



Fig. 1. Two masters of Warri competing in Speightstown, Barbados (1996).



Fig. 2. The Kikwajuni Bao club in full swing in 1992 in Zanzibar.

Mancala: Games That Count

by Alex de Voogt

Passengers waiting patiently for their luggage in the Toronto airport frowned perplexedly at my dealings with a man from Uganda. Just before customs he unearthed a badly worn wooden board from deep down in his suitcase. I gave him in return a new, full-color book and passed through customs clutching this piece of wood. Yet another mancala board had crossed an international border.

Mancala games have traveled around the world, from West Africa to the Caribbean and

South America, from North to South Africa, from the Middle East to South Asia to Southeast Asia. Recent introductions of mancala in the Western world have made it perhaps the most widely played board game in the world. I met the Uganda player in the plane from Amsterdam to Toronto and when we discovered our mutual interest in mancala, he disclosed that he always took a board with him for his friends in Canada. We decided to trade a book for a board, and in this way I could introduce the local variant of



Fig. 3. Two girls playing Ohvalhu, also known as Conka, on the island of Laamu Gan in the Maldives (1998).

mancala played in Uganda to the Netherlands, my own country.

Some forms of mancala have been played for hundreds of years by generations of people, although physical evidence of this popularity has been lost, since most wooden boards did not survive. Today, players can choose between rules ancient or invented and between temporary boards in the sand, boards cut in rock, or endless varieties of wooden boards. Travel is a common theme. Mancala players took along their boards when they migrated or when they traded with distant neighbors. In each of the dozens of variants of the game, seeds, stones, or pebbles travel around a board. (See box on "The Rules of the Game.")

Many of the boards for playing mancala variations are found in museum collections or in use. The games discussed here—Warri, Bao, Conka, and Owela—have a particularly wide geographical spread. When traveling to a region where they are played, one is likely to find many people able and willing to participate in a souvenir match.

WARRI

Although there are many players of Warri in Barbados, there are few opportunities to see them in action. The regular players in Speightstown had moved a few times, but lately they had



Fig. 4. Owela, played by Nama outside one of Namibia's gameparks (1998). Their word for the game is //us.



Fig. 5. Owela, played by guards during the savannah sunset in Namibia (1998). The Yei-speaking players call it /wine.



Fig. A. Two Liberian boards in which the end-holes are shaped as horns. The game of Warri could have been played on these boards and those in Fig. B. The end-holes are used for captured counters, but the scallop-shaped holes and the ornate end-holes also suggest that the board had artistic importance as a sculptured object.

Front to back: UPM 44-14-129; L. 62.6 cm. 53-1-1; L. 57 cm

been seen on the veranda of a deserted shop. Following explicit directions to their hideout, I felt like an explorer rather than a visitor. Two players sat facing each other at the ends of a narrow bench, the roughly cut board between them (Fig. 1). A brief greeting showed their limited interest in my presence. Two other men had just finished their game and I was cordially invited

to try a few moves. I played and lost a game and all were amused. Soon, someone else was beaten which stopped his amusement abruptly. His opponent claimed that he could beat him, a master player, six times in a row. This led to a six-game challenge. Irritation changed to concentration. Other players finished their games and became spectators at the challenge. The players were hit-



Fig. B. Three boat-shaped boards from Sierra Leone with characteristic triangular end-holes.

Front to back: UPM AF5330; L. 58 cm. AF4278; L. 69.6 cm. AF4279; L. 76 cm



Fig. C. Two rare boards, one from Ethiopia (front), one from Zaire. The players zig-zag across the three rows of the Ethiopian board, making one circle during the sowing of the counters as if playing on a two-row board.

Front to back: UPM 20291; L. 67.3 cm. AF1982; L. 67 cm

ting seeds at the corner of the board, almost tumbling the board off the bench. A regained win by the master became three wins and eventually the bold challenger became a student, who still had only one win, and was taught some modesty; nobody beats a master six times.

After three losses in a row on my part as well, I thanked them for their company and asked them about other places to play. They told me that in some pubs one can find a board and usually an owner or a guest willing to demonstrate some moves. Only in those places would I have a chance of winning a serious game.

The players in Speightstown were all men and they were known to each other by name and level of expertise. When I asked them if women played, they admitted they knew some who were reasonable players, but the women came from another town. This did not mean these women were not invited to play; even I, a Dutchman and total stranger, was invited to join in and taught that winning at Warri is only possible if they let you win.

Warri, also known as Awèlè, Oware, and Awari, is the best-known mancala game; its rules

cross language, culture, and other boundaries. During the slave trade, people of West Africa carried Warri to the Caribbean. It is played in French-speaking West Africa (see Fig. B and box on "The Evidence of the Boards") and English-speaking West Africa (see Fig. A), the Caribbean, and also in the Portuguese-speaking Cape Verde Islands, and even in Brazil. Its rules remain largely unchanged. Today one can find Warri on the Internet and play live with other players, or study the rules and meet other Warri enthusiasts. The rules can be learned in a few minutes, giving everyone a chance to compete. In Antigua and Barbados, you are likely to encounter master players. Only Warri and Bao (see below) are known to have championships and masters. Just carry the game board around and there will always be a player, or, if you are lucky, a master, eager to play or to teach.

BAO

When the barber had finished trimming the last beard of the day, a smooth wooden board

appeared. I watched two anxious Bao players, one local and one guest, take the place of the barber beneath the simple roof. These two men started rushing seeds around the four rows of eight holes in seemingly random ways. After ten minutes one of them got a lucky win and the bystanders became vocal, mumbling and moaning. As seeds were passed back and forth between the two players, challenges were likewise exchanged. Having lost one game, the local player was determined to cut the joy of his opponent's win by a series of his own (see below).

Daylight is the only time-limit set on a match of Bao in this town in Zanzibar and the players determinedly pushed their luck until they could no longer see. The nearby fishmarket was already deserted, except for a few fishermen trying to sell the leftover catch of the day. At the finish it was two games to one. This is considered a draw since only three wins in a row will give an undisputed winner. The last capture of the game did not satisfy either player. They were not here to play without a clear victory. It was good fortune for me. I knew where to find two players in a rematch the next day.

Bao is the most complex mancala game, a four-row variant played mostly by people of the Swahili-speaking cultures along the east coast of Africa. It is always played on a board with four rows of eight holes and two characteristic square or enlarged holes in the middle. Unlike Warri, with its relatively straightforward rules, it is almost impossible to master Bao without a teacher. Even after being taught the rules it takes much effort to understand strategy. Even a single move may be too complicated for a novice to calculate. Similarly, it will be impossible to pick out a Bao master. All players claim that they are masters, and since they will usually win against a student of the game, there is no way of proving them wrong.

Bao's complicated rules demand time, patience, concentration, and practice. But the pleasures of the game are equally intense. During each move that is played, many changes take place on a Bao board, as players move around large numbers of seeds. Each move may take several laps of sowing to complete. While in the

games of Warri and Conka (see below) captures are made by taking the counters from the board, in Bao and Owela (see below) the captures are moved to the opponent's rows. As many counters as a player captures in one move can be lost in the next. This often vivid exchange of captures is addictive to both novice and master, to children and to players in their sixties. There's nothing in the mancala world quite equal to the sensation of witnessing—or, even better, playing—a Bao game.

It is somewhat difficult to find a Bao master in East Africa; one must track down a Bao club (Fig. 2), and these clubs are generally found in the suburbs of cities where tourists are unfamiliar or even unwelcome creatures. In the 1980s President Nyerere of Tanzania organized an East African championship that included players from Madagascar, Kenya, Mozambique, Tanzania, Zambia, and other countries. It celebrated Tanzania's independence, but was never repeated since other presidents were not such enthusiastic Bao players. Since then, championships have been limited to Tanzania, and nowadays, to individual towns. Both lack of funds and competition from other games have changed the situation.

Although Bao has spread over the main part of the East African coast, Conka has perhaps spread farther in the world than any mancala game.

CONKA

Not all mancala players are organized in clubs. In Asia, there are no regularly scheduled matches to attend. A traveler will need to search out a family and talk to the women and children to find a board and an able opponent. Although mancala is widespread, it is useful to know what the local game is when playing a match in a private home. Conka—also known as Congka or Congkak, Sunka, Dakon, or Ohvalhu—is well known in Asia and players can be spotted in many holiday destinations, such as Indonesia (see Fig. D), the Philippines, Thailand, and the Maldives (Fig. 3 and see Fig. E). The board has two rows of holes and two end-holes. As long as

The Evidence of the Boards

The boards in the University of Pennsylvania Museum's collection were collected largely by its former director, Stewart Culin, at the end of the 19th century (Culin 1896). He was one of the first to take mancala research seriously. Since he purchased the majority of his boards at the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893, the collection includes boards from areas he never visited and from players who used rules with which he was unfamiliar. Today, much more is known about mancala boards and rules. The collection that Culin started will illustrate this.

The only way to accurately associate boards with rules is when previous players or owners of the board reveal their playing rules. In some locations the shape of the boards and the rules of play have been well documented. The characteristic shape of an Ethiopian three-row board (Fig. C) or a Maldivian two-row board (Fig. E) allows us to trace the most likely rules for that specimen. In most other cases, even when the area of origin is clearly specified in the museum records, it is impossible to deduce the rules from the information provided by the board.

Instead, the boards convey other characteristics of mancala. In the Museum's collection, the wooden boards that were most popular exhibit clear traces of use (Fig. F). Finger grooves and shiny holes with rounded edges mark these boards. The size of the holes indicates the type of playing pieces that were imagined by the maker and the size of the board sometimes indicates its cost. Some boards feature hidden storage holes in the stand, and the different carvings may indicate the skill of the artist or the wealth of the owner (Fig. B).

Each collection reveals something different. The collection of the University of Pennsylvania Museum combines examples chiefly from Asia and Africa. African mancala boards (Figs. A–C) have been studied extensively, Asian boards (Figs. D, E) much less. A quick comparison shows that both include boat-shaped boards. These boards have triangular or bow-shaped end-holes and look like miniature canoes (Figs. B and D). They unite the art of both continents and show the coastal provenience of the boards in the collection. Only the number of holes per row—commonly six in West Africa (Fig. A), but varying greatly in Southeast Asia (Fig. D)—distinguishes them.

Perhaps the most important part of any museum collection these days is the institution's records. Paper cards, computer files, and photographic records provide dates and locations. In some cases they even reveal the rules, such as the document sent from Barbados to Stewart Culin describing the playing rules of a game called Warri. Some boards were collected in unusual locations. The Museum's is only the second collection I have examined so far that features a three-row board from Ethiopia in excellent condition (Fig. C). More importantly, it is perhaps the only museum with a board from Palestine (Fig. F). African boards have been studied extensively, and Asian boards came to our attention more recently, but mancala boards and rules of the Middle East are still little understood. The British Museum in London has beautiful Syrian examples and the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford has a modern Egyptian piece, but descriptions of rules, players, and playing societies are largely unknown. The Museum's Palestinian board gives evidence that mancala may be played in this part of the Middle East. It is in this way that museum collections become a starting point for research.

For a hundred years, the boards collected by Stewart Culin lay largely hidden from view, and much of his writing was reformulated elsewhere. His collection and writings now fit into a different era, one in which many rules and boards have been collected firsthand and more than one researcher takes mancala research seriously. For example, in recent years divination has been suggested as the possible origin of mancala games; this theory had been proposed by Culin in his early work. Culin did not study mancala for long and after his one article on the topic never revisited it again. But his collection remains. In the last years of the 20th century, Ph.D. theses, catalogues, books, and journals have been filled with mancala research. Each builds on the efforts of Culin and others. Indeed, there may not be a more fitting tribute to the early efforts of Culin and the collection he made for the Museum than the current interest in mancala games.

a board has two rows and two end-holes, it is suitable for playing Conka. The number of holes per row is quite flexible and often determines the number of counters per hole that are used; for instance, a board with two rows of nine holes will usually have nine counters per hole, and a board with two rows of seven holes will have seven counters per hole. There are some variations among Conka games, but once one has played a game in one locality, the rules of the other variations will be immediately understood and easy to follow. Although the player who goes first has a clear advantage, it takes serious effort to win a game even after some practice.

Conka boards may be beautifully carved and lacquered or painted with gold leaf. As with Bao, played by the President of Tanzania, and variations of Warri, played by West African kings, Conka has been a part of life in royal households. However, while in West Africa Warri has been part of ceremonies and is said to be sometimes played to determine the succession of a king, Conka seems to have no such role.

The Evidence of the Boards

The Rules of the Game

Mancala games are played on rows of holes and with a number of playing counters, usually seeds, shells, or stones. In all mancala games moves are made by taking up the counters contained in one hole and spreading (sowing) these counters one by one in consecutive holes around the rows of holes. In most cases the object of the game is to capture the majority of the counters. Captures are made by reaching a certain part of the board or accumulating a certain number of counters in a particular hole. The ways of capturing and moving counters around the board seem endless and new variations on this theme are still being found in the world.

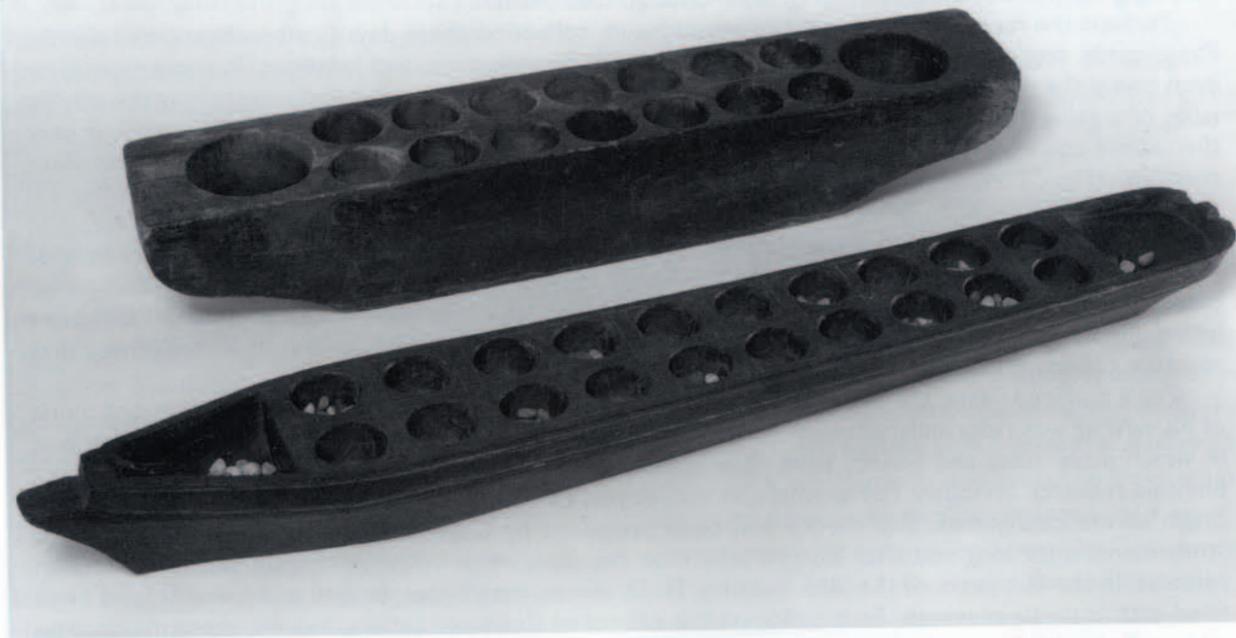


Fig. D. A board from Borneo (front) and one from Jahore in which the end-holes take part in the game. Conka could have and probably was played on these boards and those in Fig. E. Observe the number of holes per row, excluding the end-holes, which dictate the number of counters per hole when starting a game.

Front to back: UPM P1001; L. 106 cm. P1531; L. 84 cm

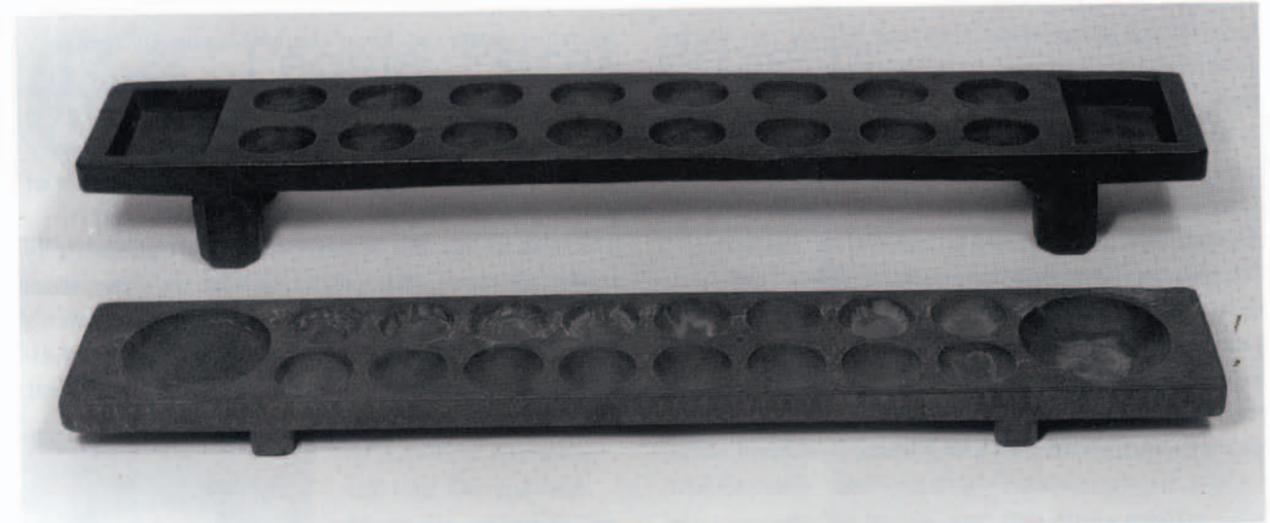


Fig. E. Two boards from the Maldives on which cowrie shells or small seeds are used. Two rows of eight small holes are characteristic of most Maldivian boards.

Front to back: UPM I6380; L. 71 cm. I6379; L. 77 cm

While some mancala games are known for their beautifully carved boards made out of wood, others are known for the size of their boards made in the sand. Owela, which can be played on four rows of more than twenty holes, is the king of mancala in the sand.

OWELA

Owela is played in countries where travelers prefer watching wild game to watching people playing games. It took a simple walk in the wrong direction to find some spectacular Owela games in progress outside the gates of Namibia's world-famous gameparks (Fig. 4). Four hands on one

side of a long row of scooped-out holes in the sand tried out a move. Four hands on the other side waited. They were quite undisturbed by my hands taking pictures. I was pleasantly ignored.

Each move appeared a team effort. Four rows of eighteen holes can use up to six hands or three people on each side to drop the stone counters up and down the six-foot board without having to walk around it to reach the outer holes. It is one of the few board games in the world where a move is started by one player, taken over by a second, and sometimes taken over again and again until the last stone drops into an empty hole.

A few days later I was invited to play under another tree in Namibia. This time a woman

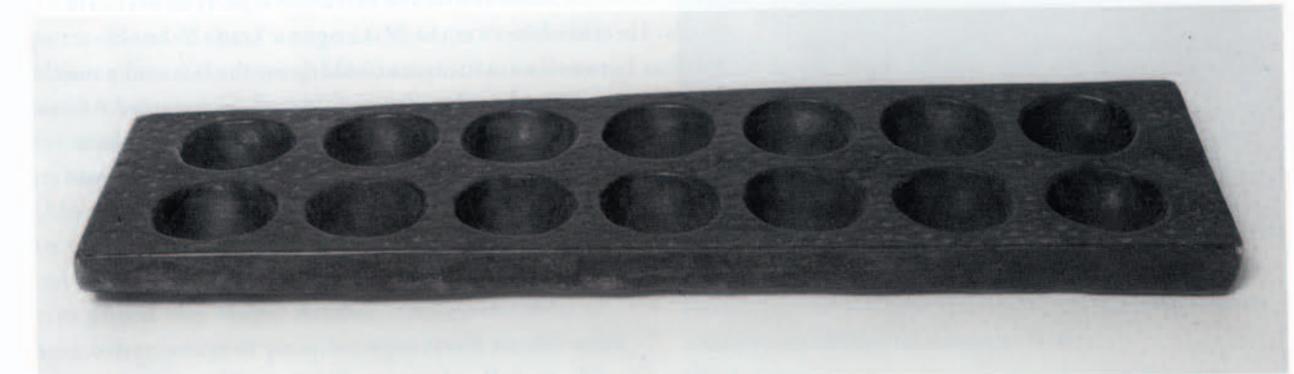


Fig. F. Starry, worn board from Palestine suggesting intensive play.

UPM I5296a; L. 65.5 cm

entered the game as well, interrupting her daily work (Fig. 5). I moved twice before I excused myself to take pictures again, leaving the game to my team members. They played for a long time; the longer the board—this one had four rows of twenty holes—the longer the game. As the game ended, I stood at a distance watching the players leave and the scooped holes being abandoned. The holes carrying stones were waiting for another set of hands to move their load around. Later, I found many abandoned rows in the sand next to the road and once in a while I would find a helping hand to round off

another game, so I too could pleasantly ignore the world.

Mancala games are addictive. That time goes quickly when you play is something you will experience as a side effect rather than a purpose of playing mancala. It is generally considered impolite to count the counters of your opponent by touching them. But touching your own counters in the smooth holes of wood or sand is part of the addiction; museum pieces should be looked at in anticipation of this feeling, which is shared by the players of the world. ♫

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Culin, Stewart

1896. "Mancala, the National Game of Africa." *Annual Report of the Board of Regents...for the Year Ending June 30, 1894. Report of the U.S. National Museum*. Washington: Government Printing Office.

de Voogt, Alex

1997. *Mancala Board Games*. London: British Museum Press.

Murray, H.J.R.

1952. *A History of Board Games Other than Chess*. Oxford: Oxford at the Clarendon Press.

1999. "Distribution of Mancala Board Games: A Methodological Investigation." *Journal of Board Games Studies* 2:104–14.

Russ, Larry

2000. *The Complete Mancala Games Book*. New York: Avalon Publishing.



ALEX DE VOOGT is editor of the *International Journal for the Study of Board Games* (readers can visit its web site at www.boardgamesstudies.org), and has published on cognitive abilities of mancala masters and the aesthetic aspects of mancala boards. He is seen here at the Mikunguni Trade School in Zanzibar between a craftsman of boards on the left and a master of Bao on the right. His recent fieldwork in Asia and Africa now focuses on issues related to the distribution of mancala games. Alex is employed by the School of Asian, African and Amerindian Studies at Leiden University, the Netherlands.