

COUNTING-OUT RHYMES

Children's Love of Rhyme, Rhythm and Alliteration



by Aynura
Huseinova

Counting-out rhymes are considered to be among the oldest play forms in the world. Although choice of imagery and metaphors may change over time, still children's love for rhyme and rhythm continues to dominate this genre, as does their deep sense of justice and fairness in using these short jingles.

Like children's games, counting-out rhymes are part of folklore as well—verbal forms that comprise belief systems that get transported down through history and dispersed geographically, block by block throughout neighborhoods, and then beyond the boundaries of villages, towns, cities and sometimes, even countries.

The specific feature of counting-out rhymes is that they belong to children—the youngest members of society. Children create counting-out rhymes to express their own worldview. Their jingles are among their first creative efforts to express themselves amongst their peers, as they begin to distance themselves from the world of adults and take on their own identities and personalities.

Much of the "literary" content of counting-out rhymes is essentially nonsense. The narrative does not necessarily follow logically. But kids don't seem to care. That's the way much of the world appears to them anyway. They don't understand everything around them and, somehow, they have learned to live with considerable ambiguity and unresolved meaning. In this regard, counting-out rhymes reflect the reality of the child's world.

What is emphatically clear is that children of this age delight in experimenting with words—especially elements related to sound—rhyme, rhythm and alliteration (repetition of similar sounds at the beginning of words or stressed syllables). Clearly, the spoken word is much more important factor in the creation of these jingles than logic is. Of course, Azerbaijani children are no exceptional; this same phenomenon can be

found throughout the world with this age group. In addition, counting-out rhymes serve to help children become more fluent in their pronunciation, but in the context of play.

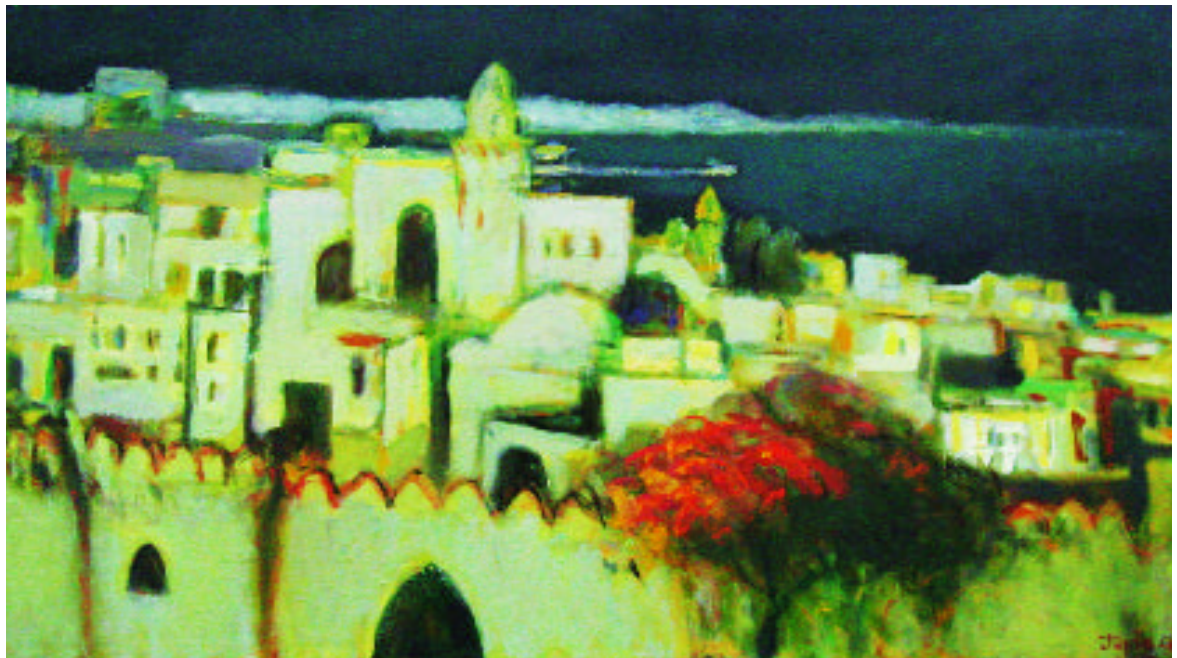
We collected these counting-out rhymes in Baku's "Inner City" (Ichari Shahar), or what foreigners often refer to as the "Old City", between October and December 2004 among children, ages 6 to about 13. They use these rhymes to choose a person to take on the desired role as chaser, seeker, or first person to lead in games such as Hide and Seek, Freezing, Sewer Cover Tag, and Hopscotch. [See *Street Games: Living Folklore—The Games Kids Play in Baku's Old City* by Aynura Huseinova and Sakina Isgandarova, Autumn 2004 (AI 12. 3). Search at AZER.com.]

We discovered that the texts that children are using today seemed to include more "aggressiveness", more sexual innuendo, and more awareness of the world at large, than the jingles we had learned in our youth, barely 10-15 years ago. This is not to say that there weren't counting-out rhymes with rude and questionable words when we were growing up. Perhaps there were, depending on gender and the specific neighborhood.

But it's fair to say that these youth who have grown up since Azerbaijan's independence (1991) are definitely exposed to more outside influences—for good or for bad—especially via television.

At the same time, these children clearly did know the boundaries of appropriate Azerbaijani social conduct for their age. For example, they were rather shy to repeat some of the texts, in the presence of adults, fearing that they might be judged as not meeting up to the criteria of being a "good boy or girl".

Some of these jingles seemed new to us. The editorial staff and members of my family knew some of them and could recognize some of their variations. For example, we were familiar with the following: Astara



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Train; Bir, İki Bizimki (One, Two, Ours); Apples; Nizami; Tamara and Needle.

We also observed the process of creating counting-out rhymes as one of our informants, Mirislam, a fifth grader (aged 12) had created some new jingles of his own. He was obviously proud that kids in his block were using them and hoped that they would spread to other corners of the Old City, too. Of particular interest was one based on a popular TV serial—Clone—an imported Brazilian soap opera—in which the main characters were characterized with amazing succinctness according to their roles in the show.

Typically, we found that the oldest person in the group just naturally assumed the responsibility of counting out by pointing to each person. Each word in the jingle represented one count until the last word, which often was enumerated syllable by syllable. Usually, the counter started counting off beginning with himself.

We also discovered that children had a deep sense of honesty and fairness. This became obvious when the rhyme demanded interaction and a child had to provide a number or suggest the name of a city to complete the rhyme. When other children suspected that child to be calculating an advantageous answer mentally, they would insist on starting all over again so that the outcome would not be manipulated.

Here are the main counting-out rhymes that we discovered. The children told us that their favorite jingles were Astara Train, Seyids, Chocolate, Ekti-bekti Chigina (short and total nonsense words).

TRAIN FROM ASTARA

Astaradan gələn qatar dayandı,
İçindəki quşka-muşka¹ oyandı,
Mən içmişəm, bu köpəkoğlu piyandı
Ay can alan, candı bizim mahlədə,
Gündə toy-nışandı bizim mahlədə.

The train, coming from Astara stopped,
Every Joe-Schmoe woke up,
I drank, but this hound is still drunk,
Buddy, everyday there's a party in our yard,
Everyday there's a party in our street.

1 "Chushka-mushka"—"chushka" refers to people of low class. "Mushka" doesn't mean anything. In Azeri, there is a tendency to pair words for emphasis. The word chosen is doubled. The second word is prefixed with the letter "m", making it turn into a nonsense word. A sense of play and disregard is expressed by pairing words this way. In English, this idea might best be expressed in words such as "Joe-Schmoe". More examples in Azeri include: "kohna-mohna" (old), "churuk-muruk" (rotten), "aghaj-maghaj" (tree), "chirk-mirk" (dirt) and "kitab-mitab" (book).



İçəri Şəhər (Old City) kids who helped compile "Counting-Out Rhymes". Left to right: Turgut Taghiyev (tall boy), Elnur Taghiyev (younger boy), Mirislam Yunusov, Farid Aliyev, Nargiz Aliyeva, Aynur Taghiyeva and Mirramiz Yunusov (center front).

FISH

Balıq, balıq olaydım,
Bankalara dolaydım,
Təzə müəllim gələndə,
Başıma papaq qoyaydım,
Müəllim dedi dur söylə,
Söyləmədim bir şilla,
Şilla yaman şartladı
Güllə kimi partladı.

Afish, I wish I were a fish,
And I swam in a glass jar,
When a new teacher comes,
I wish I had a new hat to wear.
The teacher told me to speak,
When I didn't, she slapped my face,
The slapping sounded like an explosion,
Exploded almost like a bullet.

Often the rhymes express ideas that don't seem to follow logically, but the rhymes and rhythms are so catchy and memorable that the kids love them. For children, their world doesn't always fit together logically but somehow they learn to deal with these gaps in knowledge until they have a chance to fill them in. A relationship here between fish and new teacher doesn't follow logically. It's the rhyme and rhythm that make the jingle meaningful.

CAT

O pişi mio,
Qarğıdalı çiyo,
Hasanalisan, Hüseinalisan,
Biza gələsən,
Vurum öləsən.

O cat meow,
Corn, chiyo,²
No matter whether you're Hasanali or Huseinali,³
Come to our place,
And I'll beat you to death.

2 Chiyo is a nonsense word.

3 Hasan / Husein or Hasanali / Huseinali is like saying "every John" or "every Jack" in English. It implies commonality.

SIXTEEN

Zin, zin, zin altı,
Gəlın sayaq, onaltı,
Bir, iki, üç, dörd....
On altı.

Zin⁴, zin, zin, six,
Let's count up to sixteen,
One, two, three, four....
Sixteen.

4 Zin is a nonsense word.

MAXIM GORKY

Bir, iki, üç...on iki,
Maksim Qorki,
Hansı şəhəri istəyirsən?
De görüm!
(Axırıncı sözə kim düşürsə, həmin uşaq bir şəhər adı deyir, sayan
uşaq isə şəhərin adını hərflərə bölərək deyir).

One, two, three...twelve
Maxim Gorky
Which city do you want?
Tell us!
[The child must suggest the name of a city (sometimes, he suggests a
region, instead), and the counter repeats the name, letter by letter.]

Again, there is no relationship between the words "twelve" and "Gorky",
except that they rhyme in Azeri.

ROOSTER

Bir, iki, üç, dörd, beş, altı...otuz,
Xoruz

One, two, three, four....thirty,
Rooster

Again rhyme of the two words "30" (otuz) and "rooster" (xoruz) determines
the choice of words.

A variant of this counting out rhyme is one, which ends with the last line:
"rooster", "Novruz" (celebration of Spring, a word which also doubles as a
male name) and "pig". These three words all rhyme.

Bir, iki, üç, dörd, beş, altı...otuz,
Xoruz, Novruz, donuz.

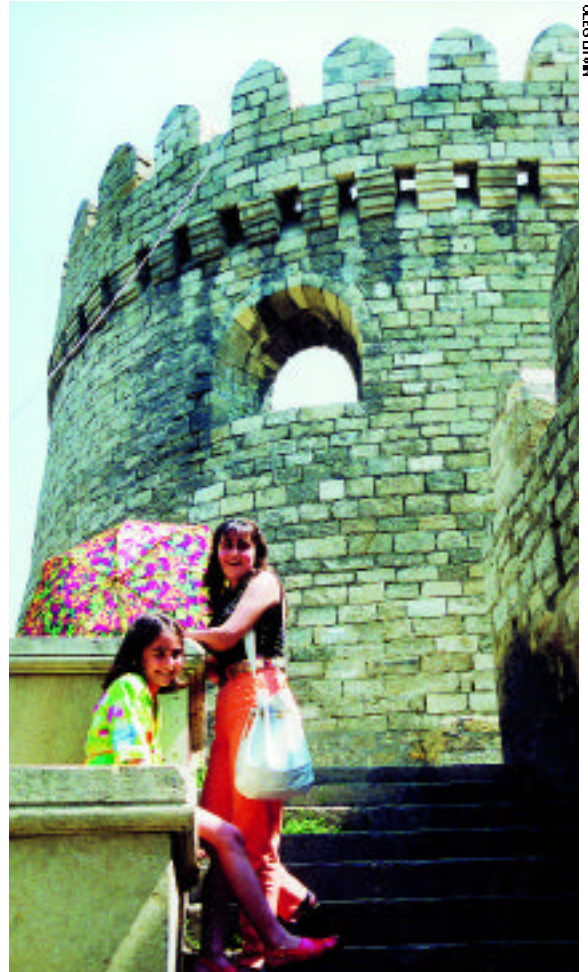
One, two, three, four.... thirty,
Rooster, Novruz, pig.

THE SEYIDS

S e y i d
Arabamı nəyütlər.
Qəfil qonaq gələndə
Durub qapını kilidlər.

The Seyids⁵
Put oil on wheels.
When they have an unexpected guest,
They rush to lock the door.

5 Seyids are revered as holy people because they are believed to be
descendents of Prophet Mohammad. As generosity and hospitality are
highly esteemed in Azerbaijani society, the meaning of the jingle is to
criticize stinginess.



ALEX LUNIN

ONE-TWO, OURS

Bir-iki bizimki,
Üç-dörd qapını ört,
Beş-altı daşaltı
Yeddi-səkkiz Firangiz⁶
Doqquz
Qırmızı don.⁷

One-two, ours,
Three-four, shut the door,
Five-six, under the stone,
Seven-eight, Firangiz
Nine-ten
Red dress.

6 "Firangiz" is a girl's name that rhymes with "eight" (səkkiz)

7 "Don" is a nonsense word that rhymes with "ten" (on).



A. HUSEINOV

CHOCOLATE

Şokoladı soydum,
Ağzama qoydum,
Oçkini taxdım,
Qızlara baxdım,
Mayka - layka
Trusik - şortik

I unwrapped a chocolate,
Slipped it into my mouth,
I put on my glasses
And stared at the girls.
Sports shirt - "layka"⁸
Underwear - shirts.

8 "Layka" is the Russian word for a type of leather jacket.

GARLIC

Bu gün ayın onudur
Gombulların toyudur,
Anam getdi pambığa,
Mani qoydu sandığa,
Atam galdı nə gördü,
Mani sandıqda gördü.
Sandıq üsta sarımsaq,
Kəs səsinə qunumsaq

Today is the 10th of the month,
And is the wedding of plumps,
My mother went to collect cotton
And locked me inside a box,
When my father came,
He found me in the box.
There is garlic on the box,
Shut up, you scoundrel.

When Mirislam was telling us this counting-out rhyme,
he hesitated to say the last word, "scoundrel", as it is
considered rude. He thought for a minute, but since we
could anticipate this word from the rhyme, we said it and
we all laughed together and Mirislam felt more at ease.

LALA AND NIZAMI

Ekti-bekti bilimiram,
Laləni dindirmiram,
Lala yaman forsludur,
Nizaminin dostudur.
Nizami səhər duranda,
Bığlarını buranda,
Evda yemək görməyanda
Restorana cumanda.

I don't care about ekti-bekti⁹
I don't talk with Lala,

She keeps her nose high
And her only friend is Nizami.
When Nizami got up in the morning,
And twisted his moustache.
He didn't have anything to eat,
And rushed to the restaurant.

9 Ekti-bekti is a nonsense pairing

APPLES

Odur, budur,
Gombul budur,
Gombulların böyüyü budur,
Alma yeyən budur.

That one, this one,
This one is plump,
This one is the plumpest,
This is the one who ate the apple.

ENI-MENI

Eni-meni qaçador,¹⁰
Çaxır-maxır pamador,
Es-mes, gülüm, çez.¹¹

Ehni-meni gagador,
Wine-mine tomato,
Es-mes, my dear, be off!

10 Ehni-meni and gagador are both nonsense words.

11 "Chez" is considered quite vulgar, meaning that the
word doesn't convey anything positive. It means "to
die", or "be off", "away with you". But the word is
generally not used in public, and "good girls" wouldn't
say it. Curiously, the boy who was telling us these
counting rhymes didn't want to say this line either, so
he whispered it to one of his friends. Perhaps, the boy
felt that it would be all right for two females to make
this exchange. The girl, in turn, whispered it to me. But
when it came to the final word "chez", she repeated it
so fast that I could hardly catch it. When she realized
that I was confused, she jotted the "vulgarity" down on
a piece of paper and passed it to me—as if it would not
be so bad if it were not spoken. This clearly shows that
these children had a deep sense of propriety in their
behavior. They understood appropriate behavior for
well-mannered children. "Good children" must always
be polite.

NONSENSE RHYMES

Ekti-bekti çıqqına,
Ayro-bayro ufi!
Ekti-bekti chiggana,
Aero-bayro, off!

TAMARA

Oturmuşdum divanda,
Qarmonum da yanımda,
Birdən qapı döyüldü,
Elə bildim atamdı,
Açdım, gördüm canavar,
Canavara bir tapik,
Uçdu getdi divara,
Divardan bir qız çıxdı,
Adın qoydum Tamara,
Tamara-Tamara tat qızı,
Ermeni soldat qızı,
İnak getdi doğmağa,
Tamara getdi sağmağa
Tamara getdi beş günə
Gəlmədi on beş günə.

I was sitting on the couch,
And my garmon¹² was at my side
Suddenly I heard a knock at the door
I thought it was my father,
But when I opened it, I faced a wolf,
I kicked the wolf,
It flew to the wall
Agirl exited the wall,
I called her Tamara,
Tamara, Tamara, daughter of Tat¹³
Daughter of Armenian soldier.
[A cow went to give a birth,
Tamara went to milk the cow].
Tamara left for five days,
But didn't return even after 15 days.

12 Garmon is an instrument in the accordion family.

13 Tat is a minority group in Azerbaijan. They speak a
Persian-related language. The lines within brackets
above about the cow is the way my mom remembered
this counting-out rhyme from childhood, but the children
in Ichari Shahar omitted them.

NEEDLE

İ y n ə - i
Ucu düymə,
Bal balıca
Balı keçİ,
Şam ağacı
Şatır keçİ,
Qoz ağacı,
Qotur keçİ,
Happan,
Huppan,
Yınl, yınl
Su iç
Q u r t

Needle, needle,
Abutton on the edge,
Honey, sweetie,
Sweetie goat,
Pine tree,
Idle goat,
Walnut tree,
Mangy goat,
Happan,
Huppan,
Yiril
Yirtıl
Drink water,
Escape!

AUNT FATMA

Fatma xala xoroshi,
Geydi cırıq qaloşi,
Getdi bazara,
Aldı gitara.
Çaldı musiqi
Düşdü trusiki

Aunt Fatma is "khoroshi"¹³
She put on worn-out galoshes.
She went to the market
And got a guitar.
She played music,
Her underwear slipped down.

13 "Khoroshi" meaning "good" in Russian. It rhymes with galoshes.

In the examples that follow, Mirislam shared with me some of the counting-out rhymes that he had created himself. He was so proud of his accomplishment. He commented that the kids in his block used his jingles; but beyond that perimeter, they weren't known. He hoped one day they be.

Here, his jingle called "Hasan" seems to be a variation of the one called "Aunt Khala" printed above, except Hasan drops his teeth, Aunt Khala's underwear had slipped down.

HASAN

Hasan getdi bazara,
Aldı rəza gitara,
Çaldı gözəl musiqi,
Düşdü çürük dişləri

Hasan went to the market,
Got a new guitar,
He played a beautiful piece
And dropped his bad teeth.

FRUITS IN THE GARDEN

Bağda yetişib meyvələr,
Alma, armud, heyva, nar,
Alma qırmızı,
Armud sarı,
Heyva sarı,
Nar qırmızı.

Apple, pear, quince, pomegranate,
Apple is red,
Pear is yellow,
Quince is yellow,
Pomegranate is red.

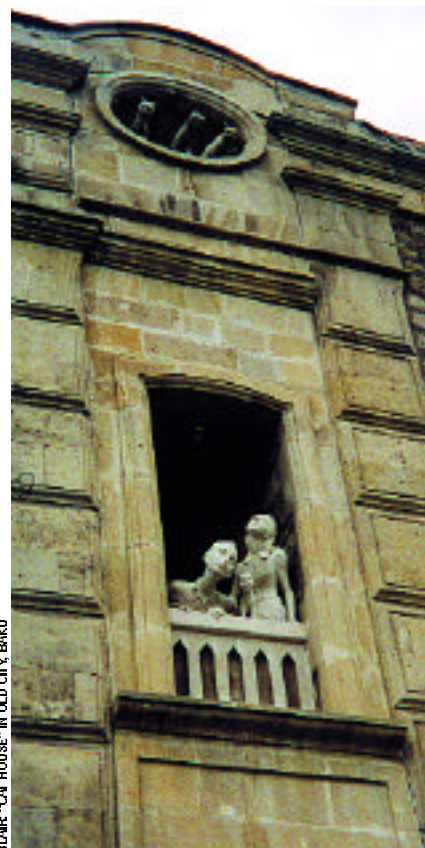
Araba gedir aşağı-aşağı.
Hadi deyir: "Məni boş".
Lukas deyir: "Pulum çoxdur".
Səid deyir: "Məndə yoxdur".
Zorayda deyir: "Aman Allah".
Xadica deyir: "İnşallah".
Maysa ilandır,
Mel narkomandır,
Leo klondur,
Hadi onundur.

The wheel turns round and round.
Hadi says, "I want to divorce".
Lucas says, "I have lots of money".
Sayid says, "I don't have any".
Zorayda says, "God save us".
Khadija says, "I pray God that it comes true".
Maysa is wicked,
Mel is a drug-addict,
Leo is a clone,
Hadi belongs to him.

In Azerbaijan, there's a very popular Brazilian TV serial called Clone. Many families watch it. The kids have made up a counting-out games that precisely mirror the narrative of the plot. In the movie, Hadi, the main character, is from Morocco. She is married to Sayid, but is in love with Lucas, a wealthy Brazilian. Zorayda is Hadi's nurse. Hadi is a very rebellious girl and her behavior comes as a shock to Zorayda, an old religious woman, who always prays that God will save Hadi and the family from bad things.

Khadija is Hadi's daughter. Maysa is Lucas's wife, who is a very rough person; Mel is their daughter. Because of the lack of family attention and warmth, and her mother's strictness, Mel has become a drug-addict. Leo is Lucas's clone. Some people think that at the end of the serial, Leo will marry Hadi though, of course, it isn't really known.

Curiously, I discovered that the basis of the counting-rhyme had been built upon one that my mother knew.



BLAIR "CAT HOUSE" IN OLD CITY, BAKU

THE WHEEL TURNS ROUND

Araba gedir aşağı-aşağı,
Arvad deyir məni boş,
Kişi deyir pulum yoxdur,
Arvad deyir məndə çoxdur.

The wheel turns round and round,
The wife says, "I want to divorce".
The husband, "I don't have any money".
The wife, "I have a lot".

No doubt, as these kids grow up and new ones play in the streets, the rhymes will change, but their social, educational and recreational function will remain the same.

Aynura Huseinova is on the editorial staff of Azerbaijan International. Her recent articles include: (1) *Slang: The Buzz Among Youth in Baku, Winter 2003* (AI 11.4), and (2) *Street Games: Living Folklore—The Games Kids Play in Baku's Old City, Autumn 2004* (AI 12.3). Search at AZER.com. ■