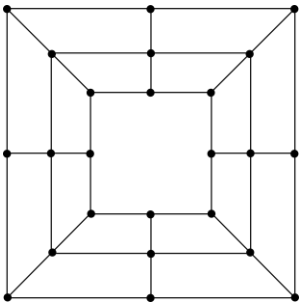
Umlabalaba & Cosmology

I was inspired to write this article while reviewing a lecture by Dr. Charshee McIntyre, one of our ancestral warrior-scholars. In the particular lecture I am discussing, Dr. McIntyre discusses the Afrocentric, Eurocentric, and Amerocentric (Native American) worldviews[1]. Her poignant assessment begins with a simple formula for understanding the construction of a group of people's worldview: "Environment determines culture. Cultures determines consciousness. Consciousness creates your worldview." (McIntyre 2016) Using this formula as my foundation, I will describe how Umlabalaba as a game represents and reflects an African cosmological understanding of life and living.

Umlabalaba & the Environment:

The environment is the stage upon where life and living occur. Looking at the etymology of the word (see environ (v.) + -ment) one can see environment means that which surrounds or encircles you. In the case of Umlabalaba, the board (environment) is three concentric squares. Each Square is permeated by eight lines: 4 diagonal lines, 2 horizontal lines, 2 vertical lines. The aggregate of three concentric squares being permeated the aforementioned 8 lines conditions 24 intersecting points. These interesting points are the sites where an Umlabalaba token may be placed. The following can be seen in its fullness below. Using this formula as my foundation, I will describe how Umlabalaba as a game represents and reflects an African cosmological understanding of life and living.



Though played on a flat surface, the environment of Umlabalaba is in fact a layered space-time continuum. A player's ability to effectively command their movement capabilities then is greatly increased when they begin to see the environment in a dynamic fashion. In this light, one can view the center most vertical line as representing both the prime meridian of the board, establishing eastern and western hemispheres, as well as acting as the cardinal directions of north and south. The horizontal line spanning the center of the board can be understood as representing the equator, dividing the environment into southern and northern hemispheres as well as marking the east and west cardinal points. The 4 diagonal points are significant for serving as areas of overlap. Looking to the image above as a reference, the diagonal lines represent the northeast, northwest, southeast, and southwest sections.

[1] McIntyre, Chashee. 2016. *Afrocentric, Eurocentric, and Amerocentric (Native American) - Three world views as a basis of Africana multiculturalism.* YouTube.

Umlabalaba & Culture

As outlined by Dr. McIntyre, the environment determines culture. Thus, the 24 intersecting points of the Umlabalaba environment bring about the next aspect of our discussion - culture. Culture, as used here, is understood by the definition given to us by Dr. Wade Nobles, as "A general design for living and patterns for interpreting reality."[2] To best interpret the reality of Umlabalaba, I will chronicle Umlabalaba through its two essential aspects; the birth (placement) and maturation (movement) phases. We will deal with the birth phase for now.

The Birth phase of Umlabalaba initiates the game. Each player has 12 tokens making 24 tokens in all; 12 black and 12 white. Black always goes first! The cultural significance of such a rule is multifaceted. Firstly, in the African world, night precedes day. Secondly, if we take a race-first doctrine, as Afrikan=black people we should be conscious that black people are the focus of our attention. Moreover, black moving first counteracts Western historiography which sees the global south as inferior followers - designated as "3rd world countries." These predominately black cultured peoples; however, represent the first and highest civilizations known to humanity, and we should recognize these cultures in their proper context as 1st world civilizations.

Moving forward in the birth phase, each player alternates placing their tokens on one of the 24 available points until all 24 pieces have been placed. A player has the right to place their token on any unoccupied space. However, if a player makes a line of three (vertically, horizontally, or diagonally) then they have the right to remove one of their opponent's pieces from the board.

This birth phase has a few symmetries to the life of African people past and present. As it pertains to ancient African cultural values, earth and nature - land - cannot be owned. As such, there is no region of the board that innately belongs to one player or another in contrast to chess. Instead, the board (environment) is a place of abundance in which all players can partake. More contemporarily, African peoples represent a diasporic population. Thus, the birth phase of Umlabalaba takes into account the reality that as African people we can find ourselves scattered around the globe.

It is also important to note the significance of Family in African culture. Remember, a player who makes a line of three has the right to remove one of their opponent's pieces from the board. This trinity of tokens can be understood to represent father, mother, and child. This perspective also adds to the reality that the game ends when the opponent only has two pieces left because he has no children. Thus, one is defeated once the family unit is destroyed. Umlabalaba, therefore, is not a game of individuals working together for a cause, but of families and communities (interconnection of families) striving to protect, direct, and perpetuate their existence into eternity.

---

[2] Nobles, Wade. Infusion of afrocentric content into the school curriculum ... [Online] Available at: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/002193470103100405 [Accessed: 27 January 2022].

Lastly, it should be noted that death isn't apart of the game. Dr. Powe hints at this fact in his article *Umlabalaba & Life*[3]*,* where he discusses the potentiality of tokens within the game. To this extent, Dr. Powe notes that tokens have three states of being each with varying potentiality:

1. (0) before being placed on the board, to
2. (1) Life and movement on the board, to
3. (-1) transition or the state of being removed from the board

Thus, life (energy) not being created nor destroyed, merely converted (transferred). Likewise, what might be commonly thought of as death in the west is more practically understood

Umlabalaba & Consciousness

Continuing on, culture is the agent which gives direction to consciousness. African consciousness can be understood through the viewing of the second phase of Umlabalaba -the maturation phase. In this phase, a player is concerned with manipulating culture to maximize its benefit to the community. This is accomplished by moving one's tokens in a way that creates stronger formations for defensive and offensive purposes (e.g. cradle, jaw of the crocodile, eye of the lion, etc.).

For the majority of the maturation phase, a player can only move their token one space at a time. This represents the gradual evolution and adaption of culture. And a token can only move along intersecting lines, representing the limitations of cultural development. This phenomena only changes once a player has three tokens left. At that point, the player's token can be said to have adrenaline and as a result is able to fly to any unoccupied spot on the board - because one's future existence as a family is nearing extinction.

> What then becomes of our consciousness as African people in light of the environment and culture of Umlabalaba? Firstly, we must be aware that no matter where we may be born (placed in the environment) we must work in harmonious unity. To this extent, one quickly realizes while playing Umlabalaba that power - in an African sense - is localized within a group of tokens in close proximity. This culture and consciousness of collective work and duty can be easily understood in the contexts of agriculture and war. For agriculture, collective cultivation and tilling of the land prepares the earth and soil for sowing and harvest that can feed the entire community/nation. Likewise, a nation must unify to defend itself from its aggressors.

Viewed in this light, to fully actualize one's potential, one must be consciously aware of and move to act in concern for the needs of the greater community (where and when to defend, where one's own group strength and stability lie, etc.). It is precisely in creating and maintaining community that an individual's raw potential can be harnessed, activated, and materialized.

Conclusion: Umlabalaba & Worldview

[3] Powe, E. Umlabalaba & Life [Online] Available at: https://blacfoundation.org/pdf/Umlabalaba-Life.pdf

In the final analysis, games - like language - carry and disseminate cultural memes through their practitioners. Umlabalaba is no different. As a game of Zulu (African) origin, we as black people should take seriously the cultural substance intrinsic within the game for our use and application towards positively influencing and navigating our lives.

Remembering Dr. Charshee McIntyre's conceptualization, "Environment determines culture. Cultures determines consciousness. Consciousness creates your worldview." (McIntyre 2016) Umlabalaba gives insight into our need for a natural psychology for transformation.

The 24 points represent - once tokens are placed upon them - our physical and social milieu, and provides the foundation of our interconnection and interdependence. As African people, we live globally in the diaspora. This brings about its own challenges but certainly its own strengths as well - particularly our right to partake in the abundance of the Earth in community with one another! Finally, we can extract from Umlabalaba that our consciousness should be rooted in family. Family is the smallest social unit of the nation. And as diasporic (read: global) people, we must internalize the futility of individualism and intertwine our families in international harmony.

So what does Umlabalaba tell us about the African Worldview? That the meaning of life is indeed to live - to be! However, to obtain the maximum benefit of life, we must maintain communal and cooperative modalities. Cosmology (how to view the world) and ontology (how to understand being in the world) are bestowed on us from observing the psychology of the environment (nature). For this reason, we also come to understand that we as Africans see ourselves as a part of nature. As tokens placed upon the Earth, we must cultivate our environment in ways that produce life, prosperity, and health.

References

McIntyre, Chashee. 2016. *Afrocentric, Eurocentric, and Amerocentric (Native American) - Three world views as a basis of Africana multiculturalism.* YouTube.

Nobles, Wade. Infusion of afrocentric content into the school curriculum ... [Online] Available at: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/002193470103100405 [Accessed: 27 January 2022].

Powe, E. Umlabalaba & Life [Online] Available at: https://blacfoundation.org/pdf/Umlabalaba-Life.pdf