Shona Traditional Children's Games and Play: Songs as Indigenous Ways of Knowing

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Abstract

This article aims to show that Shona traditional children's games and play songs are an indigenous way of knowing. It also seeks to show how the knowledge embedded in these songs and play songs is accessed. As methodology, examples of Shona traditional children's games and play songs are analysed using insights from developmental psychology and indigenous knowledge systems. The paper argues that Shona traditional children's games and songs lead to and provide a rich environment or social context that sustains the flowering of children's curiosity and exploration of their immediate world as they play. The children explore the social context of games and play songs through guided apprenticeship that is greatly rewarding and motivational. The virtues and values learnt are varied and practical. Some of them are good behaviour, hard work, competition, handling success and failure and leadership. The paper also argues that the values and virtues that are learned in these games and play songs become useful later in life.

Introduction

This paper seeks to foreground the role of Shona traditional children's games and play songs as indigenous ways of learning. Motivation to carry out such a study comes from a noticeable growing interest in indigenous knowledge systems as evidenced in the works of Warren (1991), Flavier et al. (1995) Goduka (2000), Kunnie (2000), Pikirayi (2000) and Nyota and Mapara (2007). The present authors are also motivated by the use of these traditional items as methods and tools of teaching and learning especially in Zimbabwe's rural primary schools as well as in some urban schools.

The other motivating factor is the non-use of these games and play songs in most urban preschools. These pre-schools instead prefer the use English games and songs. The authors would like to show and share how these pre-scholars and urban learners miss out and run the risk of not being conversant with what their culture can offer. This research is thus an attempt to salvage this knowledge. As scholars who were socialised in a cultural environment where these games and play songs contributed immensely to the socialisation process of the young, the present authors have the urge to share their experiences and contribute to knowledge in this area. As tools of the socialisation process, these games and play songs become part of part of the indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) which is the local knowledge that is unique to any community or culture. (The terms indigenous knowledge systems [IKS] and indigenous way of knowing [IWK] are used interchangeably in this paper). Warren (1991) has defined indigenous knowledge as the basis for decision making at the local level. Such decisions have a bearing on key issues such as societal norms and values, socio-economic issues such as socialisation of the young, food production, processing and preservation as well as natural resources management. This shows that it differs from that type of knowledge that universities, research institutions and private companies generate. To this end, Nyota and Mapara (2007:1) have remarked that indigenous knowledge is that "Knowledge that is commonly owned and shared among the inhabitants of a particular community." Similarly, Flavier et al. (1995:479) have defined it as:

The information base for a society which facilitates communication and decision-making. Indigenous information systems are dynamic and are continually influenced by internal creativity and experimentation.

These words make it clear that IKS is not a fossilised type of knowledge but a knowledge that is constantly adjusting to the immediate needs of its community as the need arises.

Shona traditional children's games and play songs have attracted the attention of researchers and scholars such as Hodza (1985) and Matindike (1984). They are also featured on radio and television. The present authors have however, observed that most earlier works on the Shona children's games and play songs focus on recording them or using them as primary school comprehension passages with very little analyses showing their cognitive roles. The present authors are thus deliberately focusing on the contribution of Shona traditional children's games and play songs towards the cognitive and socialisation of the young.

Cognitive Development of the Young

The study of the cognitive development of the young has captured the attention of earlier and development psychologists such as Piaget and Vygotsky (cited in Berger 2000), Rogoff et al. (1990), Tharp and Gillimore (1988) and Berger (2000). Most of these scholars have studied the western and eastern child on the main, with little or no focus on the African child.

The present authors do not claim any knowledge of developmental psychology with its experiments as such, but have vast interest in the Shona indigenous knowledge systems, whether this is from Shona games, play songs, proverbs, taboos or folktales. The authors are interested in the social apprenticeship aspect of cognitive development which they also went through. This type of cognitive development takes place in a socio-cultural environment through activities such as games, riddles and songs.

Developmental psychologists agree that cognitive development begins even before birth and continues through the play years. Recent research on this area has also led to an appreciative acknowledgement of cognitive abilities during early childhood, which include mathematics, language and social understanding. To this end Leach (1997) has remarked that the three to five year olds are not a waiting time before school or even a time of preparing for school but an age properly called early childhood that has a developmental agenda of its own. The present researchers agree with this assertion from their observation of the Shona children as they express their interpretation of life. For example, these children beguile us when they speak to and share jokes with their invisible and imaginary playmates, when they wonder about things such as when they ask:

Nhai mhai, ndakambomwawo munhu?

(Mother, have I also suckled from a human being?)

Such a question is asked when they see their young siblings breast-feeding.

They also provide humour when they are confused by metaphors as in the following statement that is often said by a parent to a naughty child:

Musoro wako uzere mvura (lit: Your head is full of water)

(Viz: you have no sense).

Such a child can respond by touching his/her head and prove the parent wrong by responding, "Idikita" (It is sweat).

The children are also illogical about common occurrences. For example, they can try to run away from their own shadow. They also show strategic skills when pursuing their own goals such as wanting to be served with more meat for relish.

Views of Developmental Psychologists on how Children Develop their Cognitive Skills

Piaget emphasises that the young children strive for understanding in a world that fascinates and sometimes confuses them. He tends to regard cognitive growth as a process of individual discovery propelled by personal experience and biological maturation. Vygotsky agrees with this and also emphasises that children do not strive alone since their efforts are embedded in a social context where the things they notice make them become inquisitive. Vygotsky further argues that parents and elder children offer assistance, present challenges, provide instruction and encourage the child's interest and motivation. To this end, Berger (2000:275) concludes:

In many ways then, a young child is an apprentice in thinking whose intellectual growth is stimulated and directed by older and more skilled members of society.

Berger also remarks that evidence that culture influences the growth of cognitive development comes from a process that seems to be universal.

The present researchers observe that the traditional Shona children's games and play songs provided an opportunity where the children learnt by guided participation in social experiences, in explorations of their world as they play. Such similar play has been found to instil in the young self-confidence, social skills and social understanding (Compos et al. 1989; Eisenberg and Fabes 1992; Schore 1994; Sroufe 1996; and Tangney and Fisher 1995).

The present authors observe that many social skills can be learnt through Shona traditional children's games. For example, the children learn to share tools used for the games such as *nhodo* (a game similar to Jacks) and *ndondo* where necessary. (These two games are explained later). They learn to manage conflict such as to respond to a playmate's accusation, for example, when a playmate says, "Wabira" (You have cheated), especially the when the accuser has been beaten in a competitive game. They can also learn to keep friends and playmates. They can learn to manage and deal with those playmates who are not always understanding and self-sacrificing, for instance one who is always quick to denounce friendship, "Hausi shamwari yangu futi" (You are after all not my friend). These skills have consequences that teach the children about social interaction from youth to their adult years.

The games also provide the children with opportunities for mastery of play. They have the opportunity to continue practising a skill until they are proficient at it. This enables them to gain self-confidence and self-esteem. Berger highlights that the children's games are more than just games when she observes the misconception that most researchers have about these activities. She says, "Most researchers of young children believe that play is the work of childhood" (Berger 2000:306). The importance of practice is something that the Shona value a lot. The value that is placed on practice is captured in the proverb, "Charovedzera charovedzera, gudo rakakwira mawere kwasviba" (Practice makes perfect).

Guided Learning in Shona Children's Games and Play Songs

Berger (2000:279) has remarked:

If a child's learning is not aroused by his or her parents, it may be aroused – and powerfully – when the child begins to compare his or her skills with those of other children of the same age.

Berger is emphasising the importance of the parents in a child's learning. For the Shona games that are under discussion, a child, the elder children who now have mastered the skill or graduated from apprenticeship so to speak normally give the apprentice guidance. The critical element of these games is guided participation. The elder child who has mastered the skill and the learner child interact in order to accomplish a task. As they do so, the mentor is both sensitive and responsive to the needs of the learner. That mutuality leads the learner child to succeed independently. For example, from our experience, once the learner child learns nhodo, ndondo or any other game for that matter, with the help of the elder child/children, s/he gets the urge to try it repeatedly. That alone instils the concepts of hard work and commitment that is obviously going to be handy in the child's adult life. With time, the learner needs less assistance. For instance, for *nhodo*, the child can begin by picking one stone at a time, transfer the skill to picking two stones at a time, then three and graduates to the next number as she becomes competent at a particular number until she gets to the maximum that the game requires. With complete mastery due to guidance, the learner will get the urge to try the game again, enjoy the activity and during the process learn other activities such as counting. Eventually the learner will begin to tutor the new comers. That way, the leadership skills are instilled and some sense of satisfaction is felt. The skills on constantly learning to hone one's skills as well as teaching others and assuming leadership roles are transferable to adult situations later in life.

Such interactive apprenticeships are said to be common in every culture of the world. The children who are given guidance learn to perform the skill of their own (Rogoff 1990; Rogoff et al 1993; Tharp and Gillimore 1988). Vygotsky (cited in Berger 2000:282) stresses that each society has its own lessons and skills as well as ways to teach them. Sadly, some Shona seem to be running away from theirs as was noted earlier on in this study. Many developmental psychologists further agree that in every culture, children become skilled in those cognitive skills valued by that culture. Now, if the Shona shun their own skills, whose skills are they valuing when their pre-schoolers for instance, only do English games and songs like "I am going to the zoo" at pre-school? Such songs foster traditions that are alien to the child. Some of these same English songs nursery rhymes like "Bah bah Black Sheep" foster a culture of subordination in that they promote a master-slave relationship where the sheep's wool is for the master and his family and not the sheep itself. This engraves in the learner's mind that s/he has to work for the master and not enjoy the fruits of their labour.

When the youngsters learn the games, they also engage in verbal interaction as well. Researchers believe that verbal interaction is a cognitive tool essential to interactive growth. Verbal interaction during Shona children's traditional games can be done in two crucial ways, namely private speech and face to face verbal interaction between participants. It is common practice for Shona children to engage in audible internal dialogue. Apparently the practice is not unique to Shona children only (Berger 2000; Diaz 1987). Concerning this practice Berger (2000:277) asserts:

Researchers studying private speech have found out that preschoolers use it to help them think and learn to review what they know, decide what to do and explain events to themselves and incidentally to anyone else within earshot.

It is common to hear such private speech as, "Hiya, ndazvibata" (Yes, I have grasped it), by a learner after s/he has grasped a skill that was difficulty while s/he was learning a game. On the other hand, face-to-face interaction can also assist in learning vocabulary as the elder child who is monitoring the learner explains the terms used in that game and the steps that need to be followed in order to grasp the rules of that game. The instructional interaction and guidance of the mentor resemble the systematic way observed by developmentalists who have observed how parents scaffold their children's abilities (Brunner 1982; Rogoff 1990; Stone 1993). The steps observed during the teaching of a game may include the following:

- Arousing the learner's interest in a new task
- The mentor simplifies the task so that the child thinks of best strategies.
- The mentor scaffolds the particular tasks so that they are within the learner's ability, for instance by doing some steps jointly.
- The mentor interprets the activity so that cognitive understanding will facilitate mastery.
- Solving the problem anticipating mistakes and guiding the learner to minimise or correct them.
- The mentor instils in the learner enthusiasm by encouraging the desire to achieve and by reducing boredom and self-doubt.

The above steps show that cognitive development during Shona children's games is a social process. They also show the need for emotional involvement – sparking motivation, maintaining enthusiasm and dealing with frustration.

Such elaborate apprenticeship is sure to produce the required skills. These are some of the reasons why the present researchers argue that Shona traditional games and play songs are a type of indigenous way of knowing. The authors however bemoan the relaxed manner in which the Shona people regard and approach their indigenous knowledge systems. While developmental psychologists make a strong assertion that in every culture, children become skilled in those cognitive skills valued by that culture, the Shona people, especially those in urban areas seem to disregard the evidence put forward by developmental psychologists that culture influences the development of cognitive abilities. The developmental psychologists argue that this assertion is universal. For example, they agree on one hypothesis about the general math superiority of East Asian children over American and European youngsters. Fuson and Kwon make this clear when they state:

Japanese, Korean and Chinese are much more logical in their labelling of numbers. For instance 'eleven, twelve, thirteen' and so on are called 'ten-one, ten-two, ten-three' and so on in the Asian languages (cited in Berger 2000:281).

The authors of this study observe a similarity in the labelling of numbers between these cited Asian languages, the Shona, and some Bantu language. The Shona and other Bantu languages like KiSwahili and Chewa also label the noted numbers, eleven, twelve, thirteen and so on as observed with the case of Shona as: gumi neimwe, gumi nembiri, gumi nenhatu (ten and one, ten and two, ten and three and so on). A major point of departure between Asian languages and Shona (as well as other Bantu languages) is that while the said Asian languages are used as official languages in their respective countries, Shona is not an official language, but is accorded national language status. The Education Act of 1987 gave English official status while Shona and Ndebele were accorded national status. According to this Education Act, Shona (and Ndebele) can only be used as a medium of instruction from Grade one to three. Thereafter English takes over. From the present researchers' experiences as educators, very few schools follow the rules set out in the Act since they use English as the medium of instruction from Grade one for all subjects except for the Shona language. The researchers noted that the reason for the impediment to the implementation of the Act is a combination of factors. Some of them are such as negative attitudes by the Shona speakers towards their language in its diglossic relationship with English as the H(igh) in Zimbabwe. There is also the lack of supervision and monitoring to find out if the rules and government policies are being implemented. If only Shona (or Ndebele) was used as the medium of instruction in Zimbabwe, maybe Shona youngsters would be on par with those youngsters from the Asian countries that have been identified above. For now, the Shona learners use English as the medium of instruction and one subject that they perform badly in is mathematics. Certainly language is one of the variables leading to the high failure rate. One proof to in this pathetic learning situation is that mathematics teachers have been observed to code-switch a lot from English to Shona as they attend to their classes. Another observation is that there is a high drop out rate in math classes. Obviously if the mathematical concepts are taught in a language that most of the students would understand, the drop out rate would have been low.

Analysis of Shona Children's Games and Play Songs as Indigenous Ways of Knowing

Mahumbwe (Playing house).

Mahumbwe is a socio-dramatic play. It is a traditional children's play that is participated in by children in the age groups of about four to fourteen years. These are children of both sexes. It involves the youngsters camping near their homesteads. In this game, the youngsters play house. They assign one another roles such as fathers, mothers and children. In addition, other members form the extended family like aunts, uncles, cousins, nephew and nieces. The plots of mahumbwe are both very simple and elaborate. For instance, the mother-baby scene may just consist of feeding the baby, sleeping and waking up, while the husband-wife plot is more elaborate. It involves for example, the husband gathering food and the mother cooking and serving the food.

An analysis of this seemingly simple drama shows that it has the capacity to instil in the youngsters those cognitive skills that are valued in Shona culture. In fact *mahumbwe* is a very important *rites de passage* in Shona culture in that it teaches and entrenches in the children's psyche the duties and roles they are expected to play when they have their own families. Gelfand (1979) highlights the importance of this stage in the child's learning curve. The *mahumbwe* play provides a way for the children to explore and rehearse social roles that they shall occupy in the real adult life. As the children play in *mahumbwe*, they get a chance to convince others of ideas during petty discussions at a *dare* (family meeting place for men). The children also learn to control their emotions as they simulate serious issues such as parenting and adolescence in a playful manner. They also get enlightened and have chances to explore and examine personal concerns in a non-threatening environment of real parents and adolescents. The play also enables youngsters to create self-understanding as the play affords them to be active, interactive and imaginative.

Ndondo (it has no known English equivalent)

As far as the researchers know, *ndondo* is a game that is peculiar to the Shona, specifically the Tangwena people who are domiciled on the Kaerezi Range, on Zimbabwe's border with Mozambique. Males in the age range of about five years to late adolescence play the game. It is a game of hitting targets of shelled maize cobs that are placed on either side of the contesting parties. The players will be facing each other and they can play either as a team or as individuals. The *ndondo* itself is a disc made of broken pieces of squash that are used to make gourds. It has a hole in the centre. A carefully made short stick that is tightly fitted in plugs the hole. The stick acts as the axis of the disc and enables it to rotate moving in the direction of the opponent's arranged shelled maize cobs aimed at knocking them down. Scores are based on each spin that knocks a cob. A draw results in the two *ndondos* being aimed against each other. The one whose *ndondo* is outspun and knocked down loses the game.

An analysis of this game as an indigenous way of knowing shows that the game instils in the participants good sportsmanship. These values include how to handle success and failure after a game. Through the challenges that the loser may throw at the winner, the participants are taught not to give up. For instance, the loser realises that his loss is only for that particular day, not an every day occurrence. He learns that losses are not permanent but are a temporary set back that he can overcome with more practice. The lesson for life from this game is that setbacks are temporary. One has only to assess where they went wrong in order to right it next time. The game also fosters goal and target setting in the participants. Patience is also fostered as the participants practice repeatedly. This patience is further instilled in the participants by Shona philosophy through proverbs such as, *Charovedzera charovedzera*, *gudo rakakwira mawere kwasviba* (Practice makes perfect, the baboon went up a precipice in the dark) and *Kumhanya handi kusvika* (Being in a hurry does not ensure safe arrival).

The game is also useful in environmental management matters. It promotes a cleaner environment by the use of recycled waste since the ndondo disc is made from broken pieces of gourd material that would have broken and would no longer be useful for anything. The targets are also shelled maize cobs. This game at least ensures that unwanted material and dirty are not left strewn all over the place. Overally, the game instils a sense of discipline in children. They later carry this virtue into adulthood with them.

Nhodo

The closet equivalent to an English game to this one is that of jacks. This game is played girls in the age range of about five to thirteen years old. The girls sit cross-legged round a hole in the ground. (Today they can draw a circle on a cement floor since it is impossible to make a hole). When they play the game, they can use small stones or fruit seed as play implements. One bigger stone or seed is used as the *mudodo* that is not allowed to hit the ground as it is thrown up and is caught. As the *mudodo* is thrown up the same hand removes and returns the other stones from a small hole in front of the players who sit around it and wait to take their turn in the event that other one in the round fails. There are several types of *nhodo* but all involve the *mudodo* and stones/seeds of fruits. One type involves throwing the *mudodo* and picking the other stones one by one or two by two and so on. Scoring is when the player successfully picks stones without dropping the *mudodo*. If one misses picking and in the process drops the *mudodo*, she passes the chance to the next player who also tries to win the round without dropping the *mudodo*.

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.

In addition, as the player juggles between hand, eyes and stones, she improves her motor skills. Again, like in *ndondo* sportsmanship and its attendant factors of winning, losing and practice are reinforced. There is a sense of responsibility instilled in the elder ones who teach the younger ones how to play. The learners learn to respect and appreciate the services of their mentors. In turn, this propels the young apprentices to aim high so that they can also be mentors of their own young sisters.

Pote pote (Round and round)

Pote pote is a game that is accompanied by a song. It can be called a play song probably taking after work songs (*nziyo dzepanhimbe*). The participants are young boys and girls aged seven to thirteen. One participant goes round the others who will be seated or standing in a circle. The one with the turn goes round the circle singing:

Mushauri: Pote pote! Vabvumiri: Zangariyana

Mushauri: Ndinotsvaga wangu.

Vabvumiri: Zangariyana. Mushauri: Musuki wendiro. Vabvumiri: Zangariyana. Mushauri: Anodzichenesa. Vabvumiri: Zangariyana.

Mushauri: Semwedzi muchena.

Vabvumiri: Zangariyana.

Mushauri: Simuka hande (Achibata waasarudza).

(Vanouchirira uyo achangobva mudariro).

Leader: Round and round

(Chorus: Go on.

Leader: I am looking for my own.

Chorus: Go on.

Leader: Who cleans plates.

Chorus: Go on.

Leader: Who cleans them thoroughly.

Chorus: Go on.

Leader: As clean as the moon.

Chorus: Go on.

Leader: Stand up, let us go (Helps the one he has chosen).

Chorus: Go on.

[They then clap hands for the one who has completed his turn]).

In the above play song, as the one who has the turn goes round, she sings out the attributes that his ideal partner should have. When he gets to the person of his choice he says the following words, "Simuka hande" (Stand up, let us go). This is an invitation to the chosen partner to follow. The two then sit or stand side by side and give the next person room to sing and chose a partner. If the number of participants is uneven, there will be a participant who remains without a partner. Such a participant is jeered at. There are also instances when even if the numbers are even, one may refuse choosing the remaining person because he may not be seeing her as the ideal one since from his knowledge she may not have positive attributes. Girls also take turns and sing the same song bringing out the positive attributes they want in their ideal husbands.

An analysis of this game as IKS shows that it teaches the participants to behave positively so that among other things, they meet the expectations of an ideal marriage partner. As the participants choose partners, they echo the values expected in a partner such as musuki wendiro (cleaner of plates). The idea is not just of one who cleans plates, but is a reference to general cleanliness. The same is true when a girl goes looking for muvaki wemba (builder of a house). She will be looking for someone who is hardworking. Normally those who remain without partners are known for bad behaviour like laziness, being cruel and disrespect for elders. The play song highlights the fact that the Shona value a different kind of beauty. To them beauty is measured not in physical terms, but in positive deeds. That is why they have proverbs such as Guyu kutsvukira kunze mukati muzere masvosve (A fig may look appetising from outside, yet inside it is full of ants). This proverb and other related ones emphasise deeds and not physical appearances. In this play song, the participants will always strive to meet the norms and values of their community. The youngsters are being prepared not to be misfits in their society. The value of society is captured in the proverb, Munhu munhu nevanhu (Aperson is one because of others). It teaches that if one behaves in a socially acceptable way, then the others would readily accept him/her.

Dede zangara uyo mutii? (What type of tree is that?).

This play song is done by the five to thirteen year olds who go out to herd cattle and goats. This play song is led by the questioner who sings out the question and the respondent mentions the name of the tree that is pointed out to him by the chorus. The song goes:

Mubvunzi: Dede zangara uyo mutii?

Mudaviri: Mutondo tsvengurudze paya tsve.

Mubvunzi: Dede zangara uyo mutii?

Mudaviri: Muzhanje tsvengurudze paya tsve.

(Vanoramba vachidaro kusvika mubvunzi aneta kunongedza miti kana kuti mudaviri

adzva).

(Questioner: Dede zangara what tree is that one? Respondent: It is a mutondo there you are. Questioner: Dede zangara what tree is that one? Respondent: It is a muzhanje there you are.

[They keep at the game until the questioner fails to point out trees or the respondent

falters]).

Whenever the other sings out the question, the respondent makes a responds by naming and pointing at the identified tree. If the one naming the trees falters, another participant takes over the role of questioner and the game starts all over again. The idea is to give a chance to all participants to name the trees.

When an analysis of this game is done, it can be found out that it teaches youngsters to have an understanding of some aspects of their biophysical environment. The children were expected to learn to identify different types of trees and other plants. This indigenous way of knowing was useful and still is since it can become handy when identifying trees and plants that are used for different purposes such as building, firewood, medicines and herbs, fruits as well as edible roots and tubers. They also learned to identify poisonous plants. Such knowledge implies respect and learning to be at peace with one's environment. It also means that as they will start exercising restraint in the cutting down of trees. The play song teaches responsible citizenship.

Conclusion

This article has foregrounded Shona traditional children's games and plays songs as indigenous ways of knowing. The paper highlights how lessons and cognitive skills valued in Shona culture are embedded in these games and play songs. These lessons and skills are centred on issues such as good behaviour, hard work, total commitment, competition and unity of purpose. One is demanded of these skills even in this industrialised world. The paper thus asserts that the skills and values learnt through these games and play songs prepare the youngsters to take up their adult roles. The games and play songs also provide interactive apprenticeships which the learner child is given guidance to learn and perform these skills and lessons.

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