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**LET THE CHILDREN PLAY:
ETHNOLINGUISTIC NOTES
ON SOMALI GAMES**

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1. Games and players role

Could we ever imagine a life without games? It is almost impossible. No matter the life's style, the economic condition, the political situation of a society, we will always look around and see somebody playing on the road, running or sitting in a circle.¹ Africa shows an incredibly high number of traditional games which are part of the intangible cultural heritage of the continent and need to be preserved (Yoshida & Mack 2008). Many of them have a wide diffusion in large areas, others reflect the cultural and linguistic contact with Europe or the Near and Middle East, offering a very interesting example of culture flowing and intersecting. Playing is a social practice reflecting self representation and mutual understanding among players, who share rules and roles. Playing games implies a strict definition of social roles according to cultural restrictions which may vary from one community to the other. Most of western societies have a very restricted area of overlapping for games among different ages; once grown, adults are not supposed to play very common games they used to play while they were young, except for some sport games such as football which can be occasionally played at any age. On the other side, most of culturally accepted games for adults (especially card games) can be only played at least by puberty and never in childhood.

Games are normally gender oriented; female games can only be played by girls and male games only by boys. Both of them reflect an acting-like role, in performing what is socially

expected to be their adults' role in the society. In Europe some card games were traditionally played only by men and are still much oriented by gender; in traditional game code, some card games can still be played by men only in non formal meetings, such as the ones you would expect to see in a village square or at the table of a country café. Most of women games in childhood reflect the future role of a woman in society as a mother and wife; the worldwide game of "mother and child" is usually performed with dolls or smaller girls, where the older ones behave like their own mothers in taking care of children; games for boys are often socially oriented toward the attitudes in life they are expected to get once grown up. Boys running and pursuing other with guns show their bravery against cowardice of those escaping.

There is very little literature on games from a theoretical point of view; on the other side, there is a wide choice of books written on games and their rules, though most of them do not consider social and cultural aspects of games, like the ones we have talked about.

The classification of games given by Caillois (1967) is probably the best known, at least from a cultural point of view. It includes all types of games, considering the archetype they are based on. Games are organized according to the kind of self commitment a player is involved in.

Games types	archetype
Competition	rivalry
Games of chance	luck and risk
Performance	mask
Psychophysical shock	vertigo
Patience	contemplation

Almost all games we can observe in a given society can be categorized according to Caillois parameters, though only in traditional societies some of the games are strictly linked to cultural motivation and performed during rites. To make an example, those games provoking a psychophysical shock are

traditionally performed during initiation rites where the new member of a social group would be accepted if he is able to overcome a trial, whereas this kind of games are performed under imitation as sports in Europe, without any special cultural meaning. The best example of this is probably the bungee jumping, which is an ancient initiation ritual called *Gkol* and is performed in the Pentecost Island in the Pacific Archipelago of Vanuatu; it has become a sport performed in Europe where players emulate the same extreme exercise.

If we simply consider games as a leisure activity, competition and patience games teach the player to have a balanced relationship with other members of his society, starting from a correct behavior in playing with them. Performance games are widely diffused in the world and often ritualized with a strict code. Many of them require a proper disguise, according to the role a single player has in the context of the performance. Cultural motivations of performance games fluctuate from the need of representing explicable and non explicable facts (like in magic rituals) to the one of showing oneself personality through the disguise or the mask chosen, as it happens in western celebration of carnival. Competition games are strictly based on a code of rules to be followed once being in the role of a player either in a team or as a single performer. Sport games are all under this category and show a very strict code of behavior.

Most of Somali games hereby presented undergo either the category of competition games or the one of chance, showing luck and risk as the main characteristics. Caillois' classification of games makes highly relevant the following basic elements which might also be used as a meaningful tract to classify games:

land / soil
water
air
space and hiding place
tools and implements

Some of these elements are intersecting one the other in several games, some other are opposing one the other. Games such

as hide-and-seek can only be played on the ground but never in water, and they need hiding places. Not all games need tools and implements but most of them show a defined space, like a court or a frame of a given dimension.

2. Games and oral tradition

Transmission of games from one child to the other has something to do with a deep and strong activity we can observe in any human society. Oral transmission of culture is the main implement through which traditional knowledge and common cultural background are transmitted from one generation to the other (Vansina 1985); cultural transmission has a double dimensional level, from one generation to the other and from one individual to the other, no matter the genetic or social relation is. This is to say that, in the words of Sperber (1996: 32), "oral transmission is not a reliable means of reproduction; it generates a fuzzy set of representations which are more or less faithful versions, rather than exact copies, of one another." This is the reason why researchers working on oral literature are very much used to several versions of the same myth, different chronicles of relevant facts in traditional history, high variation of poem contents, claimed to belong to the same poem. If we consider this kind of perspective to be true for any cultural content transmission, it becomes evident the way game are transmitted, giving time by time different results in rules, score keeping, number of players and so on. In fact, the most widely diffused game in West, Central and East Africa, which is the *awe*le kind like (Somali *jarkaboodo*), shows a high variety of variants, we will briefly consider in describing the Somali version of it, in the next paragraph devoted to Somali games. This game is surely one of the oldest ones, showing its evidence on carved rocks of prehistoric sites in Eastern Africa. It has hundreds of names and several versions of play, the main difference being in the number of rows. Common *awe*le show two or four rows, while the Somali ones have three. The most common *Awe*le-like games are normally played with a wooden board or

digging holes on a soft surface like soil or sand. The game is played all over in Africa though several differences in rules and shape of game-board can be observed.² *Awe*le tournaments are quite common in many African countries where players spend their leisure time in competing, while others sit around them and watch. Most of the time *awe*le are played at the open air, under a tree or a shadowing shelter. Players at their turn move a certain amount of stones or seeds which have been previously put in a pair number into each of the holes. Every player scoops up the seeds from his side of the row, according to rules which may vary from one area to the other. Change of rules and number of players is a common phenomenon we can observe in all games transmitted throughout oral tradition. Even for those games with a written code of rules (such like the very common *scrabble* or *monopoly*) the interaction between the oral and the written tradition is so strong, that it is possible to find variations from one place to the other where the same game is played.

Oral tradition in Africa is the strongest mean of communication, reflecting the general attitude to assume from others, just picking the words and replying the information at one's own interpretation of reported facts. We assume this characteristic to explain how some of Somali games have their origin in the colonial period, when we would presume the contact among Somali and Italian children playing together might have taken place. We can explain in this way how some of these games have been transmitted, manipulated, changed in some of their rules, but still keeping most of the Italian tracts which were there at the time of transmission. Evidence of this is also given in some cases by the game name, where the Italian origin is almost evident. To make probably the best example, the game called by boys *Bistolo-bistooley* is performed by boys, running after one another, and using gun-like objects (stones, pieces of wood); while running they scream: "*uno due tre arma di fako!*" a sentence which is not clear in its meaning for the boys playing today, though being an evident heritage of other boys interacting with Italian children in the past.

Contact induced transmission is a common phenomenon we can observe in social relations; it becomes more interesting when different cultural and linguistic backgrounds of people produce rich examples of intercultural exchange, as many Somali games show.

3. Some Somali counts and rhymes

One of the most common characteristics of counts and rhymes in the world is to produce a rhythmic sequence of words, which are sometimes meaningless but useful to skip from one player to the other while counting. It has been detected a common pattern of number sequence (Zaslavsky 1973: 102); rhymes can go to five or ten (reminding the number of fingers in the hands) or give emphasis to multiples of three or four (as it is for most of the Italian counts). This is the main reason why counts and rhymes are an interesting object of a research in an ethnolinguistic perspective, since their content can also give useful information on cultural aspects of the social background of players. Counts are mainly used to establish turns in playing but they can also be used while counting activities in a game.

In such a kind of text, nonsense words are mixed up with obsolete or foreign ones and the general meaning is not always obvious. When a count or a rhyme has been transmitted through generations of children, it might also give an account of cultural representations of differences which are perceived by the local community. A very clear example of this is offered by a rhyme sang by Somali girls and used to establish who's turn in a game. Some of the words and sentences have no full meaning, being used for the rhythm of the voice performing the count. From a linguistic point of view, Somali words are mixed up with Arabic ones and nonsense words. The general meaning of the count concerns the negative attitude of Somali people toward bantu-like Africans. They wish to neatly distinguish Somali origin and physical character defining "the others" with 'crimpy hair' and 'big nose'. In the last verse an

Ethiopian dictator (*menghistu*) is mentioned; the origin of the count might actually be Ethiopia:

(1) Count (1st version)

Nus shilin (arc. 'half shilling') (count base: 10)

<i>Jagagatun</i>	<i>jareeratun</i>
Those with hard hair	those with crimpy hair
<i>Laacibatun</i>	<i>kafiuratuun</i>
(arc.)Being good in something	(nonsense)
<i>Afrikaantii</i>	<i>ytoobiya</i>
African ladies	from Ethiopia
<i>Sankedhuudhi</i>	<i>sawaaxili</i>
The one who has a big nose	Swahili
<i>Bax naga tag</i>	<i>mangustoah</i>
Go away!	(nonsense, presumably the name of the old dictator Menghistu in Ethiopia)

There is a second version of the same count with a slight different content, showing a girl eager to be Somali. The count also recalls Islamic principles such as the pilgrimage to Mecca and proverb-like sentences in the last four verses:

(2) Count (2nd version)

Nus shilin (arc. 'half shilling') (count base: 3)

<i>Gabar yahay subxaano</i>	you girl you have grown
<i>Mara shabeelle xirato</i>	you use a <i>shabelle</i> Fuuta ¹ (leopard-like Fuuta)
<i>Mara khafiifa hugato</i>	covering yourself with a transparent Fuuta
<i>Magacaaga ii sheeg</i>	tell me your name
<i>Magacaygu waa sharaf</i>	Sharaf ² is my name
<i>Sharaf xaaji weeye</i>	It is Sharaf Xaaji ²
<i>Aqalada xariirta</i>	Houses made of silk
<i>Dhinac baan ka jogae</i>	I am at a side
<i>Allow yaa u sheega</i>	who will ever tell him
<i>Tinta u shanleeyo</i>	to comb his hair
<i>Shanboqol kadhiubo</i>	let him give his parents 500 shillings
<i>Naahooy sam sameey</i>	you Samsa (female name)
<i>Sabaax nuureey</i>	'female name' (arc. glittering light)
<i>Adoo xajka jira</i>	you doing a pilgrimage (to Mecca)
<i>Xasuus badaneey</i>	you remember everybody
<i>Saaxiibta caasho</i>	your friend Caasho (female name)
<i>Caashaq baa dilay</i>	she died for love
<i>U dambeyna ani iyo geel</i>	finally myself and the camel
<i>Baa isu bannan baxnay</i>	we saw each other in a desert place

Caasho ina baddi baa
Baddu ma jogsataa
Baabuurka bisbiska leh
Bisadi ma waddee
Nin raga wado

did Caasho get lost?
the sea never stops
the machine making the hair standing on end
a cat does not ride
a horse leads (riding)

The following count is used to follow the six sequences of the game. It is performed by girls only, who have to dig a hole in the soil. Five stones are given to every girl playing. While throwing in the air one stone, before catching it, the player must pick as many stones as she can in the hole. The first word is sung while throwing the first stone in the air, the others are sung in a sequence: every single word for any picked stone. If the player is able to pick up the five stones while pronouncing the five words has won.

(3) Song

Owoowow	(first stone thrown in the air)
Grandfather	
garcadow geelanoobadi	(second and third stones picked up)
white beard gives a lot of camels	
Lugtada jiiskaah oo jircambaarmarsan	(fourth and fifth stones picked up)
his leg lame your leg does not walk	
Hanagwjoonin	(sixth stone picked up)
We say it can stand	

4. A list of Some Somali games

The following Somali games with their rules were collected in 1989 during a field research in Mogadishu. A young Somali lady (Rooda) interviewed girls and a young boy (Alasow) asked the boys about their most used and beloved games. The two of them were both students at the University of Mogadishu and spent their time in researching on the road where children used to group and play together. A total number of 20 games were investigated and more than 40 game names collected, though for some of them it was not possible to collect the rules. Since then, because of the drastic consequences of civil war in Somalia, it was not possible to go back to our research. We all hope to find again children on the road playing and enjoying life in Somalia

in the future, as it used to be twenty years ago when we collected our data. Most of these games have a restriction on gender; female and male games show an almost equal distribution, while for those games which can be played by both genres it normally happens that the group of players counts boys or girls only. Somali games are mainly based on competition; rivalry is the archetype dominating. Some games are based on risk and show tossing of objects as a main activity. Some of these games have an Italian origin either in their name or in the words to be pronounced and in their rules. We used the Caillois' classification to distinguish them on a typological base.

Baluul n.f. (marbles game) Boys only	competition, rivalry
2 players throw the marbles against a wall. The marble must fall down within a distance previously agreed upon which is measured by <i>taako</i> . 5 <i>taako</i> are approximately 1 meter. Prize: the marble itself.	


Baluushu n.f. (marbles and stones) Boys and girls	competition, rivalry
2 or more players put on the soil small stones. In throwing marbles they must be touched. Marks are given to those who succeed in it.	


Bistolo-bistooley n.m. (guns) Boys only	competition, rivalry
Boys run after one another, using gun-like objects (stones, pieces of wood) and screaming: "uno due tre arma di fako!" "one, two, three fire gun!". The sentence is in Italian, it sounds like a nonsense to boys.	

Cad madow n.m. (head or tail - type 1) Boys only	chance, luck and risk
Two pair groups. One sandal, one team takes the top side the other the sole one; it is thrown in the air, the side coming up is the one of losers, they have to run fast to reach their sacred place, otherwise they are caught by the enemies and they are beaten with the sandal.	

Harsh-mudax (head or tail - type 2) Boys only	chance, luck and risk
Two players guess their chance in throwing a coin in the air.	

Imbili n.m. (lid) Boys only	chance, luck and risk
3 lids are thrown in the air; all of them must fall down with the top up. If not, the other player will play next. Rules if played with 4 lids: 4 top up = 4 scores som. <i>imbili</i> (all nonsense words probably of Arabic origin) 2 top up = 0 scores som. <i>warbac</i> 3 top up = 1 score som. <i>ta'b</i> 1 top up = 0 scores som. <i>sitta</i> 4 back up = 3 scores som. <i>aas</i>	

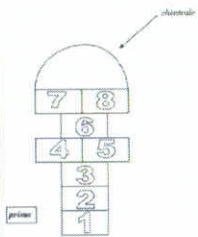
<i>Jarkaboodo</i> n.m. (Somali awele-like draughts)	competition, rivalry
	
<p>15 holes are dug in the soil; two pieces of glass or 2 stones in each of them. 4 players. 1st player takes the 2 stones in the first hole and leaves one in the second hole and the other in the third hole. Every time a hole is left empty it is the next player's turn.</p>	

<i>Jarduqeed</i> n.m. (Somali draughts) Men only	competition, rivalry
It is similar to <i>jarkaboodo</i> and played by young boys.	
<i>Kushineeto</i> n.f. (small car) Boys only	performance, mask
<p>The name of this game probably originates from Italian <i>cuscinetto</i> 'bearing' which is part of a wheel. It is a wide spread game in all Africa (A.A.V.V. CIDIS 1989), a common game in the old the old times in Europe when children used to make toys on their own using recycled materials.</p>  <p>No special rules. The small car is made of wood with 4 wheels and a steering wheel. The boy drives the car using a stick connected to the wheel, performing a car drive.</p>	

<i>Ludhuu</i> n.m. (dice) Adults only	chance, luck and risk
A six sides dice is being tossed at the player's turn, the winner gaining the highest score. It is perceived as an imported game.	

<i>Nacashnacash</i> n.m. (run and catch) Boys and girls	competition, rivalry
Everybody runs, one has to catch all the others. One score every caught. The game has no rule for shelters.	

<i>Shax</i> n.f. (three in a row) Boys or girls	competition, rivalry
<p>Two players; a double cross is drawn on the sand or a piece of paper. Each player in turn places a circle or a cross which is not occupied by the other player symbol. First one drawing a vertical/horizontal/oblique line with three of his symbols has won. A very old game widespread in all the Mediterranean area too. The Somali name might come from Persian <i>shah</i> 'king', the original name of the boarding chess which is widely diffused in the western world and is a Persian game at the origin.</p>	

<i>Primo</i> n.m. (English unknown) Girls only	competition, rivalry
<p>It is a clear borrowing of an Italian game, normally played by girls and called in Italian <i>campana</i> or <i>campanone</i> (it. 'big bell') since the drawing resembles a big bell.</p> 	
<p>The Somali name sounds like Italian <i>primo</i> 'first' and is a loan, like the Somali word <i>chentrato</i>. It. <i>Centrale</i> 'in the middle' used to call the half cupola like line, which is in the upper part of the drawing. Girls draw on the ground of cement or stone the figure hereby given and throw at their turn a small stone in one of the squares progressively. Every time they throw the stone, they jump and reach it to catch it. If they fail in throwing it or if they touch one of the lines in jumping, they rest for the next turn. The one reaching the <i>chentrato</i> at first will be the winner of the race.</p>	

<i>Skalo</i> n.m. (card game)	competition, rivalry
Rules are the same as for Italian "scala 40"; French cards must be used: it is perceived as a foreign game played by adults only.	

<i>Xarig</i> n.m. (rope skipping) Girls only	competition, rivalry
Rope skipping is one of the most diffused games for girls in Africa and in the Mediterranean area. Players at their turn must skip the rope. The winner counts more skips than the others.	

<i>Ninka beerta falayo</i> (countryman hoeing the land) Boys and girls	competition, rivalry
Boys and girls on a line of 10, screaming toward the 11 th the sentence <i>ninka beerta falayo futo gudud</i> 'hey man hoeing the land, check your bottom it is red!'. At this provocation he starts running to catch them.	

<i>Quful quful</i> n.m. (run and catch) Boys and girls	competition, rivalry
Boys and girls stand on a line of 10, kneeling down and the other team facing them and closing their eyes with the hands. While singing one of those kneeling down touches the one who is closing his eyes. In case he guesses the name of the one standing behind, him the two teams turn over.	
The song:	
<i>Quful</i> keyhole	<i>quful</i> keyhole
<i>quful</i> keyhole	<i>naar</i> hell
<i>Darab</i> nonsense	<i>masakiin, darab</i> poor nonsense
<i>naar</i> hell	
<i>Heeleeyaa</i> and so	<i>aburabrah</i> close the eyes

Notes

¹ The present paper is based on data collected in 1989 during a research campaign. Because of tragic facts Somalia has been involved in, it was not possible to go back and go into a deeper analysis of games and language matters dealing with them. I hope that children interviewed at that time are still alive and can contribute as adults to a better life for everybody in Somalia.

² See Zampolini (1984: chapters 2 and 3) and Zaslavsky (1973: chapter 11) for a full introduction to the *awe/oware* games in Africa.

³ Traditional women dress.

⁴ Sharaf is an Arabic name meaning 'respectful and wise'.

⁵ *Xaaji* in Arabic means 'who has been as a pilgrim to the Holy Mecca'.

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