

Zulu Chess vs Chess

Both chess and Zulu chess (called umlabalaba in Zulu) are board games that help develop the mind in children and retard atrophy in old age. I began to learn chess when I was five years old and was only exposed to umlabalaba at the age of fifty four. Though I am no expert in either, I play both well and find them equally enjoyable and challenging. Nevertheless, I believe promoting umlabalaba in our school systems and senior centers would be much more beneficial than promoting chess.

There are many reasons for this, but let me list the most salient ones below:

1. Acquisition vs Killing - Though both are games of war, chess is all about killing the adversary's king; whereas the goal of umlabalaba is merely acquiring cattle. In chess the king's defenders are also killed, whereas in umlabalaba the adversary's pieces are acquired. Moreover, the loser is not left destitute because the game ends when the loser still has two cows which he can take home and use to start another herd.
2. Equality vs Hierarchy of individuals - In umlabalaba there is no stratification of pieces. That is every piece has the same intrinsic value. Thus it is more appealing to our democratic ideals. In chess pieces of lesser value are sacrificed to protect pieces of greater value and thus teaches children to regard others in society as inherently of greater or less value. In umlabalaba pieces are only valued more because of their board position and this can easily be changed as the game progresses.
3. Superiority of Group over Individual - In chess a pawn can become another stronger piece if it reaches the last rank, but never a king. In umlabalaba when 9 pieces are captured, all the remaining 3 pieces become energized and move anywhere on the board. That is all of them receive an equal promotion. Thus throughout the game the pieces never lose their equality.

4. Freedom of Movement vs forward or backward movement - Whereas chess (like checkers) is based on frontal confrontations on a plane, umlabalaba is more geometric in that a piece can be moved anywhere on the board. That is, a player is not restricted to playing on his side of the board. The spaces on board are open for anyone who wants to move there.
5. Geometric vs linear vision - As a result adversaries must be aware at all times what is going on behind them, in front of them, and to either side; whereas chess does not usually require such geometric visioning.
6. Ease vs. Difficulty of Learning - Since all players move in the same way in umlabalaba it is much easier to learn. In effect it is as easy to learn as tic-tac-toe; but when two knowledgeable adversaries meet, it is as difficult to win as in chess.
7. Time is Money - Chess (other than speed chess) typically takes much much longer to play a game than umlabalaba. Indeed one can usually play three to four games of umlabalaba in the same time it takes to play a single game of chess. Thus it is the preferred game to play in a society where time is money.
8. Double vs Single Vision - The mind is equally taxed in both games and there are many strategies for winning, which, nevertheless can be blocked by the skilled opponent. In umlabalaba, however, games rarely end in a draw. In umlabalaba the best strategy results from defending and attacking at the same time rather than deciding (as in chess) should I defend or should I attack.
9. Geometry vs Arithmetic - Whereas chess involves sequences of moves to capture lesser pieces protecting the king, umlabalaba involves making

geometric formations like “bicycle”, “lion’s eye”, “crocodile jaw” etc. which will simultaneously be advantageous in attack and defense.

10. Variety vs Same Old Thing - In both chess and umlabalaba there are no two games which are exactly the same. While chess has more possible variations, they are rarely used because they would be counter-intuitive. That is, in chess you can lose a queen by moving it in front of a pawn, but no one would do this unless he had an ulterior motive. Thus though the move is possible it is seldom made.

In conclusion, Zulu chess is superior to chess for developing cognitive skills in children and keeping the mind sharp for seniors because: 1) it is easier to learn, 2) takes much less time to play a match, 3) taxes the mind as much as chess, 4) is psychologically less violent, and 5) is more democratic (i.e. teaches that all pieces are of equal value, but some – because of their position on the board – are more useful or harmful than others.

In this regard note that Chess originated in India, a land noted for its caste system relegating individuals to certain duties due to birth, whereas umlabalaba is a Zulu board game where social ranking is much more egalitarian.

Comments from chess and Zulu chess players are welcomed!

edpwe