

FACTORS AFFECTING THE PARTICIPATION OF CHILDREN IN TRADITIONAL GAMES IN TANZANIA

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Abstract

Children's participation in traditional games is crucial for their social and intellectual development. In this light, one of the puzzling issues of our time is the drastic decrease in children's outdoor play. This study sets out to investigate the reasons why, by identifying the factors that prevent children from participating in traditional games in urban Tanzania. The hypothesis driving this inquiry initially proposed that access to televisions, digital video technology, computers and mobile phone games decreases the degree of children's active participation in traditional games. Based on data collected through interviews and focus group discussions with parents and children, the study revealed that this is not the case; instead, the findings identify seven other factors, including parents' fear of child abduction and sexual abuse, parental emphasis on academic achievement, the pressure of family chores, and children's destructive behaviour outdoors as responsible for the prohibitions that defeat children's traditional play. The data includes children's own self-reflections about why they do not play outside. These results indicate the advisability of educating parents about the benefits of traditional games in children's lives. The study also recommends that parents and the wider community take steps together to create safer outdoor play environments for children.

Keywords: Tanzanian children, childhood development, traditional games, Iringa, child protection

An overview of children's participation in traditional games

This section provides a chronological background of children's participation in traditional games in Iringa. Before highlighting this history, a brief delineation is offered of the category of games regarded here as 'traditional'. This discussion refers to games as traditional if they originate from a child's natural environment. Such games are guided by obligatory rules (Mwenda 2011); they are never expensive; and their structure tends to depend upon the use of resources available already in the child's immediate locale. To play these games, no luxurious or store bought equipment is needed; all the components are available locally without any fiscal outlay. Similar to other forms of art, traditional games

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are transmitted from one generation to the next through memory and verbal communication (Ndee 2010). Importantly, these kinds of games not only while away leisure time; they also carry significance as avenues for acquiring ‘life skills’, practice in computational activities, and analytic training (Amlor 2016).

One of the characteristic features of traditional games is that they can take place anywhere. For example, they are played in the home or playground, on open, public ground, in green spaces – under the tree, down the street, in the classroom, the school foyer – provided that the child feels comfortable in the space and being there is convenient. In this research, the focus is more on the games played by children outdoors. The terms ‘games’, ‘children’s games’ and ‘outdoor games’ are used here interchangeably to mean traditional games performed by children outdoors.

In the Tanzania of past centuries, similar to other places in pre-colonial Africa (as generally construed by Africanists) – children’s participation in traditional games was constrained by several factors. Records indicate that children were regarded as miniature adults, capable of assuming many of the responsibilities of their parents and elder siblings (Ansell 2005: 8). In other words, their elders considered children as important contributors to the family labour force. As such, children were always involved in economic activities ranging from animal grazing, farming activities, petty trading, fetching water, collecting firewood, cleaning the compound, caring for younger or otherwise dependent children and tending to the infirm and elderly. Despite children suffering these constraints on their time, they created opportunities for playing by combining games with their work.

Similar to this depiction of the pre-colonial period, during colonial times, children’s participation in traditional games was often precluded by their responsibilities to family upkeep and income. Tanzania was a colony of both the Germans and the British. The Germans colonised Tanzania (then Tanganyika) from 1884 to 1918. When the Germans lost the First World War, Britain was mandated by the League of Nations to rule Tanganyika until 1961 when the country achieved Independence. The Germans, who inculcated their culture through missionary education, were suspicious of Africans’ traditional games and labelled them as heathen. For example, dance was prohibited outright on grounds of hampering civilization (Mlama 2003:187, Hussein 1975). The only game in which Germans tolerated children’s participation was marching in parade, which the

German administrators thought had a civilizing effect. It is argued that the marching parade practiced in Tanzanian schools today is not just a modernizing process for teaching discipline but a vestigial product of German's history in Tanganyika (Leseth 2010: 65).

When the British took over the foreign intrusion in the 1920s, traditional games did not make any better impression on the new colonisers. Unlike the Germans who suspected traditional games as irreligious, the British considered traditional indigenous games as inferior and their own traditional games superior (Sululu 2013). Thus, they insisted on correcting and improving traditional games to make them fit into the modern world. A report by the East African Committee for Education in 1924 exemplifies the point.

The improvement of many tribes in Africa is impossible until the degrading influences of their pleasures are corrected or eliminated . . . All concerned with colonial welfare, whether European or native . . . will find their efforts hampered by the demoralising results of games and pleasures that are physically or emotionally enervating It is therefore imperative in the interests of Africans and Europeans alike that Native amusements shall be corrected and improved.

Nkongo 1979: 23 quoted in Leseth 2010).

As a reaction to the concerns raised by the East African Committee, games like baseball, basketball, handball and volleyball were introduced to replace the natives' own games that the British regime regarded as inferior. According to some scholars, the condescending derision of the British in their attitudes toward traditional games was due to their limited understanding of the worth of implicit knowledge gained through informal training in the lives of any people, including Africans (Njoh 2006). Implicit knowledge conferred through participation in games is crucial for the African child's development in Africa because it affords the child intensive training sessions to learn skills relevant to navigating the child's immediate environment.

Literature review

There is considerable research on children and games across the globe (Vygotsky 1978, Pound 2010, Mutema 2013, Whitebread et al. 2012, Zulkardi 2011). For example Whitebread et al. (2012) researched the benefits of games for European children. The investigation revealed that traditional games help children to develop self-esteem, confidence and positive attitudes towards challenges. Zulkardi (2011) observed the importance of traditional games in children's academic lives in Southeast Asia. Children between three and five years old were observed in Indonesia. The findings indicated that playing games can improve a child's arithmetic skills. Traditional games impel children to develop counting skills in exciting ways that are observably different from regimented methods of learning. In turn, such play cultivates in some children an interest in mathematics.

Mutema (2013) investigated the role of games among the Shona in Zimbabwe. Through observation, he alleged that different kinds of games provide ways to hand down customs, traditions and cultural norms from one generation to the next. Among other games, he perceived role-playing, in which children are encouraged to imitate adults, thus providing an introduction to learning a wide range of skills, e.g. from food foraging and hunting, through food preparation, to food preservation. Learning to settle disputes is an additional value children acquire through games that imitate adult roles. Lyoka (2007) studied samples of children and games in many countries of Africa, including Tanzania's popular *rede* game. He argued that playing *rede* helped children to develop their decision-making abilities, since the game requires the players to make quick decisions of where to go, when and how, under competitive pressure and in a very short amount of time.

These studies, and more recently others, have highlighted the benefits of games in the lives of children. But none of them investigated the challenges to game playing that children have encountered in recent times. This study attempts to fill that gap in the literature.

The study's participants

Similar to other countries of Africa, children in Tanzania are regarded as economic assets in their families, so their contribution is crucial to improving their own well-being and that of their immediate relatives. Consequently, children of low income families are usually expected to

work. Unlike many children in ‘urban’ areas where work begins later in life, children in ‘rural’ homes usually begin their working careers between the ages of five and six. The capacity to work is regarded as a positive asset, and is regarded as important for securing a child’s future success. Children have been trained to believe that the ability to work is crucial for a successful life; work is regarded not as a hardship but as an entitlement to assume responsibilities that afford them the means of learning life skills and achieving their goals (Meyir 2010). In Iringa it is fairly common to find children being sent to the neighbouring city to engage as house helpers, thereby contributing to their family’s domestic welfare and their own educational needs.

Low income families that regard education as the foundation of success in the future, send their children to rich homes in Dar es Salaam, providing them an opportunity to secure their basic needs and a good education, in exchange for the child’s labour. Many scenarios have resulted in children of poor families falling victim to circumstances where they are not protected by meaningful contracts that stipulate the kind work and the schedule of hours involved. As a result, many children end up dropping out of school and with no time to play because they are burdened with endless house chores. Since most rural families are dependent upon labour-intensive farming, children growing up in Iringa are usually involved in the essential activities of agriculture, which include digging, sowing seeds, weeding and harvesting. Once children reach the age of fourteen, they are regarded as mature people, and can then be assigned duties equally to their counterpart adults. This distribution of labour curtails a child’s right to education and intrudes upon opportunities for leisure and play.

A right to play

This study refers to Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), integrating it with the doctrine of the International Play Association (2014). Both organisations advocate internationally for safer play environments for children, to combat the tendency of societies worldwide to focus their investments in education exclusively on those formal subjects which are the most competitive in the global market. For instance, mathematics and sciences are regarded universally as subjects deemed powerful enough to raise a citizenry’s capacity to compete for today’s better paying jobs. This familiar bias in favour of the maths and sciences causes, in turn, a general disaffection towards certain other types of training – i.e. those which prepare children to survive in their local environments – as trivial, relative to training

designed to facilitate a school graduate's ready absorption into the global labour market (Jotia 2000, Sobel 2009).

Edmonds (2002) conceptualizes the profound impact of globalization from the point of view of trade liberalization. He argues that trade liberalization has opened up opportunities for parents to work outside the home. In East Africa it is quite common for adults to travel long distances for employment, leaving their children behind, and to stay away from their homestead in order to make enough money to maintain it. In the absence of parents, children are forced to take over activities otherwise performed by adults present within the household. This denies them time for play. Correlatively, Fukuda-Parr (2003) defines the negative influence of globalization in terms of its disintegrating effects upon security and social cohesion. The social safety net once played an essential role in safeguarding children through the extended family and clan structure, but has lost its capacity because of growing social distrust within communities (Svendsen 2008, 95). This trend carries consequences for children's freedom to participate in traditional games taking place in vulnerable and open settings.

Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that children have the right to play, to leisure, and to join in cultural, artistic and other recreational activities. The International Play Association (IPA), a non-governmental organization, champions the implementation of Article 31, identifying the multiple and complex environmental circumstances that are likely to subvert children's right to play. These include dirty grounds, water contaminated and air polluted environments, and unsecured locations for outdoor play. In consequence, the IPA campaigns for integrated partnerships between government and communities to create secured play environments for all children.

Data collection

This qualitative study was carried out in Tanzania's Iringa region with Mlangali primary school pupils together with parents residing near the school. The primary investigator was a former teacher at the school, increasing ease of access. Being introduced as the composer of their school anthem, the children felt free to ask a manifold of questions about their anthem and in turn were eager to answer questions in turn about their own everyday activities. Before the actual process of collecting data commenced, children were explained about the rationale of the study, the benefits of taking part in this research, and what might be the risks.

Subsequently, children were asked for their consent and all agreed to participate in the research (Kellet 2011: 12). The eighty children recruited for this research were those from class three and class six (forty from class three and another forty from class six). In-depth interviews with parents together with focus group discussions with the children were the modes for collecting the large amount of qualitative data in a fairly short period of time (Laws et al. 2003). Four focus group discussions involving a maximum of twenty pupils each, were carried out; two of these were administered with the group from class three and the other two with the children in class six. The younger aged focus groups began with singing and playing simple games for familiarization purposes. When the discussion session began, class three children mentioned a few factors; thereafter they requested to stop the discussion and get back to former activities of singing and playing games, demonstrating their preference to continue with child-related activities.

Class six pupils did identify many factors that they thought were responsible for obstructing their participation in traditional games, some of which would not be expected from children of their age. Only forty of the intended eighty parents were interviewed. The truncation of the sample was decided after repetition of the same answers after thirty parents had been interviewed (following interviewing methodology of Boyce and Neale 2006: 4). Parents of children between six and fourteen years old were included in the selection, so as to compare factors mentioned concerning impediments to play of previous years with those factors perceived to affect children nowadays. In-depth interviews were conducted to explore in depth the respondents' reflections and recounts of their experiences concerning the matter under study (Boyce and Neale 2006: 2). Snowball sampling was executed, whereby an interviewed parent was asked to reveal the prospective interviewee with similar traits (Laws et al. 2003).

Relevance of the study

At this time there is very limited information in Tanzania regarding the impediments to children's participation in traditional games, in contrast with the publicity surrounding research conducted in Europe and the United States. But research generating from G-8 countries is unlikely to be relevant to the violations of children's right to play elsewhere. Each country's internal landscape features different potential obstacles – different political dynamics, disparity in levels of parental education, varying cultural expectations and economic capacities, contrasting

conditions of security and national stability. So it is likely that the deterrents to children's traditional game playing will diverge considerably in Tanzania with its fragile economy, from those in affluent nations.

Findings

While children asserted their fondness for modern hi-tech games and television, they were adamant that access to these did not limit their interest in playing traditional games whatsoever. The majority of the children in the study demonstrated that they were able to plan their time in a way that would allow them to play outdoors; however, their parents obstructed their freedom to do. One of the interviewed children explained this explicitly:

Once I get back home at 3 PM from school, I do my homework for one hour. As I wait for the sun to cool down, I watch cartoon programmes and play games. At 5 PM I go to play if my mother allows me.

Based on this extract and the views expressed by other children in focus groups, it was obvious that access to new technology such as televisions and computer games were not the primary factors preventing these children from playing traditional games; rather, the obstructions were structural in the way their everyday activities were affected by poverty, along with parental emphasis on their devoting time and attention to achieving a good academic record in school.

Academic achievement

Although the opening questions in the interviews did not mention academic concerns as a dynamic, the majority of children, especially in class three, pointed out their parents' emphasis on academic achievement as a dominant obstacle to their playing games outside. Most of the children emphasised that they rarely played games after school hours. Instead they were kept busy doing things that their parents liked them to do. This entailed doing homework, reading books, or listening to the academic related television programmes. Below is the summary of academic related issues children raised regarded as barring their participation in games.

Kiswahili version	English version
<i>Wazazi wangu wanataka niwe na akili</i>	My parents want me to be bright
<i>Baba yangu anataka niwe na bidii shuleni</i>	My father wants me to work hard at school
<i>Wazazi wangu wanataka nipenda shule</i>	My parents want me to like schooling
<i>Baba anataka nitumie muda kusoma</i>	My father wants me to spend time in studying
<i>Mama yangu anakasirika nikiwa mjinga</i>	My mother loathes me when I am stupid
<i>Baba yangu anataka nijue hesabu</i>	My father wants me to be good at Mathematics
<i>Wazazi wanataka niwasikilize walimu</i>	My parents want me to listen to the teachers
<i>Wazazi wangu wataka nije shuleni</i>	My parents want me to come to school
<i>Baba yangu anapenda niangalie vipindi vya masomo kwenye TV</i>	My father wants me to watch academic related TV programmes

Although the answers above varied from one child to another, they all communicate the fact that the pressure to achieve academically restricted their play time. One of the class six children claimed his parents told him routinely to spend time on his education instead of playing to avoid wasting his time. Another class six child affirmed her parents constantly told her to work extremely hard if she wanted to benefit from globalization, advice with which she usually agreed. Indeed, the bulk of research has shown that parents are influential in the socialization of their children (Bandura 1977, Maccoby 1992, Binh 2012). Apart from influencing behaviour, they influence the intellectual development of their children (Bempechat 1991: 31). Given that games demonstrably function in the intellectual development of a child, and that some parents view games as a thorough waste of their children's time, there is a need for parents to be educated about the connection between cognitive growth and play. Mackenzie and Veresov (2013), for example, argue that play which is related to drawing teaches children writing skills. Zulkardi (2011)

asserts that games related to counting develop children's arithmetic skills. Numerous other studies demonstrate such connections between game playing and intellectual development.

Child abduction

The forced removal of a child from familiar surroundings against his or her wishes, or coercion of a child to remain in a new location for an indeterminate time period, or indefinitely, has been associated with a range of motives (Fitzgerald and People 2006: 2). Child abductors are motivated by the intention to perform sexual assault, to collect ransom, by a desire for retribution, a desire to kill a child, or to possess one (Finkelhor et al. 2002). Interviewing parents, it became obvious that children's decreased play outdoors is connected to parents' dread of child abduction. Parents asserted candidly that their fear sometimes disallowed their children to play outdoor games. Reports of a growing tendency of child abduction for ransom heighten parental fears that demands for a large amount of ransom money would be impossible to meet. When it was pointed out that abduction was not as prevalent in their rural region as in Dar es Salaam, parents attested to taking precautions because Iringa is not far from Dar es Salaam. It was argued that "when you see s neighbour is shaved, you wet your hair to avoid a dry shave."

To determine the extent to which parental fear of child abduction hampered children's participation in traditional games, the class six children where asked about this. The majority of children confirmed their parents tended to control their movement outdoors. This was especially the case when their parents heard of a child being abducted anywhere but especially in the nearby big city:

"My mother does not allow me to go for outdoor games. She oftentimes tells me to stay home because nowadays there are people who kidnap and murder children. When she hears a child has been kidnapped in Dar es Salaam, it is when she snubs my request to go outside to buy sweets."

Whitebread et al. (2012) posit that overprotective parenting violates children's right to play (Meire 2007).

Sexual abuse

Fear of sexual abuse was another reason that parents and children mentioned as a reason for curtailing children's unsupervised outdoor activities. Children in class six were much more concerned about sexual abuse than children in class three, probably due to their age. At age eight or nine years children's conceptualization of sexuality is more or less vague. Three years later, boys and girls regard the threat of sexual abuse as a grave dilemma. The majority affirmed they had never experienced sexual abuse; but their parents often told them to fear it. While girls claimed the consequence of sexual abuse is pregnancy, boys declared the outcome of sexual abuse to be HIV/AIDS. The literature indicates a great many other consequences of sexual abuse (Finkelhor and Berliner 1995, Calder 2010, Alexander 2011, Whitehead 2011, Goodyear-Brown 2012). Goodyear-Brown (2012) reveals that sexual abuse causes self-blame, self-harm and suicide. Calder (2010) indicates that sexually abused children are more likely to commit suicide in their later life than are children who never experienced sexual abuse. Allnock et al. (2009) divulge that a child who has once experienced sexual abuse is likely to develop difficulties in learning such as poor concentration, lack of confidence, and diminished ability to cope with stress and emotions.

A further consequence of child sexual abuse that emerged in this study is the lasting trauma that affected parents as well. One of the interviewed parents whose child was sexually intimidated, cried inconsolably throughout the session. She declared herself candidly to be among parents who prohibit her children from playing outdoors. The reasons she provided had less to do with the threat of sexual abuse and more to do with the way such incidents were systematically handled in her community. At the time her child was abused sexually, she was unaware because the child did not communicate the problem to her. It was not until three days later when she was bathing the child that she discovered the child had been sexually violated. She quickly rushed her child to the hospital for medical attention. Medical doctors alleged that they would not treat the child until they saw the RB (referring to a receipt confirming that the incident had been reported to the police and officially recorded in their Report Book). Having to apparent choice, she rushed to the police station to collect the RB. After collecting the RB, she went back to the hospital and the daughter was treated. Thereafter, she kept a close follow-up of her child's case in court until she witnessed the perpetrator being detained. However she saw the perpetrator in the street a few days after detention. Ever since, she has never allowed her child to play games away from home. Now she can trust

no one. Other interviewed parents concurred that prohibiting children from playing outdoors was an important preventive measure.

But the International Play Association (2014) argues that play is essential to both physical growth and mental health. Rather than restraining children, the Iowa Department of Education (2006) recommends that parents initiate a culture of child assertiveness and self-protection to preempt sexual abuse. This includes training children to report all cases relating to any uncomfortable sexual attention from any known adult or stranger, reporting any incident where they are touched or kissed inappropriately, or spoken to in any intimidating or suggestive way. In Tanzania where child security is fairly poor, parents can insist that their children come inside before dark. More importantly, parents should establish the habit of being informed by their children of their intended whereabouts at all times.

Vandalism

The class six children were the most likely to associate their parents' reluctance to allow outdoor play with the fear of their destroying property that might incur unwieldy costs of reparation. To uncover whether this suspicion was true, parents were interviewed about the same subject. Nearly every parent confirmed they had been expected to outlay costs of repairs, replacement or to refund money stolen by their children outdoors, in amounts ranging from 40,000 to 100,000 Tanzanian shillings (between eighteen and forty-five US dollars). Some parents reported paying for medical bills or transporting injured children to hospitals due to occurrences during outdoor play. Vylegzhanina et al (2017: 166) point out that some children cause damage out of envy, others to gain parental attention, and still others are curious to explore the material effects of their actions on their physical environment (Vorobyeva et al. 2015: 141). To understand what parental response is most appropriate to an incident of childhood vandalism it is essential to examine the motivation underlying the behaviour.

Family chores

This study confirmed that Tanzanian children are socialized to perform household chores, which affects the amount of time they can play (Koda 2000). Both the groups of children in class three and six were involved in family chores during weekdays as well as weekends, which involved caring for their siblings, doing school homework assignments, washing dishes, sweeping, grocery shopping, making tea, guarding houses, fetching

water, looking after household livestock (pigs, goats and chickens), vending snacks, representing their families at local community sites of worship (Catholic *Jumuiya*, Lutheran *seli*). The duty of caring for the sick was a least attractive concern, mostly of class six children. Evans (2010) projected that over four per cent of children in African countries are likely to be regularly involved in caring for the sick, a traumatic and disturbing activity that may demoralize a child and inhibit the spontaneity of play.

Conclusion

The results of this study demonstrate that modern technology in the environment does not detract children from playing outdoors. Rather, parental trepidation and economic pressures intrude on children's recently recognised basic right to benefit from the demonstrated cognitive, emotional and physical benefits of playing traditional games in the open air. The study suggests that parents organise as communities to collaborate with local government bodies to find long term strategies for creating safe play environments outdoors. Introducing *ulinzi jamii* (social protection) protocols can minimize all children's vulnerability out of doors. Revival of indigenous village customs would be helpful to restore *dhamiri ya jamii* (social conscience) to improve upon modern individualistic attitudes towards child rearing. In the past, a child was treated as the charge of the whole community; everyone was responsible for cultivating every child, like pumpkins. At the institutional level, schools can maximize pupils' engagement in outdoor, non-mechanized games by providing rudimentary sports equipment (rope, handmade balls, sticks, sacks) and by maintaining a clean and supervised outdoor space to encourage traditional games during break times and recess. The study further disclosed that subsistence poverty requires children to be occupied with income generating activities – prematurely, by affluent country norms. There is no gainsaying that life is ruthlessly harsh on children born into abject poverty. But this offers no basis for parents to overlook the inherent fruitfulness and necessity of children enjoying their right to play.

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