

**Original Article**

**Indigenous Songs for the Indigenization of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC): ‘Tokkeen Maal’ in focus’**

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**Abstract**

After a lengthy disregard and neglect, the importance of indigenous early childhood education and care (ECEC) is well-recognized by scholars in the field of ECEC and international organizations working with children such as UNICEF and UNESCO. As a result of this shift in paradigm, need for the incorporation of indigenous knowledge and practices into ECEC (indigenization) is gathering momentum. The main purpose of this article was therefore to show how ‘Tokkeen Maal’- a common counting rhyme used to teach children counting up to ten across Oromia- can be used to indigenize the conduct of ECEC and its pedagogic richness in preprimary and primary education in Oromia and beyond. To this end, the song was subjected to thematic and content analyses. Results of the analyses of the song revealed that it has broad pedagogic/instructional values. Its wholeness, inter-activeness, and joyfulness make Tokkeen Maal a highly viable and worthwhile pedagogic strategy in preprimary and primary school settings. Apart from its pedagogic values, the use of Tokkeen Maal in ECECE helps to nurture children’s development of cultural identity, connect schools with the community and uphold children’s cultural rights enshrined in the United Nations Child Rights Convention (UNCRC). Overall, it can be thought as a highly viable means of indigenizing early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Oromia and beyond.

Key words: early childhood education and care; indigenization; tokkeen maal; indigenous knowledge; Oromo; child-oriented oral traditions.

**1. Introduction**

After a lengthy disregard and neglect, the importance of indigenous early childhood education and care (ECEC) is well-recognized by scholars in the field of ECEC and international organizations

working with children such as UNICEF and UNESCO. UNESCO promotes indigenous early childhood care and education (IECCE) and has already developed IECCE curriculum for Africa (Awopegba, Oduolowu, & Nsamenang, 2013). As a result of this shift in a paradigm, need for the incorporation of indigenous knowledge and practices into ECEC is gathering momentum. The main purpose of this article is therefore to show how ‘Tokkeen Maal’- a common counting rhyme used to teach children counting up ten across Oromia- can be used to indigenize the conduct of ECEC in Oromia and beyond and its pedagogic richness in pre-primary and primary education.

### **1.1. Indigenous Knowledge and Its Importance**

Following the unprecedented growth of interest in Indigenous Knowledge (IK), literature is replete with different definitions of indigenous knowledge. However, for the sake of space, the researcher reviewed a few definitions that are relevant to education. To begin with, referring to Easton (2004), Soudee (2009) defines indigenous knowledge as “ *a particular group’s understanding of the surrounding world, ways of sharing information or teaching, and ways of speaking and thinking that are passed down through generations*”(p. 16-17). Similarly, Majoni and Chinyanganya (2014) define IK as it applies to education on the ways of teaching and learning based on the knowledge accumulated by indigenous people over long period in response to different physical, environmental and social problems. Awopegba et al., (2013) define indigenous education “*as the body of context-evolved cultural knowledge, skills, attitudes, practices, and cultural values and aspirations transmitted from one generation to the other*” (p. 21).

Gwanfogbe (2011) traces three significant educational heritages coexisting in Africa that are derived from indigenous African, Islamic–Arabic, and Western-Christian civilizations each of which has its own unique features. African indigenous education is characterized by tacit holistic and integrated curriculum(Awopgba et al., 2013; Gwanfogbe, 2011), and context-based pedagogic strategies such as poetry, reasoning, riddles, praises, songs, story-telling, proverbs, folktales, games, dance, songs, rhymes, and more (Awopegba et al., 2013). Taken together, indigenous education is an aspect of indigenous knowledge that is based on and informed by locally originated knowledge and practices and a locally grown system.

Indigenization of education in general and early childhood education in particular is not the abandonment of western knowledge and values as some may think. Rather, it is a matter of balancing indigenous knowledge and western knowledge and values.

The importance of indigenous knowledge in general and indigenous education in particular cannot be overemphasized. Particularly, the importance and relevance of incorporating indigenous knowledge and practices into early childhood education and care programs is far-reaching. Belay Tefera and Belay Hagos (2016), after reviewing a wealth of literature, have highlighted the importance and relevance of indigenization of early childhood education and care. According to them,(1) indigenization helps to meet the needs of indigenous children and their families; (2) it leads to a more impactful, meaningful and relevant learning ;(3) it enables children to develop their cultural identity as it roots children in their indigenous knowledge and skills; (4) it leads to a preschool that is embedded within the community set up that is less costly in terms of design and conduct, more accessible to the greater majority, more relevant and useful to the children and to the nation, more able to mobilize community resources, and ensure its sustainability in the long run; and (5) it minimizes and/or reduces learning challenges leading to absenteeism, school dropout, failure in the learning process, and disinterestedness in schooling.

Incorporating indigenous knowledge and practices into early childhood education and care, also termed as indigenization ( Belay & Belay, 2016) and indigenous early childhood care and education(IECCE) by UNESCO (Awopegba et al., 2013), can be considered as a viable solution for challenges and issues facing African education in general and ECEC in Africa in particular. For example, African education is often criticized for lacking relevance to the realities of Africa. In the excerpt that follows, Obanya(2011) clearly shows how far current education in Africa in general and ECEC in particular is irrelevant to Africa's realities on the ground(p. xxv):

*African children are the only ones in the world whose socialization begins with acculturation- learning about other worlds in a foreign language- instead of beginning with enculturation- being deeply entrenched into your own world first and foremost.*

Obanya (2011) also rightly notes that it is only in Africa where the educated are de-cultured due to early exposure to education and care that lacks relevance. Cultural irrelevance of education leads to de-enculturation and also denies children their right to cultural identity enshrined in the United Nations Child Rights Convention (UNCRC). Indigenization of ECEC by incorporating indigenous

knowledge and practices into ECEC programs can surmount the issue of relevance. Indigenization as it applies to ECEC programs refers to domesticating, customizing and aligning the programs to fit to the social and cultural context of the learners and the larger community.

Education in Africa not only lacks relevance but also quality. As with the issue of relevance, the issue of quality can also be addressed by indigenization of education at all levels. In this regard, Nsamenang and Tchombe (2011) argue that education in African countries is unproductive because it aims at educating African children by separating and alienating them from their own socio-cultural realities. In other words, education that is detached from the socio-cultural realities of the learners is obviously poor in terms of quality. As Belay and Belay (2016) put it: “An inalienable quality of a good ECEC center is the extent to which it is contextually, culturally, socially, and linguistically relevant to the setting it is operating in” (p.107). Therefore, incorporating indigenous knowledge and practices into the fabrics of education unquestionably enhances its quality by connecting it to the reality of learners and the larger community.

Issues of access are other challenges of education in Africa that can be addressed by indigenization. As already pointed out, indigenized education centers are cheaper than ‘Western’ ones in terms of cost. Indigenization allows the use of locally available resources which cost nothing or little compared to modern ECEC centers. For example, a budget allocated to establish a single modern ECEC can be used to found five to ten indigenized ECEC centers. Overall, the provision of indigenous education is much cheaper and more cost-effective than the provision of Western-style education. Therefore, indigenization of education in general and ECEC in particular allows resource-constrained countries such as Ethiopia to ensure equitable access to ECEC especially in rural areas and among the urban poor where access to ECEC is little or nonexistent at all. Overall, incorporating indigenous knowledge and practices into ECEC- indigenization as Belay and Belay (2016) put it seems a viable strategy to overcome the bottlenecks of the provision of quality, equitable and sustainable ECEC in Africa general and in Ethiopia particular. However, little has been done in indigenizing education in general and ECEC in particular in Africa particularly in Ethiopia. Limited evidence available (e.g., Belay & Belay, 2016) shows a grave lack of ingenuity to indigenize ECEC. Belay and Belay (2016) have expressed the seriousness of problems surrounding indigenization of ECEC in Ethiopia idiomatically as “...indigenization of ECEC was a serious concern that seemed to add ‘goiter’ on ECCE’s existing ‘mumps’ (i.e. the problem of

access)” (p. 1). The main purpose of this article is to contribute to the efforts being exerted to provide quality ECECE by portraying how Tokkeen Maal can be used to indigenize ECEC in Oromia and beyond.

## **2. Methodological Approach**

The author conducted a series of onsite observations of children performing the song at some early childhood settings and finally recorded it. The researcher also repeatedly observed the video recorded. This was supplemented by informal interviews held with early childhood development, care and education (ECD-EC) summer in-service MA students from different parts of Oromia and the author’s personal experience. The interviews with students were made to discover to what extent students coming from different parts of Oromia are familiar with the song. All the students interviewed confirmed that they were familiar with the song as a child. The researcher’s personal experience was also used as a source of data. As a child, the author used to play this song and still remembers all verses of the song. The data collected were then subjected to content and thematic analysis. The contents and themes that emerged from the both method of analysis were narrated and discussed in relation to existing literature.

## **3. Results and Discussion**

### **3.1. ‘Tokkeen Maal’ (What is one) and its mode of play**

Oromo as a nation, like many African nations and other indigenous people across the world, is rich in all sorts of indigenous knowledge. Oromo is a nation that has its own culture and language. The language is called Afan Oromo, the language of the Oromo or simply Oromo. The term ‘Oromo’ refers to the people and their language as well. The Oromo predominantly inhabit Oromia, the most populous region in Ethiopia. In the Oromo culture, children have special place. This is implicated in its age-graded theory of child socialization embedded in the mega-system, called *Gadaa* System which has been registered as an intangible heritage by UNESCO. The Oromo have a vast array of child oral traditions that can be a valuable resource in modern formal schooling. The Oromo child-oriented oral traditions include, among others, proverbs, poems, songs, tales, myths, folktales and riddles. “Tokkeen Maal”-the counting rhythm that the researcher set out to analyze in this article is one of the oral traditions frequented among the Oromo across Oromia to

socialize children. The counting rhythm has ten verses since it meant to teach counting from one to ten. It is presented in table 1 along its respective English translation.

Table 1: Counting rhythm with the corresponding description

Verse in Afan Oromo		English translation	
<b>Dursaa/ dursituu</b>	Jalaa-qabduu	Leader	Responder
<b>Tokkeen maal?</b>	Tokkeen tokkuma!	What is one?	One is one!
<b>Lama maal?</b>	Lamaan mucha re'ee! Tokkeen tokkuma!	What is two?	The two teats of a goat; One is one!
<b>Sadii maal?</b>	Sadan sunsummanii, lamaan mucha re'ee, tokkeen tokkuma!	What is three?	The three stoves of fire; the two teats of a goat! One is one!
<b>Afur maal?</b>	Afran mucha sa'aa, sadeen sunsummanii, lamaan mucha re'ee, tokkeen tokkuma!	What is four?	The four teats of a cow; the three stoves of fire; the two teats of a goat; One is one!
<b>Shan maal?</b>	Shanan quba harkaa! Afran mucha sa'aa, sadeen sunsummanii, lamaan mucha re'ee, tokkeen tokkuma!	What is five?	The five fingers of a hand; The four teats of a cow; the three stoves of fire; The two teats of a goat! One is one!
<b>Ja'a maal?</b>	Ja'an jabbii qaraxaa, Shanan quba harkaa! Afran mucha sa'aa, sadeen sunsummanii, lamaan mucha re'ee, tokkeen tokkuma!	What is six?	The six cows for dowry; the five fingers of a hand; the four teats of a cow; the three stoves of fire; the two teats of a goat; One is one!
<b>Torba maal?</b>	Torban torbee sanbataa, Ja'an jabbii qaraxaa, Shanan quba harkaa! Afran mucha sa'aa, sadeen sunsummanii, lamaan mucha re'ee, tokkeen tokkuma!	What is seven?	The seven days of a week; the six cows for dowry; the five fingers of a hand; the four teats of a cow; the three stoves of fire; the two teats of a goat! One is one!
<b>Saddeet maal?</b>	Saddeettan dhala leencaa, Torban torbee sanbataa, Ja'an jabbii qaraxaa, Shanan quba harkaa! Afran mucha sa'aa, sadeen sunsummanii, lamaan mucha re'ee, tokkeen tokkuma!	What is eight?	The eight cubs of a lion; the seven days of a week; the six cows for dowry; the five fingers of a hand; the four teats of a cow; the three stoves of fire;

<b>Sagal maal?</b>	<p>Saglan yaa'ii Booranaa!          Saddeettan dhala leencaa,          Torban torbee sanbataa Ja'an          jabbii qaraxaa, Shanan quba          harkaa! Afran mucha sa'aa,          sadeen sunsummanii, lamaan          mucha re'ee, tokkeen          tokkuma!</p>	<p>What is          nine?</p>	<p>the two teats of a goat;          One is one!          The nine councils of the          Borana; the eight cubs of          a lion; the seven days of          a week; the six cows for          dowry; the five fingers of          a hand; the four teats of a          cow; the three stoves of          fire; the two teats of a          goat; One is one!          The ten holes for marble          game; the nine councils          of the Borana; the eight          cubs of a lion! The seven          days of a week; the six          cows for dowry; the five          fingers of a hand; the          four teats of a cow; the          three stoves of fire; the          two teats of a goat; One          is one!</p>
<b>Kudhan maal?</b>	<p>Kurnan boolla sadeeqaa,          Saglan yaa'ii Booranaa!          Saddeettan dhala leencaa,          torban torbee sanbataa Ja'an          jabbii qaraxaa, Shanan quba          harkaa! Afran mucha sa'aa,          sadeen sunsummanii, lamaan          mucha re'ee, tokkeen          tokkuma!</p>	<p>What is ten?</p>	

The song can be played in a pair or in two groups. That is one individual or group of individuals asks questions and another individual or a group of individuals answers the questions asked. For example, when the first individual or group asks 'tokkeen maal'- means what is one, the second individual/group answers 'tokkeen tokkuma'-means one is one. When the asking individual or group asks 'lama maal' means what is two, the answering individual or group answers 'lammaan mucha re'ee, tokkeen tokkuma' means the 'two breasts of a goat, one is one'. The process goes like this until ten. As can be seen from the examples, the answering individual or group not only answers the new question but also repeats the answers to previous questions. This repetition helps to anchor the meaning of the numbers in the children`s mind. The song is gender-neutral and thus boys and girls can play the song together or separately. From the analysis one can also understand that adults including parents can use the song to foster children's numerical literacy, social interaction, and communication skills by linking it with the socio-cultural life of the people.

### 3.2. Pedagogic/Instructional Values of 'Tokkeen Maal'

A closer look at the song reveals that it has vast and rich pedagogic/instructional values that are particularly applicable to pre-primary and primary school settings. Some of these

pedagogic/instructional values include inclusiveness/wholeness, inter-activeness, and joyfulness. Usage of Tokkeen Maal in the conduct of ECEC also fosters cultural identity and preserves cultural heritage. It also connects schools with the community. Furthermore, it upholds children's rights to culture enshrined in the United Nations Child Rights Convention (UNCRC). These and other related values of Tokkeen Maal will be highlighted in the next sections of this paper.

### **3.3. Wholeness of Tokkeen Maal**

Although the song is a counting rhythm used to teach children counting, a closer look at it reveals that the song is a whole and *content-rich* song. Specifically, it mainly contains within it mathematics (numeracy), science and social studies. Numbers 1-10 are contained in the song (mathematics). Parts of animal and human bodies are there (life science); for example, the second verse talks about the two breasts of a goat, the fourth about the four breasts of a cow and the fifth about the five fingers of a human hand. In addition, the seventh verses teaches children there are seven days in a week and the eighth verse tells children that a female lion can give birth to up to eight cubs at a time. Moreover, it contains social studies. The social studies aspect of the song is represented by sixth, ninth and tenth verse. Hence, it can be used to teach mathematics (numeracy), science and social studies in an integrated manner. The interchange of question and answer between parties involved in the Tokkeen Maal has also broad contribution to foster children's language development and communicative skills.

The wholeness (or completeness) of Tokkeen Maal as a pedagogic strategy is also reflected in its ability to attend to and foster all aspects of child development and learning. When singing Tokkeen Maal, children learn to count from one to ten by associating the numbers with what are found in their surrounding and their community. This in turn not only facilitates learning, but also it fosters the retention of what has been learned thereby intensifying cognitive development. When singing Tokkeen Maal, children also make physical movements which facilitate their physical development and health. Moreover, when singing Tokkeen Maal, they need to interact with each other and take turn as a result of which they develop social skills such as negotiation and self-regulation.

### **3.4. Inter-activeness of Tokkeen Maal**

Interaction between the teacher and children and among the children is very crucial for children's holistic development and meaningful learning. In fact, the quality of education in general and that

of early childhood education in particular is highly contingent on the amount of interaction that takes place in classroom between the teacher and learners and among the learners themselves as well. Tokkeen Maal is highly interactive for it allows maximum interaction among children. Therefore, incorporating indigenous pedagogic strategies such as Tokkeen Maal into early childhood education and care has manifold benefits one of which is acceleration of learning and development through enhanced interactions among actors in the classroom.

### **3.5. Joyfulness of Tokkeen Maal**

Tokkeen Maal is a joyful counting song. In principle, early childhood learning activities should be joyful. But, making early childhood learning activities and lessons joyful is a difficult task for teachers in developing countries where early childhood education and care centers are poorly designed and not well equipped or not equipped at all. Under such circumstances, it is wise to properly make use of indigenous songs and games such as Tokkeen Maal to make learning joyful and accelerate children's learning and development and foster their total well-being.

### **3.6. Tokkeen Maal as a means to foster cultural identity and preserve cultural heritage**

Aside from its pedagogic values, incorporating Tokkeen Maal into ECEC practice at class-room level has many benefits to the children, their parents and the larger community. Among others, it fosters children's cultural identity development. Indigenous ECEC roots children in their cultural knowledge and skills which in turn facilitates children's cultural identity (Belay & Belay, 2016). Children's psychological development and their total well-being better off when learning is linked to their cultural identity by incorporating indigenous knowledge and pedagogies into the fabrics of ECEC (Awopegaba, et al., 2013). Article 29 of the UNCRC stipulates that "Education of the child shall be directed to the development of respect for the child's parents, and the child's own cultural identity, language and values, as well as for national values of the country in which the child is living." Ali (2011) calls for the amalgamation of African oral traditions into education process for doing so promotes cultural identity and preserves their cultural heritage. Therefore, slotting indigenous dances, games, songs and other oral traditions such as Tokkeen Maal into the design and practices of ECEC not only fosters children's cultural identity and preserves their cultural heritage but also it ensures their rights to cultural identity cherished in the UNCRC.

### **3.7. Tokkeen Maal as A Bridge between Schools and Community**

African education systems are harshly criticized for their detachment from the realities of Africa on the ground. The connection between the learning environment of schools, home and the community is very loose or non-existent at all. Education and schooling that is not rooted in the community and cultural eco-system in which it operates uproots children from their cultural heritage. One way to root education and schools in the community and eco-culture in which they function is indigenization. Education and schools that are rooted in the community are connected to the community which they serve. Good connection between schools and the community not only enhances the quality of the education and care rendered but it also ensures its sustainability. Therefore, incorporation of Tokkeen Maal into the conduct of ECEC in Oromia as pedagogic strategy narrows the split between ECEC programs and the larger community and abridges them.

### **3.8. Tokkeen Maal as A Means to Uphold and Promote Children’s Rights to Culture**

According to the UNCRC (1989), children are holders of the rights to culture. Parents, school, community, and organizations and individuals working with children are duty bearers and thus required to uphold and promote children’s right to culture to discharge their duty. Incorporating indigenous knowledge and practices such as Tokkeen Maal in ECEC services means upholding and promoting children rights to culture enshrined in the UNCRC in one way or the other.

## **4. Concluding Remarks and Way forward**

The relevance and importance of education in general and ECEC in particular is not overemphasized. The primary purpose of education is “intergenerational transmission of cultural heritage” (Obanya, 2011). But, how does education transmit cultural heritage from generation to generation when it is imported in its entirety? In other words, education and ECEC misses its primary purpose when it is not rooted in the community and eco-culture where it functions. There might be many possible ways of rooting education particularly ECEC into the community to which it is directed. One highly viable way is incorporating the traditions, beliefs and practices of that community into educational process at curriculum and classroom level. This practice is termed as indigenization, or indigenous education (or indigenous early childhood care and education). Indigenization of education and ECEC does not mean a total rejection of Western knowledge and values. Rather, it is blending indigenous knowledge and western knowledge and values in a balanced manner to provide African children with education that prepares them for local and global life without removing them from their cultural identity and heritage.

In this paper, the author sought to showcase how to indigenize ECEC using Tokkeen Maal as a case study. To this end, the author pointed out some pedagogic richness and other benefits of Tokkeen Maal and argues that Tokkeen Maal is a highly viable vehicle for indigenizing preprimary and primary education in Oromia and beyond and thus should be included early childhood education and care guide books. The author does not claim that the discussion of the benefits of Tokkeen Maal as a vehicle to indigenize ECEC is exhaustive and calls for extensive research that will have been supported by comprehensive primary data. Future research will benefit from opinions and data collected from all stakeholders of ECEC that are generated through multiple means of data collection including onsite observation of ECEC centers.

### **Disclose Conflicts of Interest**

This paper is free of conflict of interest.

### **Authors' Contribution**

All authors contribute equally.

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