

UC Merced

The Journal of California Anthropology

Title

"Playing Leaves": A Study of a Traditional Kashaya Pomo Play Behavior

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3db753kw>

Journal

The Journal of California Anthropology, 4(2)

Author

Clavaud, Donna

Publication Date

1977-12-01

Peer reviewed

“Playing Leaves”: A Study of a Traditional Kashaya Pomo Play Behavior

DONNA CLAUD

THE Kashaya are one of the smallest divisions of the north-central California people known as the Pomo. Original Kashaya Pomo territory extended some thirty miles along the Sonoma County coastline and about eight miles inland. Pre-contact Pomo cultural adaptation was characterized by a subsistence economy based on storable acorns, the collection of wild vegetal foods, and hunting and fishing; small, semi-permanent, self-governing villages; and informal guidance by a shaman or headperson (Barrett 1908; Gifford and Kroeber 1937; Stewart 1943). Today the Kashia Reservation is located near Stewarts Point in Sonoma County; however, many Kashaya Pomos live throughout the Russian River Valley from Healdsburg to Sebastopol. The existence today of many aspects of traditional Kashaya culture is due to an emphasis by religious leaders on isolationism and maintenance of traditional beliefs (Oswalt 1964:1-8; Kennedy 1955).

Kashaya Pomo, one of seven Pomo languages, is understood and spoken today by many adults, although English is preferred for socio-economic facility. Individuals under twenty years of age only rarely know Kashaya words and phrases. The Kashaya Pomo madrone leaf game, “Playing Leaves,” is a

traditional female play activity which is no longer practiced. In the game, behavior patterns, linguistic and non-linguistic, are employed in situations indicative of Kashaya Pomo cultural norms. In this preliminary study, I consider the game as a mechanism for reinforcement of cultural identity of the Pomo.¹

Playing leaves, a group activity involving primarily pre-adolescent girls, might be seen as a type of imitative play. Pettitt (1946) reported that the imitative play in pre-contact North American education focused around doll play for girls and bow and arrow play for boys, and that these games were most often presented by elders who instructed children in the proper way to play and often supervised the play. However, Pettitt also pointed out that imitation *per se* was not a primary feature of this education, and that if the term “imitation” is to be employed, it is necessary to emphasize that imitation was taught and was a development of training (Pettitt 1946:46). In *The Child in Primitive Society*, Miller (1928:151) observed that “. . . play is the most adequate introduction to life, and imitation the indispensable medium by which a culture is made continuous, preserved, and may become the basis of further accumulation and increase.” Imitative

model play may represent a buffered learning experience for future appropriate adult behavior (Roberts and Sutton-Smith 1962). Thus, child play investigators, in suggesting there is evidence that child training variables are systematically related to play modelling, lend encouraging support to a theory of the importance of play in enculturation (Lancy 1975, personal communication; Roberts and Sutton-Smith 1962).

The study of child play in general has frequently attracted the attention of psychoanalysts and researchers concerned with cognitive development. Erickson (1950:186) proposed that "the child's play is the infantile form of the human ability to deal with experience by creating model situations and to master reality by experiments and planning." Piaget (1972) considered child play important because "in order for a child to understand something. . . he must construct it himself, he must re-invent it." Play also functions in adjusting an individual emotionally to his cultural surroundings (Peller 1971:124). Observations have shown that adults set child play readiness and norms; that play functions in a preparatory, exploratory, and socializing capacity; and that through play a child learns categories of behavior.

Although theories such as those of Erickson and Piaget clarify some of the functions of generalized child play, most psychoanalytic doll play research in particular has limited its focus to behavioral variables such as aggression, stereotypy, or prejudice,² which represent only a small sample of a child's growing repertoire of behaviors. A study of doll play of the kind represented by playing leaves demands a methodological/theoretical focus which potentially takes into consideration a wide range of behavioral variables integrated into a socio-cultural system.

Geertz (1972) suggested as an approach to play the utilization of the notions of "text" and "context." He sees the play form as a social text

only to be understood in its larger socio-cultural context, the former "interpretive" of the latter. Texts in context "allow one to see dimensions of one's own subjectivity" (Geertz 1972:28). Therefore, as a group activity, playing leaves, a type of imitative doll play, can be seen to represent varying socio-linguistic texts involving situations which reflect cultural behavior, attitudes, and values characteristic of the larger Kashaya Pomo context in which they take place.

A brief survey of ethnographic accounts of California Indian populations yields rare mention of doll play behavior. Loeb (1926:122) briefly mentioned the Pomo use of wild parsnip tops or images of clay for dolls which were made to talk to one another or were taken into the dance house and made to dance. However, he was not specific as to which Pomo groups he meant, and there is no mention of playing leaves in any of the Pomo ethnographic literature.

The present study is based on ethnographic data from taped conversations with five Kashaya Pomo informants who represent a three generational sample (elder, adult, young adult).³ No observations of a live play situation were possible.

The term "playing leaves" refers to a play activity always performed outside on the ground among the grasses. It took place during leisure hours and, in the past, while resting; for example, during food-collecting trips. Although played throughout the year, playing leaves took place more often from early spring until the rains in the late fall. Participants were primarily girls 3-14 years in ages and adult women—mothers, aunts, and grandmothers. Young boys 3-11 years in age sometimes observed but never participated. The play activity consisted of three stages: (1) a search for appropriate madrone leaves; (2) the construction of a play area; and (3) playing leaves.

Madrone (*Arbutus menziesii* Pursh.) leaves were the only leaves appropriate for use

in the play, and they were chosen according to shape, size, and color.⁴ Leaf selection criteria were passed on to young girls by their female elders. A girl learned which madrones were the best trees by "checking them." Medium-sized trees were preferred because they had thick leaves with good stems. The branches of large trees were out of reach and the leaves of small trees were soft. "Fresh" leaves on a branch were selected over old leaves on the ground. Branches approximately three feet long were carried to the play area so that extra leaves were always available.

Leaves were selected to represent kin groupings, the size of a leaf family varying from 5-8 members. In the available data, the criteria for associating leaf types with leaf persons show a three generational patterning (see Table 1). During the winter, green leaves were selected for shape and size. Shape designated sex and size designated age; the resultant

grouping designated a family consisting of generations of age-ranked females and males. As the summer progressed, color (i.e., non-green) was a variable that combined with shape and/or size to designate (a) a female in a pretty dress; (b) an adult woman (yellow); (c) a young girl (red); (d) babies and/or grandmothers (multi-colored, worm-marked); or (e) ethnicity (e.g., White [white]). Multi-colored, worm-marked leaves were prized as the most beautiful and were used to represent grandmothers, babies, or pretty women.

One informant recalled that in the spring when most of the madrone leaves were still green, young boys helped the girls acquire leaves by either climbing to the treetops to reach the newly-turning colored leaves or by using sticks to knock the leaves to the ground. Occasionally, colored leaves were saved for use again in playing leaves.

Using mussel shells, or more recently such

Table 1
MADRONE LEAF SELECTION CRITERIA
SHOWING A THREE GENERATIONAL PATTERNING
IN ITS CORRELATION WITH LEAF PERSONAGES

First criterion: shape, designating sex; second criterion: size, designating age; third and seasonal criterion: color, designating sex, age, relationships, or role distinctions as noted. Informant code: 1, elder female; 2, adult male; 3, adult female; 4, young adult female; 5, elder male (no data).

MADRONE LEAVES	PERSONS											
	Grand-father	Grand-mother	Adult Male	Adult Female	Young Female	Pretty Female	Young Male	Baby Male	Baby Female	Indian	White	Nationalities
SHAPE												
Thin	--	--	1	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
Wide	--	--	--	1	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
Round tip	--	2	--	2, 3, 4	2, 3, 4	3, 4	--	--	2, 3, 4	--	--	--
Sharp tip	2	--	2, 3, 4	--	--	--	2, 3, 4	2, 3, 4	--	--	--	--
SIZE												
Small	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	1, 2, 3, 4	1, 2, 3, 4	--	--	--
Medium	--	--	--	--	2	--	2	--	--	--	--	--
Large	--	--	2	2	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
Extra-large	2	2	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
Long stem	--	--	1	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
Short stem	--	--	--	1	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
COLOR												
Yellow	--	--	--	2	--	3	--	--	--	--	--	1
Red	--	--	--	--	2	--	--	--	--	--	--	1
Green	2	2	2, 3, 4	2, 3, 4	2, 4	2, 4	2, 4	2, 4	2, 4	1	--	--
White	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	1	--
Multi-color	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
Worm-marked	--	2	--	4	4	3, 4	--	2	2, 4	--	--	--

scraping implements as can lids, a clearing was made in the dirt for a play area. The shape of the total play area could be circular, linear, or irregular. A living space was scraped out for each leaf family, with an entrance, a fire inside or outside, and, more recently, a well and outhouse nearby. Fences were built out of pepperwood or oak twigs and pathways were sketched out in the dirt to connect living spaces. The youngest informant said that bits of colored glass were sometimes used for making these connecting pathways. Another informant said that acorns were used to represent pigs, brown rocks to designate browsing deer, and another colored rock to represent a dog. This informant also said that young boys often fashioned other animal shapes out of mud for the girls to use in playing leaves.

Older informants stated that living spaces were furnished with beds made of grasses or leaves (but not madrone leaves). Younger informants remember the use of mussel shells, wood chips, bottle tops, and construction paper for tables, chairs, and beds. One criterion constant over time has been that the beds had to be long enough for various family members to lie upon.

Girls, ranging in age from three to eight years old, learned to play leaves by observing and listening to older participants, and later by actively taking part. Older women sometimes played leaves among themselves and girls watched and listened as the women had the leaves act out various situations. Girls and women also were often participants in the same play text. Some women who "sat around all the time" participated in the leaf play more frequently than women who were busy caring for large families.

A rule of now unknown origin prohibited active male participation; i.e., a boy was told that if he played leaves, his penis would "grow so long that it dragged on the ground." However, two male informants said that boys up to eleven years of age used to sit on the

periphery of the play area and watch and listen. Although one informant commented that, as a boy, he helped girls playing leaves by getting new leaves to replace damaged ones, and by correcting their texts when they were manipulating leaves in male roles, women informants stated that boys were never involved, directly or indirectly, in playing leaves.

After the onset of menses, a Kashaya Pomo woman throughout her lifetime obeyed traditional restrictions and taboos associated with menstruation. These "rules" restricted when a female could play leaves or even gather madrone leaves for someone else to use in the game. If such rules were violated, bad health and misfortune would ensue.

The number of active participants in leaf play averaged four persons, however sometimes as many as eight were involved. Each participant manipulated two to three leaf families. A participant held a family of leaves ranked, according to size and age, in the palm of her hand, and moved them across the dirt in a group. Individual leaf persons "going visiting" were passed from player to player until a desired destination was reached. Participants could drop out at any time and the play could go on. Playing leaves could always be interrupted and left if necessary and returned to later by one or all. Incentive to play leaves was often dependent upon individual personality; one informant remembers that she preferred to watch because she didn't know what to say in particular situations.

Ways of speaking varied according to the situation. One informant said that her "old people" had told her, "You'll learn to speak playing leaves." Other informants recalled learning new words "by seeing how they [the leaves] acted," and one said, "we just talked like the people did; older corrected younger; I remember I used to hear some words that we never used everyday, when the older ladies played."

Specific sound segments were uttered as

leaf persons with particular characteristics were manipulated; girls when walking made a "coosh, coosh" sound; men walking with heavy loads sounded like "dip, dip"; babies crawling made a "cuss, cuss" sound. Madrone leaves were selected for stems or "legs" which made effective ticking sounds when the leaves were walked along dirt or glass pathways. Deep registers were used when impersonating male voices; higher registers were used for women's voices. Voices and gestures of specific individuals were also imitated. One informant remembers imitating the "old people's language" by using "e-naaay," a Kashaya exclamation.

Informants also commented on variations in naming leaf persons. Older informants, who referred to the leaves as "play dolls," did not name leaf persons; their elders had told them not to use names for fear of using someone's name and consequently being poisoned. Younger informants reported giving names to leaves. Female leaves often had fruit or flower names, and one pretty female leaf was named "Miss Water." Further study is necessary for understanding name-use patterning and its possible changes through time.

In answer to a question concerning suitable topics for playing leaves, one informant said, "We did what the people do . . . if you know how, act out men hunting rabbits, squirrels [or] catching fish; let women pound and soak acorns." Another informant remarked that "they [girls] see and hear stories of life and can repeat them." Other informant comments indicate that playing leaves included such situations as picking berries, going hunting, going fishing, coming home, going to a wedding, getting married, and harvesting. The youngest informant also spoke of going to work and going to school. Participants recreated these real-life situations and exchanged information about each other's family lives. One older informant remarked in retrospect that "playing leaves was learning the life of the Indian, looking back to how things are done,

and pretending to be people, talking and living." Another commented that leaf play involved "what they [girls] saw and what they heard and the things that they would like to have or would like to do."

Through leaf play, girls learned "how to set up a family and to care for them as they grew"; older female kin taught younger girls the "rules" associated with menstruation; and girls practiced "manners." Linguistic styles and texts were developed in "jaw-talking," in which participants learned to "call each other down" and "talk back." Jaw-talking was also extended to play interactions in which leaves represented Whites in "ancient times." In interpreting playing leaves, informants recalled there was no conflict between participants as a result of "jaw-talk" or someone's portrayal of one's self or one's family. One informant remembers laughing about how others saw her behavior. Participants did not see playing leaves as having serious consequences for real-life personal interactions.

Stories of the past and present were often incorporated into playing leaves. These stories relayed cultural information about Kashaya Pomo history (e.g., times of plenty and times of hard winters or drought). Myth was also used; for example, the myth about Coyote the Creator.

Not every Kashaya Pomo cultural activity could be recreated in leaf play. Reenactment of roundhouse activities was forbidden because religious ceremonies could never be "mocked." Dreamers' songs could not be used; however, it was permissible to use some songs learned from elders (e.g., "hand-doctoring songs,") in the re-creation of certain curing ceremonies.

Playing leaves, a game representing texts in context, is clearly a Kashaya Pomo reading of Kashaya Pomo experience and is, as Geertz (1972:26) says, "a story they tell themselves about themselves." The participants act as both subject and object in a jointly created event. The young, in trying varying social

Table 2
CONTRIBUTIONS OF "PLAYING LEAVES" TO CULTURAL SURVIVAL
 Adapted from Lansley (1969)

CONSTANT COMPONENTS IN PLAYING LEAVES	CONDITIONS FOR CULTURAL SURVIVAL							
	Production, Repair, Maintenance of Material Goods	Maintenance of Optimum Population Level	Socialization/Enculturation	Maintenance of Normative Order	Provision of Leadership	Maintenance of Communication	Maintenance of Common World-View	No Apparent Contribution to Cultural Survival
Madrone leaf used	(+)	-	-	+	-	-	-	-
Leaf selection criteria	(+)	(+)	+	+	-	+	+	-
Family members as dolls	-	+	+	+	-	-	-	-
Use of indigenous resources	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Imitation of economic activities	+	+	+	+	-	+	+	-
Imitation of values, beliefs	-	-	+	-	-	-	+	-
Focus on homemaking	+	+	+	-	-	-	-	-
Elders teach young	-	-	+	-	-	+	-	-
Elders play with young	-	-	(+)	(+)	(+)	+	-	-
Young observe elders play	-	-	+	+	-	+	+	-
Kinship terms used	-	-	-	+	-	+	+	-
Kashaya language used	-	-	+	-	-	+	+	-
English language used	-	-	+	-	-	+	-	-
New words learned	-	-	+	-	-	+	-	-
Leaf family interaction	-	(+)	-	-	(+)	+	-	-
Myths and legends told	-	-	-	-	-	+	+	-
"Jaw talking"	-	-	-	+	+	+	+	-
"Hand doctoring" songs	-	(+)	-	+	-	+	+	-
"K ^h ela" restrictions	-	(+)	+	+	-	(+)	+	-
Ruling prohibits boys	-	(+)	+	+	-	-	+	-

Note: + Indicates positive value to unit
 (+) Indicates provisional positive value to unit
 - Indicates no data obtained for unit

roles, learn that all roles have a relationship to one another. In playing leaves, the participation of older community members—mothers, aunts, grandmothers, cousins, and sisters—acted as regulatory mechanisms in the socialization of the younger girls to the Kashaya Pomo cultural norms of behavior. The game disclosed patterns of importance in Kashaya Pomo culture and thus functioned to integrate and to preserve cultural identity.

Lansley's (1969) analysis of twelve play activities collected from four Melanesian societies revealed an inconclusive (though positive) correlation in the contribution of these activities to cultural survival; however, his analytic categories appear useful in the study of doll play, especially of the kind represented by playing leaves. My preliminary findings suggest that playing leaves has made a significant contribution to Kashaya Pomo cultural survival. In Table 2, adapted from Lansley (1969), we find that 20 components in playing leaves held constant over time and space for three generations and, when correlated with seven proposed conditions for cultural survival, show strong positive values for maintenance of communication, socialization, and enculturation; maintenance of normative order; and the maintenance of common world-view. Variations are due to (1) the mode of lifestyle maintained at a particular time; (2) the flora and material resource availability; (3) influence of individual preference or individual family tradition; and (4) degree of acculturation.

As Geertz (1972:29) has so eloquently stated, "the culture of a people is the ensemble of its texts, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong[;] societies, like lives, contain their own interpretation—one has only to gain access to them." Playing leaves and other text-in-context play situations involving role portrayal, the reenactment of real-life situations, and language use offer the investigator po-

tential insights into the cultural patternings of a people. Moreover, the data which have been presented in this preliminary study indicate that playing leaves is significant in that it has been a traditional mechanism for socializing and enculturating Kashaya Pomo children; consequently, it has potential value today as one means of encouraging the survival of Kashaya Pomo ways.

In a recent review of the anthropological study of play, Schwartzman (1976) urges play investigators to focus future work on studies of children's activities in order to define variations, innovations, and cultural contact changes, and thus obtain further understanding of the dynamics of the interaction between the physical and social environments. In arguing that cultural values and beliefs, social institutions and forms, roles and personalities, and the history and ecology of a community are inextricably entwined with the communicative events of that community, Hymes (1974) urges that socio-linguistic studies include a concern with the child's integration into the communicative economy of its community. As this study of a traditional form of play indicates, play behaviors, as communicative events,⁵ contain varying linguistic texts and situations in which language acquisition and usage skills are a natural and integral part of the larger cultural context. Investigation of such activities as playing leaves, a potentially effective adaptive mechanism for reinforcing cultural identity, would add to our understanding of the diverse, yet highly interdependent modes of interaction between language and culture.

*Sonoma State College
Rohnert Park*

NOTES

1. I sincerely thank each Kashaya Pomo informant who contributed information to make this effort possible. I am also indebted to Shirley Silver

for her continuous support, reinforcing comments, and editing efforts; to D. Lancy and B. Guillemin for valuable comments and criticisms; and to M. Clavaud for his help and patience during this study. Any errors or misinterpretations are of my own making. This study was conducted as part of the Kashaya Pomo Language in Culture Project, whose research was supported by a grant from the Education Program Division of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH Grant No. EH-20095-74-381). A preliminary presentation of this paper entitled "An Ethnographic Description and Analysis of the Kashaya Pomo Madrone Leaf Game as a Study in the Ethnography of Communication" appeared as Working Paper No. 18, Kashaya Pomo Language in Culture Project, Department of Anthropology, Sonoma State College.

2. Some of this research is summarized by H. Levin and E. Wardwell (1971) in their paper entitled "The Research Uses of Doll Play."

3. For convenience only, informants will be referred to by a number system (see Table 1): (1) elder female; (2) adult male; (3) adult female; (4) young adult female; and (5) elder male. Elder male gave no data concerning madrone leaf selection.

4. Informants do not recall myths concerning the madrone leaf, or songs or legends of persons or animal characters playing leaves.

5. My survey of the socio-linguistic literature has yet to reveal an ethnography of communication study specifically of doll play.

REFERENCES

- Barrett, S.A.
1908 *The Ethno-Geography of the Pomo and Neighboring Indians*. University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology 6(1).
1952 *Material Aspects of Pomo Culture*. 2 vols. Bulletin of the Milwaukee Public Museum No. 20.
- Erickson, Erik
1950 *Childhood and Society*. New York: Norton.
- Geertz, Clifford
1972 *Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight*. *Daedalus* 101:1-37.
- Gifford, E.W., and A.L. Kroeber
1937 *Culture Element Distribution, IV: Pomo*. University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology 37(4).
- Hymes, Dell
1974 *Foundations in Sociolinguistics: An Ethnographic Approach*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Kennedy, Mary Jean
1955 *Culture Contact and Acculturation of the Southwestern Pomo*. Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley.
- Lancy, David
1975 *The Role of Games in the Enculturation of Children*. Paper presented at the 74th Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, San Francisco.
- Lansley, Keith
1969 *The Contribution of Play Activities to the Survival of Traditional Culture in Four Melanesian Societies*. Unpublished manuscript, University of Alberta, Edmonton.
- Levin, Harry, and Elinor Wardwell
1971 *The Research Uses of Doll Play*. In *Child's Play*, R.E. Herron and B. Sutton-Smith, eds., pp. 145-184. New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc.
- Loeb, Edwin M.
1926 *Pomo Folkways*. University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology 19(2).
- Miller, Nathan
1928 *The Child in Primitive Society*. New York: Brentanos.
- Oswalt, Robert
1964 *Kashaya Texts*. University of California Publications in Linguistics 36.
- Peller, Lili E.
1971 *Models of Children's Play*. In *Child's Play*, R.E. Herron and B. Sutton-Smith, eds., pp. 110-125. New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc.

- Pettitt, George
1946 Primitive Education in North America. University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology 43(1).
Ethnology 1:166-185.
- Piaget, Jean
1972 Some Aspects of Operation. *In* Play and Development, M.W. Piers, ed., pp. 15-27. New York: W.W. Norton and Co., Inc.
- Roberts, J.M., and Brian Sutton-Smith
1962 Child Training and Game Involvement. Schwartzman, Helen
1976 The Anthropological Study of Children's Play. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 5:289-328.
- Stewart, O.C.
1943 Notes on Pomo Ethnogeography. University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology 40(2).

