

Traditional play in different cultures

Play is an unspecialised, undifferentiated, ambiguous, multifunctional, autotelic, divergent activity and as such has a specific role in human ontogenesis. It presents the most suitable area for development and trying out of various psychic processes and human features. A child demonstrates his competence at play (mental, social, physical etc.) but he wants to experience also those activities and processes he isn't really up to yet. It is amazing how children find those games that anticipate their physical and mental development. Play therefore contains, according to Vigotski (1966), all the tendencies of development, i.e. it reflects the zone of child's later development.

Being a complex children's product, play carries messages about itself as a product (such as a fairy tale, myth, ritual, an image), as an externalisation of child's possibilities it carries messages about the development of psychic functions of a child, and as a part of children's subculture it carries messages about childhood and the way of growing up.

Play and childhood are immanent, inseparable parts of culture and they became not only the objects of developmental psychology, but also of sociological, historical, ethnographic, cultural research. The understanding of play as a complete phenomenon requires an interdisciplinary approach. New knowledge, according to Kon (1988), emerges on boundaries of different disciplines.

Every human community, every culture contains also children's subculture with its tradition, where children act as creators, mediators and transmitters. Creation, maintenance, change and transmitting of play is a sort of production of cultural products by children, i.e. a sort of child culture that children maintain and transmit within their tradition. Play is connected to all sorts of activities and experience of children groups, children beliefs, material objects made and kept by children, linguistic production etc., and all this with the tendency to be repeated from year to year.

Children tradition, as well as national culture, is determined by psychological, space, time and sociological co-ordinates of the collective poetics production.

As a developmental psychologist I have worked on the problem of play for over 20 years (I have written two books on that subject), but ever since 1985, when I took part in the OMEP project on traditional children games, I have carried a hidden wish to explore play in different cultures. I had neither opportunity nor money to do some serious field research of play, but nevertheless I have managed to work on this problem and I would like to share some of my findings with you here.

In 1983, when I read about the game LOT ANTJAK played by children of Khmer in Cambodia in Kon's Ethnography of childhood I was astonished because I played that very game with my friends when I was a child, only under a different name. But then I remembered a lot of universal elements that exist in national culture: Wheel dancing is present all over the world; the motive of dragging through a narrow passage can be found both in adult folklore and in children games all over the world; according to some data there are 345 versions of Cinderella in the world; Andrejev (according to Langer, 1967) proved by statistic analysis that the fairy-tale topics common for Russian and West-European stories make out one third of the entire index; Kirk (1970) researched the universality of myth structures in the world, and topics of myths and fairy tales similar all over the world are the object of many research; a puny, little tailor is a constant object of ridicule in the entire

European folklore; the motive of miraculous birth is one of the most common motives in the world etc.

Having researched the literature on inter-cultural research of play I concluded the following:

- most authors (psychologists, ethnologists, folklorists, anthropologists) focus on differences, and not similarities of play;
- there are far more comparative data on games than on symbolic play (role play), probably because games are more formal and are therefore easier to code;
- comparative data, however untrustworthy and unsystematic sometimes, indicate mostly 2 kinds of differences: differences between extremely developed communities and extremely underdeveloped ones, and differences between some undeveloped communities. There are very few data on play in developed communities, for example, on play of European children;
- children from more complex cultures, i.e. cultures that are technologically, socially and economically more complex, play more and in a more complex way.

Bearing in mind the fact that development of community leads to creation of more complex play I ask myself: *Would the present differences in child play between developed and undeveloped communities reduce (disappear) if the latter (undeveloped) reached the same technological, economic and social level of development as the former ones? Does play 'serve' to develop some general human developmental features or cultural particularities? In other words, what does play represent - similarities or differences among cultures? Is play similar or different among developed societies?*

As previously said, I did not have a possibility to explore play of different cultures. But, there are many descriptions, even collections of games and they are often used as secondary comparative sources. Even though there are many variations in game performance, they still have a more stable structure, are handed down from generation to generation and their recording is possible. They, in a same way as poems, stories, become the way of objectification of children tradition, they can be looked upon as finished products (on their own), as "crystals", as we do with myths, customs and rituals.

On the basis of a comprehensive research conducted in Slavonia (North-Eastern region of Croatia) I identified and described ludic corpus of children of this region. Collection of games is published as an appendix of my book *Child and Play*¹ and contains a detailed description of 204 games.

Three sources were used: information obtained from children, information obtained from adults, and observation and record making of children games on spots where children gather and play. These games children create independently and on their own initiative and they are "handed down from one generation to another"

I compared products of children's subculture "crystallized" in such a way to children games from New Zealand and Great Britain described in collections of games Folk games of Children by B. Sutton-Smith and Play in Street and Playground by Opie and Opie. The descriptions of games had been collected in the same three ways as ours were.

The similarity of all game categories is amazing². Some games are not only similar but also completely identical. This level of similarity requires psychological, but also anthropological, historical and other explanations - as it is necessary in explanation of places of all fairy tales in the world. (Only one theory proved insufficient).

Folklore is, according to Prop, an international phenomenon. A problem common for all nations made us raise a question that Turner formed (1989) in this way: "...why do different groups of humans in different time and space have similar and different cultural expressions?"

When I compared Croatian and New Zealand games I used the Sutton-Smith's classification; when I compared Croatian games to those from Great Britain I used the Opie and Opie's classification. In Child and Play I give my own classification. There's no time

¹ Dijete i igra

² All categories are in detail described in Child and Play

enough to go into this, but I would like to stress out the following: the question of classification and sorting out of the whole play manifestations are not just formal. Just as it happens when you turn a kaleidoscope, different classification may lead to discovering new relations and characteristics. Classification is not only the result, but it's also a tool of a logical analysis a certain material is subjected to.

But, let's go back to referred similarities and demonstrate them on one example (out of many). Iona and Peter Opie, describing one of the category of games they called **Play of acting**, asked: Why do girls in blue jeans play drama games that could have taken place on the streets of London a few centuries ago? ("A witch in the attic", "A ghost in the well" etc.)

Sutton-Smith finds and describes such games in New Zealand children and calls them **Dialogue games**. I find them in Croatian children and call them **Theatre games**. Kravcov and Lazutin (1983) give descriptions of similar Russian games and they call them small theatre shows.

Similar are not only the structure and fairy-tale logic, but also the dialogues.

In Croatian game *Skeleton* children say to their mother (one child is the mother) that they are hungry and want to eat something. Mother sends them up to the attic to get some ham and sausages. Children come quickly back; they are frightened and shout: "Mother, there's something up there!" Mother comforts and tries to reassure them. Every child that plays the role of the mother has to improvise the reassuring part. (Those are only dad's old shoes, an old broom etc.). In the end, mother is convinced in the truth of children's words and leads the following dialogue with the skeleton:

Mother: "Who are you?"

Skeleton: "Skeleton"

Mother: "What do you sleep on?"

Skeleton: "Nails."

Mother: "What do you drink?"

Skeleton: "Human blood."

Mother: "What do you eat?"

Skeleton: "Human flesh."

Mother: "What time are you coming?"

The skeleton whispers this information to the mother, so that the children cannot hear it. The mother makes a dancing wheel with the children, the wheel turns and they all chant: "The first hour has passed, the skeleton hasn't showed, the second hour..." They keep on chanting until they come to the time the skeleton specified to come and the mother runs away. They all start running, the skeleton runs after them, children scream representing fear and the child the skeleton catches becomes the new skeleton.

Sutton-Smith describes a really old game from New Zealand called *Ghost in the garden*. Mother sends her children to the garden, and children come back in fear, screaming and shouting: "Mother, there's a ghost in the garden." Mother comforts and tries to reassure the children. "Those are only your dad's white underpants drying on the line." The mother is finally convinced and she has a dialogue with the ghost where she finds out that he is making a fire, to boil some water, to cook a stone, to sharpen a knife and to cut off her head. Then they all run away, screaming with fear, and the child that gets caught becomes the ghost.

In the British game *The old man in the well* children ask their mother to give them some bread and butter. The mother looks at their hands and sees that they are dirty, so she sends them to the well to wash themselves. Children lean over the "well", scream with fear and run back to their mother complaining they saw someone in the well. The mother reassures them (improvises), for example: "Those are only your father's old underpants." Eventually, the mother is convinced in their horrible experience. The old man jumps out of the well and starts chasing the mother and children. Children scream with fear and the child caught becomes the old man.

These games, as opposed to symbolic play (role play) have a relatively permanent dramatic composition. The cause for that lies in the fact that there are some basic rules that determine the course of the main events in the game. The game takes place in a linear way with the fixed succession of actions according to the "then" principle (Then this happened,

and then this...). What we have here is a story children play more or less in a way they played it the last time. Therefore the content of the game and its style become traditional. I've noticed that the compositional unity lies, the same way as in drama, most of all on the unity of speech and action. Dramatic composition develops from the introductory part that creates the conditions to develop the plot, through the middle part that develops the plot with the accelerated increase of suspense, and finishes with the last part. These games, the same way as drama, let us follow: exposition, plot, culmination, problem and disentanglement. Looking at these games as semiotic products and the way they are carried out in practice (things I paid attention to with Croatian plays) refer to thematic and structural connections with two products of national culture: fairy tale and oral national teatrology. In fairy tale topics children go through terrible experience: they come across a skeleton in the attic, the witch in the well, unknown and bad people kidnap them, parents don't believe them when they talk about their horrible experience, but the close members of their family also go through terrible things and they may easily lose them. But these games contain also topics closer to the real life, often accompanied by humour. A thief steals honey from the godfather, grandfather makes a fool of grandmother saying for example: "Run home, your cow has just had kittens."

Relatively permanent dramatic composition resembles the one of the renaissance *commedie dell'arte* that was based on the actors' improvisations and where they followed the course of events to only a certain degree. It also resembles the various forms of folk teatrology where tradition and improvisation take turns.

Next to the obvious delight children take in acting, we might say that juggling with the entire human repertoire for message transmission (words, gestures, face expressions, posture, breathing slowly or quickly, styled movements etc.) also has additional secondary symbolism. Children toy with their fears of the dark, loneliness, to lose the closest members of their family etc.

These examples refer to one category of games, but as already mentioned, there is a striking similarity between all categories. However, some games are not only similar, they are completely identical. In Croatia children play the game of tag: *Crocodile, crocodile, can we cross your golden river...?* Crocodile might answer for example: "You may if you have red colour" (it refers to the clothes colour). In New Zealand this game has the name *Guard the door*. Children ask: "Jack, may we cross your golden river?" The answer is the same.

This game spread somehow all over the world (in Croatia crocodiles can be found only in Zoos). If in 50 years someone researches children play in Croatia he or she is probably going to find many new games that children refugees brought back to Croatia from all over the world during the 90-ies. However, the question is not where the game came from, but why it was preserved in that culture.

There are many didactic games teachers force on children, and yet they were never really accepted by them and are only used in institutions. A traditional game "Bees", on the other hand, was the first time recorded in our parts in 1958. My grandmother, my mother and I played it. It is still played on the streets of Osijek. A similar game is found in New Zealand and Great Britain. These games probably satisfy certain developmental needs of children. Durability and universality supplement each other.

These days I've been corresponding with Edyta Zierkiewicz from Poland. We exchanged the predicting games, often played by schoolgirls in our countries. (These games should give answers to the following questions for example: Who are you going to marry? How many children are you going to have? What does it mean if you see a licence number with a certain combination of numbers? How much does your boyfriend love you - in percent? etc.). Croatian games have their twins in Poland.

If there are some play activities in your countries join Edyta and me.

And to sum up, based on everything said here so far, bearing the diversity of games in mind, I think that play is in service of that what is similar in all people, and not different. However, the play texture, which contains everything children need in order to develop and become a part of human community, possesses a lot of culturally specific symbolism as well.

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