

The possibilities of cross-cultural research in children's folklore have been greatly enhanced in recent times by the Internet, and particularly through the children's folklore network instigated by Dr Julia Bishop from Sheffield University in the United Kingdom. A recent international discussion (initiated by a folklorist from Norway) concerned the popular playground game of 'elastics', and whether it could be identified before the 1950s. Sometimes called Chinese skippy or skipping, many Australian researchers into childlore believe elastics came to Australia in the 1950s, probably from South-East Asia.

In addition to children's folklore, there are many other multicultural sound recordings in the National Library's collections, such as Barry York's interviews with Maltese-Australians, which hold great interest for scholars. Linguists, for example, are interested in 'migrant English' and in the changes taking place in languages from the home country. The National Library's sound recordings provide a rich body of source material for researchers in linguistics and other disciplines.

First published in *National Library News* in February 2003. Reproduced with permission.

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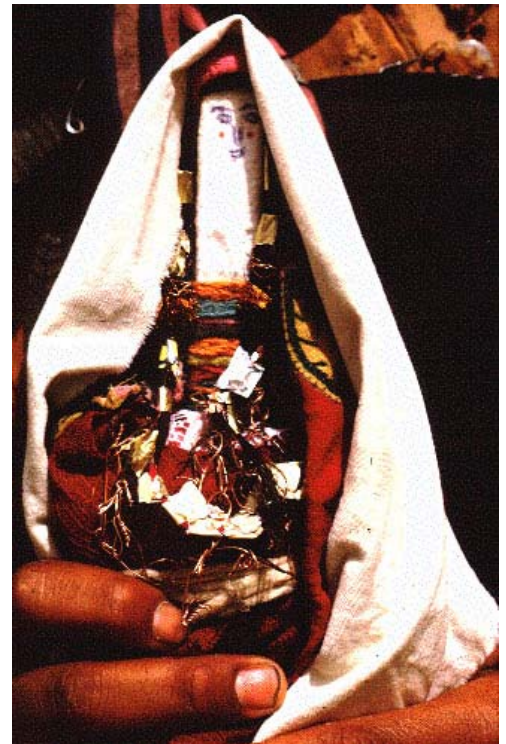
## ■ CHILDREN'S CREATIVITY THROUGH TOYS & PLAY IN MOROCCO & THE TUNISIAN SAHARA

Jean-Pierre Rossie

Every toy made by a child and every play activity is a creation, an original act resulting from the child's personality combined with influences from the physical and human environment in which the child lives. However, being creative does not necessarily refer to the unreal or to the imaginary as it very well can be related to everyday life.

From 1975 until 1992 my research was funded by the Belgian National Foundation for Scientific Research, Brussels. For this paper, I have drawn on my fieldwork among the Ghib between 1975 and 1977; ongoing fieldwork in Morocco since 1992; the collection of Saharan and North African toys in the Musée de l'Homme in Paris; and various ethnographic, linguistic and other publications relevant to this field of study.

The results of this play and toy research are partly available on the Internet ([www.sitrec.kth.se](http://www.sitrec.kth.se)), in an interpretative book *Toys*,



Female doll made by a girl but facial features designed by her brother. Ghib, Tunisian Sahara, 1975. Photo by the author.

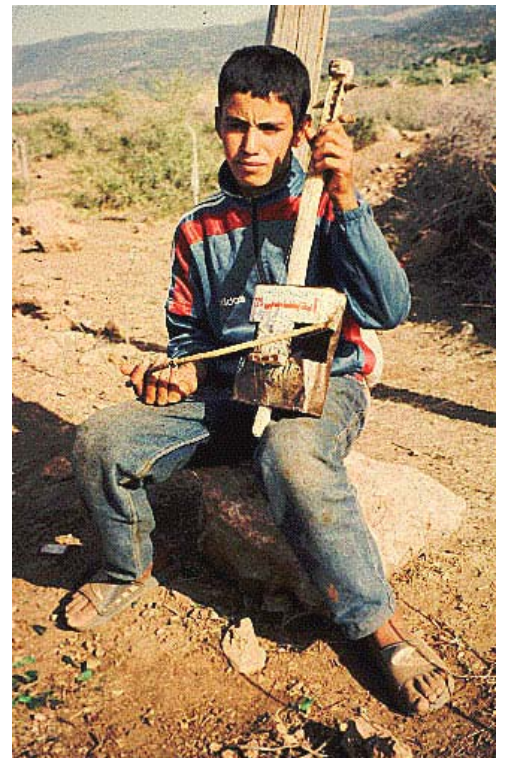


*Culture and Society: an Anthropological Approach with reference to North Africa and the Sahara* (T), and in the descriptive series *Saharan and North African Ludic Heritages with a Commented Bibliography* and a book on *Children's Dolls and Doll Play* (D). Two volumes are forthcoming: *The Animal in Play, Games and Toys* (A) and *The Domestic Life in Play, Games and Toys* (L). Two more volumes are planned *Games of Skill*, and *Traditional and Modern Techniques in Play, Games and Toys*. The capital letters T, D, A and L used before a number refer to the relevant figures in corresponding book. Thus T15 refers to Figure 15 in *Toys, Culture and Society*.

During an observation period in the Tunisian Sahara in 1975 I observed a little boy who showed much creativity while playing.

Three-year-old Bechir plays outside with a stick attached to a rope. He pulls it behind him and calls it 'airplane'. A few minutes later the stick becomes his horse. After a while Bechir takes two halves of an oil barrel, and once his 'car' is constructed by leaning one sheet against the other he sits on top of it; the upper part of the sheet lying over his legs serves as a steering wheel. He imitates a running motor and a car's horn. Later, Bechir starts a pretend play showing much fantasy. This fantasy refers to the real world, not to an imaginary world like the one of Pokemon. Bechir walks to a large basin placed against the hut serving as the kitchen. He climbs on a basin, calling it his donkey. He steps off his donkey, takes a drinking cup and puts it on the basin. Then he goes to take a cushion from the house. Returning he sees that the basin has been removed. He starts crying and his mother puts the basin back against the hut. He puts the cushion and a plastic bag filled with cups on his donkey. He takes a small plank, says that it is his radio, and starts talking about his donkey. His mother and father answer him and accept their integration into the play activity. They tell him to mount his donkey and he says that he will go to the shop. With a stick Bechir beats the donkey, imitating at the same time the movements of the donkey and the cart.

Children's inventiveness in the use of natural materials of mineral, vegetable, animal and even human origin is omnipresent in North Africa and the Sahara. Ghrib girls from the Tunisian Sahara use wet sand, little branches and reed to make dollhouses (L14-16). They also use different kinds of natural material, such as sticks, reed, goats' or girls' hair when making their dolls (D39-40). Ghrib boys also use sand to make a small house by taking advantage of the different qualities of wet sand and very fine sand (T9-12). The same boys cut out for their herdsman game the shape of a dromedary in dromedary dung (A16). A long cylindrical sandstone represents the herdsman and a smaller one the shepherd's dog.



Violin made by the herd boy playing on it. Middle Atlas, Morocco, 1999. Photo by the author.



I have found a clever use of reed-leaves to create the hair of their dolls among the girls of a Central Moroccan village. To give their dolls the much-valued very long hair, these girls look for the upper part of a reed with long green leaves, leaves they split with their fingernails into small strips (T65). Moroccan boys from a High Atlas village use summer squash, pieces of potatoes and sticks to make human and animal figurines (D24). They use clay, mud and gypsum to make human and animal figurines, small houses, toys, utensils, all kinds of vehicles and even a telephone.

Moroccan and Tunisian Sahara children's creative use of material is not limited to natural materials; they also excel in re-utilizing waste material. When making dolls, Ghrib girls use a lot of waste material such as vari-colored rags, threads, yarn, silver paper, pieces of white iron and aluminum, copper wire and buttons (D37-40). At the very beginning of the 1990s, a girl used one of the newly available waste products, namely an empty plastic flask to make a female doll (D41). The girl who made this doll designed an elaborated face on the flask head, something that was not done in the 1970s.

Waste material was also extensively used by Ghrib boys as in the case of making a cart pulled by a mule of stone or when making bicycles (T90-92). For one type of bicycle wheel they used about 20 sardine tins fixed around a tomato tin. When Moroccan girls play household they use whatever kind of waste material they can find (T29-31). Waste material is also used when girls make dolls as in the case of the bride doll riding on a toy-sheep – imitating one of the wedding rituals (D97). The toy-cars and toy-trucks of the Moroccan boys show the great variety of waste material, including old oil filters, used to make them (T100). In 1999, I saw a thirteen-year-old shepherd boy, sitting at the side of a road in the Middle Atlas while playing on a self-made violin. An old tin can serves as resonance chamber and the three metallic strings are made with spirals taken from exercise books (L122).

Some children from these regions have also shown to play creatively with imported material produced by the toy industry or other industries. A striking example of this was shown to me in 1992 by a young woman from a poor quarter of Marrakech, who as a girl of about nine years and at a time when most girls still played with traditional self-made dolls, already played with a cheap plastic doll imported from Hong Kong that she transformed into a splendid Marrakech bride (T32-33). Other girls also use new or second hand imported dolls to adapt them to local ways by sewing clothes for their dolls (T 34). Two eight-year-old village girls living in Central Morocco in 1999 had an original way to play at the wedding of their bride doll using a cardboard box as dollhouse (L32). The bride doll was a Barbie-like imported plastic doll wearing a self-made dress. As one of the dolls lacked arms, the girl replaced these by a piece of reed, returning to the way in which traditional dolls are made (L33). Boys as well show creativity in relation to imported or possibly locally made new material such as plasticine. So, an eight-year-old boy created a few years ago



Dollhouse with Barbie-like doll, the missing arms being replaced by a reed. Central Morocco, 1999. Photo by the author.



his own dinosaur with plasticine one can buy in grocery shops (T107).

I want to stress that these children's creativity was expressed in different ways:

- by using new material for elaborating traditional concepts, as when imported plastic dolls were transformed into traditional brides;
- by using traditional material for elaborating new concepts, as when Ghrib boys made a telephone line with sand and little branches at a time when no Ghrib family had a telephone (T103-104);
- by transferring new meanings to generations-old toys when using them in a totally new context, as when toy-animals of palm-leaves were made to be sold to tourists (T13-16).

Why were these Moroccan children from the 1990s and Tunisian Sahara children from the 1970s, living in non-industrial communities and playing and making toys that more or less often reflect tradition, were so creative? Creativity is defined here as to performance or creation of something personally and independently from adult interference. I want to stress the possible role of the personal initiative and responsibility of children in non-Western non-industrial communities in learning about their physical and sociocultural environment through observation, imitation and play.

Children's play activities in these regions are especially, but not exclusively, collective and outdoor activities. Playgroups are children's basic social organizations. Playmates are chosen mostly on ties of kinship, gender and neighborhood. Because of the primordial importance of such playgroups, I want to put forward the hypothesis that these children's creativity in playing and making toys might more often be expressed in the children's interactions within their playgroups rather than in the case of isolated players.

I think it is no exaggeration to say that Moroccan and Tunisian Sahara children are regularly shown to be creative players and toy makers. One can find examples of creativity in all types of these children's playful behavior such as motor, visual, verbal, non-verbal and musical expressions, alone or in combination as in pretend play, games of skill, singing and dancing.

Following the importation of toys produced by Asian and European toy industries that already existed in 1915, a re-interpretation of the children's self-made toys is needed. As the personal creation of a toy is replaced by an external input this not only creates a dependency on a purchased toy but also from the one who offers it, namely an adult. At the same time this provokes a devalorization of the self-made toy. It will also provoke a change in the children's attitude towards the material they normally use, dethroning the material of animal, mineral, vegetable and domestic origin. Another fundamental influence on self-made toys and on the play activities in which they are used comes from the mass media, especially television, and from the Western school system. Such powerful agents of change certainly are introducing new models of play and toys.

The usefulness of the Saharan and North African ludic heritage is not limited to North Africa and the Sahara as it is quite possible to integrate it in what is called intercultural pedagogy, peace education or mundial education, for example in Europe where 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 described in the chapter 'Perspectives' in my book on children's dolls and doll play. What I found very stimulating and useful in these ludic approaches to intercultural education is, next to the stimulation of the creativity and personal effort of the children, the promotion of a more positive image of Third World children.

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## Book Review

**Colin Heywood (2001). *A History of Childhood*. Cambridge: Polity Press**

Reviewed by Gwenda Beed Davey

One of the best things about Colin Heywood's *History of Childhood* is that he makes it very clear what he intends to do. The sub-title of the book is *Children and Childhood in the West from Mediaeval to Modern Times*, and his section headings are straightforward; Part I *Changing Conceptions of Childhood*, Part II *Growing Up: Relations with Parents and Peers*, and Part III *Children in a Wider World*.

Colin Heywood is a Senior Lecturer in Economic and Social History at the University of Nottingham, and his book is a wide-ranging survey that presents a great diversity of evidence about children and childhood. He also presents a diversity of interpretations of this evidence. In this sense his book is a great relief in comparison to some previous histories of childhood, with their tunnel vision about their dominant themes, such as those of Philippe Aries ('the idea of childhood did not exist in mediaeval society'), Lloyd de Mause's litany of child abuse ('the history of childhood is a nightmare...') and Neil Postman's notions of 'the disappearance of childhood' in contemporary society. All of these three have written, essentially, about things which are *done* to children by adults, and they have paid little attention to children's active involvement in their own lives.

Heywood not only rejects the visions of Aries, de Mause and Postman, but argues firmly for historical continuities in (for example) parent-child relations, rather than simple improvements over time. 'There were of course considerable variations created by the familiar influences of class, gender and ethnicity', he writes, but he does not see contemporary childhood as an 'escape from a nightmarish past' (p 116). In this respect Heywood is in accord with the writers of some current American publications, such as Nicholas Orme's *Mediaeval Children* (2001) and David Kertzer and Marzio Barbagli's *History of the European Family Vol.1* (2001). Both also favour continuity in family treatment of children.

It seems to me to be a weakness that so many histories of childhood are written without much, or any, acknowledgement of the importance of children's unfolding physical and intellectual development. Heywood's 2001 book purports to study both '*children* and *childhood*', but neither of the great psychologists Jean Piaget nor Eric Erikson are mentioned, and Heywood cannot be said to pay much more than lip service to features of

