The Game of Bao or Mankala in East Africa

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Introduction

'Mankala' is one name given to any of a variety of basically similar games played in many widely spread parts of the world. The common feature of all these games is that they are played with pebbles, beads or large seeds on regularly patterned playing areas or boards consisting of a number of 'holes' arranged in two or four rows. These playing areas may be actual wooden boards or they may be holes scooped in the sand or even carved in solid rock. The generalized game is played from the West Indies to Hawaii and from Turkey to South Africa. This broad belt includes all of Africa, the Middle East, India, South East Asia, Indonesia and the East Indies, and the Phillipines. The similarities between all the varieties of 'the game' leads to the inescapable conclusion that, at some time in the past, they all originated in a single place.

A thorough understanding of the games can yield much information concerning the movement of peoples and the contacts between different cultures. For example:

The name mankala, or variations of it, is used in Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Mombasa, Zaire, and Malawi. However, the local rules are not always the same. The name chanka, or variations of it, is used in India and the Phillipines. The name wari, or owari is used throughout Nigeria, Ghana and Niger. There is little variation in the rules. The same "West African" version of the game, with the same name, is played in the West Indies. The connection here would seem obvious. Further, the name weri is used by the Jopadhola in Uganda.

Ambao, Bao, Mbau all derive from the word mbao which simply means "board". They are common, but highly unspecific, names for any of the mankala games. In some tribes they may refer to a specific version of the game but different tribes use the same name for different versions. Bao is the most common name in Tanzania. Forms of this word are found as far south as Malawi and west to Angola.

Mweso, Omweso, Wezo are commonly used names in Uganda and Tanzania.

Kombe is the name used for the game along the northern Kenya Coast and in Lamu. The word has two meanings in Swahili: to hollow out by carving and to clean out or bankrupt an opponent. Thus mbao ya kombe means "the hollowed-out board" and mchezo wa kombe means "the game of cleaning out or bankrupting". The first meaning refers, of course, to the method used to make the board and the second to the fact that the game is played until one of the players has lost all his counters and is 'cleaned out'.

Soro and Coro are extremely common in northern Uganda.*

Aweet is the name used by the Dinka tribe of the Sudan. This version is played on the four-by-ten board.

Mongale is commonly used along the coast and in Mombasa. It is related to the generic name mankala. Mongola is used in the upper Congo. However, it must never be assumed that the use of a name related to mankala implies a game similar to mweso, or any other specific game. The Egyptian mankala is played on a two-by-six board and is very different.

It is commonplace to credit the "Arabs" with the diffusion of the game. Though it is often assumed that the game diffused through the Arab traders, this begs the question of which "Arabs" and by what sorts of social contact the game was learned by other peoples. The game is mentioned in rather ancient Hindu mythology. It was not brought to India by the same Arabs who brought kombe to Lamu. It also appears that the game entered East Africa by at least two different routes. There seems to be no relation between the games played by those tribes whose contacts with the Arabs were extensive, and those whose contacts were marginal, such as the peoples of the Rift Valley area. For example, it is unlikely that the Arabs taught the Maasai enkeshui.

There is a second reason for spending more effort in understanding these games. Games, to repeat a truism, are a microcosm of life. And the games played within a society are a subtle reflection of the values of that society. For example: in the game, a single 'hole' is called a cattle-corral by the Meru and the Maasai, in India it is called a shop, in Java it is a rice-field. An European often (though not always) plays chess with slow deliberation, a Ugandan always plays omweso as fast as possible and the slightest hesitation is actually penalized by forfeiting the move. The Maasai have a unique style which gives the impression of incomprehensible confusion to any spectator insofar as several players appear to be (and are) playing simultaneously on the same board. In some societies the games are played only by men and are accompanied by elaborate etiquettes, in others they are simply an amusement for old women and children.

*In non-Bantu languages but the 'same word' (e.g. solo, tsolo) is found in the Bantu area at least as far south as Zimbabwe-Ed.

Common Features

There are a large number of features which are common to all mankala games. On the other hand almost every game is exceptional in some detail. The most common version of mankala in East Africa is called mweso or mbao, or some variation of these two names. This is the dominant version in Uganda and Tanzania. However, though there is great uniformity in the rules of mweso, the game is not typical of mankala in general. Here follow some features which are common to almost all mankala games.

With the exception of mweso, all games have from 12 to 24 'holes' or 'cups' arranged in two parallel rows, and it is these games which will be described below. The two-by-six and two-by-seven versions are most popular in West Africa, The Middle East, Indonesia and the Phillipines. Two-by-ten or two-by-twelve are most common in East Africa. It is common to carve a large storage cup at each end of the board to contain the winnings of each side. For example this is done by the Tigani, Chuka, Gusii and Luyia (e.g.) in Kenya.

A given number of beads, stone pebbles, or seeds, are distributed among the cups. This distribution may be (i) uniform, (ii) it may follow a fixed, but non-uniform, pattern, or (iii) it may be entirely at the discretion of the individual player. The first is the most common. In the case of the third, an experienced player will probably choose one of the accepted 'openings', much as in chess. A significant difference between mankala and the majority of Western board-games, including chess, draughts, backgammon, etc., is that no distinction is made between the beads. Firstly all beads have the same value. Secondly the distinction "yours/mine" only lasts until the board-frontier is crossed - that is, any bead that crosses the dividing line between one player's side of the board and his opponent's immediately changes ownership, or at least temporary ownership. Permanent ownership resides in the "sides of the board"; that is, one side is mine, the other is yours.

A move consists of picking up the entire contents of any cup on one's own side of and redistributing the beads, one in each suceeding cup, in a counterclockwise direction. The term 'sowing' is often used to describe this process and is very apt. It is part of the game that some of these beads will go around the end of the row and over to the opponent's side. This is not a permanent loss, however, since they may be regained in a subsequent move. It may at times even be strategically desirable to do this in order to upset your opponent's arrangements. Certain cups may be omitted from this sowing process in some games. The significance of any move is determined by the cups in which the last bead of a handful lands. To generalize, this may result in (i) the move being over, (ii) a second move which may follow a prescribed pattern or in another version be at the discretion of the player, or (iii) the capture of some of the opponent's beads. There are certain exceptions to the counterclockwise rule in East Africa which are not permitted in mankala elsewhere.

All games provide rules for capturing beads from the opponent's side of the board and most also allow captures from one's own side. A game is over when one of the players no longer has enough beads on his side to make any effective moves. The winner is then decided by the number of beads each has captured.

Enkeshui

Enkeshui is a mankala-type game played by the Maasai and illustrates the East African pattern of 'world' variations. The description that follows is based on observations around Narok and Maasai Mara, around the town of Ngong, and Amboseli. It also illustrates one of the main difficulties in learning the rules of a game-variety from direct observation - namely, the difficulty in distinguishing the difference between rules, strategic considerations, and removals irrelevant to the actual course of the game. The board has two rows, eight, ten or twelve cups in a row. It may be significant that only even numbers are used. Among the Maasai the even numbers have female connotations and this might subconsciously be related to the symbolism of placing seeds in cups. Women do not play the game. Twelve is the preferred number but eight is common because the board is much easier to carry. Eight is also used by beginners. Two common starting arrangements are shown below:

3 3 0 3 3 0 3 3 0 3 3 0
0 3 3 0 3 3 0 3 3 0 3 3

4 4 4 4 4 4 0 0
0 0 4 4 4 4 4 4

The two zeros may be at either end of the row as long as they are at opposite ends. Both rows contain 48 beads. This is of interest because the number 48 is considered to be ritually propitious. These 'beads' are traditionally stone pebbles, but these days are also cast aluminium or carved plastic. The aluminium beads are hammered to make them round and the plastic ones are carved with a sharp knife. The latter look much like dried seeds. An individual counter is called a "cow", a cup is called a "kraal-camp", and a cup containing four counters, as described in rule 2 below, is called a "bull". To capture an opponent's counters or beads is "to eat", and to complete a move and come to a stop is "to sleep". The latter two terms are common to all East African versions.

Rule 1. Although there are certain formalities involved in starting a game, let us suppose that player 'A' starts. All moves will be described from his point of view. 'A' picks up the entire contents of any cup on his own side of the board and sows the beads one by one counterlockwise as described in previous section. If the last of a handful lands in an empty pit on B's side, the move is over and 'A' sleeps. If it lands in an occupied pit on either side, the last "cow" and the entire contents of that pit

are picked up and the move continues. Once a move is begun no distinction is made between the two sides of the board and the sowing continues right across the boundaries until the player "sleeps".

2. If the last of a handful lands in a pit already containing three "cows", so that it now contains four, that pit is termed a "bull" and belongs to the player that made it. It can no longer be moved and any "cow" that falls into it in passing stays there. The beads in a "bull" can at any time be removed and placed in a less crowded "bull" or removed to any safe place away from the board. This does not affect the status of that pit as a "bull" belonging to a certain owner. Any move ending in a "bull" "sleeps". It is also possible to form a pair of "bulls" if the last two of a handful form three and four in adjacent pits. The three and four may be in either order.

3. Assume 'A' is playing. If the last of a handful lands in an empty pit on his own side and there is at least one "cow" in B's pit directly opposite, the contents of both pits are captured by 'A' and may be placed in any of his "bulls" or in a safe place away from the board. If B's pit is empty or is a "bull", 'A' "sleeps".

4. If a capture is made as in rule 3, and the pit making the capture is followed by a continuous string of one or more empty pits on A's side, and each of these has "cows" in the opposite pit on B's side, the contents of these pits are also captured. Here is an example:

.	.	.	.	(2)	(1)	(3)	2
.	.	2	1	(0)	0	0	1

If the 2 is moved to the right the contents of all the pits marked by parenthesis are "eaten" including the "cow" that landed in the pit marked (0). 'A' "sleeps" after a capture.

5. Once a player has gone completely around his opponent's side of the board and returned to his own he is allowed to play in either direction.

6. Unlike in draughts, a player is not compelled to make a capture if he does not feel it is strategically desirable to do so.

7. Games are often begun in the following manner: Both players start simultaneously from the far right-hand cup, sowing the beads as fast as they can. The one who sleeps first or the one who goes farthest before sleeping, makes the first move of the regular game. The manual dexterity displayed during this procedure is highly valued. Which of the two is used to decide the beginner appears to be a local variation. This procedure is watched carefully by the supporters of both sides as errors are easily made.

8. It is sometimes permitted that each player make an advance move. This move allows a player to take the contents of any two of his pits and redeploy them on his own side in any way he sees fit.

9. The game is over when one player no longer has any "cows" on his side with which to carry on the game. His opponent then places all the remaining "cows" on his side into one of his "bulls" and any that he may have laid aside. The winner is the one with the most "cows", including all those in the cups that have become 'bulls'.

Bets may be placed on either side by placing a pebble or an unused bead near the side of the board which the bettor favors. Series of games are often played and are organized in two ways: Firstly, it may be agreed that the series should consist of a certain number of games and a record of wins and losses is kept with small twigs. Secondly, the "cows" won in one round are replaced on the board starting from the right. The player with a surplus removes them from the game and the player with a deficit must continue without them. The game continues until one player does not have enough "cows" to fill his right-hand cup. He is then the loser.

The most interesting thing about enkeshui is not the rules but how the game is played. As with many things Maasai, it is generally a group effort with decisions taken according to principles of egalitarianism and consensus. Each side consists of a "floating" team of up to five members each. This requires some explanation. Players may join a game already in progress and may leave during the middle of a game they have started. One difficulty in learning the game is that once one has started a game others will join in and eventually take over if, in their eyes, one's own playing is not sufficiently competent. A team member may suggest a move by making a trial move which will either be allowed to stand or will be retracted and replaced by another move. Since this is goingon on both sides of the board, considerable confusion results. Cheating is common and often attempted. If it is detected by a member of the opposing team, he simply retracts the move. This may even give the impression that someone is playing on the wrong side of the board. A move may also be retracted if it is put forward by someone not sufficiently high ranking to participate in the game other than as a spectator. This practice results in extreme difficulty for anyone attempting to learn the game. Many young Maasai today do not know how to play properly for this reason.

Mweso

Mweso is one of the many names of what is probably the best known East African version of mankala. It is played from Lamu southwards along the entire Swahili coast and inland to all the areas contacted by the Arab traders. This includes the area west of Lake Victoria, all of Uganda and north into the Sudan. Further south, mweso is found in the western Congo and in Malawi. Four row boards are also found in north-western Kenya. There is remarkably little variation in the rules and what variation there is consists of details such as the starting positions. A board of four rows with eight cups in each row is standard. There are exceptions, however— four-by-seven boards are used in

Zaire, four-by-ten in the Sudan. One board of four-by-thirteen has recently been found carved into solid rock on an island in Lake Baringo. It was apparently still in use. Nevertheless, four-by-eight is by far the most common. There are always two counters per cup, usually 64 altogether. The large degree of standardization in the rules and the fact that it is not played by any of the tribes that did not have close Arab contact suggests that its introduction into East Africa is fairly recent compared with the other, two-row, games played here. Perhpas the game was invented by the Swahilis. It is probable that at present mweso is gaining in popularity. A very good description of the game as it is played in Uganda is given in Omweso, a Game People Play in Uganda by M.B. Msimbi, (Uganda Publishing House). It includes much detail such as the names used by the various Uganda tribes, the Luganda terms for certain special board configurations, and various customs surrounding the game in that country. In order to avoid duplicating what Msimbi has done so well, only a summary of the basic rules of that variation will be given. Rules for series of games and for special models of play are also given in his book and will not be repeated here.

Buganda--Omweso The Baganda play on a very carefully chiseled four-by-eight board. They are probably the most ornamental boards in common use in East Africa. A typical board is about 2 cm thick and 30 cm. by 50 cm. in area. The cups are square with sloping sides and closely adjoin each other with no gaps. Two models are in use. One type has a handle in the middle of one end, the other has two hinges and folds lengthwise. The boards are always carved with a slight rounding-in at the ends: This makes them rather reminiscent of the Buganda dress styles. The counters are natural seeds. They are almost perfectly round, ca. 1.2 cm. in diameter and rather uniform in size. They are black and very hard. The scientific name is mesoneurum wewitschianum. Only men play the game in Uganda.

The three diagrams below explain the terms that will be used in describing the game. Each of the diagrams also shows a different way of setting up the initial positions. Diagram (a) shows that each opponent has two rows of the board. To make a move, the entire contents of any cup in the player's own two rows are picked up and sowed in the direction of the arrows in diagram (b). When the last seed is put down, the move is continued by picking up the entire contents of the cup in which the last seed landed. This includes the last seed of the previous handful. A move is over when the last of a handful lands in an empty cup. Then the other player makes his move.

The key to the game is in the last seed of a handful. If it lands in a previously occupied cup in a player's front row and both the front and back cups of the opponent's side in the same column are occupied, the player captures the contents of both the cups on the opponent's side. He takes these captured seeds and places the first of these in the same cup where he placed the first of the previous handful. From there he continues sowing as before. This is the only circumstance in which seeds cross from one side to the other. It is not obligatory to make a capture if it is not strategically desired.

diagram columns

(a)

4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	back row — side two
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	front row
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	front row
4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	back row — side one

(b)

4*←0←4←0←4←0←4←0←0
↓ ↑
0→4→0→4→0→4→0→4→4

* starting position

direction of movement

4←0←4←0←4←0←4←0←0
↓ ↑
0→4→0→4→0→4→0→4→4*

(c)

2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2

[ ] special areas

There is one exception to the counterclockwise rule: If the last of a handful lands in one of the areas labeled "special areas" in diagram (c), and there are already seeds in the cup in which the handful ends, it is allowable to continue the move in the reverse direction. This allowed only if an immediate capture is made. It is not permissible to loop around the right-hand end during a reverse move.

It is illegal to pick up an isolated seed. Since the game is over when one player can no longer make any moves, it is over when he has only single seeds scattered across his side or will be in this position in the forseeable future. This player then loses.

A player may at any time "pass" or omit a move at his discretion. If his opponent also passes then he is forced to make the move. It is common to decide the player to make the first move in the same way the Maasai do when playing omweso: both players start simultaneously from the places marked in diagram (b). The first to sleep begins the next move of the regular game. The most interesting feature of mweso as opposed to other versions of mankala is that seeds must be removed from the board.

Lango (Uganda) — Coro The only difference between this and omweso is that repeated captures are slightly more difficult; the contents of one's own cup opposite the captured counters are picked up with those of the two cups on the opponent's side.

Lamu — Kombe The Lamu board contains one feature that is also found in Malawi: the cups marked with the square in (d) are carved square, and are slightly larger than the others. Apparently during well-played games large numbers of counters tend to accumulate there. There are also a number of specialized

games which make much use of these large cups. They might be compared to the various puzzle games based on chess. Unfortunately none of the rules are available. Both men and women play the game in Lamu.

The board itself is generally rather large and quite solidly made. It consists of a single slab of wood about 3½ to 4 cm. thick and 35 cm. by 70 cm. in area. The board may have two large pockets extending from one end. These play a role in some of the specialized games mentioned above. They are not used in the regular game.

The counters used are natural seeds about 2 cm. across but oval and rather flat. They come in various shades of greyish-brown and green - rather pretty and looking a little like olives. Besides their convenient size, they have one great advantage over all other types - the seed inside the shell is loose and rattles. This means they bounce very little when dropped and tend to fall "dead". Two seeds grow together in a flat, brittle, thorny, reddish-brown pod about 4 cm. by 7 cm. The pod grows on a bush. The Kampala seeds, by way of contrast, can be very troublesome if they bounce onto a hard floor from a table, and are very easy to lose. The beads used in Nigeria are identical with the ones in Lamu. The favored starting position is shown below:

(d)

	5	5	5	5	0	0	0	0
	2	2	2	6	0	0	0	0
	0	0	0	0	6	2	2	2
	0	0	0	0	5	5	5	5

underlining marks square cups

Note that the total contents still number 64.

There are two differences in the rules between kombe and omweso: In kombe, (i) Only the contents of the opponent's front row are captured (the conditions for capture remain the same); (ii) reverse moves are permitted for indirect captures. That is, the ruling that one may not loop around the other end remains. It is also permitted to begin a move with an indirect reverse capture.

It is desirable to distribute the seeds in as "tricky" a fashion as possible. For example, if a player knows that the last of a handful will land in a given place, he will start there and distribute the seeds backwards. This combined with the requirement that the moves be executed as fast as possible can make it difficult for an inexperienced person to follow the game.

Mombasa-Mongale This version differs in some details from kombe, but they are not on record. The favored starting position is shown:

4	4	4	0	0	0	0	0
2	2	2	0	7	0	0	7
7	0	0	7	0	2	2	2
0	0	0	0	0	4	4	4

If, at any time, he has none, the game is over. The seeds left on the opponent's side belong to the opponent. The winner is the one with the most seeds.

As with the Maasai, it is common practice to continue the game into a second phase. One proceeds like this: The person with the fewer seeds replaces them on the board in any arrangement he choses. Much experience is required to take maximum advantage of this opportunity. Some versions of the game do not require one to replace on the board all the seeds or stones that one has. In addition, if the loser of the first game has less than half of his original number of counters, he may ask that the board be shortened by two cups in each row, to a minimum of three. His opponent, who has the most counters, places an equal number in each cup on his side opposite to the ones placed by the loser. Some versions require that the winner place double the number in each of his cups, if the loser has less than half. The game then continues as before until one player cannot continue. The second game is begun by the loser; after that the two take turns.

Ndoto is played by the Kilinje. The game as recorded below is extremely simple. It may be that some of the more sophisticated minor rules are missing. It seems to be a 'stripped down' version of some other game. There is, for example, only one mode of capture while most games contain two. (For example, forward and reverse capture in mweso; simple capture and making 'bulls' in enkeshui.)

Ndoto is played on a two-by-eight board with beads in each pocket, as shown below:

2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2

2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2

It is common to decide the player to start the game by the same method as in enkeshui: Both players start simultaneously at high speed from the right-hand cup and the first to sleep has the next move.

A move is made, as is usual in East Africa, by picking up the entire contents of any one cup on the player's side and sowing the beads in the counterclockwise direction. When the last of a handful lands, that bead and the entire contents of that pit are used to continue the sowing. If the last of a handful lands in an empty cup, the move is over. Then it is the opponent's turn.

If the last of a handful lands in an empty cup on one's own side, and the cup opposite contains one or more beads, these beads are captured. The move is over after a capture.

It is not permitted to move from a cup containing only one bead that is not followed by an empty cup. In other words, a single bead cannot be used to begin a chained move. It can, however, be used to make a capture.

The game is over when one side has no beads left with which to play.

Each player then keeps the beads left on his side. The winner is the one with the most beads.

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