

Mancala

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Mancala is a family of board games played around the world, sometimes called "sowing" games, or "count-and-capture" games, which describes the game-play. *Mancala* games play a role in many African and some Asian societies comparable to that of chess in the West, or the game of Go in Eastern Asia. The list of *mancala* games best known in the Western world includes *Kalah* and *Oware*. Other games are *Congkak*, *Omweso*, *Ünee tugalulakh*, *Bao*, *Sungka* and *Igisoro*.

The word *mancala* comes from the Arabic word *naqala* meaning literally "to move." There is no one game with the name *mancala*; instead *mancala* is a type, or designation, of game. This word is used in Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt, but is not consistently applied to any one game.

In the USA, however, "*mancala*" is often used as a synonym for the game *Kalah*.

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General gameplay

Mancala games share a common general gameplay sequence. Players begin by placing a certain number of seeds, prescribed by the variation in use, in each of the pits on the game board. A player may count their stones to plot the game. A turn consists of removing all seeds from a pit, *sowing* the seeds (placing one in each of the following pits in sequence), and capturing based on the state of board. This leads to the English phrase "Count and Capture" sometimes used to describe the gameplay. Although the details differ greatly, this general sequence applies to all games.

Equipment

Equipment is typically a board, constructed of various materials, with a series of holes arranged in rows, usually two or four. Some games are more often played with holes dug in the earth, or carved in stone. The holes may be referred to as "depressions", "pits", or "houses". Sometimes, large holes on the ends of the board, called *stores*, are used for holding the pieces. Playing pieces are seeds, beans, stones, cowry shells, or other small undifferentiated counters that are placed in and transferred about the holes during play. Nickernuts are one common example of pieces used. Board configurations vary among different games but also within variations of a given game; for example Endodoi is played on boards from 2×6 to 2×10 .



Wooden Mancala Board from West Africa

With a two-rank board, players usually are considered to control their respective sides of the board, although

moves often are made into the opponent's side. With a four-rank board, players control an inner row and an outer row, and a player's seeds will remain in these closest two rows unless the opponent captured them.

Object

The object of mancala games is usually to capture more stones than the opponent; sometimes, one seeks to leave the opponent with no legal move or to have your side empty first in order to win.

At the beginning of a player's turn, they select a hole with seeds that will be sown around the board. This selection is often limited to holes on the current player's side of the board, as well as holes with a certain minimum number of seeds.

In a process known as *sowing*, all the seeds from a hole are dropped one-by-one into subsequent holes in a motion wrapping around the board. Sowing is an apt name for this activity, since not only are many games traditionally played with seeds, but placing seeds one at a time in different holes reflects the physical act of sowing. If the sowing action stops after dropping the last seed, the game is considered a *single lap* game.

Multiple laps or *relay sowing* is a frequent feature of mancala games, although not universal. When relay sowing, if the last seed during sowing lands in an occupied hole, all the contents of that hole, including the last sown seed, are immediately resown from the hole. The process usually will continue until sowing ends in an empty hole. Another common way to receive "multiple laps" is when the final seed sown lands in your designated hole.

Many games from the Indian subcontinent use *pussa-kanawa laps*. These are like standard multilaps, but instead of continuing the movement with the contents of the last hole filled, a player continues with the next hole. A pussakanawa lap move will then end when a lap ends just prior to an empty hole. If a player ends his stone with a point move he gets a "free turn"

Capturing

Depending on the last hole sown in a lap, a player may *capture* stones from the board. The exact requirements for capture, as well as what is done with captured stones, vary considerably among games. Typically, a capture requires sowing to end in a hole with a certain number of stones, ending across the board from stones in specific configurations, or landing in an empty hole adjacent to an opponents hole that contains one or more pieces.

Another common way of capturing is to capture the stones that reach a certain number of seeds at any moment.

Also, several games include the notion of capturing holes, and thus all seeds sown on a captured hole belong at the end of the game to the player who captured it.

History

One of the earliest evidence of the game are fragments of a pottery board and several rock cuts found in Aksumite Ethiopia in Matara (now in Eritrea) and Yeha (in Ethiopia), which are dated by archaeologists to between the 6th and 7th century AD; the game may have been mentioned by Giyorgis of Segla in his 14th century Ge'ez text "Mysteries of Heaven and Earth", where he refers to a game called qarqis, a term used in Ge'ez to refer to both Gebet'a (Mancala) and *Sant'araz* (modern *sent'erazh*, Ethiopian Chess).^[1] The similarity of some aspects of the game to agricultural activity and the absence of a need for specialized equipment present the intriguing possibility that it could date to the beginnings of civilization itself; however, there is little verifiable evidence that the game is older than about 1300 years. Some purported evidence comes from the Kurna temple graffiti in Egypt, as reported by Parker in 1909 and Murray in his "Board games other than chess". However, accurate dating of this graffiti seems to be



Ancient Gebeta (i.e. mancala) holes in the base of an Aksumite stele, Axum, Ethiopia.

unavailable, and what designs have been found by modern scholars generally resemble games common to the Roman world, rather than anything like Mancala.

Although the games existed in pockets in Europe -- it is recorded as being played as early as the 17th century by merchants in England^[*citation needed*] -- it has never gained much popularity in most regions, except in the Baltic area, where once it was a very popular game ("Bohnspiel") and Bosnia, where it is called Ban-Ban and still played today. Mancala has also been found in Serbia^[*citation needed*], Bulgaria^[*citation needed*], Greece ("Mandoli", Cyclades) and in a remote castle in southern Germany (Schloss Weikersheim).

The USA has a larger mancala playing population. A traditional mancala game called Warra was still played in Louisiana in the early 20th century. In Cape Verde, Mancala is known as "ouril". It is played in the Islands and was brought to America by Cape Verdean immigrants. It is played to this day in Cape Verdean communities in New England.

Psychology

Like other board games, Mancala games have led to psychological studies. Retschitzki has studied the cognitive processes used by awale players^[2]. Some of Restchitzki's results on memory and problem solving have recently been simulated by Gobet with the CHREST computer model^[3]. De Voogt has studied the psychology of Bao playing^[4].

See also

- List of mancala games

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2. ^ Retschitzki, J. (1990). Stratégies des Joueurs d'Awélé. Édition L'Harmattan, Paris (France)
3. ^ Gobet, F. (2009). Using a cognitive architecture for addressing the question of cognitive universals in cross-cultural psychology: The example of awalé. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 40, 627-648.
4. ^ Voogt, A. J. de (1995) Limits of the Mind: Towards a Characterisation of Bao Mastership, Leiden: CNWS Publications

External links

- Mancala World - the largest wiki on mancala games
- A great introduction from MSO.
- General information on "Count and Capture Games"
- Mancala, Oware and Bao history and descriptions

- Play Mancala Online Free - popular mancala variant "kalah"
- In pictures: Sudan's calculating game *BBC*

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