11. Children’s Songs and Rhymes

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11. Children’s Songs and Rhymes

Lullabies and nursery rhymes. Children’s games and verses; Southern Sudanese action songs.

Little systematic interest has been taken in children’s verse in Africa, and though isolated instances have been recorded this has been done without any discussion of context or local significance. On the published evidence it is not clear, for instance, how far the previous lack of a distinct body of schoolchildren in most African societies affected the specificity of children’s verse as distinct from that of other groups, or how far the oral compositions now current in the increasing number of schools parallel similar phenomena recorded elsewhere. Nevertheless, some remarks on what is known to occur in Africa may be relevant here, not least if its shortcomings provoke further research or synthesis.

I shall discuss first lullabies (and other songs designed for children but primarily transmitted by adults) and secondly the rhymes and songs that tend to be for a slightly older age-group and are regarded as belonging to the children themselves in their own play.

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1 Though see Tucker 1933; Griaule 1938a: 205–75; Adam 1940: 131–4; Gbadamosi and Beier 1959: 53–8; Béart 1955; Blacking 1967.

2 Further material can almost certainly be found which so far has achieved only local circulation, e.g. Beier and Gbadamosi, Ibadan, n.d. (Yoruba children’s poems), and collections made by local teachers and others. Children’s songs are also sometimes included on recordings published by the International Library of African Music (e.g. five Tswana children’s singing games TR III).
Lullabies provide a good example of the way in which what might be expected to be a simple, ‘natural’, and spontaneous expression of feeling in all societies—a mother singing to her child—is in fact governed by convention and affected by the particular constitution of the society.

One major factor is the question of who has the main responsibility for looking after a child. Among the Ngoni, for instance, a kind of upper-class group in Malawi, there were few lullabies: most Ngoni women employed nurse-maids from other groups to look after their children. Something similar was true among the rank-conscious Nyoro of Uganda. There, however, the nurses commonly sang their own lullabies to their charges, expressing their feelings about the mothers’ attitude:

Ha! that mother, who takes her food alone.
Ha! that mother, before she has eaten.
Ha! that mother she says, ‘Lull the children for me’.
Ha! that mother when she has finished to eat.
Ha! that mother she says ‘Give the child to me’.  

(Bansisa 1936: 110)

One of the main *raisons d’être* of such lullabies among Nyoro nurses would in fact seem to be, not primarily the lulling of the child at all, but an indirect comment on their own position, ‘for they were afraid of making direct requests to their masters and therefore they always expressed what they wanted in lullabies’. (Bansisa 1936: 110)

Other African lullabies fit more easily into our common picture of a mother concentrated on the needs of her child; but even in these the tone and purpose may vary. Some lay the greatest emphasis on the idea of rocking the child to sleep, often brought out by the rhythm and liquid vowel sounds of the original. Here, for instance, is the first verse of a long Swahili lullaby:

Lululu, mwana (wa) lilanji,
Luluhi, mwana (wa) kanda!
Luluhi, mwana (wa) lilanji,
Lululu, mwana (wa) kanda!

(Lululu, Kindchen, warum weinst du?
Lululu, verwöhntes kleines Kind!
Lululu, Kindchen, warum weinst du?
Lululu, verwöhntes kleines Kind!)  

(Von Tiling 1927: 291–2)
and the same soothing repetitive sounds come in one of the commonest Zulu lullabies:

Thula, thula, thula, mntanami,  
Ukhalelani na?  
Ushaywa ubani?  
Thula mntanami, umam’akekho  
(Peace, peace, peace, my child, 
Why weepest thou? 
Who annoys?  
Peace, child, mother is not home).  

(Thula, thula, thula, mntanami,  
Ukhalelani na?  
Ushaywa ubani?  
Thula mntanami, umam’akekho  
(Peace, peace, peace, my child, 
Why weepest thou? 
Who annoys?  
Peace, child, mother is not home).)  

(Dhlomo 1947: 7)

Other songs seem to represent more the mother’s delight in playing with her child than a desire to soothe it, or a detached and good-humoured comment as in the lullaby a Dogon mother sings to the child on her back:

Où est partie la mère du petit?
Partie puiser de l’eau.
Pas revenue de puiser l’eau.
Partie piler la feuille de baobab
Pas revenue de piler la feuille
Partie préparer les plats
Pas revenue de préparer les plats
Sur la falaise, sur la falaise, un œuf de poule est suspendu!

where the last line vividly pictures the way the little child’s bottom is perched like an egg on his mother’s steep back (Griaule 1938a: 226). The Kamba mother also pictures her own absorption in her child and her neglect of other things for his sake, viewing her own attitude with a certain detachment:

Mother, mother of the child, leave off crying, poverty!
You have come, you have surpassed me in crying.
And even if it is the rain which rains,

3 See also slightly different versions in Curtis 1920; Vilakazi 1938: 120. The reference to the mother’s absence may be just a conventional part of the song, or may, if taken literally, indicate that this lullaby too was much sung by nurses. Some other Zulu lullabies (isihlabelelo) are made up specially by the mother for individual children with whom they are intimately connected, so that each individual has his isihlabelelo, ‘the song of his childhood, regarded as something essentially his own’ (Krige 1936: 338–9).

4 e.g. the Swahili song given by Von Tiling 1927: 290.

5 Kamba children are often called ‘mother’ by their own mothers

6 i.e. I am glad that you came to me, but I never cried so much when I was a baby.
I put away the tree, I shall call my mother.
And even if it is the Masai,
Who carries spear and shield, I put away the tree.
I shall call you, I shall lull to sleep on my arm, mother.
I shall not hear the goats who are bleating. (Lindblom iii, 1934: 51)

Like many other lullabies, those of the Rundi are characterized by rhythm and cadence as well as the use of onomatopoeic words. But they also seem notably meditative in tone. The mother expresses and comments on her own feelings and on her expectations of the attitudes of others:

O ce qui me donne du travail, je t’aime.
Demain de bonne heure nous causerons.
De très bonne heure, des qu’il fera clair.
Viens que je te caresse (en te donnant de petits coups).
Endors-toi, mets fin à ma solitude.
Ecoutons s’il y a des ennemis.
Mon roi, mon roi.

Tranquille! que je te frotte d’odoriférants
Qui t’accompagnent chez le roi (qui te font arriver jusque chez le roi).
Tranquille! sommeille sur le dos.
Ta belle-mère est stérile.
Elle te donnerait du tabac (au lieu de nourriture).
Même si la bouillie ne manque pas. (Zuure 1932: 352)

There are also rhymes or songs for grown-ups to recite to children, distinct both from lullabies and from ordinary adult songs. The Zulu are said to have many ‘nursery songs’ in both rural and urban areas, among them one made up of an amusing combination of clicks to teach children the correct pronunciation (Qhuweqha weqhuweqha, / Qhingqilithi qh! etc.) (Vilakazi 1938: 121). Several examples of these rhymes for children are included in Griaule’s comprehensive study Jeux dogons. One is for finger play:

Le petit doigt a dit; oncle j’ai faim
L’annulaire a dit: nous allons recevoir (à manger)
Le majeur a dit: demandons
L’index a dit: volons
Le pouce a dit: je n’en suis pas (pour voler).
Depuis ce temps, le pouce s’est ecarte des autres doigts. (Griaule 1938a: 224)

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7 i.e. digging stick. Women are usually very busy in their gardens at the start of the rainy season, but this mother is thinking only of her child.
8 For some further references to lullabies, besides those already mentioned, see e.g. Nketia 1958b (Akan); de Rop 1965; Coupez 1959; Béart 1955: 60ff. (various lullabies from West Africa); Sempewba 1948 (Ganda); 1949; Anya-Noa 1962-63; Belinga 1965: 23ff.
The next song is to stop a small child crying by tickling up his arm:

Singe noir
Dans la main de mon fils
Ai mis un pêlyé [fruit] cassé
L’a enlevé puis l’a mangé
Puis ça, puis ça, puis ça.
Ça, gèrgèrgèr . . . .  

(Griaule 1938a: 225)

There does not seem to be evidence of a large body of specialized nursery rhymes in any African society to the same extent as in English tradition, for example. However, it is hard to believe that it is only in Zulu and Dogon—two of the most comprehensively studied African cultures—that rhymes of the kind quoted can be found, and it is very possible that further research will reveal similar nursery-rhyme forms in many other African societies.9

II

Like children elsewhere, African children seem to have the familiar range of games and verse for their own play—nonsense songs, singing games, catch rhymes, and so on. They also engage in riddle-asking and in other games and dances that cannot be treated here (see Ch. 15).

Before quoting instances of such children’s verses, one has to sound a note of caution. Obviously, what is to count as ‘children’s verse’ in a given society depends on the local classification of ‘children’, and one cannot necessarily assume that the ‘children’s songs’ of another society are directly comparable with those of one’s own. In English society, for example, the contemporary concept of ‘a child’ is closely connected with the idea of a school population, a partly separate community of school children with their conventions and lore to some extent opposed to those of adults. It was suitable therefore that the main sources for the Opies’ classic work (1959) on children’s verse should have been the schools. But this close association of children and formal schools does not hold true in all areas of Africa—and was even less true in the past—and one cannot necessarily assume the same clear-cut separation between the interests and orientations of children and those of adults.

9 They are sometimes mentioned in passing for other peoples, e.g. Tracey 1929: 97 (nursery rhymes among Kalanga, Southern Rhodesia); Béart 1955, Ch. 6 (West Africa); Adali-Mortti 1958: 39 (nursery rhymes among the Ewe and other West African peoples); Hillelson 1918 (Arabic); Simmons 1955: 420–1 (Efik); Lambert 1959: 78.
This is not to say that there are no local or traditional ways of marking off the age-group of children from that of the adult world, merely that these do not necessarily parallel those of Western Europe. It is common for a ceremonial initiation to mark a clear dividing-line between childhood and maturity, often taking place at around the age of puberty, but in some societies (or with some individuals) this may be much earlier or much later. In some cases, initiation may be as young as, say, seven or eight years old, and the special initiation songs that are so often a feature of this ceremony might seem to parallel songs sung by similar age-groups in other societies. In fact they may be quite different in intention; they are to be sung by the children qua initiates (i.e. officially no longer children) and are often taught them by their elders. They cannot then be regarded as children’s songs in the sense we are using the term here. In some African societies, again, there is strong pressure from children, as they get older, to prove themselves ready to enter the adult world. This means that, besides having their own verse and games, they are likely to try to master certain of the songs and other activities regarded as suitable for adults, and, indeed, may be encouraged to do so. Among the Ilu and Tonga of Zambia, for instance, ziyabilo songs in praise of cattle and other possessions are sung by grown-up men; but many of these adult ziyabilo were in fact composed by their singers when they were still young boys minding their father’s cattle in the bush. The child thus models himself and his verse on his father and other adult men rather than concentrating on a special type appropriate to children (Jones 1943: 12–13).

One way in which children are often separated from other groups is in the kind of work they are expected to do, and there are sometimes special songs associated with such tasks. These include the light-hearted songs sung by the young Limba boys who spend long weeks in the rainy seasons in farm shelters scaring away the birds and animals from the ripening rice, or the children’s song among the Dogon, sung to discourage various birds from plundering the millet:

Oiseau, sors!
goro sors!
bandey sors!
Pour vous le mil n’est pas mûr.
Il n’est pas l’heure de manger le mil vert
Diarrhée du ventre.
Où il est parti le guérisseur de la diarrhée?
Il est parti à Banan10

10 A nearby village.
Il est parti à Banan; ce n’est pas le moment de venir.
Oiseau sors!
Tourterelle sors!
Pigeon sors. (Griaule 1938a: 220)

If the exact nature of ‘children’s verse’ must be seen as depending partly on the particular ideas of each society about age structure, assignment of tasks, and behaviour expected of the various age-groups, it does nevertheless seem that in most African societies children do to some extent separate themselves off from adults in at least some play activities and have at least some rhymes and songs of their own. This is encouraged by the fact that many of them live in large family groupings, with much time spent outside their own homes in the open air rather than in small, enclosed family circles. Nowadays, too, there is the additional factor of the increasing number of schools.

Nonsense songs, tongue-twisting rhymes, and trick verses are all documented. Ibo girls, for instance, sing a nonsense rhyme which could be translated as ‘Oh, oh, oh, oh, / girls agree / tall girl, Iruka / koko yams, / sour, sour koko yams, / he goat sour’, and tongue-twisters are recorded among the Mbete of West Central Africa and others:

\[\text{Kusa le podi kudi} — \text{Le liseron enlace le poteau.}\]
\[\text{Kudi le podi kusa} — \text{Le poteau enlace le liseron}\]
and
\[\text{Mva o kwadi nama} — \text{Le chien attrapa l’animal.}\]
\[\text{Nama o txwi mva} — \text{L’animal mordit le chien.}\] (Adam 1940: 133)

The nonsense frequently takes the form of a kind of follow-up or progressive rhyme, usually in dialogue. In one form or another, this type of verbal play has been recorded from several parts of the continent. The sequences may be just for fun or may also include a definite competitive content making up a kind of game. This is true of the Moru of the Southern Sudan where the children divide into two sides, one of which asks the questions. The answer depends on remembering the right sequence of words quickly enough, and those who get it wrong are ridiculed:

\[\text{A.} \quad \text{A’di ru doro maro ni ya? \quad Who has taken my bowl?}\]
\[\text{B.} \quad \text{Kumu au. \qquad Kumu has.}\]

11 Iyoo, o / Abo, kwekwe / ḫen, Iruka / ede / bwaloka, okawalede / nkpi bwaloka (Thomas 1913 iii: 51).
12 e.g. the West African Dogon (Griaule 1938a: 212–14) and possibly Fulani (if the examples of ‘chain-rhymes’ cited by Arnott 1957: 393ff. are intended for children, which seems not improbable), as well as the instances from the Swazi (South Africa), Mbete (West Central Africa), and Moru (Southern Sudan) mentioned below. Cf. also Gamble 1959: 82–3 (Wolof, Mandingo, and Fula), Blacking 1967: 101; 102; 116–17 (Venda); and catchword compositions (for adults) in Malawi (Macdonald 1882, i: 50–1).
Sometimes the verbal parallelism is less exact, as in the Swazi ‘children’s part-song’ in which the children are divided into two groups that take turns in singing a line, then join together at the end. It is not an action rhyme, but depends on the words and tune alone for its attraction:

A. Ye woman beyond the river!
B. We! (responding to the call)
A. What are you dusting?
B. I am dusting a skin petticoat.
A. What is a skin petticoat?
B. It is Mgamulafecele.
A. What have they killed?
B. They have killed a skunk.
A. Where did they take it?
B. To Gojogojane.
A. Who is Gojogojane?
B. He-who-eats-cowdung-when-hungry.
A. For whom would he leave (some of) it?
B. He would leave (some) for Shishane.

A. and B.
Shishane is not to blame,
The blame is for Foloza,
He who says he alone is handsome.
The hoes of Mbandzeni
They go knocking against him,
The knocker of Njikeni.
Magagula, Magagula keep the clod of earth tightly squeezed in your—.

(given as quoted in Englebrecht 1930: 10–11)
A more complicated form is quoted from the Mbete where the rhyme builds up in a cumulative way. Two children take part:

A. Sedi a nde? La gazelle où est-elle?
B. Sedi miye nkwi. La gazelle est allée au bois.
A. Omo a nde? La première où est-elle?
B. Omo milono sedi o nkwi. La première a suivi la gazelle au bois.
A. Oywole a nde? La deuxième où est-elle?
B. Oywole milono omo, La deuxième a suivi la première,
   Omo milono sedi o nkwi. La première a suivi la gazelle au bois.
A. Otadi a nde? La troisième où est-elle?
B. Otadi milono oywole, La troisième a suivi la deuxième,
   Oywole milono omo, La deuxième a suivi la première,
   Omo milono sedi o nkwi . . . La première a suivi la gazelle au bois . . .

and so on up to the tenth which involves the answerer repeating the whole sequence (Adam 1940: 132–3).

Other types of rhymes and songs are also recorded. There is the kind of catch rhyme exemplified by the Yoruba:

Who has blood? **Chorus.** Blood, blood.
Has a goat blood? „ Blood, blood.
Has a sheep blood? „ Blood, blood.
Has a horse blood? „ Blood, blood.
Has a stone blood? — —

in which the point of the game is to try to get some child to say ‘blood’ after an inanimate object. A mistake results in laughter and sometimes a friendly beating (Gbadamosi and Beier 1959: 55; 67). There also seem to be plenty of songs enjoyed for their own sakes or for their usefulness in mocking other children. A Dogon child with his head recently shaved will be greeted with

Crâne nu, lonlairé!
Viens manger un plat de riz,
Viens manger un plat de potasse,
Viens manger un plat de mil. (Griaule 1938a: 230)

while a Ganda child who has not washed may hear

Mr. Dirty-face passed here
And Mr. Dirtier-face followed. (Sempebwa 1948: 20)

Or again, a kind of general comment may be made as in the humorous and rueful song by a Yoruba child;

Hunger is beating me.
The soapseller hawks her goods about.

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13 Adam also gives an example where the response directly echoes the second half of the query (1940: 132).
14 Some of these are in the ‘chain-rhyme’ form.
But if I cannot wash my inside,
How can I wash my outside? (Gbadamosi and Beier 1959: 54)

So far we have concentrated on rhymes and songs that are mainly valued for their words or music rather than their relation to action. But there are also many examples of songs sung to accompany games or dances, or forming an integral part of them. A minor example would be the counting-out rhymes of the Dogon where those partaking are gradually eliminated according to whose leg the last syllable falls on at each subsequent repetition.² Yoruba children similarly use a rhyme as part of a hide-and-seek game. The searcher faces the wall singing his nonsense song while the others hide. When he reaches the question part of the song the others must reply in chorus, giving him a clue to their hiding-places:

Now we are playing hide and seek.
Let us play hide and seek.
Hey, tobacco seller,
This is your mother here,
Whom I am wrapping up in those leaves.
I opened the soup pot
And caught her right inside
Stealing meat!
Who nails the root?
Chorus. The carpenter.
Who sews the dress?
Chorus. The tailor. (etc.)

(Gbadamosi and Beier 1959: 55; 68)

Other action songs are more complicated in that they are based on imitation or on definite set dance patterns. Shona children, for instance, have an imitative song in which they circle round and round imitating an eagle catching small chickens (Taylor 1926: 38). Again, there are the Hottentot action songs based on the common principles of a ring or of two rows facing each other (Stopa 1938: 100–4).

A more detailed account of action songs is given by Tucker, drawing on his observation of children at mission schools in the Sudan in the 1930s (Tucker 1933). His conclusion is that the songs and games were not introduced by the missionaries themselves (or at least not consciously), but whatever the truth of this, it is in any case suitable to end by quoting from this account in some detail. Schools are becoming increasingly important in the lives of more and more children in Africa, and it is likely that similar
singing games—from whatever source—are now widespread (and thus accessible to study) among school groups.

The children whose round games were studied were mostly boys from various Southern Sudanese peoples (Nuer, Shilluk, Dinka, Bari, and Lotuko). The games are played on a moonlit night in the dry season and the singing, mostly in strophe and antistrophe, is led by one of the boys and accompanied by hand-clapping, foot-thumping, or the action of the game. Often the words themselves count for little. Sometimes the meaning is almost slurred out of recognition, and in this ‘the Shilluks and Nuers are the greatest offenders, some of their songs consisting of mere nonsense syllables, which they themselves do not pretend to understand. (In such cases they usually give out that the words are “Dinka”)’ (Tucker 1933: 166). The translations are therefore rather free.

Most of the singing games are based on the principle of a ring, the players squatting or standing in a circle. In one, the equivalent of ‘Hunt the slipper’, the players sit in a circle with their feet under them. The leader in the middle of the ring has to find a bracelet which is being passed surreptitiously round the ring. He sings, answered by the others as they slap their knees in time to the song:

Leader. Bracelet of my son’s wife,
Chorus. I want I want now, bracelet of poor Bana,
            It is lost

repeated over and over until the leader successfully challenges one of the circle who, if caught with the bracelet, has to take the leader’s place in the centre. (Ibid.: 166–7) Another action song based on a ring is a type of counting-out game:

The boys sit in a circle, or, it might be, at right-angle, with their feet stuck out straight in front of them. An elder boy squats on his haunches before them and chants a queer formula, much longer than any European equivalent, tapping the feet as he chants, till the last word is said. The foot last touched is ‘out’ and the owner must sit on it. He goes on in this way till everybody is sitting on both his feet, i.e. practically kneeling. He then begins with the first boy of the line. There is a formula and response, and then he bows down in front of the boy with his eyes shut and his head almost touching the boy’s knees. The boy has to stand up without touching the man’s head with his knees. (He may use his hands to help himself, if he wishes.) If the man hears the boy’s knees creak as he rises, the boy is made to stand on one side. If his knees do not creak, he stands somewhere else. Soon we have two groups—creaky and non-creaky knees. (Of course, the longer one is forced
to sit on one’s feet, the greater the likelihood of creaky knees!) . . . The game ends with the non-creaky knees pursuing the creaky knees and punishing them (Tucker 1933: 169–70).

Another ring game is the Lotuko one in which a boy in the centre, ‘the ape’, has to try to grab the leg of one of the boys dancing round him in a ring and to upset him. If he succeeds, they change places:

Here he goes around to steal
Break away
Bad ape.

Break away
Bad ape.

(Ibid.: 170)

There are also a number of games based on the idea of the arch or the line. In one the boys line up in two opposing ranks and one line advances slowly towards the other, which retreats, both sides singing:

The foreigner
Chin of a goat
The foreigner comes striding haughtily
With his red skin.

This is repeated several times, the two lines taking it in turn to advance. Suddenly the pace and verse change. Those advancing now run stiff-legged and try to kick the others’ shins, again singing over and over:

Why does the stranger hurry so?
Ha! ha! hurry so.
Why does the stranger hurry so?
Ha! ha! hurry so. (Ibid.: 182)

Tucker comments that ‘this game is definitely a hit at the white man. The “chin of a goat” in the first song refers to the beards of the R.C. missionaries (beards being considered unseemly among the Nilotic tribes); while the kicking in the second song is thought to be a skit on the average official’s use of his boots when angry or impatient’ (Tucker 1933: 183).

Chasing and following games also take place to sung words. In the Acholi version of ‘Follow my leader’ the boys stand in single file, holding each other’s waists, and the leader takes them in a closing circle to the words of the song ‘close in’, then worms his way out again, singing ‘open out’. The words of the song form the background. The verse ‘A dula dul dula na dula dul. A dula ye. Dula na dula dul. A dula kuk! Dula na dula dul. A dula ye’ means ‘close in’, while the same tune, with gonya instead of dula, means ‘open out’ (Ibid.: 179).
Finally there are imitations of animals. Some of these occur in chasing games like the Shilluk ‘Lion and sheep’, but in others the imitations seem to be taken more seriously. In one a boy doubles himself up to represent a frog and tries to jump backwards in a circle without falling over, in time to his companions’ song:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Jump up and down,} \\
\text{\quad \textit{Up and down.}} \\
\text{Jump up and down,} \\
\text{\quad \textit{Up and down.}} \\
\text{I shall jump again,} \\
\text{\quad \textit{Up and down.}} \\
\text{I shall jump again,} \\
\text{\quad \textit{Up and down?}}
\end{align*}
\]  

(Tucker 1933: 185)

In ‘Bush-buck in a trap’ the success of the game depends on the exactness of the leader’s imitation of the animal:

The boys stand in a ring, holding hands. One boy is in the middle, and he is ‘Gbodi’, the bush-buck. He sings suiting his actions to the words, and the others reply, copying him.

Thus, for example:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Gbodi shake your head, Gbodi shake your head.} \\
\text{\quad \textit{Kango.}} \\
\text{Gbodi crouch down, Gbodi crouch down.} \\
\text{\quad \textit{Kango.}} \\
\text{Gbodi scratch your ear, Gbodi scratch your ear.} \\
\text{\quad \textit{Kango.}} \\
\text{Gbodi stamp your foot, Gbodi stamp your foot.} \\
\text{\quad \textit{Kango.}} \\
\text{Gbodi snort and snuffle, Gbodi snort and snuffle.} \\
\text{\quad \textit{Kango.}} \\
\text{Gbodi break away now, Gbodi break away now.} \\
\text{\quad \textit{Kango.}}
\end{align*}
\]

At the words ‘Gbodi break away now’, he makes a wild dash for safety, and tries to break through the circle. If he fails, he has to act ‘Gbodi’ again (Ibid.: 184).

These are only a few of the singing games recorded by Tucker,\(^{15}\) and he himself claims to give only a random selection. But even this, he considers, ‘picked up casually from different corners of the Southern Sudan, and

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\(^{15}\) He gives twenty-four in all, fully illustrated with the music, original, and (usually) translation.
covering primitive races with mutually unintelligible languages, should serve to show the main foundations on which the great majority of children’s singing games are built . . . These foundations are, to all intents and purposes, identical with those that underlie the forms of European children’s games, viz. the ring, the arch and the line’ (Tucker 1933: 184).

It seems clear that many such singing games and other types of children’s songs remain to be collected or analysed.16 At the moment little can be said about the distribution of different types, the transmission of these forms among the children themselves, the degree of individual originality as against conventional forms,17 or the incidence of topical or other comment. What does seem certain is that the growing numbers of school children in contemporary Africa are likely more and more to develop their own distinct and conventional songs and games—increasingly it is in the schools that these can most easily and fruitfully be studied.

16 They are mentioned (or, in a few cases, described) for e.g. Kamba (Mbiti 1959: 259); Ganda (Sempebwa 1948: 20); Ewe (Jones 1959: 16–39); Ashanti (Nketia 1962: 67); Tswana (1933: 80); Mpama-Bakatu (Windels 1939: 19); children in Leopoldville (Comhaire-Sylvain 1949, 1952); Ibo (Nettl 1954a: 238–9); Efik (Simmons 1958); Hausa (Krieger 1955).

17 The Dogon examples collected by Griaule suggest the same kind of variations on a single theme for some of the verses as is evident in the many variants of the ‘same’ rhyme in the Opies’ collection of English school children’s rhymes.