

Chapter 6

Indigenous African Curricula and the Question of Epistemic Diversity: The Case of the Mulabalaba Game

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ABSTRACT

A qualitative case study in orientation, the research used the Mulabalaba indigenous game to explore the forms of knowledge and pedagogies that underpin indigenous African curricula and the implications they hold for present-day higher education curriculum development and transformation. We observed ten purposively selected participants who played the Mulabalaba game during the School of Education's Staff Wellness Day in 2024. A key finding of the study was that the indigenous African curriculum is underpinned by diverse epistemic forms, values and skills like the 21st century skills that are highly sought in present-day higher education curricula. Other findings revealed that the underpinning epistemic forms, values and skills are interwoven seamlessly and comprehensively and delivered in captivating and engaging pedagogies. The study recommends future research into how lessons from indigenous African curricula can be incorporated to inform and strengthen present-day higher education curriculum development and transformation.

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Using the Mulabalaba game, the study reported in this chapter explored the forms of knowledge that underpin indigenous African curricula, the pedagogies used to teach these forms of knowledge, and the implications indigenous African curricula hold for higher education curriculum development and transformation. Mulabalaba game, is an indigenous African game widely played among different African communities.

The game carries different nomenclatures according to different languages and cultural groups. In Namibia, the game is called Mulabalaba among the Lozi-speaking language group in the far north-eastern Zambezi Region of the country. In contrast, among the Awambo-speaking groups in north-central Namibia, it is called Owela. According to Meeran et al. (2024, p. 378), among some Sotho-speaking communities in South Africa, the game is called ‘Mmela’ while its South Sotho name is ‘Morabaraba’, and among the Nguni speakers, it is called ‘Umulabalaba’.

As free leisure is discouraged in most traditional African settings, the Mulabalaba game is considered one of the most acceptable occupations for the young and elderly in the afternoons while resting from their daily chores of ploughing or herding cattle or goats. Sometimes, when herding cattle or goats, young men digress from their main task of herding and engage in the Mulabalaba game, something that elders do not approve of as the cattle or goats end up getting lost or may end up in the fields. The game may not interfere with work.

In the traditional community setting, the game is designed by anyone familiar with it before they start to play. The game is drawn up or designed on the ground under a tree, preferably on hard-surfaced ground, to ensure it can be reused again the following day(s). If the game is played only for that day, it could also be designed or developed on soft sand. In modern days, the game can be designed on hard boards (see Figures 1 and 2 below) or on a computer.

Traditionally, the design involves digging up 24 or more shallow holes in equal rows of 4, each with six holes or more. The rows are designed in even numbers. The rows can be used to represent the multiplication table. In the traditional setting, the depth and width of the holes are measured in terms of appropriateness as opposed to numerical specifications. However, despite the specifications or measurement stated in qualitative terms of appropriateness, the holes always maintain a standard size irrespective of the community where the game is played.

Figure 1. Mulabalaba game board (Goggle search, 2024)



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