

Tamba, dzidza, rarama (play, learn, live): Indigenous Shona games as foundations for life and therapy

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SYNOPSIS

This paper explores traditional Shona games as developmental tools that prepare children for life through movement, rhythm, role-play, and interaction. Framed through an occupational science and neurodiversity-informed practice, the paper discusses the relevance of indigenous games and how they can be harnessed to support children's functional and holistic development.

Drawing on personal cultural experience and professional occupational therapy practice, including case reflections and cultural storytelling, this article examines how traditional Shona games such as *nhodo*, *tsoro*, *hwishu*, *mafurawu*, and others support the development of physical coordination, emotional regulation, sensory integration, and cognitive flexibility. These traditional games, which range from individual to predominantly cooperative and some competitive in nature, offer a culturally anchored and relational model of therapeutic engagement. From a sensory integration perspective, they provide rich opportunities for regulating arousal levels, promoting praxis, and supporting sensory discrimination within meaningful social contexts. Their value is particularly significant when working with neurodiverse children, as these play-based, culturally responsive activities naturally integrate sensory, motor, cognitive, and social demands.

By embedding therapeutic goals within familiar, joyful occupations, such approaches foster not only participation but also a deeper sense of inclusion, belonging, and identity affirmation. The article addresses the underrepresentation of indigenous play occupations in mainstream therapy and highlights their therapeutic potential in identity-affirming, sensory-rich intervention. By reclaiming Indigenous occupations, this perspective calls for their intentional integration into contemporary therapeutic frameworks advancing inclusive, culturally grounded approaches that honour lived context and foster holistic development across diverse childhoods.

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INTRODUCTION

Play is a foundational occupation in childhood, shaping how children develop physically, cognitively, emotionally, and socially. In occupational science, play is recognised not only as a means of skill acquisition but also as a meaningful expression of identity, culture, and belonging (Lynch, and Moore, 2016). Yet, many therapeutic frameworks remain grounded in Euro-Western paradigms, often overlooking culturally embedded forms of play that hold developmental and communal significance in non-Western societies (Kielhofner, 2009). In this paper, the term *Indigenous* refers specifically to occupations and cultural practices rooted in Shona traditions of Zimbabwe. This is distinct from populations who have migrated and may carry these traditions into new cultural and geographical contexts, such as within diasporic communities.

This perspective is informed by elements of personal and professional experience; it is presented as a commentary exploring the therapeutic potential of Shona games in occupational therapy. This paper draws from lived experience and professional practice as a Zimbabwean occupational therapist currently working with neurodiverse children in the United Kingdom and having worked in Egypt and Bermuda. In Zimbabwe, I observed children naturally integrating games like *tsoro yematatu* into daily life, building problem-solving skills. In Egypt, therapy often incorporated music and rhythm, while in Bermuda I noted adaptations of Western games with cultural twists. Working in the UK, I noticed limited outside play and more digital grounded play, which raised questions about the universality of play in occupational therapy practice.

This perspective explores how traditional Shona games such as *Mahumbwe* (role play), *Nhodo* (fine motor skill and numeracy), *Chamuhwande hwande* (hide and seek), and *Mapere Akaenda Hwedza* (group strategy and physical agility) functioned not only as recreational activities but also as deeply rooted educational systems.

These games promote physical coordination, emotional regulation, sensory integration, executive functioning, and resilience. Robertson (2010) highlights the importance of integrating personal cultural experience into occupational therapy practice. This aligns with my own trajectory, where my Shona heritage informs my professional engagement with neurodiverse children. Through rhythm, storytelling, movement, and interaction, children develop life skills long before and during formal schooling.

Beyond developmental benefits, these games foster a strong sense of *Ubuntu*, a collective spirit of humanity, belonging, empathy, and cooperation. The indigenous games are played outdoors for hours, fully immersed in imaginative, cooperative play that reinforced shared values, intergenerational learning, and cultural continuity. The social context of these games creates environments where every child has a role, every voice matters, and every action has a communal significance.

In the context of migration, where cultural identity can often be fragmented or diluted, reviving and adapting these traditional games within therapeutic and community settings offers a powerful bridge between heritage and wellbeing. For families who have migrated and particularly for their children navigating identity within Western systems, these games can serve as cultural

anchors, helping to preserve indigenous values while also fostering inclusion and mutual understanding among peers from diverse backgrounds (Chawla-Duggan, 2016). When shared with host communities, they open opportunities for cross-cultural dialogue and co-regulation through joyful, meaningful participation.

This paper advocates for the inclusion of indigenous games within occupational therapy practice not as relics of the past, but as living, dynamic tools that enrich developmental pathways, promote inclusive cultural practices, and affirm the identity and strengths of every child (Kapp, 2020).

Categorising the games by developmental function

The traditional Shona games are far more than mere pastimes; they serve as powerful vehicles for achieving multiple developmental goals across diverse domains. Central among these is the enhancement of executive functioning, defined as the intelligence to organise oneself and adapt effectively to changing environments (Mercurief, 2023). This concept aligns with a broader, holistic understanding of intelligence, not just as cognitive ability, but as dynamic adaptability (Zelazo et al., 2012).

Furthermore, these games embody the Ubuntu philosophy of or Unhu in Shona we say *munhu munhu pavanhu* “I am because we are,” highlighting the essential interconnectedness of individuals within their communities (Letseka, 2012). Through cooperative play, children develop not only individual skills but also a sense of belonging, empathy, and shared responsibility (Van Breda, 2019).

Collectively, these games engage the whole child and their surrounding context addressing physical, cognitive, emotional, social, and cultural dimensions, while recognising that development is a holistic and integrated process. In this way, the whole is truly greater than the sum of its parts, with each game contributing uniquely yet synergistically to nurture well-rounded growth through meaningful, culturally grounded play, (Nsamenang, 1992).

Motor and physical development

Nhodo, an indigenous game among the Shona of Zimbabwe (Madondo, & Tsikira, 2021), is played using small stones placed in a shallow hole. Each round begins with a player tossing a primary stone (*mudodo*) into the air, then swiftly picking up one or more stones from the hole before catching the airborne *mudodo* with the same hand. With each successive round, the difficulty escalates from picking one stone at a time to two, three, and so on. The turn ends when either the player drops the *mudodo* or completes the sequence successfully. Nhodo enhances fine motor coordination, bilateral integration, postural control, timing, grading force, sensory integration and eye-hand coordination. Children manipulate small stones with precision under time pressure ideal for developing dexterity and timing. Pada (hopscotch) encourages balance, proprioception, motor planning, and lower limb strength.

Mafurawu is another game involving physical agility, coordination, and strategic thinking (The Patriot, 2017). It is typically played with two players positioned on the outside who throw a ball back and forth, aiming to strike players situated in the middle. Those in the middle must dodge the ball to remain in play. If a player is hit, they are temporarily out of

the game; however, if a teammate manages to catch the ball, previously eliminated players are allowed to re-join. This game promotes agility, spatial awareness, endurance, teamwork, emotional regulation, and cooperative problem-solving.

Another Zimbabwean traditional outdoor ball game is *hwishu* (People of Valid Opinions, 2009). *Hwishu* involves two teams one positioned in a large circle (the offensive team) and the opposing team positioned behind a designated score line. A player from the offensive team kicks a ball outward, then, along with teammates, races back to a home base. Meanwhile, the defensive team attempts to retrieve the ball and "strike out" the runner before they safely return home. If the offensive player kicks the ball into the air and it is caught on the full by the opposition who then exclaims "*Hwishu!*", the kicker is out. Once all players are eliminated, the teams swap roles. *Hwishu* builds gross motor rhythm, motor coordination, vestibular input, turn taking, teamwork and cooperative timing, providing critical sensory regulation alongside physical development.

Sensory processing and regulation

Tsoro supports deep focus and repetitive hand motion, offering calming proprioceptive and tactile input that aids sensory modulation (Mawere, 2012). *Mapere Akaenda Hwedza* trains auditory cueing, response timing, and dynamic movement in response to sensory stimuli such as the sounds of hyenas, fostering auditory discrimination and sensory-motor integration. *Nhombo* (stone throwing) requires depth perception, tactile exploration, and motor accuracy, engaging both visual and tactile senses. *Chamuhwande hwande* (hide-and-seek) develops auditory discrimination, stealth movement, and sensory-motor planning,

contributing to multisensory processing, identifying state of calm and self-regulation (Bundy et al., 2002). Notably, games such as *hwishu* also provide vestibular and proprioceptive input, highlighting the overlap between motor and sensory domains critical for balanced sensory processing.

Cognitive and executive function

The game of *tsoro* has variations for example *tsoro yenhatsu* (3-in-a-row game), is a competitive hand game, supports working memory, strategy development, and pattern recognition. It involves turn-taking, problem-solving, logical sequencing, and adaptive thinking, fostering executive functioning skills including cognitive flexibility and planning. *Dudu-u Muduri*, which entails naming songs under pressure, tests recall, phonological awareness, and group listening skills, enhancing attentional control and rapid information processing. These games collectively develop core cognitive skills such as sustained attention, flexible thinking, and problem-solving under social and temporal demands.

Emotional and psychological development

Mahumbwe, a role-play game, allows safe expression of emotions, rehearsal of adult roles, and symbolic play, thereby building empathy, emotional literacy, and social understanding. *Gumbe Gumbwe*, a totem dance game, fosters pride, cultural identity, and emotional expression through music and rhythm, which can enhance confidence and self-regulation (Thomas & Chichaya, 2023). Additionally, these activities support stress management and resilience by providing structured yet creative outlets for emotional processing and social connection.

Social participation, communication, and life skills

Mota dzemawaya, the wire car making game, encourages problem-solving, creativity, sustained attention, and peer collaboration, thereby developing teamwork and leadership qualities. *Dunhu*, a territory-based game, teaches boundaries, conflict negotiation, group rules, and competitive fairness, essential skills for cooperative social interaction. *Chisveru* (tag) and running games promote inclusion, resilience, fairness, non-verbal communication, and verbal exchanges, building foundational communication and social skills (Graham et al., 2024). These games also contribute to the transmission of cultural knowledge and traditions, reinforcing social identity and belonging (Amin et al., 2011).

Language and communication development

While implicit in some games, language and communication are critical developmental domains. Games such as *Dudu-u Muduri* engage children in verbal skills including storytelling, instruction-following, and expressive language. Incorporating explicit focus on language development through group interactions and turn-taking further supports receptive and expressive communication competencies, critical for social participation and academic success.

Adaptive and daily living skills

Some games contribute indirectly to adaptive functioning by developing fine motor skills, problem-solving, and sustained attention that transfer to daily living tasks. For example, the precision required in *Nhodo*, *Mahumbwe* parallels skills needed for self-care activities such as dressing and feeding. Collaborative tasks like wire car making (*Mota*

dzemawaya) enhance sustained focus and creativity, traits beneficial in everyday problem-solving and managing routine challenges.

Implications for neurodiverse children and those with motor or physical disabilities

Children with autism, ADHD, sensory processing differences, motor skill deficits, or physical disabilities often benefit from structured, rhythmic, and culturally meaningful activities. Considering how people with disabilities continue to experience inequalities and violation of dignity a modality that includes them is vital (Chibaya et al., 2021). In the context of so many African countries with high rates of HIV/AIDS cases, play activities for children are crucial (Munambah, 2021). Indigenous Shona games naturally provide predictable patterns and clear rules that create a safe and scaffolded environment, supporting a child's need for routine and structure. Their repetitive nature and simplicity make them easy to learn and accessible, fostering confidence and participation across varying abilities.

These games deliver high sensory input including vestibular, tactile, and proprioceptive, that supports sensory modulation, discrimination and regulation, helping children manage sensory overload or seek appropriate stimulation. They also accommodate children with motor skill challenges and physical disabilities by allowing modifications and adaptations, ensuring inclusive engagement regardless of physical capacity.

In addition, many games, *Dudu muduri*, identify participants by personal attributes

such as name, birth month, or totem, which strengthens inclusivity and cultural specificity, fostering a sense of identity and belonging. The games can be both structured, with established rules and roles, and unstructured, allowing flexibility and creativity. Importantly, it is the children who collectively decide which game to play, when to start, and when to finish, promoting autonomy, social negotiation, and mutual respect- Ubuntu.

Role play and imitation embedded in games like *Mahumbwe* support theory of mind development, while group activities offer opportunities for co-regulation, emotional regulation, social communication, and resilience (Reilly, 1974). For example, *Chamuhwande hwande* encourages auditory filtering and stealth movement, enhancing sensory processing and motor planning. *Nhodo* builds fine motor endurance and visual tracking, skills transferable to everyday tasks.

Moreover, these games nurture executive functioning skills such as working memory, cognitive flexibility, and self-regulation by requiring children to adapt to rules, plan strategies, and sustain attention (Diamond, 2013). When thoughtfully facilitated, they serve as therapeutic, culturally grounded interventions that promote identity, community connection, and holistic development. Through inclusive adaptation, cultural relevance, and child-led decision-making, these games offer a powerful framework for supporting diverse developmental needs within a supportive social and cultural context.

Reclaiming indigenous knowledge in occupational therapy

Traditional Shona games are often overlooked in modern therapeutic models, yet they reflect deeply rooted indigenous theories of child development, *kubatsira mwana kukura* (helping a child grow). These games seamlessly integrate learning with rhythm, movement with memory, and community with play. They are not merely cultural expressions but valid occupational forms, representing *play*, the central occupation of childhood and a foundational domain in occupational therapy (Hocking, 2000).

Including these games in occupational therapy practice not only supports neurodiverse development but also contributes to the decolonisation of occupational therapy by integrating non-Western, contextually grounded play occupations (Hammell, 2009). Their inclusion challenges narrow definitions of what is considered 'therapeutic' and expands the profession's understanding of occupation to include culturally embedded, collective, and sustainable practices.

These games provide multiple sustainability benefits. They require minimal resources, promote outdoor and communal engagement, and reduce dependency on electronic devices, digital practice, encouraging screen-free, active participation. This makes them particularly useful in low-resource settings and for families seeking practical, low-cost, and culturally familiar home strategies to support developmental goals especially for families having the burden and strain of living with a child with complex needs (Mlambo, 2015). For therapists, these games significantly expand the therapeutic toolkit, offering accessible, adaptable, and engaging interventions that support sensory regulation, motor coordination, executive

functioning, emotional expression, and social interaction (Munambah, 2018). Therapists working with indigenous families or migrant communities can draw on these familiar games to build rapport, enhance cultural safety, address treatment goals and strengthen therapeutic alliances. Likewise, therapists who have migrated and are working with diaspora populations can use these games to affirm cultural identity and bridge generational gaps in a meaningful, therapeutic way.

Furthermore, sharing these games with therapists unfamiliar with them encourages cultural exchange, equipping the wider professional community with new tools that are both effective and inclusive. This process fosters mutual learning, deepens cultural humility, and affirms the knowledge systems of both Indigenous communities and those with migration experiences.

Ultimately, reclaiming and integrating traditional games into occupational therapy is not only a clinical innovation it is a cultural, sustainable, and ethical imperative (Otuniga & Chichaya, 2025). It strengthens families, communities, and the profession itself by recognising that healing and development are most powerful when rooted in familiar, meaningful, and shared human experiences (Keller et al., 2017).

CONCLUSION: *Tamba, Dzidza, Rarama*
Tamba (play), *Dzidza* (learn), *Rarama* (live) encapsulates what these traditional games offer, not merely entertainment, but holistic preparation for life. They teach regulation, connection, movement, imagination, and resilience, embedding essential developmental skills within culturally meaningful and socially engaging experiences.

As we seek to support neurodiverse children, those with physical and motor challenges, and children from diverse cultural backgrounds, these games provide a powerful, low-cost, and sustainable model for life-based therapy. Rooted in indigenous knowledge systems, they are accessible, adaptable, and inherently inclusive supporting the whole child in ways that are culturally relevant and neurologically enriching.

Occupational therapists are called to recognise these traditional games as legitimate therapeutic occupations worthy of inclusion, innovation, and documentation in both clinical practice and academic training (M'kumbuzi et al., 2016). Integrating them expands the therapist's toolkit, promotes cultural humility, and strengthens therapeutic rapport particularly with indigenous and families who have migrated to a different country.

Further research is required to examine how Shona games can be systematically evaluated for therapeutic outcomes, particularly in neurodiverse populations. Longitudinal studies could assess their role in regulation, social skills, and participation in daily occupations. Families and communities are equally encouraged to reclaim and share these games not only as cultural heritage, but as living tools for healing, connection, and development. In a time when screen-based interactions are rising and resources may be limited, these games offer sustainable, embodied, and socially rooted alternatives.

Finally, these games hold global relevance. For therapists and families who have migrated, these practices help bridge identity across generations and geographies. For

local practitioners, they offer opportunities to learn, engage, and enrich practice through cultural exchange. Let us honour and evolve these practices not just for the past they represent, but for the future they can help shape.

Regai va-tambe, regai va-dzidze uye regai va-rarame- Let them play, let them learn and let them live.

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