goes well numerous sparks fly around like in fireworks and all those too close jump away.

In Tiznit during the Ashūra feast a parade called imashar goes on for one week. Local adolescents and men, but sometimes also boys in their early teens, perform as musicians, singers, dancers and masked figures. Two or three lads walk around large animals such as a giraffe with a very long neck, a camel or an elephant. Girls participate by chanting and acclaiming the parade. As seen on the photograph made by Khalija Jariaa at the end of January 2007, boys participate in the 𐒚Ashūra festivities possibly wearing a self-made or a bought mask (fig. 6).

Especially for the Mūlūd, the feast of the commemoration of the Prophet’s birth, the boys of the small towns of Goulimima and Tinejdad in Central Morocco make little windmills (fig. 7). Normally this is only done at this occasion. Sometimes boys make these windmills to sell them for about 1 dirham (0.1 EUR). Girls playing with such a windmill were not that exceptional even if they did not make the toy themselves.

**Play, toys, girls and boys**

Sexual differentiation played and still plays a very important role in the growing up and socialization of North African and Saharan children and therefore also in the sphere of play and toys. It is especially in their pretend games, and in the making of the toys used in these, that the girls or the boys of these regions represent the everyday life of either their female or male relatives. As girls are part of the female world they remain more bound to tradition than boys do and this reality is reflected in their games and toys. It maybe partially explains why most toy making and most play related to technological and socio-cultural change are found among boys.

My research on North African and Saharan children’s dolls and doll play shows that boys only seldom play with dolls and if they do so their dolls represent, with very few exceptions, male figures. Thus, it is not surprising that playing with dolls most often reflects adult womanhood and that the dolls themselves are a copy of an adult woman, more specifically a bride – the most enviable status for a young girl. The same holds for play activities and toys that refer to household life (small houses, toy utensils, toy
hand-mills, toy looms) and are more peculiar to girls. Play activities and toys related
to the animal world, subsistence activities (breeding, gardening, agriculture, trade) and
technology (fighting with weapons, transport, modern communication) predominantly
belong to the world of boys. These are games and toys that serve to enact stories inter-
preting the male dominated outside world.

Some games belong to the play activities of girls as well as to those of boys but
both sexes play them separately as for example in the case of games for which a small
house is constructed. The same happens with musical games, dances and certain play
activities linked to feasts and rituals. It also happens that girls play games normally re-
served for boys or that girls use toys made by boys although they do not make these toys
themselves. Finding eight-year-old boys playing girls' games or using toys made by girls
seems to be much more difficult. When one looks at the photos of toys made by North
African and Saharan girls or boys illustrating the volumes of the collection *Saharan and
North African Toy and Play Cultures* this sex based distinction is strikingly revealed.

From the age of about six years sexual differentiation in play activities becomes
very clear. It happens that girls and boys of six years or more form mixed playgroups,
but in these cases the children are quite young and they normally belong to the same
family or are close neighbours. At the age of about six years boys leave the playgroups
more or less controlled by older girls to form their own playgroup from which the girls
are excluded. From that age onwards children's playgroups become separated between
girls' groups and boys' groups, but older girls are much more likely than boys to have to
care for little children while playing. Allison James has put the same age limit forward
for the separation between girls' and boys' playgroups in Great Britain.

As playgroups of girls and playgroups of boys are strongly separated, the role of the
peer group with its same-sex playmates is overwhelmingly important for sex-appropriate
games and toys. Yet, boys and girls not only use their playgroups for reasons of identifi-
cation, in them they also exchange experiences with same-sex peers, this way learning a
lot about their future place in the male or female worlds.

Within their playgroups boys certainly enjoy more freedom than girls do in their
playgroups. Boys can go much further away than girls, the distance broadening when the
boys become older. This way older boys escape the direct control of their parents and
other adults. Girls on the contrary often must stay in the vicinity of their home among
other reasons to be available to help in the household or to be in charge of the little ones,
but also to remain under a stricter supervision.

Another difference between boys and girls, already at the age of six years but be-
coming more important at a more advanced age, is the time available to play and this
because of the greater integration of girls in the household tasks. I observed one of the
most striking examples of this difference in a popular quarter of Midelt August 20th,
1999 in the morning.

Play activities also show another kind of relationship between boys and girls
whereby the boys in particular disturb girls' games in order to make the girls take notice
of them. Commercial entertainment through playrooms established in a café, a house or a garage and where one finds money games such as billiard, table and pinball is quickly expanding even in small Moroccan towns. This evolution not only brings about important changes in the play activities of especially teenage boys from urban centres but also a new clear-cut difference between boys and girls as girls are most often excluded from such places of commercial entertainment.

It should be stressed that one must be cautious with generalizing statements such as the strict separation of older girls and boys because there are indications that this separation can be surmounted. For example, some of my Moroccan female informants declared that being children they liked to play together with their brothers, cousins and other boys of the neighbourhood among other things to play football or to climb in trees. This shows that a population’s sociocultural norms are not the sole determining criteria in children’s play activities but that the players’ intentions must be taken into account. Yet, more research based on observing children’s actual play activities is needed to gain a better understanding.

Recent research of scholars studying children’s play in Western communities made me realize that notwithstanding important differences between Western and Saharan or North African communities, the influence of sexual differentiation on play, games and toys remains truly similar.5

**Play, toys and change**

Influences such as sedentarization, moving from village to town, devalorization of the mother tongue, schooling, gender differentiation, adult interference, and/or influences such as emigration, tourism, television, toy and entertainment industries, high tech, and the consumer society strongly influence Saharan and North African children’s play and toy culture.6 In this article I can only discuss very briefly several of these influences.

What made me be attentive to the topic of change already in 1975 was that some Ghrib boys going to the primary school designed facial features on the dolls their illiterate sisters wanted to give me. Traditionally, these dolls do not have such features and the Ghrib girls respected this norm. Nevertheless, the girls did not oppose their brothers’ spontaneous action and some girls even tried clumsily to do the same. Some fifteen years later, in 1991, the facial features designed by school going girls are well elaborated.

In Moroccan towns imported plastic dolls have almost totally replaced the locally made doll. Nine years ago in Sidi Ifni I observed a six-year-old girl playing with her cheap plastic doll before her house’s entrance. However, the other items used in her doll play were just as in older times. So, this girl placed her plastic doll in a dollhouse, the little square of paving stones on top of the stairs leading to the door, and as utensils she used a miniature wooden table with on top a few oil can stoppers filled with water and representing cups of tea.
This example reveals a specific feature of the relationship between continuity and change in children’s play in these regions. This characteristic can be described as partial change whereby part of the play activity and the play material is modernized and other parts remain directly linked to the traditional way of playing. This partial change is not limited to introducing new toys, it can also appear in the make believe context of the game as when boys from the Tunisian Sahara added to their traditional fight activity the context of a fight between Muslims and Christians after they had seen an Arabic film about the Crusades on television at the end of the 1980s. This partial change is the most common way through which evolution occurs whereas a total change in play activity and toys is more seldom.

The evolution of North African and Saharan dolls refers to the play activities of girls as boys only rarely make dolls. But the evolution of toys representing means of transport and technology on the contrary refers to the play activities of the boys. 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, irrigating a miniature oasis garden and driving self-made cars and trucks. Another example of the influence of the modernization of North African and Saharan societies on toys and games refers to the very recent use of the mobile phone. A mobile phone represented by thrown away remote control or by a model mobile phone made with clay or wood (fig 1).

It is interesting to notice that change occurs most of the time in two ways: by using local material and techniques to create toys referring to new items, for example the mobile phone in clay, and by using new material and techniques to produce toys referring to local themes, for example dolls dressed in shining candy wrappings or packaging paper.

The influence of modernity on children’s play is not only from today in North Africa and the Sahara as herber mentions in 1918 the selling of European dolls in Moroccan towns and Dufrenq writes in 1933 that German toys are sold in Tunisia during the Ashura festivities. 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; at least I have found only one example made recently by a Sidi Ifni girl. Nevertheless, a lot of children, largely but not exclusively in rural areas, still have much fun in creating toys.

In Morocco the galloping urbanization and the consequent desertion of the villages changes not only the play environment of the children but also the content of their pretend play, for example by replacing open air unstructured play areas by streets, toy animals by toy cars and make-believe play related to agricultural tasks or animal husbandry by play related to driving cars or other specific urban activities.

The school strongly influences children’s play in these regions. This influence is exerted on the time to play as the school regulates children’s time, on the level of the content of play activities for example when girls play school with their dolls, and on the
level of creating playgroups because a child has the possibility in his class to engage in friendships with children who are not available in his neighborhood and family.

The importance of the role played by the media such as television, film and video on children’s play, games and toys is unresearched in North Africa as far as I know. The influence of these agents dominated by Western viewpoints and attitudes is clearly found in the play activities of Moroccan boys, for example when they are enacting aggressive play sequences copied from Kung Fu and other action films. Up to now I can only mention among children from popular milieus the craze for all that is linked to Pokemon existing in the central Moroccan small town of Midelt as well as in the similar southern Moroccan town Sidi Ifni during the year 2000. This craze began when one of the two Moroccan television stations started to broadcast an Arabic spoken version of the Pokemon animation films. However, although the popularity of Pokemon had been great it came to an end as soon as it’s broadcasting stopped.

Although imported toys have entered North Africa decades ago, the influence of the toy industry becomes more and more important. This is easy to observe during the major feasts and the annual fairs held in Moroccan towns and villages. Among popular urban families and in rural areas it is the cheap scale of industrially produced toys and the second hand toys that are bought. The commercialization of toys also stimulates the attitude of looking at toys as a gift from adults to children, an attitude that until recently was as good as non-existent there.

Tourism also influences children’s play and toy culture. In the east of Morocco, where tourists come to admire the sand dunes of Merzouga, some young girls made in 1997 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. The same evolution happened somewhat earlier with the toy animals made from palm leaves by the boys from the oasis of Meski or the gorges of Tinerhir, two popular tourist places in Central Morocco. Such an evolution related to toy vehicles can be observed in other African tourist places in for example Kenya, Tanzania, Mali or Senegal, possibly changing a child’s play into child labor.

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?

Using North African and Saharan toy and play culture

The eventual use of North African and Saharan toy and play culture for sociocultural and pedagogical action in Developing Countries as well as in a Western context is only highlighted here. Interested readers can find a previous but almost complete version of this text on the Internet (Rossie 2005).
I am convinced that it should be out of the question to consider my research on children’s play activities as a purely academic or folkloristic occupation. Much to the contrary, it should bear concrete results. I am thinking here of the fields of child welfare, formal and informal education, the adaptation of the school to local conditions, the relationships between parents and children, between parents and teachers, of community development and the promotion of intercultural understanding.

One of the contents of the local culture that perfectly fits into formal school programs is the play activities and toys of children. Seen from this angle, it would really be harmful if those in charge of education in North African and Saharan countries were to neglect the play and toy culture of their communities. One could also think of promoting the interaction between local games and toys and Western pedagogical games and toys to develop an adapted pedagogy.7

In Morocco an attempt to valorize the play and toy culture could become a reality through the collaboration of two organizations: the Alliance de Travail dans la Formation et de l’Action pour l’Enfance, ATFALE and the Ministry of Education whose project is directed towards the about 35,000 Koranic preschools who care for children between two and six years. Those two projects work together to give training to the personnel of these schools, untrained as they are to work with this age group and for whom no on the job training existed. No doubt the local children’s own toy and play culture should play an important role in the preschool. A role the more important as the participation of parents in the preschool forms an integral part of these projects.

Witnessing the children’s skills in making toys it would be really useful that a preschool teacher tries to find out what the children already know and can do. This way an important pedagogical rule can be applied, namely starting from the child's own experience in his own milieu. Next to the parents one should also build on the older children's experience and interest in making toys. A preschool teacher could even find useful help in creating pedagogical and other toys for her practice by integrating older children, who are the real toy making experts, in this effort. In India a project supported by the Aga Khan Foundation teaches day care workers “how to use creative but low cost materials to stimulate a child’s thirst for discovery” (Bernard van Leer Foundation Newsletter, 1993: 3). There is no doubt that the need for educational toys exists in North Africa and the Sahara and when I see all the toys made by Moroccan children still today it cannot be that difficult to find models for adapted educational toys that are cheap to produce and useful for preschools and primary schools. The remarkable development of preschool classes, for example in Morocco, could well make this necessary once school practice takes into account the value of children’s play and toys, and this simply because Western educational toys are so expensive that most schools of the concerned regions have no means to buy them.

In a chapter called The Education Revolution, published by UNICEF in 1998, it is stated that a comprehensive approach of learning for life necessitates that “children must be able to express their views, thoughts and ideas; they need opportunities for joy and play; they need to be comfortable with themselves and with others; and they should be
treated with respect” (p. 22). How could one formulate a better statement for using children's creativity in making toys and in playing or even inventing games? If adults want to make the classroom experience more fulfilling and relevant, then isn't taking into account children's play and toy making experiences one of the best ways to achieve this? At least, if these adults do not control the children's spontaneous play activities too much, and do not change them into purely didactic exercises. In the full text on using North African and Saharan toy and play culture I mention three examples from sub-Saharan Africa showing that it is possible to use games and toys for a development better adapted to children’s needs in and to the context in which they grow up.

Children’s play and toy culture can also be used for sociocultural action by for example youth houses and youth, cultural and welfare organizations. Just one remark must suffice here: any social policy for the children and their mothers can only succeed when it takes into account the sociocultural reality in which they live. One modest but effective means to do this is to relate to the playful experiences of children in the social and cultural activities set up for them.

The usefulness of the Saharan and North African play and toy heritage is not limited to North Africa and the Sahara or to the Third World as it is quite possible to integrate it in what is called intercultural or peace education, for example in Western Europe where many immigrants from these regions settled down decades ago. As a volunteer of the Ghent Committee for UNICEF in Belgium, I worked out a small project I like to entitle "the world at play: intercultural education through toys and play". Within this project I started in 1989 to work with a preschool group of children of about five years. I showed them a short series of slides referring to the games of make believe of the Ghrib girls and boys of the Tunisian Sahara. In this series of slides the reality of the children's daily lives is portrayed as well as the interpretation of this reality in the children's play and toy making activities. The themes evoked are: life in the desert; the oasis; animals; the household; spinning; weaving; and the modernization of nomadic life. After the children have seen and commented on the slides, I asked them to look for some advantages of living in the desert and some disadvantages of life where they grow up as well as for some inconveniences of life in the desert and some pleasant aspects of life in their homes. The children spoke, for example, of the sunny weather, the free space, the availability of play-mates in the desert in contrast to the rainy weather, the danger of playing outside, the loneliness of a lot of children in Belgium or the scarcity of water, food, toys and luxury goods in the desert versus the abundance of all this in Belgium. After playtime, the girls and boys were divided in several small groups. Each group made something to create an oasis village. Some children made a copy of the houses they saw on the slides, others made a palm tree, a well, a dromedary and so on. The materials at their disposal were waste material, Plasticine, building blocs, green pipe cleaners and cardboard tubes of kitchen rolls. At the end, the children learned a little song with a known simple melody but with adapted words. Then they walked around their oasis village while singing and imitating the walking of a dromedary (fig. 8).
Since this experience, I have used the same approach to the intercultural from the first to the sixth year of the primary school, each time in sessions of one hour. In the class I use a video of twenty minutes on the way children from Kenya in East Africa live and play, a video made for the Dutch Committee for UNICEF. This way some Ghent children were confronted with a quite different material situation and family life but they also saw that the Kenyan children are creative in making their toys. This brought more than one primary school child to express spontaneously its admiration for this creativity and know-how. After the video, the same way of opposing what the pupils like or dislike in their own life and that of the African children is worked through. As I gave this intercultural program in the lessons of religion or lay ethics, the teacher often continues this approach in a subsequent lesson and/or gives the children the possibility to make toys with waste material they bring from their homes. So doing a small pedagogical project is elaborated possibly giving rise to an exposition of the toys, designs and stories realized during this intercultural education program. It also occurred that I was asked to enter a pedagogical project related to a specific theme such as ‘water’, ‘waste and recycling’, ‘environmental protection’, ‘children’s creativity’.

In these cases I select a series of slides on play activities and toys from the Tunisian Sahara and Morocco to exemplify certain topics linked to these themes.

What I found very stimulating and useful in such playful approaches to intercultural education is, next to the stimulation of the creativity and personal effort of these Ghent children, the promotion of a more positive image of Third World children, an image that very often is unilaterally negative and based on images of sick, miserable or starving children, images one regularly sees on television, as if this is the only reality of Third World children. The results of these pedagogical activities have convinced me of the certainly limited but creative possibility of using play activities and toys for an intercultural purpose. Indeed, already in 1989 the European Council’s Workgroup for the Encounter of Cultures, Division of Education of the Council for Cultural Cooperation, included in its recommendations for intercultural pedagogical activities the theme of play and toys.

Fig.8. Ghent preschool children walking around their oasis village, 1989.
Conclusion

I am convinced that the information on North African and Saharan children’s play and toys has its value, on the one hand, as testimony of a partly outdated and partly fully alive reality, and on the other hand, as a contribution to a more holistic study of children’s toys and play from all over the world.

I hope that one day the past and contemporary toy and play cultures of Saharan and North African children will be recognized as of major importance by the scientific, cultural and educational institutes of their countries. I also hope that scholars studying children’s play and toy cultures and scholars studying African communities will try to integrate in their analyses and theoretical elaboration the available information on Saharan and North African children’s play, games and toys. Moreover, this information can also be useful for cross-cultural analyses and to overcome an approach too strongly biased by Western facts and Western values.

Finally, I would like to direct the attention of researchers and research centres studying Third World societies towards children and their culture in rural areas and popular quarters of cities as I have the impression that little effort is invested in research on these topics. Yet, if the situation of children is to improve in these areas and if the desertion of villages is to diminish, a better understanding of the children, their culture and environment and of the changes that affect them will be indispensable.

Notes

1 As it is only possible to integrate a few photographs of Saharan and North African children’s toys and play activities in this text the reader is referred to my publications available on www.sanatomyplay.org and on www.sitrec.kth.se for more examples. Apart from photograph 6 made by Khalija Jariia, the photographs in this article were made by the author. All but two represent toys and play activities recently found among Moroccan children from the Anti-Atlas.

2 Ashura is the first feast of the Islamic calendar. It comes one month after the Aid el Kebir, the feast of the sacrifice and two months before the Aid el Mûlûd, the commemoration of the birth of the Prophet. In North Africa it is an important feast and as Jemma-Gouzon (1991: 257) writes: Ashura absorbed several rites related to the winter and summer solstice, e.g. the custom of lighting bonfires. It also absorbed rituals related to women, children, fertility and death.

3 That sexual differentiation appears already at an early age is clearly demonstrated by the reaction of a three-year-old boy being engaged with his six-year-old niece in doll play in front of a house in Sidi Ifni in January 2002. When the niece orders the small boy to make dolls or to perform female tasks he flatly refuses to do so stating loudly that he is a man (Rossie and Daoumani, 2003, Video 1).

4 The scene is a shallow depression, some 250 meters long, between the quarters Ait Mansour and Taddawt. Within an hour, I observed the making and dissolution of about three boys’ playgroups. One group playing at throwing stones at each other or at a given target, another group doing some wrestling, and a third group starting a football game. Moreover, an eight-year-old boy was helping a younger boy to ride on a children’s bicycle while another boy pulled a hoop before him. Yet, during
this whole hour I did not see one girl playing in this typical play area. What I observed was a six-year-old girl cleaning the ground in front of her house-door putting little stones in a basket to throw them aside. A somewhat older girl is passing by with a plate of biscuits on her head to take them to the oven. Two other girls, also about six year old, have done some errands and return home. Meanwhile, an older girl is looking after a group of toddlers sitting near the entrance of a house. The only play activity in which a girl together with two boys shortly was engaged, happened in front of a little shop where they just bought a laab u kul, literally play and eat, sweet and a little string needed to make it rotate like a spinning wheel.

5 For example there seems to be no difference with the dolls and other toys of French children of which Pierre Tap and Gilles Brougère say that they support the sexual differentiation and the conformity to the social model (Brougère, G. (1993). Le jeu à la poupée bébé et ses accessoires. Le rôle du jouet dans la structuration du jeu contemporain. In C. Gougoulis (Ed), Special Issue on Children’s Play. Ethnographica IX, Athens: Peloponnesian Folklore Foundation, 256, 175-182, p. 176).

6 In Toys, play, culture and society I propose an overview of a changing childhood in an North African and Saharan context before discussing the evolution of children’s play, games and toys of the children living in these regions. This overview is illustrated with a microscopic analysis of the changes occurring in several aspects of children’s lives between the childhood of a grandmother, her daughters and her grandchildren in a Central Moroccan area between 1940 and 2000 (p. 150-160).

7 An example of this interaction is found in the book of Chantal Lombard on the toys of the Baoule children in a rural African society published in 1978. She notes that her analysis is based on two statements. First, so that the traditional creativity can be integrated into the school as ferment for children’s development it is necessary to open the school whereby it becomes a place of encounter between traditional culture and scientific knowledge instead of being a place of disruption. Second, so that the traditional creativity acquires a new dimension and enriches modern thinking it is necessary that the school brings the children to another level of mastering the material environment and that it reconciles technology with creative imagination (Les jouets des enfants baoulé. Essais sur la créativité enfantine dans une société rurale africaine. Paris: Quatre Vents Editeur, 236 p., p. 209).
Hereafter are found the original colour photographs of the illustrations shown in this article in black and white.