Sowing the Seeds of Competitive Play

The Enduring Legacy of Mancala

By Kristen Pearson

ABOVE: This Luba board has 7 x 4 (28) pockets. Photograph by Risa Korris. UPM object #2015-22-73.

LEFT: Natural materials are often used as game counters.
Mancala has been popular in the United States since a commercialized version was introduced in the 1940s under the brand name *Kalah*. This version of the game is simple to learn and is played on a small, plain wooden board with two rows of six pockets and a set of flat marbles to use as counters. For those familiar with this version of the game, it may seem surprising that the Penn Museum has recently acquired a large collection of mancala boards. But these boards—generously donated by Doug Polumbaum and Risa Korris—are hardly comparable to the kalah boards American children grow up using.

Many of the donated boards are massive by comparison, with some standing over two feet tall. Most are carved out of a single piece of heavy, high-quality wood, with sculptural decorations like leopards, human faces, and snakes. Some have four rows of pockets as opposed to the two found in kalah; one has the expected two rows, but each of the rows has twenty pockets. The simple kalah game is, in fact, only the most recent in a long line of mancala games that may stretch back to prehistory. The boards in the Polumbaum/Korris collection represent some of the finest modern exemplars of a diverse and ancient tradition and, as Dwaune Latimer, Friendly Keeper in the African Section notes, they form a wonderful addition to the Museum’s preexisting collection of mancala boards established by Stewart Culin (see page 44 of this issue).

**WHAT IS MANCALA?**

Versions of mancala are traditionally played across Africa and Asia, with gameplay and board dimensions varying considerably between different regions. Doug Polumbaum described the great variety of games, saying that hundreds of different versions of the game have been recognized and that boards may be configured with two, three, or four rows of pockets with between four and fifty pockets in a row. The boards are most commonly made of carved wood, but can also be made of stone, ivory, or metal. Pockets can also be scooped out of the ground to create a temporary game board, a practice still common today. The counters used in the game, always undifferentiated, can be made of seeds, beans, pebbles, cowrie shells, and other materials.

With all this variation, what defines a game as mancala? In essence, mancala is a sowing game. The basic game play consists of selecting the counters in a pocket and distributing them—or “sowing” them—around the board by dropping them one at a time into consecutive pockets. The goal is generally to capture the most counters, though rules of capture vary.

**HISTORY OF MANCALA**

While mancala may be one of the world’s oldest games, its history is difficult to reconstruct accurately. This is due in part to the fact that it may be played in the earth, which leaves no trace, or on wooden boards, which deteriorate with time. Researchers have proposed several discoveries as possible early mancala boards, the oldest of which are stone slabs with rows of depressions found at Neolithic sites in Jordan and Iran.

Later possibilities include boards and rock carvings from Bronze Age sites in Cyprus, Egypt, the Levant, and Mesopotamia. Although many of these objects do bear a strong resemblance to mancala boards, it is impossible to prove that they actually functioned as such without textual or iconographical evidence. The earliest definitive reference to mancala we have is from the 10th century *Kitab al-Afghani* from Persia and, indeed, mancala seems to have been popular in the medieval Muslim world. It is also mentioned in one of the stories of the
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Arabian Nights, and the word we use for the game today comes from the Arabic word “naqala” meaning “to move.”

Whether we accept one of the early dates or a more certain medieval date for the origins of the game, experts agree that mancala developed in the general region of the Near East and traveled outward from there, in part as a result of Arab expansion. One can imagine that it would have been a popular game for travelers, whether merchants or migrants, since playing it requires only a piece of flat earth and something to use as counters. Considering this, it is perhaps not so surprising that mancala was able to travel from the Near East all the way to West Africa in one direction and to Indonesia in the other.

BEYOND GAMING

While the spread of mancala was probably aided by the simplicity and portability of its board and pieces, this did not necessarily remain so once the game was established in a region. In assembling his collection, Doug Polumbaum was particularly attracted to royal boards because they functioned as sculpture in their own right, symbols of the wealth and status of their owners that would have been prominently and permanently displayed. Elevated to art objects, they could be used as vehicles for expressing a culture’s iconographical language, often incorporating imagery taken from legends and folktales.

According to Dr. Kathy Curnow, professor of African Art History at Cleveland State University and Consulting Scholar in the Museum’s African Section, artists from numerous parts of Africa anthropomorphized many of the more elaborate boards, usually as a female figure. ”This accords with many other types of figurative containers, since pregnancy transforms a woman into a vessel.”

The game itself also developed ritual significance in some regions and was incorporated into local systems of superstition and taboo. Depending on the specific area of the world in which it is being played, there may be traditions governing who may play it, as well as where and at what time of year it may be played. In some cases, these customs are related to the game’s use of chance (it is connected with divination in many regions and may have originated as a divinatory tool) or to its ties to agriculture (these are especially evident when one considers that the game play imitates sowing, that real seeds are often used as counters, and that it may be played in the earth). In others, superstitions surrounding the game have arisen as many superstitions do, with a coincidence interpreted as causative. For example, Doug Polumbaum recounted an Asante legend that says that a king and his wife were playing mancala with gold counters when they were killed, and so it is considered bad luck to play with gold counters.

THE FUTURE OF MANCALA

Thanks to researchers, collectors, and mancala enthusiasts around the world, the future of the game looks to be as vibrant as its past. Like other strategy games, mancala has been studied extensively by artificial intelligence researchers and computerized versions have been built. Its potential for use in mathematics education has been recognized and, in fact, part of the Polumbaum/Korris collection has been allocated to the Learning Programs Department at the Museum. Mancala continues to present exciting new opportunities for research and application, both for those who study the past and those who look to the future. The incredible new collection of mancala boards at the Museum carries with it the promise that Penn will be at the center of these endeavors.

KRISTEN PEARSON is Assistant Editor of Expedition.

FOR FURTHER READING

Eagle, V.A. “On a Phylogenetic Classification of Mancala Games, with Some Newly Recorded Games from the “Southern Silk Road,” Yunnan Province, China.” Board Game Studies 1 (1998): 50-68.
TOP: This Javanese board is decorated with painted and gilded dragonheads. Photograph by Risa Korris. UPM object #2015-22-117.

CENTER: A Dan board from Liberia was carved in the shape of a woman resting on her arms and legs. Note that the feet are used as pockets. Photograph by Risa Korris. UPM object #2015-22-44.

BOTTOM: This Asante board was carved for a member of the royal court. It is decorated with cowrie shells, symbolizing wealth, and royal trumpets. UPM object #2015-22-1.