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INNOVATION AND TRADITION IN MOROCCAN CHILDREN'S TOY AND PLAY CULTURES

J-P. Rossie

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Summary

This article is a short overview of the data on innovation and tradition in children's play and toys found in my publications on Saharan and North African toy and play cultures (see www.sanatoyplay.org). The examples come from my ongoing fieldwork in Morocco.

Introduction

This article refers to the chapters "Toys, play, sociocultural reproduction and continuity" and "Toys, play and change" in my book *Toys, play, culture and society. An anthropological approach with reference to North Africa and the Sahara* (2005) and to similar chapters in the volumes of the collection: *Saharan and North African Toy and Play Cultures*. [1]

The data on North African and Saharan children relate to the 20th century and the very beginning of the 21st century. The information gathered speaks of children between three and fifteen years living in rural areas and popular quarters of towns.

The main purpose of my research is fourfold:

1. 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.
2. 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.
3. To create a bibliographical, visual and museographical documentation on Saharan and North African children's play and toys.
4. To promote an interest in children's culture, especially the play and toy culture, in Saharan and North African countries.

So that the 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 Ghib toys (1975).

Material and methods

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

1. Ethnological fieldwork on the Ghib children from the Tunisian Sahara between 1975 and 1977.
2. Ongoing ethnological fieldwork in Morocco since 1992.
3. The collection of Saharan and North African toys in the Musée du Quai Branly, Paris (<http://www.quaibrantly.fr>).
4. The ethnographic, linguistic and other bibliography of the geographic area concerned.



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.

I am using a detailed descriptive approach with a qualitative perspective when analysing specific children's play activities and toys, and the sociocultural 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.

Results

The amount of change and continuity in children's play and toys greatly depends on the social class and the human settlement in which a child grows up. So there can be a huge difference between the toys and games of a child from a wealthy city family and those of a poor village child. Moroccan children's games and toys reflect the social and cultural realities of the community in which they grow up. They are directly related to the child-rearing methods and to the values upheld in the child's family and community. These settings are the household, the extended family, the playgroup, the peer group, the neighbourhood and the local community. The dolls, toy-animals, pretend houses, self-made cars and utensils serve for games in which an interpretation of female or male life is enacted. These representations of adult roles are directly linked to the everyday life of the children and their parents. However, what is at stake is a personal interpretation of the adult world, not a simple imitation of it.

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.

Influences such as sedentarization, moving from village to town, devalorization of the mother tongue, schooling, gender differentiation, adult interference, emigration, tourism, television, toy and entertainment industries, high tech, and the consumer society strongly influence Moroccan children's play and toy culture.

In Moroccan towns imported plastic dolls have almost totally replaced the locally made doll. The evolution of Moroccan dolls refers to the play activities of girls. The evolution of toys representing means of transport and technology on the contrary mostly refers to the play activities of boys. An example of taking up the latest high-tech item by Anti-Atlas village children is the toy-mobile phone represented by a thrown away remote control or by a model mobile phone made with clay or wood.

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 neighbourhood 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. [2]

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.

Discussion

In Morocco the evolution away from traditional childhood started many decades ago but the speed of this process has been much quicker in cities than in small towns and in villages. The introduction of the school and of modern communication has certainly speeded up the changes. The effects of economic and cultural globalisation are more and more felt in remote villages and this has a direct influence on children's toys and play. For example the massive import of cheap toys made in China drives children away from making toys themselves towards becoming dependent on gifts from an adult.

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 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?

Moroccan children's play and toy culture not only has a scientific value but also a practical value. A discussion of its use for sociocultural and pedagogical actions in Developing Countries and for intercultural and peace education in a Western context can be found on my website. [3]

Notes

[1] The references of these books are found on the website <http://www.sanatoyplay.org> : see publications. The volumes of the collection Saharan and North African Toy and Play Cultures are - Commented bibliography on play, games and toys (2005), Children's dolls and doll play(2005), The animal world in play, games and toys (2005) and Domestic life in play, games and toys (available at the end of 2007). The books of this collection are also published in French. Many photographs of Moroccan children's toys and play activities are available on the mentioned website.

[2] 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.

[3] <http://www.sanatoyplay.org> : see publications Rossie (2005). Using North African and Saharan toy and play culture.