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Kpelle Children at Play

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Introduction

Although children's play has been a relatively popular subject for anthropologists who study childhood, comprehensive studies of the entire play repertoire in a society are rare. One such study was carried out among the Kpelle people in the remote Liberian village of Gbarngasuakwelle four decades ago. A summary of that study reveals that Kpelle children have access to a rich store of traditional play-forms including makebelieve, board-type games, active play, contests and folklore. A major finding affirmed that play, far from being the antithesis of work or a reversal of cultural ideals, fundamentally supports and affirms the child's acquisition of her culture, especially adult subsistence skills.

Before proceeding to a discussion of play among Kpelle children, I feel compelled to reveal my own particular biases regarding the role of play in childhood. First, play has both proximal and distal "payoffs" That is, players may experience "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi 1975) or "optimal stimulation" (Lancy 1980a), which would be the proximal or immediate payoff. Distal payoffs might be to the long-term development of the individual, improving their competence and, ultimately, their inclusive fitness. There might also be distal payoffs to the society such as keeping toddlers out of the way of working adults. Or, there may be zero distal benefits, even some costs—such as injury to the players. To reiterate, play doesn't have to do anything constructive or developmental for the individual or her society, it will be practiced because "it's fun." Think nicotine. We should not, therefore, be surprised to find societies where parents discourage and restrict children's play considering it to be risky or detracting from more important activity such as working in the garden (Fajans 1997; Lancy 2001; Reichel-Dolmatov 1976).

Second, as Piaget and his followers demonstrated, there are redundancies built into child development. A great variety of experiences can trigger particular developmental accomplishments. So play is unlikely to be critical for the achievement of any of the important benchmarks of youth—no matter how widespread it appears to be. To take one example: girls may "learn" many domestic skills like infant care, cooking and, rice hulling with mortar and pestle via make-believe play. But, in some societies, girls finesse this play stage altogether and learn these skills directly by assisting their mothers.

Third, each society and, by extension, each family, composes a unique program for children's play to meet its own ends. Play theory has been almost fatally crippled by the tendency to see the developmental program (including, especially, play) of highly educated Euroamericans as the norm for the species rather than as the extreme outlier it clearly is (Henrich et al 2010: 63). Mother-child play, for example, is seen—among the contemporary elite—as an essential and universal component of the growing child's experience, which, is not at all the case elsewhere (Lancy 2007). However, if we adopt a cross-cultural perspective, play appears to be instrumental in the achievement of culturally valued, but non-universal attributes such as literacy, "formal operations," or behaving as a "fierce warrior." I will briefly enumerate some aspects of this program for the Kpelle and the implications for a more general theory of play.

Ethnographic Study of the Kpelle

The material presented in this chapter is based primarily on an ethnographic study of the Kpelle community of Gbarngsuakwelle (Lancy 1996) and a comparative survey and analysis of the ethnographic archives on children at play (Lancy in press). Ethnography has some unique virtues that make ethnographic "data" particularly valuable. One such virtue is that by gathering information as a participant observer, the ethnographer weaves together three strands of information. First, they describe what they're seeing compiling an impressive observational (complemented with photos and audio/video recordings) log from which patterns can be detected. Second, by interviewing or engaging their informants in a discussion of what they've witnessed, they gain an insider's (*emic*) perspective, which often makes intelligible the foreign or exotic practices. These perspectives typically coalesce into what has been termed a cultural model (Quinn 2005: 479; Strauss 1992: 3) or parental ethnotheory (Harkness and Super 2006). These models are useful in trying to place particular child-care practices into a broader, more comprehensive cultural context. Third, an ethnographer will usually "confess" his or her own comparative or *etic* perspective. As a reader of ethnography, I pay particular attention to the anthropologist's "aha" moments when they are surprised or shocked by something that violates their own cultural model of childhood. Conducting an ethnography of childhood, especially of play, is not without challenge. As children are treated by others as inconsequential and empty-headed, not much attention is paid to them. Birthdates are not recorded and a successful pater familias may have so many children that he doesn't even remember their names. My quest to study childhood was treated as the most bizarre among a catalog of bizarre behaviors I displayed. That I got down on the ground to become a participant observer in play bouts was a source of wonder and amusement. Children were usually more tolerant of my interest but had almost no prior experience talking with (as opposed to taking orders from) an adult so they were often extremely inarticulate.

The Kpelle are a numerous population of slash and burn horticulturalists, occupying much of the interior of Liberia. Villages, headed by a "chief," range up to 500 persons in size. The unit of production is the household and these can also vary greatly in size. The staple, upland rice, requires enormous inputs of labor, which puts a premium on senior males' ability to acquire wives and other dependents. Large households beget larger households. At the time of my fieldwork in Liberia (the late 60s and early 70s), areas with modern institutions such as schools, clinics, passable roads, electricity and the like were still quite limited. My principal research site, Gbarngasuakwelle, had no school, clinic, electricity, public water source, office or, store and only very limited communication with or access to the outside world. The principal tools were the machete (used by men) and short-handled hoe (women). Draft animals were non-existent. Neither Christianity nor Islam had made significant inroads in the traditional religion. In a secondary but more acculturated site, Sinyeé village, children were "schooled," but not "educated," their lives largely unchanged (Lancy 1975).

I joined the community as a paying guest in the large, multi-roomed house of the town chief Wolliekollie. The focus of my research was the role of play in children's acquisition of adult skills, ideas and values.

Initial Impressions

Observing children in villages and (the Sinyeé) school, there were a number of noteworthy "aha" moments. Perhaps the first was the incredibly fluid quality of family life. I gradually teased apart the elements of this social stew. First, the Kpelle are polygynous. Ideally, each adult male strives to create a family with multiple wives and children, at least in part, to insure an adequate labor crew to work the land in the

household-based economy. Aside from marriage, households might add additional members by taking in foster children or accommodating kinsmen closely related to existing members—such as a teenage sister of one of the wives. Second, the Kpelle, like most pre-modern societies, practice cooperative breeding (Hrdy 2005). That is, children, even infants, are often cared for primarily by relatives other than the biological mother. This practice enables a woman to increase her fertility—extremely important in this very labor-intensive form of subsistence—and also frees her to labor on the farm. Breeding age women are just too important to family survival and growth to "waste time" on child-care that can be better undertaken by less-productive individuals like post-menopausal women or young girls. Third, I was struck by how rapidly children moved from the status of needy dependent to helpful assistant. This insight led, eventually, to the formulation of a model contrasting the society of my childhood-a Neontocracy-with Kpelle society-which I characterized as a Gerontocracy (Lancy 1996: 13).

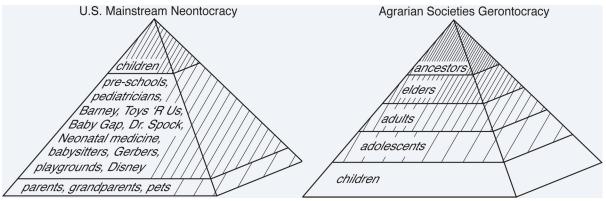


Figure 1: Neontocracy versus Gerontocracy

A second early focus of my study was the very public quality of children's lives. Infants, attached for convenient access (for nursing bouts) to their mother's bodies by a *lappa*, were unobtrusive observers and participants in community life. As toddlers, they were engaged with their older sib caretakers in various play activities in the open, cleared areas between houses or at the edge of fields where the family might be working. The Kpelle refer to this area as *panang lè-ma* or mother ground. I gradually came to realize that the mother-ground enabled adults to casually monitor their children's well-being (they could detect whether their distress calls were genuine) (Lancy 1996: 9) and also enabled the children to observe adult work while they played, an important component of the chore curriculum (Lancy 2012). I should mention that Kpelle houses are typically window-less (to keep malicious spirits out at night) and without electric light, so indoor play is not really an option. I was struck by the fact that so much of Kpelle culture was enacted during daylight, outdoors and in public (including flirting and verbal fisticuffs) and this was a boon to children striving to make sense of and master the culture.

The Play of Toddlers

After noting the differences between Kpelle children's lives and the society that I came from, I was struck by much that was familiar as well. The very young were fascinated by objects and, while they were not given purpose-made toys, they were free to handle commonly-found objects, including those with sharp edges. On the other hand, crawling was considered animal-like and unsafe (given the insects and detritus on the ground, open fires and the like) so they might be aided in learning to walk to unburden whoever might be charged with carrying them. As soon as the child could walk, it was integrated

into a playgroup that might be supervised by one or two older (e.g. 7-9) girls. A very typical activity was make-believe (called *neé pele*) reenactment of the daily round of activities they'd observed with regularity and concentration. Invented characters and situations were, of course, absent¹. Aside from participating in their own little soap operas, carefully scripted and directed by the older caretakers, toddlers also begin to acquire a repertoire of skills that would be utilized as they participated in the large inventory of games. These included handling pebbles and seeds (in anticipation of marble-like games) and drawing in the sand (preparing them to do games like *maung kau*).

Make-believe can become quite elaborate and incorporate a large cast of both sexes and a wide age range (Lancy 1980b). Two examples from my notes illustrate this complexity.

- A girl (portraying a grown woman) makes thread from pissava palm fibers (actually strips the fiber into threads rather than twisting it) which she winds onto a "bobbin." This she gives to a boy (adult male) who has made a "loom" from bamboo sticks. He lays two sticks on the ground, parallel to each other to represent heddles, and moves his feet up and down as if to raise and lower them. Leaves represent the woven cloth and this is distributed to the "children" (toddlers under the care of the older children) for their "clothes."
- A few men from Gbarngasuakwelle have, at one time or another, gone down to the coast to work for a few months for wages on the Firestone rubber plantation. I observed a seven-year-old boy with his younger brothers and sisters reenacting the homecoming scene of a worker returned from Firestone. He had made a carrier basket of palm thatch and proceeded to distribute to his "wife and children": dirt (= salt), leaves (= clothes), sticks (= shoes), rope (= belt), gourds (= pots), and cowry shells (= money) (Lancy 1996: 87).

Kpelle children are using make-believe to, effectively, learn and appropriate their culture.

Learning the rules

While scholars have given a great deal of attention to the role of play in the acquisition of culture (Roberts and Sutton-Smith 1962), less attention has been given to how children learn to become proficient players. In the Neontocracy, of course children are generally *taught* how to play by parents, teachers and coaches (Waldfogel 2006: 43). Children in Gbarngasuakwelle learn games through a multi-phased process no different from the process whereby they learn to work a rice farm. First, they observe their older siblings at play. Next, they replicate what they've observed as closely as they can (drawing in the sand, manipulating stones, repeating what they've heard) but while still on the periphery. For example, I observed a group of very young girls take over a hopscotch template that had just been abandoned by older girls. The little ones—who don't yet know the rules—can still practice the jumps or hops and master that aspect (Lancy 1996: 113). Inept novices may attempt to join the game but are usually rebuffed as not yet ready. No one would consider *teaching* them. Once they are permitted to play, they are usually forgiven for violations. For example, during an episode of a game called *Sanjao* an older child who makes an error is called out but a novice's errors are ignored

¹ In the Neontocracy, children's play becomes "supercharged" with the addition of

(Lancy 1996: 95). This attitude insures that play can proceed and that the novices will not be too frustrated. As their competence improves, learners will be chastised for rule violation – rather than being told what the rules are. At the last stage short of mastery, the expert players may then actually bend the rules in their own favor in order to remain consistent winners. Finally, the novice learns all the *official* rules and will "call" a rule violation, thus completely "leveling the playing field" (Lancy 1996: 112).

The majority of games are structurally quite simple: there are, for example, numerous variants of hide and seek. Other games, collectively referred to as stone play, can be scaled in difficulty ranging from the complexity of tic-tac-toe (*too-too*) through dominoes (*kwa-tinang*) to chess (*malang*). Not surprisingly, children play and master the simpler games before graduating to the more complex. More complex games take on a greater competitive cast. As in the marbles play recorded by the Opies (1997: 42), rule bending or violation is an occasion for litigious debate. Winners earn bragging rights. As Boyette (2013: 83) has recently affirmed, competitive play is largely missing from the repertoire of forager children but very evident in more populous farming communities. Foragers adhere to egalitarian relations among adults while agrarian communities are more evidently hierarchical and this is reflected in play. Kpelle men and women are highly competitive and status conscious and children's play reflects this.

The line between contests and make-believe is often blurred. For example, *bambé* is used to refer both to a game and to the child-managed "secret society" within which the game is played. The literal meaning is something like "perception." In the game "initiated" older boys challenge younger boys (girls are tolerated as spectators) to find hidden items by reading "signs." Some of the contestants (recently initiated) have been introduced to the signs in secret. They are successful while the unitiated are unsuccessful and become the objects of teasing and ribald humor. *Bambé* is both a contest and a very elaborate replication of key components of the Kpelle boys' initiation rites². Here, too, and in keeping with a near universal pattern found in such rites, initiated men use "secrets" to elevate themselves over young men and women (Barth 1975: 219; Lancy in press). In effect, *bambé* has rules and Rules. The Rules are deeply rooted social imperatives about how to behave as a proper Kpelle.

Bambé also prompts two further points. One is that the Kpelle are comfortable with children continuing to engage in very public play beyond the threshold of adolescence and this is not always the case. In many societies, play in youth who've begun to display the first signs of puberty is viewed as a sign of failure to mature and act responsibly (Gaskins et al 2007; Lancy and Grove 2011). The Kpelle are unusually playful as adults, men play board games and men and women are quick to joke with and tease each other. Dancing and song are popular. Second, the Kpelle are very comfortable with allowing their children to participate in a distinct and separate children's society. Girls, in particular, are given a great deal of leeway to play³ (games, dancing, singing) away from the immediate domestic environs compared to societies that make early demands on girls to display reticence and modesty in public and to serve as the full-time assistant to their mother (Lancy in press).

(natural and domestic) and, can draw appropriate inferences (Lancy 1996: 108).

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Adult informants also pointed out that *bambé* reinforces the belief that a "smart" Kpelle is someone who's observant, can detect meaningful physical alterations in the landscape

³ Still considerably less than that accorded to boys (Lancy 1996: 110).

The pinnacle of the Kpelle contest hierarchy is *malang*, know elsewhere by *mankala or wari*. This board game is found throughout Africa, Arabia and further east to India. The basic game consists of 12 holes in 2 parallel rows containing a certain number of counters such as seeds or shells. A "move" consists of picking up the seeds from a hole (or a depression on a wooden or ceramic "board") and dropping them, one at a time, in the holes that succeed the first, moving in a counter-clockwise direction. Depending on the tally of seeds now sitting in the holes, the move may lead to a "capture" of seeds. Play continues until the seeds are all captured and a final accounting made. This bare bones description belies how complex and challenging the game can become (Retschitzki 1990), especially as it is usually played with great speed. It is played strictly by men and there is a close correlation between the aptitude, age and social standing of players. This status may be underscored by the age and beauty of a man's personal *malang* board.

Boys who're interested must serve a lengthy apprenticeship before they are treated seriously as players. Many of the simpler games I recorded are clearly preparatory in that they involve counting and distributing pebbles according to some template drawn in the sand. Play is very rapid which privileges more proficient players. An aspirant *malang*ist will have spent many hours as a rapt spectator at *malang* matches. His first games will be played against somewhat older boys. He learns by playing and losing—not by instruction. A considerate father or grandfather might consent to "coach" the novice. But this will consist entirely of direct, unexplained commands ("Put them in that hole.") or admonishments ("That was a stupid move.") As a novice myself, no one ever "explained" the game or described particular strategies and tactics. However, I was readily able to deduce some of the more obvious ones through observation. Even when confronted directly by my persistent inquiries, informants could not articulate the deep structure of the game. Teaching, as we understand it—especially involving verbal explanation—is just not part of non-literate society (Lancy 2010).

Play and Folklore

My ethnography included what is referred to as an "elicitation" exercise. The purpose of such an exercise is to use semantic relations to provide a glimpse into how the people you're studying view the universe. Using this technique, I mapped the semantic net for play and work. Play, for the Kpelle, includes what we might categorize as folklore. Specifically, play includes a rich repertoire of songs, dances and several distinct types of folk tales. I collected these, studied how they were learned and, where possible, revealed their meaning. I will focus here on the folk tales.

Unlike other kinds of play where participation (at least for a specific age and gender cohort) was high, child story-tellers (like their adult counterparts) are uncommon. As there is in Kpelle and West African call and response songs, audience participation during story-telling bouts is high. Among my sample of boys there were many who had a small repertoire of stories they knew well and could perform with great flair but only one boy who was truly a story-teller in that he had a very large repertoire. Kollie had no qualms about inventing a new story that had all the "traditional" features. These include stock figures like the "old lady," the husband with a wandering eye, and "spyder" (a trickster). Like folk tales everywhere, there is a moral to each story and these obviously mirror Kpelle values. For example, cleverness is valued but not in the service of greed.

While it was easy for me to discern important adult skills and ideas embedded in the play scripts I recorded, I was most forcibly struck by the connection between story-

telling and "talking matter" (Lancy 1980c). When boys tell *meni-pele* tales, they are interrupted by the other boys with expressions like "What do you mean?" or "How do you know, were you there?" or "That's not possible." While comments are made in jest, the teller must pause in his narrative to answer them. The challenge for the teller lies in being able to return to the tale and continue narrating smoothly from the point where he left off. This isn't easy. In the village court where participants are "talking matter," the plaintiff or defendant's speech is designed to sway the audience in their favor. But the speaker will be interrupted by another court participant who asks pointed questions: "What are you saying?" "When did this happen?" or, makes a joke at the speaker's expense. If these outbursts are not successfully negotiated by the speaker and if he cannot easily resume his speech, the impact he has been trying to achieve is lost. A requirement common to both *Meni-pele* and talking matter is verbal agility in the face of a hostile audience.

As *polo-gee*, or fables are long, one must hold an audience's attention for quite a while. This is done by dramatizing the tale. Gestures, changes in speech tone, even facial expressions are part of the performance. Since the stories are generally familiar to the audience, their attention may wander if the teller is unskilled. The same process occurs in the court. There are occasions where a participant may engage in a lengthy narrative; delivering what I've labeled the "self-evident," "staged-anger and," "penitent" speeches. When a participant gives one of these dramatic soliloquys the longer he can hold the court's attention the better the outcome will be for him (Lancy 1980c).

Play in the Neontocracy

I find that the gerontocracy-neontocracy contrast is extremely helpful in accounting for the wide gulf in the nature of childhood then and now. With respect specifically to play, we see contemporary elite parents lavishly furnishing their child's lives with costly play things, play environments and time to play—uninterrupted by chores (Ochs and Izquierdo 2009)—whereas for the (very typical) Kpelle, parents main involvement with their children's play occurs when they tell them to stop playing. Our current view of parent-child play as a given—indeed it is treated as obligatory (Trevarthen 1983)—is a product of our very recent history. In 1914, the Infant Care Bulletin of the US Department of Labor's Children's Bureau warned against the dangers of playing with a baby because "it produced unwholesome [erotic] pleasure and ruined the baby's nerves." However, from 1940 "Play, having ceased to be wicked, having become harmless and good, now becomes a duty" (Wolfenstein 1955: 172-173). So entrenched has this idea become that WEIRD scholars can now make the ridiculous assertion that children learn make-believe play through the patient teaching of their parents (Rakoczy et al 2005: 71). Equally absurd are studies of parents "teaching" their children how to play with peers (Schütze et al 1986; Waldfogel 2006: 43). From the earliest scholarly attempts to understand and theorize about children's play, scholars singled out its voluntary, selfguided, purposeless attributes as central (Lancy 1980a). How can a parent or teacherguided "lesson," no matter how well disguised, be considered play?

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