

PLAY AND FOLKLORE



NO. 60, DECEMBER 2013

FROM THE EDITORS



This issue of *Play and Folklore* introduces a new design to match other publications produced by Museum Victoria. As usual, it includes a varied table of contents. Jean-Pierre Rossie describes the many ways sand is used by children of the Tunisian Sahara in their play, and their mastery of its properties in building complex constructions. He also explores the effects of massive social and environmental changes on the children's lives and their play. Clare Needham uses extracts from oral history interviews to bring to life the childhood experiences of several people who grew up in Bendigo, Victoria from the early 1900s to the 1970s. She writes about the innovative way the interviews were used as part of the exhibition *Childhood: growing up in Bendigo*, and the city's official status as a 'child-friendly city'. Extracts from Oswin Van Buuren's oral history interview by Gwenda Davey recount his childhood experiences and memories of school days in colonial Ceylon (Sri Lanka). A book review by Kate Darian-Smith examines the richness and depth of Australian folklore research in the 21st century and the publication of a book of multicultural games is welcome news for adults and children wanting to expand their play repertoire.

There is a growing world-wide movement that seeks to give children the kinds of play experiences enjoyed by previous generations, providing safe places for street play, reconnecting children with nature and advocating for unstructured play which involves risk-taking. Our next issue will be a special edition focussing on outdoor play, and we welcome articles, letters, opinions and ideas on this topic. Please send your contributions to j.factor@unimelb.edu.au.

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Play and Folklore

Editors: June Factor, Gwenda Beed Davey and Judy McKinty
ISSN (printed) 1329-2463 ISSN (web) 1447-5969

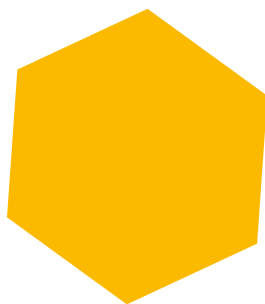
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Two issues per year, published by History & Technology Department, Museum Victoria.
GPO Box 666, Victoria 3001, Australia. Phone: +61 3 8341 7378. Email: playandfolklore@museum.vic.gov.au
Available on the web at <http://museumvictoria.com.au/about/books-and-journals/journals/play-and-folklore>
Design Layout: MV Design Studio



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Sand as environment and material in Saharan children's play and toy-making activities

Jean-Pierre Rossie

In nomadic, semi-nomadic or sedentary communities living in an environment of sand dunes, children familiarise themselves very early with sand and readily use it in their games. These include pretend games related to weddings and female or male activities, games of motor skill involving movement, equilibrium, flexibility and fighting, and also games of cognitive skill such as board games and riddles with drawings. The 'toys' created with sand can be very simple – for example sand itself serving as play material for the small ones – but also quite complex, as in the case of a mosque and minaret made with wet sand by older children.



Fig.1. Ghib girls building an enclosure with sand in front of their toy tent, Tunisian Sahara, 1975
Photographer – Jean-Pierre Rossie

The data comes from my fieldwork in the Tunisian Sahara in 1975 and 1977, the ethnographic literature and other documents on Saharan populations, and my research in Morocco from 1992 onwards. As this article is largely based on the play culture of Ghib children it is useful to offer some information on this population. The environment of the Ghib is part of the Grand Erg Oriental, situated below the salt lake Chott el Jerid in southern Tunisia. The terrain is fairly flat, with sand dunes here and there. In 1975 the Ghib population was estimated at

about 4,400 people. Nowadays this population is almost completely settled, mainly in the oasis of El Faouar, which has become a major urban centre.

Sometimes I refer to the writings of other authors, but as the original books and articles in which the documentation can be found are difficult to find, I have also mentioned the place where these data can be found in my own publications available on the internet.



Sand as environment and material in Saharan children's play and toy-making activities



The natural environments in which Saharan children grow up consist only partly of sand surfaces (about 20 per cent) and for the rest they are stony and rocky, so it is both a stony desert and a sand desert. In this article I will speak mostly about children living near sand dunes or in an oasis. However, I will sometimes refer to the playful use of sand by Moroccan children who do not live in an environment of sand.

Ghrib toddlers living in tents in the 1970s easily had the opportunity to explore the playful possibilities offered by sand. A game that amused small children a lot was to find a small object slightly pushed under fine sand, and somewhat older children used a long thorn to try to pick up a date hidden in one of a series of holes juxtaposed in a sandy slope.

Among the Ghrib, both girls and boys used their sandy environment for many pretend games. For example, girls often created open-air houses large enough for household, dinner, mother and wedding play. Two types of small houses are most often found – the house using a hollow in the sand made suitable for girls' play and the small house with little walls built of wet sand. The game of the wedding feast, very much loved by Saharan and North African girls, was played by the Ghrib girls in the sand on which they erected a tent in miniature (fig. 1). Boys from the age of about six years had fun in pushing over the dunes their self-made vehicles, with wheels of tin cans attached to a long stick, and also pulling a cart made with two palm branches. Two young boys became a human car, being at the same time driver and car.

Sand dunes were used as an environment in many play activities of Ghrib children, but mostly for boys' skill games such as crawling on their knees, walking each other like wheelbarrows or tumbling down from a dune. Sliding down a dune was done by sitting on a branch of a date palm tree (fig. 2) and friendly fighting between boys often took place on soft sand. In one particular game an older boy, whose legs were buried in the sand up to his knees, was kicked by some other boys running around him while the 'buried one' defended himself by thrashing his arms at them.

In the ethnographic and other literature on the Sahara I found some information that corroborates



Fig. 2. Ghrib boy sliding down a dune after a rare rain shower, Tunisian Sahara, 1975
Photographer – Jean-Pierre Rossie

the data on the role of sand in the games of Saharan children. For example, Tuareg girls were observed playing scenes of nomadic life in the sand with toys representing dromedaries and warriors (Lhote 1944: 113, pl. VIII; Rossie 2005: 64). Digging a small well in the sand was sometimes part of household play, as evidenced by a photo taken in the Saoura Valley in the Algerian Sahara (Rossie 2008: 204). Toddlers among the Moors of Mauritania have a special way to get what they want from adults by going to lie on the burning sand, knowing that adults will bend to their will (Béart 1955: 145; Rossie 2008: 164).

Today Moroccan children living in settled communities use sandy environments in their play, especially if they live at or near the Atlantic Ocean. Just as Ghrib boys do, Moroccan boys from the coastal town Essaouira try to perform somersaults from the top of a dune, and teenagers and adolescents play football on all Moroccan beaches. Small Moroccan girls and boys amuse themselves by filtering sand and playing with mud. On a dune at the beach of Tan-Tan two girls created a store and a high mound from which their teddy could observe the scene (fig. 3) (Rossie 2008: 273-274).



Fig.3. Two sisters playing in their shop at the beach, Tan-Tan, Moroccan Sahara, 2006
Photographer – Khalija Jariaa

Playing with sand and creating sand toys

In the 1970s when the Ghib were still semi-nomadic and wandered around with their animals in search of pasture, especially in the spring, the children lived with their families in small settlements of a few tents. This was reflected in their play when they were in the desert as well as in the oasis. A miniature tent set up in the sand, used by Ghib girls for their doll and household play, was surrounded by small sand walls imitating the tent enclosure (fig. 1). A few indications suggest that other Saharan girls among the Tuareg (*Touaregs: 12 photographes témoignent*, 1993), the Moors (Béart 1955: 840) and the Sahrawi (Pinto Cebrián 1999: 103, 110) also built tents in the sand and possibly a small camp in imitation of a real camp (Rossie 2008: 59-63).

The miniature house is a toy for children of sedentary or sedentarizing populations and it is found throughout the Sahara and North Africa. As with the toy tent, the small houses are mostly

made by girls. However, recent information from the Anti-Atlas shows that boys also make such houses, but use these to play male occupations such as working in a bakery or a restaurant and being a tailor or a road constructor (Rossie 2008: 260-266).

In the 1970s, influenced by the evolution of their society from a nomadic life to a sedentary life in the oasis of El Faouar, small and older Ghib girls of the Tunisian Sahara made small houses used for make-believe play related to wedding, dinner and household activities. Small boys may participate in these play activities and often an older girl is the play leader. Several types of sand houses exist, including houses with a flat roof or with a dome-shaped roof.

To make such miniature houses a small wall of wet sand forming a square or rectangle must be built. Twigs, reeds and possibly pieces of cardboard are disposed on the walls, but without covering the entire space. Once the house is finished rags representing mats are placed on the ground. Making a small house with a dome-shaped roof needs a know-how that only older girls possess. To build such a miniature house one must be able to create a well-rounded dome in wet sand (fig. 4). Since it is difficult to use such sand houses, having only a small opening as entry, the play activity is limited to the construction. There are also larger open-air houses delimited by little sand walls that surround small spaces representing the main room, the kitchen and the storage room (Rossie 2008: 76-79, 112-113).



Fig.4. Ghib girls using wet sand to create small houses with a dome-shaped roof, Tunisian Sahara, 1975
Photographer – Jean-Pierre Rossie



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In May 1975, at the natural source of El Faouar, which no longer exists, boys from six to 13 years created different constructions with wet sand, such as a livestock yard and a market. Another construction made by a 12-year-old boy represented the tomb of a local saint. In the same place and at the same time a 13-year-old boy, showing a remarkable aesthetic sense, created a fine mosque with an elegant minaret and a courtyard (fig. 5). At another spot a taxi was made with wet sand by a boy about the same age, who afterwards pushed it on a sand dune. At that time, when in the oasis of El Faouar there existed only one telephone – at the police station – Ghrib boys created their own telephone line by digging a long and narrow trench in the sand and covering it with twigs and sand. Alternately speaking and listening at both ends of the line, two boys passed messages.

Sand is also used for several games of intellectual skill played by boys and girls. I watched Ghrib children playing a series of games based on the movement of pieces (stones, goat droppings, date kernels) on a board which evolved from the three-on-a-line board to the checkerboard, all drawn in the sand. During the Mousseem or the annual feast of Tan-Tan in southern Morocco, I have seen girls and women play the popular Sahrawi game of *sig*, a game of strategy played on a small mound of sand.

Some Ghrib children's guessing games needed a drawing in the sand – for example the riddle of the lost key, based on a short story of an adult going to the oasis to work but losing his house key, a key which is drawn in the sand while telling this story. Another riddle with a drawing clearly shows the transmission of knowledge about the Ghrib social structure. A small child must choose along which of four paths a child might try to escape to avoid punishment, although each path is blocked by an adult holding a stick (fig. 6). These adults are the father, grandfather, paternal uncle and maternal uncle. The correct answer indicates that the child must take the path where the maternal uncle stands, because he will not hit the child as he is not obliged to exercise authority, which belongs to the paternal family.



Fig.5. An older Ghrib boy and his mosque with an elegant minaret, Tunisian Sahara, 1975
Photographer – Jean-Pierre Rossie

Through their play activities the children mentioned in this article transmit all types of content in relation to the natural and human environment in which they grow. When creating toys these children not only exchange information on the materials that are useful but also on the skills needed to use the toys, and at the same time on the positive or negative attitudes of adults in these contexts.

Although change has always existed in the Sahara and North Africa this change certainly accelerated during the 20th century, and more especially since the Second World War. The transition from village to town, urbanization, education, mass media, toy or entertainment industries, high technology, consumerism, migrants and tourists have more or less strongly influenced children's play and toy-making activities (Rossie 2005/2013: 161-182; 2008: 361-364). The progressive sedentarization of nomads in the Sahara undoubtedly reduces the availability of sandy environments for children, and the massive importation of cheap plastic toys not only disrupts the tradition of creating toys oneself but also replaces children's initiative with an attitude of viewing toys as a gift of adults, an attitude which until recently was almost non-existent in the communities concerned. However, I want to stress that, from my observations, these changes do not seem to create much conflict for Moroccan children between the transmission of tradition and the acceptance of innovations.

Sand as environment and material in Saharan children's play and toy-making activities

A few aspects of the evolution of the Ghib population in the 1970s are mentioned at the beginning of this article. I would like, however, to add what Gilbert J. M. Claus told me during his stay in Belgium in July 2011. On this occasion I asked him about the current situation of Ghib children's play in and with sand and he told me that about 20 years ago the natural source of El Faouar, where children used to create constructions with sand, disappeared, and this caused a decrease in such play activities as rainy days were very rare. Yet in recent years, rain has become not such a rare event in the Tunisian Sahara, and nowadays it may even rain in summer. Now that the availability of wet sand has become more common one sees young children having fun with it. Girls and boys more often use wet sand to build small houses or other constructions, and the game of sliding down a dune has reappeared. All this shows how games

that seemed outdated resurface when favorable conditions return.

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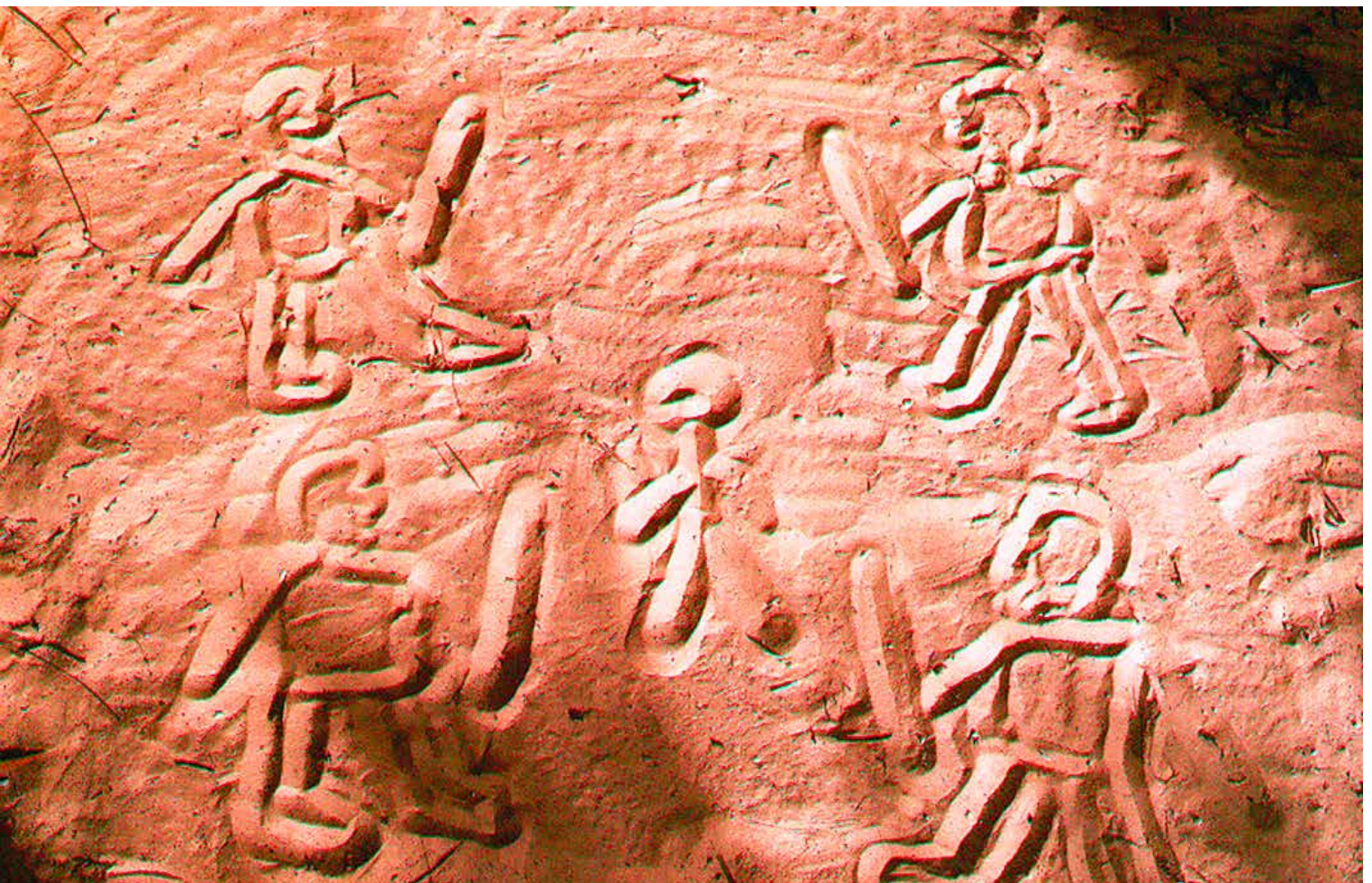


Fig.6. Riddle for small Ghib children based on a design in the sand, Tunisian Sahara, 1975
Photographer – Jean-Pierre Rossie



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