

Traditional games

Recording experiences in Pacific and European cultures

ALLAN THOMAS

Games, and the rhymes and songs that go with them, have a fascination for many specialists: they are an 'underground' communication system spreading without media or print, they are a field of creative language play for the young, and they are an archive of archaic custom. My reasons for collecting games at home and in various parts of the world have been musical. The game songs in traditional music cultures are often a simplified music (with rudimentary rhythm and pitch organisation) which seems to prepare children for later participation in adult music making. There is also an archival interest because game songs can preserve musical features which have been lost by wholesale change in the wider music of a culture.

It is the twin aspects of change and preservation, innovation and tradition, that are the concern of this talk. Within the language, music and play of traditional games there are features which are age old and some which are brand new. In the microcosm of the game there is a creative use of tradition.

Whenever the talk turns to traditional games adults uncover memories of playground games that they used to play, or recollect rhymes for choosing 'it', or echoes and fragments of chants and rhymes they didn't know they had; this is a magic world, viewed with awe and nostalgia. Rather like the discovery of abandoned brightly coloured marbles when digging in the back garden, in the novel

Rainshadow by New Zealand writer Michael Jackson:

The sections had been, of course, first cleared of every tree, grass blade, vestige of topsoil and rendered anonymous and barren, ready to receive the imprint of each individual householder. Our section was the site of an old school, and the house built where the playground had been. From time to time the earth yielded a small trove of marbles and rusty toy trains – bits of the past which had miraculously escaped the bulldozer blades.

Apart from being an assiduous planter of boundary hedges, my father was a fanatical water-diviner. He delighted in digging holes all over the section to reach the water table. When each pit was dug and the sides neatly spaded, I would toddle to the edge and gaze down at clay-clouded water seeping in and half-filling it, then clearing as the sediment settled. 'Don't you fall in, Nicholas!' my father would shout, as he staggered away at the mercy of a violent twitching branch of green willow. It was in the course of digging these pits, which my father said would ultimately lead to England, that the marbles came to light – marvellous agates with sinuous lines of scarlet or blue and chipped taws that had once devastated an opponent's most cherished mandalas in the middle of an eye-shaped arena.¹

Games, seem to have a special innocence and timelessness about them, though on closer examination they are often neither innocent (including many bawdy, sleazy references, and allowing competition, bullying, exclusion) nor are they timeless (many being highly topical). They are however a wonderful communication system; a culture



Cover, and right:
A game of marbles in
19th-century
New Zealand.

Unidentified photograph,
Alexander Turnbull
Library, Wellington.
Neg. no. G10529 1/1

within a culture; as Ted Hughes says 'a corner of folklore that nature has managed to keep to herself. The games have the same archaic, earth-rooted quality of very primitive art'.²

The study of games is often a personal journey, uncovering memories, so I propose to begin with two that have been of special interest to me in the collections I have made.

'Green Gravels' is a game I first heard in South Devon, at the village school of Sidbury, about 1970. The bleak asphalt area provided that unlikely setting which makes playground games seem so especially creative, gem-like. The head teacher told me that one of the reasons that traditional games were so prevalent at his school in his opinion was that the old high windows of the forbidding Victorian building cut the teachers off from the children at playtime; that an important privacy was accorded them in play. But that he also encouraged the games by alluding to them from time to time, and he was happy to get the children to play some of them for me to record.

This game 'Green Gravels' is said to have been known throughout New Zealand about 1900³ but I have never heard it here. It was also recorded in Australia about the same time, where it surfaced in 1973 as a skipping rhyme using just the first line – 'Green gravel, green gravel'.⁴ I remember the words of the game in Devon as:

- (i) Green gravels green gravels the grass is so green
The fairest young lady that ever was seen
Kiss me once kiss me twice we all fall down.
- (ii) All the boys in Sidbury
Are going to have a wife
Excepting Tommy Blandie
... a wife he shall marry
a-courting he shall go
along with Nelly Wilson
because she loves him so
she kisses him she cuddles him,
she sets him on her knee

Part (i) was a linked hands dance in a circle with the 'all fall down' in the third line requiring the last child standing to go into the centre. Part (ii) included the choice of a partner (pointing) and mime of the courtship.

Iona and Peter Opie⁵ say of this kind of game:

Linking hands and dancing round in a circle with the back to the centre gives much the sensation of riding on a merry-go-round. The body is propelled outwards by the swing of the movement, yet kept on course by the constraints of the ring. The fun children have from this amusement is as nothing, however, compared with enjoyment antiquarians obtain from it, who associate the sport with witches, one of whose sins when attending Sabbath is alleged to have been dancing in rings back to back.

The 19th-century collector of English games, Lady Alice Gomme, also mentions it, and provides charming, if a trifle genteel, illustration of it:

'Green Gravel' is probably 'green grave', and the incidents of washing and dressing the corpse and writing an inscription,



important functions.... In many versions love and marriage verses occur. An old funeral ceremony known as "Dish-a-loof" illustrates the action of the players in 'turning back their heads'. During this ceremony the watchers at a funeral went out of the room (where the corpse was lying) and returned into it backwards.⁶

I saw only part of the full 'Green Gravels' but there are fragments of several kinds of games and processes: dancing in a circle, the children's mimicry of an old funeral custom (turning back heads), old language not now understood (green gravels), choice of an 'it' (through 'all fall down'), courtship and wedding references.

The same kind of blocks of material brought in from perhaps separate sources, are evident in a game collected this year in Wellington, 'Under the Bam Bushes':

- i Under the bam bushes, under the sea, bym bym bym
True love for you my darling, true love for me
We're getting married, to raise a family,
With sixteen children all in a
- ii Row row row your boat gently down the stream
Throw your teacher over board and listen to her scream,
ah!
- iii Johnny in the ocean, Johnny in the sea,
Johnny broke the milk bottle and blamed it on me
I told Ma, Ma told Pa,
Johnny got a hiding with a ha ha ha.

This is a clapping rhyme, for two players using a sequence of three moves: two girls face each other and on the first count clap each other's palms with hands held horizontally, on the second with both hands held vertically, and on the third they clap their own hands together.

Although clapping games are a cooperative activity between two players, a fast tempo throughout, and possible acceleration towards the end, makes it competitive – to see who can go fastest without making a mistake. In

GREEN GRAVEL

slowly

Green gravel green gravel your grass is so green. The fairest young
 damsel that ever was seen. I'll wash you in new milk and dress you in
 silk, and write down your name with a gold pen and ink. Oh

(Mary) Oh (Mary) your true love is dead He's
 sent you a letter to turn round your head.

The prolific collector, Alice Gomme, was one of the 19th-century folklorists who recorded tradition before (as they saw it) industrial society could swamp it. Their preoccupation was with the games as an archive of folklore; ancient custom preserved in the rhymes and patterns of the games. Although their view was somewhat idealised their collections form a valuable compendium of folklore.
 Alice B. Gomme. *Children's Singing Games, 1894.* (Dover edition 1967).

In addition, this chant uses a clapping rhythm of three against a text rhythm of four which increases the difficulty at speed. The Opies⁷ say that in the English game one beat rest follows the three pattern (giving an even match of four moves with the rhyme of the chant) but this is not the situation in New Zealand. Other clapping games may have a different pattern (including a further move: one player's right palm against the other player's right; then left against left) thus increasing the difficulty for each particular game. Whatever the movements there is to the game a 'slithery flow'⁸ of clapping rhythm which can easily get out of hand and the game breaks down.

There are three sections to this chant:

- (i) 'Under the bam bushes', or 'Under the bramble bushes' or 'Under the bram-bles', or as the original popular song had it 'Under the bamboo, under the tree'. This song, 'The Cannibal King', ended with the line 'bym, bym, bym'.
- (ii) 'Row row row your boat' is a common educational song, which originated as a minstrel song. This element is sometimes omitted when the game is played in Wellington.
- (iii) 'Down by the ocean down by the sea' – a skipping rhyme.

In three Australian versions quoted by Turner⁹ there is a possible return at the end to the final line of the original song 'Dum diddly dum dum [sex-y]' or a replacement of

this with 'cha cha cha' or a quote from a Foster's lager commercial 'It's got the flavour that makes life worth living'. In Young and Lasenby's New Zealand recordings¹⁰ the shortened form is given:

Under the bam bushes, under the sea, bym bym bym
 True love for me my darling, true love for you
 When we get married we'll raise a family
 A boy for you a girl for me
 Tity, tity ana, sex-y.

In the versions recently recorded in Wellington however, there are both chant and song characteristics: 'Row row row your boat' is said rather than sung to the familiar music, but 'Under the bam bushes' is said by some children and sung by others. It would take a considerable collection and research project to determine whether the semi sung and sung versions are reminiscent of the original song 'Under the bamboo tree', which became mixed with another song of the time 'The Cannibal King'.

The original, 'Under the bamboo tree', was a landmark of popular song in the move away from 'Coon songs' (blackface singing, portraying Negro laziness and other stereotypes) by the trio of Cole and the Johnson brothers. It became a ragtime hit in Europe and America in 1902 – 1903. The opinion has been expressed its musical theme was a variation in ragtime of the spiritual 'Nobody knows the trouble I see' though this is perhaps a little elevated for the simple song. It had a further period of popularity when sung by Judy Garland in 'Meet me in St Louis' (1944), where one may surmise the children's game 'caught it'.

CHANGE AND CONTINUITY IN TRADITIONAL GAMES
 In looking at 'Green Gravels' and 'Under the Bam Bushes' I have emphasized the conservative qualities of games – how long each particular section has been maintained and

where it originated. This archive aspect is one of the most astonishing feature of children's games: today's familiar hopscotch was introduced throughout Europe by the Romans during the expansion of their Empire; the roads they built were ideal for scratching ('to scotch') the game diagram. A similar longevity can be observed in the Pacific: a little game called ant pinching is played in the Tokelau Islands. I have also found this in West Futuna and it has been observed in the Polynesian Outlier Bellona separated from the rest of Polynesia by 1000 years of history.¹¹ Ant pinching is a game in which children make a pile of hands, each hand pinching the top of the hand beneath. As each hand is removed from the pile it pinches a bit harder, and a verse is sung.

In Bellona the game is played by adults as an interlude in a ceremony, and the music reflects some of the solemnity of a major occasion. With games as old as this one could expect some musical features to have been continued from earlier times and this is sometimes the case; these semi-spoken and chanted forms and trailing cadences (considered remnants of an older Polynesian music) are found in game songs which are no longer current.

But however much games preserve old customs, or musical forms they also change. A major study of this has been undertaken by the ethnomusicologist Jacob Wainwright Love on the Samoan game 'Tolotolo Uga' (crawling crab). This is a guessing game: one team tries to guess the identity of a participant who is concealed behind a mat (who may emit short squeaks to help or confuse identification) while the other team sing a short song. Love recorded 23 adults and children from one village individu-

ally singing the song of this game. Their birthdates ranged from 1875 to 1966. The five-line song text is changed in the recordings of this 91-year sequence: words are altered and parts of the rhyme are dropped out, as well as additions being made. Jacob Love concludes that 'the texts of one generation and the following generation is like that of an ancestor and a descendent;... the occurrence of eccentric mutation doesn't diminish the resemblance.'¹²

Innovation has also been noted by the Opie's as they developed 'reporters' throughout Britain and the English-speaking world. In 1936, for example,

News that there was a constitutional crisis did not become public property until around 25 November of that year, and the king abdicated on 10 December. Yet at a school party in Swansea given before Christmas 1936, a mistress had to restrain her small children from singing...

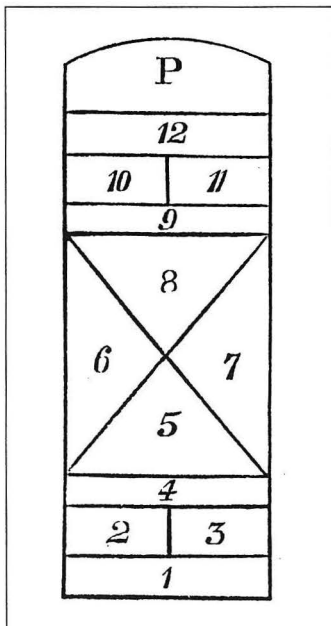
Hark the herald angels sing
Mrs Simpson's pinched our king.

a song that was known all over England.¹³

The Opie's also trace versions of the ballad of Davey Crockett, a popular song in 1956, which were rapidly known in different parts of the English-speaking world including Sydney in 1956 and as some of us experienced, New Zealand. The English version which they record has a reference to Joe's Cafe, which the Opies explain is a cafe on the Swansea waterfront in Wales. The same reference was made in the New Zealand song, though of course we had no idea where, or if, the cafe existed.

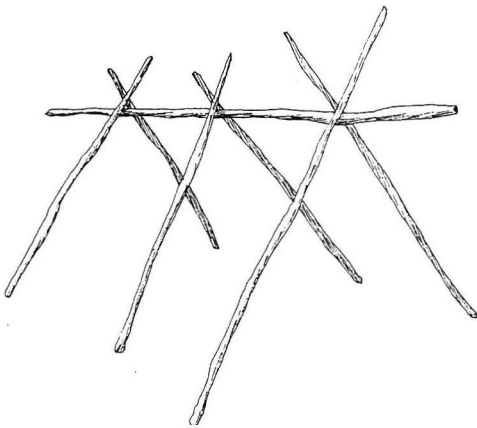
SPORTS AND GAMES

Another cluster of games which exhibit change are those that are close to sports. In the Pacific game of darts a *tika*/



In this early American plan for hopscotch the P stands for plum-pudding; more frequently it was 'heaven' and the hopping was a journey (similar to the symbolic maze journeys of early Christianity), with an obstacle thrown into each square in turn. Today hopscotch is widespread in Europe, America and the Third World - a researcher recently catalogued nearly 20 versions in San Francisco. The American Boy's Book of Sports and Games 1864 (Chandler Press 1988) and Games of the World, UNICEF, 1975.





A traditional Maori method of casting spears with a *kataha*, or whip. Sketch by Miss E. Richardson, *Games and Pastimes of the Maori* (Wellington 1925).

In the Tokelau Islands *tika* (javelin or darts), the losing dart is held horizontally while the others beat it, in the shape of a roof, to the accompanying chant. Illustration by Fuimanu Kirifi in *Thomas et al Songs and Stories of Tokelau*, Wellington, 1990.

teka (dart or javelin) is thrown to ricochet off a smooth earth mound and travel as far as possible. There is no target board as in English darts, but a competition on the distance travelled by the *tika*.

In Tokelau a teacher and children demonstrated this game for me. Its name is *velo* or (the Samoan) *tagatika*. The Tokelau version ends with the loser's dart (which went the shortest distance) subjected to a little humiliating chant. It is held horizontally and the other players beat their dart against it (making a roof formation as shown in illustration) while they chant:

Keina omaia	Come on
Takaho te fale	Roof the house
Te fale O Meto	The house of Meto

The reference in the chant is to an incident in the 'The Tale of Alo', a folktale in which Alo wins a game of darts thereby

becoming the partner of Meto, an ugly character who nags him to fix the roof and other chores around the house.¹⁴

Elsdon Best¹⁵ records the *teka* game in New Zealand and quotes a description by Mr J White:

The darts consist of straight stems of the common fern. Round one end of such a stem was wound a narrow strip of green flax so as to form a knob termed *poiike*. A clear piece of flat ground, free of weeds or other obstructions was selected and a mound of earth formed thereon. In playing the operator stood some 30 feet behind the mound, holding his *teka* or dart in his right hand in the proper position, and, taking a run forward he cast his dart so that it would just

graze the upper surface of the mound and glance off it in an upward direction. He whose dart went the farthest won the contest. The game was said to have been invented by the legendary hero Maui (who made the hollow along the backbone of his brothers by shooting his darts) and may have had charms sung to ensure that the darts travelled far. Best notes that several tribes had different traditions and he differentiates this game from the tactical skills of warfare – other drills were used in parrying and thrusting weapons, and in exercises for throwing spears man to man and deflecting or catching them.

The distinction between warfare drills (which may have had an element of competitive game) and games (which needed the same kind of skill) is an interesting one that has echoes today in the distinction between sports and games – what should be in the Olympics? what should be professional? – these are all live issues in the sports arena. Last year sports writers, commentators and administrators had a field day on the game of European darts: the leader writer of the *Dominion*¹⁶ summed up the confusion:

Jill MacDonald won the women's singles title at the world darts championships in Holland. The Darts Council promptly reminded the New Zealand Sports Foundation that under the foundation's incentive scheme New Zealand sports people who win world titles are eligible for grants of \$25,000.

Unfortunately there was a catch, as there always seems to be where bureaucrats are involved. The foundation's executive director, Keith Hancox, pointed out that darts was not on the list of sports which qualified for the grants, and to add insult to injury, he questioned whether darts was a sport in the first place... It would be up to the foundation to determine whether darts could be recognised as a sport for the purposes of receiving a grant, Mr Hancox solemnly pronounced.

It is hard to imagine that the foundation found it necessary to go through this vexing process in deciding that rugby, tennis, bowls, golf and (dare we say it?) swimming are bona fide sports. So what are the criteria which might exclude darts?

Darts involves throwing small missiles at a target. It does not demand enormous strength or stamina but it does involve co-ordination of hand and eye. Much the same could be said of snooker, or even marbles and croquet. Sports, or mere games? 'Games' shout the traditionalists. Now consider archery and rifle shooting. Again neither

demands enormous strength or stamina. Like darts they involve aiming at targets. Sports or games? The traditionalists fidget uncomfortably and look at their feet. 'Well sports ... sort of.'

All this, I hope, underlines the point that games are sometimes indistinguishable from competitive sports. But they can also be close to 'play', a more unstructured activity. A game may be played in an informal way or it may be elaborated as competition and intergroup interaction. This can be observed in many sport-games: European darts as played in the local pub or as a competitive 'sport'; Pacific darts in its manifestations in several islands (Niue, Cook Islands, Tonga, Fiji, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, Hawai'i, Uvea, Tokelau and Samoa). In Samoa there are various incantations reported to make the dart fly further, and, as Moyle¹⁷ notes:

The social importance of the game is indicated in proverbial sayings ... and also in the careful and detailed manner in which reference is made to it in legends and stories both historical and fictional. For nowhere in these is *tagati'a* mentioned merely in passing; always the game is as much a contest to prove or defend one's honour as it is a game in its own right, and a decisive victory is usually a significant point in the narrative ... In some areas, *tagati'a* [became] banned by village councils on account of the large numbers of eye injuries caused from flying javelins.

Moyle suggests¹⁸ that the introduction and popularity of cricket brought about the demise of *tagati'a*; that the two sports had in common 'large numbers of adult participants performing individually over an extended period of time, and also vociferous groups of supporters'. The tension between darts and cricket has an interesting historical parallel in England in the 15th century. The game was forbidden in 1477 (with penalties of heavy fines and imprisonment) as one of those illegal games so detrimental to the practice of archery. In the Pacific it has also been noted that in American Samoa the local form of cricket has itself given way to baseball as the popular game – a further layer of change in the area of participant-sport games. Kilikiti (Samoan cricket) has a great deal of musical material within it:

- (1) the *lape* of the batting side and supporters (singing and dancing) is ostensibly to encourage the batters, but serves to enliven the social situation for all participants with continuous song and sometimes dance; and
- (2) the triumphant drum and dance routines of the fielding side when a wicket is taken punctuate the game are free improvised 'dancing', with a recognised rhythm often played on a metal fuel barrel.

These musical elaborations of cricket are part of the adaptation of the game. Samoan kilikiti could be termed a 'remodelling' of the English game – there are new rules, new bat and ball, the teams are extended, the atmosphere of the game is changed with the music and dance. In turn each of the islands that Samoan missionaries introduced the game – Niue, Tokelau, and most notably the Trobriand

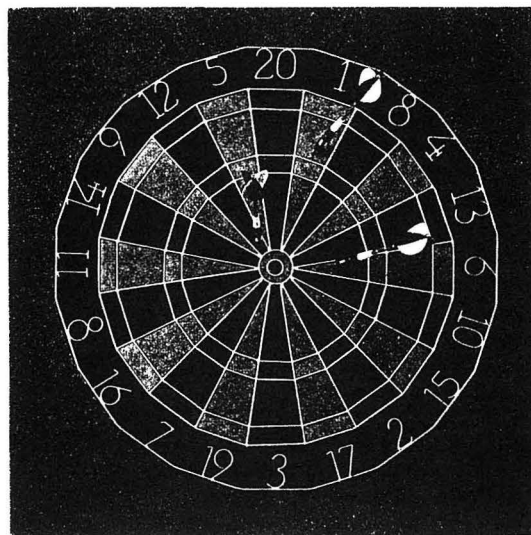
Islands of Papua New Guinea – further remodelled it.

Another kind of change is an internal remodelling which I would term a 're-invention'. Here the game equipment and rules remain unchanged but the ethos of the game is transformed. For example, dominoes in Tokelau is clearly recognisable: the familiar counters, played in sequence with their numbers matching, double number counter placed cross-wise, turns alternate around the players, and so on. A clue to the difference introduced is the resonant wooden board on which the Tokelau game is played. This board is elevated in each corner so that a resonant space is created under it. Like a drum, it resonates when a piece is played. The Tokelau game is a fast, noisy, competitive one. Each counter is crashed to the board (and then slid into place), there is laughter, bragging, and other players are challenged. The game is played by men and women, outside, and often in the early evening. It is also played during day-long community cricket matches, often by older women, under the trees.

In considering how games change, I have suggested the re-invention of dominoes and the remodelling of cricket; also there is the substitution of Pacific cricket for javelin *tagati'a*, and that uneasy balance between the serious (warfare drill or sport) and the unserious (play). Traditional singing games also change in many small-scale ways – sections from different games coalesce, phrases and words change their form and rhythm. Although small

In medieval England archers would entertain themselves by throwing short heavy hand-held arrows at the butt-end of a tree trunk on the tavern wall. Although the pastime became refined in the Tudor court, and the game went to America in the Mayflower in 1620, yet it has preserved its original form and its association with the tavern.

Games of the World, UNICEF, 1975.



these are often highly important to the players who adhere strongly to their version.

Other creative changes in the children's games of western societies include parodies in which new material is introduced. Over-arching all these modifications appears to be an emphasis on the competitive or exercise games rather than the old dramatic role-playing games. With a certain resignation folklorists have noted this change in Britain and it has been detected in Australia. As Ian Turner points out:

...the dramatic games have not in general survived in the world of children [in Australia] the exercise games have – a childish inventiveness has created a new poetry, much of which has itself become traditional, to accompany these games. One thing however has changed. The exercise games for which rhymes have been created are the property of girls, as were the old dramatic games. Of these exercise games the most important kinds are skipping, hand-clapping and ball-bouncing.¹⁹

A CHILDS VIEWPOINT

Although many experts have looked at the function of games and related the activity to role playing, or the development of verbal skills, or a broader cultural background, few have asked 'what do children think they are doing when they play traditional games'? This question has a bearing on the competing qualities of conservation and innovation in the games, and deserves investigation.

The Opies say:

children themselves often have a touching faith in the novelty of their oral acquisitions ... Children are, in fact, prone to claim the authorship of a verse when they have done no more than alter a word in it, for instance substitute a familiar name for a name unknown to them; and they tend to be passionately loyal to the presumed genius of a classmate, or of a child who has just left their school, who is credited with the invention of each newly heard composition.²⁰

But they also record what seems the opposite – games must be accurate. When one girl was telling the Opies about a song another rounded on her and said:

You don't know how it goes Jennifer so shut up! They don't know it down here [she complained]. I've told 'er once, and 'er once, and I've told Michelle. But they don't really know it.²¹

Likewise the children will defend their version against adult criticism.

If the words are questioned they retort "It's like that. That's what it says", as if the game were a living entity, which perhaps, by virtue of tradition, it is. They become irritable if a game is held up by adults asking irrelevant questions. They know the game itself matters: "we can't explain", they protest, "we'll show you".²²

For children the act of playing a game probably has little long term archival interest; they do it because that's the way it has always been done – at least since they learnt it last year or the year before. The antiquity of games is not their concern. But the fixed quality of it is. Submission to the rules of the game (which includes the rhyme and rhythm that coordinate it) is part of the purpose of playing.

A few weeks ago two ten-year-old girls were idly bouncing on the trampoline at our place and they started a chant, a skipping chant. I overheard this and I thought 'this is an adaptation of an old chant to a new game' but when I said that I would include this in my talk (in the Stout series), they said, No. It didn't seem proper to them that a casual innovation like that (which they had happened upon without thinking) should be quoted as a *real* game, I suppose they felt that games have a certain permanence to them, and of course they have. What we don't know is under what circumstances the mutations, elaborations and changes that occur become accepted and spread. We don't know how innovation becomes accepted into tradition.

From a Stout Centre Seminar on 23 September 1992.

Allan Thomas is a senior lecturer in the School of Music, and has undertaken ethnomusicological fieldwork in the Pacific and in Indonesia. In addition to his own collections his talk on games was supplemented with recordings of games by students in World Music, and material from discussions in 'Games of the World', a Centre for Continuing Education course held earlier this year.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Michael Jackson, *Rainshadow*, McIndoe, Dunedin, 1988: 3, 4.
- 2 *Sunday Times* review of Iona and Peter Opie, *Children's Games in Street and Playground*.
- 3 Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Games of New Zealand Children*, 1959.
- 4 Ian Turner et al, *Cinderella Dressed in Yella*, 1978: 31 & 52.
- 5 Iona and Peter Opie, *The Singing Game*, Oxford, 1988: 236.
- 6 Alice B Gomme, *Children's Singing Games*, 1894 Dover 1967: 65, 66.
- 7 Iona and Peter Opie, *The Singing Game*, Oxford 1988: 444.
- 8 *ibid*.
- 9 Ian Turner et al, 40.
- 10 Young, Hugh and Jack Lasenby, *Catch A Nicker By The Toe*, Replay Radio 422, Radio New Zealand, n.d.
- 11 Jane Eissen, *Polynesian Songs and Games from Bellona (Mungiki)*, Ethnic Folkways Records FE4273.
- 12 Jacob Wainwright Love, *Samoan Variations*, Harvard, 1990:228.
- 13 Iona and Peter Opie, *The Lore and Languages of School Children*, Oxford, 1959:6.
- 14 'The Tale of Alo' in Allan Thomas et al (eds), *Songs and Stories of Tokelau*, Victoria University Press, 1990: 66-85.
- 15 Elsdon Best, *Games and Pastimes of the Maori*, GP, Wellington, 1925:61.
- 16 'Getting to the point', *Dominion*, 12 October, 1991: 14.
- 17 Richard M. Moyle, *Samoan Music*, Auckland, 1988: 99.
- 18 *ibid*.
- 19 Ian Turner, 156.
- 20 Iona and Peter Opie, *Lore and Language of School Children*, London, 1959: 12.
- 21 Iona and Peter Opie, *The Singing Game*, Oxford, 1988: 2.
- 22 *ibid*.