

AFRICAN MANKALA

(reworked version of paper for National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1984)

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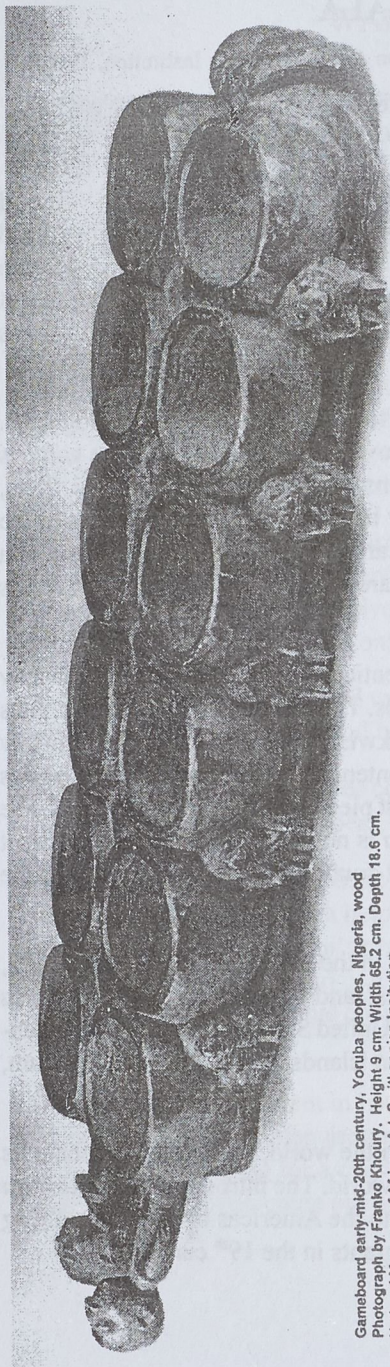
In the United States we play numerous boardgames such as chess and pachisi that originated long ago in distant lands. Other popular boardgames—"Chuba," "Pittfall," "Kahla," and "Oh-Wah-See" came to this country from Africa. In this article we present African *mankala*, the prototype of these commercial games in order to expose a little-known aspect of the African sculptor's art, as well as to reveal the history and significance of such games in their original setting.

Mankala (also spelled *mancala*) is a generic term used to describe a family of boardgames. It derives from the Arabic verb *naqala*, meaning "to move" something about. The game is played by two persons or, on rare occasions, by two teams, on a board containing two, three, or four cuplike depressions or "holes." The board may be simply holes scooped out of the ground; or it may be formed in clay, cast in metal, or carved out of wood in the shape of a square, a rectangle, an oval, or a circle. Some boards are cut into natural rock formations or even exposed roots of trees.

The game is played with a predetermined number of identical pieces or counters which may be made of non-edible seeds, cowry shells, or dung balls. The pieces are placed in the holes and are moved around the board, usually counterclockwise. When playing on a two-row board, the players, rotating turns, remove the entire contents of a hole and drop the pieces one by one into successive holes, stopping when the last piece falls into an empty hole. The goal is to capture the majority of the pieces. *Mankala* is not a game of chance; rather, it requires considerable calculative strategy. It is without doubt a game which appeals to the intellect.

Mankala games are the most widely distributed games in the world and are, or have been, commonly played in the Middle East, and in Central and Southeast Asia as well as throughout Africa. In the New World it is played in the United States, originally in African-American and Syrian communities, on many Caribbean islands, and in Guyana, Surinam, and Brazil.

Although *mankala* is believed to be the oldest game in the world, scholars still debate its antiquity, its origin, and its distribution throughout the world. The introduction of *mankala* in the New World, however, is certain: It was brought to the Americas by Africans during the slave trade and to New York City by Syrian immigrants in the 19th century.



Gameboard early-mid-20th century, Yoruba peoples, Nigeria, wood
Photograph by Franko Khoury. Height 9 cm. Width 65.2 cm. Depth 18.6 cm.
National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution



Gameboard, mid 20th century, Ghana, wood
Height 14 cm. Length 60 cm. Width 19.5 cm.
Collection of Mr. C. Ajae
The plug in the centre caps the compartment where the seeds for playing are stored.

Mankala in historical perspective

A limestone board that was discovered in Memphis, Egypt, by the English archaeologist Sir Flinders Petrie and published in 1927 is probably the oldest extant example of a *mankala* gameboard. It has three rows of fourteen holes and is estimated to be 3,500 years old. Archaeological excavations in southern Cyprus in 1983 yielded a two-sided limestone gameboard of which one side has three rows of fourteen holes. According to Dr. Stuart Swiny, the British archaeologist who directed the dig, the gameboard and pieces found with it date from about 2,500 B.C. and are the oldest examples found on Cyprus. Rockcut gameboards with two rows dating from around the 2nd to the 9th centuries A.D. have been found in Egypt, Turkey, Ethiopia, and Sri Lanka. Four-row boards cut into rocks at various sites in Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Namibia, and Angola remain undated. However, it is not certain that all ancient rock-cut boards were actually used for playing *mankala*. Some may have been used in fertility or divination rituals, for counting, or even for playing other games.

The earliest written reference to *mankala* is found in the 10th-century Arabic text *Kitab al-Aghânî*, or "Book of Songs," by Abu-l Farâj. In it he refers to a "game like *mankala*." Beginning in the 16th century, accounts of European visitors to Africa provide numerous allusions as well as accurate descriptions of *mankala* games that attest to its wide geographical distribution. For example, Father Francesco Alvares, chaplain of the Portuguese embassy in Abyssinia in the 1520s, mentions a gameboard he found at the court of Emperor Lebna Dengel who reigned from 1503 to 1540. In another narrative, *Voyages*, written by a French explorer, Jean de Thévenot, there is a description of *mankala* being played on a two-row, twelve-hole board in the Levant in the 1650s. Dr. Thomas Hyde, an Oxford University professor of Arabic and author of the 1694 treatise, *De Ludis Orientalibus*, gives detailed descriptions of *mankala* games played in Mesopotamia and Jerusalem.

African *mankala* in historical perspective

The earliest accounts to date of *mankala* in sub-Saharan Africa date from the 17th century. The first appears in *The Golden Trade*, 1623, by Richard Jobson, an English supercargo. In Gambia he observed two men playing a game on a "peece of wood, certaine great holes cut" using "some thirtie pibble stones." The second account, in *Histoire de la Grande Isle Madagascar* by Estienne de Flacourt, describes a *mankala* game (*fifangha* in the local language) in Madagascar in the 1640s that was played on a four-row wooden board containing thirty-two holes. Flacourt's description corresponds to the opening rounds of *bao*, a Swahili version of *mankala* that is still played in East Africa.

Eighteenth-century English and French narratives mention *mankala* games played by the Wolof, Fulani, and Manding peoples in the Sahel as well as by coastal peoples in the old Gold Coast. In the early 19th century Thomas Winterbottom published *An Account of the*

Native Africans in which he describes *k'yungee-bel* ("game of palm nuts") being played on a twelve-hole, boat-shaped board in Sierra Leone. T. Edward Bowdich observed in his account, *Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee*, 1819, that the game was played among the Ashanti people whose king, Sai Tootuo Quamina, reputedly owned a gameboard made of gold.

By the end of the 19th century mention of *mankala* games was common in the accounts of European ethnologists, colonial administrators, and other visitors. Stewart Culin, a well-known American ethnologist, upon viewing *mankala* gameboards from Africa at the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893 in Chicago, concluded *mankala* was the "national game of Africa." Culin's observations, the first worldwide perspective of *mankala*, were published in the 1894 *Annual Report* of the U.S. National Museum known today as the Smithsonian Institution.

Since the publication of Culin's seminal paper, a few scholars, including historians of games, anthropologists, mathematicians, and art historians have contributed to our knowledge of *mankala* in traditional African societies. The author is indebted for the information that follows to the pioneering studies of Charles Béart and H. J. R. Murray, and more recently the work of Richard Pankhurst, André Deledicq and Assia Popova, Philip Townshend, and Claudia Zaslavsky whose books and articles appear in the bibliography.

Mankala in traditional African societies

African *mankala* has hundreds of vernacular names. For example, the Dogon of Mali call it *i*; the Baule (Ivory Coast) call it *awele*, while the Ashanti (Ghana) call it *owari*. It is known as *mbek* among the Fang (Gabon), *kubuguza* among the Songye (Zaire), *mwesoo* among the Ganda (Uganda), and *elee* among the Iteso (Kenya). The game is usually named after the seeds or stones used locally. During play the pieces are given other names, for example, "men," or "wives," "children," or "cattle." The holes into which they fall are called "houses," "villages," or the months of the year. The gameboard itself may symbolize the universe, the village, or a cattle enclosure, representing a people's ideas about the cosmos, society, or nature.

Mankala games are played for entertainment or are used in ritual performances. As entertainment, the game is an outdoor, daytime activity to be enjoyed after the day's work is done. It is a dry season rather than a raining season game. However, nocturnal games are played for other purposes; for example, during funerary rites *mankala* is played more to placate the departed rather than amuse the living. Thus, the latter are protected from harmful spirits.

Traditionally *mankala* was a game for adult males, particularly elders and rulers. Women and children often played a simplified version of the game. Men played in public or played privately in their own lodges, but never with or before women or children. This was so, they

say, to preserve masculine authority.

One remarkable exception to this social pattern is found in Ashanti culture where men and women play *owari* together. This fact is reflected in various art objects where scenes depict *owari* on ceremonial stools belonging to chiefs and on staffs carried by agents of the royal advisor. There is a *Gelede* dance headdress which depicts two women watching men play *ayo*, the Yoruba (Nigeria) version of the game.

In some societies ownership of a carved wooden gameboard was restricted to the ruler or a man of high rank and wealth. The prestige of the owner may be indicated, for example, by the gameboard carved in relief on the door to an Igala (Nigeria) chief's residence or by the depiction of gameboards embroidered on a Liberian chief's robe. In contrast, in other societies each family or the men's lodge in a village possessed a portable gameboard. However, even in societies where there were restrictions of ownership, anyone could play on a gameboard simply by scooping out holes in the ground.

The most elaborately decorated gameboards were prestige objects. A Liberian prince at the 1893 Chicago World's Columbian Exposition told Culin about the costly gameboards owned by chiefs in his country. He described one made of ivory and gold with ivory balls used as pieces.

In some societies *mankala* was used in the political sphere, for example to determine the selection of a new ruler. Upon the death of an Alladian chief in Ivory Coast, rival candidates played *awele* all night and the winner—the new ruler—was announced in the morning. The implication of this act is that humans play only during the day while divinities, ancestors, and future rulers who are part of the supernatural world, play throughout the night. Kingship rituals of the Ganda of Uganda and the Kuba of Zaire required the newly enthroned king to play *mweso* and *lyeel*, respectively. How the game was played and won revealed the ruler's intelligence, maturity, and character as well as confirmed whether he enjoyed divine approval.

Mankala was also used in the education and socialization of youth. In Lega society (northeastern Zaire), a miniature *luzolo* gameboard was shown to male initiates of Bwami, the men's organization. Proverbs associated with the game admonished the initiates to respect their elders and honor the values of their people. Girls among the Fon of Benin and in the village of Ikhin, Nigeria, played *adji* and *akpo*, respectively, in coming-of-age rituals. The playing of a man's game by these young women is symbolic of their new adult status.

Much of this information about African *mankala* belongs to the past. Many of the traditional religious, social, and political customs and institutions did not survive confrontation with Western culture. In the area of leisure activities, imported card games, checkers, billiards, and soccer have all but supplanted *mankala* games except among the rural and urban working classes. However, knowledge of the richness of their cultural heritage and

appreciation of *mankala* games being equal to chess and other foreign intellectual games have caused educated Africans to revive interest in playing and studying *mankala*.

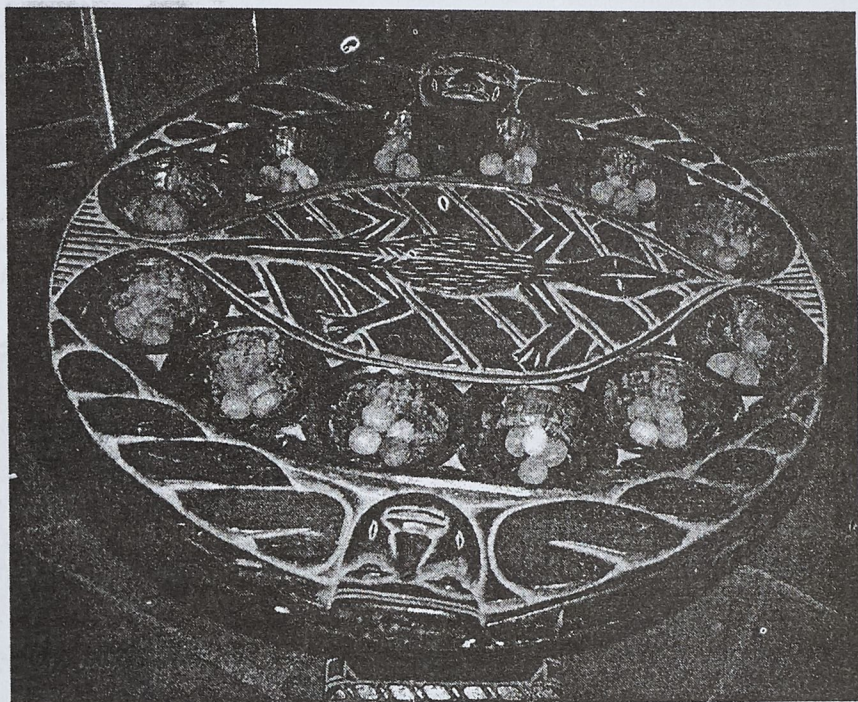
Nevertheless, African *mankala* has not been exempt from social change. For example, women, even those who were denied the privilege of learning the game, nowadays play "real"—meaning "men's"—*mankala*. Regrettably, in the absence of skilled carvers to produce heirloom-quality gameboards, indifferent folding boards with pyro-engraved designs and metal hinges are produced for tourists and local people alike. Let us hope interest in playing *mankala* will encourage contemporary artists to create visually exciting boards on which to play.

African *mankala* in art historical perspective

Many questions about gameboards in museum collections remain unanswered. Ideally we would like to know who were the gifted sculptors of these gameboards? Successful African artists were not anonymous; rather, they were professionals whose talent was well known. Such artists were commissioned to create sculpture or other work for personal or family shrines, lodges, or temples and were compensated for their efforts. In recent years art historians working on location in Africa or with museum collections have learned to match names with objects, or to recognize the hand of those whose names are lost to posterity.

In addition, we would like to know the motive for creating the gameboards. We would like to know who were the clients? Was a gameboard destined to be a personal object used for entertainment or was it destined to be used in ritual performance? Does the presence of religious symbols, for example, the *oshe Shango* (double-axe-headed staff) on an elaborately carved Yoruba gameboard mean the owner was a devotee of Shango, the god of thunder, or that the board was commissioned for use in a Shango temple?

It may be possible to determine the origin of *mankala* games. Archaeologists, anthropologists, linguists, historians, and other scholars interested in the subject are engaged in studying rules and strategies of *mankala* games worldwide as well as the words used to describe the materials of the games. They trace trade routes and study oral traditions about migrations and contacts with foreign people (African foreigners included). What can art historians contribute to the search? We can examine early histories and narratives of voyagers and other visitors to Africa to discover where and when sculptured gameboards existed; collect African oral traditions about the history of *mankala* and the use of a sculptured gameboard in a given area; study gameboards in museum and private collections and put them in morphological and stylistic groupings according to regional, local, and personal variations; interpret the iconography of gameboards; and analyze the aesthetics of them from two points of view: African and Western. Multidisciplinary studies could lead to a thorough understanding of African *mankala* and its existence throughout the world.



Gameboard, mid-20th century, Ibadan, Nigeria, wood
Height 43 cm. Diameter 49.5 cm., Collection of Mr. C. Ajao



Detail of the same,
showing carved
pedestal

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Playing ayo in Abeokuta c. 1967

Photo: R. Elkington