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MAKONN AND THE INDIAN OCEAN: EAST AFRICAN SLAVE TRADE AND THE DISPERSAL OF RULES

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An unpublished game with few rules may disperse through the work of a single traveler, but a mancala game requires practice considering the complex interaction of its rules. Mancala rules cannot travel as a consistent whole without long-term contact between players or the migration of players (see [9]). As a consequence, the presence of a series of near identical mancala games across wide geographical areas is only explained through intensive contact. Such contact is possibly established through trade, assuming that the traders also play. A second, equally credible, mode of dispersal is migration in which a group of players settles in another area. Slave trade, it is generally assumed [1], has brought games from West Africa to the Caribbean. This trade moves groups of people, creating dispersal as with migration. The situation on the Seychelles suggests that East African slave trade [6] and mancala are linked in the Indian Ocean.

The Seychelles are an independent island country in the Indian Ocean, located between Madagascar, the Maldiv Islands, Oman and the African coast, including Tanzania, Kenya and Mozambique. Mancala games have been attested for all countries surrounding the Seychelles [2, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10]. Contrary to its neighbours, the Seychelles were uninhabited until the end of the seventeenth century when French settlers took possession of the islands. African slaves were introduced in the course of the eighteenth century and slavery has continued well into the nineteenth century [4]. The supply of slaves is said to have originated in Mozambique and sometimes occurred via the island of Zanzibar.

During a visit to the Seychelles in 2007, the following rules were collected of the game of *Makonn* that is still being played in the islands. Its popularity

coincides with that of *baka* (or *bacca*, see [4, p.80]), a local alcoholic drink based on fermented sugar cane. The rules below were collected at a baka bar where the owner played and taught *Makonn*.

The players

The National Historic Museum at Mahé owns one *Makonn* playing board [access number 0119/99]. It consists of four rows of ten holes and, according to the museum information, was brought in by World War I soldiers as a souvenir. With the assistance of the senior curator Ms Bella Rose and assistant senior Curator Miss Jeanne Pothin, the following players were located near the capital Mahé.

On March 22, 2007, Barry Marengo (1933–) was invited to the museum and illustrated the game using the museum board. He confirmed that the name was *Makonn* and that the configuration had always been four by ten holes. He played with stones, although cowry shells are also known to be used, that were placed one by one in each hole and he spread the stones in anti-clockwise direction. Singles were not allowed to be played unless the player had singles only. He had learned the game at age fourteen and used to play in a group of circa eight players.

Two days later a visit was paid to Robin Pierre Marie (1934–) who owns a *lakanbiz* or baka-bar in Pointe La Rue, south of Mahé. In his bar there was one *Makonn board*, a ten by ten draughts board and another board game similar to draughts and known as *Damn la tete*. On arrival players were involved in playing *Makonn*.

Mr Marie started his bar in 1989 and used a self-made board for play. The players in the bar were mostly taught by the owner although in former days other players, already familiar with the game, had also joined. He started playing the game at age sixteen and also played in Diego Garcia from 1959 onwards with other men from the Seychelles and Mauritius. He later played in Desroches, part of the Amirantes archipelago and Aldabra. In 1988 he left Desroches and returned to Mahé where he had resided since he was nine. He was originally brought up on the island of La Digue.

The game was not known to him with any configuration other than four rows of ten holes. Since the game is associated with drinking *baka*, women do not commonly play with men but they are known to play the game in separate areas. Both Mr Marie and Mr Marengo were not familiar with any competition or tournament play for this game.

The National Sports Council produced a document in which the game of

Makonn is described but the rules cannot be inferred from this description [3]. The following rules were obtained after observing, playing and asking questions about the game of *Makonn* in Pointe La Rue.

The *Makonn* rules

Makonn is played on a board with four rows of eight holes. It needs forty counters, usually stones or shells. Each player owns two rows of eight holes that are closest to the player as well as the counters in those rows. The object of the game is to capture all counters of the opponent.

The game can be divided in three stages.

The opening

The game starts with one counter in each hole. One player begins by rearranging the counters in the two rows owned by that player. The player may rearrange these counters in any way as long as they remain on the board and on the player's side of the board. One counter may be placed in order to capture the opposite occupied holes of the opponent (for capture moves, see middle game).

Once ready, the other player may rearrange the other part of the board and, if possible, also place a counter to capture the content of the opposite hole(s).

The middle game

Once the counters have been arranged, the first player starts a move by picking up the contents of a hole on the player's side that contains more than one counter. These counters are placed one-by-one in consecutive holes in counter-clockwise direction within the player's own two rows. When the last counter of such a sowing reaches an occupied hole, that hole is emptied and the contents are sowed starting in the next hole and in the same way and direction. This continues until the last counter of a sowing ends in an empty hole.

When the last counter ends in an empty hole the move ends or the player makes a capture. The player can only capture if this empty hole is directly adjacent to an occupied hole of the opponent. The complete contents of the opponent's hole and, if present, the contents of the hole directly behind this hole in the back row of the opponent, are captured and taken from the board.

This game continues until one player has nothing left and lost the game or when one player has only holes with single counters in which case this player enters the singles game.

The singles game

If a player has only single counters in the two rows of holes, this player is still allowed to play. The player may now move a single counter in the same way and direction, but only into an empty hole. It is not allowed to play a single into a hole that already contains a counter. Captures are made in the same way as in the middle game.

Since the game starts with all holes containing a single counter, it is necessary that in the opening game at least one change is made to allow the players to make a move.

The rules of the singles end-game is much similar to the game of *Hawalis* found in Oman. The games found in Zanzibar and Madagascar, although featuring four rows, are much different. Instead, similar games may be found in Mozambique. A brief comparison between Oman and Seychelles mancala suggests that in both countries the game of mancala was introduced from a similar areathe Mozambiquan coast.

The comparison

Oman boasts a four-row mancala game, one of few found outside of the African continent (see [10]). It is played by men in clubs and despite its recent decline it can still be found in Muscat near taxi stands where card and other games are also practiced. The Omani fixed the board to four rows of seven holes and usually play in the sand using stones. The game strongly resembles descriptions that have been made of Mozambiquan mancala games [2].

Makonn is fixed on four rows of ten holes but despite the larger board, the rules and thereby the playing strategies are remarkably similar to those of *Hawalis*. The following list shows some of their similarities:

	<i>Hawalis (Oman)</i>	<i>Makonn (Seychelles)</i>
playing counters:	stones, pebbles	stones, pebbles
playing direction:	counterclockwise	counterclockwise
places of capture:	capture front±back	capture frontback
exception to play:	no singles played	no singles played
	if only singles rules change	if only singles rules change

Moving and capturing counters are near identical in these two games. The main differences are found in the size of the board and the opening game that is fixed in Oman with more than one counter in each hole and open to more variation on the Seychelles where the configuration of counters is changed by the players. The singles end-game is almost identical and requires specific playing tactics.

There is no link between the Seychelles and Oman in their history or in their present contacts. It is argued that the slaves that entered the Seychelles played a similar game compared to the game introduced by Africans that settled in Oman. The opposite route in which Omani traders introduced the game to the East African mainland from where the game spread to the Seychelles is ruled out. No other four-row games appear in Oman or near Oman, instead two-row games abound in the Middle East and the Indian Sub-continent with rules that do not compare to those found in Oman.

It is concluded that African slaves from specific regions on the East African coast have been instrumental in distributing a four-row game of mancala to Oman and the Seychelles where these games can still be found today with few local variations. With increasing knowledge of mancala in the Indian Ocean, the distribution patterns of mancala invariably follow (slave) trade routes that date from the age of coastal trade and migration.



Mr Marie observing a Makonn game. Mahé, Seychelles, 2007

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Board Games Studies was first published in 1998, an initiative inspired by the colloquia on board games held at Leiden University, the Netherlands, in 1995 and 1997. Five institutions affiliated themselves with the journal: the Institut für Spielforschung und Spielpädagogik in Salzburg, the International Institute for Asian Studies in Leiden, the Russian Chess Museum in Moscow, the British Museum in London, and the Department of Computer Science at the University of Maastricht. The journal, which was published by CNWS Publications in Leiden on a yearly basis, was partially funded through the assistance of patrons and boasted a modern layout, trilingual summaries and color plates. The broad ambition of this journal required a continuous commitment from the editors, who reviewed contributions in German, French and English, provided translations of summaries for each article and, in several cases, collaborated extensively with authors to develop manuscripts that were to the academic standards of the publication. The journal had a trial run of three years, after which the format, content and review process was evaluated. The authors of the articles integrated wide-ranging literature necessary for a comprehensive understanding of particular games. Contributions from different disciplines — including psychology, computer science, philology, classical archaeology and history — allowed for a better historical and systematic understanding of board games to emerge. Starting in 2000, a section with a translation of primary sources was added. Book reviews and research notes further complemented the multi-faceted contents. Its first ambition, to serve as a platform for the publication of board games research, was met quickly, while gradually the journal gained prominence among researchers by publishing seminal historical overviews. The colloquia continued from 1995 onwards, moving from a biennial to a yearly schedule. The host institution was expanded beyond Leiden to universities and museums throughout Europe as well as Jerusalem, Philadelphia and, in 2013, the Azores. The colloquia continue to gather an enthusiastic group of scholars, players and collectors. Despite the institutional affiliations and a group of patrons, the production of the journal became financially and logistically problematic with CNWS no longer able to serve as a publisher. Reluctantly, the paper version of the journal was discontinued after volume 7 was published in 2004. The possibility of an online version of the journal had been explored with the online publication of the first issues, a decision that greatly assisted the dissemination of knowledge accumulated in those early volumes. The next step, an online journal that operates again as a platform for recent board games research, was not far away but required the skills and enthusiasm of previous and new editors to materialize. In these last fifteen years, the study of board games has gained momentum and this journal will not only showcase new results but, most of all, will encourage and publicize the work of the dedicated researchers in this field.

Alex de Voogt



To the authors

Board Game Studies is an academic journal for historical and systematic research on board games. Its object is to provide a forum for board games research from all academic disciplines in order to further our understanding of the development and distribution of board games within an interdisciplinary academic context. Articles are accepted in English, French, and German and will be refereed by at least two editors under the final responsibility of the Editorial Board. Please send your contributions in any editable format (Word, L^AT_EX, rtf, ...) with a matching PDF file. Please send all the illustrations in separate files.

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