

African Indigenous Games: Opportunities and Challenges

By Jacob Mapara (DLitt et Phil)

jacob.mapara@gmail.com, jacomapara@yahoo.co.uk, jmapara@gzu.ac.zw

Senior Lecturer: Department of African Languages and Literature and Acting Director:
Institute of Culture and Heritage Studies

Great Zimbabwe University Masvingo, Zimbabwe

Abstract

This paper argues that indigenous games are those games and related activities that are performed by the indigenous populations of a particular geographical area. In the case of Africa, these are games and activities that were and are still performed by the largely black populations of the continent. It further argues that these games were either marginalised or the owners and performers of such games were positively discouraged from participating in them. It is the assertion of this paper that the games were marginalised by the former colonial leaders of the colonial states and some religious denominations who saw them as symbols of a backward civilisation because they never saw the values that were embedded in these same games. The paper goes on to state that the rekindling and in some instances revival of these games, at both the national and international level, would go a long way in Africa's efforts at being visible on the global platform since these same games' revival will go a long way in recreating Africa's image that has been battered and bruised by centuries of lies and distortions.

Introduction

Indigenous games are those physical activities that are done by both adults and youngsters for recreation, entertainment as well as physical training and education. They are a major facet of indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) or indigenous ways of knowing (IWK). These games' origins are on the African continent and they were largely done during certain times of the year. Every season had certain types of games that were done. Questions may be asked especially when one looks at the South Africa scenario on whether games that have originated from the Afrikaner and Indian communities qualify to be called African indigenous games. If by definition indigenous refers to games and other recreational activities that have originated on the African soil but not necessarily from blacks, then those also qualify to be indigenous games. If they were imported, they are definitely not African. It is therefore the task of researchers to dig into these games and find out which ones have their roots on African soil. What is also clear about indigenous African games is that they were in some instances placed at a lower level in recreational activities in schools and in others they were completely relegated and consigned to the dustbins of history. The colonial and past education systems that the Europeans brought to Africa with them did not seek to retrieve and utilise the value systems that were entrenched in these games. What they did was to rubbish everything and yet these activities were very important to the communities that had them as part of their common heritage.

An Overview of African Indigenous Games (AIGs)

Africa is a continent of many people. Each people has games and activities that are relevant to it. Some of these games were and still are purely for recreational purposes, while others were/are for both recreation and education. There are yet others that were for physical training. African indigenous games were of and still are of different types. Most of them are

inclusive in that they can be played by all age groups with those as young as three years also taking part in some of them. Both females and males also take part in them.

AIGs are not only confined to rural areas but also to urban, mining and farming communities. They are also not games that are confined to one particular season. Each season, if the Shona games are looked at, has its own type of recreational activities. The games that are there are not common throughout the continent. The unifying factor about those games however is the fact that they entertained, physically trained the participants and educated them.

Among the Shona of Zimbabwe, the following are some of the games that they participated in: *tsoro*, *dudu muduri*, *pote pote*, *hwai hwai huyai/mapere nemakwai*, *pakasungwa neutare*, *dede zengera*, *ndikatsandikatsandika*, *sarura wako*, *kusika nyimo*, *ndondo* and *nhodo*. *Tsoro* was and is still played on a wooden board or on the ground which is levelled. Holes with a circumference of about 15 to 20 centimetres are made. The depth of the holes is about a centimetre. The total number of holes is either twenty-four or thirty six. They are arranged in the order of four by eight or as for by six. Two stones, three or four are placed in each hole and as the participants play, they move each set of stones from one hole to another that is opposite that of an opponent. He/she collects the stones in the adjacent holes of his opponent and adds these to his. If he/she drops the last stone in a hole where there is none, he stops and then the opponent also takes his turn. As they take turns, the one who is the first to clear the other's stones becomes the winner.

The game of *tsoro* involves calculating before one makes a move. Its value lies in the fact that it inculcates the significance of patience and careful planning in people. *Tsoro* also has recreational value. It has been imported into urban areas through the migrant labour system, where for example the Harare City Council has built some *tsoro* platforms in some of its beer

gardens where patrons partake alcohol and at the same time play them. Outside beer halls, some have drawn circles on certain floors and the game has been played and even modified. In some instances the number of holes has been increased from four by eight to four by twelve or four by sixteen. The result has been that the game has also taken longer to complete and its entertainment value enhanced.

Anyone can play *tsoro*, male or female, adult or youngster. In fact, the game gives room for people of different age groups and gender to interact. It builds social relations and understanding. In urban areas the game has also brought together people of diverse ethnic backgrounds. The game also inculcates in participants the value of cooperation. This is realised mostly in situations where those who intend to play it, work together to create the board or make it on the ground and looking for stones or other objects that they use as playing pieces. Cooperation is also observed when some spectators end up participating as advisors to the players.

Another game that the Shona play, especially children is *Dudu muduri*. This game is largely played by youngsters who are aged between 4 and 13. It is a memory game where children will learn to recall names of relatives, family members and friends. Related games are ‘*Dede zengera*’ and ‘*Ndikatsandikatsandika*’. The other two games focus on identifying toponyms as well as names of chiefs and sub-chiefs. The ‘*Ndikatsandikatsandika*’ game goes:

Leader : *Ndikatsandikatsandika*

Chorus: *Ndikatsa*

Leader : *Mususu ndikatsandaika*

Chorus: *Ndikatsa*

Leader : *Mugodo ndikatsandika*

Chorus: *Ndikatsa.*

Every time the leader sings out the name of trees that he/she knows. If she/he is running out of names she/he goes back to the refrain '*Ndikatsandikatsandika*' in an effort to try to recall some of the names that she/he would have forgotten. The game's value lies in its teaching the value of memory recall. It also teaches about the natural environment. The participants will not only know all the trees that are around them, but also about the types of trees and plants that are used for different activities like building, firewood and even medicine, and therefore deserve special care.

These two games that have been analysed and the others mentioned above are of immense value to the Shona. They teach counting at least up to ten as is given in the game *Nhodo*. According to Nyota and Mapara (2008: 197).

When this game is analysed as an indigenous way of knowing, it shows that it teaches numeracy. Each player is taught to count since as each picks the stones she does pick the stones singly, in twos or in higher numbers. This shows that the player learns to count in an orderly manner in an ascending order.

The western education system did not see this value, neither did the western anthropologists who studied Africans and their customs.

Indigenous games also build sportsmanship. People learn that they can lose in a game, but that is not the end of it. They also learn that they will play again at another time. The core-value here is in the entertainment and recreational aspect of the activity. For example, in

playing *nhodo* or even *ndondo* after one has lost several rounds, she/he can give up and give room to others to play. The other value of these games is that they are not like soccer, rugby, golf or tennis where the players only participate and others are spectators. In these games as people take turns those who would have been spectators a few moments earlier would become players as well.

The AIGs also built tolerance and focused on what communities valued most in men and women. This is clear in games such as '*Sarura wako*' and '*Pote pote*' where participants picked partners on the basis of cleanliness and hard work. Games like '*Chihwandehwande*' (Hide and seek) highlight the values of endurance and self-preservation. In a game such as this, participants also sharpened their senses especially auditory ones.

Justification for the promotion and revival of AIGs

AIGs just like African languages are identity markers. They are besides language, another window through which African values can be looked at. Hammersmith (2007: 111) amplifies this when he points out that the study of IKS is aimed at as part of the struggle for the indigenous people's reclamation, revitalisation as well as the renewal of their knowledge systems. These games' revival and promotion are part and parcel of the struggle and drive towards the African renaissance. The games help to confirm that recreation and related activities are not the product of Africa's contact with the western world, but that these have always been there. In fact, the revival and restoration of these games as well as their promotion has historical significance in that through them Africans are reclaiming their position on the world stage. They had been robbed of this position through colonialism and its attendant evils. As part of Africa's heritage, the following words go a long way in justifying why it is necessary to have indigenous games:

No historical grievances will rankle so long, or be the cause of so much justified bitterness, as the removal, for any reason of a part of the heritage of any nation. It is our duty, individually and collectively to protest against it, and there are obligations to common justice, decency and the establishment of the power of right, not of expediency or might, among civilized nations (Members of the Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives Section of the United States Army, Wiesbaden, Germany 1945, in Prott/UNESCO 2009: iii).

These words, said in 1945 at the end of the Second World War were cautioning against the plundering of the German heritage after her defeat and surrender. Even though the members who put these words down were part of the victorious nations, they were against the plunder and looting of Germany's cultural heritage, this being despite the fact that Hitler had ordered the plunder of other nations' treasures and cultural artefacts.

These words became hollow and meaningless when they are read from an African perspective. This is so because Africa's heritage was vandalised and plundered. Games were suppressed and marginalized. They were labelled as signs of laziness and backwardness. There is also the possibility that the colonial goals did not want to see blacks gathered together where there were no police officers because they feared that such gatherings were potential political awareness meetings and recruitment areas for the armed struggle.

Another justification for the revival, restoration and production of indigenous games is that they help minimise crime. If people are engaged in some of these games, be it at gates to certain industries, or in parks in urban games, or even in the rural areas, they will have something occupying them. It will not be the same with loitering. As such, the chances of these people being involved in criminal activities are reduced/minimised.

Another rationale for the AIGs restoration is their value as memory centres. AIGs are laden with history. A study of some of these games shows, as has been highlighted above that they have an educational significance in them. They also highlighted what their creators valued most in their lives. These same games open up avenues for the possible broadening of the African educational curricula. Another important reason for the revival of the games is to highlight the Africans' creativity. For example, games like *nhodo* that teach, numeracy, make it clear that numeracy is not something that came on the African shores as a result of colonial conquest but it was already there.

AIGs are also worth preserving and restoring, as well as promoting because most of them are inexpensive. They do not need special attire and equipment like uniforms, boots and clubs if it is a sport like golf. The other advantage of AIGs is that most people can participate in them, and almost all age groups can be involved.

Adding Value to AIGs

AIGs can have their value immensely increased if they are included in the educational curricula of their respective countries. Their value can also be greatly enhanced if information and communication technology (ICT) is taken advantage of. In the educational field the games can be included as part of the curricula just as sports is. In Zimbabwe sporting activities are referred to as co-curricula activities not as extra-curricula. If they are taken on board as such their promotion becomes easier because they will also be done on sports days that are on the school calendar. In pre-schools the same would apply. They would also be treated in the same manner in tertiary institutions, the way soccer and other established western types of sports are treated. In institutions of higher learning there may be need to employ an officer who has a deep knowledge and appreciation of these games for purposes of their promotion. The AIGs can also be appreciated and have value added to them if they are

used as teaching-learning aids in some lessons. To make learning more meaningful and interesting as well as entertaining an innovative teacher may use games such as ‘*Nditatsandikatsandika*’, ‘*Dudu muduri*’ and ‘*Dodo zengera*’ in teaching subjects such as history, literature and geography. Traditionally among the Shona such games have been used to teach youngsters to learn to identify trees and mountains as well as people around them.

In a subject like history, any one of those games can be used to identify major players or events within a particular historical period. If for example one is teaching major players in Southern Africa’s struggles against colonialism and the establishment of democracy, actors such as Julius Nyerere, Nelson Mandela, Samora Machel and Robert Mugabe have to be identified. If the focus is on Europe in the post-1870 period, then people like Otto von Bismarck and the Berlin Conference of 1884-5 have to be mentioned. If the subject is literature (in any language) the same game may be used in identifying major characters in a set text. If for example the class is studying Charles Mungoshi’s *Ndiko kupindana Kwamazuva* (How Time Passes – 1975), they would be expected to identify the following major characters: Rex Mbare, Rindai, Magret Murima and Zakariya Munyati as well as Rangarirai. These actors are the prime movers of the story. The idea is not just the identification of events and characters in either history or literature. The teacher is then expected to ask the students to point out the major contributions of the characters to the development of the study, or movement of historical events.

A creative geography teacher may also use any one of the above three games to identify major discussion areas, for example, when teaching about the development tourism in sub-Saharan Africa she/he may ask students to mention major tourist areas. While a student may not mention all of those, a good one should include at least the following: Tsavo (in Kenya), Serengeti (in Tanzania), Hwange (in Zimbabwe) and Kruger National Park (in South Africa). After the identification of these areas s/he may then assign students to work in groups to discuss factors that have led to the growth of tourism in these areas.

In pre-schools and primary schools, teachers may use these games to empower their students with the knowledge of their immediate environment. They may ask pupils to identify items such as road and street names. They may also name shopping centres and health institutions that are close to them. Through the same games they can also mention names of suburbs in their neighbourhood as well as schools. If possible, the teacher may ask the students to point the general directions in which the identified suburbs are located.

Innovative ICT companies can tap into the rich AIGs. This is especially so if there are investors who are prepared to invest their money into the technology of some of these games. The implications is that if the games are developed they can be licensed and sold to gaming companies that may then put these on the market. There is however need for whatever company that chooses to go into this area to work with the communities that own such games, because to just take them and market them is to infringe on those communities' intellectual property rights. Even though these games may appear to be public domain property, they are owned by the communities from which they would have originated.

National Structures: The case of South Africa

Every African country has some indigenous games. The question is: what has been done about them? The answer is either not much or nothing. This is of course with the exception of South Africa. This is one country in the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) and Africa at large that has positively identified the value that is locked up in them.

According to the website <http://www.srsa.gov.za/PageMaster.asp?ID=22> South Africa held its first National Indigenous Games in 2004 in Oudtshoorn. These were followed a year later by the second edition in Polokwane. After Polokwane the next place to host them was Badplaas, in Mpumalanga. This was in 2006. The 2007 edition of the games was held in Mdantsane near East London.

What South Africa has managed to do is to set up a national organising committee that coordinates the hosting of the National Indigenous Games (NIGs) every year. The success of the national structure lies in the fact that it has managed to hold the games annually in a different province and attracting as much as 2000 people, to the official launch activities (Mhlope: <http://ulwazi.org/index.php/news.22.html>). The figure 2000 may appear very insignificant especially in a country like South Africa that has more than 60 million people. When this figure is looked at it appears very insignificant. But there is need to bear in mind that these games had long been relegated to the dustbins of history and had been marginalised for a very long time. It is therefore a very significant number.

One of the major activities of the National Structure for AIGs in South Africa is the drive to popularise these activities in the South African education system starting from nursery schools going up to tertiary institutions. The other emphasis of the National Structure in their drive for the revival and promotion of AIGs is that they have health benefits. They lead to an active lifestyle. They also seek to establish provincial structures.

IIGs in the Region and Africa

The SADC region and Africa at large have to learn from South Africa. The problem with Africa north of the Limpopo is that its political leadership, especially the ministries that deal

with sports, education and culture have tended to promote a largely academic curriculum. They have made very little attempts at indigenising the education curriculum. This has led to a yawning gap in as far as the revival and promotion of AIGs is concerned. There is need for the setting up of Regional and continental structures that will help promote and coordinate activities in indigenous games in different countries and at the continental level. These bodies can help in setting up national structures in different countries.

Once most countries would have set up national structures, each country has to hold national indigenous games every year. It is out of these games that the best teams would be picked to go and showcase their country's heritage in as far as games are concerned in a host country that the regional structures and the continental body would agree upon. The games may be held every two years just like the AFCON competitions for soccer that are held every two years. This of course has to be done in such a manner that they do not clash with the soccer showcase.

The organisers of the games may choose to follow the format of a festival. If they choose this way to make it more entertaining and refreshing they may also include the showcasing of musical talent interspersed with these games. The music would also be to see a celebration of Africa's musical creativity and the playing of African indigenous instruments like *mbira*, *marimba* and the *kora* would be encouraged.

If the launch of an Africa-wide indigenous games festival, is a success, there is need to work towards the holding of the world's festival on indigenous games. The purpose of the world festival would be two-fold. At the first level it will be a celebration of African renaissance where Africa would be showcasing to the world her rich cultural heritage in as far as games are concerned. The second level would be to celebrate together with every nation the global cultural diversity.

When national, regional and the continental structures have been set up there is need to put down policy guidelines that would assist in the execution of duties by those who would have been elected into office. A policy framework would become the guiding principle for the office bearers. According *Western's Student of the English Language* (2000: 562) a policy is a course of administrative action. It is also any system of management. The *Macmillan English Dictionary of Advanced Learners* (2002:1090) defines policy as:

- (1) Set of plans or actions agreed on by a government, political party business or another group.
- (2) A principle or set of ideas that you think is sensible or wise.

All the above definitions agree on one issue – that a policy is a guideline that is a pointer towards the type of action that those who would have agreed should embark on.

The structures that would have been set should not just concentrate on the documentation of the type of games. They should also work towards the promotion and development of these games. The structures should be aggressive in pushing and marketing these games. The policy should also give direction on the implementation of these games and their inclusion in the education curricula from pre-school right up to university level.

Challenges

The greatest challenge to African indigenous games is that they are looked down upon by the west and their allies. Some people in the west view Africa and the continents to her east as

culturally and technologically inferior. This is worsened by Africa's never ending wars that are largely ethnic and religious. The deteriorating human rights conditions and in some instances the non-existence of these make Africa's situation even more precarious. It becomes difficult to convince the world that despite all these turbulences Africa has a rich games and recreational activities heritage.

The other threat to Africa's IGs is the Africans themselves. Most members of the ruling elite have become what Fanon lambasts in his book *Black Skin, White Masks*. According to Fanon, (in Mapara 2009:14) colonialism because of its blatant promotion of white racial superiority over non-white peoples has created a sense of division and alienation in the self identify of the colonised. Fanon argues that under the yoke of colonialism, the history, language, culture, customs as well as belief systems of the white coloniser are to be considered as universal and the norm. Those of the colonised are viewed as inferior and not worthy. It is the permeation of this corrosive notion into the psyche of those in power that has made them to take no action on the revival and promotion of such an important marker of the African people's identity, despite boasting several score years of political and cultural independence.

These ruling elites have enrolled their children in informer whites only schools. When the whites felt that they were being overwhelmed by blacks, they built their own private schools, which in Zimbabwe are today known as trust schools. The activities and games that are promoted and pursued with religious vigour are sports like soccer, rugby and basketball. Students also do quizzes where they are tested on western knowledge that focuses on history, literature, geography and science. They are asked for example, to state who Alexander the Great was. These same students do not know who Samora Machel was or who Samori Toure was. Such quizzes are even promoted by black quizmasters. Such games entrench the mentality that Africa has nothing to offer in terms of games and other activities.

Still linked to blacks/Africans is the low self esteem that the indigenous people have of themselves. They do not believe in themselves. In Zimbabwe there is what we may refer to as the *Chibhoyi* syndrome (Boy syndrome). The term *mubhoyi* (boy) was used to refer to blacks in colonial Zimbabwe. Adult males were always viewed as boys and therefore minors by the white racist rulers. Since they were always pushed and tossed around they developed a low self esteem and came to be awestruck by the white person. Unfortunately, this syndrome has so thoroughly permeated the Zimbabwean psyche to such an extent that most blacks do not trust one another, let alone value their own institutions and games. It is also because of this that it becomes difficult to convince them and those few who know the games or have participated in them who are scattered in different parts of the country. Some also state that they cannot participate in those games because they belong to a world that is long lost and is better forgotten.

AIGs have also been affected by the fact that very few people have studied them so as to unlock the values that are embedded in them. Serious study in the area of AIGs may go a long way in restoring them and have their recreational as well as entertainment and commercial values unpacked.

AIGs are largely carried by indigenous languages. If these languages are left to die, as is already happening in some areas, then the games also die. The challenge therefore is to ensure that the languages survive through the introduction and implementation of comprehensive national language policies. Without these, the future of the AIGs is not so bright. The ministries of education, arts, sports and culture should also strongly promote these activities and even hold workshops to raise awareness and promote these games in their respective countries.

One other major challenge is that of funding. Even if there are people who need to promote AIGs, they may fail to get funding for promotional purposes. Most people who fund may argue that they are interested in funding only those activities that would benefit artists. Maybe the best way forward in such a situation is to look for funders of National Indigenous Games Festivals.

Conclusion

This paper has argued on the value of African Indigenous Games. It has discussed why they are important and why they should be revived and promoted. It has gone on to state that the future of these games lies in Blacks having a positive image of themselves. It is this image that will go a long way in helping reposition and relaunch the Africans on the world stage where they had been removed by colonialism and racism. The paper has argued that the promotion of AIGs can be enhanced by their introduction into the school curriculum. It has further stated that those in the ICT industry can also help in the promotion and revival of these games if they adopt some of them for gaming purposes and promote them through gaming companies and the internet.

References

- Landau, S.I. (Editor-in-Chief) 2000. *Webster's Student Dictionary of the English Language*.
New Dehli: CBS Publishing.
- Mapara, J. 2009. Indigenous Knowledge Systems in Zimbabwe: Juxtaposing Postcolonial
Theory. In *Journal of Pan African Studies*, Volume 3, Number 1, pp 139-155.
- Mhlope, G. Indigenous Instruments and Modern Technologies Festival.
<http://ulwazi.org/index.php/news.22.html> Accessed on 19 May 2010.
- Nyota, S. and J. Mapara. 2008. Shona Traditional Children's Games and Play: Songs as
Indigenous Ways of Knowing. In *Journal of Pan African Studies*, Volume 2, Number
4, pp 189-202.
- Prott, L.V. (Editor)/UNESCO. 2009. *Witnesses to History: A Compendium of Documents and
Writings on the Return of Cultural Objects*. Paris. UNESCO.
- Rundell, M. (Editor-in-Chief) 2002. *Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners*.
Oxford: Macmillan.