



Law and Order on the Playground

by Bess Lomax Hawes

Traditional children's pastimes rarely disappear completely; they simply change, adapting to varying circumstances. In southern California, for example, where the afternoons are far too hot for vigorous running, "Hide and Go Seek" is rarely played. Instead there is a "new" game, "Marco Polo" in which swimmers try to outwit and outpace a goal tender guarding a "base" at one end of a swimming pool.

Is this a new game or simply another variation on an age-old theme? Folklorists dealing with traditional children's lore continually confront just this kind of problem, because the double factors of stability and variation that characterize all folklore are stretched to the utmost.

On the one hand, the historical continuity of childlore is one of the most remarkable aspects of the human condition. Revolutions, wars, vast migrations of peoples often seem to have had little or no effect upon the private worlds of the children involved. Some of the counting-out rhymes still chanted on twentieth century playgrounds can be traced to Celtic languages spoken by Britons in pre-Roman times. Spanish-speaking children in the new world still play the singing games that their old-world cousins play, though an ocean and two-hundred year time span lie between. Marbles, kites, cats cradle and hopscotch go back before recorded history, and, as a child in Texas, I used to thump on my brother's back in a guessing game mentioned by Petronius.

On the other hand, variation is as obvious a characteristic of childlore as is stability.

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Schoolyard stickball.

One of the perplexing difficulties in dealing with children's lore is that out of a hundred renditions of the "same" counting out rhyme, for example, almost no two will be exactly identical. The continual co-existence of stability and variation in childlore is indeed so striking one begins to wonder whether they are not perhaps complementary rather than antithetical. Maybe, in other words, you have to have both.

In investigating this notion one summer, I decided to concentrate on watching the actual play of children engaged in those pastimes sometimes called "games of individual skill" such as jacks, ball bouncing and hopscotch. Such games have at least three points in common: they are played mostly by 7-12 year olds; they are generally learned informally; and they operate, like all games, within a framework of rules.

In actual play, however, in spite of the large number of stringent requirements of which agreement is general: (a player may not move any jack except the one in play); (all jacks must be picked up first one at a time, then two at a time and so forth); (a player who doesn't catch the ball after one bounce has "missed"), there are a large number of variables which are free-floating and considered open to discussion.

For example, there are fifteen or more sub-games of jacks—"babies," pigs in the pen; eggs in the basket; around the world; rolling down Broadway; shooting stars; and the like. Just which of these sub-games are played and in what order has varied with almost every game reported to me.

It is apparently negotiable each time a round of jacks is proposed. Even after the sequence has been agreed upon, a number of points of play remain open to a number of kinds of settlement; "kissies," "haystacks," "cart before the horse," etc. The point is that agreement on all these questions is only short-term; all such rules are in effect only for the duration of the particular play session about to begin. The traditional rules for playing jacks are constructed to include

a variation factor, which, through millions of rounds of play, has successfully resisted all the powerful forces of stabilization.

Observation of other traditional games indicates that many of them contain a similar ratio of stability and variation factors.

Even more significantly it appears that in games where the rules have been officially stabilized by adult intervention or decree children counter by inventing their own areas of variation.

In such adult-sponsored games as Chinese handball, four-square and tether ball, the "children's underground" circulates a vast number of variant rules, any of which may be tapped into effect by the magical formulae "I tap . . ." or "Dibs on. . ."

Thus, in the life-style of American children, there appears to be a kind of fundamental need, or requirement for a bifurcated game structure: unchangeable rules combined with those aspects of a game which are subject to variation. It is through temporary consensus that the format for both is reached. Pre-play discussion about the "right" rules is sometimes prolonged and vociferous, and it may sometimes even use up the entire time available for play. Floating over our playgrounds are the shrill intense voices of a thousand decision-makers at work—testing, probing, rearranging, counter-posing, adjusting. No wonder the decibel rates of our schoolyards and playgrounds is so high.

For variation is frequently productive of uproar; there is no doubt of that. However, our children appear to have taken their cultural stance; they will cheerfully risk chaos any day in order to preserve a satisfactory degree of group or individual autonomy. On the playground, then, "law" and "order" (in the sense of "ordering") become alternative and complementary processes, twin channels through which the human control of the human destiny may flow. As we observe this more closely we stand to learn much,

Odds, evens, who goes first?



for clearly our children, as they play, are themselves grappling with issues of central importance to a democratic society—the interlock of order and flexibility, group consensus and individual freedom, stability and change.

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For some more interesting reading on childlore see:

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