

Ashura a children's feast in Morocco

**PowerPoint presentation and texts prepared
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Ashura: a children's feast in Morocco

Introduction to a PowerPoint presentation for Global Education

For Sunni Islam, e.g. in Morocco, Ashura only is a day on which it is recommended to fast. But since unmemorable times the Ashura festivities have been an important popular happening in North Africa. Today children and youngsters are not or only vaguely aware of these old meanings. This way what formerly was experienced as a rite or magic practice becomes an entertainment and a game.

To offer concrete and recent information on children's playful activities during Ashura I almost exclusively refer to what I have observed or heard recently in the southern Moroccan Anti-Atlas and almost all photographs were taken between 2005 and 2007.

When looking at the PowerPoint presentation different topics can be discussed

- the use of natural and waste material to make toys
- games and toys in relation to the natural elements water and fire
- children's interpretation of the adult world
- the old and the new in children's life and play experiences
- the role of change and the influence of globalisation in childhood



In the PowerPoint presentation and the joined comments attention has been given to highlight similarities between the shown southern Moroccan customs and those still existing in Great Britain and other European countries. Concrete examples from Great Britain and Europe can be found on the mentioned websites.

Moroccan practices

- playing with self-made dolls
- singing and playing music
- Ashura door to door collection
- spraying water
- firing sparks oneself
- creating personages for mascarade



European practices

- playing with dolls from the toy industry
- singing and playing music
- Magi feast, Halloween door to door collection
- spraying water
- firework with bought projectiles
- creating personages for carnival, Halloween



Issues and underlying statements related to global education

1. Similarity

- Human beings seem to react in a similar way to the uncertainties related to nature and human condition (draught, floods, illness).
- People's joys and fears are not only expressed on a personal level but also on a collective level through festivities and rituals (birth, marriage, death...) and on specific times of the year (Ashura, summer and winter solstice, New Year...).
- Where people live together there seems to be a basic need to celebrate and to put on stage experiences and beliefs,
- Using artistic and theatrical forms to express common feelings and attitudes.
- Children play everywhere and always, except in extreme situations of conflict, illness, hunger or maltreatment.
- The main categories of games and toys seem to be universal. Pretend play, construction play, games of skill, games of chance and the toys used in these can be found almost everywhere (e.g. hopscotch, building small shelters, balls, dolls, masks).

2. Diversity

- There surely is a strong common background to humans on the biological, social and cultural level, nevertheless human groups want to create a boundary between themselves and the others.
- Looking on TV at the way people in different countries and different continents eat, dress, travel, pray, mourn and celebrate offers abundant examples.
- What makes games and toys different is the specific environmental, economic and sociocultural situation of a given community.
- They influence practices like making toys oneself or buying them from the toy industry, being largely autonomous in deciding what play activity one shall engage in and what toys to use or participating mostly in adult organized entertainment and receiving toys as gifts from adults.

3. Change

- All communities and countries are in evolution. A 'primitive' stable and unchanging 'tribe' doesn't exist.
- Every human group has its past and present, its history, and change is fundamental on the whole planet. What differs is the way in which this history is recorded (written or

oral history) and experienced (openly discussed, kept secret, idealized, used in conflicts).

- Also different has been the rapidity of change. Until World War II one could say that change in the Western world was obviously quicker than for example in Morocco.
- But this is not the case anymore when one sees in Developing Countries the rapid evolution from a predominantly village based population to a situation where the majority of the population lives in towns and cities. According to the [State of World Population 2007: United Nations Population Fund](#) more than half of the world's population will live in urban areas in 2008 (www.unfpa.org/swp).

4. Environment

- The natural and human environment has a fundamental influence on childhood and children's play and toys. One example among many highlights this: the availability of open space in rural areas or its lack in crowded cities.
- A topic often linked to the situation in Developing Countries is the lack of resources and poverty. This is easily analysed as solely negative although it may have positive effects for children's creativity and autonomy. Children being overwhelmed with sophisticated play material in consumption societies can be hampered in relation to these aspects.
- Children in Developing Countries have more possibilities to learn about risk and risky behaviour something that European children in an almost "zero risk" society are missing more and more as says Tim Gill (www.rethinkingchildhood.com).

However, one should be aware of two pitfalls

- To idealize the situation of children from popular milieus in Developing Countries by emphasising only that they create remarkable toys at no costs, are masters in recycling, have many friends to play with. This is one-sided as for example in rural areas where self-made toys are common the children making them and their families also suffer from a lack of sanitary, medical, educational and/or employment possibilities.
- To lament on these children by looking only at the negative side of their situation, namely that according to the standards of a Western consumer society they are poor or miserable with bad living conditions and no 'real' toys.

In reality the living condition of these children just as the one of children living in consumption societies has advantages and disadvantages. Therefore the positive as well as the negative aspects in both situations should be taken into account.

Ignorance about foreign peoples and cultures in a world where one eats and buys things from many far away nations is a contradiction. With the global economy and market of today also travel peoples' habits and ideas. Remaining ignorant can become a breeding ground for fear, distrust and rejection of the unfamiliar and the strange. Luckily younger children still have an open mind and using children's entertainments, play activities and toys to talk about how children live in Developing Countries is a pleasant and non-threatening approach.

After showing and talking about Southern Moroccan children's Ashura festivities and its corresponding festivities in Europe or elsewhere, it is useful to involve the participating children. For example one can ask the participating children what they like or don't like about the living conditions and the entertainments of the children they have seen in the PowerPoint presentation and what they like or don't like in their own situation.

Information and photos on Moroccan and other North African and Saharan children's play, games and toys are found on www.sanatoyplay.org

Notes for the PowerPoint presentation

Ashura: a children's feast in Morocco

This PowerPoint presentation is available on the website www.sanatoypay.org section multimedia: Rossie, Jean-Pierre (2008).

Slide 1. The day of the Ashura feast itself (aïd Ashura) falls on the tenth of the first month of the Islamic lunar calendar but the festivities start on the first day of that month. So they last for ten days and this number (ashra in Arabic) gives the period it's name. A few European authors as well as Moroccan authors mention Ashura from the beginning of the twentieth century onwards. Until some fifty years ago the Ashura feast was certainly related to ancient agricultural rites. Agricultural rites referring to seasonal changes and executed to promote fertility. A Moroccan scholar wrote that still in the 1960s most people from Tiznit, a southern Moroccan town, believed that Ashura secured a good year as these rites enhanced the fertility of nature and humans. Ashura, like carnival in other regions, was a mix of seriousness and joyfulness and adults as well as children actively took part in it.

Slide 2. For Sunni Islam, e.g. in Morocco, aïd Ashura only is a day on which it is recommended to fast. But since unmemorable times the Ashura festivities have been an important popular happening in North Africa in which traditional beliefs and practices found refuge. Today children and youngsters are not or only vaguely aware of these old meanings so they have lost their signification. This way what formerly was experienced as a rite or magic practice becomes an entertainment and a game. Therefore one must distinguish the formerly ritual aspects from the playful aspects of today. Being a researcher on children's play and toy culture I stress in this PowerPoint presentation children's play activities during Ashura. Anyway it is the playful aspect of Ashura that survives the important social and cultural changes in Moroccan communities. The children's practices are:

- making dolls with a frame of bones or reed
- singing and playing music often engaged in during a quest for
- collecting gifts of sweets, dates, eggs, or pennies
- spraying water: an obvious fertility ritual but nowadays more a game
- playing with fire: refers to bonfire traditions all over the world
- children's mascarade a prelude to the important youngsters' mascarade in the Tiznit region

Slide 3. To offer concrete and recent information on children's playful activities during Ashura I only mention and show what I have observed or heard recently. The information comes almost exclusively from southern Morocco and more precisely from the triangle formed by the towns Tiznit, Ifni and Tafraoute in the Anti-Atlas. The information on the Ashura dolls with a bone structure and the Ashura song comes from the region of Chemaïa, halfway between Marrakech and the Atlantic Ocean and from Midelt at the foot of the Jbel Ayachi Mountain in central Morocco. Almost all photographs were taken between 2005 and 2007.

Slide 4. Tiznit is a town well known for its walls and the creation of jewellery. It is nowadays a quickly expanding and modernizing town where young people continue to stage a big Ashura mascarade and that children from the region too young to participate imitate.

Slide 5. Ifni (or Sidi Ifni) is a small apparently sleeping town at the Atlantic coast. Its centre and a few buildings from the 1930s remind of the short Spanish period it experienced.

Slide 6. Regularly the small village Ikenwèn at about 40 km from Tiznit along the road to Tafraoute will be mentioned. In this village new attitudes mix with old customs, like the practice to ask for rain with a 'belghenja' doll.

Slide 7. A woman makes a tall 'belghenja' doll with a big wooden ladle. The similarity of the symbolism between pouring water with a ladle and rain falling from heaven is obvious. The ladle is dressed like a bride on the day of her marriage. In this dry region the ancient custom to ask for rain is still performed. Belghenja is walked around in Ikenwen and neighbouring villages and the women accompany her while playing music and singing specific songs. After that the women enjoy together a great dinner party.

Slide 8. A girl from the village Ikenwen made this doll with a small wooden ladle and created her version of the doll to ask for rain. With this doll the children imitate the ceremonial wandering about of their mothers' belghenja doll and later on they play at dinner party.

Slide 9. Ashura is also about changes in the agricultural and life cycles and henceforth death is remembered as well as new life is celebrated. This link to new life probably explains why children not only enjoy several typical play activities during the Ashura period but also that it is custom to give them sweets, musical instruments, toys and clothes, all this of course as far as family resources permit. So, in Morocco giving

presents to children is clearly related to a ritual period. But the same is very often the case when European adults or adults in other continents give presents to children. In Europe and America for example most sweets and toys and eventually also new clothes are given for Saint Nicholas Day, Christmas and New Year, ritual feast that are associated with legendary figures like Saint Nicholas, Father Christmas and Santa Claus.

Slide 10. Seldom seem to be the places where this kind of dolls with a bone of a sheep's leg as structure is made. In older times girls made these dolls and buried them with the usual ceremony on the day of the Ashura feast. After that the boys deterred the dolls, stripped off the clothes and throw the bones away. According to authors describing the custom in the beginning of the twentieth century this practice was linked to the death of nature and its coming rebirth. Today the girls of the Chemaïa region still make such a doll but the outcome of this practice is more about teasing than about ritual. When the girls now burry their doll together with a date in the cemetery they try to hide this for the boys. Later on the boys must find and deter the dolls. When a boy remembers to which girl the doll he found belongs he takes the date and puts it in an ants' nest proclaiming that that girl will have to scratch her hear for the whole coming year because of lice. The girls of this region also continue to sing the traditional Ashura songs like the one the on the ground sitting grandmother, her daughter and granddaughter are singing.

Slide 11. In the Anti-Atlas villages I haven't found girls making dolls with sheep bones but they certainly continue to make traditional dolls with a frame of two reed sticks or pieces of a plank tied together in shape of a cross. On this frame they hang several layers of clothes. The dolls representing a woman, often a bride, have a belt. The ones without a belt and with only one or two layers of cloth represent a man. The doll's hair is made with wool or goat hair but it happens that the girl uses a bit of her own hair. Sometimes facial traits are incrustrated or designed and sometimes there are no facial traits.

Slide 12. Cheap plastic dolls mostly made in China or second hand dolls coming from Europe are nowadays much liked by these girls. However, they adapt them to local habits by making them new dresses.

Slide 13. Some musical instruments were and still are given to children especially for Ashura. Traditionally the tambourine on the left was given to girls and the drum on the right to boys. However, today girls also play the boys' drum. With these instruments they rhythm their singing.

Slide 14. And as this photo shows a three-year-old village boy tries to hit the right rhythm on a tambourine his father made for him.

Slide 15. I bought for a small amount of money this series of four 10 cm high and one 20 cm high drums in Sidi Ifni during Ashura at the end of January 2007. In 2008 Ashura was celebrated in mid January, as the Islamic lunar calendar by which Ashura is determined is about ten days shorter than the solar calendar. Together with the spinning tops this type of children's pottery drums, with a skin as membrane, is one of the remaining toys made by Moroccan artisans.

Slide 16. But the children also play reed flutes like the ones cut out and sold by an old man from Tiznit. Accompanying themselves with these musical instruments town and village children, especially the girls sing Ashura songs. Probably I should say sung Ashura songs as one heard during Ashura 2007 the Sidi Ifni girls sing more songs from popular Moroccan artists seen on TV than traditional Ashura songs.

Slide 17. The saying states: "the world has become a global village" and surely the Moroccan rural areas are more and more steadily incorporated into this global village. Globalisation infiltrates children's life even in the most isolated Anti-Atlas villages. Due to global marketing and massive import markets and small shops are inundated with cheap toys mostly made in China. These toys received from parents or other family members and experienced as a gift have in the eyes of a child more prestige than self-made toys.

Slide 18. Children as young as six years but more often older children, girls as well as boys, go from door to door while playing on their musical instruments and singing. Small children receive candy and other sweets, an egg or some dates. Older children prefer a piece of money as these Tiznit boys showing the result of their Ashura quest in a street bordering the town wall. This quest during Ashura has already been mentioned in 1921 for the High Atlas and Anti-Atlas Mountain regions. Since long and till today a similar children's quest exists in some European countries for example on the feast of Epiphany the 6th of January. In this Christian tradition children dress up as the Magi or three Kings bringing gifts to the baby Jesus. The painter Rembrandt van Rijn made a drawing of this children's quest about 1646 called *The Star of the Kings* found in the British Museum (http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/pd/r/rembrandt_van_rijn_the_star_o.aspx). As for the Ashura feast there exist specific songs. In the United States Halloween is a national feast characterized by a children's quest for candy, a feast that also becomes more and more popular in Europe. "The main event for children of modern Halloween in the United States and Canada is trick-or-treating, in which children disguise themselves in costumes and go door-to-door in their neighborhoods, ringing each doorbell and yelling "trick or treat!" to solicit a gift of candy or similar items" (quoted from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Halloween#Trick-or-treating_and_guising).

Slide 19. Another important practice during Ashura is the spraying or even the wasting of water. Water is directly related to fertility and prosperity. Therefore water plays a prominent role in many rituals and is fundamental to all religions (see the document *Water in Religion* on <http://www.africanwater.org/religion.htm>). About 1980 and in the region of Midelt children might put an adult into a small irrigation canal or throw from the flat roof of the mosque buckets of water on passing by people. But those who told me these anecdotes added that nowadays adults wouldn't accept this anymore.

Slide 20. This syringe made of reed is an old toy to spray water. Today it is made when a child didn't receive a water pistol. But I have seen something better. In Sidi Ifni during the Ashura festivities in 2003 the children threw bombs: plastic bags filled with water. However, some adults complained to the local authorities and throwing water bombs was forbidden the following year. This anecdote shows that the old signification of spraying water seen as beneficial has lost much of its impact.

Slide 21. As with musical instruments and other toys, a plastic toy replaces the traditional water sprayer. Nowadays children like a lot the guns with a large water reservoir. A member of the family living in Europe and visiting his or her region of origin is often bringing such toys as prestigious gift.

Slide 22. Authors speak of children running quickly around with a burning bundle of firewood and of Ashura fires one dances around or jumps over. This is a custom resembling the bonfires originally lit on the summer solstice and celebrated as 'midsummer' on the 21st of June (see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bonfires> and <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Midsummer>). According to Wikipedia traditional Midsummer bonfires are still lit on some high hills in Cornwall, a tradition revived by the Old Cornwall Society in the mid 20th century. Today in Sidi Ifni and Tiznit boys and girls lit a fire and hold a wick of steel wool used to clean pots in the flames.

Slide 23. Once the wick of steel wool is red hot the child needs to turn it around firmly using its arm like a windmill's wing. If done adequately numerous sparks create a private firework. The use of firework is found all over the world and it is part of many cultural and religious manifestations (see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Firework>).

Slide 24. In the town Tiznit and some villages of the region male youngsters start well in advance of the Ashura period to make masks, dresses, animals and other items for the Imashar parade (derived from ashura). From the day after the Ashura feast some groups of young men parade at night in the midst of typical music performed by drums, flutes and cymbals and this for about a week. Although women and girls don't participate in the

parade, they play an important role as spectators and supporters of the young men. Several aspects of Imashar - the procession of disguised persons, the rhythmic music, the mockery and the insolence towards established rules (subversive behaviour) - are similar to what is done in several carnival tradition across the world (see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carnival>). More photos and information on this Imashar mascarade is found in another PowerPoint presentation and the related activity sheet.

Slide 25. Incited by the young men's fever to prepare the mascarade boys to young to participate play at becoming an Imashar. Although this ten-year-old boy from the village Ikenwen received a plastic mask produced by the international toy industry he prefers to make himself the attributes needed to bring alive some personages that impressed him during the year.

Slide 26. The boy represents a young bearded cyclist who regularly drives on the road passing through his village. Since recently he protects his eyes with goggles for the dust something this boy imitates by using yoghurt pots of which he cut out the bottom. His beard is made with the inner bark of a palm tree.

Slide 27. The boy's second personage is a wise old man. With such self-made masks or bought masks children, but especially the boys, imagine and perform their children's mascarade. Using masks as a disguise is really universal and this by children as well as adults. In some regions the carnival masks are really famous (see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mask>).

Slide 28. The three-year-old Tiznit boy, who so proudly poses for this photograph with the mask his father made, already dreams of being a real Imashar. So, is he not doing that what children everywhere like to do?

Slide 29. If interested in Moroccan and other North African and Saharan children's play, games and toys you can find a lot of information and photos on my website www.sanatoyplay.org Remarks on this PowerPoint presentation can be send to sanatoyplay@gmail.com

Khalija Jariaa made the photographs in the slides: 4 6 7 12 14 18 19 21 22 23 24 25 26 and 27.

Jean-Pierre Rossie made the photographs in the slides: 3 5 8 9 10 11 13 15 16 17 20 28 and 29.