

Umlabalaba & Life

In his play entitled *As you Like It*, Shakespeare once compared life to a stage, a theatrical performance in which all people are actors who play various roles. He wrote

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts...

These four lines and my experience playing the Zulu board game known as Umlabalaba have inspired me to write this essay attempting to explain the deeper meanings of birth, life, and death.

Indeed, umlabalaba is a reflection of life itself, with the token being a cow and its potential to act. The game is of Zulu origin in which one adversary competes in a game of wit with another to acquire ten of his opponent's tokens. Each time he makes a line of three cows he gains a token, and correspondingly each time his opponent forms a line of three, he loses a token.

The game, like life, has three phases: placement of the token on the board (corresponding to birth), movement one space at a time along lines connecting one intersection to the next (life itself), and removal from the board when a token is captured (corresponding to death).

If we observe closely, however, the token itself never really changes. What is different about it from one phase to the other is only its potential. Before being played to the board its potential is zero. When it is played its potential is activated to 1, and when it is captured, its potential goes to (-1). Being, however, that the Zulu (the originators of the game) consider life to be the relationship between the ancestors, the living, and the yet to be born, it is easily seen that the only difference between the unborn, the living and the dead is merely "potential". Moreover, the Zulu believe in ancestral reincarnation (symbolized by the start of a subsequent game) in which the captured cattle return to the ownership of the adversary for the beginning of the second game.

Thus a token always has three potentials, and these change cyclically from (0) (before being placed on the board) to (1) (movement on the board), to (-1) (state of removal from board) in a never ending sequence (0 > 1 > -1... > 0 > 1 > -1...). That is, the umlabalaba token (like the soul) does not undergo any significant change, but rather only changes its potentiality to affect or inter-relate with other souls on the playing board (i.e. life as we know it).

Note here that the cows are not regarded as being dead but rather captured and

placed in another holding pen. Thus their resuscitation in a subsequent game poses no problem. Indeed, the loser is always left with two cows so he can produce another heard for a subsequent game.

This conceptualization answers the basic questions “from where do we come?” and “where do we go?” for the token (like the soul) is immortal and undergoes as many rebirths as there are games. Even tokens remaining on the board after the game are recycled after each game symbolizing that “potential” is not permanent (even for survivors). This, however, says nothing about the meaning of life itself. To answer this question let us look deeper into what actually occurs on the board when tokens have the potential of (+1).

You will note that the objective of life (“the game”) is to form lines of three (gain sustenance) and to prevent your opponent from reducing your numbers by blocking his capture line. We can say the object of life is, therefore, to stay alive as long as possible by: 1) feeding one’s self; and 2) preventing death of your group. Of the two, “feeding one’s self” is as important as “preventing death” and so the moves are aimed at doing both at the same time and, when this is impossible, to decide which scenario is better for group survival.

Group survival (not the protection of the King as in chess) is, indeed, the key to life and this is mirrored in the game in many ways:

1) a line of three when formed not only generates sustenance but also provides the tokens that compose it with a defense against attack because (in the placement phase of the game) if an adversary removes a token that is so aligned, the player simply replaces it with one of his own tokens and gets one of his adversary’s tokens in return. This aspect demonstrates strength in unity;

2) clustering pieces together (as in the Crown of Elvis) provides a greater opportunity to form cradles where one token captures along one line and on its next move captures in another line, swinging back and forth in endless succession. A cradle therefore can be compared to a “factory” that mass produces captures and thus also illustrates strength in unity. Note, however, that though it appears tha an individual piece is doing the work, without the other pieces in place he would be unable to do this. That is, a general is nothing without an army;

3) playing opposite corners however is also useful because “you should never place all your eggs in one basket” and become corralled, so to speak. That is, two formations far removed from one another are often stronger than a single fortress. This illustrates admirably well the strength forming alliances;

4) the existence of defensive formations such as “eye of the lion” and “jaw of the crocodile” which are so powerful that they can break a cradle. This illustrates the roles of individuals in society where each is essential to the well-being of the other even when it appears they are doing nothing.

At the end of the game when an adversary is reduced to three tokens, in desperation (like a shot of adrenaline) all of his tokens are given the gift of flight and can move to any vacant space on the board. This is because if one more token is lost, the game is lost and so they perform to their utmost under stress, much like an anguished mother can lift a car to rescue her child that lays beneath it.

Another aspect of the game that I have not yet dealt with is that though all the tokens (unlike in chess) are intrinsically of equal value, the position they occupy on the board at any given moment determines their value to the group. Thus an adversary will want to capture tokens that potentially threaten or stand in the way of his attack and survival strategies.

As can be seen from the preceding passages, the meaning of life is simply "group survival" and, as in life, some of the tokens have less mobility than others and are not as important strategically. Yet they have the same intrinsic value and because of their potential could eventually move to a position of greater possibilities and eventually decide the fate of the group.

Indeed, learning how to form strategies and defend oneself from the strategies of the adversary by skillfully maneuvering tokens is the essence of umlabalaba and, indeed, the essence of life itself.

Your comments are welcome.

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