

## The Games Kids Play in Baku's Old City



by Aynura Huseinova



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It's something you can always count. It's so predictable. When you go walking through the narrow winding streets and walkways in Baku's Old City (Ichari Shahar), you'll always find children out playing games, especially in the afternoon. The hottest days of summer are the only exceptions. No doubt children's play is an integral part of what has characterized the Old City for centuries. It's almost impossible to imagine Ichari Shahar without the sound of children's voices at play.

Children all over the world are amazingly inventive when it comes to games. They improvise and modify, varying the parameters of the game to fit the situation and the capabilities of their playmates. The same holds true for children growing up in Ichari Shahar, especially since space is so limited and often there is no sophisticated equipment.

Take basketball, for example. They have no gym in which to play. There is no wooden floor with two hoops hung on the opposite ends of the court. Instead, kids often play in the alleyways on a cement surface in a space probably no larger than 6 by 12-15 feet. Nor does it seem to matter that they have no standard basketball hoop. And so they make one by taking an old chair, sawing off its front legs, pulling out the seat and attaching its frame to the gas pipe running along the building above the doorways.

Sometimes, the "hoop" is lower than the standard basketball regulations for height; other times it's affixed even higher—it depends totally on wherever the gas pipe happens to be. And it seems to work fine, if you disregard the nagging neighbor who doesn't like the excitement and noise, and who is concerned that the makeshift hoop might be a safety hazard and cause the gas pipe to break.

Or take another example with a tag game that utilizes the sewer covers in the middle of the walkways as a safe haven. If you run over and stand on a sewer cover, you're safe and can't be tagged. Again this is another example of cleverly adapting materials and props that are available.

Kids all over the world have a keen sense of fairness when it comes to playing games. The same holds true in Ichari Shahar. We found that the kids were not willing to tolerate cheating. Elnur, one of the older kids told us: "We usually know who tries to cheat and so when it's their turn, we watch them very closely. If we catch them cheating, we make them lose their turn."

The kids seem to know everybody's background in Ichari Shahar. They love to whisper secrets about people who live there and disclose other kids' nicknames which tend to indicate character, achievements and, of course, weaknesses.

We found the kids in Ichari Shahar keen to meet foreigners and try out the little bit of English that they had been studying in school. Some of them would exhaust their entire vocabulary in a vigorous attempt to elicit any kind of response from foreigners: "Hello-how-are-you-I'm fine-thank-you-very-much!" Others, even with very limited vocabulary were amazingly dexterous at engaging and carrying on meaningful exchange.

In general, boys and girls play together along the walkways, though there are some games that seem to be more gender specific. Young boys do play Hopscotch (Clas-Clas), though this game is generally considered girls' domain. "Hunter and His Two Dogs" (Ovçu və iki it) is only played by boys. Soccer or what is called Football naturally seems to attract more boys than girls as well.

In play, the kids convey the spirit of Ichari Shahar—warm, energetic, helpful and very friendly. And, in general, you can say that the adults themselves embody these same qualities. Here are some of the games that the children described as their favorites.



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## MOST POPULAR GAMES

## Hopscotch (Klas-klas)

One of the most popular games is Hopscotch (Klas-klas). This is generally considered to be a girl's game though younger boys sometimes get involved as well. You'll find quite a few hopscotch grids drawn with chalk on walkways throughout the Old City. In general, the game is played as it is in other parts of the world. The players must throw their pebbles into a specific square and hop through the sequence and not step on any line. But we identified a few modifications.



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As the player moves through the sequence from Square No. 1 to Square No. 11, and reaches certain levels, she has to do some "multi-tasking". For example, when she reaches Level No. 7, it's forbidden to engage in any conversation. No talking. No laughing. No matter how much the other players try to distract her so that she forgets the rule and loses her turn.

On Level No. 8, she must recite a little jingle while hopping. We found the most popular one to be a Russian nonsense rhyme about a crocodile.

Crocodile walked / Smoked a pipe / Pipe dropped / And wrote: Opa, opa, opa / America, Europe, England and China / Who do they choose?

Shyel Krokodil / Trubku kuril / Trubka upala / i napisala: Opa, opa, opa / Amerika, Yevropa / Angliya i Kitay / Oni kogo vibiray?

On Level No. 9 sequence, the player must sing a song. The most popular songs were from contemporary Azeri and Turkish singers that the kids see on TV. For example: 1. Aygun Kazimova: Taking My Photos (*Şakimi Çaka-Çaka*); 2. Brilliant Dadashova: I am with You (*Səninləyəm*); 3. Turkish singer Tarkan: Dudu; 4. Manana Japaridze (a Georgian singer who lives in Baku and sings in Azeri): Everyone is Looking for a Mate (*Həm Gəzir Yansımlı*); 5. Turkish singer Davud Guloghlu: Traitor (*Yalançı*).

#### Sewer Cover Tag (*Kanalizasiya oyunu*)

This is a game of tag. If you run and stand on a sewer cover, you're safe and can't be tagged. The round sewer covers are located at regular intervals in the middle of the walkways.

#### Freezing (*Dondurma*)

Another tag game. One person is chosen to represent Frost and chases the others. Whenever he tags someone with his hand or a ball, that person must freeze in the position he was caught in. He can't move until someone else "unfreezes" him. The goal is for Frost to try to freeze all of the players. The last player to be tagged becomes Frost for the next round of play.

#### Hide and Seek (*Gizlənpaç*)

This is one of the children's favorite games because there are so many good places to hide in Ichari Shahr. Counting-out rhyme determines who must hunt for the others. When that person is selected, he usually goes over to a tree or a wall and hides his face, closes his eyes and counts to allow time for the other players to hide. How high he must count is determined by the number of players, which is multiplied by 10. For example, if five kids are playing, the Seeker must count to 50 while the other players run and hide.

In Ichari Shahr, children especially like to play this game at night when it's dark. Since the kids know Ichari



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Children's street games are characteristic of the Old City.

Shahr so well, they know the best secret hiding places and are not afraid to hide there in the dark. At night the walkways are very dark and kids told us that you could even hang from a suspended gas pipe in the street and might not be noticed. They suggested that the best hiding places were in the doorways because you could press yourself up against the doorframes and almost become invisible.

During the day, they like to wander up into the Shirvanshah Palace complex where every corner provides a good cover. Their most favorite haunt used to be a place dug out underground, possibly the opening of one of the underground tunnels that was used prior to the Soviet period. To get there, we were told: "Pass the fountain until you see some stairs leading down underground. Follow the stairs and turn left, and you'll find yourself in a place that is totally dark".





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ALAKBAY ARCHIVES/REU

Presently because of ongoing renovation, this secret place is closed to the public. So the kids have moved on to find another place. One of the foreigners who is living in their neighborhood has a garage surrounded by a high fence which he allows the kids to climb over so that they can hide in his garage. This has become one of their favorite spots because by the time the Seeker manages to climb the fence, all the other kids who have been hiding can race back to safety.

## **Basketball (Basketbol)**

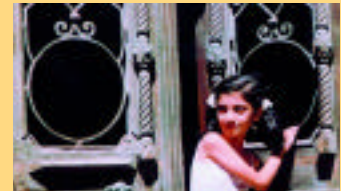
The kids affix an old chair with a busted out seat to a gas pipe high up on the wall of one of their houses. This serves as their basketball hoop. No teams are necessary; nor is there a limit on the number who can play.

However, to qualify, you must succeed in making a basket before the game actually starts. This first basket is called "issuing a passport" (**passport açmaq**). If a player can't do this, he's not allowed to join the game. This eliminates the weakest players at the beginning of the game. Only those who "issue a passport" can participate in the game.

At the beginning of play, the number of total points is determined, such as 60 points. The game is organized into three levels. When you make a basket on the First Level, you earn 9 points, The Second Level gives 6 points; Third Level, 3 points. And then the cycle repeats until someone reaches the designated sum. Each time the ball goes through the basket, the player earns points and is allowed a free throw at the next higher level.



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For each level, a player is allowed three tries. If he fails to get a basket, he must drop out. The game requires considerable skill along with a rather complex set of mathematics to keep adding in one's head.

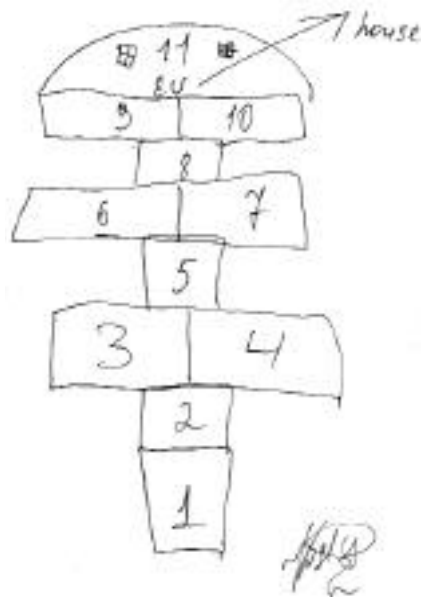
#### Misleading (*Azdırma*)

This game is a variation of "Hide and Seek". Instead of one person hunting all the other players, one team goes in search of another team. Players divide into two teams with an equal number of players, usually about four. Members of one team close their eyes while the other team members run and hide. The first team goes out in search of the other team. Whenever a person is found, the Seeker says: "One, two / Pot two / If you run / You're not in the game (*Raz, dva / Qazan dva / Qaçdın/ Oynamırsan*). The numbers "one" and "two" (*Raz* and *dva*) are said in Russian but the other words are in Azeri.

This game becomes quite difficult when the players spread out all over Ichari Shahar and hide in distance places. One of the girls told us that when this game is played in mountain villages, it becomes even more challenging because it's so hard to find anyone hiding in the mountains.

#### Color-Color (*Rang-Rang*)

This game requires several players; the more, the better. One player is designated as Mother; another is the Wolf and the rest of the players are given the names of colors by the Mother who whispers in their ears. The Wolf comes and knocks on the Mother's shoulders:



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Above: Hopscotch is one of the favorite children's games in the Old City as evidenced by the many hopscotch grids chalked on the walkways.

Left: Nura quickly draws a sketch to illustrate the grid pattern for hopscotch. Square No. 11 is marked "ev" in Azeri, which Nura proudly writes as "house" in English. For her, the most difficult square is No. 7. She says you'll lose your turn if you say a single word or even laugh while you're hopping that sequence. You can be sure your friends will try to distract you and get you to say something to forget the rule.

Opposite page above: Girlfriends gather around the entrance steps of their friends home to chat. Because the lanes are so narrow—sometimes, no wider than two meters, the architecture provides good climate control, blocking out the strong winds that blow off the Caspian as well as providing shade on at least one side of the street, except at midday.

Since the houses are built so close to one another, essentially there is no privacy. When the windows are open, people passing by can hear family conversations, know what's cooking for dinner and what television programs are being watched. In essence, there is no privacy or anonymity. The end result is that people, in general, are open, quite friendly, and very helpful to one another.



# Street Games



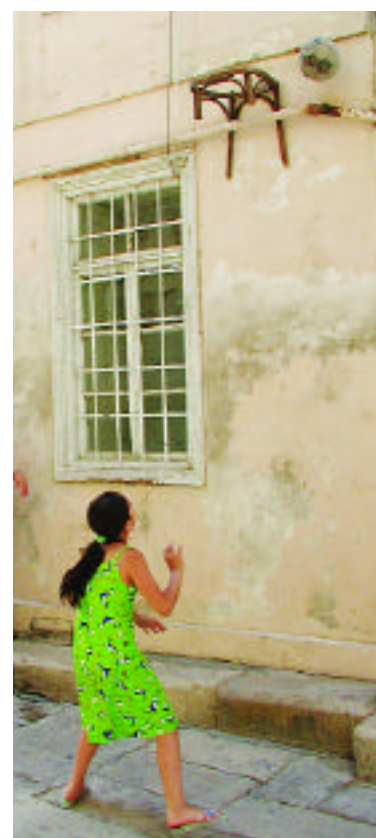
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BOTH CAT PHOTOS BY ALAKBAR AGAJANOV



AYNUR HUSEYNOVA



SADIKHA ISKANDAROVA



Wolf: "Knock, knock!"  
 Mother: "Who's there?"  
 Wolf: "Me. Wolf."  
 Mother: "What do you want?"  
 Wolf: "A color"  
 Mother: "Which color?"

**Canavar: Tuq! Tuq!**  
**Ana: Kimdir?**  
**Canavar: Canavardır.**  
**Ana: Nə istəyirsən?**  
**Canavar: Rəng**  
**Ana: Hansı rəngi?**

The Wolf calls out the name of a color, for example, "Red" (**qırmızı**). If someone has been designated as Red, that player tries to run away and escape. However, before the Wolf can start chasing him, he has to turn around in a circle as many times as the age of the child that he is chasing. The color tries to escape. If he manages to run away and then make his way back and touch Mother's hand, he is safe and is called "Gold Basket" (**qızıl vedrə**). Mother designates a new color name for him and he joins the game again. However, if the color is caught by Wolf, he is called "Shit Basket" (**poxlu vedrə**) and Wolf takes him away. The game continues until only the Mother remains. Then the game starts all over again. The most popular colors are red (**qırmızı**), black (**qara**), green (**yaşıl**) and yellow (**sarı**).

If the Wolf names a color that no one has been assigned, the Mother orders Wolf to go away, break his arm or leg, and then come back again.

A variation of this game is Fruit-Fruit (**Meyvə-Meyvə**) where fruits rather than colors are designated. The most popular fruits are orange (**portağal**), lemon (**limon**), apple (**alma**) and pear (**armud**).

#### Sculptor (**Heykəltəraş**)

A counting-out rhyme is used to determine who becomes the Joker. The regular players start clowning around and making funny poses until the Joker screams out the word "sculptor" (in Azeri) in syllables: "**Hey-kəl-tə-raş**". At that instant, the other players must freeze in whatever position they were in when the Joker screamed the last syllable. They can't talk, move, or laugh. The main thing is for the players not to change that position or pose in the slightest way. If they do, they are assigned as Joker and the game starts all over again.

#### Hunter and Two Dogs (**Ovçu və iki it**)

It takes three boys to play this game; girls don't play. A counting-out rhyme is used to determine who the Hunter will be. The Hunter has to chase the other two players who are designated as Dogs. The Hunter pelts the Dogs with little pebbles and tries to make them stop. If he succeeds, that Dog has to become the Hunter, and



Opposite page (top left): Nigar, playing dress up, in her mom's high heels. Baku's Old City.

Middle: It wouldn't be Ichari Shahar if there weren't cats. It's rare to find dogs in the streets. Cats are the favorite pets.

Below left: Kids playing tag on the sewer covers. Mir Ramiz (right, safe on the sewer cover) being chased by his brother Mir Islam.

Below right: Improvised basketball hoop in the Old City. No hoop? An old chair will do. Aynur Tahiyeva shooting baskets in the narrow walkways.

Above: Playing backgammon and chess are favorite pastimes with the men in Ichari Shahar.

the game continues.

There are other games that the children in Ichari Chahar play such as: Rock Putting (**Daş Qoydu**), Gold Door (**Qızıl qapı**), Hi Soldier (**Salam Əsgər**) and Flag-Flag (**Bayraq-bayraq**). Of course, as is true any place in the world, games have a way of spreading geographically. Without a doubt, these games are played in other cities, towns and villages

beyond the citadel walls of Ichari Shahar.

The following children helped us to gather information about contemporary games in Ichari Shahar: Taghiyev Kids—Elnur (12), Aynur (11) and Turgut (9); Aliyev Kids—Nargiz (11) and Farid (10); Yunusov brothers—Mir Islam (11) and Mir Ramiz (9), Ilkin Ahmadzade (7), Aykhan Rajabaliyev (12), Laman Mirzayeva (12), and Saleh Mirzayev (11). ■