

IN MEMORIAM

EXPLORING THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF PLAY IN AFRICAN CHILDREN'S GAMES

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Abstract: The transformative power of indigenous African children's games can be demonstrated by how they were framed by the aesthetics of play such as imitation, imagination, make-believe, repetition, spontaneity, and improvisation. Such games could be regarded as 'rites of passage' for children's initiation into adulthood as they occupied a crucial phase in the process of growing up. Using the illustrative paradigm of indigenous children's games from the Shona-speaking peoples of Zimbabwe, this paper explores the transformative power of play as a means by which children engaged with reality. The paper proceeds to argue that the advent of modern agents of social change such as Christianity, formal education, urbanization, industrialization, scientific technology, and the cash economy not only created a fragmentation of African people's cultural past but also threatened the survival of African cultural performance traditions. Although indigenous African children's games were disrupted by modernity, they have managed to survive in a modified form.

Keywords: improvisation, indigenous children's games, mastery of reality, Shona tradition, transformative power of play

INTRODUCTION

Virginia Koste (1995) has argued that children's games are a rehearsal for life. Such games involve the selective observation of reality, developing into assimilation and absorption of the social data of life and then representing it in a new frame. Imitation becomes a playful way of studying life, a rehearsal of things known and an exploration of things yet to be known. In the ongoing attempt to master reality, African children's imitation combines with imagination to transform mud into a staple food, sticks into axes and spears, playmates into children and nothing into everything. It is that transformative power in play which Koste (1995) describes

as optimally conducive to learning, discovery, and innovation. Far from being a childish fantasy, child play becomes a bridge towards the mastery of reality.

Using examples of African indigenous children's games, drawn from among the Shona-speaking people of Zimbabwe, this paper explores the transformative power of play as a means by which children engage with reality. Through the playing house game, for instance, children enter the being and character of their mothers and fathers, and in the process they exercise their ability for spontaneity and improvisation on what it means to be a parent. Such play becomes a transformative agent for getting more and more familiar with parenthood. As Peter Slade (1954) once argued, the seriousness of children's play lies in the honest and sincere absorption of the players. Such an act of faith brings with it intense feelings of 'realness', at least from the children's own perspective.

The paper argues that African children's games are not mere child play, but rites of passage for children's initiation into adulthood. They occupy a crucial phase in the process of growing up. The major focus will be on the transformational power of such games as a rehearsal for adult life. The paper begins by demonstrating how children's games have been framed by the aesthetics of play such as imitation, imagination, make-believe, repetition, spontaneity, and improvisation. These discursive frames of play typify Huizinga's (1955) assertion that play draws from the deepest levels of being where transformations are made possible.

However, it will also be argued that the advent of modern agents of social change such as Christianity, formal education, urbanization, industrialization, scientific technology, and the cash economy not only created a fragmentation of the African people's cultural past but also threatened the survival of African cultural performance traditions. In the case of indigenous children's games, the paper ends by showing how they extended into the 'modern' period, but in a modified form. In terms of historical context, the paper regards the period before British colonization in the nineteenth century as the indigenous or precolonial period. The greater part of the period after British colonization in the twentieth century marks the 'modern' or colonial period up to 1980, when Zimbabwe gained its political independence from British colonization. Most of the source material for this paper was collected during the time of data collection for my doctoral study in Zimbabwe in 2002–2003 (see Chinyowa 2005). At that time, the living conditions for Shona children were not favourable due to the declining economic conditions in the country. The post-independence period in the country has been characterized by neo-colonial conditions that have worsened rather than improved the living conditions of Zimbabwean people, including children.

FRAMING REALITY THROUGH PLAY

The Shona-speaking people use the collective term *mutambo* to denote all cultural performance practices such as children's games, ritual ceremonies, storytelling, music, song, dance, drumming, and masquerade. *Mutambo*, in its linguistic copulative rendering readily translates into Gregory Bateson's 'this is play' (1972: 179), which has been regarded as the basis of play in both theory and practice. As the early play theorist Johan Huizinga (1955) once argued, play is not just an element of culture but culture itself bears the character of play. In fact, Huizinga (*ibid.*) went further to assert that cultures emerge and unfold *in* and *as* play. This places *mutambo* at the centre of Shona tradition as a processual element *of* and *in* culture.

Hans-Georg Gadamer (1975 [1960]) regards play as a mode of aesthetic being, that is, society expresses itself through symbolic codes, idioms, and metaphors that combine to constitute people's cultural worldview. In other words, people define their spatial and temporal relationships in terms of symbolic expressions that have been shaped by culture. They *see*, *do*, and *feel* things in terms of a structured vocabulary provided for them by society. They are 'taught' by society 'how to do', 'how to see' and 'how to feel' according to certain cultural frames of reference. Thus, the symbolic patterning encountered in *mutambo* as cultural performance is part of its signifying elements. In Margaret Drewal's (1992) view, different modes of symbolic expression such as children's games, storytelling, oral poetry, and ritual ceremony are part of a performative strategy that places them squarely within the domain of play. In a way, play defines what happens to people in the process of creating, presenting, interpreting, and understanding their experience of the world.

More specifically, children's games are a form of playful activity through which children demonstrate their ability to create symbolic alternatives to reality. In his seminal book entitled *Homo Ludens* (1955), Johan Huizinga sums up what may be regarded as the basic features of play. In a rather lengthy description, Huizinga says:

Summing up the formal characteristics of play, we might call it a free activity standing consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious' but at the same time absorbing the players intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means. (1955:13)

Implicit in Huizinga's description of the characteristics of play are such aesthetic features as enjoyment, freedom, imagination, absorption (or flow), time, space, rules, secrecy, and disguise.

To elaborate further on some of these aesthetic features, Brian Sutton-Smith points out that the mood of play and its quality as an activity experienced through 'playfulness' (1997: 148) has the capacity to disrupt what people might have expected. Richard Schechner also notes that the fun of 'playing', that is, the doing and experiencing of playful activity, involves "going in over one's head, inverting accepted procedures and hierarchies" (1993: 26). Feelings of rapture, enthusiasm and elation often accompany the playful mood followed by mirth and relaxation. Gary Izzo (1997: 8) concludes that for the players, the only real motive for play seems to be in the sheer *enjoyment*. Paradoxically, it is the intense absorption arising from the fun and joy of playing that seems to wield the power to move the players to other states of being. Thus, the essence of play as fun, jest and enjoyment appears to provide players with an unusual access to a fundamental quality of creativity. As Izzo (1997) points out, when people grow into adulthood, they lose that creative ability to play because they learn judgment, denial, hate, and fear.

In the process of enjoyment, play frees the co-players from the world of familiarity. In Huizinga's view, "the first characteristic of play is that it is free, [it] is in fact freedom" (1955: 675–676). Play exists outside the boundaries of ordinary time and space. It creates a different order or frame of existence, which offers the players a sense of *freedom* from the constraints, limitations, and obligations of social reality. It is the freedom created within the play frame that provides an opportunity for the players to experiment and generate new symbolic worlds. It allows the players to experiment with new frames of existence in a climate in which they are free from the consequences of their actions. Don Handelman (1977) asserts that the attribute of freedom affords the players an opportunity to try out new forms of thought, feeling, and behaviour, which would never have been tried under normal circumstances. Freedom acts as a basis for altering the usual means of communicating messages by camouflaging itself in play.

Play may appear as a random and nonsensical activity, but if there is a feature that lends it order and beauty it is the *rules*. No wonder that one who breaks the rules of play is deemed a 'spoil sport'. For example, if a child picks up a stick and declares that 'this is a sword', other players need to agree and accept that it *is* a sword, and it remains so until the rules are changed by consensus. But if another player suggests that 'this sword has the power to heal dead people', it changes and *becomes* a healing sword. However, if a 'spoil sport' were to come and say, 'That's not a magic sword, it's only a stick', the immediate response would be, 'That's not fair'. The rules of play are momen-

tarily suspended, if not broken, and the play frame collapses. Thus, the rules of play are not only a significant feature but a 'social contract' that binds the players. Levi Vygotsky (1976) once asserted that play has rules that determine what holds its imaginary world together. If children are playing the roles of mothers and fathers, they have to observe the rules of maternal and paternal behaviour respectively.

Rules do not destroy the enjoyment and freedom of play because they are chosen and agreed upon by the players. Gavin Bolton (1984) notes that it is the submission to the rules that liberates the players to engage in spontaneous behaviour. Rules also act as constraints that enable the players to focus on the matter at hand, and, in the process, increase their imaginative capacities. Hence the rules of play tend to operate between the extremes of freedom and restraint, thereby creating a gap that affords the players an opportunity for *creativity, imagination, spontaneity, and reflection*. It is perhaps these qualities embedded within the rules of play that give it the semblance of order and stability. As Izzo has noted, "Into an imperfect world, play brings a sort of temporary, limited perfection" (1997: 11). The 'perfection' arises from the binding nature of the rules.

The rules of play are more binding when it comes to the respect or reverence accorded to the play *space*. The ancient Greek word for the play space, whether a physical or an imaginary stage, is *temenos*, meaning 'sacred circle'. "It is a sacred spot cut off and hedged in from the 'ordinary' world, a consecrated spot, a hallowed ground within which special rules obtain" (Izzo 1997: 9). The play space therefore is an aesthetic space set apart for and dedicated to the creation and performance of a play act. The 'magic' or 'sacred' nature of the play space is not necessarily a religious one, but a special regard accorded to it as a venerated and hallowed object, secured against defamation, violation or intrusion – a protected and inviolate space. Thus, whether in a classroom, courtroom, playfield, under a tree, on the altar or in the backyard, players respect and observe the rules of the *temenos*.

In African cultural performances, the idea of the *temenos* is closely associated with the cultural philosophy relating to the 'magic circle'. In both indigenous material and non-material culture, the circular shape manifested in the sculpture, architecture, eating habits, and performing arts symbolizes the people's sense of beauty, nurturance, growth, and community (see Seda 1998). In the case of the performing arts, for instance, the concept of the 'theatre-in-the-round' practised by many community theatre groups has been adapted from African curvilinear philosophy. During storytelling sessions, children often sit in a circular formation around the evening fire. The stories shared within that 'narrative space' are crucial to the children's socialization into the moral fabric of society. As Augusto Boal (1995: 20) points out, the 'aesthetic space'

possesses properties which stimulate knowledge, discovery, and recognition. As with enjoyment and freedom, the 'sacredness' of the play space allows the players to experiment with the burdens of reality in safety.

Gary Izzo (1997) also elaborates on the '*temenos* of the mind', the mental space that constitutes the *imagination*. Boal (1995) asserts that it is the 'aesthetic space' that liberates the imagination by making all combinations possible. In Boal's own words:

In the aesthetic space one can be without being. Dead people are alive, the past becomes present, the future is today, duration is dissociated from time, everything is possible in the here-and-now, fiction is pure reality, and reality is fiction. (1995: 20)

Thus, as a feature of play, the aesthetic space gives birth to 'concrete dreams' (Boal 1995: 21) as the imagination makes the present non-existent. In other words, imagination animates play by endowing it with the quality of possibility, of imagining what might exist but is not yet present. If play is an activity set apart from the real context, imagination is the feature that engages with the fictional world by enabling play to create and bring forth alternative realities.

Another peculiar quality of play is how it promotes the formation of groups that share a sense of 'being apart' together. Such groups are distinguished by a tendency to *disguise* themselves and operate in *secrecy*. Izzo notes that the overriding feeling in these groups is that "[the] others outside (our group) don't concern us; we within this circle have our own special way" (1997: 13). To this end, the players may disguise themselves by means of a costume, mask, or other forms of 'dressing up'. The shroud of secrecy, coupled with the disguise, enables each player to play a different part, to become another being. In Julie Dunn's view (2002: 290), play creates shared dramatic worlds whose 'realness' is enhanced by elements of disguise such as costume and props.

The features of play, secrecy, and disguise enable the players to develop a bond of solidarity whose power may go beyond the duration of the play itself. Each playful experience serves to renew that bond, to draw the players even closer and create a strong sense of community. The total play experience, its enjoyment, freedom, sacred space, binding rules, imaginings, and disguises seem to combine to cement the relationships between and among the players. The bonds formed within the world of play, free from the suspicions, fears, and inhibitions of the outside world, are likely to be stronger than in ordinary life. The games and exercises that are part and parcel of playful activity are attempts to search for this shared bond of secrecy, disguise, and solidarity. As the saying goes, 'those that play together, stay together'.

CASE STUDIES OF INDIGENOUS CHILDREN'S GAMES

Indigenous Shona children's games may be divided into genre categories, each of which serves its own educative role. These genre categories include *magure* (courtship games), *zvidobi* (love games), *jikinyira* (satiric games), *mahumbwe* (playhouse games) and *pfukumbwe* (memory games). Each of these games went a long way towards equipping the young with the social and cultural values of their society. Through the medium of play as an aesthetic category, children were initiated into the roles that they were to assume later on in adulthood.

Children's games were an oral performance art with a significance that went beyond mere pleasure and entertainment to involve the instruction and socialization of children into the community's philosophy of life. As children converged into the centre of the village from different neighbourhoods, they participated in playful activities that taught them the virtues of collective existence. Such a communal approach to life would ultimately influence children's future moral behaviour, social relationships, gender roles, cultural values, practices, and beliefs.

For instance, early courtship games called *magure* can be regarded as a preparatory stage in the crucial business of proposing love. The sense of admiration for a female partner was developed through the joyous experience of a courtship game. In children's games like *mwaramu woye* (my beloved one), *dzwitswi* (let me enter), *sarura wako* (choose your beloved one) and *zipotepote* (going round and round), young boys and girls were trained for what to look during courtship. For instance, when playing *zipotepote*, boys and girls would sit in a circle. The boys took turns to assume the leader's role and moved around the circle, touching each child's head as follows:

Leader: *Zipotepote* (Going round and round)

Chorus: *Zangariende* (Let it go round)

Leader: *Ndinotsvaga wangu* (I am looking for my beloved one)

Chorus: *Zangariende*

Leader: *Musuki wendiro* (The washer of plates)

Chorus: *Zangariende*

Leader: *Anodzichenesa* (Who can make them clean)

Chorus: *Zangariende*

Leader: *Kuti mbe mbe* (To be very clean)

Chorus: *Zangariende*

Leader: *Somwedzi wagara* (Like a new moon)

Chorus: *Zangariende*

Leader: *Iwe sara! Iwe simuka! Aiwa ndanga ndichireva uyu!*

(You remain! You stand up! No, I meant this one!)

Zipotepote encouraged boys to consider not only physical beauty when choosing a girl but also social attributes like cleanliness, politeness, generosity, and industriousness. If a boy made a wrong choice, he was laughed at by others as a way of aesthetic correction. In turn, girls were made aware of the qualities that were expected of an ideal wife. Honour and respect were given to those girls who could blend beauty with cleanliness and hard work. As a result of such early courtship games, children of the opposite sex grew up well accustomed to each other because they would be able to interact freely. Thus, games like *zipotepote* satisfied children's hunger for socialization and release from loneliness and anxiety. They afforded children the opportunity to socialize through play and, in the process, the insecurity and tensions created by the feeling of solitude were purged. As an early courtship game, *zipotepote* was not an end in itself but a means to a purposeful end.

Early courtship games were usually followed by more serious love games called *zvidobi* (delicacy), or *zvitorawatora* (pick your own choice). These games were played by more mature children whose ages ranged from twelve to fifteen years. Love games prepared such older boys and girls for married life by training them to choose an ideal partner and by allowing more intimate bodily contact. Such games included *tsikidzi muramu* (I have fleas, my dear), *karombo kari kumusana* (there is pain on my back), and *riri haye* (craving sensation). Although camouflaged in a theatrical performance, there were some implied sexual signals inscribed in the game. For instance, in *tsikidzi muramu*, a boy and a girl would sit in the middle of a group of children. The boy would act as if he was being bitten by fleas. The girl would scratch the boy's back to ease the pain. Meanwhile the other children would be singing and clapping their hands. The game was played as follows:

Leader: *Tsikidzi muramu* (There are fleas, my beloved one)
Chorus: *Kutsakadzika* (That is painful)
Leader: *Ndirare zvaramba* (I cannot sleep well)
Chorus: *Kutsakadzika*
Leader: *Hii-i muramu* (Oh, my beloved one)
Chorus: *Kutsakadzika*
Leader: *Ndikwenye muramu* (Scratch me, my beloved one)
Chorus: *Kutsakadzika*
Leader: *Ndiringe muramu* (Face this way, my beloved one)
Chorus: *Kutsakadzika*
Leader: *Hauonika muramu* (That's wonderful, my beloved one)
Chorus: *Kutsakadzika*

In this game, the word *tsikidzi* (fleas) was a metaphorical reference for imagined sexual desire. As such, the game created an opportunity for children to express hidden sexual feelings that could have remained suppressed. The game provided children with elementary lessons on sex education. As Aaron Hodza once pointed out (1984: 64):

Chinodzidzwa mumutambo uyu mabimbiri kana kuti kutamba nemukadzi mumba.

The lesson behind this game was sexual romance or playing with the wife in the bedroom.

Direct bodily contact between boys and girls was only permitted within the context of playing the game. It was regarded as taboo for boys to fondle girls outside the context of the games. This customary sanction was reinforced by derogatory names like *jengavakadzi* and *jengavarume*, which were ascribed to promiscuous boys and girls respectively.

As was the case with early courtship games, love games also created space for the release of pent-up feelings and emotions. The games produced a cathartic effect in the manner in which they helped to purge children's sexual fears, fantasies, and longings. The children could satisfy their sexual desires and anxieties through vicarious participation, thereby avoiding real sexual experimentation. These games could also be regarded as a substitute for actual lovemaking. As Coggin remarks, "Children's games could satisfy in fantasy the needs of an urgent instinctive kind which were deprived of satisfaction in actuality" (1956: 187). Therefore, love games helped to mediate children's understanding of love through what McFee calls "the education of the feelings" (1992: 159). Children's feelings and emotions were developed in such a way that they would be able to exercise self-control in sexual matters.

There were also satiric games called *jikinyira*, which were aimed at inculcating and upholding the moral guidelines of the community. These games could reinforce the established cultural practices on which the Shona society was based. Through satiric games, children learnt to guard against such unbecoming behaviour as excessive drunkenness, theft, deception, gossip, falsehood, waywardness, tricksterism, and other types of moral laxity. For example, in the game *Chinogodaro chiiko?* (What is the reason for this?), a boy and a girl acting as husband and wife argue over the husband's intention to go to a beer party. The wife demands to accompany the husband because she suspects that he might be going to meet a lover. This game taught boys to shun negligent and irresponsible behaviour that results from excessive beer drinking. In another satiric game called *Ndiani akaba mamera?* (Who stole the sorghum?),

a woman called Matiyanka accuses another woman called Mai Muzavazi of having stolen her sorghum. Mai Muzavazi denies this vehemently and blames yet another woman, Mai Zimwaya. But Mai Zimwaya also denies the accusation and proceeds to blame Mai Mazhambe. The game goes on and on until all the accusations and counteraccusations result in a fight. This game taught children to guard against theft, deception, gossip, and falsehood. In traditional Shona society thieves were either made to pay back what they had stolen several times over or, if they failed, they would be banished from the community.

Satiric games taught children the essence of *unhu* (high moral integrity), without which a person would not be considered a complete human being. To have *unhu* was to possess desirable qualities of moral maturity, wholeness of character and personality. Hence, when the Shona people say, *ava munhu abve zera* (he or she is now a mature person), they will be referring to both physical maturity and moral uprightness. Satiric games also taught children the cultural principle in which the individual finds fulfilment. This communal principle is best summed up by Mbiti when he says, "I am because we are and, since we are, therefore I am" (1994: 113). In other words, the individual is what he or she is because of others. Individuals who lacked the sense of belonging to others were deemed to be a threat to the wellbeing of the community. They were therefore subjected to a satiric attack or social ostracism.

Perhaps the most prominent of traditional children's games were *matakanana* and *mahumbwe*. These may be considered as the equivalent of modern playing house games. *Matakanana* was a typical scenario in which four-to-six-year-old boys would mould clay toys such as cattle and huts or make spears and axes out of wood. On the other hand, girls would cook *sadza* (thick porridge) using soil as a substitute for mealie meal and make relish out of tree leaves. But from the age of seven to about fifteen years, children would engage in *mahumbwe* which was, and still is, a much more serious 'household' game than *matakanana*.

Mahumbwe was a more serious children's game that involved almost all the elements of theatrical performance. Children impersonated and enacted such family roles as father, mother, sons, daughters, and other members of the family. Apart from such role playing, *mahumbwe* was enacted on an open space as a substitute for the stage, and involved audience participation, improvised dialogue, dramatic spectacle, movement and gesture, mood and atmosphere, as well as props and costumes. The time when and the place where *mahumbwe* was performed were also quite appropriate to the occasion. The game was performed at the end of the harvest period when people were free to engage in leisure activities. Girls would collect crops that had been left over in the fields after harvesting. They would also perform other domestic chores that were expected

of women. Their mothers would provide them with household utensils like pots and plates. Boys played their part by erecting small huts on the ground, cut firewood, went out hunting for meat such as mice and locusts, and looked after security matters. Older boys and girls played the roles of husbands and wives while the young acted as children. When the husband returned from a hunting trip with meat, the wife would welcome him with jubilant ululation and chanting of clan praises. The wife might report errant children to the husband who would discharge discipline which could take the form of moral instruction. After eating the day's meal, the husband and wife would resign to their sleeping quarters, while children did the same.

However, there was to be no sexual intimacy between husband and wife. For this reason, those boys and girls who would have 'graduated' from *mahumbwe* could no longer participate in the game. A special 'graduation' ceremony called *nyenda* was held, to which parents were invited. The parents would be given real food prepared by the 'graduands', after which there was song and dance to celebrate the observed signs of maturity. Because they will have attained the age of puberty, the 'graduands' were now supposed to undergo the more serious rites of initiation into manhood and womanhood. Indeed, it was possible for partners of *mahumbwe* to become so closely attached that they could end up marrying. In such an eventuality, *mahumbwe* will have transformed from a mere simulation of reality into a rite of passage and entry into adolescence, and eventually adulthood.

Matakanana and *mahumbwe* laid a foundation for the future by preparing children for the adult life. They constituted a practical training in self-reliance, resourcefulness, discipline, and problem solving. As Gelfand has observed, through such games Shona children learned to create everything for themselves (1992 [1979]: 158). Girls learned to cook properly and to look after their children, while boys learned to fend for and construct shelter for the family. These games instilled a sense of individual and collective responsibility, of communal sharing and commitment to the family unit. For instance, the nature of gender patterning in *mahumbwe* may be likened to that of a complementary role relationship. Girls and boys learned to treat each other in relational rather than oppositional terms. The game instilled in each gender category the sense of mutual division of labour within the domestic space. Through play, both sexes not only acquired practical training in creativity, resourcefulness, and self-reliance, but also learned to dialogue with and relate to each other. The complementary sharing of power in managing resources and in decision-making indicated an equal contribution to the family as a unit of production. Hence *mahumbwe* prepared the girl-child for reciprocity of power and authority with the boy-child in future adulthood.

In essence, Shona children's games were a typical illustration of the transformational power of play, and the means by which children rehearsed for adult life. Far from being a childish fantasy, such play became a bridge towards children's mastery of reality. Peter Slade (1954: 48) has argued that the seriousness of children's play lies in the honest and sincere absorption of the players. Such an act of faith brings with it intense feelings of 'reality', at least from the children's point of view. In the case of *mahumbwe*, for instance, the game could reach such serious proportions that the players often ended up being partners for life. The transformations that appeared during moments of suspended disbelief were reminiscent of flow as a crucial element of play. Thus, children's games typify Huizinga's (1955) assertion that play draws from the deepest levels of being where transformations are made possible.

MODERN ADAPTATIONS OF CHILDREN'S GAMES

Traditional children's games as part of the African cultural heritage were not spared from the disruptive effects of the modern agents of social change. European settlers harboured myths that led them to regard Africans as a 'non-cultured' race, who were in need of a 'civilising mission' (Moodie 1975). Africans were viewed as having no tradition of drama or theatre or, if any existed, it was bound to copy from European art and culture (Plastow 1996: 74). Spurred on by these settler paternalistic notions, colonial cultural programmes were introduced in order to make Africans adopt Western values, norms, and beliefs (Kaarsholm 1990). The African people's perception of their own cultural forms was gradually transformed by persistent exposure to Western modes of entertainment, which were regarded as of a 'standard civilized type' (Kaarsholm 1990: 249).

As early as the mid-nineteenth century, European missionaries had already begun to set up mission schools throughout Zimbabwe. Indirectly, they were also paving the way for direct colonization of the country. Western Christianity was strongly opposed to the continuation of African rituals, ceremonies, and other cultural practices as these were a threat to missionary proselytization. The famous nineteenth-century missionary explorer, Robert Moffat, once referred to black Zimbabweans of that time as people who were "still living in Egyptian darkness and beastly degradation with everything in their political economy directly opposed to the will of God" (Zinyemba 1986: 17). Missionaries therefore preached not a modification of African ritual practices but their uprooting. They looked forward to the day when Western Christian values would permeate the African way of life. As a result of Western missionary influence, children's games were gradually replaced by Bible-based passion plays in missionary-

run primary and secondary schools. In order to purge Africans of what was considered as sinful pagan practices, and to exhort Africans to live morally upright lives, children were made to enact such Biblical tracts as “The Prodigal Son”, “The Good Samaritan”, “The Last Judgement”, and “The Ten Virgins”, to mention only a few. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o points out, it was Western cultural imperialism that curbed the free development of theatre traditions that were rooted in the ritual ceremonial practices of the African peasantry (1981: 81). In the process, indigenous children’s games also lost their original appeal due to the increase of missionary-sponsored schools. To enhance Europe’s ‘civilizing mission’, formal Western education was introduced in a way that made it appear as an instrument of alienating Africans from their culture. African children were consistently subjected to Western-oriented education, which compelled them to admire the culture of the colonizer and to stop believing in their names, their language, their cultural practices and, ultimately, in themselves. More emphasis was placed on reading English-language literature texts at the expense of African vernacular literature and language.

What used to be learnt through traditional children’s games was now replaced by the school classroom, reading books, and playing Western games. These forces of modernity gradually distanced Shona children from their indigenous theatrical activities. Thus, traditional children’s games were gradually relegated when the village empty space, where the games used to be played, was superseded by the school playground and community halls where children began to act out Western dramas like William Shakespeare’s plays. The encroachment of urbanization, industrialization, and scientific technology also played a crucial role in the marginalization of traditional children’s games. Children were suddenly exposed to alternative forms of entertainment such as films, radio, television, and, of late, computers. The growth and spread of manufacturing and retailing industries, the setting up of commercial farms and urban housing units compromised the importance of the village community. They gave rise to the migrant labour system that disrupted the existing cultural structures and social bonds (Kamrava 1993: 113). Apart from altering the prevailing communal system, these agents of modern change created a cultural shock and the undervaluing of indigenous norms, values, beliefs, and practices.

As children could no longer relate to the social and cultural worldview of the past, new games began to emerge in line with the more individualized modern sub-culture, much to the detriment of the communal sense of belonging. For instance, the idea of modern indoor games seems to encourage the spirit of individualism and to discourage the communal spirit that was instilled through traditional children’s games. However, as Mbiti asserts:

Culture is a very complex phenomenon. Even if certain aspects of it die out, other aspects will survive and many of them will be changed or transformed to meet the needs of the changing times. (1992 [1975]: 192)

Because culture embodies a people's ontological outlook passed on from generation to generation, it adapts to social change in its own way. Rather than remain static, culture continues to be constructed as men and women seek to expand their horizons of knowledge and understanding. It was the same case with traditional children's games as they tried to resist the effects of colonial marginality.

Most modern survivals of Shona cultural performances that are to be found in both rural and urban areas not only demonstrate the staying power of traditional African theatre but are also ample evidence of a collective longing for past modes of expressing a people's ideas, values, and beliefs (Chinyowa 1998: 12). Thus, to meet the challenges of modern change, some traditional children's games began to incorporate Western elements in both their form and content. For example, some love games like *zihachu hachu mwaramu woye* (I am craving for you, my dear) became *ndipewo bhasikoro pombi ndinayo* (give me a bike, the pump is here), *zipotepote* (going round and round) adapted some English words and became 'sport sport', and *sarura wako* (choose your beloved one) has close parallels with 'sweetie sweetie'. There were other new games that emerged to reflect colonial cultural hegemony by praising European legendary figures, chanting English choruses and verses. These include "Fish Fish", "Christopher Columbus", "Baa Baa Black Sheep", and "Tomato Sauce". But some indigenous games like *mahumbwe* (playing house), *paushamwari hwedu* (our close friendship), and *chihwande-hwande* (hide and seek) managed to resist colonial change and remained intact.

To an extent, Western cultural imperialism adversely affected African traditions during the colonial period by instilling a sense of false consciousness that caused children to become alienated from their cultural heritage. Children gradually lost touch with indigenous modes of cultural expression and socialization as they began to identify with agents of Western modernity. As David Masolo points out, under the colonial experience, African identity became subject to "valuational ambivalence" (1997: 285), that is, a state of ambiguity in which the individual's identity is divided between two different worlds. But due to the dynamism and staying power of culture, children began to adapt to the forces of colonial modernization. Indeed, some adaptations of traditional children's games are still being played to satisfy the desire for entertainment, socialization, and education. Thus, contemporary children's games are mainly creative adoptions and adaptations of past games that are linked to the process of integrating tradition with modernity.

CONCLUSION

This paper has shown how indigenous African children's games went beyond mere childish play to act as rites of passage for children's initiation into adulthood. The paper demonstrates how the aesthetics of play framed such games to enable children to move towards a better mastering of reality. However, the advent of modern agents of social change such as Christianity, formal education, urbanization, industrialization, scientific technology, and the cash economy disrupted the African people's cultural past and threatened the survival of indigenous cultural performance traditions. African children's games resisted the adverse effects of 'modern' forces of change through the process of adoption and adaptation as a survival strategy.

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