

Rossie, Jean-Pierre (2004). Children's creativity in toys and play in Morocco, the Tunisian Sahara and peace education. Original English version translated in Finnish by the editor for Liisa Piironen (Ed.), *Leikin pikkujättiläinen (Handbook of Play)*, 9 p. (without the illustrations of the Finnish version).

Children's Creativity in Toys and Play in Morocco, the Tunisian Sahara and Peace Education

Every toy made by a child and every play activity certainly is a creation, an original act resulting from the child's personality combined with the influences from the physical and human environment in which the child lives. When looking at it from this angle the creativity shown by many Saharan and North African children really is remarkable. However, being creative does not necessarily mean to refer to the unreal or to the imaginary as it very well can be related to everyday life.

Four sources of information lay at the basis of my documentation: my fieldwork among the Ghrib between 1975 and 1977, my since 1992 ongoing fieldwork in Morocco, the collection of Saharan and North African toys I have found and analyzed in the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, and the ethnographic, linguistic and other bibliography of the concerned area (1).

Using concrete examples of toys and play activities, I shall try to highlight the topic of creativity in aspects such as the use of material and settings, simplicity and complexity, adult-child and child-child relationships, gender, evolution and change. At the end I mention some eventual uses of North African children's toys and play for experiences in intercultural activities and peace education.

Making toys and playing with them only makes sense within a play activity. The transformation of a simple plank into a running dromedary by a two and a half-year-old Ghrib boy from the Tunisian Sahara makes it clear that the intention of the player is fundamental and that the material used as play object remains secondary because it could have been replaced by several other objects or even acted out with the child's body alone. This toddler did not imitate anyone, he only did choose an available object to represent in a simple yet efficient way the central figure of his pretend play based on a daily event in his semi-nomadic community.

I think that such a solitary individual creativity although existing among Moroccan children, only is one of the possible forms of creativity. After all, it could be that it is not so important or even impossible to know if and in how far a child has 'invented' a toy or a play event. Take for instance the creation by an eleven-year-old Central Moroccan boy of his own copy of a local musical instrument completely made with waste material. Although I haven't seen another such toy-instrument, one cannot know if it is a personal invention of this

boy except through the boy's own affirmation that it is so. Yet, even in this case it still is possible that others have more or less consciously influenced the boy. Nevertheless, if it is not this boy who has created such a toy-instrument first, it is another one from his community who did it as in Morocco examples of self-made toys are not shown on TV or in other media and neither are proposed in schools or youth houses.

During one and the same observation period lasting for about two hours and taking place in the Tunisian Sahara one afternoon of 1975, two brothers, of three and five-year, showed a lot of creativity in manipulating the material at their disposal and in using the setting in which they found themselves. My observation protocol starts with both boys eating couscous. After some ten minutes, the three-year-old boy, named Bechir, goes to play outside with a stick having a rope attached to one of its extremities. He pulls it behind him and then transforms this object by calling it his 'airplane'. A few minutes later he transforms the stick once more by putting it between his legs and changing it into 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 goes sitting on top of it whereby the upper part of the sheet lying over his legs serves as steering wheel. He imitates a running motor and a car's horn. A six-year-old cousin mounts also on the car and both boys continue the fictive trip.

Another ten minutes later, Bechir starts a pretend play full of creative manipulation and whereby a lot of phantasy is shown. Yet, this phantasy refers to the real world, to the boy's direct environment and not to an imaginary world like the one of Pokemon. This play activity goes on for about one hour. Bechir starts playing by walking to a large basin placed against the hut serving as kitchen. He climbs on the basin and transforms it by calling it his donkey. Immediately he steps off his donkey, takes a drinking cup and puts it on the basin. Then he goes to take a cushion in the house.

Returning to his donkey he sees that the basin has been removed. He starts crying and his mother puts the basin again against the hut. He puts the cushion and a plastic bag he did fill with some cups on his donkey. He goes in the hut to look for some other objects to charge his donkey with but meanwhile, two sheep have managed to pull everything off the basin. When Bechir sees this, he chases the sheep away and puts everything in place. After that, he takes a small plank, says that it is his radio and starts talking about his donkey. His mother, father and oldest brother answer him and accept to be integrated into the play activity. They tell him to mount his donkey and he tells them that he will go with it to the shop. With a little stick Bechir beats the donkey imitating at the same time the movements of the donkey and the cart. After a while, an older cousin joins the small boy's play. Together they discuss the road to follow, and Bechir uses a stick to make his donkey run faster. Finally, the little boy goes to play with some older boys lying on top of a sand dune.

These play activities would certainly be labelled as creative pretend play by Western scholars. Yet, would this also be the case with members of the boys' family and community? Unfortunately, this question will remain unanswered as at that time I did not pay attention to such aspects and as a result did not analyze these persons' point of view. The only two remarks I can offer are: first, that the parents and older siblings of Bechir and Ali were amused with this pretend play and, in the last example, willingly accepted to be involved; secondly, that their behavior showed they viewed this pretend play as completely normal and adequate, certainly not as something unusual or exceptional.

Children's inventiveness in the use of natural material of mineral, vegetal, animal and even human origin is omnipresent in North Africa and the Sahara. Some of these examples also show how specific material is chosen to serve specific purposes. Ghrib girls from the Tunisian Sahara use wet sand, little branches and reed to make dollhouses whereby rags figure the carpet. They also use different kinds of natural material, such as sticks, reed, goat's or girl's hair when making their dolls. Ghrib boys also use sand to make a small house by taking advantage of the different qualities of wet sand and very fine sand. The same boys cut out for their herdsman game the shape of a dromedary in dromedary dung. A long cylindrical sandstone represents the herdsman and a smaller one the shepherd's dog. I have found a clever use of reed-leaves to create the hair of their dolls among the girls of a Central Moroccan village near Midelt. 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. A girl from a village in northern Morocco uses stones not only to delimit her dollhouse but also to transform one of the dolls into a male doll by putting a small stone at the place of the head. Moroccan boys from a High Atlas village use summer squash, pieces of potatoes and sticks to make human and animal figurines. I did also find along a road in southern Morocco a boy running with a self-made car for which he used two floaters of fishing nets as wheels. One should mention the use of clay, mud and gypsum, to make, human and animal figurines, small houses, toy-utensils, all kinds of vehicles and even a telephone.

Moroccan and Tunisian Sahara children's creative use of material certainly is not limited to natural material as they also excel in re-utilizing waste material they find on the spot. When making their dolls Ghrib girls use a lot of waste material such as varicolored rags, threads, yarn, silver paper, pieces of white iron and aluminum, copper wire and buttons. At the very beginning of the 1990s, these girls innovated the making of their female dolls by using one of the newly available waste products, namely an empty plastic flask. Moreover, 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 what they called bicycles. 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 lay hand on and suiting their momentary needs. Waste material is also used when girls make dolls as in the case of the bride doll mounting a toy-sheep this way imitating one of the wedding rituals. The making of this toy-sheep seems to be an original creation of the girl herself or at least of her playgroup as the four sisters of that girl firmly stated that they never have made or seen among other girls such a toy-sheep. The toy-cars and toy-trucks of the Moroccan boys show the great variety of waste material, among others old oil filters, used to make them. In 1999, I saw a thirteen-year-old herds 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 drawled spirals from exercise books. This violin surely is one of the few examples of strictly individual creativity I have found until now, a statement that was confirmed by members of the boy's family and some of his neighbors saying that they new of no other boy from the region doing the same.

Some children from the documented regions have also shown to be creative with imported material produced by the toy industry or other industries. A striking example of this, and at the same time another proof of individual creativity among Moroccan girls, 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. Other girls also use new or second hand imported dolls to adapt them to local ways by sewing clothes for their dolls. Two eight-year-old village girls living in Central Morocco in 1999 staged another original play activity. As the mother of one of the girls forbids her daughter to play outside in the 'dirt', a certainly exceptional attitude of a primary school teacher's wife, this girl makes a dollhouse out of a cardboard box. A girl living next door has the same doll's house and together they play at the wedding of their bride doll. This bride doll is as special as is the doll's house. It is a Barbie like imported plastic doll one can buy in local shops but that normally is only used as a decorative object. The two girls have both the same doll and they have sewed a dress for it. For one of the dolls lacking arms the girl replaced these by a piece of reed, returning to the way in which traditional dolls are made. 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 his own dinosaur with plasticine one can buy in grocery shops.

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

- by using new material for elaborating traditional concepts, as when imported plastic dolls are 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;

- by transferring new meanings to generation old toys when using them in a totally new context, as when toy-animals of palm-leaves merely are made to sell them to tourists.

Transferring new experiences to common toys is another way to be creative. A fine example of this creative process was shown to me in a Central Moroccan village. Up to then, the boys made a truck with an oil can, four wheels cut out of a tire, a steering wheel of wire and so on. However, as they observed during the reconstruction of the irrigation system how a concrete mixer was filled with a lifting tray attached to the mixer, they invented a way to attach a lifting tray to their toy-truck using a small tin can tray and a long wire fixed to the steering wheel.

Moroccan and Tunisian Sahara children's creativity may express itself through great simplicity. Yet, most self-made toys have a more complex elaboration, sometimes becoming clever combinations of many elements, as with the toy-tractor of a High Atlas Mountain village boy and many dolls made by Moroccan girls.

One could wonder how it comes that 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, are so creative, creativity being defined here as to perform or create something personally and independently from adult interference. In this context 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 (2).

Although mothers, fathers, older siblings and other family members occasionally do play with children, especially small children, the role of older girls and older boys and of peer groups is overwhelmingly important in the regions under discussion. Children's play activities in these regions are especially, but not exclusively, collective and outdoor activities. Playgroups are hereby the basic social organizations. They consist of only girls or only boys, seldom of boys and girls together. When girls and boys form a playgroup together they are toddlers or somewhat older children, possibly under the direction of an older girl, eventually also an older boy. The factors of choosing playmates are mostly based on ties of kinship 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.

In Moroccan and Tunisian Sahara children's playgroups and from the age of about six years onwards, gender differentiation becomes really strong. At that age, the boys leave the playgroups often controlled by older girls to make their

own playgroups from which girls normally are excluded. In these playgroups the boys enjoy more freedom than the girls. Moreover, the girls should stay near their homes, whereas the boys have the opportunity to go further away from their homes, the distance broadening as the boys become older as in the case of a Moroccan group of boys playing on the beach at two hours walking from their village. This way the boys can escape the direct control exerted by their parents or other adults.

Another clear difference in boys and girls is the time they have to play and this because of the girls' greater integration into household activities. When looking after the small children, girls certainly can find occasions to play. Yet, the boundary between the task of amusing and occupying the little ones and the possibility to amuse oneself is difficult to draw.

But as in other circumstances, one should always be careful with generalizing statements such as the strict separation between older boys and girls in play or between boys' games and girls' games because there are indications that this separation is not insurmountable. Two examples from Morocco, one of a girl making a toy-car and another one of toy-utensils made by boys, offer some proof for this. Moreover, a few of my Moroccan female informants stressed that as a child they liked to play together with their brothers, cousins and other boys from the neighborhood, for example football or climbing trees. This makes it clear that the cultural norms of these regions are not the only determining factor in children's play activities and that the personality and the wishes of the players also have to be taken into account.

Reviewing the given examples, I think it is not exaggerated to say that Moroccan and Tunisian Sahara children regularly show 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.

During the whole twentieth century but more clearly during the second half of that century, the changing conditions of Saharan and North African families regularly provoked a loss of interest in the transmission of the adults' and the older children's knowledge and experience onto the young children, especially when there is a migration from village to town and/or a devalorization of the Berber mother tongue. So, non-industrial communities and families should not be seen as static groups but as dynamic entities.

Following the importation of toys produced by Asian and European toy industries, a re-interpretation of the children's self-made toys imposes itself upon them. The influence of industrially made toys dates back to a century or so as F. Castells writes in 1915 and for Rabat that an old representative of tradition offers with little success some traditional toys to the children because of the concurrence of those selling imported European toys such as guns, ball, dolls,

drums, bugles, etc. Yet, these toys are even today quite rare outside the cities, although emigrants on vacation in their country of origin bring some of these toys with them as a prestigious gift for children of their relatives (3).

Where industrially made toys replace children's self-made toys, fundamental changes are inescapable. As the personal creation of a toy is replaced by an external input this not only creates a dependency from a purchased toy but also from the one who offers it, it is to say 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, vegetal and domestic origin. This is already happening in the cities where plastic dolls, animals, cars and weapons are found much more than in the countryside. 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. Shortly before the Hameenlinna conference in August 2001, I heard for the first time about a television program's influence on the play behavior of Moroccan children from a popular milieu. This happened when an eleven-year-old boy told me about Midelt's younger children's craze for all that refers to Pokemon, a craze that begun only this year when one of the two Moroccan television stations started an Arabic spoken version of the Pokemon animation films. However, when I was in Sidi Ifni, a small southern Moroccan coastal town, in the beginning of 2002 I was told that the popularity of Pokemon had also been great there but that this stopped quickly after the program came to an end.

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 I like to entitle "the world at play: intercultural education through 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 imitation of the Ghrib girls and boys from the Tunisian Sahara. In this series of slides are shown the reality and the imitation of this reality in play activities. The themes evoked are the life in the desert, the oasis, the animals, the household, the spinning, the weaving and the modernization of nomadic life. After the children have seen and commented 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. Spontaneously the children spoke of the sunny weather, the free space, the availability of playmates 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 little groups. Each group made something to create an oasis village. Some children made a copy of the houses they did see on the slides, others made a palm tree, a well, a dromedary and so on. The materials at their disposal were waste materials, plasticine, building blocs, green pipe cleaners and cardboard tubes of kitchen rolls. As I mentioned at the beginning of the session the relationship between the transhumance of Saharan nomads and that of the modern nomads of circuses and fairs, some children created with Lego blocks a caravan pulled by a horse with its rider. At the end, the children learned a little song with a more or less known repetitive simple melody but with adapted words. Then they walked around their oasis village while singing and imitating the walking of a dromedary.

Since this experience, I used the same approach to the intercultural from the first to the sixth year of the primary school, each time during one hour. This way some Ghent children were confronted with a quite different material situation and family life but they also saw that the African children are creative in the making of their toys. This brought more than one primary school child to express spontaneously its admiration for this creativity and know-how. As I give 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. In the context of a UNICEF-day, organized in May 1998, it became once more clear that children are easily stimulated by examples of toys made by Moroccan children to create themselves toys with waste material.

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 these Ghent children, the promotion of a more positive image of Third World children, an image that until then was unilaterally negative and based on images of sick, miserable or from hunger dying children, as if this is the only reality of Third World children. The results of these pedagogical actions have convinced me of the certainly limited but creative possibility to use ludic activities and toys for an intercultural purpose. To succeed, I believe it will be necessary to link an 'intercultural approach of play', into which fits my research, to a 'playful approach of the intercultural'.

Notes

1. From 1975 till 1992 my research has been subventioned by the Belgian National Foundation for Scientific Research, Brussels.

2. See Göncü A. (ed.), 1999, *Children's Engagement in the World. Sociocultural Perspectives*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

3. Castells F., 1915, "Note sur la fête de Achoura à Rabat", in *Les Archives Berbères*, re-edition 1987, p. 332-346.

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