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THE PLAYFUL PICCANINNY

BY DR. RALPH ST. J. PERRY

DO the children of Africa play games? Sure they do. Many of them are like those played by American children; but there are quite a few that are distinctly African in origin which I have never seen in this country.

One of the most popular is bong bayamy, or monkey trap. Twenty, more or less, boys join hands and sing a song about a monkey being caught in a trap, dancing in a circle as they sing. When they reach that part of their song story where the monkey tries to escape, they stop circling, and the youngster who has been chosen by lot to impersonate the monkey tries to break the circle by lunging against the joined hands, while the boys in the ring try to throw him on his back by swinging their arms when he jumps on them. This is to represent the monkey jumping against the ropes of the trap and being thrown back therefrom.

Should the monkey succeed in breaking the circle and escaping, the person releasing his hold must in turn become monkey, while the escaped boy takes a place in the ring. Should he fail to break the circle, he is allowed to rest, being supposed to be exhausted. The song then continues, and tells how he tries to jump over the rope that holds him, only to find himself still fastened. To illustrate this the boys each throw one leg over the circle of hands, thus straddling their arms, and while in this attitude jump up and down three times. This is then repeated with the other leg. If any boy falls or breaks his hold, he is regarded as having set the monkey free, and must take his place in the trap. The game begins anew with each monkey.

IN "choosing out" in this and similar games the method most commonly used is that of choosing hands, one hand holding a pebble, the other empty. The one holding the pebble after all have chosen is "it," either "leader" or "goat." Each player before choosing recites the following rignarole.

Too too pr-r-rata,
Too too pr-r-rata,
Marlo monda bededa,
Keh! Keh!

The first two lines are to represent the sound of squeezing a broken orange or lime, the hands being squeezed while they are recited. The third line reads, "I do not like any hand but this one!" and at "Keh! Keh!" the player slaps the chosen hand.

BOW NAW is played along the same general lines as the American game of "follow your leader." There is a leader chosen, and all other players must do and say just what he does. It is a game well calculated to cultivate a child's memory and the powers of observation. Half a dozen or so children squat round a large stone, which, when the game opens, they all lift together by placing their fingertips underneath it, slowly up and slowly down, while they chant:

Ze-e-e-e now belong;
Ze-e-e-e now tokay.
(Lift this rock up slowly;
Lay this rock down gently.)

After this the leader makes certain gestures, touches several players, and speaks a number of words. Each player must repeat all of this exactly, and in the same order and manner as done by the leader. Should any player fail, he is placed upon his hands and knees, and the leader gives him from four to ten blows on the back, always slapping his back first, and again before the last blow, which is given with extra force. While doing this he sings:

Zeely! Ping, ping, ping, ping. Zeely! Ping!

"Zeely" stands for the sound of the slaps, and "ping" for that of the blows, usually five. The leader may make as many and such signs over the victim's back as he chooses, which each player must repeat exactly when he pounds the victim, and failure to do so causes him to take the forfeiter's place.

GOY-YE-YE is a boys' game, though girls frequently play it. Each player, there being usually from six to a dozen, takes a rock, the leader having a larger one than the others, and the rocks are passed from hand to hand while the following song is sung:

"Goy-ye-ye-a Gom-i-gow!
Go wow wow Sow!
E-keeling heeling-oo,
E-keeling heeling-jangy."
"Jangy dow pbally."
"Kaw-seey Kaw-kaw!
Sumba beamayda.
Iding-yai!"

In this song "goy-ye-ye-a Gom-i-gow" and "Kaw-seey kaw-kaw" are native names of two birds, and the ditty, when freely rendered into English, goes thus:

"Goy-ye-ye-a Gom-i-gow!
Come, come quickly!
Bring the grass also."
"I cannot; its edge is too sharp."
"Kaw-seey Kaw-kaw!
What did this big rock do to you?
Here is the rock!"

The passing of the rocks takes place at the end of each line, and at the final pass the big rock is loudly slapped down before the player who is caught, whereupon that individual must reveal the name of his or her lover. The game is continued until all are caught.

ANOTHER game involving amatory revelations is called the "whoorah play," having evidently been introduced from that belligerent tribe through some of its children at the mission schools. The leader stands in the center of a group of a dozen or so boys, who crowd closely round him, squatting on the ground with their knees drawn up to form arches, and the series of arches so formed makes a circular tunnel round the leader. The boys all place and keep their hands in this tunnel while a ball is passed from right to left, or always in the same direction.

The leader now tries to get possession of the ball by diving for it, thrusting his hands into the tunnel at any point where he thinks he can catch it. He is not allowed to keep his hands in the tunnel, waiting for the ball to come round; but must withdraw them quickly and try some other point.

Whoever holds the ball when it is caught must tell the name of his love, and no player is allowed to name the same girl twice. During the diving the following song is sung over and over.

LEADER: "Numah jollay oh-h-h-h jollay!"
CHORUS OF PLAYERS: "Jollay-a-a-y!"
"Man must not be red, oh red!" "Red!"

QUALAH VINGO, or monkey jump, is the same as the American game of leap frog. At each jump the jumper calls out "qualah vingo!" and the jumper answers "Vingo!" (jump).

COMMA TEAH, or cut the elephant (comma, elephant, and teah, cut), is another circle game, in which one boy plays the part of the elephant and stands in the center of a circle about twenty feet in diameter; the other players then hop into the circle, one hop only being allowed, and try to slap or "cut" the elephant. The elephant may move round inside the circle as freely as he pleases; but the player must stand in his place on one foot until he has slapped the elephant. Should the elephant leave the circle, the players may do so also; should any player put both feet on the ground within the circle or fail to hop out in one hop after having cut the elephant, he must take the elephant's place.

THESE people have few toys. One of the commonest and simplest is the tap-tap, made by cutting flaps in a piece of sugarcane or cornstalk. In operating the toy the child throws the flaps back and forth, thereby making a tapping sound, from which the name is derived.

ANOTHER simple home-made plaything which gives rise to much acute transitory joy in the life of the youngster is the lily top. In all inland marshes, lake bayous, and sluggish streams there grows on six-foot stems the beautiful African water lily, of several different species, from a foot to two feet in diameter, with pure white or deep blue corolla and bright yellow stamens. These magnificently beautiful nymphs, which would readily sell at from one to ten dollars each at metropolitan florists' shops, are here used by the Nature-loving children for making tops.

Taking a seven-dollar lily in his hand, the boy ruthlessly tears away all the petals that are lying flatly open, leaving only those few which inclose the stamens; then splits the skin from one lengthwise quarter of the stem and cuts away the other three quarters about two inches from the base of the flower, leaving the ribbonlike skin attached to the stub end. This gives a long string to the top and a stem to wind it on. When the string is wound up and the flower dropped from the hand, the latter spins rapidly, the few unopened petals being forced open and forming a beautiful wheel