The Culture of Traditional Physical Activities and the Enhancement of Human Flourishing Amongst Indigenous Communities

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Abstract

This paper explores integral role of traditional physical activities in promoting human flourishing within indigenous communities. Traditional physical activities, encompassing a range of practices such as dance, hunting, fishing, and communal games, serve not only as forms of physical exercise but also as vital expressions of cultural identity and social cohesion. This study examines how these activities foster a sense of belonging, enhance mental and emotional well-being and contribute to the preservation of cultural heritage. By engaging in traditional physical activities, individuals within indigenous communities experience improved physical health, increase resilience, and deeper connection to their cultural roots. Furthermore, these practices facilitate intergenerational knowledge transfer, strengthening community bonds and promoting collective well-being. The findings underscore the importance of recognizing and supporting traditional physical activities as essential components of holistic health and human flourishing, advocating for their inclusion in public health initiatives and cultural preservation efforts. Ultimately, this research highlights the need for a greater appreciation of indigenous knowledge systems and their contributions to sustainable well-being in contemporary society.

Keywords: *Culture, Traditional Physical Activities, Human Flourishing, Indigenous Communities.*

Introduction

African indigenous community possesses a rich tradition of culture, sport, history and social institutions as seen in different countries. Traditional games, plays, dances and arts were used for the purposes of socialization, initiation, ceremonies, recreation, and education, among others. In addition, physical prowess was traditionally essential for the ability to perform practices such as hunting, gathering, inter- tribal conflicts, wrestling sports and pastoral activities (Amusa, 2010). Traditional African sports hold significant cultural value within African society. They are played to celebrate life, death, and other significant milestones such as weddings and harvests. These sports are also played to promote unity and peace among different tribes and communities. African sports are used to teach important life skills such as teamwork, discipline, leadership, and respect for authority.

Traditional African sports promote physical fitness, which is essential for living a healthy life. Through these sports, young people learn about their heritage and gain a sense of pride in their culture. Traditional African sports reflect the diversity and richness of the continent's cultures. They offer insight into the different customs, beliefs, and values of the many communities that make up Africa. For example, stick fighting is a traditional sport practiced by the Maasai people of Kenya and Tanzania. It is not only a form of entertainment and competition but also a rite of passage for young men in the community (Blacking, 1987).

Wrestling heritage has been recorded and preserved as an important sport in the Egyptian culture. This has been confirmed with accurate dating found in the burial tombs of Egyptian elites or specific Pharaohs, particularly the Beni Hassan tombs, dating 2000 – 1500 B.C. With the rest of the vast continent and lack of sufficient recorded information

especially with sub Saharan part of the continent, most authors writing about precolonial African traditions depend on word of mouth from the older generation of the African people, the explorers and colonists, where the latter two's contact with the local people was even limited (Craig, 2002).

Indigenous communities

The term 'indigenous communities' is notoriously difficult to define (Anaya, 2002). The UN has paid attention to the position of the world's indigenous peoples for more than 40 years (Barsh 1994), but has never adopted a formal definition of 'indigenous peoples', not even in the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations, has suggested that 'the concept of "indigenous" is not capable of a precise, inclusive definition which can be applied in the same manner to all regions of the world (Daes, 2011).

There is no universally agreed definition of Indigenous Peoples. However the United Nations and the world community recognize that Indigenous Peoples live all over the world, including in Africa, and their plight is extensively discussed in the international fora. A preliminary working definition provided by the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations states as follows: Indigenous communities, peoples, and nations are those that, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing in those territories, or parts of them. They form at present non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop, and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal systems. In certain instances, this definition can be considered to be limited in context since it is heavily skewed towards pre-colonial societies and may not ably apply to a broader perspective that includes marginalized societies, which transcends the post-colonial era.

Another perspective is provided by Coates (2004), who defines indigenous populations as those groups especially protected in international or national legislation as having a set of specific rights based on their historical ties to a particular territory, and their cultural or historical distinctiveness from other populations. The above definition puts emphasis on national recognition and protection by both international and national laws. This implies that there is a problem in circumstances where national laws do not necessarily recognize certain segments of society as indigenous. From the foregoing definitions, two issues arise. One is the uniqueness of a given community and its tie to a peculiar identity, history and territory. The second deals with statutory recognition. It is these two aspects that we interrogate in the African context as a precursor to gaining a deeper appreciation of Indigenous People in Africa.

Most attempts to define or otherwise identify characteristics agree on the following criteria: Indigenous groups are non-dominant or marginalised communities who are culturally distinct from the majority population. Daes suggested four core criteria that may be used to identify indigenous peoples: (Daes, 2011).
1. occupation and use of a specific territory;
2. voluntary perpetuation of cultural distinctiveness, which may include aspects of language, social organisation, religion and spiritual values, modes of production, laws and institutions;
3. self-identification, as well as recognition by other groups, as a distinct collectivity;
4. an experience of subjugation, marginalisation, dispossession, exclusion or discrimination.

Indigenous Peoples are distinct social and cultural groups that share collective ancestral ties to the lands and natural resources where they live, occupy or from which they have been displaced. The land and natural resources on which they depend are inextricably linked to their identities, cultures, livelihoods, as well as their physical and spiritual well-being (World Bank, 2023).

They often subscribe to their customary leaders and organizations for representation that are distinct or separate from those of the mainstream society or culture. Many Indigenous Peoples still maintain a language distinct from the official language or languages of the country or region in which they reside; however, many have also lost their languages or on the precipice of extinction due to eviction from their lands and/or relocation to other territories, and in. They speak more than 4,000 of the world´s 7,000 languages though some estimates indicate that more than half of the world's languages are at risk of becoming extinct by 2100 (World Bank, 2023). There are an estimated 476 million Indigenous Peoples worldwide.

While Indigenous Peoples own, occupy, or use a quarter of the world's surface area. Indigenous Peoples conserve 80 percent of the world´s remaining biodiversity and recent studies reveal that forestlands under collective indigenous people and local community stewardship hold at least one quarter of all tropical and subtropical forest above-ground carbon They hold vital ancestral knowledge and expertise on how to adapt, mitigate, and reduce climate and disaster risks (World Bank, 2023).   Much of the land occupied by Indigenous Peoples is under customary ownership, yet many

governments recognize only a fraction of this land as formally or legally belonging to Indigenous Peoples. Even when Indigenous territories and lands are recognized, protection of boundaries or use and exploitation of natural resources are often inadequate. Insecure land tenure is a driver of conflict, environmental degradation, and weak economic and social development.

This threatens cultural survival and vital knowledge systems – loss in these areas increasing risks of fragility, biodiversity loss, and degraded One Health (or ecological and animal health) systems which threaten the ecosystem services upon which we all depend (World Bank, 2023). Improving security of land tenure, strengthening governance, promoting public investments in quality and culturally appropriate service provision, and supporting Indigenous systems for resilience and livelihoods are critical to reducing the multidimensional aspects of poverty while contributing to sustainable development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Over the last 30 years, Indigenous Peoples' rights have been increasingly recognized through the adoption of international instruments such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) (World Bank, 2023).

Indigenous People and Physical Activity

The current health status of Indigenous people is linked to the social inequalities they have experienced over time (Grey, 1991). With particular reference to physical activity levels, it is evident that the active lifestyles and roles Indigenous people once held were disrupted by the dispossession associated with European colonisation. The health disadvantages can be viewed as historical in origin (Carson et al 2007), but they continue through contemporary social foundations and are reflected in the various 'social determinants of health (Wilkinson & Marmot, 2003). Until the late 18th century, Australian Indigenous people had largely a hunter-gatherer lifestyle (Gray, 1991). This lifestyle incorporated the day-to-day physical activity involved with finding renewable food and resources, sustaining the spiritual connection to country, and maintaining familial and cultural practices. Many Indigenous people experienced a diverse environment of extreme climate and varying terrain, and it was not uncommon for large groups of people to move periodically to areas where access to food and water were attainable, depending on season and location (Moodie, 1981).

This lifestyle incorporated the physical activity of moving across the land as well as sourcing and obtaining the required resources. Indigenous people used renewable natural resources from the land at a level for sustenance, rather than producing surplus through rigorous agriculture or industrialisation. This meant that physical activity was required on an ongoing basis to identify and procure the necessary food resources. With the arrival of the Europeans from 1788, the lifestyles of Indigenous people were forced to change with the gradual spread of the European settlers (Gray, 1991). The agricultural practices introduced by the settlers progressively took the natural resources away from many Indigenous people and displaced them from their lands. This dispossession meant that many Indigenous people had to rely on the provision of food by the Europeans.

The Importance of Physical Activity (PA) to Human Flourishing

PA is an essential element of a healthy lifestyle, deciding about physical fitness, which undoubtedly determines the high quality of life and wellness. Regular physical exercises are crucial in the prevention of diseases related to cognitive function disorders and help to preserve the psychological well-being. One cannot ignore the positive impact of PA on the functioning of the body in older people and the phenomenon of the so-called successful aging. PA helps to improve the health of people suffering from mental disorders (including depression and anxiety disorders), supports coping with stress and reduces the risk of self-destructive behaviours. PA also allows to maintain proper cognitive functions, reduces the risk of neurodegenerative diseases and alleviates the symptoms of already diagnosed disorders, e.g. in the case of dementia.

Findings related to neurogenesis induced by physical effort are directly connected with the improvement of psychological and cognitive functions (Taylor, Brown and Ebrahim, 2004). PA also helps with diabetes. Type 2 diabetes is one of the strongest increasing chronic diseases globally and can be demonstrably prevented with healthy lifestyles, incorporating aerobic and resistance activities, that are significantly more effective than Metformin treatment, a medication commonly given to people at risk. If PA helps to prevent and treat these chronic diseases, we also expect PA to delay mortality and enhance longevity. There are several studies that report the important association between PA and longevity. Therefore, the aim of this review was to explain the literature about the association between PA and longevity (Knowler, Barrett-Connor and Fowler, 2002).

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs as a theoretical base for Human Flourishing

It was in 1943 a Psychologist Mr. Abraham Harold Maslow suggested his Theory of Human Motivation. His theory is one popular and extensively cited theory of motivation. Maslow's theory is based on the Hierarchy of Human Needs depicting human flourishing. According to Maslow, human behaviour is related to his needs. It is adjusted as per the nature of needs to be satisfied. In hierarchy of needs theory, Maslow identified five types / sets of human need arranged in a hierarchy of their importance and priority. He concluded that when one set of needs is satisfied, it ceases to be a

motivating factor for human flourishing. Thereafter, the next set of needs in the hierarchy order takes its place. Below is an explanation of the various needs.

Physiological Needs: Physiological needs are the basic needs for sustaining human life. These needs include food, shelter, clothing, rest, air, water, sleep and sexual satisfaction. These basic human needs (also called biological needs) lie at the lowest level in the hierarchy of needs as they have priority over all other needs. These needs cannot be postponed for long. Unless and until these basic physiological needs are satisfied to the required extent, other needs do not motivate an employee. A hungry person, for example, is just not in a position to think of anything else except his hunger or food. According to Maslow, 'man lives by bread alone,' when there is no bread. The management attempts to meet such physiological needs through fair wages.

Security/Safety Needs: These are the needs connected with the psychological fear of loss of job, property, natural calamities or hazards, etc. An employee wants protection from such types of fear. He prefers adequate safety or security in this regard i.e. protection from physical danger, security of job, pension for old age, insurance cover for life, etc. The safety needs come after meeting the physiological needs. Such physiological needs lose their motivational potential when they are satisfied. As a result, safety needs replace them. They begin to manifest themselves and dominate human behavior. Safety needs act as motivational forces only if they are unsatisfied.

Social Needs: An employee is a human being is rightly treated as a social animal. He desires to stay in group. He feels that he should belong to one or the other group and the member of the group should accept him with love and affection. Every person desire to be affiliated to such groups. This is treated as basic social need of an individual. He also feels that he should be loved by the other members. He needs friends and interaction with his friends and superiors of the group such as fellow employees or superiors. Social needs occupy third position in the hierarchy of needs.

Esteem Needs: This category of needs includes the need to be respected by others, need to be appreciated by others, need to have power and finally prestigious position. Once the previous needs are satisfied, a person feels to be held in esteem both by himself and also by others. Thus, esteem needs are two fold in nature. Self-esteem needs include those for self-confidence, self-respect, competence, etc. The second groups of esteem needs are those related to one's status, reputation, recognition and appreciation by others. This is a type of personal ego which needs to be satisfied. The Organisation can satisfy this need (ego) by giving recognition to the good work of employees. Esteem needs do not assume the motivational properties unless the previous needs are satisfied.

Self-actualisation Needs: This is the highest among the needs in the hierarchy of needs advocated by Maslow. Self actualisation is the desire to become what one is capable of becoming. It is a 'growth' need. A worker must work efficiently if he is to be ultimately happy. Here, a person feels that he should accomplish something in his life. He wants to utilise his potentials to the maximum extent and desires to become what one is capable of becoming. A person desires to have challenges and achieves something special in his life or in the area of his specialization. Though everyone is capable of self-actualization, many do not reach this stage. This need is fully satisfied rarely.

Human flourishing in indigenous communities

Access to proper health and social services is a key issue flourishing amongst indigenous peoples, who face significant challenges in education, housing, economic development, well-being, and health (Assembly of First Nations of Quebec and Labrador [AFNQL] and First Nations of Québec and Labrador Health and Social Services Commission [FNQLHSSC] 2007; National Association of Friendship Centres [NAFC] 2013; Saini and Quinn 2013; Wilson et al. 2011). Health and social services delivered using a Western approach have limited success in responding to the needs of Indigenous people, in part because of the complex interactions between the various dimensions of wellness (Saini and Quinn 2013). Moreover, the theories, models, and tools used in health services cause inequities, cultural insecurity, and even harm to Indigenous communities (Drolet and Goulet 2018). Holistic approaches that consider all dimensions of wellness and focus on the strengths of individuals and communities may produce better results than interventions focusing on specific problems that do not consider interactions between dimensions (Institut national d'excellence en santé et en services sociaux [INESSS] 2014).

To better meet the needs of indigenous peoples, promoting the teaching of traditional knowledge and practices in accordance with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples adopted in 2007 (United Nations 2008) could be part of a holistic approach and contribute to equity in health (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada [TRCC] 2015). Teaching of traditional knowledge and practices involves sharing values, culture, and collective identity, notably through Indigenous elders' participation in education, community development, and intergenerational relationships (Basile et al. 2017; Kant et al. 2014). In Indigenous contexts, someone is recognized as an elder by other community members based not necessarily on age, but on wisdom, skills, and knowledge (Wilson 2003).

Individual wellness can be defined as a "way of life oriented towards optimal health and well-being in which mind, body, and spirit are integrated by the individual to live life more fully within the human and natural community" (Myers et al. 2000; p. 252). Community wellness is "the simultaneous satisfaction of personal, relational, and collective needs of individuals and communities" (Totikidis 2003; p. 10). The roles implied in favouring individual and community wellness encompass the domains of social participation in the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) model (World Health Organization [WHO] 2001). Based on a holistic philosophy, the Indigenous worldview includes unity, wholeness, continuation, perpetuity, inseparability, completeness, balance, security, equality, comfort, and health (Graveline 1998) as the many interconnected dimensions of wellness.

The relationship between Physical activity and Human Flourishing amongst Indigenous people

According to the Indigenous Knowledge Institute in Australia (2023) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples lived a very active outdoor lifestyle prior to colonisation, in the way they managed the landscape, travelled, and obtained food. Transport options were walking, running, swimming, or by boat/canoe. Cultural activities included dance, and a lot of traditional games. Traditional food production and gathering methods involved a combination of hunting, digging, fishing, and 'fire-stick farming'. This was an important method of land management in mainland Australia that used fire to boost productivity of ecosystems and reduce the risk of large bushfires. It involved hours of walking, deliberately lighting small fires in targeted areas, watching to make sure the right areas were burned or preserved, and tracking animal movements.

Crop cultivation and animal husbandry form major sources of physical activity amongst indigenous people. One common method is through the use of "fire-stick farming" to burn patches of land regularly with low-intensity fires, retaining 'mosaics' of unburnt land as refuges for plants and animals to ensure diversity and productivity is maximised (Pascoe, 2014). This method of living require a high degree of landscape-scale management planning, taking place across large areas, meaning that in certain areas people regularly moved from place to place, both to follow the most productive areas in cycles, and to prevent depleting any one area. This means a great of walking, carrying and physical labour.

Harvesting of grains is done by hand and with some use of tools, and then hand-ground using grinding stones (Pascoe, 2014). Tubers e.g. yams (like a sweet potato) as well as vegetables and fruits are gathered as a daily activity. The freshness and variety of bush foods is nutritious and healthy, unprocessed, and the labour involved in gathering, processing and cooking keeps people fit and active. In addition, land management is a highly collaborative community effort. Indigenous farming is based on the needs of the community, as opposed to the needs of individuals or businesses. Indigenous farming is practiced collaboratively, including between clans, to maintain balance and abundance and ensure everyone has enough (Bangarra Dance Theatre, 2018).

Changing patterns of physical activities within indigenous communities

Nonetheless things are changing with the arrival of European colonisers. Many indigenous people are forced off their traditional lands, and forced into missions and reserves, meaning people can no longer rely on access to their traditional lands for bush foods or continue 'fire-stick farming' in the traditional way. This has the effect of forced reliance on European foods like wheat, sugar and tea. This sudden decline in quality and variety in diet, combined with living a more sedentary lifestyle, as well as introduced diseases, contribute to poor health outcomes at the time, some of which persist today. These include an increased risk for several chronic diseases, e.g. heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure, being overweight, as well as reducing overall mental health and wellbeing.

Today physical activity is more closely linked to sport and culture, rather than food and living off the land, but remains hugely important to improve health outcomes and maintain connection to culture and community. Sport is necessary for communities as never before. Research has found that participation in sport can help to reduce violence, keeps young people out of serious trouble and enriches the lives of many indigenous people. This can be especially important for youth who are faced with disadvantage or social issues in their communities, which is not uncommon due to the health challenges that exist on top of a history of dispossession and ongoing discrimination.

There is a big focus on teamwork and community in many traditional games, both children's games and adult sports and games. Marngrook is an example of a traditional football game played by both children and adults, including men and women on the same team, using a possum skin ball. The game also is reported to have had totemic sides, increasing the cultural significance of belonging to a team. This is somewhat similar to a modern team mascot, although totems are of great personal significance and come with important cultural obligations, as totem animals are considered literally brothers and sisters, and should be treated with respect. Dance has also remained an important part of indigenous cultures, with many groups performing traditional dances that enhance human longevity.

Until the late 18th century, indigenous people had largely a hunter-gatherer lifestyle (Saggers and Gray, 1991). This lifestyle incorporated the day-to-day physical activity involved with finding renewable food and resources, sustaining the spiritual connection to country, and maintaining familial and cultural practices. Many Indigenous people experienced a

diverse environment of extreme climate and varying terrain, and it was not uncommon for large groups of people to move periodically to areas where access to food and water were attainable, depending on season and location (Moodie, 1981). This lifestyle incorporated the physical activity of moving across the land as well as sourcing and obtaining the required resources. Indigenous people used renewable natural resources from the land at a level for sustenance, rather than producing surplus through rigorous agriculture or industrialisation. This meant that physical activity was required on an ongoing basis to identify and procure the necessary food resources.

With the arrival of the Europeans, the lifestyles of indigenous people were forced to change with the gradual spread of the European settlers. The agricultural practices introduced by the settlers progressively took the natural resources away from many Indigenous people and displaced them from their lands. This dispossession meant that many Indigenous people had to rely on the provision of food by the Europeans. Physical activity levels and nutrition were greatly impacted by these changes to the roles of Indigenous people (Moodie, 1981).

Conclusion
For some Indigenous people, the concept of physical activity is not understood in the same way as other non-indigenous people. The activities of the traditional Indigenous lifestyle, involving hunting, gathering, and participation in other customary activities, are vital, interwoven aspects of life (Thompson, 2009). These historical roots form part of the contemporary values of many Indigenous people; from this, it can be seen why engaging in an individual activity, such as physical activity, to benefit only oneself and in isolation from family or community, may be seen as inappropriate. Physical activity (including activities like group fitness classes or walking groups) continues to not be seen by many indigenous people as a separate, measurable concept in the same way as it is by non-indigenous people (Thompson, 2009). This has implications for the assessment of physical activity, as well as the implementation and evaluation of specific interventions among indigenous people. At a statistical level, self-reported measures could inaccurately record the level of physical activity for indigenous people, as the westernised definition and measurements of physical activity used may differ from indigenous concepts. Interventions targeting physical activity for indigenous people risk failure if they are based on westernised views of physical activity rather than taking account of Indigenous concepts of physical activity.

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