

"LIAR, LIAR, PANTS ON FIRE!" THE SURVIVAL OF CHILDLORE

Photo: Henk Piker



**What's the time?
Half past nine,
Hang your knickers
On the line.
When the copper
Comes along,
Hurry up and
Put them on.**

I picked up this rhyme, used as a cheeky response to an everyday question, from Louise, one of the seven-year-olds I was teaching last year. It is word for word the same piece that I recall bubbling over some eighteen years ago. Although some four generations of schoolkids have been and gone, the rhyme was passed on because of its appeal and its strength.

This is an example of childlore or school-lore: the language, the rhymes and songs, tricks and pranks, games, beliefs and codes that make up a distinct body of children's culture, and which circulate freely between the ages of six and seven and the onset of puberty.

What are the characteristics of this sub-culture, so neglected that it does not even have an agreed name? As with folklore, the material is anonymous, and the origins of any piece are almost always unknown. The familiar and commonplace is more valued than the original. Thus much of the lore has acquired a ritual character, to be sung or said in a particu-

lar time or place, and in a particular manner, as with jeers like "Tell tale tit" or "Liar, liar, pants on fire."

Differences of age are usually more significant than differences of sex. The material known by an eleven-year-old is distinct in many ways from that known by a seven-year-old, but there is relatively free exchange between girls and boys of the same age. In a similar way, childlore acts as a great social leveller—there is little to distinguish the type of lore learned by working-class or middle-class kids.

Details and specific 'pieces' may vary according to the region, the school or even the child, while at the same time certain rhymes such as "eeny meeny miny mo" or games such as 'British Bulldog' are found in one form or another in all English-speaking countries. Much childlore, games and jokes especially, is communicated from language to language, 'kick the can', for example, being found throughout north-west Europe.

Above all, childlore is an oral tradition, passed on from mouth to mouth and requiring direct contact between children. Only very rarely does a rhyme originate in a book, and even then it is either transmitted orally or it fades. By and large childlore is exchanged at school, and at play especially, among classmates, or very often is learned at home from older brothers and sisters. Sometimes it is imported from visiting friends or relatives or even (to confound the rules) occasionally from adults—grandparents in particular, while playing with their kids and recalling their own buried lore.

It was through my own interest in the oral tradition of folksong and folk or regional culture that I was reminded of the existence of a distinct schoolkids' culture. At the end of my teaching practice at Kingston School in East Sussex, England, I decided that I would interview as many of the pupils as possible and collect their lore and language on tape.

As resident student-teacher, the kids knew I was different, not one of the 'real teachers' somehow, and I had built up a friendly relationship with most of them (sometimes too friendly when it came to class control!). This trust was essential for me to be able to coax the lore out of them, especially as it required healthy quantities of cheek and rudeness.

I made up a provisional list of categories and appropriate questions to ask, such as "do you know any rhymes about TV characters?", "any songs about school dinners?", and interviewed groups of up to four kids at a time in a relaxed 'you can tell me anything you like' atmosphere. My tape recorder was perched at a discreet distance.

Most children opened up immediately, and were both amazed and tickled that a grown-up should take any interest in what they exchanged so readily between one another. It was not simply a one-way process. I would encourage them with "that's a really good one" or even "when I was at school it used to go like this..." On occasion I introduced rhymes that gained instant popularity, such as a particularly attractive rhyme about school dinners, involving



**snot and bogie pie
all mixed up
with a dead dog's eye.**

—embarrassingly well received and repeated! In this way I tried to weaken the barriers between myself and the children, not only the social barrier of teacher to pupil but also a generation gap. Several came up to see me later on to give me “more stuff they’d forgotten to tell.”

The kids clearly took delight in playing with language, whether in rhyme, song or joke, and in learning what supple and creative tools words can be. Repetition and familiarity with material only strengthens this process. Originality, if it counts at all, is limited to improvisation within the set pattern and, most important, to the delivery of a piece.

Children, as in any sub-culture, have to an extent evolved their own vocabularies according to their special requirements. For ‘french skipping’ the girls at Kingston had given names to the different skips, such as ‘daisies, flips, sevenses, Z-cars, diamonds,

catapults, strawberries, squashed tomatoes and walkie-talkies’. There are slang words to cover most subjects of interest to schoolkids from playing truant (‘skiveing’) to farting (‘to blow off’).

The enjoyment of words for words’ sake (or rather sounds for sounds’ sake) is caught in nonsense rhymes and songs such as:

**om pom pee karolee karolosti
om pom pee karolee
om pom pee karolee karolosti
om pom pee karolee
akadairy sosoree
akadairy otcout
eeny meeny makaraka
eye eye donsna
nicka sucka**

om pom poosh

—a hand-clapping song/rhyme to exercise not only verbal skills but also co-ordination. Tongue twisters are always popular as a test of dexterity and among the most enduring pieces of lore for children of all ages:

**she sells sea shells
on the sea shore:
the shells she sells
are sea shells I’m sure**

—which is known throughout Kingston, probably owing its origins to the music hall, some hundred years ago.

Older children especially take delight in mock recitations, delivered in full-dressed rhetorical style:

**There is a little breath of air
Passing through your heart
And when it reaches open air
It’s commonly called a fart.
A fart is very useful,
It gives your body ease,
It warms your little pants
And kills off all the fleas.**

Mischief is perhaps the supreme form of pleasure for a schoolkid, and parodies of poems and prayers, hymns, carols and other songs knocked into them 'for their better edification' provide a necessary escape valve for frustration, and a way of getting even. The parody versions of 'while shepherds washed their socks by night' and 'we three kings' are better known than the proper versions. Schoolkids need to poke their tongues at the figures of authority that threaten the spontaneous expression of their energies—parents, teachers, headmasters, Jesus, God, the Queen. . . . Perhaps the most common rhyme at Kingston was

**Yum, yum, bubblegum,
Stick it up the teacher's bum.**

Swap the word 'teacher' for mother, father, Mr. _____, Mrs. _____, and you have a simple verbal tool to debunk any adult and an enjoyable piece of rudery at the same time. As for religion:

**Jesus Christ, Superstar,
He walks like a woman
And he wears a bra.**

serves as a healthy response to enforced 'acts of daily worship'. I also collected a parody of the opening swell of the national anthem:

**God save our gracious Queen,
Covered in salad cream. . .**

—succinct and effective. Nor can I refrain from passing on a rhyme to scandalize those lofty custodians of the 'British Way of Life' who seized on Jubilemania to instil an ancient reverence for monarchy and its trappings among schoolkids:

**In nineteen seventy-six
The Queen pulled down her
nicks,
She licked her bum**

**And said, "Yum, yum!"
In nineteen seventy-six.**

—popular again with children of all ages, especially the younger ones!

The attention given to the delivery and performance of a piece is clearly seen with children's jokes. The ability to tell a good joke well, to get things in the right order, to build up anticipation, and to time the punchline properly, requires an impressive range of skills, and brings with it respect, popularity, and 'face'. (It's particularly amusing to hear the six-year-olds who get it all wrong and usually miss the 'hook'!) This early sense of the importance of tone and timing in the use of language, and of ritual, is usually stressed further in the ever-popular games of 'mind-reading' and 'fortune-telling', which require a suitably dramatic atmosphere.

The ritual aspects of childlore are also clear in the stock rhyme responses to a crybaby ("cry baby bunting . . .") or a coward ("cowardy cowardy custard. . ."). There are rites and rhymes for particular occasions from somebody's birthday to the end of the school term, and even rhymes to celebrate the weather ("It's raining, it's pouring. . ."). The lore provides a framework that children can latch onto, to find a measure of stability and familiarity in a shifting and often threatening world. It may even provide a vehicle for initiation into different phases of life; thus certain games and jokes help a child handle the changes that prefigure the onset of puberty.

In other ways, too, kids learn for themselves the need for agreement and trust. In their games they evolve codes of behaviour which require a



marked degree of organization and co-operation. For any game of 'tag' or 'he' there are agreed rules—this area is 'out of bounds', this area is 'home', and so on.

There is always a code word for calling a truce. Over forty different truce words are current in Britain, the most popular at Kingston being 'paxies'. Similarly, set formulas or codes exist for making friends, for placing a bet, for swapping, for promising not to tell a secret.

I was amazed at the amount and the range of the childlore I collected, only a very limited part of which I

have conveyed here. But although the lore remains strong and rooted it is also sensitive and susceptible to the many influences of contemporary 'metropolitan' culture that threaten its very existence. Comparing my own study to that made by Iona and Peter Opie in the 'fifties (*The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*, Oxford UP, 1959), there was a net loss. It is not simply a matter of nostalgically regretting the passing of quaint old ways. Childlore responds to the needs of children in a way that cannot be replaced. It is and has always been created *by* children *for* children.

The media in particular pose an obvious menace to a homegrown children's culture, imposing an adult 'overview' and often callously exploiting children to serve a commercial end. Children are being changed from active participants in their own culture to passive consumers.

Television is used as a pacifier or a sedative for the child's energies. The problem is clearly not simple. No parent can be expected to devote all their time and attention to their kids; many are worried about letting them on the streets, and television provides what seems an ideal solution to keeping them occupied and 'out of harm's way'.

Meanwhile the advertising companies pump the kids full of 'pap and crap' about products that are usually harmful to children in one way or another, and condition them towards taking their place in the consumer society. There can be no illusion about the intentions of the ad-men. A top official of an American cereal company states, "with TV we began to

sell our product before they could talk. They know who the TV characters are before they say full sentences.”

Childlore is exploited by the use of slogans, the slang and even the tone of voice, the false sincerity and jollity used in commercials. Its local dialectal aspects are undermined by the uniformity of ‘received pronunciation’ and vocabulary. Television may give parents a respite but it has a largely negative effect and impact on children and their own culture.

Only a small amount of the material I collected was inspired in any way by television—a couple of jokes about Kojak, Starsky and Hutch, and a few jingles. This lack of overt references to TV might be taken as evidence that it has little impact. But as a ‘look and forget’ rather than a ‘look and learn’ medium, television takes creativity away from kids and gives nothing in return. Programs ‘wash over’ the child’s mind, allowing no time for the process of assimilation, repetition and attention to details that is essential to learning, and that childlore permits. Programs come and go—they may be referred to in school the next day, but are then quickly forgotten.

The effect of comic magazines is double-edged. The content of some reflects the same tendency as TV towards overt adult manipulation and social conditioning. For example, the war comics condition boys to associate masculinity, heroism and aggression; yet many kids’ comics, in Britain at least, relate more to the traditional concerns, the language and learning patterns of childlore. With comics children can assimilate material in their own time

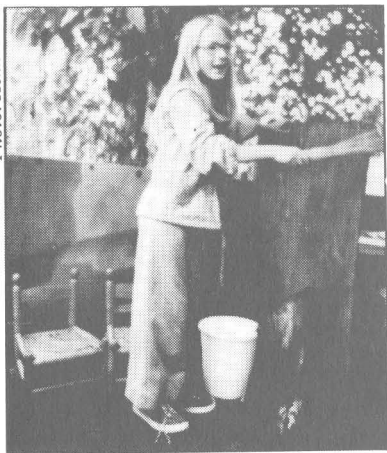


Photo: Henk Piker

and on their own terms.

More problematic is the impact of pop—both the star-swooning ragmags and the discs are pitched at pre-pubescent kids as well as at teenagers, girls in particular. Penetrating ever deeper into childhood, ‘weenybopper’ pop replaces the often elaborate skipping and hand-clapping songs with commercial romantic ‘slop’, masquerading as love and genuine feelings. It’s not easy to tackle such exploitation: the ad-men will protest “we are only giving them what they want, what they ask for”, but these requirements are themselves conditioned on all sides by a society dominated by commercial interests. It becomes difficult to distinguish between what is natural and what is artificially induced—difficult, but all the more important.

An even greater threat to boys in Britain is ‘football kulcha’ (sic)—the mindless chants, cheers, rhymes, and fragments of song that accompany soccer matches. The kulcha is



typified by crudity, brutality, lack of imagination and blatantly anti-social attitudes. Young kids are especially vulnerable, of course: it is more daring to recite rhymes that are obscene rather than simply rude. It makes a lad look 'big', because the kulcha is created by older boys as a reflection of and as a reaction to a world that relegates them to the economic and social rubbish heap. With its stress on the violent, the crude and the ugly, football kulcha is to an alarming extent replacing child-lore among boys under the age of ten.

I'm not knocking soccer as a sport, but the crass mass culture it has spawned—and lost control of. This is the verbal side of hooliganism. At its most basic, and it is pretty basic, football kulcha is concerned with two things only: blind adulation of your own team, and denigration and hatred of the opposing team, supporters, and usually the referee. These examples, all collected at Kingston but common throughout Britain, speak for themselves.

A rhyme to insult opposing

supporters is put to a fragment of the country and western classic "Distant Drums":

**Over there!
Over there!
And do they smell?
Like fuckin' 'ell!**

A fragment of the Welsh national anthem is used to insult rival teams as:

**Man. United, Man. United,
You're not fit to wipe yer bums!**

Note that both the above exist only as fragments—football kulcha is essentially unimaginative and cannot usually sustain complete songs or rhymes.

A standard insult to a referee who has made a decision against your team is to chant (to the tune of "Clementine"):

**'Oo's a bastard
'Oo's a bastard
'Oo's a bastard referee?
'Oo's a bastard
'Oo's a bastard
'Oo's a bastard referee?**

—a skipping rhyme to this tune would shift focus from line to line, but football kulcha is so uncreative that there is no variation.

My objections are not based on narrow moral grounds. Football kulcha is exploiting boys in a similar way to pornography exploiting men, by preying upon natural urges and concerns and perverting them into an anti-social force. It is a relatively easy step from verbal to physical violence.

I have cited television, pop and football kulcha as the most noxious influences on the traditional culture of children. But the influences may come from any number of directions in an increasingly changing society—from education policy, the closing of small schools, the replacement of free

play time by adult-organized games, to greater mobility through speed and ease of long-distance transport and communication, to housing policy with the destruction of many inner city areas and cheap housing and growth of 'tower blocks' and drab suburbs. Changes which may appear desirable to adults can have serious effects on children—the restrictions of high-rise living, for instance. Social planners are notoriously blind to the needs of kids.

It is difficult to ascertain, let alone measure, these influences. Clearly, children are 'guinea-pigs' who must submit to the cultural experiments and pressures imposed on them, a human testing-ground for the future. But while their voice is seldom raised it is wrong to believe they lack such a voice—to be heard every day in what remains of their childlore.

There is an urgent need for more collections and studies to be made. In Britain the work of the Opies, mentioned above, is already several generations out of date, and no further national surveys have followed. In Canada, two excellent books by Edith Fowke, *Sally Go Round the Sun* (McClelland and Stewart, Toronto, 1969) and *Ring Around the Moon* (1977), have helped create an interest in childlore, but neither book interprets the material found (or the material noticeably absent). There should be at once regional, national and even international surveys, with comparisons made between the lore collected at a particular school at a particular time, and that collected five and ten years later at the same school.

Childlore is of value not only to children but also to adults. We can learn a great deal about their



behaviour and their psychology, their attitude to language, to rhythm, to ritual and to music. The present state of the lore is at once healthy and deeply troubled. As long as there are children there must be childlore, which alone responds to so many of their demands and developments. Children's enthusiasm for rhymes, songs and games at a particular stage in their lives is undiminished. Yet this lore is vulnerable and can in part be exploited and destroyed by mass culture with its steam-rolling uniformity.

The most damaging effects of mass culture are not limited to kids and can only be resisted by activity and creativity that will counteract the tendencies to passivity and manipulation. We should respect and encourage the

lore of children, before more of what is also our *own* common culture withers away, with all its humour and ingenuity:

Miss Mary Mac Mac Mac
All dressed in black black black
She could not read read read
She could not write write write
But she could smoke smoke
smoke

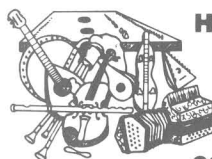
Her father's pipe pipe pipe
She asked her mother mother
mother

For fifty pence pence pence
To see the elephants elephants
elephants

Jump over the fence fence fence
They jumped so high high high
They touched the sky sky sky
They didn't come back back
back

Till the end of July July July.

Tony Montague



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