

## Gender and playgroups among Moroccan rural Amazigh children

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### Résumé :

*Genre et groupes de jeu chez les enfants amazighs ruraux marocains.* Les enfants amazighs, entre deux et treize ans, vivant dans les régions rurales du Moyen Atlas, du Haut Atlas et de l'Anti-Atlas (Maroc), sont au cœur de cet article. Le travail sur le terrain commencé en 1992 et toujours en cours est à la base de la discussion sur le jeu, la création de jouets et l'utilisation des jouets. Les thèmes analysés sont les différences entre filles et garçons concernant les groupes de jeu, le temps et l'espace de jeu, la matérialité des jouets, les jeux liés aux rituels et aux fêtes, ainsi que les jeux et jouets des enfants dans des communautés en évolution. Depuis 2003, la collaboration d'une femme amazighe de l'Anti-Atlas, Khalija Jariaa, est devenue de plus en plus importante. Huit photographies illustrent l'article.

**Mots-clés** : genre, garçons, filles, jeu, jouets, tradition, évolution, communautés rurales, Amazigh, Maroc

### Abstract :

Amazigh children between two and thirteen years, living in rural regions of the Middle Atlas, High Atlas, and the Anti-Atlas (Morocco), are the subjects of this article. Fieldwork, starting in 1992 and still going on, lies at the basis of the discussion of these children's play, toy creation, and toy use. The analysed topics are differences between girls and boys about playgroups, playing time and space, the materiality of toys, play related to rituals and feasts, and children's play and toys in changing communities. Since 2003, the collaboration of an Amazigh Anti-Atlas woman, Khalija Jariaa, became growingly important. Eight photographs illustrate the article.

**Keywords** : gender, boys, girls, play, toys, tradition, evolution, rural communities, Amazigh, Morocco

### Abstracto :

*Género y grupos de juego entre los niños amazigh rurales de Marruecos.* Los niños amazigh, de entre dos y trece años, que viven en las regiones rurales del Medio Atlas, el Alto Atlas y el Anti-Atlas (Marruecos), son el centro de este artículo. El trabajo de campo, iniciado en 1992 y aún en curso, es la base para la discusión sobre el juego, la creación de juguetes y el uso de juguetes. Los temas analizados son las diferencias entre niñas y niños en cuanto a grupos de juego, tiempo y espacio de juego, materialidad de los juguetes, juegos relacionados con rituales y festivales, así como juegos y juguetes para niños en comunidades cambiantes. Desde 2003, la colaboración de una mujer amazigh del Anti-Atlas, Khalija Jariaa, se ha vuelto cada vez más importante. Ocho fotografías ilustran el artículo.

**Palabras clave** : género, niños, niñas, juego, juguetes, tradición, evolución, comunidades rurales, Amazigh, Marruecos

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## Introduction

Many Moroccan rural children belong to the native Amazigh populations from North Africa and the Sahara. The Amazigh children whose play and toy heritages are discussed in this article live in the Moroccan Anti-Atlas, High Atlas, and Middle Atlas. They speak Tashelhit in the Anti-Atlas or Tamazight in the High and Middle Atlas, two of the three Amazigh languages that became official Moroccan languages some years ago. These children grow up in popular class families from agricultural areas or urban centres. Some, live in urbanized villages such as Douar Ouaraben, recently integrated into the town Tiznit. These rural families mostly follow tradition in the areas of women and children. However, the evolution towards modernity, globalization, and digitalization becomes stronger decade after decade since the third quarter of the twentieth century.

The age of the children, whose play and toy culture we research, lies between two and fifteen years. So, there is little information on babies, tots, and older teenagers. Except for solitary play (Rossie *et al.* 2021: 412), rural children play, make toys, and use them in gendered playgroups. Mixed playgroups often exist when boys are younger than eight. The information on gender and playgroups relies on observing and talking to children, sometimes on the memories of adolescents, adults, and older people.

The reader will find below a short overview of the research methods and ethics with Amazigh children and families in rural areas. However, I published a detailed analysis in Rossie *et al.* (2021: 454-465). The ethnographer, wanting to observe and photograph children during play, will get a quick response as they withdraw or connect and accept a discreet and non-interfering presence. Yet, one can make observations from a distance, but the children's agreement is quickly necessary once they noticed the observer. Participatory research is impossible without the trust of children, their families, and neighbours. Trying to do otherwise will be difficult as the fieldwork happens in families and public spaces.

The topic of gender is related to sexuality. Nevertheless, children's sexuality is lacking in this article. As an adult man and because of my age, I am associated in rural families with a grandfather and grandfathers, especially foreign ones, should not question children or mothers and fathers about older children's sexual development. Asking such questions is the best way to make research in families and villages impossible. When discussing this aspect with Khalija Jariaa and Boubaker Daoumani, they have confirmed my point of view most firmly.

From 1992 to 2000, my research in Morocco spanned a large territory extending from the coastal region via the Middle and High Atlas to the Sahara. I published the results of this research in *Toys, Play, Culture and Society* (2005/2013) and in a series of books on children's dolls, the animal world, domestic life, and technical activities in play and toys (Rossie 2005-2013). In 2002, I decided to return doing fieldwork in a limited space like I had done in 1975 and 1977 among the Ghrib children of the Tunisian Sahara. This time, I settled in the Anti-Atlas in the southwest of Morocco. Soon a thorough analysis became possible when obtaining the collaboration of two locals, Khalija

Jariaa and Boubaker Daoumani. Khalija Jariaa started to take care of my household in Sidi Ifni at the end of 2002, and slowly she got interested in my work on children's play and toys. After a while, she started to tell me about her youth, and she made a copy of some dolls she created about twenty years earlier. Through the way, I questioned her, by showing her the information and material I collected, and by observing together Anti-Atlas children's playing and toy-making, she became an adequate observer. Due to her exceptional memory and aided by the good photographs she takes; she could do reliable observations alone. Boubaker Daoumani is very valuable for his linguistic skills in translating between Tashelhit, Moroccan Arabic, and French. He also did help me to get information and photographs from children living in a few Anti-Atlas communities.

The result of this research is available in *Make-believe play among Amazigh children of the Moroccan Anti-Atlas* (Rossie *et al.* 2021). In the same book, the archaeologist Argyris Fassoulas published the findings of his fieldwork in 2013 and 2016 with the title « The manufacture of clay toys in the Anti-Atlas region » (534-636).

Moroccan children often like the interest in their games and toys. They feel respected and appreciated when approached as valuable informants and creators of objects. Research on the material culture of children seems a prudent way to study children, childhood, family, and community.

Observing and describing how children play, make and toys provide not only information on materials, techniques, and symbols. They also offer insight into the roles and situations girls or boys integrate into their play activities.

In the data analysis, an approach too tied to Western assumptions and theories, rarely based on information from Third World countries, has been avoided. Besides, this research on play, games, and toys in their ecological and human context does not claim global or statistically verifiable representativeness. This article is largely based on the observation of rural children's play and toy making activities.

In the following pages, we will discuss the role of gender concerning children's playtime and space, playgroups, toy making and toy use, play related to rituals and feasts, and to change.

## **Gender, playing time and space**

From the age of about six, a difference in playing time between rural boys and girls becomes significant, because girls from this age onwards have more often to help in the household or look after babies and tots. However, mothers are not equally strict when imposing duties on girls of primary school age and older. The number of daughters in a household also plays a role because if mothers receive the help of older daughters, the younger ones need less helping. We made almost no observations of play activities during the girls' execution of household tasks. But one can be reported about a few High Atlas girls playfully gathering firewood. Boys can do household tasks such as errands, especially if there is no old enough girl in the family, yet I saw this seldom. A rather typical situation is what I observed one morning during the school holiday of August 1999 in the then-rural town of Midelt at the foot of the Jbel Ayachi in the High Atlas. During this observation in an open space between two neighbourhoods, I saw three playgroups with some boys. During the same period, no girl was playing. On the contrary, a six-year-old girl was cleaning the place in front of her home, another somewhat older girl passed with a plate of biscuits on her head going to the professional oven, and two girls were doing errands. A fifth about ten-year-old girl looked after a

group of small girls and boys.

Normally, babies and infants of both sexes are confined to the household of their caregivers. Yet, this is not limited to the household of their parents, but may include that of neighbours, grandparents or other family members living nearby. During their first years of their life, the playground for toddlers is largely limited to private spaces. Growing up, they can play more and more in unoccupied spaces near the houses or a bit further away but regularly under the control of older girls. This way, play areas move from private to public spaces.

The distance from home when going to play is often more limited for girls than for boys but this difference begins only when children go to primary school. A difference that is based on the same reason as the one mentioned for giving girls less time to play. Primary school age boys as well as girls prefer to play at some distance of their houses, and I found an Anti-Atlas girls' playground with small houses walled by pebbles at about one kilometre from their village. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that teenage boys can move further away from home without being accompanied by adults than girls.

## Gender and playgroups

Asking about gender differentiation between small children will often be seen as a nonsense question by youngsters and adults alike. Still, they start making a difference between girls and boys when children enter primary school, although this may not be the opinion of some toddlers. A situation videotaped in 2002 in the coastal town of Sidi Ifni showed that Yasin, a boy of four years and two months, made a clear distinction between boys and girls and between being a man or a woman. While Yasin participated in a doll play with Fatiha, his seven-year-old niece, she demanded him a few times to help in making dolls or doing another household task. When Fatiha commands Yasin to prepare dinner, he has enough of it and shouts: "Go yourself! I am a man, not a woman! I, I am a man, not a woman!". The discussion started somewhat earlier and culminates a few minutes later when Yasin, replying to Fatiha telling him: "go to make [the dolls] breakfast" shouts: "go yourself! Am I a woman?" (Rossie *et al.* 2021: 658-662).

Nevertheless, until the age of five or six, children of both sexes are found playing together regularly under the supervision of an older girl, rarely an older boy. An exceptional situation found in 1994 in a small village near the Pre-Sahara, shows a three-year-old girl looking after and playing with her eighteen-month-old sister (Rossie 2008: 116).

One of the tasks older girls must fulfil is looking for younger siblings, sometimes also babies and toddlers of neighbours, often to permit mothers to do other tasks. To keep these small children happy, older girls try to amuse them with some play activities, but more is at stake. The older girls ask toddlers to help them by bringing water, collecting stones, and natural and waste materials. Sometimes they become partners in a make-believe game by playing the role of a baby or small child, a shopkeeper, or even a doctor.

About the age of attending primary school, boys leave the playgroups organized by older girls and begin to build their playgroups, girls excluded, although we have seen exceptions.

Starting fieldwork in Morocco in 1992, I have quickly noted the importance of playgroups in the growing up of rural children. But also, of children living in popular neighbourhoods of towns and cities. In rural areas, these playgroups consist of two to sometimes more than twenty children.

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However, in many cases, the playgroups are small, among other reasons, because their members are often limited to siblings and children from nearby households. Such playing together, first in mixed playgroups and later in playgroups of girls or boys, of children living in the same natural, linguistic, and sociocultural environment promotes the cohesion between members and creates favourable conditions for the communication between them.

What children experience and learn through playful relations with same age or older children is doubtlessly of fundamental importance for their development and for the relationships they will build out as adolescents and adults. Moreover, the close contacts between children in playgroups strongly influence their socialization and the development of know-how, skills, worldviews, beliefs, and morals. In such child societies, girls and boys learn most games, venture to make toys, integrate the rules managing playgroups and gender differences, learn the non-verbal and verbal child culture, etc. Nevertheless, it is not tradition only that is transmitted in such playgroups. Non-traditional situations are increasingly observable in rural areas as girls and boys see them in the media, the behaviour of Moroccan emigrants visiting their families or tourists discovering Morocco. Primary and secondary school children add these events to their make-believe games, together with their individual and collective interpretations.

It is by no means an exaggeration to claim that child culture is learned and created in such playgroups. Playgroups are like laboratories for cultural and social development that, among other things, prepare children for adulthood. Nevertheless, the friendship and cooperation between playgroup members do not prevent discussions and conflicts. However, these conflicts happening in the Anti-Atlas were not taking place within playgroups but between girls' playgroups and boys' playgroups.

Peer groups consisting of children or adolescents of similar age become growingly important during primary school years. Yet at least two reasons make defining what is a peer playgroup difficult. One reason is that the difference in age between the youngest and the oldest member of a peer group easily spans four years, say a difference between six and ten years.

Observations carried out in the rural areas of the Anti-Atlas since 2002 confirm the role of playgroups in learning to play and creating toys, develop relationships, collaboration, and solidarity, and managing and resolving conflicts. The prolonged relation between rural playgroup members promotes the elaboration of common viewpoints, habits, and expectations.

These peer groups are often, yet not always, differentiated according to gender as mixed playgroups of older girls and boys exist. However, mixed playgroups show that boys and girls most of the time engage in parallel play, whereby boys perform male tasks and girls, female tasks. Playgroups in which boys and girls perform tasks together are truly seldom.

Playgroups may have a leader, but their role seems more linked to the activity than that they would be permanent leaders of the playgroup. Another aspect of this leadership is that being the eldest one is not the primary factor to be chosen as other characteristics are important. Factors like being the initiator of play activities, showing inventiveness in proposing play themes, and being a skilful creator of dolls and other toys. In the description of his research on modelling and eventually firing clay toys in the Anti-Atlas Argyris Fassoulas writes:

*Each group has its hierarchical structure, with the dominant girls taking more initiative and managing the sharing of tasks. These are older girls who are usually more skilled at making clay*

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toys, surrounded by a nebula of younger girls who aspire to participate, learn, and become members of the group. These young children take care of the often 'auxiliary' tasks (bringing water, collecting fuels, etc.) seeking above all to be at the disposal of elderly girls (Rossie et al. 2021: 516).

## Gender, play, toymaking and toy use

Concerning the different situation and attitudes towards girls and boys in a Moroccan village of the Khemisset region Aicha Belarbi, a Moroccan researcher, writes in 1997:

*If we summarize a four-year-old girl's activities for one day, as they were described by the mothers and focused on by the young sisters, we point out the limited and repetitive nature of the child's activities. The four-year-old boy has a different daily experience than his female counterpart. This simple description illustrates deep gender differences: while girls are expected to wake up early, sometimes without any help, mothers take into consideration the character of boys in terms of when they are expected to wake up. Some of them wake up early, others have difficulty in doing so and that is fine. When washing, boys need to be assisted by mothers or sisters; girls manage by themselves. Concerning play activity, girls are allowed to play near home, for a short time, and the mother keeps a watchful eye on them. An implicit permission is given to boys to play as long as they want and where they want. The access to Koranic school is also different. Girls usually attend it one year later than boys, except for those who have siblings attending the same school. In essence, the life of the four-year-old boy is more interesting, and he appears to interact more with adults and siblings than the girl child. Four-year-old girls are expected to be more self-reliant, but they are not yet given many responsibilities. This shifts by the age of six (1997: 6).*

At the end of her article, she states: "The results of this study cannot be generalized. Nonetheless, we find the same way of life and the same perceptions within other rural communities studied in other research." (1997: 10)

Some examples of gender influence in play activities, toy making, and toy use are mentioned and illustrated with photos. Several PowerPoints, available online, offer the readers more visual information (<https://ucp.academia.edu/JeanPierreRossie>: conference presentations).

Rural children from Morocco and other North African and Saharan regions often find their inspiration in the local adult world. Through their games, girls and boys represent the life of female or male members of their families and larger human environments, like neighbourhoods, shops, hospitals, or schools. In rural communities, the world of women and men divides adult life. Because children mirror adults, their play activities are from six years or even earlier split up into make-believe activities for girls or boys. In general, doll play, dinner play, play related to household occupations, and female handicrafts belong to girls. On the contrary, play activities about animals, agriculture, transport, and combat belong to boys. Still, one should not overgeneralize such statements because exceptions have been observed, be it rarely.

The most eloquent example of gender difference between Moroccan rural girls and boys came when a primary school teacher in a small High Atlas village near Midelt invited me to meet his pupils. Six girls brought with them self-made dolls, and eight boys self-made two-wheeled stick cars (Rossie 2013: 135-137).

In the Anti-Atlas, the youngest girl making a doll was two-and-a-half-year-old. She made it with a long cactus piece into which she pushed a branch as arms, and it wears no dresses (Rossie et al.



2021: 196).

High Atlas girls of about three years already make houses to play with walls delimited with a single layer of well-arranged stones. They use a lot of waste objects as utensils. A little girl of just two years plays preparing food in a plastic yogurt jar (Rossie 2008: 118-119).

Figure 1 below shows three girls from the first year of a primary school in the coastal mountains near Sidi Ifni, holding their self-made dolls in 2005. These four dolls show a simple one on the far right made with a stick covered by a piece of a plastic bag. The girl in the middle and the one to the left hold dolls made with a vertical reed pierced by a small horizontal piece of reed to represent arms. These two dolls have facial features. The doll held by the girl in the middle wears a traditional headdress. The doll on the left received a modern look with uncovered long hair, taken from the girl's hair, and wears a hat cut out of a plastic bag showing as an eye-catcher the name and symbol of an Agadir supermarket.

**Figure 1 - Girls of the first year of primary school holding their self-made dolls, Lahfart, 2005**



Source: picture Jean-Pierre Rossie

Young girls of the popular quarters of the town Midelt at the foot of the High Atlas regularly make houses to play delimited by stones. For example, three girls of about seven years built, in 1997, such a house against the wall of their home. Bottle caps, stoppers, tin cans, and similar objects change into utensils. They play at preparing food with sand and water, making tea, and doing other household tasks. In the same neighbourhood and at the same time, eleven-year-old girls constructed a large house for their household games. They made it near their homes on wasteland used as a playground and grazing area. This house has three rooms with walls delimited by stones. Two plastic receptacles filled with herbs as flowers mark the doorstep. Bottles, cans, and containers of all kinds represent household items. They also use cardboard egg trays. A used paint container on a large stone on top of the photo serves as an oven. The young boy is just passing by (cf. Figure 2 below).



**Figure 2 - Playgroup of six girls in their small house, Midelt, 1997**

Source: picture Jean-Pierre Rossie

Examples of older girls taking care of toddlers and integrating them in their play activities were observed in several Amazigh villages and neighbourhoods and are described in the online books of the collection *Saharan and North African Children's Toy and Play Cultures* (2005-2021). In the same publications, one will find some older boys taking care of small children, but in most cases, they are brothers.

In this collection, two books are more concerned about boys play and toy making, namely *The animal world in play, games and toys* and *Technical activities in play, games and toys*. These books mention groups of Moroccan older boys and young adolescents catching lizards, mole crickets, salamanders, scorpions, and birds (Rossie 2005b: 116-118) or using toy weapons almost always found in the hands of boys (Rossie 2013: 68-98). Information on boys between three and six years old is rare, among other reasons, because these small boys do not yet organize playgroups but often participate in mixed playgroups supervised by older girls.

Playgroups of older boys or young adolescents regularly amuse themselves in play activities referring to male occupations. In 2002, I observed an example linked to farming and breeding in a coastal mountain village near Sidi Ifni (*cf.* Figure 3 below). Four about eight-year-old boys play during several hours building mud walls for a large farm said to belong to wealthy peasants. This game does not consist of traditional themes only. It refers also to the nearby town as a plastic bus, driven along a road delimited with stones, arrives at the farm. At the farm's entrance, a boy parked a plastic lorry.

**Figure 3 - Playgroup of four boys building a farm, Lahfart, 2002**

Source: picture Jean-Pierre Rossie

An evening in 2002, two boys of about thirteen years were arranging and driving skateboards made with ball bearings on the sidewalk of a Sidi Ifni sloping street. The next day and the day after, four somewhat younger boys joined them. The two initiators of this game of skill not only helped their buddies to make a skateboard but also to drive it. Such a seldom found situation resembles the one between a master and an apprentice (Rossie 2013: 104). An informal training that also exists between girls creating clay toys (Rossie *et al.* 2021: 610-611).

An ethnographic and theoretical approach to informal learning is found in the book of David Lancy and colleagues.

In June 2007, Khalija Jariaa photographed in the village where she was born, located about 23 km from Tiznit, a child village that is a perfect example of parallel play. Such a child village is built each year during the summer holidays in the same place and used during the whole vacation period.

Figure 4 below shows below a tree the house of fifteen girls and above that tree one of ten boys. The girls arranged a living room with a television, two dining rooms, two kitchens, a place to do laundry, a shower, a toilet, and a terrace. The less elaborated boys' house contains a shop on the right side of the tree with the partially blue items, where the girls buy what they need for dinner and household play (Rossie *et al.* 2021: 293-300).

**Figure 4 - Child village of fifteen girls and ten boys, Ikenwen, 2007**



Source: Picture Khalija Jariaa



In a popular uphill neighbourhood of Sidi Ifni, the boys of a peer playgroup delimit with a rope their restaurant in 2006. A girl looking on would like to play with them, but the boys sent her away. Somewhat later, she found a trick to participate by proposing to clean their restaurant. Her proposal is accepted, and she is now permitted to play with them (cf. Figure 5 below). Sure, we did not see all Anti-Atlas children's play and toy-making activities, but this clearly will remain an exceptional situation.

**Figure 5 - Girl infiltrating a boys' playgroup, Sidi Ifni, 2006**



Source: picture Khalija Jarjaa

The year before and in the same neighbourhood, we observed a failed gender border crossing. Three girls rebuked two boys wanting to participate in their dinner play. These boys and girls were about seven-year-old (Rossie 2008: 193-194).

Parallel play is most common between boys and girls. However, an example from Douar Ouaraben, a village that recently became a quarter of Tiznit, proves that children of both sexes can perform tasks in collaboration. It happened in 2007, when four girls and four boys, between seven and ten years, decided that their child village needed to have a mosque. The mosque was made with a cardboard box by a ten-year-old boy who offered it to be the centre of the child village. Once this mosque being in place, a girl builds the dome of the minaret (cf. Figure 6 below). In the same photo, a boy manipulates a tanker bringing water to the village but made by one of the older girls with waste material (Rossie *et al.* 2021: 278-282).

**Figure 6 - Four girls and four boys collaborating in constructing a child village, Douar Ouaraben, 2007**





Source: picture Khaliya Jariaa

The book on Anti-Atlas children's play and toys offers a detailed description of the role of gender (Rossie *et al.* 2021: 414-420), and playgroups (Rossie *et al.* 2021: 399-412).

## Gender in play related to rituals and feasts

The study of children participating in rituals and festive events and their views on rituals and feasts expressed in games indicates that gender differentiation plays a role. The available information shows girls' play being more related to rituals, and boys' play more to feasts and musical performances. As explained below this difference between girls and boys is linked to the fact that magico-religious customs and rituals belong to the female world and musical entertainments and masquerades to the male world.

In the book *Saharan and North African Toy and Play Cultures. Children's Dolls and Doll Play*, I discuss how girls enact in their play activities rites concerning weddings, delivery, birth, funerals, and imploring rain (2005a: 111 ff) as well as circumcision (200). The ritual burial of dolls is mentioned in the same book (Rossie 2005a: 187-190). In former times, some games of skill, like ball games and swing games, were related to rites imploring rain and promoting agriculture, although often played by adults.

In their doll play, Amazigh girls of the village Ksar Assaka near Midelt at the foot of the High Atlas

sometimes used about 1980 a toy sheep in a scene acted out during the wedding of the bride doll. The toy sheep represents the sheep brought by the bridegroom family to the home of the bride. The bride mounts this sheep to get assured of a good life. During play, the girls enact this ritual, laying the bride doll on the sheep and walking them around. An old plastic oilcan with a piece of sheep wool tied around it serves as sheep. They pierce two sheep horns into the can at the right spot. Four used batteries put on the ground become the legs (Rossie 2005a: 128-129).

Rural girls integrate into wedding play other rituals concerning the marriage of a *tislit* and an *isli*, being the names of the bride and bridegroom in adult life and the female or male dolls in children's play. The girls enact adult rituals of applying henna on hands and feet and use vegetal material to decorate the bride and bridegroom doll to prevent misfortune and bringing happiness in marriage.

A Moroccan scholar, Lahcen Oubahammou, describes in 1987, a ritual performed by Middle Atlas girls when the lack of rain disturbs the season for ploughing or when in spring the grains dry out in the fields.

*This ritual game is called 'tirghist tabakhant' or the black cow. The girls decide to walk a black cow around in the fields, asking God for rain. A little girl with a black skin pulls the cow with a black string (according to Doutté, 1905: 385, the black colour is seen as the colour of the clouds that bring rain). The other girls walk along with the cow while singing: "Al bagra am Labgar. Ya rabbi ôâtina lamtar". Oh cow, mother of cattle. Oh God, give us rain (1987: 61).*

In the High Atlas and Anti-Atlas, women traditionally performed in periods of drought a ritual to implore rain. They use a tall doll, called *telghenja* or *belghenja*, made with a big wooden spoon. In the same village Ksar Assaka mentioned above, the girls performed this ritual playfully. After making their *telghenja* doll with a wooden spoon of about 50 cm high, they walk it around in procession holding in turn *telghenja* upright above their head as a sign of respect. Meanwhile, some girls play the tambourine, and all sing appropriate verses. After the procession, the girls go with *telghenja* to the tomb of a local saint, where they turn three times around the tomb kissing it several times. After eating bread and tomatoes and drinking homemade tea, a second walk between the village houses takes place. At the end of this ritual play, the girls strip the *telghenja* doll of all its cloths and decorative items, and the wooden spoon is given back to the mother who provided it (Rossie 2005a: 190-191).

A nine-year-old girl from a village high in the Anti-Atlas Mountains created in 2006 the *belghenja* doll in figure 7 below. A group of ten girls between four and thirteen years and five boys between five and eight years enjoy celebrating the ritual for obtaining rain (Rossie 2008: 306-310).

**Figure 7 - Belghenja doll made by a nine-year-old girl, Idoubahman-Imjad, 2006**







Source: picture Jean-Pierre Rossie

In Khalija Jariaa's home village, she observed in 2007 how about ten-year-old girls created similar *belghenja* dolls. The reader will find the description of these dolls in the collective book published in 2021. A remarkable interpretation of the *belghenja* doll made by one of the girls has as its head an old electric lamp surrounded by aluminium foil. This girl explained that when she watched Tom and Jerry on television, there was a blackout, and therefore she could not see the rest of the animated film. Because women make a *belghenja* with a wooden spoon to obtain rain, she made a doll with a lamp, wishing there always will be electricity when she is watching television. According to Khalija Jariaa, who heard the girls' conversation in their playgroup, they thought that thanks to the intervention of this adapted *belghenja* doll modelled with a symbol of electricity, there will happen no further power cuts while watching their favourite television programs (Rossie *et al.* 2021: 313-316).

In rural and urban Morocco, *Ashura* is probably the most important yearly period in the lives of Amazigh and Darija (Moroccan Arabic) speaking children. In Morocco, the *Ashura* period spans ten days beginning on the first day of the Muslim year, a period when adults give presents to children, not only toys but also new clothes, treats, and coins. The traditional gift for boys was a small pottery drum, and girls received a tambourine.

Amazigh children, and possibly other Moroccan children, refer in their *Ashura* games to ancient customs related to water and fire. They walk from house to house to collect gifts, play their tambourine, or drum, and sing *Ashura* songs (Rossie 2008: 286-290, 319-325, 385-386). According to a French author, the following was common in the High and Anti-Atlas at the beginning of the 1900s, but he only mentions *Baba Ashur*, a male doll with a frame of reed or bone (Rossie 2005a: 201-202). However, the information gathered in some Anti-Atlas villages refers to *Baba Ashur* and *Mama Ashur*. Girls from the Anti-Atlas created in Ikenwèn around 1984 when Khalija Jariaa was a ten-year-old girl, and in Imjâd in 2007, such a couple of dolls. These Anti-Atlas *Baba Ashur* and *Mama Ashur* dolls are made with a bone from a posterior leg of the sheep sacrificed at the *Aïd al Kebir* also named *Aïd al Adha*, the feast of sacrifice taking place some weeks before *Ashura*. The bone is cleaned, dressed in pieces of textile, and decorated. This game includes the death and burial of these dolls taking place towards the end of the *Ashura* period. All available information indicates this game with a ritual resonance being a girls' game. Nevertheless, the boys have a role to play by digging up the dolls, the girls have buried, and stripping them of clothes and decorations (Rossie *et al.* 2021: 190, 423-424). There is some information about *Baba Ashur* and *Mama Ashur* from Chemaia located near the road from Safi to Marrakech (Rossie *et al.* 2021: 720-722) and the *telghenja* doll from the Moroccan Tafilalt (Rossie *et al.* 2021: 723). The assembled literature, the collection of North African and Saharan toys of the Musée de l'Homme, and my fieldwork do not offer data on Moroccan boys' play related to rituals. Instead, there are references to musical performances and festivities. For example, Sidi Ifni boys organized a percussion orchestra with cans and other waste material saying this represents the orchestra that often lives up wedding feasts with music and song. Handmade musical instruments, like flutes, violins and guitars are boys' creations (Rossie 2008: 93, 261, 293-299, 312, Rossie *et al.* 2021: 290-291, 321-322). However, I do not remember girls doing the same, but they sing, play the tambourine, or recently also the boy drum, and dance.

At the end of the *Ashura* festive period, another feast lasting for a week and organized by young adult men and older adolescents takes place in Tiznit, a large town located at the foot of the Anti-Atlas. In

this town, *Imashar*, a parade with masked characters, musicians, and large animals walks around each evening after dark (Rossie, 2008: 325-329). This event refers to ancient agricultural rites. Nowadays, *Imashar* evolves more and more towards folk entertainment and becomes a possible touristic attraction for the near future. Some preadolescent and young adolescent boys dream of participating in the *Imashar* parade and prepare themselves in Tiznit and some villages of this region by making masks, dresses, musical instruments (cf. Figure 8 below), and imitations of large animals like camels and cows (Rossie *et al.* 2021: 290-292, 318-319).

**Figure 8 - Boys preparing to be participants in the Imashar masquerade, Tiznit, 2007**



Source: picture Khalija Jariaa

## Evolution of rural children's play and toy culture

Since the start of my fieldwork in Morocco at the end of 1992, slow but continuous evolution of

children's play and toy culture from tradition to modernity is going on in the rural areas of plains and mountains. In the Anti-Atlas, traditional play and toys remain essential in children's indigenous culture. Children's play changes for sure, yet traditional characteristics remain, such as outdoor activities, playgroups, little intervention by adults, use of local material resources, and play themes related to real adult life. However, the toys bought by local adults, brought by family members living in Europe, or by tourists, increases.

The evolution towards modernisation, westernisation, and globalisation of Moroccan children's toys started a long time ago. The first mention I found in the literature dates to the time of the first world war. Speaking of the feast of *Ashura* in Rabat, F. Castells writes in 1915 (342, translated from French):

*Some shops besieged by children sell toys of European import: guns, balls, dolls, drums, bugles, etc... Next to these shops crouched in front of his merchandise, an old representative of the tradition who offers, without much success, humble little toys of indigenous manufacture: turnstiles intended to make noise, miniature cradles, automatic hammers striking in turn and by the play of a string on a wooden anvil, monster-shaped hen tingling on its small plank when swung.*

One might object this speaks about wealthier classes living in a large town but by no means of popular families or rural areas. Nevertheless, such European toys could later be found in the hands of these children as second-hand toys.

The inspiration for play themes of boys and girls comes, today more than in the past, from information not related to local life. Television and Smartphones bring rural children in contact with the way people live in North African and further away countries. Watching the news from all over the world and movies and comics from Brazil, Egypt, France, India, Japan, Turkey, and the United States expose them to multicultural situations. European tourists and tourists of Moroccan origin living abroad also influence these children's ideas and behaviour.

Since the start of the year 2000, evolution becomes more rapid and intrusive when digital television, satellite dishes, video games, and mobile phones became available. Other aspects influence the life and play activities of the last two generations of Anti-Atlas children. Influences such as desertion of villages, urbanization, schooling, the return of Moroccans living in Europe, tourism, the entertainment industry, and the consumer society.

Recent games from the Anti-Atlas, two of the boy playgroups and four of the girl playgroups, confirm this. In their make-believe play the boys enact in 2006 the smuggling of goods at the Moroccan-Mauritanian border (Rossie *et al.* 2021: 353-356) and in 2009 the relation between gendarmes and hashish smugglers (Rossie 2013: 344-355). Through their make-believe play the girls express views about the behaviour of female tourists in 2006 and 2007 (Rossie *et al.* 2021: 106-108, 111-115, 120-127, 162-164). Although these games are based on television programs and refer to actual Moroccan situations, the traditional gender differentiation remains very prominent, something that is said to occur in many countries.

Two books offer a broader discussion of change and continuity in play, toy making, and toy use in North Africa and the Sahara (Rossie 2005/2013: 149-182) and in the Anti-Atlas (Rossie *et al.* 2021: 446-453).



## Conclusion

Between three to six years, Amazigh children belonging to the same family or who are neighbours, play very often outside their homes in mixed playgroups under the supervision of an older girl. From the age of six or seven, they start building playgroups of boys or girls. Sometimes, one finds mixed playgroups, but then they often engage in parallel play in which girls enact female roles and boys enact male roles. School holidays are good periods for playing and creating toys and may span several days.

These children first want to have fun, but at the same time, they learn about the physical and human reality that surrounds them. They socialize on their initiative, practice non-verbal and verbal communication, social relations, domestic and economic tasks, and integrate customs and beliefs. Girls and boys also playfully learn skills that will be useful in adult life. However, the communities in which they live are more and more quickly changing.

Amazigh children's make-believe play is today less than in the past, related to local life and more often influenced by the media and the behaviour of migrants and tourists. Play activities should not be viewed as imitations of the adult world but as an interpretation through children's eyes. Rural children and adolescents adapt their play and toy culture to their changing views, needs, and hopes. In this context, Brian Sutton-Smith wrote: "Play schematizes life, it alludes to life, it does not imitate life in any very strict sense... it is a dialectic which both mirrors and mocks reality but never escapes it." (1986: 141)

Rural children use much natural material of mineral, vegetal, and animal origin in their play activities. They can also be seen as masters in the reuse of objects adults throw away, waste objects used in whole or in part. A fundamental difference between traditional toys and industrial toys relates to the opposition between non-durable and durable toys. Two other reasons why children like industrial toys refer to being bought and looked upon as gifts from parents, family members, and eventually tourists. Anti-Atlas children continue to create toys. However, the growing influence of the toy industry causes a decrease in the number of self-made toys.

From about six years onwards, sexual differentiation between girls and boys plays a growing role in the socialization and play activities of Amazigh and other Moroccan children. Girls belonging to the female world remain more bound to tradition than boys but for how long. When looking at the photos of rural child games and toys that illustrate the books of the collection *Saharan and North African Toy and Play Cultures*, this sex-based distinction strikingly appears. Another difference between boys and girls, already at the age of six years but becoming more important at a more advanced age, is the time available to play this because of the greater integration of girls in household tasks. On the other hand, some information indicates that girls play more often games of boys than the other way around. The collective book on Anti-Atlas children offers a detailed description of the role of gender (Rossie *et al.* 2021: 414-420) and playgroups (Rossie *et al.* 2021: 399-412).

Children performing and participating in rituals seem to have been more common in former times (Westermarck 1913; Rabaté 1970; Oubouhammou 1987), yet in such cases performing and playing mix easily. Concerning the link between religious festivities, games, and toys, the *Ashura* feast comes to the foreground. Yet, the *Aïd el Kebir* or the feast of sacrifice, and the *Mulud*, the commemoration of the Prophet's birthday, also play a role. The play activities integrating rituals

belong with few exceptions to girl playgroups. Anti-Atlas boy playgroups show more interest in the *Imashar* masquerade and parade.

In Morocco, the toy industry has found in the *Ashura* festivities and other feasts a promising situation to sell toys often in plastic. Local markets and shops are overloaded with such toys. These last years, water-pistols and water-guns have been added to the musical toys, the toy beauty sets, the toy utensils and the toy weapons. However, the children whose parents cannot afford to buy good quality toys feel frustrated and become less motivated to make themselves toys. So, parents sometimes buy cheap toys of rather bad quality, even toys that are dangerous for children as safety controls for toys are lacking in the region.

As a final remark I want to stress that although sometimes suffering under poverty or sickness Moroccan rural children are at the same time active participants in creating the society and culture in which they grow up. Therefore, their children's culture should be rightly recognized as an integral part of the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity.

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