

Games and Pastimes of Southern Nigeria

By R. J. Newberry

PART III.—*Ayo*

“**A**YO” is what the Yoruba calls a game, which, with slight modifications, is played by many tribes scattered throughout Central Africa. On the Gold Coast it is called “*Warri*,” and among the Ibo “*Okwe*.”

Yoruba folk of all ages and both sexes play *ayo*, but in some parts the men discourage the women and small boys who show signs of making the game an almost full-time occupation. Many of the men, especially the older ones, are confirmed *ayo* addicts, and may be seen sitting at the game for hours on end. In Lagos, men often warn boys against becoming too fond of the game by relating the following story.

“One day a man who spent all his spare time playing *ayo* was deeply engrossed in a game when a messenger came running to tell him that his house was on fire. The player addressed did not take the report seriously, and was so little alarmed at the news that whenever his opponent was slow to play he twitted him saying: ‘*Ta! Nwọn ni ile enjo!*’ (‘Play! They say your house is burning!’). Later, when the game was over, and the speaker went to his house, he found it burnt to the ground.”

Grown-ups usually play in the evening when the day’s work is done, but old men, no longer active, often settle down to the game as soon as they have finished their morning meal.

The apparatus required for *ayo* is simple: 48 seeds of the plant *Casalpinia crista* (Yor. *igi ayo*), and a piece of smoothed timber, measuring roughly two feet by eight inches, and about two and a half inches thick. In the wider surface of the latter twelve cup-like hollows, large enough to allow the insertion of four bent fingers, are carved in two rows of six running the long way of the board. The board is called “*ọpọn ayo*” (*ayo*, tray or trough), and is usually provided with a handle at either end; it also may be decorated with patterns carved in low relief according to the fancy of the carver.

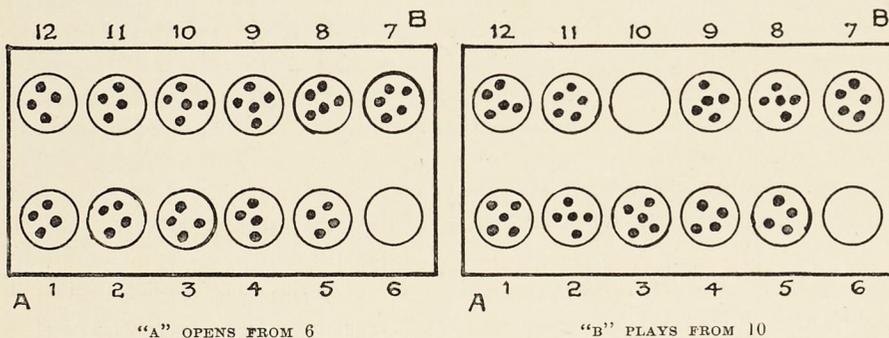
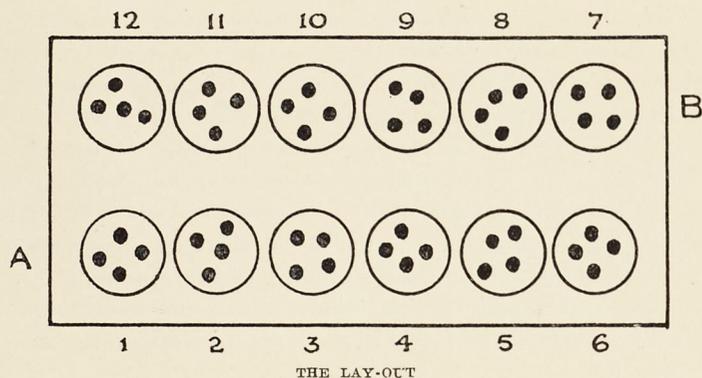
There are three versions, or rather, separate games of *ayo* commonly played by the Yorubas, namely, “*ayoyayo*,” “*j’erin*,” and “*j’odu*,” but each starts with four seeds in each “*ile*” (house), as the holes are called. There

are many rules which are by no means obvious to the uninitiated spectator, and so, at the risk of their seeming tedious, the descriptions which follow are of a rather detailed nature.

Ayoyayo.

This is the commonest of the three forms of ayo. Two players sitting on opposite sides of the board play in turn by taking the seeds from one of their own 'houses' and dropping one of these seeds in each of the successive houses to the right of that from which the seeds were removed, and continuing to do so, moving in a counter-clockwise direction, until the hand is empty, with the object of making the total number of seeds in certain of the opponent's houses up to two or three, these being the numbers which make it possible for the attacking player to take and hold them as part of his winnings, subject to the conditions explained below.

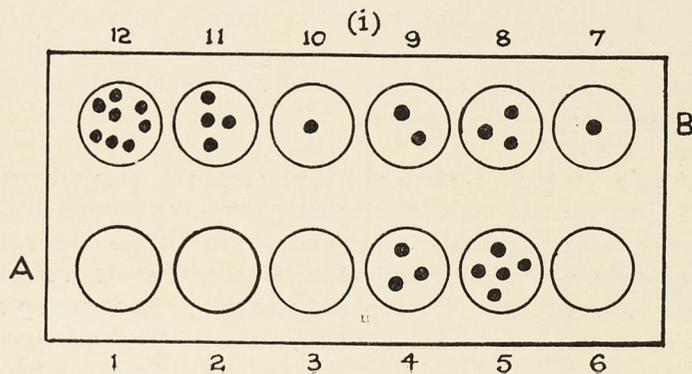
In the three diagrams which follow it is supposed that the player "A" makes the first move, followed, of course, by "B," and that the houses are numbered in rotation in the direction of the moves to simplify the explanation. (The "*ofo* ayo" is never so numbered).

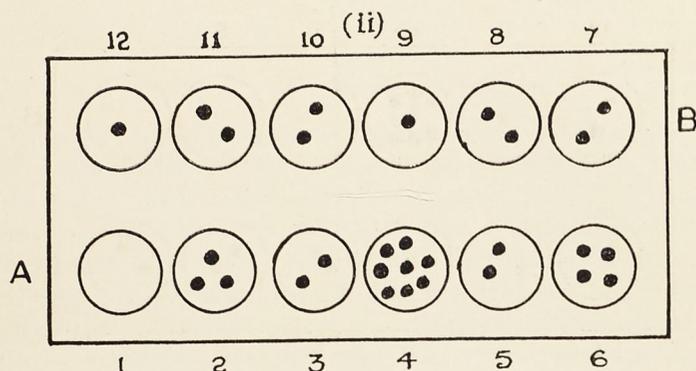


(" A " may open from any one of his houses.)

" A " begins by taking the four seeds from one of his houses, and drops them in the next four houses to the right as described above, thus increasing the totals of those houses to five apiece.

" B," following him, plays in the same way, though if he opens from one of his houses which now contain five seeds he may move further round the board than did his opponent. Both players now have an empty house, and they continue to play alternately as described. A moment's reflection will make it clear that soon there will be some houses with either one or two seeds in them, and it is at such a stage that a player begins to 'eat' (take or win), the seeds in his opponent's houses. The rule is that a player may only take seeds from the opposite side of the board, provided the last seed dropped makes the total in the last hole reached up to two or three. Otherwise the fact that he has made several twos and threes during his move does not count, and he may not remove any seeds from the board. When, however, not only the last house reached in a gambit contains two or three seeds, but also the houses on his opponent's side immediately preceding it, the player may 'eat' from all such houses, provided that (a) these houses are adjacent to each other, and (b) no more than five houses are emptied in this way. It will be appreciated that if it were permitted to remove the contents of all the opponent's houses at once the game would end prematurely through the opponent having no seeds for his next move. Diagrams may make these last points more clear :



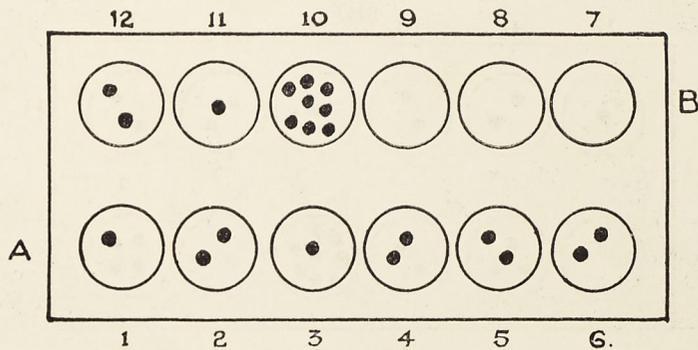


In (i.), "A," by playing from 5 into 6,7,8,9, and 10, can 'eat' from 10 and 9, but not from 7, since, although 7 contains two seeds, a bar is formed by a "non-eatable" total in 8, as explained in (a) of the last paragraph.

In (ii.), if "A" plays from 4, then all the houses on the opposite side will be vulnerable—having totals of twos and threes—but "A" will take only those in 12,11,10, 9, and 8 in that order, leaving the contents of 7 for his opponent to carry on with (see (b) above).

A large number of seeds in one house, as shown in 12 (i.), is called "odu," the play which leads to the formation of such a reserve being called "ikun odu" ("filling the treasury.") Most players collect an "odu" during the game, and a special move consisting of the transfer, *en bloc*, of the seeds in a house to the one next to it, is allowed each player once during a game. A win can be brought about without using this move, and expert players occasionally dispense with it.

As the game progresses, more and more seeds are removed from play, and the few that remain are sooner or later strung out in a succession of ones and twos, a very vulnerable arrangement. The player makes the most of the situation by using, if he can, just the number of seeds to reach round to the head of his opponent's string, and removing at one swoop most of the seeds left on the board. For example, if it is "B's" move when the board appears as below he may capture as many as 16 seeds, including the six played by himself, if he plays from 10 :—

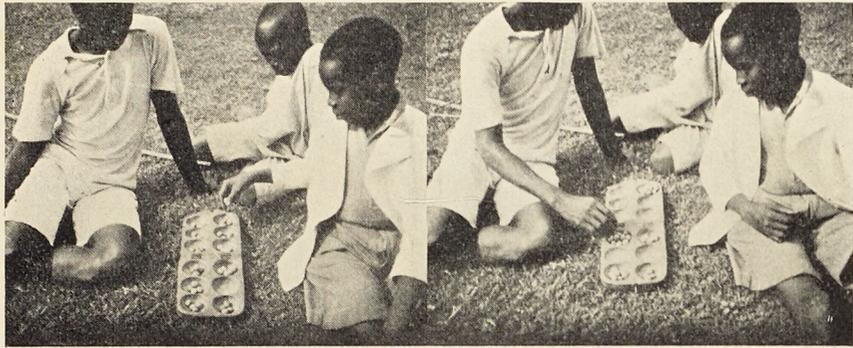


He does not 'eat' in houses 11 and 12 as these are on his own side of the board. Play goes on as described until the game is ended in one of the following ways. A player, as a result of his opponent's last move, is left with no seeds on his own side of the board and can retaliate by taking all the seeds left on the other side, a form of penalty exacted from the opponent for having broken the rule that all the houses must not be emptied at once. The game also ends when so few seeds remain as to make further play pointless, *e.g.*, when there are two seeds or less on either side. At the end of the game the seeds are counted by replacing them in fours back on the board, the player who cannot fill his own six houses being the loser.

By tacit agreement the game is played rapidly, with the briefest possible pauses for counting. On seeing the game for the first time the impression may be gained that it is easy to play, but there are many combinations of seed totals possible and arrangements of these different totals among the different houses. Frequent playing and long experience makes each arrangement familiar to the Yoruba *ayo* player, and the unsuspecting novice wonders why he cannot compete with the local performers. The truth is that the novice needs to study his moves, but the speed at which the game is played gives him no time to do this, while the Yoruba expert makes the moves almost mechanically, a glance at the board telling him at once what his gambit must be and what are his chances of a coup.

J'erin.

The seeds are laid out as for '*ayoyayo*,' but the opening move consists of taking the contents of two adjoining houses, four in each hand, from one's own side of the board, and dropping them one by one in the houses lying next in a counter-clockwise direction, as before. The rules for 'eating' are quite different from those in '*ayoyayo*,' but apart from this the moves



“AYOYAYO” I.
PLAYER ON RIGHT MAKING THE
OPENING MOVE

“AYOYAYO” II.
LATER IN THE GAME.
BOTH PLAYERS HAVE FORMED AN
“ODU”

are as follows. When one hand is empty the player continues to move round the board from the point where he left off using the seeds in the other hand. On the last of his seeds being dropped, he takes up all the seeds now in the house in which this seed has fallen and continues to move round the board using his fresh supply of seeds. The gambit is continued as long as his last seed does not drop into an empty house.

Totals of four made during this play are removed from the board and the player continues his circuit of the board unless the last seed in hand makes the number of seeds in the house reached up to four, in which case he removes them, but has nothing with which to continue his move. In “*J'erin*” a player cannot take seeds from his opponent's houses, as in *ayoyayo*, but only from his own side of the board, and if he omits to take any set of seeds to which, by the above rule, he is entitled, his opponent may take them.

The game ends with eight seeds on the board, and all of these are removed by the first player to make a total of four anywhere on the board with his last seed played.

After the game the seeds are replaced in the houses, and in the event of a win (a draw is possible), the winner fills not only his own houses but also some of his opponent's. These extra houses on the other side of the board are now added to his for the next game, in which he is allowed to take ‘fours’ from them. Thus in a second game, a player may have as many as ten houses. Eleven is a possible number, but such a state of affairs gives the opponent no sort of show as it leaves him only one house in which to ‘eat.’

(To be continued).