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### Review Article

## TRADITIONAL CHILDREN'S GAMES IN THE MEDITERRANEAN: ANALOGIES

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### ABSTRACT

Games such as marbles, knucklebones, triangle, hopscotch and ring-based games are played in modern times in Mediterranean countries, but they date back to the 5th century BC, and are mentioned by Alcibiades. Taking as a basis these interesting facts, we decided to investigate further and sought out specialist articles and books on traditional children's games. The similarity of games in Mediterranean countries would seem to be due to a shared culture, but can the analogies detected be confirmed from the perspective of social sciences and sciences of physical activity? Due to such a large body of documentation and the number of authors with specialist knowledge in games, we have selected those that we feel make the most solid epistemological contribution. We have specifically chosen researchers who could best guide us in terms of interculturality in traditional children's games, ranging from eminent classical historians to the most well-known modern-day folklorists. Analysing the factors that have led to the development of Mediterranean culture, it becomes clear that the human race is simply the product of the constant mixing of human beings. The world of play may also be the result of an individual's biological, sociomotional and contextual characteristics. In this context, interculturality means recognising the culture of the other, and the positive values of both cultures. The universal language of play is a valuable tool to foster knowledge of and respect for different cultures and languages present in society. In short, children's traditional games are an excellent instrument for intercultural development, given that many of them increase tolerance, respect and participation, and due to their content constitute a powerful resource for moral education and a unifying link between children from different cultures.

**Key words:** *traditional play, folk games, Mediterranean, analogies.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The language of play may be universal, as it is very closely (though not exclusively) linked to human movement. In turn, co-existence is based on respect for both the individual and the group, and the one group that all people belong to equally, in the widest sense, is the human race (Rico, 1999). Cultural interaction, universal language and games are related social and human phenomena.

The phenomenon of play can be explained in terms of various sciences and disciplines, and cannot be contained within a single scientific context, but rather is the object of multidisciplinary study. Sciences such as psychology, pedagogy, biology, sociology, history and anthropology, and now the sciences of physical activity and sport, have studied the phenomenon in depth. Of all these, the field of psychology has probably given most explanations and interpretations concerning children's play.

Given the large number of documents written on the subject, and the amount of authors with specialist knowledge, we have selected those that we feel make the most solid epistemological contribution to this work.

Firstly, Johan Huizinga (1872-1945) is an obligatory starting point for any researcher studying play. His most important work, *Homo Ludens* (1938), sets out his theory on play and culture throughout history.

Another key author is the New Zealander Brian Sutton-Smith (1976), who has studied traditional child games for 50 years in both his own country and the USA. He is considered a leading expert in anthropological science and folklore. In the field of sociocultural kinanthropology, Roland Renson et al. (1975), has produced some significant research into traditional games.

## THE SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF PLAY

History provides certain information on the games of old. Archaeologists have obtained information from the discovery of play materials and images in ancient tombs and temples<sup>2</sup>. Avedon and Sutton-Smith (1971:21) observes that a Sumerian game board (2600 BC) has analogies with another, known as *Morris*, found a thousand years later in Egypt. In the England of the Middle Ages (1300 AD), Medieval examples (1300 AD) have been found in the English cathedrals of Norwich, Canterbury, Gloucester and Salisbury, and in Westminster Abbey.

Legislation as a historical source includes anti-gambling laws in Rome (Guillén, 1995), which were the result of the bets that would be made over board games, in which all one's belongings were played for.

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<sup>2</sup> "A Sumerian game board (c.2600 B.C.) recovered from the royal cemetery at Ur of Chaldees is an example. Similarly, Egyptologists have recovered dice and game boards from the tomb of Queen Hatshepsut (c.1600 B.C.), and game boards of the "Morris" type have been discovered cut into the roofing slabs of the Temple of Kurna, Egypt, dating from 1400 B.C. "Morris boards have been cut into the cloister seats of the cathedrals of Norwich, Canterbury, Gloucester, Salisbury, and Westminster Abbey, dating from A.D. 1300. Remnants of ceremonial ball courts (C.A.D. 1000) have been discovered in Mexico at Tula. In sum, one source of historical information about games is the equipment employed in the play of the game or the especial setting in which the game was played." (Avedon and Sutton-Smith, 1971:21)

According to Avedon and Sutton-Smith (1971), the first historical treatises on games were *De Historia Shahiludii* (1689) and *De Historia Herdiludii* (1694), both by Thomas Hyde, professor of Arabic at Oxford University. *The Complete Games ter*, written by Charles Cotton around 1674, is another famous book from this period.

Anthropologists and folklorists began to study play in the last two decades of the 19th century. In *Anthropology*, Tylor stated that play can provide clues about cultural contact, and posited the theory that play has a universal nature. He claimed that certain forms of play spread from Southeast Asia to Polynesia and New Zealand, and suggested that the culture of play could have spread to the American continent across the Bering Strait<sup>3</sup>.

For Avedon and Sutton-Smith (1971:57), the staunchest exponent of the theory of the universality of play was Stewart Culin, who in 1900 defended the existence of analogies between different cultures and whose studies helped the popular notion of play, previously considered a somewhat trivial concern, to be seen as an integral part of human culture.

Folklorists have based their research into play on the study of oral tradition. For Avedon and Sutton-Smith (1971:159), the first classic work on folklore and games was *The Games and Songs of American Children* (1883), by William W. Newell. A pioneer in the study of games, this American folklorist also defended the universality of games and the notion of global spread. As well as recording and safeguarding games from decline or total loss, the greatest motive of Newell and other folklorists was the reconstruction of times gone by, and the study of games became a way of reconstructing history.

Other authors (Adell, 1997; André, 1984; Caro, 1978), state that there is sufficient empirical continuity in games over long periods of time to conduct historical academic studies. Diachronic and synchronic study would provide significant data to show the continuity of games.

## **CHILDREN'S GAMES IN THE MEDITERRANEAN: SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES**

In our research into children's games played in Mediterranean countries throughout history, we were surprised by the fact that most of the existing historical studies were concerned with traditional games played by adults, making it difficult to find a common thread detailing the evolution of children's games over the centuries. Conscious of these limitations, we attempt in this study to provide examples of traditional children's games and analyse the similarities and/or differences between them.

The Mediterranean was the cradle of Western civilisation and the scene of many notable examples of expansion throughout history (AAVV, 2003). The spread of games and toys, which can now be dated back to Greek and Roman civilisations, or previously to

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<sup>3</sup> "Tylor is usually accepted as the first to have pointed out that games might be used to provide clues about cultural contacts. Holding the view that complex aspects of culture could only have arisen at one time and in one place, Tylor pointed to the games as providing evidence that civilization had spread "from South East Asia over the vast Malayo-Polynesian district as far as New Zealand". He also argued that games were brought to the North American continent from the Asian mainland when a land bridge existed across the Bering Strait." (Avedon and Sutton-Smith, 1971:55)

Egyptian times, was a consequence of the common substratum that is the Mediterranean tradition.

Eduard Spescha<sup>4</sup> (1978) stated that knowing the origins of games and how they have evolved over history and geography enriches and widens our respect for other cultures and peoples. E.B. Tylor, in Avedon & Sutton-Smith (1971:63-65)<sup>5</sup> considers a series of questions on the similarities and differences found by travellers in types of play from continents as separate as Europe and Asia. One of the possible explanations may be that human beings have the same characteristics regardless of where they are born. However, there are also examples of barbarian countries in which almost no evidence of games has been found, despite being surrounded by more developed civilisations. Tylor<sup>6</sup> notes the depiction in Egyptian painting of the game known as *morra*, which has remained unchanged in various Mediterranean countries for three thousand years.

Sports historian Robert Flacelière (1993:225) states that the main games of childhood and youth vary very little from one people to another, or from one era to another. Most of the games played today, including many kinds of ball games, existed in the same or a very similar way in ancient Greece.

Flacelière posits that the first thing to surprise historians about ancient times is how similar, analogous or even identical the customs and habits of different peoples are who were largely ignorant of each other but who lived in very similar conditions as a result of the almost parallel evolution of techniques, lifestyles and even intellectual undertakings. There are many features of daily life, religious rites and customs that we have observed that are also to be found in other ancient peoples, including Persians, Mesopotamians, Egyptians and Hebrews, as well as very considerable differences, of course (Flacelière, 1993:331).

Bett, (1929)<sup>7</sup> bases the thesis of possible analogies on the Mediterranean tradition of children's games, quoting Petronius (66 AD), who tells of a game from antiquity, and finds certain parallels with a game played by English children in the early 20th century. Bett also writes of another game<sup>8</sup> recorded by medieval writers in which a flower is used as an oracle. The petals are removed one by one, reciting: he loves me, he loves me not, and so on.

<sup>4</sup> President of the Working Group "Information" of the European Committees for UNICEF, the book's foreword Games worldwide.

<sup>5</sup> "It may give us confidence in this way of looking at the subject if we put the opposite view to the test of history and geography to see where it fails. Travellers, observing the likeness of children's games in Europe and Asia, have sometimes explained it on this wise: that the human mind being alike everywhere, the same games naturally found different lands, children taking to hockey, tops, stilts, kites, and so on, each at its proper season. But if so, why is it that in outlying barbarous countries one hardly finds a game without finding also that there is a civilised nation within reach from whom it may have been learnt? And what is more, how is it that European children knew nothing till a few centuries ago of some of their most popular sports?" E.B. Tylor (in Avedon & Sutton-Smith, 1971:63-65).

<sup>6</sup> "Another of the Egyptian pictures plainly represents the game we know by its Italian name of *morra*, the Latin *micatio*, or flashing of the fingers, which has thus lasted on in the Mediterranean districts over three thousand years, handed down through a hundred successive generations who did not improve it, for from the first it was perfect in its fitting into one little niche in human nature".

<sup>7</sup> "The Games of Children. Their origin and History". In his work reads as follows: "Thus, to give a few examples almost at random there are numerous references in the Greek and latin poets games played with balls, hoops, and tops".

<sup>8</sup> "But probably the most interesting allusion to a child's game in any ancient writer is in a passage in Petronius, where he describes how a boy climbed on to the back of Trimalchio 'and slapped him on the shoulders with his hand, laughing and calling out, Bucca, bucca, quot sunt hic? This is precisely the same game, and, what is more extraordinary, played with precisely the same formula, as that played by English schoolboys today, where a boy 'sets a back' and other boys leap on to it, holding up so many fingers, with the cry, 'Buck, buck, how many horns do I hold up? Some interesting references to children's games are found also in mediaeval writers. There is a familiar game in which a flower is used as an oracle. The petals are stripped off one by one with the formula, He loves me, he loves me not" Bett (1929:2).

Bett (1929:4)<sup>9</sup> also describes five classes of games taken from Rabelais's work *Gargantua*, with their parallels in England: games imitating weddings and funerals (several games are accompanied by chants and wedding simulations); games based on making others laugh, such as *Don't laugh!* (Kaminski and Sierra, 1995); games involving a blindfold with varying forms of being caught; games involving seasons; and games involving bridges (such as *Angels and Demons*). He also explains the legends<sup>10</sup> behind bridge games, in which two children hold hands and let the others pass underneath while singing a tune.

It can be difficult to establish the origin of a certain game, though most authors agree that there some intrinsically human faculties are essentially timeless (Navarro, 2002; Van Hoorn, 1982; Elchenbroich, 1979; Russel, 1970).

Along the same lines, recent studies have attempted to ascertain the origin of local games and the influences of other peoples or groups, and have confirmed how games have spread from other regions (mainly through emigration) and been adapted to the new environment with slight modifications, surviving to this day (Boissevain, 1992; AAVV, 1988; Pfister et al., 1996).

Grunfeld (1978:10) also provides examples of similar games in different moments of history, and points out a liking of games is universal, with no cultural or linguistic boundaries. Just as ancient and primitive religions of the world have similar rites to invoke fertility or in their adoration of the sun and the moon, many games from various parts of the world seem to be common to human beings. The tug of war, for example, is a dramatisation of a fight between oracles; and even hopscotch is related to ancient myths. One such universal game is cat's cradle, which is known in Africa, Asia, Europe, the Western hemisphere, the Pacific, etc., and is one of the Eskimos' favourite games. The tradition is for the player to tell a story to accompany each shape that is made, and in this way the legends of the Inuit (Eskimos) have remained unchanged for generations: each figure that the string forms acts as a mnemonic device to help players to remember their stories, with the figures symbolising birds, canoes, sleds, bears, foxes and other elements of Arctic life. Further south, the Navajo Indians from the southwest USA make string figures resembling tents, coyotes, rabbits and constellations. In New Guinea, the figures symbolise spears, drums, palm trees, fish and crabs. Each people has its own figures, taken from their surroundings, and each has its own system of values and traditions associated with the game.

Other games played all over the world and which have reached the 21st century include marbles, which were known to exist in ancient Egypt and pre-Christian Rome, and knucklebones, which was played in ancient Greece (Grunfeld, 1978:158), although for

<sup>9</sup> "Then there are references to children's games also in writers of the Renaissance. Thus Rabelais tells us that *Gargantua*, in his amazing childhood, played with his companions at many games, among them those which he calls *A mariage, a je te pince sans rire, A cligne-mussette, A je vous prends sans vert, aux ponts chus*. The first was evidently a wedding game of the type of Sally Waters; the second was something like the game of Buff, where you have to refrain from smiling when provoked to it; the third was the equivalent of our Blindman's Buff; the fourth was a game in which a green leaf was worn; and the fifth was a game like London Bridge is Broken Down".

<sup>10</sup> "...The next development, under the influence of civilization and Christianity, is to think of the animal, not as deliberately offered in sacrifice to the animal, not as deliberately offered in sacrifice to the spirits of the earth or the water, but as thrown to the Devil to cheat him of human prey. This applies to other buildings beside bridges. So the minster at Aix-la Chapelle was built by the aid of the Devil, whose reward was to be whoever first crossed the threshold when the church was completed. A chained wolf was loosed as the procession neared the door. The Devil howled with rage, snatched up the wolf, and kicked the door in spite as he departed. The split oak is show to this day. There are bridges all over Europe about which some such legend is told, ...".



the author the spread of the game from one people to another is not a sufficient explanation for its universality.

Sophocles attributes the invention of knucklebones to Palamedes, whom he says taught the game to Greek soldiers during the Trojan war, though it seems more likely to have originated in ancient Asia. The Romans, introduced knucklebones to many countries during their military campaigns, though the game is also traditional in other parts of the world, from Russia to Polynesia, that the Romans never reached (Donatti et al., 1992). A modern form of the game, with five stones, is very popular among schoolchildren all over the world. The version played in Morocco in the 20th century was called Tabuxarat (AAVV, 1939; Azzuz, 1959; Granda, 1995). The present-day *Tazos* could be considered a modern variation of the same game, with plastic discs used instead of stones).

Hopscotch is related to ancient myths concerning labyrinths, adapted to represent the journey of the soul from the earth to heaven. Concerning the geographic spread of hopscotch, Chanan and Francis (1984) write that the *buat rumah batu* of Malaysia has in common the picking up of a stone or a bean while standing on one leg, and jumping from one square to another without standing on the lines drawn on the ground.

With its geographic variants (including heaven and earth, water, the post, the days of the week, English, the moon, etc.), hopscotch has existed in many civilisations. One of the oldest diagrams known is the pattern made in the ground of the Roman Forum (Carcopino, 1993). During the expansion of the Roman Empire, the legions built stone roads to link the countries in northern Europe with those in the Mediterranean and Asia Minor.

The game has also been found in places as far apart as the Canary Islands (Sánchez & Suárez, 1996) and Bosnia (Kaminski & Sierra, 1995), and of course in Italy, France (Lequeux, 1984) and Spain, among others.

Images of a spinning top appear on Greek pottery; the Greeks thought very highly of the top as physical exercise for people of a weak constitution. Hippocrates, the great doctor, recommended it in one of his medical treatises around 300 BC (Grunfeld, 1978). On bridge-based games, such as *pase misi*, the author provides interesting details and comments on its history that coincide with the Bett's findings (1929).

He states that since ancient times all European children have played at moving under an arch or bridge made by the outstretched arms of two people standing opposite each other and locking hands. The name of the game, its rules and the chants involved naturally vary from one country or region to another, but in almost all cases there is a common element: the allusion to a nationally renowned bridge or arch. Thus, in Spain (and particularly in Castile), the two players who join hands form the *Puerta de Alcalá* in Madrid, whereas in England it is London Bridge, the only one which for centuries and until recently joined the two banks of the Thames as it flows through the British capital. In the Middle Ages it was believed that the two sides of the bridge represented good and evil, and this belief was transferred to the game.

Some forms of play, usually considered as adult games (e.g. bat-and-ball games), appear in compilations of children's games, such as the 1901 work by Santos, (1986:116-124).

It can also be observed that many compilations of traditional children's games often refer to a particular geographic area. The title given to works of this type may confuse readers. The heading *Games from...* may lead people to think that these games originated in that region, yet it is not always possible to pinpoint the origin of certain games and forms of play.

According to Renson (1984:151), traditional games vary from one culture to another, not in their form (text), but in their cultural significance (context). For Pierre Parlebas (1989:28), this disparity is increasingly accentuated when comparing games from different cultures.

### POSSIBLE ORIGIN OF THE WORLD OF PLAY

It is widely accepted, and backed up by numerous examples, that humans have an urge to play. This is the first similarity between all cultures, peoples and civilisations, from pre-history to modern times, leading to a heterogeneous world of play in which there are more similarities than differences and with multiple individual, group, local or worldwide manifestations.

This world of play may be due to the combination of three elements: universal variables of movement, a network of movement-based communication, and the sociocultural context. Studying these three variables can lead to an understanding of the traditional and ever-changing world of play among children in the Mediterranean region, and an appreciation of the analogies of the games played.

We have attempted to set out and interpret the phenomenon of children's games in Mediterranean countries, using the historiography and historical sources at our disposal.

Having consulted these sources, our first impression was that history seems to be cyclical, as suggested by Cagigal (1966)<sup>11</sup>. Play appears as a phenomenon that is inherent to all humans throughout history; man is *Homo ludens* (Huizinga, 1984).

The consideration of humans as creative beings and their sociocultural context would explain existing differences. When a culture develops, it shapes its environment in response to its values, ways of life and customs. The regions of the Mediterranean have experienced different cultures over the centuries. The constant journeys across land and sea by Greeks, Carthaginians, Romans Berbers and Arabs have made the Mediterranean Sea a cultural sub-world, the roots of which affect the area to this day (AAVV, 1996). This ongoing cultural exchange and enrichment could be the reason for the numerous analogies that exist between the games played by the region's different peoples. Throughout our research we have found examples of how games have spread and survived that leads to a reflection on the characteristics of play in human beings. The similarities that exist may be explained not only by the influence of culture but also by

<sup>11</sup> José María Cagigal (1966:99), showed close to that classic cyclical interpretation, in which the game had a strong presence. If the entire history of mankind is reduced to one page of fifty lines, thirty talk of war. Of the twenty remaining talk at least several games. All historical density enclosed in the concept "game" is dealt, from primitive cultures, in the most varied types of social organizations. The clans of the old rural Chinese civilizations celebrated the changing seasons with leisure skills. In the indigenous civilizations of America would play the most original expressions. "...En el Japón, en el Tibet, en África, en los pueblos nórdicos de Europa está presente desde la más remota memoria el "tinglad o" festivo lúdico, como perpetuo testigo de una constante humana que tiende a ofrecerse espontáneamente en manifestación social..."



the presence of certain universal variables of movement. Human beings have a biological make-up that allows them to put a series of innate skills and abilities into practice.

Parlebas (1989) defends the existence of *universals* in the forms of interaction and organisation of play. Groupings within a game (individuals, pairs, a small group, a large group, two sides, etc.) may vary depending on the interests of its participants; from the individual game, such as marbles, games in pairs; *pasé misí*, in threes; the ancient Roman ball game known as *trigonalis*; to games in groups of four, such *the four corners*, etc.

All games, of any kind, are organised in such a way that success or failure is attributed to certain highly characteristic actions of movement.

Due to their intercultural content, traditional children's games are also a good way for children from different cultures to socialise.

We could therefore analyse games from other eras from the viewpoint of the present-day discipline of physical education, and even recover their importance for contemporary specialists. For example, movement analysis of hopscotch, played for centuries by different civilisations, shows the need for good adjustment of posture, constant static and dynamic changes in balance, and both general and eye-foot dynamic co-ordination. Notions of spatial awareness are required with regard to the lines drawn on the ground, which the individual must interiorise in order to play the game well (Avedon & Sutton-Smith, 1971)<sup>12</sup>.

Recent studies propose analysis of the *movement behaviour* involved in children's games, in order to study the wealth of movement of physical play (Andreu, 2004).

## CONCLUSIONS

### *Universal variables of movement*

The movement skills of an individual can be defined in both qualitative and quantitative terms. These movement skills involve perception and co-ordination skills (postural attitude and tonicity, space-time structuring, balance and co-ordination), basic motor skills (movement, jumps, spins, throwing and catching, and flexibility) and basic physical qualities (strength, resistance, speed and flexibility). Sociomotor skills would include interpersonal communication, creativity and physical expressiveness.

Classifying skill in this way is useful for a permanent evaluation throughout history.

### *Sociocultural context*

The logic of traditional games can be viewed from an anthropological viewpoint, which assists comprehension of the rules followed by the phenomena observed when contemplating the development of games of this type. The physical and sociocultural contexts limit individual and group actions and lead to certain behaviours. Traditional games undergo a process of irreparable decontextualisation. Games vary from one culture to another, not in their form (text), but in their cultural meaning (context).

<sup>12</sup> We find a complete study on the variants of this game and his history in Brewster, P.G.: "Some unusual forms of Hopscotch" and Crombie J.W. "History of the game of Hopscotch" (Avedon & Sutton-Smith, 1971).

Any analysis of motor actions would have to be carried out within the relevant cultural context. Motor actions acquire meaning in the context in which they take place, and are lost when decontextualisation occurs.

### ***Mediterranean***

Several traditional children's games in Mediterranean countries have a greater number of similarities due to common context and cultures. In the specific realm of historical science, and the topic of our analysis of the permanence of play over time, it can be stated that there is evidence of games involving balls, jumps, ropes, races, dances, stones or marbles, fighting, throwing, acrobatics and bodily expression from Egyptian times to the present day. These are good examples of similarities in play between different peoples over the centuries.

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