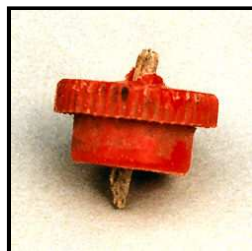


## Jean-Pierre Rossie

### An introduction to Moroccan children's toys and games

The Moroccan children between five and twelve years old whose toys and games are highlighted live in villages or popular quarters of towns. Their families belong to lower income groups earning a livelihood from working in the agricultural, non-formal, service and industrial sectors. The adult family members often received limited or no formal education. Most toys and games on which I received information come from villages or small towns located in mountainous regions or from places close to or bordering the Atlantic Ocean. The information refers to the last fifteen years but almost all described toys and games existed in earlier generations of children. Moroccan children belong to Amazigh-speaking or Arabic-speaking families. The Amazighs, also called Berbers, speak one of the three Moroccan Amazigh languages or Moroccan Arabic. It happens that parents speak Amazigh with their adult family members but Arabic, the primary school language, with their children.

Five-year-old girls and boys already make simple tops themselves. For example by pushing a little stick through the center of a bottle stopper (fig. 1). The hole must be pierced as close to the middle as possible and an adequate stick must be used. A jam pot cover with a nail driven through its center is also used. Possibly some small round fruit ending in a point serve as tops. All these tops are twisted by hand.



A more complex top is totally made with waste material (fig. 2). Through the center of a large oilcan bottle stopper the cap of a ballpoint is driven and a plastic string is wound around the cap. Then a plastic straw is pushed into the cap to be able to hold the top with one hand while pulling the string. This top turns as quick as the wooden tops. Arabic-speaking children from the town Tan-Tan at the Northern Sahara border made the shown top, but I was told that such tops are made all over Morocco. This is confirmed by Mustapha Jarih a 33-year-old man who says that he and other children from a village in

the Casablanca region already made such tops about 1980. Learning to choose different suitable materials and the right site to throw the tops, together with the development of dexterity and hand-eye coordination are important aspects in this play activity.



In 1995 a seven-year-old Amazigh boy from the small town Goulmima in Central Morocco made the windmill seen on figure 3. A stick and 3 pieces of paper of about 3.5 cm on 25 cm is all that is needed. Yet, the result is remarkable. The strips of paper must be folded into one another as to create some kind of conical dome with three wings. The whole looks like an airplane propeller. One must push up the centre of the dome to be able to pass the third strip over and in the two other strips. Finally the three wings must be folded somewhat upwards at their ends to ameliorate the turning of the propeller. The paper propeller is put on a stick or a plastic coated electric wire. The child runs with this toy while holding the stick in an oblique way. If done correctly the propeller turns very quickly.



In the same town and in another town about 150km northward, young Amazigh boys make another kind of windmill for the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad (fig. 4). An iron wire serving as axle pierces the top of a reed of about 60 cm length. To fix this iron wire the end sticking out at the back of the reed is bended and reintroduced into the reed a bit lower. At the front side of the reed the iron wire sticks out for about 6 cm. To make the windmill's sail, one takes the half of a reed of 10 to 20 cm length cut lengthways, and then makes a little hole in its center. At both sides of the hole a more or less rectangular piece of paper is attached by turning a side of the paper once or twice around the reed. Then this piece of paper is glued with glue prepared from fig tree sap, dates and flour; but today adhesive tape or glue bought in a local shop are more often used. Normally, the paper leaves are decorated with geometric designs. One or two sails should now be put on the axle through the little hole in the center of the sail. To keep the sail in such a position that it will turn really fast, a very small piece of hollow reed is inserted on the axle before and after the sail. A small rectangular and flat piece of reed with a hole in its center or a small plastic tube can be used instead. To keep everything in place, the end of the iron wire sticking out in front of the sail must be folded back. In order to make the sail turn the children run with it really fast. Technical know-how and basic scientific principles play a role in this toy

making and play experience.



Self-made musical instruments belong to the play world of girls as well as of boys but my information seems to support the statement that the more complex musical instruments are made by boys. Children use flowers, leaves or pieces of paper as whistles and all kind of cans as drums. When growing older children learn to make more complex toy instruments such as the one representing the local oboe-like flute and made by an eleven-year-old boy from Midelt (fig. 5). To create a mouthpiece a plastic straw, found in small lemonade boxes, is pushed through an opening in the center of the stopper.



Only in the hands of a few older boys have I seen self-made guitars and violins, as in the case of these two boys from the mountain village Lahfart in the Anti-Atlas (fig. 6). The boys said they received help from an older brother or father when making these instruments.



Without doubt making musical instruments and playing with them is of great importance in Moroccan children's general development and especially on the level of dexterity, knowledge of materials, rhythmic and musical abilities, coordination when playing together. The next photograph shows six about ten-year-old Sidi Ifni boys singing and playing on drums of their own (fig. 7).



Games of make-believe seem to belong more to the play world of Moroccan girls than of Moroccan boys. At least that is what my research results indicate. These games refer to doll play, dinner play, household play and play related to other adult activities. The girls, such as those of the village Aït Slimane in the High Atlas, often make pretend houses using stones or other material to outline (fig. 8).



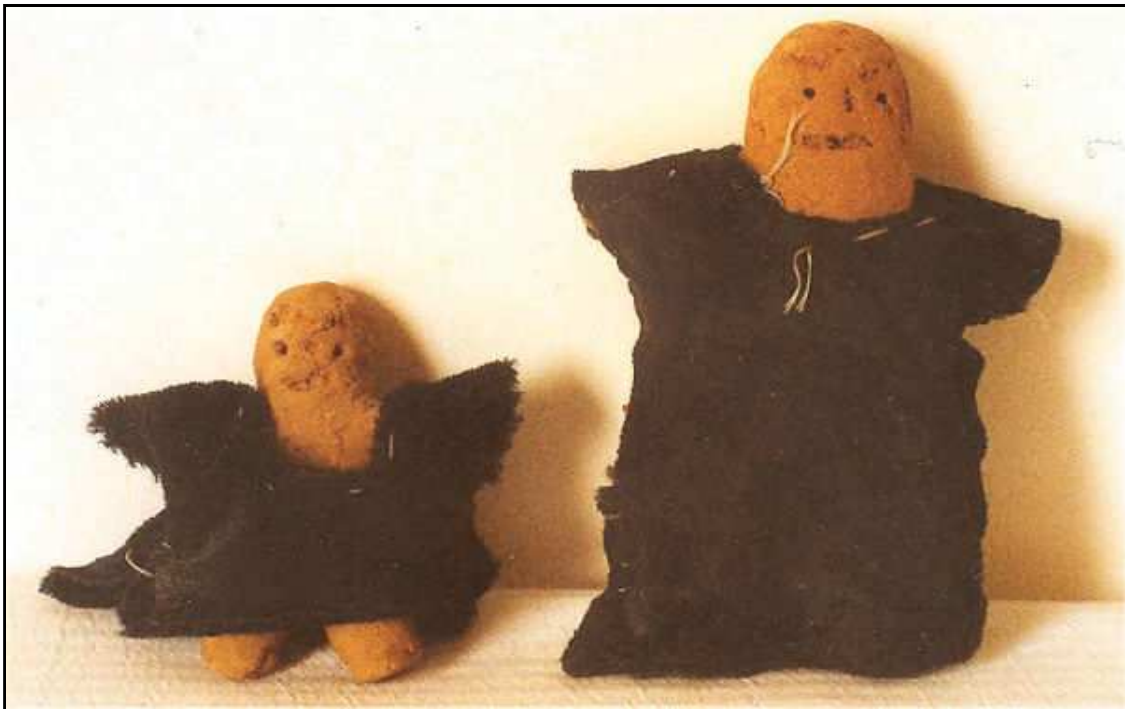
In such pretend houses Moroccan girls often play at wedding. The Amazigh-speaking girls invariably call their self-made and imported plastic dolls *tislit* and *isli*, just as Arabic-speaking girls call them *arusa* and *aris*, meaning bride and bridegroom. The bride dolls mostly have a cross-shaped frame to be dressed with rags. The dolls are often given long hair and they may wear self-made or children's jewels. A doll from the Anti-Atlas village Ikenwèn along the road from Tiznit to Tafraoute serves as example (fig. 9).





Especially in rural areas, the girls sew for their (second hand) plastic dolls a dress adapted to local manners. This is what a seven-year-old girl from the village Igîsel near Guelmim in the Pre-Sahara did (fig. 10).

Except once in Sidi Ifni, I have not seen self-made dolls in towns. When playing at wedding the bride doll is treated like a real bride. The bridegroom doll remains imaginary or is rudimentarily made, eventually being replaced by a small boy. The two clay men of figure 11 are only dressed in a rag sewn together at the sides. They were collected from a young child of the village Lahfart in the Anti-Atlas Mountains.



All kinds of self-made or ready found objects representing items of adult life, ranging from utensils and household items to objects representing cars and telephones, are used for such games. Dinner play and other kinds of household play are often integrated in the doll play. And the newest items of adults' life soon find their way in children's play as is the case with the mobile phone designed on a piece of wood or made with clay. The clay mobile phone of figure 12 was made by a seven-year old girl from the above mentioned Lahfart village.

Girls seem to make boys' toys or to play boys' games more often than boys do with girls' toys or games. This is for example the case when girls play football or make cars. The last photograph shows a seven-year-old girl from the Lahfart village who made her own car (fig. 13).



Showing African children's toys and games to children from high tech communities stimulates creativity and promotes a positive attitude towards foreign children and their communities. Like dance and music, toys and games create more easily understanding and empathy for the situation of children and their families in Third World countries (see "Using Saharan and North African toy and play cultures in a Western context" in Rossie JP, 2005, *Toys, play, culture and society*).

### **List of figures**

All photos made by the author.

1. Self-made top, Kenitra, 1994.
2. Self-made top, Tan-Tan, 2005.
3. Self-made windmill, Goulmima, 1995.
4. Windmill for the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad, Midelt, 2000.
5. Oboe-like flute made with waste material, Midelt, 1998.
6. Self-made guitar (right) and self-made violin (left), Lahfart village, Anti-Atlas Mountains, 2005.
7. Drumming and singing boys, Sidi Ifni, 2005.
8. Pretend house, Aït Slimane village, High Atlas Mountains, 1999.
9. Self-made bride doll, Ikenwen village, Anti-Atlas Mountains, 2006.
10. Second hand plastic doll dressed locally, Igisel village, Pre-Sahara, 2005.
11. Male dolls in mud dressed with a rag, Lahfart village, Anti-Atlas

Mountains, 2002.

12. Portable in mud, stones as keys and piece of tin with inscription as screen, Lahfart village, Anti-Atlas Mountains, 2005.

13. Young schoolgirl with her newly made car, Lahfart village, Anti-Atlas Mountains, 2005.