

Children's Spinning Tops in North Africa and the Sahara

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Abstract

This chapter is related to a description and analysis of North African and Saharan children's play and toy cultures published on Academia.edu and Scribd under the author's name. After the introduction, text is divided into three parts: child made spinning tops with natural material, child made spinning tops with waste material, and children's spinning tops made by artisans. The information is based on fieldwork among Ghrib children from the Tunisian Sahara in 1975 and 1977, and among Moroccan Amazigh (Berber) and Arabic-speaking children since 1992. Other data were found in the consulted bibliography. These children aged between four and fourteen years belong to families and communities living in rural and urban environments during the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century. As the images are essential, the reader is provided with 14 illustrations in the text and a PowerPoint freely available on the Internet.

1. Introduction

This overview of North African and Saharan children's spinning tops is limited to the use of a fruit, nut or piece of wood that can be twirled, possibly with some adaptation by shaping its form or adding a point, to spinning tops modeled in clay, and spinning tops created with waste material. These children also use artisan-made spinning tops. All these tops are operated by hand eventually using a string wrapped around the body and unwound with force. Neither observed nor found in the consulted literature, are children's tops given a continuous movement with thongs or whips.

The author's fieldwork on children's toys and play started among the semi-nomadic Ghrib in the Tunisian Sahara in 1975 and 1977. It was continued in central and northern Morocco between 1992 and 2001 among Arabic and Amazigh-speaking children from rural and urban regions. With the help of

Khalija Jariaa and Boubaker Daoumani, my two Anti-Atlas collaborators, this is done more in detail among Amazigh (Berber) children living near or in the Anti-Atlas Mountains of southwestern Morocco since 2002. Khalija Jariaa was born in 1974 in Ikenwen, a village 29 km from Tiznit, where she lived during her youth. Since 2005 she lives in a village on the outskirts of Tiznit, now a quarter of this town. Boubaker Daoumani, was born in 1973 in a village 30 km from Sidi Ifni but lived in that town from a young age. He is a primary school teacher who obtained in 2012 the diploma of Amazigh studies at the Ibn Zohr University in Agadir.

This fieldwork is based on observation, unstructured interviews, making photographs and a few videos. When observing and photographing children during play, an ethnographer will get a quick reply, they relate or withdraw. Their consent is mostly indicated indirectly by accepting a discrete presence. Without being trusted by the children, their families, and neighbours, participant observation is impossible. However, the research is more accessible because the children like our interest in their toys and games. They feel respected and appreciated when seen as valuable informants and producers of objects and knowledge. When asking children how they prefer to be mentioned in writings, they say their real first name should be used, and the consulted adults found this no problem. When mothers, fathers, or other adult caretakers accepted research on their children, they almost always offered this permission verbally. Indeed, one cannot do such research without the adults' and children's approval, as it happens in families and public spaces. The reader can find more details on the ethical and methodological aspects of the research in two publications (Rossie 2008: 24-26, 45; Rossie *et al.* 2021: 454-465).

The information on spinning top games covers the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century. William Marçais described in 1911 the oldest ones and Khalija Jariaa observed the most recent in 2021. The written data were found in books and articles mentioned in a commented bibliography (Rossie 2021), in particular, Bernus (2003), Lambrugo (2013), Moscoso (2002), Rossie (2001, 2005, 2022). In the research, tradition as well as modernity are looked after. The evolution of this play culture shows the influence of local social and cultural changes, television and other media, emigration, and tourism, and is putting forward the growing impact of globalization and digitalization.

Amazigh children, whose tops and spinning top games are described, inhabit mainly the Rif Mountains, Middle Atlas, High Atlas and Anti-Atlas Mountains, the Sous region, and the area near the Jbel Ayachi Mountain. The contacted Moroccan Arabic-speaking children were living in coastal towns, less often in inland towns. Boys created all the tops modelled in clay or with waste material mentioned in this chapter, but girls also twirl tops. They are aged between four and fourteen years. Throwing tops may be a solitary occupation especially as

a training activity, whereas using tops in competitive games was only observed and described in the literature as boys' games.

Fourteen photos illustrate this chapter supplemented by a PowerPoint with additional photos and a map of the Tunisian Sahara, North Africa, Morocco, and the Anti-Atlas, available on the Internet (Rossie 2022).

Because this ethnographic chapter is published in a book about archaeological research, referring to a comparison between North African and Saharan children's play and toy cultures and those from Antiquity can be useful (Rossie 2020). Some archaeologists in classical antiquity have expressed that this comparison offers new and stimulating ways of analysing and interpreting archaeological objects and images. Véronique Dasen added: «The comparisons with the games you are dealing with are so useful for understanding the past, not to conclude that it is the same thing. However, the anthropological parallels are good to think about» (Rossie *et al.* 2021: 470).

2. Child Made Spinning Tops with Natural Material

Spinning tops made of natural material such as fruits, nuts, wood, or clay are seldom mentioned in the available information although these were used by North African and Saharan children as among the Ghrib of the Tunisian Sahara and in Morocco.

In the 1970s, Ghrib children from the Tunisian Sahara twirled a pomegranate with about 4 cm in diameter. A thorn or a pointed stick is pushed in its bottom, sticking out for 1 cm or so (fig. 1). As young as three years, boys and girls try to twirl on a solid surface, but they start to make it when they are about six years old. Children could play in the house as well as outside.



Fig. 1. Pomegranate spinning top (diameter about 4 cm), Ghrib boys and girls, El Faouar, Douz region, Tunisian Sahara, 1975 (© photo Jean-Pierre Rossie).

According to a friend and colleague, Gilbert J. M. Claus (1977, 1997), who has lived among the Ghrib since 1973, spinning tops are called *dunwâma*, and the verb *dunwama* means ‘to twirl’. Ghrib children also tried to spin the bud of a plant called *blab zîta* or *blab tarfa*. *Blab* refers to an unripe fruit that remains quite hard. *Zîta* is the name of the tamaris plant, so *blab zîta* refers to the bud of the tamaris, while *tarfa* refers to another plant. To spin the pomegranate top, a child takes it between the index and middle fingers. Children would eventually start a competition to see whose spinning top whirls the most prolonged time, possibly leading to a dispute (emails 27-28 November 2021).

During the 1990s in Central Morocco, a small round fruit ending in a point was sometimes used as a spinning top, as seen in Imzouren at 20 km from the coastal town Al Hoceima in North Morocco. In August 1993, children twirled a natural top taken from the *safsaf* tree by snapping its point between their thumb and middle finger.

In the Anti-Atlas during Boubaker Daoumani’s childhood in the coastal town Sidi Ifni around 1980, boys and girls made a spinning top with an apricot nut. They needed to rub the nut’s top and bottom on a hard stone until a small hole appeared right in the middle of the nut, but one a little larger than the other. Through these two holes, one introduces an argan thorn or a wooden pointed stick (design in PowerPoint slide 13). Taking the top of the thorn or stick in hand and turning it vigorously, the child could spin this top at full speed. Such toys are called in Tashelhit *tamjarrayt el mishmash* meaning spinning top with apricot nut. Children played with it alone from the age of five or as a competition between boys of seven and more. This was done on a solid surface in the house or outside (Daoumani 2012: 24).

Pierre Flamand describes a toy that all Taroudant children in southeastern Morocco can make and call in Tashelhit *tamzizelt*. It is an apricot kernel, or a cardboard ring, pierced through by the passage of a reed stem. A string wraps around the reed stem inside the pit, and a ball (pomegranate) attached to the stem’s bottom rotates when the coiled string is pulled (research 1948-1958: 151).

Modelling spinning tops in clay is arduous yet sometimes created by Amazigh boys from about six years in the Anti-Atlas village Ikenwen at 29 km from the town Tiznit. Spinning tops are named *tatrubit* in the Tashelhit language. In 2008, six to ten-year-old playgroup fiends, often neighbours, modelled tops with clay taken from the bottom of a well where there is not much water left. To get this clayey earth, the boys use an old oil container with its top cut off. A boy tied a rope to both sides of the container and fixed a stone to make it heavier. So, the container will slowly sink into the clayey mud, and once filled with soil, he raises it. Then the clay must dry a little before being shaped. When the clay is ready to use, these boys try to model well-functioning spinning tops using a nail as the point. Smail, an eight-year-old boy, made the two clay tops in fig. 2. The smaller one measures 6.5 cm in height with a maximum diameter of 4 cm and the larger one 7 cm on 4.5 cm.



Fig. 2. Clay tops (H. 6.5 x diameter 4 cm and 7 x 4.5 cm), made by Smail, an eight-year-old boy, Ikenwen, province of Tiznit, Morocco, 2008 (© photo Jean-Pierre Rossie).

Smail said that the smaller top is better because a bigger one spills over quickly due to its more considerable volume. These spinning tops in clay are propelled by a length of string wound around the bottom, holding the other end with a bottle cap between two fingers and throwing them in a large basin to wash the clothes after putting a little fine sand on its bottom. Two boys throw their spinning top together. The one whose top runs towards the opponent's top and hits it wins and receives a piece of paper as a point earned. The winner then confronts the next boy. When the two tops do not touch, it is a draw, and both players start over. The game continues until one of the boys has obtained ten papers and, therefore, ten points. When a top breaks, the winner faces a new opponent until all players have thrown their top. Boys also use clay tops for other games, such as pushing the top of another player outside a circle drawn on the earth or pavement. Eventually, a player tries to break another player's top by throwing his top vehemently towards the other top.

Among the authors mentioned in the *Commented bibliography on play, games, and toys* (Rossie 2021), only Jean-Philippe Arm writes about a clay top concerning the children of the oasis town Oualata in southeast Mauritania. These children use a spinning top, called *zumaigig*, consisting of a small clay disc crossed by a thorn (Arm 1976: 121).

In the 1930s and according to Germaine Laoust-Chantréaux, Amazigh children from Ait Hichem in Northern Algeria made themselves wooden spinning tops. «The wooden top (*abu n-eccab*) is a wooden cone cut with a knife and in the point of which a large-headed nail of local manufacture has been fixed» (Laoust-Chantréaux 1990: 175, translated from French). Ait Hichem is in the province of Kabylia at about 40 km inland from Tizi Ouzou.

Sometimes only part of the spinning top consists of natural material, like when children use a thorn or stick pushed through a bottle cap to make its point. This type of spinning top is discussed in the next section.

3. Child Made Spinning Tops with Waste Material

For decades North African and Saharan children have constructed spinning tops with waste material such as small and broader bottle caps, lids of jam jars, pieces of tin cans or aerosols, plastic straws, sardine can openers, plastic nozzles, ballpoint pen's ink reservoirs and different kinds of threads.

Several spinning tops played by Moroccan children, especially boys, are made with waste material, with sometimes a piece of reed or other natural material being added. I observed the first tops of this kind in 1994 in Kenitra, a coastal town situated 55 km north of the capital Rabat. It was elementary, just a plastic bottle cap with a small, pointed stick pushed through the hole in the centre. The photographed top is not an efficient one (PowerPoint slide 16). However, some other similar tops did twirl well. Girls and boys of about five years already made them in the Moroccan High Atlas at the end of the 1990s. Sometimes, they used a jam jar lid pierced through its centre with a nail.

In the Rif, an Amazigh region bordering the Mediterranean coast in North Morocco, spinning tops are eventually made with waste material, such as a cap of a five-liter bottle. In the local language, this top is called *trumbi* (Said 2016: 45).

Veronika Ritt-Benmimoun published in German a lengthy article on the games of Marâzîg boys and men living in the Tunisian Sahara close to the Ghrîb people. One of these games is played with a spinning top called *kbudrâf* in their Bedouin language. This top has a small plastic bottle cap as body and a thorn pushed through its center. The following description is a free translation of the German text based on a Marâzîg adult's memories:

We played this game when we were little and made the toy. We went to the hospital to fetch bottle caps. These were round tiny plastic caps, probably of medication bottles. We got thorns and stuck one from behind into the middle of the cap until the thorn came out in front. Then we looked for a cloth washing basin to twirl our top in it because there was much sand in the yard and therefore no place with hard, solid earth where the top could turn. We were two or three people throwing our spinning top and whose top turned the longest before falling over was the winner. We had a lot of fun. (Ritt-Benmimoun 2010: 109-110)

All the spinning tops mentioned above must be twirled by hand to spin. The following spinning tops made with waste material are set in motion by pulling a rope. Small children need to exercise their dexterity before they can play well with such tops.

In 2010, Mustapha, an 11-year-old Amazigh boy from the small village of Igîsel 20 km from Guelmim in southwestern Morocco, made a top with a bottle

cap. The top holder and its tip are a sardine can opener pushed through the opening in the centre of the cap. To twist his top around, Mustapha used a black plastic string.

In his manuscript on Ain Toujdate children's games and toys in the 1980s (El Hajeb Province, northern Morocco), Mustapha Jarih mentions a more complex spinning top made with waste material. A boy pierces a pen cap through the centre of a 2 to 3 cm large oil or milk bottle cap. Then he pushes a plastic rod into the pen cap to hold the top with one hand while pulling the thread wrapped around the cap with his other hand (Jarih 2004: 6). Si Ahmed, a nine-year-old Sahrawi boy from Tan-Tan in the coastal region of the northern Sahara border, shows this model of spinning top in December 2005 (fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Spinning top with waste material (H. 8 x diameter 5 cm), made by Ahmed, a nine-year-old Sahrawi boy, Tan-Tan, coastal region, Moroccan Sahara, 2005 (© photo Jean-Pierre Rossie).

Observing how to construct such a spinning top, our observation added that breaking off the lid of the pen cap is needed before pushing it through the bottle cap. One must also hold a string's end against the side of the bottle cap and wind the remaining part around the ballpoint cap below the bottle cap. Such tops are spinning really fast. At first, twirling this top should be done close to the ground level (fig. 4), but this position can be later changed.



Fig. 4. At first, twirling this top should be done close to the ground level, Sidi Ifni, Anti-Atlas, Morocco, 2007 (© photo Khalija Jariaa)

In December 2007, three about thirteen-year-old Sidi Ifni boys speaking Tashelhit throw their spinning top in a circle delimited with stones. The boys on the left and right use a spinning top made with a bottle and pen cap. The middle boy throws a store-bought yellow plastic top (fig. 5). The three players twirl their tops and look at which one turns the longest time. They also drive the other boys' tops outside the circle.



Fig. 5. Thirteen-year-old boys throw two spinning tops of waste material and one toy industry top, Sidi Ifni, Anti-Atlas, Morocco, December 2007 (© photo Khalija Jariaa).

In 2006, Khalija Jariaa brought back from her Anti-Atlas village Ikenwen three spinning tops made by a seven-year-old boy, named *tatrubmit* in Tashelhit, constructed with a cut of the upper part of tin cans. The boy holds two of these tops in hand with a metal string and the middle top with a wooden stick pushed into the nozzles, all used as the tops' points (fig. 6).



Fig. 6. A seven-year-old boy created spinning tops with cut of bottoms of tin cans. Ikenwen, Anti-Atlas, Morocco, 2006 (© photo Jean-Pierre Rossie).

In the former village Douar Ouaraben, now a quarter of Tiznit, a boy built in October 2021 two examples of spinning tops with waste material. He made them with pieces of aerosols used against insects cut off with a knife. A plastic nozzle serves as the top's tip. He holds it in hand with a transparent plastic drinking carton straw pushed into the nozzle (fig. 7). A string coiled around the body serves to twirl the spinning top.



Fig. 7. A boy constructed two spinning tops with pieces of aerosols and a plastic nozzle serves as the top's point, Douar Ouaraben, Anti-Atlas, Morocco, October 2021 (© photo Jean-Pierre Rossie).

In Ikenwen, boys made a toy with a bottle cap or reed wheel a year later. The top shown was constructed with an apricot nut, bottle cap, and nail and measures about 5 cm in height and diameter (fig. 8). As in the case of the apricot nut top described in the section of spinning tops with natural material, the top, bottom, and one side of the nut must be rubbed on a stone to create the holes. Taking the nut between thumb and index finger and pulling the thread, the string comes out of the nut and the child lets the top fall to spin on the ground.

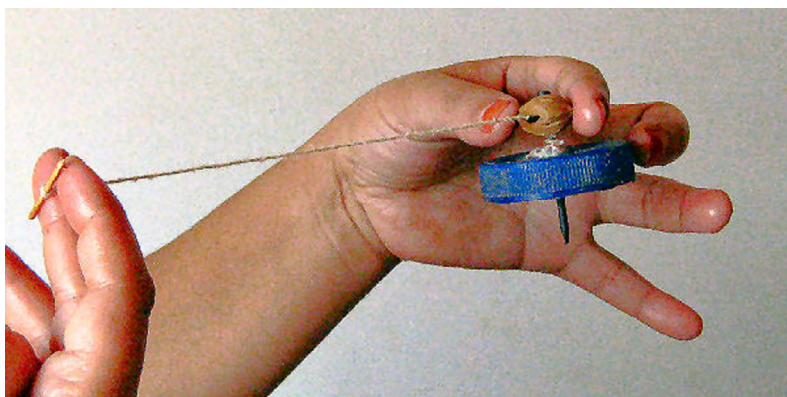


Fig. 8. Spinning toy made with an apricot nut, a bottle cap and a nail (H. and diameter 5 cm). This string is not attached to the nail so the top falls in the ground and continues to turn. Ikenwen, Anti-Atlas, Morocco, 2007 (© photo Jean-Pierre Rossie).

This toy is also called *tamjarrayt el mishmash* in *Tashelbit*, like the spinning top with an apricot nut mentioned above (2. Child made spinning tops with natural material). Sometimes an ear of maize is fixed on the nail below the bottle cap (PowerPoint slide 13). Such tops are still made nowadays in that village and in Douar Ouaraben. Ikenwen boys also make spinning wheels they nowadays call *élikoptèr*, helicopter. To construct this toy, pieces of reed, a nail, a ballpoint pen's ink reservoir, and a string are needed. When holding the reed vertically, this toy becomes a continuously turning wheel as the string rewinds when the wheel turns around (fig. 9). Another model based on the same technique but held vertically consists of a wooden axle put through a piece of reed with on both sides a half piece of reed attached with a nail.

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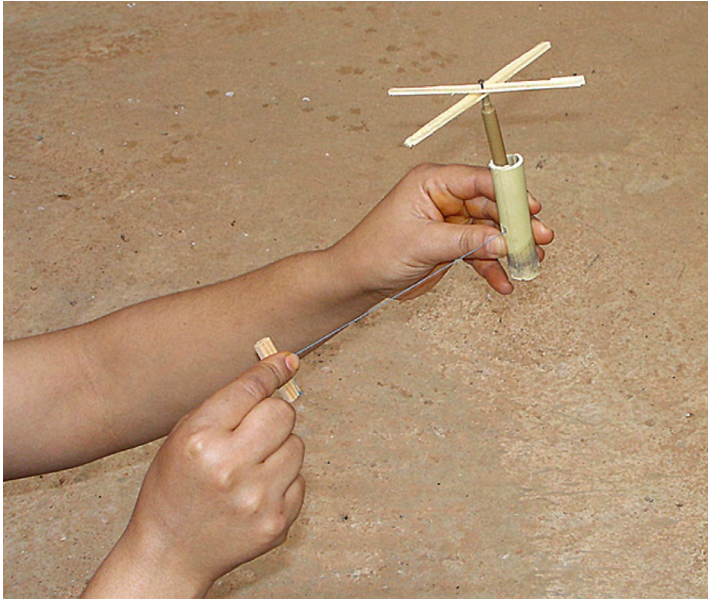


Fig. 9. Boys make continuously spinning blades with pieces of reed, a nail, a pen's ink reservoir, and a string, nowadays called helicopter. Ikenwen, Anti-Atlas, Morocco, 2006 (© photo Jean-Pierre Rossie).

Boys constructed all the spinning tops made with waste material and the continuously turning toys (fig. 9). Exceptionally a girl would make one after observing how a boy made it. Girls sometimes play with these toys when they receive one from a brother or another boy.

4. Children's Spinning Tops Made by Artisans

North African children throwing artisan made tops is not a recent phenomenon as this is already mentioned in the beginning of the twentieth century. William Marçais in his 1911 book *Textes Arabes de Tanger* tells the story of a boy's spinning top and spinning top game in a neighbourhood of the coastal city of Tangier in North Morocco. This is the oldest detailed description of this game that I have found. It is therefore offered below in a non-literal version translated into English. This is about a group of six boys playing two days before *Ashura* Day, celebrated on the tenth day of the first month of the Muslim calendar. The *Ashura* festive period, starting on the first day of the Muslim year, were a time especially devoted to this game. The spinning top and the playing with it are called *trimbu*. The author mentions several terms in Arabic for the distinct phases of the game, terms that can be found in his book. This author analyses two ways to play the spinning top.

The first game is trying to reach, by throwing a top, another top already in motion. The second game targets a partner's top, lying on the ground. In this case, there are two possibilities. When throwing a top, it should hit the top on the ground with the first shot; if not, it will become the target instead. The boys called this way of playing 'a sharp game'. Secondly, as long as his top spins, the player has the right to pick it up in the palm of his hand. Then he must throw it, by choosing position and distance, against the target top. This way of playing is called 'a liberation game'. If he hits the target top, he is released. The object of this game is to push the target top into a hole dug at the end of the playing field. When the players succeed by successive chocks in pushing the target top into the hole, it is fixed in the ground. Each player will strike this top ten times with the point of his top until it is jagged or even split in two (Marçais 1911: 177, translated from French).

The text explains further how the boy's top gets a new steel point in a forge shop selling spinning top points.

The shopkeeper grabbed the spinning top, put it in the holder, and tore off the old point. He took the point of steel with its protruding edges and threw it into the brazier of his forge. The tip turned a fiery red. It was grabbed with the pliers and thrown into a bucket of water not to become dull. He then took it off, took a strand of wool, and wanted to put it in the hole of the top, to put the point in it. The boy, not wanting that gave him two feathers to put them in the hole before fixing the tip. If he had put on the strand of wool, the top would have been heavy, while by putting a feather on it, it became a fine top, very snoring, light. Making the top light and buzzing, it was customary in Tunis and in several parts of Algeria to trap a fly in the hole where the shank of the point was lodged. To try out his new spinning top, the boy bought a piece of red thread measuring three cubits from the grocery store. As it was too long, he took it and broke one end of it to which he fixed a strip of tambourine, which, in the launch of the spinning top, was to hold the string between the fingers and prevent it from escaping. (Marçais 1911: 178-179, translated from French).

The boy strung his top and began to strike a target top with the others. At the first stroke, he made a large notch in it. Another knocked twice and pushed the target top about ten paces; yet another brought him a little closer to the goal; then another led him to the entrance to the goal. The first boy tossed his top gently to the ground because he did not want to hit the target top for fear of pulling it from the spot near the goal. He picked up his top with his hand, but he did the target top neither good nor bad on the first try. He picked up his top for a second shot, and this time the target top came right in the middle of the goal. The owner of the target top refused to have his top destroyed and removed it from the goal. The other players disagreed, started to discuss, and made him feel ashamed. The owner then agreed to have his top fixed in the ground so that the other players could try to destroy it with ten hits each. The

third player destroyed the target spinning top. (Marçais 1911: 180-182, translated from French).

William Marçais also mentioned that this boy entered the top spinning game of a group of friends the next day. In her comment on this chapter, Claudia Lambrugo noted «This is interesting for some comparisons with ancient Greek festivals connected to spinning top games». William Marçais did not explain why spinning tops are especially played during the Ashura feast period.

Concerning Mozabite children from the Mزاب region in the Algerian Sahara, A. M. Goichon writes in 1927 that they play at spinning tops, named *ẓebrúj* in Mozabite language, when school starts. This author does not specify the tops the children play with but probably these are wooden artisan-made tops (Goichon 1927: 60).

In 1939, twelve Spanish primary school teachers from schools for Moroccan children authored the book *Cómo juegan los niños morroquíes* containing ninety-seven games of skill played by Arabic or Amazigh speaking pupils living in several regions of the former Spanish protectorate in Northern Morocco (Ghomara, Rif). For one of the games called *trembot* in *Tarifit language*, these children used spinning tops. It is similar to the first game William Marçais shortly mentioned. The playing field's ground needed be hard enough for the top to spin adequately. The playgroup usually consists of four to six children. After drawing a line on the ground, they prepare their tops by wrapping a rope around them. One of the players counts to three, and then they all throw their top towards the line. The top rolling on its side first is attacked by the other players trying to hit it with their top. The throwing order is indicated by how long each top twirls during this first launch, from the longest time to the least long. Successively, the players throw their spinning top towards the top on the ground, trying to hit it directly. If no one hits the target top the player who owns it takes it away, and the top that did spin the second brief time must be put to the line. The players repeat this game if someone hits the top on the ground (1939: 72-74).

Another information was found in the bibliography regarding spinning tops in North Morocco. In the book *Juegos Populares de la Cultura Bereber*, Juan Granda Vera, Rafael Domínguez Saura and Said El Quariachi Anán describe 58 games of Amazigh children from the Rif region mostly studying in secondary schools in the Spanish enclave Melilla. Boys play spinning tops, *ẓarbot*, from the age of seven years. In a circle traced on the ground, they place a coin to push it out of the circle through the player's throwing their top alternatively from a previously decided line. The player who removes the coin from the circle can keep it (Granda Vera *et al.* 1995: 72).

From 1992 onwards, observations of Moroccan children's play and toy-making activities and talks with children and adults revealed spinning tops in different regions. In November 1992, photographs taken in the town Kenitra show

how a boy picked up a twirling top in the palm of his hand before throwing it towards another top turning on the ground (fig. 10).



Fig. 10. Boy trying to pick up a twirling top in the palm of his hand, Kenitra, coastal Morocco, November 1992 (© photo Jean-Pierre Rossie).

In 1997 living in Midelt, a town in a central Moroccan Amazigh region at the foot of Mount Ayachi, I noted observations of children from the working class Aït Mansour quarter. About spinning tops, it says that on a Sunday in November, boys aged between five and twelve played with spinning tops called *trimbu* in *Tamazight*, and other boys played football. Two days later, in front of a house, a girl of about seven throws her spinning top in the company of two boys who do the same. Another two days later, small groups of two or three boys are training to twirl tops in some alleys. All these tops were bought in local shops. Sometimes children want to make their spinning tops stand out, like an eight-year-old boy from the same neighbourhood did this by applying white, red, and black areas separated by white stripes) (PowerPoint slide 23).

In September in Safi, a central Moroccan coastal town, two boys playing spinning tops agreed we make photographs while visiting pottery workshops. These pictures show a boy holding his top with the rope turned around the lower part of the body, the throwing, and the top twirling on the ground (PowerPoint slide 29, 30).

Between 2002 and 2021, Khalija Jariaa and I looked for Tashelhit-speaking Anti-Atlas boys and girls playing with artisan-made or toy industry spinning tops. In Douar Ouaraben, a former village integrated into Tiznit, several observations and photographs of children were collected. In January 2012, Khalija Jariaa observed a playgroup of seven about nine-year-old boys throwing their shop-bought wooden spinning tops in the evening. One player starts throwing

his top, and then the other players twirl their tops. The game's goal is to throw a top vehemently to hit and eventually damage the tops of the other players or hit a white piece of paper. One player falls to the ground and is comforted, but at the same time, the others laugh at him a bit. In January 2017, we also took in this village photographs of boys and girls playing spinning tops. Fig. 11 shows a boy and a girl, both seven years old, throwing their shop-bought top.



Fig. 11. Seven-years-old boy and girl throwing their artisan-made spinning top, Douar Ouaraben, Anti-Atlas, Morocco, January 2017 (© photo Khalija Jariaa).

At that time, Ilyas, Khalija's just nine-year-old eldest son, showed how such a wooden spinning top should be prepared before using it in a top spinning game. With a knife or a long metal pin heated at one side in the flame of a butane bottle, he makes a hole in a plastic lemonade bottle cap. He puts one end of the rope through the cap and burns it a bit to widen this rope's end so that it cannot get out of the cap. Then he turns the rope around the bottom of the top's body, showing the result in (fig. 12).

Khalija Jariaa also observed and photographed a recent example of a top spinning game of four boys aged 6, 7, 10 and 13, at a marketplace of Tiznit in November 2021. They draw lots before starting the game. Four small pieces, like orange peel, mint leaf, date nut, and bread, are used. Each player chooses which piece will represent him. The oldest boy opens his fists and closes his eyes. While the other two players move away, the next in age places the four pieces on the fingers of the oldest one, two on the right hand, and two on the left hand. Now the oldest boy shows his closed fists to the other players, choosing a finger. When the oldest boy opens his fists, the place of the pieces chosen by the players to represent them indicates the player's order to spin their

top. A small inner circle and a large outer circle have been drawn with plaster on the ground. In turn, as the drawing of lots indicated, each player throws his top towards a piece of plaster placed in the middle of the small circle (fig. 13).



Fig. 12. Nine-year-old Ilyas showing his artisan-made top after preparing it for playing, Douar Ouaraben, Anti-Atlas, Morocco, January 2017
(© photo Jean-Pierre Rossie).



Fig. 13. A player throws his top towards a piece of plaster placed in the middle of the small circle, town of Tiznit, southwestern Morocco, November 2021
(© photo Khalija Jariaa).

If it hits the piece of plaster, this player can continue to throw his spinning top until the piece of plaster gets out of the large circle. If he misses the piece of plaster, the next player can throw his top. When a boy has managed to push out the piece of plaster from the large circle, the other three players must offer him a marble, and he wins three marbles. These players may continue to throw their tops one after the other, but they do not receive marbles when they remove the piece of plaster from the large circle. The four players may restart the game and win or lose marbles. This game aims to win marbles for games starting at the end of November and continuing until February.

These Tiznit children did not explain why they twirled spinning tops and played with marbles during this period. As mentioned in the PowerPoint, in the Anti-Atlas, eight periods when they played with spinning tops happened during the rainy season between November and March in 2005, 2007, 2009, 2017, and 2021. Therefore, one can state that twirling spinning tops in the Anti-Atlas is preferably done during this time. The example from Kenitra, a coastal city in northern Morocco, dates from November 1994. In Safi, another coastal town close to southern Morocco, a boy played spinning tops in the street at the end of September 2009.

In January 2017, three older Douar Ouaraben boys agreed to show their spinning top skills. The photographs show the prepared top, different ways of throwing it, a discussion between players, how to pick up a twirling top and keep it turning on the hand.

Keltoum, a four-and-a-half-year-old girl living in Ikenwen, showed in February 2017, that she could already throw a *tatrumbit* or spinning top. She begins to wrap the thread above the point, and everything goes well until the fourth round. However, the thread comes out of the right way on the fifth tour. Keltoum very quickly succeeds in fixing this and wraps the thread around the top, up to eleven turns. Then she takes the top in her right hand, passing the thread between the index and middle fingers (fig. 14).

Throwing the top is not a problem for this little girl, but the top only spins for a brief time.

Playing with a spinning top in southern Tunisia was, according to Abderrahman Ayoub, probably the most popular game among these children, nonetheless at risk of extinction towards the end of the twentieth century. It was a boys' game that girls were not allowed to play. The top had different names depending on its shape and size: *nabla*, *bartûk*, *zurbûk*. For this game, a boy draws a circle on the ground. All the players throw their tops to see which one spins the longest time, and the owner of this top starts the game. The object of the game is to destroy the top of an opponent. Now, one should try to hit the top on the ground with his top tip. The damaged top is taken out of play because if it stays, it will be 'humiliated' or, as the boys say, "its dress has been torn" (Ayoub 1991: 47).



Fig. 14. Keltoum, a four-and-a-half-year-old girl, is ready to twirl her spinning top, Ikenwen, Anti-Atlas, Morocco, February 2017 (© photo Jean-Pierre Rossie).

At the end of this descriptive overview of North African and Saharan children's spinning tops, two special Moroccan artisan-made tops bought in Rabat in 1992 and Sidi Ifni in 2006 should be mentioned but were not seen being used by children. These two tops have a ring on top of the wooden body (PowerPoint slide 36).

5. Conclusion

Although no systematic analysis was conducted, certain statements may be drawn based on the data presented in this chapter. Data that refer to a collection of observations of and discussions with Ghrib children from the Tunisian Sahara in 1975 and Moroccan children from 1992 onwards and information gathered from the consulted bibliography (Rossie 2021).

Making and throwing spinning tops is mainly an activity of North African and Saharan boys. However, saying that girls are forbidden to play spinning tops would be unrealistic. Exceptionally this might have been the rule in specific families or communities in older times, but this was mentioned only once in the available information. Some Anti-Atlas girls offer clear proof of girls

enjoying spinning tops. The youngest children throwing tops were three years, and the oldest ones were about fourteen years old.

Spinning tops alone is more an exercise than a game. Among primary and secondary schoolboys, twirling tops is a playful competition practiced in small groups composed of siblings, neighbors, or friends. Showing off and boasting about one's spinning top skills is more important than winning, among other reasons, because older children regularly play together with younger ones. Nevertheless, rivalry, anger, and aggressive behavior exist, but playgroup members try to resolve conflicts themselves and rarely seek help from adults.

All the mentioned spinning tops are twirled by a child's hand or with a rope turned around the lower part of the top's body. We did not observe or read about children whipping their tops to continue to spin. Nor have we observed, or found in the consulted literature, spinning tops with symbols or inscriptions used as dice to promote randomness in games or for divination and ritual purposes. The only exception is a top used by Jewish children in Morocco. This toy has the shape of a four-sided pyramid trunk with the four faces marked by a Hebrew letter (Flamand research from 1948 until 1958: 204).

Spinning tops of natural and waste material, artisan-made tops, and the ways children twirl tops have remained similar since Antiquity (Rossie 2020: 21). « Indeed, some games played by the Greeks and Romans, some toys that accompanied their childhood such as rattles, spinning top, hoop or dinette, have hardly changed. The ancients used them just like us, with the same sensitivity, the same excitement, the same urge to have fun and distraction » (Dasen, Schädler 2013).

Environmental and socio-cultural changes have always influenced children's play and toy-making activities but, their evolution accelerated since the second half of the twentieth century. Although, a playgroup of Anti-Atlas boys continued to make and use spinning tops in clay in 2008, and boys from this region created spinning tops with waste material in 2021. Nevertheless, children watching television and videos and, more recently, playing games on smartphones are making their self-made tops obsolete and spinning top games a less popular play activity. The influence of Moroccan emigrants, their children and grandchildren living in European countries, of tourists, the consumption society and globalization is felt even in remote villages. Moreover, cheap, and technically more complex spinning tops sold in local markets and shops (PowerPoint slide 38) may provoke the traditional spinning tops to disappear.

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- The PowerPoint related to this chapter on Children's Spinning Tops in North Africa and the Sahara will become available when the book is published. See *Academia.edu* : <https://www.academia.edu/108449371>
Scribd : <https://www.scribd.com/document/679291098>