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Andrew M. Guest
University of Portland, guesta@up.edu

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Andrew M. Guest

“You Traded Your Mother for an Unripe Mango”: Playing with Insults in an Angolan Refugee Community

ABSTRACT: This article draws on material gathered in a community of Angolan refugee camps to describe and analyze the content of a children’s verbal insulting game, called *estiga-se* in local Portuguese-language slang. The game takes a form similar to verbal insulting games in other parts of the world but also invokes local understandings of what it means to be a good person. Using examples from children asked about the game, this analysis offers a typology of insults used in the community and interprets how those types illustrate local norms and meanings. While some of the insults targeted familiar personal traits in creative ways (e.g., “Your chest is like a biscuit, when you try to concentrate it breaks”), it was more common for children to target behaviors and social roles (e.g., “Your father used witchcraft to steal bread from children” or “You traded your mother for an unripe mango”). The insults ultimately highlight a necessary balance between individual ambition and collective expectations for appropriate behavior within familiar social roles.

DURING SIX MONTHS of fieldwork in a community of Angolan refugee camps undertaken in 2002–03 as part of a larger research project investigating the cultural psychology of child and youth development in economically marginalized communities, I spent much time inquiring about types of local play and games. It was only by accident, however, that I learned about a game that ultimately became

one of my richest sources of data. One day, when readying to leave the community, I noticed a group of ten or so preadolescent boys laughing uproariously while huddled off to the side of a dirt road running through a small community hub. When I approached, the boys were surprised to find me interested in the game they called *estiga-se* (Portuguese-language slang translating approximately to “abuse-you”). The basic idea was simply to trade *estigas* (or insults) that were implicitly evaluated based on their ability to entertain the group through wild exaggeration and creative wit: “Your father made a doll pregnant and he ran away in the bush”; “Your father is the best carjacker in the world that manages to steal toy cars made out of tin cans”; “You learned how to swim inside a soup spoon.”

Although my initial exposure to *estiga-se* involved a group of boys, the game was also played by girls and proved to be familiar to community members of all ages. It also varied in formality from casual exchanges between a pair of friends to large groups using *estiga-se* as a sort of improvised talent contest. No one had thought to mention the game to me in response to my initial research inquiries because it was generally thought of as a meaningless amusement. But for the purposes of my fieldwork, I came to think of *estiga-se* as a vivid illustration of what Artin Göncü and colleagues refer to as “play as cultural interpretation” (Göncü, Jain, and Tuermer 2007, 155), and I have since come to suspect that the game shares lineage with other verbal insulting games documented in folklore-related literature.

In this article I offer a brief overview of this literature in order to situate *estiga-se* as a ritualized insulting game similar to those found in a wide range of cultural settings, including several African variations. I then describe my observations and data gathering in the Angolan refugee community, analyze ways the game took on local meanings, and offer a typology of *estigas* collected during fieldwork. Due partly to the nature of the material I was able to collect, the typology here is based on an interpretive, rather than a linguistic, consideration of how *estigas* commonly target particular types of traits and behaviors. While verbal games can be usefully considered from linguistic and discursive perspectives (see, for example, Goodwin 1990), the intention here is to consider *estiga-se* more broadly as a piece of folklore illustrating children’s play as a way of engaging local cultural norms and meanings.

Scholarly Perspectives on Verbal Insulting Games

Ritualized insulting, often embedded in play and games, is common across a variety of disparate cultural communities. Jerome Neu (2008), for example, has drawn on variations on ritualized insulting from contexts as varied as those of Greenland Eskimos, the urban United States, rural Mexico, and Mediterranean Turkey to argue that insults of all types are essential forms of power play that reveal much about both individual character and community norms. Making such insults playful or putting them in game form allows them to be more entertaining than threatening, while still conveying salient local meanings.

Perhaps the most prominent example of such ritualized insulting play in folklore literature is “the Dozens,” a game usually associated with urban African American communities in the middle of the twentieth century (see, for example, Abrahams 1962; Dollard 1939; Labov 1972), though it may also have African heritage (Smitherman 1999). Although the term is used variously in different contexts, the Dozens most commonly refers to a category of verbal play involving the humorous exchange of insults, often directed at “Yo’ Mamma.” The origin and function of the Dozens is subject to some debate, with Robin D. G. Kelley (2004) arguing that most academic analyses have minimized the aesthetic pleasure of verbal play in favor of a problematic assumption that the Dozens serves as a coping mechanism to deal with social marginalization.

In fact, one major problem with interpreting the Dozens as a way for African Americans to cope with the problems of urban America is the presence of very similar games in other parts of the world. Donald C. Simmons (1963), for example, responds to one psychoanalytic analysis of the Dozens (Abrahams 1962) with speculation that the form may have evolved from West African customs including tone riddles and curses. Likewise, in a 1976 article titled “The Dozens: An African-Heritage Theory,” Amuzie Chimezie notes similarities between the Dozens and a game played both in Ghana and among the Igbos of Nigeria where it is titled *Ikocha Nkocha*—translated as “making disparaging remarks.” Example remarks include “Look at him with cheeks like those of a child whose mother bore him a junior sibling too early” and “His back looks like that of a person who has spent years in a sick bed” (Chimezie 1976, 404). More recently, at least one analysis argues

for meaningful similarities between the Dozens in African American communities and “wording” as an insulting game played by Nigerian Pidgin speakers in Port Harcourt, Nigeria (Faraclas et al. 2005).

Although I have not been able to find any literature specifically locating versions of similar games in Angolan communities, a 2007 analysis by Peter Githinji of *Mchongoano* verbal duels in urban Kenya describes a game notably similar to my observations of *estiga-se*. Example insults from Kenyan *Mchongoano* include “Your father is so stupid that he failed a blood test” and “You are so poor that if you go to Nairobi streets to beg, beggars give you their money” (2007, 94, 99). Importantly, however, Githinji argues that *Mchongoano* is most usefully considered as “an art with a socialization function” that also represents “various shades of social reality” (2007, 93). Thus, while such games may function primarily for aesthetic pleasure, they also serve to subtly illustrate salient social meanings.

From a broader social psychological perspective, G. R. Semin and Monica Rubini (1990, 465) have argued that the meanings embedded in what they term “verbal abuse” relate to cultural concepts of personhood, “since it enables one to examine those aspects of the person which are culturally so critical that their denial removes a central feature of the category of person prevailing in the culture.” Drawing on research comparing verbal abuse in different parts of Italy, the authors distinguish between verbal insults embedded in “individualistic” and “collectivistic” cultural contexts. They argue that in “individualistic” cultural contexts, in which people are conceptualized primarily as independent actors distinct from their group, verbal insults tend to target individual dispositions (such as insults about being “stupid” or “ugly”). In contrast, verbal insults in “collectivistic” cultural contexts are more likely to target social roles and relationships because these are most central to concepts of personhood (for example, insults referencing group members, such as being a “Communist”).

The idea that verbal insults demonstrate cultural meanings related to concepts of personhood fits well with my observations in Angola, particularly when contrasted with the content of American versions of the Dozens, as shown by a contemporary example. In 2005, African American comedians Shawn and Marlon Wayans created “The Dozens Trash-Talkin’ Card Game,” sold by the Topps trading card company. Though the specific insults used in the game often demonstrate

entertaining creativity, the themes across the insults are strikingly consistent in their focus on individual traits ("ugly," "dumb," "fat," etc.) or on personal conditions ("broke," "nasty," "stank," etc.). The cards include insults such as "Yo mama's so ugly, they use her face to punish terrorists," "Yo mama's so dumb, she waited at a stop sign until it said go," and "Yo mama's so broke, she goes to Kentucky Fried Chicken to lick other people's fingers." While these types of individualized insults were sometimes used in the Angolan community I studied, they were less common than insults directed at behavior that was considered unseemly or peculiar in the community. *Estiga-se*, as I describe in more detail below, is particularly oriented to insulting a lack of proficiency in communally valued social roles. In my analysis I use this orientation to further consider the ways *estiga-se* reveals local values and meanings related to cultural concepts of personhood.

Insults in the Field

Because I first learned about *estiga-se* in the midst of participant-observation field research with children in an Angolan refugee community, my data gathering was largely opportunistic. Once I recognized the potential significance of the game, I started explicitly asking about verbal play during the course of regular discussion and observations, and I improvised ways of documenting the content of *estiga-se*. Due to the nature of this work, my discussion of methods is primarily descriptive, beginning with a brief depiction of the community context and concluding with a discussion of how specific *estigas* were gathered.

The community was a set of long-term "camps" (most residents had been settled and working for at least five years) housing approximately eight thousand residents who had originally been displaced by wars in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Angola. Although displaced by violent conflict, few residents had direct experience with armed combat. The community was on the distant outskirts of Luanda, the Angolan capital city, and was established to the point of being visibly indistinguishable from other neighboring communities.

Most interactions in the community—and most of the *estigas* I observed and gathered—took place in Portuguese, the national language of Angola. Older residents of the community, depending on their community of origin, often also spoke French, Swahili, or Bantu dialects

(most frequently associated with Kimbundu, Ombundu, Bakongo, and Chokwe ethnicities), but children almost exclusively spoke Portuguese. Though I spoke enough Portuguese to be conversational, I also employed local research assistants and translators to enhance accuracy.

The broader research project drew on a variety of methods, with participant-observation in play and recreation programs as the foundation. In addition to keeping detailed field notes, which included documenting several estigas, we undertook written surveys and semi-structured interviews with children between the ages of six and twelve years old and with adult community members. Once I became aware of and interested in *estiga-se*, I added a question to the interview protocol with children asking them to identify a favorite *estiga*. I also recruited one young adult community member who worked with play and recreation programs to help me gather additional *estigas*. In total, these efforts resulted in the documentation of eighty-one *estigas* from community members ranging in age from seven to twenty-two years old. The average age of those from whom we documented these insults was twelve and one-half years, and 47 percent of the insults were from females.

Unfortunately, due to the opportunistic nature of the data gathering I was not able to obtain accurate written Portuguese versions of all the *estigas*. In some cases the *estigas* were directly translated and discussed with my primary bilingual Angolan research assistant, and in some cases the *estigas* were written down by community members with limited literacy skills. In all cases, the translations reported in this article were first made by my primary Angolan research assistant and discussed to ensure comprehension. Because my research interest was in local values and meanings rather than in linguistic form, these discussions focused on ensuring that the final translations conveyed the intended messages. Due to these constraints, in this article I only report translations, most of which accommodate English conventions. I also focus on thematic types within the corpus of *estigas* that seem to represent the various ways community children and youth thought about personhood. Thus, in the section that follows, I report brief ethnographic descriptions of *estiga-se* as a game and the frequencies with which particular people and types of characteristics were targeted for insulting within the game. Overall, the focus of the analysis is on how *estiga-se* represent the local socialization climate for children and youth.

Playing with Insults

Whenever I asked community residents questions about *estiga-se*, regardless of the person I was talking with, the overwhelming initial response was bemused laughter. Despite the potentially hostile messages conveyed, performing *estiga-se* was broadly recognized as a purely playful endeavor in which children could employ creativity without much risk of personal offense. Children themselves often played the game primarily with their close friends and relatives, usually ensuring that any potential for hurt feelings was buffered by the trust of existing relationships. Further, while adults were usually familiar with the game, most told me they perceived it as little more than a silly and amusing child’s pastime. There was, however, some range in the formality of playing *estiga-se*.

On the more informal end of the spectrum, one twelve-year-old girl (whom we engaged as a case study in the broader research project) enjoyed playing the game primarily with her younger brother, for whom she often served as caretaker. At the time, the girl had finished the equivalent of fourth grade—the highest level offered in the immediate community—and was mostly staying at home while trying to find money to pay for fees if she could get admitted to another school. She lived with her mother and brother in a home comprised of a large canvas tent that was originally donated as a temporary shelter, but which had become a more permanent home; her father had left the family several years earlier. Because her mother spent much time away from home, it often fell to the girl to give her younger brother a small snack of tea and bread after school, and their time together offered an increasingly rare chance for her to joke and play. In a typical exchange, the girl would simply suggest “*Vamos estigar,*” to which her brother might think for ten or twenty seconds before replying: “You have a head like *bolinos* [fried cakes] and when you think it starts to pour oil.” The girl would laugh enthusiastically, think a bit more, and respond, “Well, your father was the tallest guy in the world, but he still tried to play basketball under the bed.” Their game might end at that, or might continue for a few more rounds, but it was almost always just casual fun. Further, when I specifically asked about the fact that by insulting her brother’s father she was also insulting her own father, she just laughed more and explained, “It’s just for fun—sometimes he tells me my mother did something, and I talk about his father.” Thus,

even in a specific situation where children likely did have complicated feelings toward unreliable parents, the insults seemed genuinely de-personalized and focused more on the fun of creatively using typical *estiga-se* forms.

On the more formal end of the spectrum, I came to know one young adult male who took particular pride in his skill with *estiga-se*; he told me that “if you evaluated it and gave positions, I would be the president.” In fact, he explained, when he was younger he had the opportunity to play in contexts where money was at stake: “We had a group of friends that, when they saw us, they would call us and tell us to start abusing each other. They said they would contribute some money for the winner . . . but it was a combined effort, so after [one of them won by being particularly funny and creative] we would go somewhere else and share the money.” In this case the friends offering the prize determined the “winner” by simply agreeing on which *estigas* they found the most amusing. Based on my other observations and discussions, this version of *estiga-se*—as essentially an organized spectator sport with tangible rewards for the winners—seemed rare in the community; it was much more common for children and youth to play spontaneously as a pastime among friends. But it did encourage the “president” to get serious about the game; he and his friends would spend time listening to others play *estiga-se*, write down their favorites, and create new ones by brainstorming with each other. When I asked him whether it seemed cruel to spend time thinking about how to insult others, he seemed perplexed: “As a kid we didn’t think like that.” It was just “good entertainment.” When I first asked the “president” if he had any favorite *estigas*, he told me, “Don’t take it the wrong way, but I remember once when I told my cousin, ‘Your mother is the best harlot in the world, but she doesn’t have sex.’” Apparently the insult lay in being the best at something that is embarrassing, and even then not doing it quite right. This basic type of insult proved popular for *estigas* (with the “tallest guy in the world” above serving as a related example), though it seems unlike other common types of ritual insults in the folklore literature—demonstrating one way the “president” and his friends invoked local meanings in their play.

More commonly, *estiga-se* games occurred spontaneously. A child would suggest “*vamos estigar*” during free leisure time, and the group would begin trading creative insults. Examples included “Your father wasn’t weaned off your mother’s breast until he was thirty-eight years

old" or "In your house when you are eating, if a person drops a grain of rice then you're going to have the police come" (suggesting that the family is so miserly, they worry about a single grain of rice). The implied goal of the exchanges was to generate amusement and admiration, though the players only sometimes bothered to explicitly declare a "winner." The process might last only a few minutes or for nearly an hour, depending on how much fun the children were having and on their other obligations. When the insult play ran its course, the groups would often simply transition naturally to other forms of play and leisure popular in the community.

Within the variable formatting of *estiga-se* there were clear patterns in the content and meanings of the *estigas* themselves. As with other examples of insulting games from the folklore literature, these patterns fit primarily with two key dimensions. First, who was the target of the insult? Your mother? Your father? You? Second, what types of characteristics did the insult address? Was it targeting relatively enduring traits such as being fat or stupid? Was it targeting personal conditions such as poverty? Was it targeting strange behaviors? Though some *estigas* fit with each of these categories, and while there was occasional overlap in the types of characteristics targeted, the majority of those collected targeted "your father" and focused on strange behaviors.

Table 1 demonstrates how *estigas* fit within these categories. 53 percent of the *estigas* collected commented on one's father, 21 percent commented directly on the other participant, 17 percent targeted one's mother, and 9 percent generally addressed one's family or "house." Of note here is the relative paucity of insults directly addressing the other participant, demonstrating a preference for targeting insults at fathers, mothers, and other family relations. This preference for focusing on social relations was also evident in the types of characteristics referenced by most *estigas*. While 38 percent addressed either enduring traits (such as one's physical appearance) or personal conditions (such as poverty), 62 percent addressed different behaviors that were insulting because they violated social norms and ideals. These *estigas* addressing behaviors also came in different types, which I have put into three groups: those targeting unseemly or disgraceful behavior, those targeting peculiar behavior, and those targeting a sort of distinguished failure. Each of these five types of *estiga* is described further below, including examples and possible interpretations as to how each type relates to local meanings in the community.

TABLE 1. Children's Insults Categorized by Target and by Characteristic Being Insulted

Total <i>estigas</i> collected	81
Target of the insult	
Other participant's mother	17%
Other participant's father	53%
Other participant directly	21%
Other participant's family or "house"	9%
Characteristic being insulted	
Trait	22%
Condition	16%
Unseemly behavior	25%
Peculiar behavior	17%
Distinguished failure	20%

Insults directed at personal traits

The most straightforward type of insult employed in *estiga-se* were the 22 percent targeting qualities of a person that are enduring and relatively permanent, such as being "ugly," "fat," "skinny," "deformed," "crazy," or "stupid." Though direct, these insults still depend upon a vibrant creativity, as when a girl claimed, "Your mother is the fattest person in the world, and because she's so big she has to wear tires for earrings." These *estigas* commonly target physical appearance or intelligence, describing a person or a relative as "ugly" or "dumb" in ways that highlight personal traits of particular concern in the community.

Though the core of these insults is often simple and straightforward, the *estigas* themselves tend to be relatively elaborate, demonstrating a creative use of cultural meanings. One girl, for example, commented on physical attractiveness by saying, "The face of your father is like a doormat in Portugal," referencing the nation that had colonized Angola in a way that implied an unworthiness potentially related to broader national status anxieties. Another girl referenced the mysterious circumstances surrounding the death of Angola's first president in commenting on bad breath: "The smell of your father's mouth is what killed Augustino Neto." Other examples include: "Your

chest is like a biscuit, when you try to concentrate it breaks”; “Your mother doesn’t have teeth, but she tried to bite a thief”; “Your father was fired from his job because he wasn’t circumcised”; “Your father is the ugliest person in the world, when he went out of your house one day he was fined”; and “Your father is so dumb that he tried to stop a limousine with his slipper.” It is worth noting that most of these estigas do not actually describe the personal traits being targeted; instead, they insult undesirable traits by describing their social consequences. The implication is that the children are less interested in the traits themselves than in how those traits relate to experiences.

Insults directed at personal conditions

A second type of personal insult common to estiga-se, comprising 16 percent of those collected, is directed at a personal condition that is temporary and hypothetically possible to change, such as “dirty,” “hungry,” “corrupt,” “poor,” or “weak.” Typical examples include “Your father is the dirtiest person in the world; he went to the beach to have a bath and all the water ran away” and “Everybody in your house was having a bath with just one can of soda and there was still water left over!” These estigas emphasize the importance of avoiding personal conditions that have embarrassing implications for managing daily life.

Insults directed at personal conditions most often made fun of a family’s poverty or of a person’s lack of hygiene, which were both issues of much general concern in the community. Examples include a boy saying “Your family had a mosquito leg for Christmas dinner” and a girl saying “Your father is the dirtiest person in the world, when he passes near buildings people spit at him.” Some estigas directed at personal conditions also make fun of odd conditions such as facial expressions (“Your mother gave a bad look at the water pump and the water stopped”) or skepticism (“Your father is the most doubtful person in the world; he came out from reading the *Journal* [newspaper] shaking his head saying I don’t believe it”). Other examples include: “Your father’s face stops fitting when the clock strikes twelve [because of not having anything to eat]”; “In the time of the war everybody in your house gathered on the back of a matchbox [because they were so skinny]”; “Your father hit himself with paper and lost a toe nail [because he is so weak and frail]”; “Your breakfast was roast ice and bread

[because you are so poor]”; and “In the time of war you used diarrhea to bake a cake for Christmas.” Insults directed at personal conditions emphasize the indignity of not being able to function in society.

This category of insults also blames the victim to some extent, in that misfortune is taken as shameful. While such attitudes may be part of a broader tendency among children to identify people’s status with the conditions of their lives, it is worth noting that these *estigas* persist in referencing personal conditions as part of the broader social context (as, for example, related to “the time of war,” referencing Angola’s long civil war). In all cases, this type of insult allows the possibility of turning misfortune into humor.

Insults directed at unseemly behavior

The most common behavior-focused insults were the 25 percent directed at behaviors that are dramatically inappropriate for someone in a particular social role or of a particular age, status, or position in society. These insults emphasize the local importance of demonstrating competence through the apt performance of relatively defined social roles (as girls, boys, women, men, parents, leaders, workers, etc.). Examples include “Your father is only able to walk with crutches, but you asked him for a ride” and “In the time of war and hunger, your mother pretended she was a hen in order not to be caught by UNITA [the rebel army].” The insult in such *estigas* focuses on the disgracefulness of unseemly behavior, even amidst challenging circumstances, with several insults explicitly referencing the long civil war that had recently ended.

Other common examples of the relevant social roles referenced by unseemly behavior insults include mature adults and respectful family members. Thus, *estigas* such as “Your father was born in 1202 and only stopped making tin can cars by demand of the court after United States independence” (using a hyperbolic and vague sense of historical dates to imply very old age) and “For your father to have a bath he needs to have someone run after him as if he was a kid” are insulting because they suggest that one’s father acts more like a child than an adult. Likewise, *estigas* such as “You traded your mother for an unripe mango” and “In the time of war you traded your mother for two tins of sardines” reference poverty and desperation by emphasizing a lack of respect for one’s mother. Other examples from this category include:

“Your father stayed overnight in mourning with just one touch of the drum [and thus did not engage in the mourning ritual appropriately]”; “In your house you have a pan with potato leaves on top and cooked maize on the bottom [which is the reverse of how it should work]”; “Your father used to hang from Savimbi’s [the hated former UNITA leader] beard”; “During the war when your mother ran away she took the dog instead of the baby on the bed”; and “You went to register for school and said you were your younger brother [thus trying to cheat by pretending to be young].” These insults mock behaviors that do not meet community standards, demonstrating to children the importance of dignified behavior regardless of circumstances.

Insults directed at peculiar behavior

Befitting the emphasis in *estiga-se* on mocking inappropriate behavior, 17 percent of *estigas* addressed peculiar behavior, defined here as behavior considered unintelligent or strange in ways that indirectly represent a character flaw. Though there is some conceptual overlap between unseemly behavior and peculiar behavior, for purposes of this analysis, the latter category is distinguished in its emphasis on the strange rather than the disgraceful. For example, when a boy proclaimed, “Your mom is the best at trying to dodge the rain,” the insult lay in the fact that dodging the rain is both strange and impossible. To be the best at dodging rain is thus very odd, though not necessarily unseemly. While this insult also subtly implies that the mother is too skinny, when I asked for an explanation I was told the insult lay primarily in the strangeness of the behavior.

Although mocking a lack of intelligence is often implicit in *estigas* targeting peculiar behavior, the explicit insult most commonly describes behaviors that children think of as simply bizarre. Other examples of these types of *estigas* include: “Your father was invited for a party to play *soeca* [a local card game] and showed up wearing soccer shoes, a bra, and a whistle to referee the game”; “When your mother cooks she puts bars up on top of the pan so that nobody smells the odor [which does not work]”; “Your mother has underwear made out of leather and when it is dirty she polishes it”; “Your mother slept with a porter and gave birth to a wheelbarrow”; “Your mother slept with a toy doll and your father got jealous”; “Your mother sells water in the evening and when she sees the police she hides the water in her pubic

hair”; and “You went to register a fish as your younger brother.” These insults imagine amusingly bizarre behavior, while simultaneously mocking those who act in odd ways. Claiming, for example, that someone tried to “register a fish” as a brother simultaneously insults the individual for thinking he could include a fish as family while also insulting the brother for being like a fish. In these creative and subtle ways, such insults convey the importance of adherence to particular social norms as a marker of competence and an important local value.

Insults directed at distinguished failure

Perhaps the most unusual insults in *estiga-se* were the 20 percent that identified a person as having a valued status or skill and then immediately devalued that status through some form of humiliation. This category includes insults that focus primarily on wasting an idealized opportunity by performing poorly or strangely, as when one boy proclaimed “Your father went to the United States to be trained as a driver for cars made out of tin cans.” The insult here is that one would waste the opportunity of going to the United States on something as childish as playing with toy cars. The particularity of this type of insult lies in its emphasis on the extreme shame people attach to wasted opportunity, or what I am calling *distinguished failure*.

As suggested by the above example, traveling away from Angola was one particularly valued opportunity employed in *estigas* targeting distinguished failure. Examples include “Your father was issued a passport just to travel behind your house” and “Your mother went to Brazil for studying a course on mending buckets.” In the first case, the simple fact of getting a passport was a major challenge for those without connections or power. In the second case, Brazil was a much idealized destination for Angolans (as another lusophone country that provided much of the media—such as the popular *telenovelas*—available in local markets), whereas learning to mend buckets was an uninspired task. In all cases, however, the insult lay in wasting idealized opportunities.

Other types of opportunities that are particularly meaningful in the community include those related to the recently ended civil war, those related to work, and those related to wealth and style. Examples include: “Your father enrolled to be a deputy, but instead his name came out for grinding [low status mill work]”; “Your father wanted to be like American niggas and he started wearing a blanket on his

forehead [which is an embarrassing substitution for a bandana or do-rag]"; and "Your father in the war killed 120 enemies and the president of the country gave him a cartridge of bullets as a reward [which is not much of a reward considering the magnitude of the deed for a soldier, who could presumably get bullets easily]." The eclectic global range of cultural references in these insults, from perceptions of urban American style to Brazilian telenovelas to the Angolan civil war, is further enhanced by estigas that reference local concerns such as witchcraft, as in the estigas "Your father has the best witchcraft in the world, but he used it to stop farting with a hammer" and "Your father used witchcraft to steal bread from children." The point of these insults is that there is no need to bother with witchcraft if you want to stop farting or steal bread from children; you can do that anyway. Using it to stop farting or to steal bread from children is a waste of perfectly good witchcraft.

Overall, this type of estiga is particularly interesting as a representation of local meanings because of the distinctiveness of its formulation. Other examples of insulting games in the folklore literature, such as the Dozens, rarely include insults about a failure to take advantage of opportunities. Yet such insults make sense in the context of an economically impoverished refugee community in a semi-rural area where community residents were close enough to the Angolan capital to be familiar with urban life and related opportunities. For most residents, entirely agrarian lifestyles were no longer a realistic option, but formal education and wealth—which might make social mobility possible—were scarce. Many people in the community had grand ambitions but were also realistic enough to realize the constraints they faced. They were also from cultural worlds where collectivist values and strict social hierarchies influenced a respect for the everyday act of proficiently fulfilling regular social roles. That distinctive tension, negotiating new individual ambitions amidst a collectivist ethos, seems to have created bountiful meaning-making possibilities for playing with insults.

Conclusion

Although varieties of verbal insulting games can be found in cultural settings across the globe, they are always laden with particular community values and meanings that offer insight into local social worlds. In the case of estiga-se as played by children in an Angolan refugee

community, those values and meanings tend to situate people within family contexts and attend to appropriate behavior in social roles. There is less explicit emphasis on calling people dumb, ugly, or poor, and more emphasis on creatively mocking people's actions. Most commonly, children in the community use insults in a way that highlights the shame of behaving in unseemly ways, of acting peculiar, and of embarrassingly failing to realize grand ambitions.

In contrast to early scholarship on insulting games such as the Dozens, which argued that the games offered psychosocial coping mechanisms to counter marginalization, it is important to emphasize that *estiga-se* games are mostly an entertaining opportunity to engage in creative word play. In some cases the *estigas* did make reference to real hardships—most notably in regular references to the “time of war” or the “time of hunger”—and it is possible that turning such hardships into humor helped residents to reframe difficult realities. But it seemed more common for hardships to be used primarily as descriptive context. Children simply thought the game was fun, and part of the fun was to exaggerate social realities in ways that were intentionally implausible. The fact that I only saw the game played in good humor, without hints that it was tapping deeper psychodynamics, has led me to focus instead on the game as a particularly rich insight into cultural concepts of personhood: the insults were essentially attempts to creatively define the characteristics that are critical for being a good person. Through *estiga-se*, children highlight the importance of balancing individual ambitions with collective expectations for appropriate behavior within familiar social roles.

While games such as *estiga-se* offer an interesting way to access broader sociocultural norms related to childhood, the degree to which such games simply demonstrate, rather than socialize and create, local meanings and values remains an open question. My suspicion is that verbal insulting games, like many play activities, provide a rich space in which the dynamic nature of culture is simultaneously internalized and expressed. When children play with insults they are playing with local culture by creatively interpreting and appropriating local norms and meanings. Because of this, verbal insulting games continue to offer rich opportunities for new research investigating global forms and local meanings across diverse historical and cultural settings.

University of Portland
Portland

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ANDREW M. GUEST is an Associate Professor of Psychology and Sociology (by courtesy) at the University of Portland. His scholarly work focuses on the developmental and sociocultural meanings of play, games, sports, and other activities. (guesta@up.edu)



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