

Shona Traditional Children's Games And Songs As A Form Of Indigenous Knowledge: An Endangered Genre

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Abstract: *Indigenous knowledge systems are culture specific; they form the basis for a people's livelihood. Children's traditional songs and games are one aspect of Indigenous knowledge systems. Through the songs and games children got to know their environment and acquired life skills among other things. Therefore, this study investigated the existence and performance of traditional children's songs and games among children. The mixed methods approach was adopted in order to come up with an accurate report. The research then found out that the traditional children's songs and games are no longer as popular as they used to be. In fact, it is possible that they are facing extinction. The study also established that this status quo is as a result of quite a number of factors for example formal education and technological advancement among several others. Therefore educationists and other key players are called upon to consider coming up with frame works which help advance Indigenous knowledge*

Key words: *children, Indigenous knowledge systems, traditional children's songs and games*

I. Introduction and background

Universally there are two main knowledge systems, Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) and Western Knowledge Systems (WKS). Indigenous knowledge is also referred to as local, non-formal or traditional knowledge. Greiner (1998) says it is the unique, traditional, local knowledge existing within and developed around the specific conditions of men and women indigenous to a particular geographic area. It can be summed up as a way of life of a people since it refers to knowledge, know-how and practices developed and maintained by people with long histories of close interaction with their natural environment (Soni, 2007). Western knowledge on the other hand is formal knowledge supported by written documents, rules and regulations and technological infrastructure. Apparently Western knowledge systems are made universal through western education while Indigenous knowledge is being suppressed in most parts of the world (Dewes, 1993).

Indigenous knowledge is transmitted orally from one generation to another (Soni, 2007). Warren (1991) states that it is the basis for local decision-making in agriculture, health care, food preparation, education, natural resource management and a host of other activities in rural communities. Most indigenous communities have traditional songs, stories, legends, dreams, methods and practices as the various modes of Indigenous knowledge transmission. Sifuna (2008) asserts that Indigenous learning was an education for living which was meant to train the youth for adulthood. They learnt by observation, imitation, practice and listening to stories told by their elders. It was a way of life and Dei (2002) argues that it is not disconnected into the universal abstract but grounded in a people and place.

Since it is a way of life, it manifests itself through different dimensions, namely, agriculture, medicine, security, botany, zoology, craft skills and linguistics (Mapara, 2009). Warren (1991) goes on to say that Indigenous knowledge system touches on the socialization of the young, food production, processing and preservation as well as natural resources management. This shows a holistic approach to life and a close interaction between the indigenous people and their environment (Soni, 2007).

However, Indigenous knowledge is susceptible to change owing to a number of factors (Soni, 2007). Urbanisation and technological advancement have seriously impacted on Indigenous knowledge systems. World Bank notes that much Indigenous knowledge are at risk of becoming extinct because of rapidly changing natural environments, fast pacing economic, political and cultural changes on a global scale. This is where this research comes in because traditional children's games and songs are one form of Indigenous knowledge.

As indicated earlier, Indigenous knowledge systems also incorporated the socialization of the youth, it was a form of education though some would like to refer to it as non-formal education. They acquired knowledge and skills on food production, processing and preservation, natural resource management, marriage, relationships, leaders and conflict management among others (Warren, 1991). This paper seeks to show that all this has succumbed to Western education and where it is still operational it is at a very small scale.

The Shona traditional children's games and songs played a crucial role in the transmission of Indigenous knowledge in its various forms to the young. Occiti (1973) says children were taught how to farm,

hunt, fish, prepare food, build houses and to run a home through the games and songs. Erny (1981) also stresses that play was an informal method of instruction where children imitated adult roles. However, the World Bank (1997) points out that today many Indigenous knowledge systems are at risk of becoming extinct because of rapidly changing natural environments, economically, politically and culturally global wide. This researcher is interested in finding out the existence of the traditional Shona children's games and songs. Urbanisation has taken its toll on African indigenous knowledge systems and the same has been done by the Western education system. Soni (2007) says Indigenous knowledge is at risk of changing because people are highly mobile, they move to new regions and lifestyles tend to change with time.

Western knowledge systems have dominated the universe and most children are exposed to formal learning from very tender years during their preschool years. Here they are grounded in English games and rhymes. Nyota & Mapara (2008) argue that English games have gained prominence in urban pre-schools. If Indigenous knowledge is to be effectively passed on to younger generations this has to be done during their childhood so that they become socialized in the appropriate norms, values and societal expectations. However, formal education has disrupted the practical everyday life aspects of Indigenous knowledge and ways of learning. This paper seeks to show the impact of Western knowledge systems on Indigenous knowledge systems, mainly concentrating on children's games and songs.

Previous studies on children's games and songs as a form of Indigenous knowledge systems focused on precolonial samples, form and content, functions and purposes (Gelfund, 1979, Hodza, 1984, Masuku & Ndawi, 2001, Nyoni & Mika, 2003, Nyota & Mapara, 2008). This study focuses on the extent of performance of children's games and songs, showing how popular they are among the children and also to find out if they still contribute as much as they did to children's well being.

II. Shona traditional children's games and songs

Children's games and songs provided primary socialization. It was this socialization which made it possible for children to adapt to their natural and social events. Berger (2008) says children's games are more than games. Nyota & Mapara (2008) assert that Shona traditional children's games and play songs provided an opportunity where children learnt by guided participation in social experiences and explorations of their world. Through the games and songs they learnt a lot about adult roles, socially and economically, social skills like sharing, solving conflicts, practical skills like constructing a hut, preparing and preserving food among others. All this was learnt during childhood but today, with the coming of Western knowledge systems, information communication technology and globalization children no longer have time for the traditional games and songs. Nakashima, Prott & Bridgewater (2000) assert that formal education has disrupted the practical everyday life aspects of Indigenous knowledge and way of learning. They go on to say that much Indigenous knowledge is being lost as people embrace Western knowledge systems as the way of knowing and learning. Therefore, this paper sought to establish how endangered children's games and songs are among the Shona of Zimbabwe.

For purposes of this study only a few Shona traditional children's games and songs are going to be discussed paying particular attention to what was learnt. Games were meant to sharpen children's intellect as well as prepare them to confront and solve real life problems (Mawere, 2000). In games like *nhodo* and *tsoro* (draughts) one needed to be really a fast thinker to be able to outdo others.

Masuku & Ndawi (2001) say children's traditional games are a way of ensuring the continued existence of its customs, traditions and culture as a whole. Therefore, courtship games were performed in order to introduce the youth into adulthood. They would learn how to do it and also what was expected of the 'suitor' for example games like *sipoti sipoti* (round and round), *sarura wako* (choose yourself a partner).

Children's games also taught counting for example *motsiro* or *kapotsa* (one). These were competitive games where they wanted to find who counted better/more than the others. All these were practical aspects of their day to day living where they were expected to be able to count their livestock or any other items which required counting.

Object or people naming was another aspect which children learnt during play. They gave the names of trees, *do do zengera uyo mutii?* (guess what tree is that?), *du du muduri* (guess what his name is?) They got to know one another, their environment and what it comprised of and yet all this was done in an exciting manner.

Children also played house, *mahumbwe* where they imitated the adult roles of father, mother and children. Here they practised what they saw their elders do, looking for food, preparing and preserving it, resolving disputes and even worshipping. Masuku & Ndawi (2001) sum it all by saying that children's traditional games are a way of ensuring the continued existence of its customs, traditions and culture.

Other games and songs helped them learn about positive attributes, virtues and values like; hard working, smartness, obedience among others. For example, *kana ndikadai* (if I do this), *amai ndakanaka* (mother I am beautiful). The games and songs were just a platform for learning and a lot was learnt including natural resources management, seasons of the year, physical strength, perseverance and determination, conflict management, handling success and failure. Hunt (1994:3) says children's literature is, "a powerful literature..."

such power cannot be neutral or innocent or trivial.” This implies that the games and songs had a lot of bearing on children’s worldview and attitude (Nyoni & Nyoni, 2013). Therefore, this paper seeks to find out whether this is still obtaining in this globalizing world.

III. Methodology

The study adopted a Mixed methods approach where both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies were used. Leech & Onwuegbuzie in Cohen et al (2011: 22) say mixed methods involve, “---collecting, analyzing and interpreting quantitative and qualitative data in a single study---.” The two are used in order to promote accuracy as well as to reduce bias. Fifty children were randomly sampled from five urban primary schools in Gweru while thirty parents were conveniently sampled because the study required only those parents who have primary school going kids. Such kids are the ones who engage in children’s songs and games. The study also included ten teachers who were randomly selected from the five schools used in this study. Questionnaires and structured interviews were the main means of data collection.

IV. Facts and Discussion

Knowledge of children’s songs and games

The investigation found out that out of ten sampled indigenous children’s songs and games very few of them are well known by children. This is shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Children’s knowledge of traditional children’s songs and games.

N=50

Types of songs/games	Number of children who know the song/game.	Number of children who do not know the song/game.
Sipoti sipoti	28	22
Zai rakaora	23	27
Sarura wako	35	15
Kana ndikadai	18	32
Kapotsa kapiri	14	26
Motsiro dendere	16	34
Mahumbwe	50	00
Kwedu kune nyimo	07	43
Nhodo	50	00
Tsoro	20	30

A sample of ten children’s songs/games was looked at in order to find out how familiar children were with the songs/games. It was found out that only four songs/games recorded a 50% or better and these are sipoti 56%, sarura wako 70%, mahumbwe and nhodo 100% each. Maybe mahumbwe scored a 100% because this emanates from what they see daily in their families which makes it more appealing to children. Though the African family has been seriously affected by Western values and norms, the father-mother and child relationship is still in existence, so as was the norm in the past that children would learn by observation and then emulate what they would have seen when the opportunity comes that is what happens when they play *mahumbwe*. Erny (1981) says children imitated adult roles during their make-believe activities. However, the children also showed that they were not familiar with quite a number of songs/games drawn from the sample. Counting games recorded the least percentages, *kapotsa kapiri* 28% and *motsiro dendere* 32% the majority said they did not know the songs/games. The changing natural environment, economic, political and cultural aspects of society is adversely affecting the Indigenous knowledge systems because some of the issues end up inappropriate (Warren, 1991). For instance, nowadays the traditional counting system is no longer applicable; almost everyone uses the conventional counting system which children are taught right from preschool. However the million dollar question lies with the issue of performance because knowing them or knowing about them is one thing while performing is another. On this issue most children said they did not perform most of the songs/games save for a few very popular ones like *sarura wako*, *sipoti sipoti*, *mahumbwe* and *nhodo*.

Children spend most of their time at school so teachers were asked as to whether they hear or see their pupils performing the songs/games. 70% of the interviewed teachers said they rarely saw or heard them sing or perform. When asked why the situation was like that 80% of the teachers indicated that their schools did not have time for traditional children’s songs/games. 20% said they included them in their physical education periods but this is not sufficient because the time for physical education is very little in most Zimbabwean schools. Parents also showed that they hardly hear/see their children engage in the games. 50% of the interviewed parents said they never heard/saw their children playing the games or singing the songs. Others were quick to add that they most often heard them sing songs they heard over the radio or TV which had nothing

to do with Indigenous knowledge systems. 33% said they often came across their children engaged in the traditional songs/games.

The study went on to look at what children do during their spare time and this is illustrated in the table below.

Table 2: Activities that occupy children's spare time.

Activity	Number of children	Percentage %
Traditional songs/games	10	20
Reading	32	64
Television	40	80
Phone/computer games	20	40
Football	15	30

All the children who participated in this study said that they have access to a television and as a result the majority, 80% indicated that they watch television during their spare time. The Zimbabwean national television broadcasts quite a number of programmes which promote western values at the expense of our indigenous knowledge. The children's animation programmes are produced in English and even the cartoon characters and settings are foreign based. There are very few programmes especially for children which promote indigenous knowledge among the children. Some of the exotic jingles which some parents alluded to earlier are acquired from the television and with the digital satellite television the situation is even worse. The digital satellite television has a lot to offer so much that if parents do not put restrictive measures some children would hardly have time to socialize with their peers. In the past children had to perform the songs/games in groups and that helped to instill certain values among children but this is now different. A child can watch the television all by himself and if they are many everyone will be concentrating and in most cases those who interrupt the programme are not welcome. The other activity which has a large number of participants is reading which has 64%. Again this is an individual activity which requires concentration. The aspects of sharing, working together and the sense of belonging which are key concepts in Indigenous knowledge systems (Nyota & Mapara, 2008) are not enforced under such circumstances. Nakashima et al (2000) say that formal education has disrupted the practical everyday life activities of indigenous knowledge and ways of learning and the findings from this study bear testimony to this notion.

40% of the children indicated that phone/computer games were part of the activities which they engaged in during their spare time. What needs to be taken note of is the fact that most of these activities are activities which one child can do on his/her own which is a direct contrast of what traditional children's songs/games promoted. 20% of the children indicated that they had time for traditional children's songs/games but this has the least number of participants. This helps to show that the traditional children's songs/games are slowly getting extinguished in favour of Western individual activities. Teachers and parents who participated in this study also agreed that this genre was soon disappearing. Dewes (1993) asserts that Indigenous knowledge systems are being suppressed in most parts of the world while western knowledge systems are made universal through Western education.

Parents were also asked to give how their children spent their spare time and this is shown in the table below.

Table 3: Parents' responses on how their children spend their spare time.

N=30

Activity	Number	Percentage %
Television	16	53.3
Reading	06	20
Phone/computer games	03	10
Football	03	10
Traditional children's games/songs	02	6.7

From the above statistics it can be noted that the majority of parents, 53.3% indicated that their children spent much of their time watching television. 20% said that their children read books while 10% said they saw their children playing computer or phone games. Only 6.7% mentioned traditional children's games/songs. This shows how the genre has lost popularity among children in urban settings. Parents were also asked if they took some time to play the games with their children. The majority of parents said they were too busy for that while others said the children did not have any interest in the songs and games because they are outdated.

School work was also blamed for consuming the largest chunk of the children's time especially in the evening because children bring with them some homework as a result they do not have time for games. In addition, technological advancement is also taking its toll on traditional children's songs and games. 67% of parents strongly agreed that technological advancement and globalization are negatively affecting the existence and performance of traditional children's songs and games. Parents referred to satellite television, western

education cell phones, internet and computers among others as the agents of this change. They said their children had no time to participate in activities that promote our culture. Other parents even said the traditional songs and games were old fashioned and difficult to learn. Sifuna (2008) says in the past the songs were meant to develop children's memory and to promote their language. All the ten teachers who participated in this study agreed that technological advancement was adversely affecting some aspects of our culture and that includes the children's songs and games.

When asked to give one activity which they prefer more than other activities most children cited the television. A sample of ten children's songs and games was drawn and children were also asked to give their favourite song or game and the results revealed that the majority did not have one.

Table 4: The children's favourite traditional song or game

N=50

Song/ game	Number	Percentage %
Mahumbwe	06	12
Zai rakaora	03	06
Nhodo	07	14
Sarura wako	05	10
Tsoro	02	04
Motsiro dendere	00	00
Kana ndikadai	03	06
Kapotsa kapiri	00	00
Kwedu kune nyimo	00	00
Dudu muduri	04	08
None of the above	20	40

Table 4 above shows that the traditional children's songs and games are fast losing popularity among children. *Nhodo* seemed to be a popular game with 16% followed *mahumbwe* with 12%. Counting games like *motsiro* and *kapotsa* did not have even a single person. Children said it is very difficult to count using the traditional mode and this is worsened by the fact that they use the conventional way of counting at school and in other real life situations. Therefore it does not make sense to them to seriously engage in something which does not 'apply' to their day to day lives. Warren (1991) asserts that Indigenous knowledge practices vanish as they become inappropriate due to the intrusion of foreign technologies and developmental components. 40% of children who participated in this study indicated that they did not have any traditional song or game which they could give as their favourite. This shows how formal education, technological advancement and other factors have negatively impacted on Indigenous knowledge systems. Great value was placed on the children's songs and games in the past because they played a key role in the lives of children. They helped socialize children into their respective cultures but this seems to be slowly vanishing. Soni (2007) says Indigenous knowledge systems are susceptible to change especially considering that they are orally transmitted.

V. Conclusion

The study has established that traditional children's songs and games as a form of Indigenous knowledge systems are facing possible extinction. This is due to a number of factors that are militating against the existence and perpetuation of Indigenous knowledge systems and these include Western education, technological advancement and its various forms as well as globalization among others. However, it is never too late for the responsible authorities and other key players to come up with a framework to help rescue the situation.

Recommendations

- Indigenous knowledge systems should be made part of the core aspects of the school curriculum right from early childhood programmes.
- Sponsored school competitions should be held in order to promote Indigenous knowledge systems.
- The national broadcaster should promote Indigenous knowledge systems by making them a part of their prime programmes and providing animation programmes for children in Indigenous knowledge systems.
- Communities should also promote Indigenous knowledge systems by forming performing clubs.

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