

Peer play and pastoral knowledge transmission: what a game can teach

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This talk will illustrate the process of child-to-child learning and transmission of pastoral knowledge through peer play in pastoralist societies of East Africa. Starting from an ethnographic account of the “herding game” played by Hamar male children (Petrollino, 2024), the talk will illustrate the importance of child agency in the transmission of cattle management and pastoral ecological knowledge.

During the game children learn from each other the communicative technology needed in livestock management work: this includes the pastoralists’ categorisation system for livestock, and the rich lexicon for coat colours and patterns, its semantic distinctions and categorization principles. The game also allows children to learn and practice the communicative style typical of human-animal interactions: this includes the Hamar system of address for cattle, animal-directives and “bell-ideophones”.

This ethnographic account illustrates how children become not only “speakers of culture” in Ochs’ sense (2002), but also competent users of linguacultural practices essential for the central activities of a pastoral society. This peer-to-peer process of knowledge transmission is moreover a context for linguacultural maintenance, given that the herding game is played by children who are educated according to the traditional pastoral culture: child-focused ethnographies are thus significant in the light of the progressive spread of national education based on Western ideologies, and the endangerment of traditional educational practices.

In addition to describing herding games and revealing the dynamics through which children learn how to become competent herders, the aim of the talk will be also to reflect on the contribution of anthropological linguistics to our understanding of indigenous modes of knowledge transmission and social practices. As argued by Ng’asike (2015) for the Turkana pastoralists in Kenya, more research in this domain is needed in order to develop culturally responsive pedagogies which reflect the African philosophy and vision of childhood education (cf. for example Aikenhead 2001).

References

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