

An Introduction to Umlabalaba

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Umlabalaba (labyrinth in Zulu) is an intriguing “mind-building” Zulu board game that is often translated as “Zulu Chess”. There are two versions of the game in Zululand involving slight differences in the board layout and the end game. The *isisuthu* version has 25 positions (i.e. points on the board where two lines intersect) upon which counters can be placed, whereas the *isizulu* version has only 24 positions. In both games, however, each player is given 12 counters which are played alternately - one counter at a time - on any of the board positions. After all the counters have been used in this way, the counters can be moved one space at a time to new positions along the lines on the board. If by chance (in *isizulu*) all 24 counters are placed on the board and no counter has been captured (for which see further), then each player is required to remove one of his counters and “gift” it to his opponent. In this case, the first person to remove the counter is the one who played first.

The object of the game - like tic-tac-toe - is to form a consecutive line of three counters either vertically, or horizontally (as well as diagonally in *isisuthu*) both during the first phase of the game (placement), and during the second phase (movement). Each time a player forms such a line, he removes one of his opponent's tokens from the board. The winner is the player who succeeds in capturing ten of his adversary's tokens.

A major difference in the end game between these two versions of *umlabalaba* is that in *isizulu* whenever a player has only three counters remaining on the board, he is entitled (when it is his turn) to ignore the lines and move any one of his counters to any place on the board he chooses. In *isisuthu*, however, this provision is non-existent. In summary, the rules of the game for the two versions are as follows:

Isisuthu –

1. Each player is given 12 tokens (In the BLAC Foundation version, 9 cows, two herd boys , and one warrior).
2. Player one places one of his tokens on any one of the 25 possible board positions (i.e. points at which two lines meet).
3. Player two then places one of his tokens on any one of the remaining possible board positions.
4. Player one then places another token in any position with an aim at blocking his opponent from the possible alignment of three tokens in succession (a capture line) or to position himself to form his own “capture line” composed of three tokens (as in tic tac toe).
5. If either of the players succeeds in forming a horizontal or vertical row of three consecutive tokens (a capture line), he removes any one of his adversary's tokens. Note, however, that in this variety of the game, the position in the very center of the board can only be used to form a capture line **within the center square**. That is, a line formed using the center square, a position on the perimeter of center square, and a position on the adjacent square is not considered to be a valid capture line.
6. The game continues thus until all tokens are placed on the board. Then the second phase begins.
7. After the second player places his last token on the board, the first player moves one of his tokens one space along the grid lines into an empty space in an effort to form a capture line or to block his opponent from forming a capture line. Note, however, that if all of a player's pieces are immobilized, his adversary must move again.
8. When a capture line is formed, that player removes any one of his opponent's tokens.

9. When a player captures ten of his opponent's tokens, he is declared to be the winner.

Isizulu

1. Each player is given 12 tokens.
2. Player one places one of his tokens on any one of the possible board positions (i.e. points where two board lines meet or intersect).
3. Player two then places one of his tokens on any one of the remaining possible board positions.
4. Player one then places another one of his tokens in any position with an aim at blocking his opponent from the possible alignment of three tokens in succession (a "capture line") or to form his own "capture line" composed of three tokens (as in tic tac toe).
5. If either of the players succeeds in forming a horizontal or vertical row of three consecutive tokens (a capture line), he removes any one of his adversary's tokens.
6. The game continues thus until the second player places his last token on the board. Then the second phase of the game begins.
7. After the second player places his last token on the board, the first player moves one of his tokens one space along the grid lines into an empty space in an effort to form a capture line or to block his opponent from forming a capture line. Note that, in the event all 24 positions are occupied, the first person who moved must remove any one of his own tokens and gift it to his opponent (*lobolo*). The second player is then required to remove and gift any one of his tokens to the first player. Note also that if a player is unable to move because all his pieces are immobilized, the adversary moves again.
8. When a capture line is formed that player removes any one of his opponent's tokens.
9. Unlike the *isisuthu* version, when a player has only three tokens remaining he may move any one of these tokens to any position on the board.
10. When a player captures ten of his adversary's token the game ends and he is declared to be the winner.

Note that in Zululand all the tokens are the same. However, in the BLAC Foundation version there are 9 cows, two herd boys (*abelusi*) and one warrior (representing a Zulu *impi*), and it is suggested that a player use the warrior token for his / her first or last move in the placement phase.

Though no one knows exactly how and when the umlabalaba emerged in Zulu land, it has a long history and , even today, remains the most popular Zulu board game in the region.

Dr. Edward L. Powe (in describing the qualities of the young Shaka in his Saga of Shaka Zulu) wrote:

*Fleet of foot was Shaka Zulu
Swifter than the swiftest runner,
And he had greater endurance,
Than the other abelusi.
Strong he was, though lean of body,
Threw his throwing spear the furthest,
Never failed to strike his target,
In stick-fighting was their master.
Keen of wit was Shaka Zulu,
Beat all at umlabalaba,
For he saw beyond the present,
Seeing five and six moves forward.*

Cultural Notes – Umlababa is in essence a “cattle capture” game. Cattle were once extremely important to the Zulu people for, in addition to being a source of meat, leather, milk and curds (*amasi*), they became symbols of wealth and status and were the focus of the entire social order. The sacrifice of cattle propitiated a favorable relationship between the worlds of the living and the dead and were an essential element in rites of passage.

Indeed, in the past, the transfer of cattle from the groom’s family to the bride’s family was considered a requisite for marriage. These *lobolo* cattle (traditionally eleven in number) represented compensation for the loss of a “productive unit” in the bride’s family. More significantly, however, *lobolo* was considered to be a settlement made by the ancestors of the bride’s clan for any and all children born of the marriage. That is, a child born to the bride does not belong to its mother’s clan but rather to the clan of its father.

If a wife was barren, her husband had the right to reclaim the *lobolo* (but not the eleventh bovine which represents the bride’s virginity) and use it for acquiring an additional wife. It should be noted here that (in order to avoid devolution of the *lobolo*), the bride’s father could offer another daughter who would bear children on behalf of her barren sister. The resulting offspring, however, were deemed in every respect to be children of the barren wife; whereas the child’s actual mother was considered to be merely a “seed bearer.”

Nguni cattle were small, hardy, tick and tsetse fly resistant, heat tolerant, and self-sufficient bovines that were also resistant to disease and exhibited a remarkable diversity of colors and horn shapes. Several basic colors appeared in the Nguni breed, namely: white, yellow, red, dun, brown, and black and they all exhibited variations in the intensity of color (from pale to deep and glossy). While mixed colors were also common, Shaka (the founding father of the Zulu empire) was said to have a herd of 50,000 snow white cattle. For a more thorough discussion of Zulu cattle see pages 1008-1009 of Dr. Edward L. Powe’s Three Northern Nguni Nations.

Strategies & Formations - The basic strategy for victory in umlabalaba is similar to “tic tac toe” in that a player tries to position his pieces so that his opponent can not block him. That is, he places his tokens in such a way that he can (on his next move) form a three token line in either of two directions. While a great deal more will be said about this topic in Dr. Powe’s forthcoming “Zulu Chess”, it should be noted here that there are two formations (or patterns) that merit special attention, namely: 1) the eye of the lion (a formation in which four of a player’s tokens surround an empty space) and 2) the “cat’s jaw” or “cat’s cradle” (a formation where a player’s tokens are so arranged that by moving one piece in a capture line he forms another capture line.

The importance of the “eye of the lion” rests in the fact that regardless of which token an adversary may choose to capture, the owner of the eye will be able to form a capture line as soon as it is his turn to play. The cat’s jaw, on the other hand, greatly limits an opponent’s opportunity to muster his pieces to defend or attack.

Electronic Umlabalaba Game

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