

# A Review of Historical, Geographical and Vocational Influences on the Selected Indigenous African Sports: The Challenges for the Sports Scientists

## 從歷史、地理及職業角度來探討對南非本土運動的影響： 對運動科學者的新挑戰

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### Abstract

This paper evaluated and reviewed selected indigenous African sports of physical skills, their socio-cultural and the historical similarities. Attempt was made to channel a course for the sports scientists towards the development and growth of traditional African sports. This was a historical research with literature review of historical, anthropological, and sports texts, journals and published proceedings of sports events in Africa. The findings revealed similarities in the historical background of the Africans, despite the diversity of the ethnicity in the continent. Also revealed were similarities in vocations, cultures, environment and the indigenous sports of physical skills amongst Africans. Materials reviewed revealed that the sports scientists were not involved in the scientific development of indigenous African sports of physical skills. The African sports scientists and administrators should strive to identify what is beneficial and entertaining and sieve this from what is hazardous and still attempt to maintain the cultural heritage of the Africans.

### 摘要

本文旨在探討南非的歷史背景、地理環境及職業文化等社會元素對本土運動發展的影響，並試從運動科研的層面，分析各種因素。初步資料顯示出運動科研參與本土運動的發展不高，本文作者又倡議當地運動政策主管人，應該尋找出一套有利發展本土運動的方案。

Keywords 關鍵詞 : Indigenous African sports, sports scientists, historical, culture

### Introduction

There is diversity of culture in Africa with a wide range of indigenous sports, games and play. These sports and plays are similar in description but different in names in different parts of the continent (Pufaa, 1999). The rolling target game

for example was played in the whole of Africa under different names (Raum, 1953a & b). Sports is an element of culture which accepts the uniqueness of individuals, sociologists seek to find explanation for behaviours by examining groups, not individuals (whether in sports, religion, family or education setting) (Pooley, 1995). Hagedorn (1990) defines culture as shared symbols

and their meaning, prevailing in any society. These symbols and their meaning include ideas about facts, desirable goals, and how people should act or not.

According to Blanchard and Cheska (1985) the understanding of sport as an element in other cultures is thus a potential source of ethnographic, ethnological, archeological and ethnohistorical data. Also, it has futuristic applications by studying the play of others we develop new and more entertaining ways of playing for ourselves. Cultures are valid when judged on their own terms though situations such as physical and social constraints can reasonably limit the kind of definitions that are effectively available.

According to Kamba (1998), the African culture is rich and diverse. The promotion of diversity in a plural society such as ours should involve the identification of cultural differences and harnessing them creatively so that each cultural group can give free reign to its cultural expression and enrich Africa as a continent. The diversity of cultures in Africa therefore, should be a source of strength rather than weakness.

Many African youths are not aware of the variety of culturally related sports that abound in Africa. Most of these sports are disappearing with the adoption of western technology and custom. Some have either chosen not to know or refused to acknowledge them because they are thought to be inferior to that of the west or that traditional sports and dances are associated with the worship of idols (Pufaa, 1999).

It is time, the sports scientists in Africa harnessed their knowledge in research to promote and develop traditional sports in our community with regards to formalization of official rules and elaborate safety equipment. This will go a long way towards the development of the skills and preservation of our traditional indigenous games, play, sports and therefore culture.

The African scholar would have failed in research application to development if indigenous plays, games and sports are not revived and maintained. The importance of play in human life is becoming increasingly evident, especially in scholarly circle. It is generally accepted that play is vital to human survival and a critical factor in the evolution process. Play is a mechanism which human beings employ to remove themselves from the anguish of reflecting on the realities of existence. Play is a symbolic distancing that relieves or at least limits that tension and this still addresses (though indirectly) those vital issues of survival (Blanchard & Cheska 1985).

Traditional sports are based on so many historical and social facts. It provides insight into the activity itself as well as revealing much about the social lives of the people involved. Some of the heavy contact sports e.g. amateur wrestling, stick fighting falls under this category. These traditional sports (though facing extinction) are still present in many African communities of Nigeria, Ghana, Zimbabwe and South Africa, Mali, Burkina Faso to mention a few (Bressan 1994; Bryant 1967; Pufaa, 1999; Raum 1953a & b; Van der Merwe & Bressan 1995) .

So many factors have been found to affect the outcome in competitive sports. Musculo-skeletal composition, somatotype, body size, amongst others, were found to affect performance (Owolabi & Makpu, 1994). These factors would also affect performance in traditional sports. Meanwhile, there is a dearth of literature on the health related and performance related fitness variables in indigenous African sports. Interestingly, there is no published research on the role of sports scientists in developing African traditional sports.

This paper therefore, shall attempt to identify and review these sports and their socio-cultural and the historical similarities and background. And also attempt to channel a course for the sports scientists towards the development and growth of traditional African sports. This paper shall be delimited to games of physical skills only as defined by Van der Merwe and Bressan (1995). Traditional and indigenous sports, games and play were used interchangeably.

## The Plural African Society

The countries that make up the African continent are of varying cultures with different colonisation and historical background. Majority of the people in Africa belong to different ethnic groups and languages yet share some similarities in culture and sports. We shall attempt to review the historical background of selected plural societies of the west African sub region, and relate this to their culture and sports.

For more than a thousand years West Africa was exposed to the profound impact exerted by alien immigrants coming from area whose people had evolved a more sophisticated culture (Hallet, 1993). There was an attempt to impose this sophistication on every area of life of the colonised Africans. Sports and games were some of the elements imposed on Africans.

Despite the variation in the culture and tradition of the African people as you move across the continent, there is a lot of similarities amongst them. These similarities according

to Tidy and Leeming (1986 & 1987) could have emerged from inter marriages and migrations of the Africans resulting from the resentment of the people to colonisation and forced rule by the west or protest migration by the Francophones. Tidy and Leeming reiterated that there were protest migrations from French West Africa to the British territories to escape the harsher French rule. Africans migrated from French Dahomey to British Nigeria, from French Ivory Coast to British Gold Coast (Ghana), from French Senegal to British Gambia, and from French Guinea to British Sierra Leone and even to Portuguese Guinea.

Sibanda, Moyana and Gumbo, (1995) indicated that this trend is similar in all colonised Africa except a few like Zimbabwe, Lesotho, Rwanda. In most of the rest of the continent, countries tend to have several languages, while only the smaller states such as Lesotho or Rwanda tend to one-language countries. Historical documentation have it that modern Zimbabwe is unusual, compared with most African states of the same size, in that it has only two main languages, Shona and Ndebele. (Sibanda, Moyana, & Gumbo, 1995). The modern Nigeria has an area of 356,000 square miles. In 1875, this territory was divided up among a very large number of independent polities formed by people of strikingly different cultures (Hallet, 1993). Different traditional games abound in Nigeria.

### Sports, Games and Dances in the African Society

According to Blanchard and Cheska (1985), the sporting activities characteristic of the early urban West African states are myriad, but seem to cluster around several basic themes: track and field, combative events, outdoor skills, gymnastics, water sports and ball games. The evidence of sports in prehistoric Egypt is quite detailed. Materials found in graves- specifically, playing equipment, dated to the pre-dynastic period of Egypt, (ca 3000B. C.) revealed the presence of various games and sports. Later archeological remains from the Egyptian Pharaonic dynasties point to both athletic event and spectacle: hunting, fowling, fishing, dancing and stick fighting, archery, competitive swimming, running, and bull fighting. Some of the sports and games from this era were restricted to elite or upper class participation.

There are various sports development programmes in Africa, which are based on different models. The development of programmes for the indigenous African athletes should be based on the African tradition and culture that would be accepted by the people. According to Bressan (1994), the present sporting model that is used is based on theory and history that is alien to Africa. Models for programmes that work with people must have strong culture-specific means of making the theory come true in practice because people can not leave their culture entirely

behind them. In a sense, a person's culture is the basis of his or her personal theory about life and how it should be lived.

Another element that was of interest in this study was the environment of the African people. The environment influenced the nature and type of indigenous sports, and the specific problems of adaptation faced by the people in which it occurred. Lifestyles, topography, floral and the environment also affected the type of sports or/and games that were found amongst the people. The sports in the African situation were similar to the case of the two Tarahumara athletes. These athletes (who represented Mexico in the marathon in the 1928 Amsterdam Olympics) were good example of the influence on living adaptation on performance in sports. They crossed the finish line with their typical unhurried composure and running until they were asked to stop and informed that they had covered the distance. The endurance of the Tarahumaran can be viewed as an adaptation to the rough Chihuahuan terrain. Travel, predominantly a matter of moving foot, requires running or walking over hills and valleys with radical variation in altitude. The Tarahumaran hunted deer by pursuing them on foot, relentlessly chasing a single animal until it fell over in exhaustion (Blanchard, & Cheska 1985).

### Classification of Traditional Indigenous African Games and Sports

The historical similarities that existed between these African states might be responsible for the presence of similar games under different names that were found in the present countries of this sub continent. Majority of the indigenous sports in the Africa was classified under the games of physical skills, games of chance, strategy, rhythm, verbal, memory and stimulation (Cheska, 1987). This paper was delimited to traditional sports of physical skills such as stick fighting, swimming, wrestling and dancing.

In the traditional African society, sporting activities were essential part of living. Different traditional sports and games were displayed during cultural festivals. Some of these traditional sports are vocation-specific; i.e. they were related to the activities of daily living of the individuals. Examples are farming, fishing, and hunting. Hunting and fishing expedition are accentuated by songs and dances demonstrating the act of fishing and hunting, examples of these are the *muchongoyo* and the *dinhe* dances in Zimbabwe and the *atilogwu* dancers of Nigeria (Isibor, 1998).

These indigenous sporting activities indirectly, assisted in developing physical and health performance fitness variables (e.g. strength, endurance and power) or were a reflection of the presence of such components of health and performance related physical fitness.

## Stick Fighting

This game was commonly played during male circumcision. Van der Merwe and Bressan (1995) quoting Elliot wrote the following:

*I cannot think of the age of adolescence among young Xhosa without feeling that this is the period of their lives, which they enjoy more than any other. The whole atmosphere of their lives at this stage is one of freedom and of happy abandon and one where they seem to have no cares in the world and will romp or dance or sing and play all day. They parade around in large groups and their dance. Consists of wild jumping and stamping movement to the accompaniments of singing and musical instruments.*

The account above reveals that of joy, happiness, and dance amongst the youth. Meanwhile, this type of sport may appear brutal to someone of different socio-cultural background. The understanding and appreciation of this sport might assist with the development of human technology with emphasis on tool making and its utilisation as it relates to the sticks used in this sport.

The sports scientists should advise on the modification of these activities by introducing safety measures- appropriate clothing and rules. Physical performance and health related components in these indigenous sports should be evaluated, documented and modified to ensure safety.

The danger of total ban of such sport will lead to the loss of more than the actual physical benefits of the game but also the accompanying paraphernalia, costumes, music, dancing and culture.

## Swimming as an Indigenous Sport

Swimming is another sport that is influenced by the general vocation(s) and environment of the people in traditional African communities. Swimming skills were commonly found amongst Africans who were traditionally fishermen and hunters. In these regions different types of water games existed (Van der Merwe, & Bressan, 1995). These ranged from diving, duration of sustained under- water immersion and swimming.

This experience is also true for the riverine *Lagosians*, *Ijaws* and *Urhobos* of the southern states of Nigeria, in West Africa who are also fishermen. There is interestingly a link between environment, survival, culture and leisure or sports amongst these groups of Africans located in the western region of the continent.

Expectedly, these people were excellent swimmers. As a matter of fact, the *Ijaws* and the *Lagosians* are up till date considered the best swimmers in modern Nigeria. There is a general belief that a newly born child from that part of the country (Nigeria) must be immersed in water within few hours of his birth to ascertain his true 'citizenship' or paternity.

There is again a challenge here to the scientists to evaluate performance parameters amongst these Africans, and therefore document them.

## Amateur Wrestling

Amateur wrestling is another common game that combines physical skills with strategy (Cheska, 1987). In the colonial West Africa, competitions were organised intra and inter community. The type of amateur wrestling that was seen within the rain forest region of Africa was special and organised. The rain forest wrestling had a lot of dance and drumming associated with it. Champions were identified within age groups and communities. Seasonal competitions were organized through various festival bodies that were done annually (Gorer, 1944).

According to Gorer (1944), amateur wrestling was by far the most popular, indeed almost the only West African sport. It was developed to an extent, which makes it comparable with the 'Olympic' games. The title of champion wrestler was highly esteemed, and the holder of it brings great glory to the village. Eliminating bouts were fought for, through out the year and the championship is fought for at Dakar throughout the month of January. The challenger of the champion usually is a 'virgin' (male). Gorer also highlighted the presence of preliminary bouts, which according to him were much more entertaining than the actual fights. The fighters enter the arena in order of merits at about ten minutes interval – there are several smaller fights as well as the championships and popular favorites make an appearance without the intention of fighting to gratify their fans- dressed in wrestling costume.

Amateur wrestling is also common amongst the *Igbo* speaking group from the eastern part of Modern Nigeria. The *Adę* wrestling festival of the *Uwherun* clan of Delta State of today Nigeria is another example amongst so many.

The show of strength and dexterity during wrestling is exhilarating. The sports scientists should research and document muscular strength, endurance and flexibility of all joints of the African amateur wrestler.

## Wrestling and Dance

Wrestling and dance in the traditional African community exhibits the presence of dexterity, flexibility and co-ordination. Achebe (1987, p.12) in 'Things Fall Apart' adequately reflected this. He clearly presented the combination of the African dance and wrestling in the eastern part of Nigeria as follows:

*The drummers took up their sticks again and the air shivered and grew tense like a tightened bow. The two teams were arranged facing each other across the clear space. A young man from one team danced across the centre to the other side and pointed to whom ever he wanted to fight. They dance back to the centre together and close in. The last match was between the leaders of the team. They were among the best wrestlers in all the nine villages. The drums went mad and the crowd also. They surged forward as the two men danced into the circle. It was a fierce contest. The wrestlers were almost still in each other's grip. The muscles on their arms and their thighs and on their backs stood out and twitched. It looked like an equal match.*

There was a lot of power demonstrated in this account. The presence of strength, power and skill was very clear.

In the earlier chapter, Achebe accounted for how Okonkwo achieved his wrestling fame. He indicated that as a young man of eighteen he had brought honour to his village by throwing *Amalinze* the cat. *Amalinze* was the great wrestler who for seven years was unbeaten. He was called the cat because his back would never touch the earth. It was this man that Okonkwo threw in a fight which the old man agreed was the fiercest since the founder of their town engaged a spirit of the wild for seven days and seven nights. The drum beat and the flutes sang and the spectators held their breaths. *Amalinze* was a wily craftsman, but Okonkwo was as slippery as a fish in water. Every nerve and every muscle stood out on their arms, backs, and thighs and one almost heard them stretching to breaking point. In the end Okonkwo threw the Cat.

The analysis of Achebe's presentation reveals that wrestling, as a sport was highly associated with dancing. This dancing and drumming is fast disappearing from today's traditional amateur wrestling. It was also clear that this traditional sport was meant for very strong members of the community. Inter and intra community tournaments were strongly represented in the account above. Traditional wrestling as a sport was well organized with judges present and different bouts were presented with the main bout reserved to the end. His description of the muscle work involved

shows the need of strength, endurance, skill, speed and good co-ordination in amateur traditional wrestling. Achebe's description of muscle work in amateur wrestling is still found amongst wrestlers in African communities.

The presence of the dance was like the warm-up exercise in the present day wrestling. Historically, it is well established that sports and dance have existed in all known cultures of the world from the earliest of times. They have been important aspects of ancient art as well. Man has always used sports and dance to express personal emotional, feelings, as well as to communicate non-verbally, the moves and goals of the family, tribe, village or state (Folawiyo, 1994). The duration and intensity of this should be studied and documented.

## Challenges to the African Sports Scientists

Despite the cultural diversity in Africa, there is some similarity in the way of life of the people. Activities were guided by their environment, vocation and survival strategies.

The sports scientist in Africa should harness his research skills toward identifying the similarities in these traditions and culture as they affect performance. Champions in these identified sports are identified. Our focus therefore, should be to develop the five basic areas of technical, scientific, political, aesthetic and ethical considerations for all the traditional sports in Africa.

## Conclusion

The present modern sporting culture is eroding the African indigenous sporting culture where Africans are disconnected from their social world or/and roots.

The sports scientists and administrators should strive not to loose the cultural heritage present in the variety of sports in different parts of the continent. One major assignment is to identify what is beneficial and entertaining and sieve this from what is hazardous and of no benefit and still attempt to maintain the tradition and culture.

The sports scientists should assist in the following ways:

- a) Developing normative data for the different traditional African sports and games after effective identification and classification.
- b) The anthropological, sociological and historical foundation of these sports and dances should be studied.
- c) Evaluate performance and health-related physical fitness parameters in these sports.

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