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**CHANGE AND MIGRATION OF A GAME
CALLED MANKALA/WARRI IN AFRICA AND
THE AMERICAS DURING THE COLONIAL PERIOD**

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**CHANGE AND MIGRATION OF A GAME CALLED
MANKALA/WARRI IN AFRICA AND AFRICAN-DESCENDED
SOCIETIES IN THE AMERICAS DURING THE COLONIAL PERIOD***

By Richard D. Ralston

The Stone Game of the Ancients

Out from old Zimbabwe's ruins,
Underneath the lowest floor,
Comes the Stone-game of the ancients
Played by patriarchs of yore.

Taken there by the Sabaeans,
Father Abram's ancient foe;
Later played by the Phoenicians
Thirty centuries ago.

O thou stone game, what'd they call you
In those days of early fame?
Thou hast lived, endured, persisted,
Till in fact thou hast lost thy name.¹

This essay is part of a much larger, ongoing study having to do with "Work, Play, and Culture in Modern Africa and the African Diaspora: Oral History Essays on African Perspectives on Industrial Labor, Food Production, and Recreation." The parent project will undertake a collection and deconstruction of folk texts and popular culture from the 19th and 20th century throughout the African southern tier, the Caribbean basin, and parts of South America in order better to comprehend three themes: (1) African worker attitudes toward employment within white- or expatriate-dominated situations (via work songs, narratives, jokes, and aphorisms centered on the mines in

*I am grateful to the W.E.B. DuBois Institute for Afro-American Research at Harvard University, for support as a research fellow in 1988-1989, and to Clark University, where I held the E.Franklin Frazier Visiting Professorship (1988-1989), for valuable support during the completion of this research. Many of the ideas in this paper were first presented to a fellows' forum at the DuBois Institute and later at the E. Franklin Frazier Memorial Lecture at Clark.

¹"Lines and Lights from Africa," quoted in *Count and Capture: The World's Oldest Game* (Delaware, Ohio, 1955), 2

Southern Africa),² which should disaggregate and, therefore, reveal an important, interior facet of the whole industrialization process from the perspective of African workers); (2) popular or mass-level attitudes toward endangered moments and places where severe staple food crisis was encountered (via such folk materials as songs, jokes, narratives, in which food production or popular food staples, such as the ubiquitous mealie-meal or corn, is mentioned); and lastly, (3) the formation and transformation over time of an African aesthetic, cultural definition, and cross-cultural notions of work and leisure³ (again via an examination of songs and games and direct focus on "recreational" activities or a society's "trivial" pursuits).

In this vein, then, imagine an animated gathering of people somewhere in, say, Burundi, on the East African banks of Lake Tanganyika. One day several adolescent boys come together to sit cross-legged around several shallow pits scooped out of the earth in four parallel rows. Interested spectators quickly gather. Then, with pebbles or with seeds taken from trees bending nearby, engaging in turns of two or so, they race through alternate moves in an apparent game of serious tactics and casual but swift arithmetic calculation, rich with affect such as boasting, cheering, and interpersonal abuse. On another day the men of the community come together around a game board as elaborate and ornate as the other was crude and makeshift. They engage in a decorous, but equally animated, equally dexterous movement of pieces, with much ritualistic affect around the board, including relentless criticisms (even of the host), loud boasts and gossiping, apparent cheating that induces neither anger nor retaliation, sometimes betting, and frequently narratives of events that seem to have no bearing whatever on the activity for which the game board seems to be the focus. Although the game board activity itself is carried out in a focused, rapid way, there appears no hurry to terminate the social event that surrounds it.

In both settings the participants often seem indistinguishable from non-participants. Participants are subjected to merciless criticisms and generous second-guessing from onlookers if they play too deliberately, incompetently, or without creative flair only to be replaced by other participant-observers who find themselves similarly verbally and vigorously excoriated by other on-lookers. This verbal combat and apparent play event is reenacted repeatedly, to the accompaniment of boisterous laughter, cheering, scolding, and social commentary. Episodes last for hours. The play activity wends back and forth without apparent seams that divide one unit of play from another, or any clear dichotomy between work and play, child's play and the

²Sub-group approaches to resistance and cultural autonomy as reflected in black slave folk music are discussed in my "Black Music as History: Explorations into Pan Africanist Trends in the Culture of the Black Masses," *Pan-African Journal*, VI, 3 (1973), 262-83.

³See Richard Ralston, "Biography and the Anti-Hero in African-American Population Culture: A Socio-Historical Analysis of the Ballad of Stagolee," for an illustration of this approach.

world of adults, the silly and the serious, the didactic and the distractive, the sacred and the profane.

These descriptions are based on events I observed in Burundi in 1987. Furthermore, I have learned of their textual equivalents in numerous and widely separated places I have travelled: Egypt, Ethiopia, Liberia, Mauritania, Nigeria, Senegal; Martinique and Haiti in the Caribbean; Brazil; and the Philippines, Viet Nam, and Malaysia. What are we to make of these events, these historical texts? Anthropologists might tell us that we are actually witnessing two levels of ethnographic fact: The first and the obvious one is that the events described seem definitely foreign to Western experience. There is no ready explanatory compartment in which to place this combination of ribald laughter and seriousness, adult and adolescent participation, the commingling of audience and performers, and the elision of work and play. The differentness of the event is palpable. It strikes us squarely between the eyes.

A second observation, however, is that the events, however we understand them, seem to be replete, both with rules establishing a proper way mechanically to execute the activity in question and also with substantial layers of ritual and conventional practices to suggest that all parts of the activity — whether by the older men or young boys, whether in West Africa, the West Indies, or elsewhere — carry broad work-related and socio-historical significance for the society of players and the society at large. In short, these events cannot be dismissible as simply a trivial pursuit sandwiched between more productive enterprises.

Why does such recreational/play activity seem initially so strange to us? Is it that the activity described is difficult to comprehend because it is simply fundamentally foreign? Because it seems like utterly trivial activity in the context of analogies that come readily to our minds? Or that the observed event commingles trivial activity with serious activity, adult activity with that of children, and sacred or privileged behaviors with profane and common ones in a way that violates our sense of appropriate ordering of social activity?

So what is it that we have witnessed? Is it simply some childish recreation that distracts the players from formal work or substitutes for it? Could it be a rite of passage? A religious ceremony? A disguised political competition? Or is understanding such historical texts not only an anthropologist's contribution to the historian (for which we must be eternally grateful) but also a window exposing the broader culture and history of the people, the region where played, the process of cultural diffusion, and the canon of Western research priorities?

What is the precise relationship of a game played by children in Burundi to the game played society-wide or to the general battery of activities of the adult world? A rehearsal or practice for the young? What is the relationship of the complexity of these games of strategy to the degree of socio-political complexity that pertains in the society at large? To the nature of colonial history and structure? Does our inability to decipher

the hurly-burly or to see that there are orderly lines to it all reveal the distance that separates us from the people of the Third World and of earlier times?

To comprehend these dynamic, living texts, I have long since turned from the unadorned ethnographic description of the above events to a variety of references to this "game" known under several names, and found in African folktales, proverbs, Western observer reports, visual art, and other contemporary and historical accounts. To paraphrase French cultural historian Robert Darnton's fascinating dictum: the best point of entry at which to penetrate the mystery of an alien culture or a past time may be precisely the point where it seems most inconsequential or trivial in the light of one's own society.

Above all else such an approach accomplishes two things. It interdicts the tendency to invest past times with the historian's contemporary value system. And, additionally, it shakes one out of a premature and false rush of familiarity with the past time or the "the other." As Darnton found in the research for his tour de force in popular history, *The Great Cat Massacre*, the bizarre practice of torturing animals (particularly cats) revealed not merely a frequent occurrence and "a popular amusement in Europe at that time."⁴ Indeed, he found that study of the context revealed a plethora of surprising symbolisms and interior social language that make the cat torture joke more and more explicable although the cats are no less dead. The cat-killing constituted broad symbolic speech, connoting such things as fertility, female sexuality, and, when used in a certain way, cuckoldry perpetrated against the man of the house. For example, tales of cat cruelty filled the ethnographic literature of 18th-century France, including the children's habit of attaching cats to poles, roasting them over bonfires, and, in Aix-en-Provence, engaging in a sport called the "jeu du chat" where cats were thrown into the air and smashed to the ground. Moreover, as evidence of the significance and pervasiveness of cat as symbol, many popular expressions emerged with cats as referents or puns: "patient as a cat whose claws are being pulled out," and "patient as a cat whose paws are being grilled."⁵ As Darnton notes, these bits of evidence

indicate that people simply understood the world in a way that is different from the way we do. Once you begin to see how the joke works, I think you can see how men used the elements of an artisanal culture to express what they had on their minds. And they often said things with things -- not with words, but with gestures [or actions].⁶

⁴Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre, and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York, 1984), 90-91.

⁵*Ibid.*, 91.

⁶*Ibid.* See Ellen K. Coughlin, "A Historian Turns to Anthropology to Understand an 18th Century Joke," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (May 2, 1984), 7-8; Clifford Geertz, *The*

There are obviously purists in the historical profession, as Darnton implies, who feel that study of a mere game takes popular culture much too seriously and transports the historian's craft too far from the conventional literary sources and broad issues with which we have always been concerned.⁷ Even in Western societies, however, where "socialization is toward work, not play,"⁸ games still retain an enormous if ambiguous grip on the public imagination.

A Western obsession with card-playing (particularly whist), for example, is documented in the life and work of Englishman Edmund Hoyle (1672-1769). Hoyle, the most famous card scholar of all time, was afflicted by the disease of card-playing. His book on the subject, *A Short Treatise on the Game of Whist*, caused a great stir when it appeared in Europe in 1742 and embedded the phrase "according to Hoyle," synonymous with authoritative finality, in Western vernacular.⁹ Hoyle gained additional prominence in the mid-18th century by teaching the members of the nobility to play whist. In her book about the Englishman Thomas Anthony Trollope (1774-1835), the author observed with a mixture of criticism and condescension that Trollope took "no pleasure in life except work, hunting, *whist*; and the society of his men friends." That said she concluded with perhaps an overdose of feminist criticism that he had missed "the good things life offers."¹⁰

Although by the turn of the 20th century, bridge had overtaken "the 400-year domination of whist among the white middle and upper classes," the popularity of whist remained strong among the black underclass, albeit with much affective or expressive augmentation and a bidding or bluffing aspect that reflected more the expressive culture of Africa and Afro-America than that of Europe. Arguably, when bridge blossomed at the turn of this century it played its own small part in (white) female emancipation. Unlike the males-only games of that era, such as poker and dice, bridge attracted partners of both sexes.¹¹

As Stewart Culin, long-time anthropologist for the Smithsonian Institution, wrote in 1894, when he first called attention to the world-wide scope and importance of

Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays (New York, 1973), particularly his Chapter 15, "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight."

⁷A conference convened by the National Association of Scholars in 1988 lamented that "academia has begun to treat popular culture as if it merited the same treatment as Platonic studies, and has replaced standards of excellence with a kind of curricular affirmative action." See [popular culture editorial], *Washington Post* (November 14, 1988), A3.

⁸See Sara Harkness and Charles M. Super, "The Cultural Structuring of Children's Play in a Rural African Community," in Kendall Blanchard, ed., *The Many Faces of Play* (Champaign, 1986).

⁹Charles Hobson, "The Wicked World of Bid Whist," *Tuesday Magazine* (May 1972), 17.

¹⁰F. Stevenson, *Victorian Fiction: A Guide to Research*, 195..

¹¹Hobson, "Wicked World," 18.

the game Mankala, "the comparative study of games is one that promises an important contribution to the history of culture."

The origin of many games is lost in the unwritten history of the childhood of man. Mankala is a game that is remarkable for its peculiar distribution, which has just penetrated our own continent after long having served to divert the inhabitants of nearly half the inhabited area of the globe.¹²

Found all over Africa, the Mankala-type game has absorbed innumerable local names, including: Mongale (in Mombasa and along the East African coast), Mongola (upper Zaire), Chuba, Gabatta (Ethiopia), Kale, Kombe (in Lamu and along the northern Kenya coast); Warri or Owari and Adi or Adji in West Africa, and Bao; and in parts of East Africa Omweso, Mweso, or Weso (Uganda and Tanzania) and Ikibuguzo (Burundi); "Rholfs" in Angola, and Wa-wee or Warri in St Lucia and the eastern Caribbean. Historically, the game so proliferated across the African continent over time that Culin, after witnessing "hundreds" of such game boards at the Columbian Exposition at Chicago in 1894, dubbed it the "National Game of Africa." Indeed, Mankala, one of two widespread games of strategy reported over much of colonial and pre- and post-colonial Africa, has been reported "in one or other of a variety of forms by at least 300 peoples in almost every part of black Africa."¹³

Although Mankala's purchase was once thought to be limited to Africa, clearly it was not. As Culin correctly reported, it was substantially the same game that was exhibited in different versions at the Chicago exposition in 1894. From Syria (where it may have received the name Mankala, a common Arabic word, meaning "game of transferring"), came one version. Another was exhibited from Ceylon, the Maldiv Islands, Turkey, the Malay peninsula, Benin, and from Liberia. In addition, an Indian visitor to the Chicago exhibit reported that "the game was common at Bombay" and also that "the game was common in Java, as well as the Philippine Islands, where a boat-shaped board with 16 holes is played."¹⁴ According to other reports a game that closely resembles Mankala dates back to the days of the Mahabharatha, the three

¹²Stewart Culin, "Mancala, The National Game of Africa," *Report of the U.S. National Museum under the Direction of the Smithsonian Institution* (June 30, 1894), 597.

¹³Philip Townshend, "Games of Strategy: A New Look at Correlates and Cross-Cultural Methods," in Helen B. Schwartzman, ed., *Play and Culture: 1978 Proceedings of TAASP* (West Point, 1980), 218. The other major game is Dara, as it is known among Hausa language speakers, apparently confined to Islamic areas of Africa.

¹⁴An Indonesian version of the game is known as Dakon, played by two players with six counters or shells on a carved board or in holes dug into the ground. In the Philippine Islands the game is called Chungaejon or Sunca. See World Wide Games, Inc., brochure (Colchester, Conn., 06415), distributor of a modern replica of the game..

thousand year-old Hindu epic.¹⁵ The name Chanka, or variations, is used in India and in the Philippines. For the Liberia exhibit alone, there were 11 boards, comprising three different versions of the game. George Schweinfurth reported it was played by "the Niam-Niam, the Peul, the Foulahs, the Toloofs [Wolof?] and Mandingos in Senegal country . . . who devote a great portion of their time to this amusement." It was also reported seen in Angola, where "cavities are cut in the rock for this game at the stations where the porters halt."¹⁶

One Reverend A. C. Good, the collector of Kale, as Mankala was called among the Fon (of Benin), boasted prematurely:

The Fans do not play these games skillfully. They seem unable to count ahead to see where the last counter will fall. A white man, as soon as he understands the game, will beat them every time.¹⁷

Meanwhile, Culin himself concluded, also incorrectly, that: "No skill is necessary or of any avail in this game, the result being a mathematical certainty, according to the manner in which the pieces were distributed in the beginning."¹⁸

The African communities that *do not* play Mankala are evidently in the minority. These non-players were once thought to be concentrated mainly among aboriginal hunter-and-gatherers in South Africa and pygmoid populations of the Equatorial Rain Forest. Even this generalization seems unsafe given the rapid movement of the game over time. Nevertheless, the major concentrations of players are situated in the remainder of the African continent, plus a broad belt including shorelines of the Mediterranean, South Asia, South East Asia, Malay Peninsula, Indonesia and the East Indies, and the Philippines.¹⁹ There exists no uniformity in social structure or socio-economic composition of the playing societies. They include fishing villages, agricultural and pastoral peoples, and every form of socio-political organization from the very simple to highly centralized kingdoms like that of the Shona.²⁰ Thus, the distribution of Mankala, in Africa, at least, follows considerations other than those propounded by early scholars of games in culture and history.

¹⁵*Ancient Counting Games of South India* (Delaware, Ohio, 1956), 3.

¹⁶Quoted in Culin, "Mancala," 602.

¹⁷Quoted in *Ibid.*, 602.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 598.

¹⁹Walter Driedger, "The Game of Bao or Mankala in East Africa," *MILA: A Biannual Newsletter of Cultural Research* (University of Nairobi), III, 1 (1972), 8.

²⁰This conclusion conflicts with the "conflict-enculturation hypothesis" that games of strategy necessarily correlate with high political integration, social stratification, animal husbandry, advanced technology, and other variables. See John M. Roberts and others, "Strategy in Games and Folk Tales," *The Journal of Social Psychology* 61 (1963), 188.

Further, the game has been found to be very old. Thomas Hyde included an account of it "200 years ago" in his treatise *De Ludis Orientalibus*, while Lane in his *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* describes it very fully as being played in Cairo upon a board with 12 holes.²¹ Meantime, another collector, Dr. J. T. Bent, in his *Ruined Cities of Mashonaland*, gave a quite colorful, if ethnocentric, description of the game:

Huge trees sheltered the entrance to their village, beneath which men were playing *isafuba*, the mysterious game of the Makalangas, with 60 holes [!] in rows, in the ground. Ten men can play at this game, and it consists of removing bits of pottery or stone from one hole to another in an unaccountable manner. We watched it scores of times while in the country, and always gave it up as a bad job, deciding that it must be like draughts or chess learned by them from the former civilized race who dwelt here.²²

Thus did the complex societies Old Zimbabwe once again have their culture explained away in terms of outside influence. This time external origins were supposedly reinforced by the evidence of Mankala's migration. Thus, for Dr. Bent, "the game is found in some form or another wherever Arabian influence is felt [and] . . . it forms for us another link in the chain of evidence connecting the Mashonaland ruins with an Arabian influence."²³

It would appear that the game extends along the entire coast of Asia as far as the Philippine Islands. Mancala and a kind of draughts [checkers?] were the favorite amusements of the negroes from the French settlement of Benin on the West coast of Africa in the so-called Dahomey village at the Columbian Fair. They played on a boat-shaped board, with 12 holes in 2 rows, which they called *adjito*, with pebbles, *adji*, the game itself being called *madji*.²⁴

Reportedly Mankala was played in Damascus with "pebbles which pilgrims collect in a certain valley on their way from Mecca."²⁵

Walter Driedger reports about the migration of the game that "it is commonplace to credit the 'Arabs' with the diffusion of the game." Though it is often assumed that the game diffused through Arab traders, this begs the question of which "Arabs" and how the game was learned by other peoples. "It also appears that the game entered East

²¹*Ibid.*

²²Culin, "Mancala," 603.

²³Quoted in *ibid.*, 604.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 601.

²⁵*Count and Capture*, 6..

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."²⁶

As early as 1891, a variant of the game was being manufactured in the United States by the Milton Bradley Company, under the name of *Chuba*. The company's recitation of the rules of the new game captured 19th-century Western attitudes toward Africa and reflected aspects of American culture as well:

Chuba is an adaptation from a rude game of eastern Africa which is greatly enjoyed by the natives, who squat on the ground and play in holes scooped out of the sand, using shells, young cocoanuts, etc., for counters, which they move from hole to hole. As now presented to the civilized world for its diversion, Chuba is a game of skill for 2 players. It is made up of a board with 4 parallel rows of holes or pockets, 11 in each row, and 60 small beads used as men or counters.

The board is placed between the players as usual, with the longer sides next to them. Each one confines his playing to the 2 rows of pockets nearest him. The row close to his edge of the board is his outer row, while the other is his inner row.

The natives call the counters in the inner row "*man and wife*," and those in the outer row "*spinsters*" [emphasis added]. But these spinsters are married by passing a counter over them from the inner row, till, in the progress of the game, all the pieces become single, when they are called "widows." These widows [although ironically now single] have a double advantage over the married families, and are sure to make havoc among them. The game is appropriately named, as the word *chuba* means "to extinguish" or "eat up" and the object of each player is to annihilate his opponent by putting the latter's counters in a position from which escape is impossible.²⁷

This leaves us to speculate about the genesis of the game. What caused Mankala to be so widely distributed? Was it because returning pilgrims to the various parts of the Muslim world served as a human delivery system, as Culin believed? Was it spread as a concomitant of four centuries of illegitimate trans-oceanic commerce, such as slave trading? What changes did the game undergo during or because of European colonialism, and during and because of its diffusion into the Americas? With what paradigms in the parent culture was this "African retention" to be associated

²⁶Driedger, "The Game of Bao," 8.

²⁷Culin, "Mancala," 607.

historically, e.g., cults of the dead and the ancestors as in West Africa, or something else?

Difficulties of nomenclature aside, geographical distribution and the low scholarly prestige of play as a field of study also complicate this study. Games find themselves cast into a definitional morass, neglected as a serious area of study, consigned to the shelf or the playroom or playground but officially prohibited from the boardroom, the parlor, or the shop floor. The migration of Mankala has spread the game all over Africa, the Mediterranean basin, much of the territories of the Americas bordering on the Atlantic, and almost literally all over the world—amidst the "gyrations of barbaric peoples," in the words of one historian in the 1960s—and therefore not worthy of serious, document-bound study. Finally, leisure activity has been disparaged by scholars from medieval thinkers to modern students of society because it has not appeared to concern moral purpose or productive activities.

This paper aims to help to redefine the research methodology for the study of different types of games, to refine the terminology of so-called leisure activities, to disaggregate a society's perception of work, play, and eschatology, and generally to offer a different, subject-oriented perspective on the colonial period, the slave trade, and migration or population displacement.

Two articles — a seminal article "Games in Culture" in the influential *American Anthropologist* (1959) and another called "Strategy in Games and Folktales," in the prestigious *Journal of Social Psychology* (1963) — simultaneously jerked the study of play out of the sandboxes and into systematic seriousness and established the reigning orthodoxy in the field. Since the publication of *Games in Culture* in 1959, scholars have divided games into three categories: games of strategy (such as chess, checkers, and backgammon in the West), games of physical skill and dexterity (hop-scotch, jacks), and games of physical skill and chance (Simon Says). A game, as opposed to other varieties of play, was characterized by the existence of (a) organized play, (b) competition, (c) two or more sides, (d) criteria for determining a winner, and (d) agreed-upon rules.

The most prominent conclusion of a 1959 *American Anthropologist* article was to predict what sorts of societies would develop what sorts of games.²⁸ Since games of strategy simulate social systems, those systems should be complex enough to generate such needs for expression. Simple societies should not possess games of strategy and should resist borrowing them. Furthermore, pastoralist societies would tend not even to have games of strategy.

With the help of the African game, Mankala, however, I want to challenge this typology, to drive another nail into the coffin of the correlation between games-of-strategy and cultural complexity, sharpen the usual blunt instrument of cultural

²⁸"Games in Culture," *American Anthropologist* (1958).

diffusion theory, and deepen our understanding of the African cultural legacy in the Americas and the world.

For purposes of this analysis, I have found it useful to examine games and related play activities in four different but overlapping areas: First, the functioning of games as entertainment or as a puzzle to test intelligence or skill; second, their functioning as didactic tools, or as simulators or transmitters of social values for the whole society; third, their functioning as a stimulator or a socially protected, highly ritualized but democratic engine of social change; and fourth, games and play as historical text or dynamic artifact, comparable to the rare document or pivotal interview, illuminating popular migration, cultural diffusion, and cultural change during the last century or so.

An overemphasis on the first of these has caused some Western scholars to dismiss game-play traditions as peripheral, or less important than work or work-related activities. Second, some of the earlier studies have overemphasized the conservative or modeling aspect of games, and thus detracting from the dynamic role of games in actually influencing social change. For example, Johan Huizinga commented nearly forty years ago:

Summing up the formal characteristics of play we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside "ordinary" life as being "not serious," but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. . . ²⁹

How is it that Mankala has migrated so far? And how has the process of migration affected the game itself and the rituals associated with it? Townshend is correct when he argues that "diffusion or copying of games, in Africa at least, has proceeded without regard to the structure of the societies concerned."³⁰ Moreover, its diffusion has taken place via a number of means: by augmentation or inter-group kin ties (e.g. marriage), by acquisition of bondsmen or joking relations (i.e., "by the people of one group more or less consciously emulating another of higher status"), by post-sojourn instruction of a member of the learning group (e.g. King Shamba of the Bashongo of Zaire returning from visits elsewhere and bringing back games enjoyed while away),³¹ by acculturation or creolization (i.e., a process by which a new tradition or syncretism is distilled out of the melding of previous traditions). This process does

²⁹Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (Boston, 1950), cited in Steven Phillips, *Studies in the Anthropology of Play* (West Point, 1977), 241.

³⁰Townshend, "Games of Strategy," 219.

³¹See Geoffrey Parrinder, *African Mythology* (London, 1967), 110-112.

not appear to be "inherently different or speedier in its impact from those migrations than from those of western games spreading to the non-West."³²

Let us now turn to Mankala/Warri and Mankala/Mweso in terms of the four different aspects outlined above. First, as a simple ethnographic event, Mankala is fairly easy to describe. In general terms the implements or equipment and rules of play for the game include the following most common features in all of its versions: the game is played with multiple numbers of counters or pieces (also variously called men, wives, and spinsters), but unlike the majority of Western board games (such as chess, checkers, or backgammon), all pieces are indistinguishable in value and appearance in the game. Moreover, after the first play or so of the game, the usual distinction between "yours" and "mine" is so transitory as to lose meaning altogether.³³ The type of game counters adopted seems to reflect availability and the inventiveness of the players as much as traditional choices. Counters may be fashioned from pebbles, beans, beads, large seeds, kernels, small stones, broken pottery pieces, or, in some desert communities, chips of animal dung. Mankala differs from such Western board-games as chess, checkers, and backgammon, in that no distinction is made between individual beads. As play is democratically available to players of all status, the game's counters were similarly of uniform small size and status-blind.

In combination, however, the game pieces achieved various stylized designations as they landed in a compartment on the board. For example, reference to a "husband and wife" is a compartment containing two pieces, a "cow" among the Bao is a pit with three beads, and a "bull" is a pit with a cow plus another bead (i.e. four pieces). Any conveyance of the beads from compartment to compartment, called a move or "sowing," that ends in a bull requires the mover to "sleep" or "rest" (i.e. to discontinue his moves).

As to playing surface, the game has been played on game boards ranging from a simple design to elaborately carved ornate boards. Whether simple or elaborate they are made with a standard number of compartments or indentations (varying from place to place), variously called "cavities," "holes," "pits," "houses," "cattle corrals" (among cattle keepers), or "shops" (in commerce-oriented India), and "rice fields" (in agrarian Indonesia). These pits are arranged sometimes in two rows, sometimes four, and number 6 or more parallel "holes" or "cups." The 2x6 and 2x7 versions are most popular in West Africa, the Middle East, Indonesia and the Philippines. Larger versions, such as 2x10 or 2x12 *Omweso* versions, are most common in East Africa. It is common to carve a large storage cup at each end of the board to contain each side's winning pieces. The playing surface might be an actual wooden board or just holes

³²*Ibid.*

³³See Driedger, "The Game of Bao," 8.

scooped in the sand, or in some cases (such as southwest Africa and islands of lacustrine East Africa), cavities carved in solid rock.³⁴

Two basic ways have developed to initiate play, depending upon the way in which the pieces or counters are distributed in the holes at the outset of the game. The player beginning play distributes a given number of counters in the fields (or holes), in one of three positions: (1) uniformly in the holes; (2) according to a non-uniform but fixed pattern; or (3) entirely at the discretion of the individual player. The first of these patterns has been most widely reported. When the third opening is employed, the player adopted a stylized or conventional string of moves which had been successful in the past.

The variation one finds in rules of play consists of such details as starting positions. Driedger reports that Mankala is often begun in the following manner, with "both players simultaneously from the far-right hand cup, sowing the beads as fast as they can. The one who sleeps first or the one who gets farthest before sleeping, makes the first move of the regular game."³⁵ A careful or somnolent style of play is socially unacceptable. The manual dexterity displayed during these moves, therefore, is highly valued. Despite the danger that these rapid movements heighten the possibility of errors, the etiquette for play is always "play fast!"

Don't count with your fingers! The mind is quicker than the hand!
Scoop seeds with fingertips into palm. Play with palm up. Feed seeds into cups between 1st and 2nd finger, controlling flow with thumb. Practice lightning calculation. With experience one can tell at a glance where every seed will end and compute several moves in advance.³⁶

Thus, a "non-counting," "non-stop" style developed among lacustrine players of Omweso. In this lightning kind of play no player is permitted to spend time musing over the advantages and disadvantages of various move options open to him. As soon as one player has finished his turn, the other must immediately start his move. A moment's undue hesitation is considered socially obtuse and triggers a second consecutive move by his opponent by way of a penalty. The penalty is known as *okutanza*.

This quick mode of play seems to derive from the late 19th century but, in any case, it is the most commonly used today, particularly in towns. The game became a brisker one, requiring not only intimate knowledge of the game, but lightning reflexes and the confident ability to calculate and execute quickly amidst the tumult of the new

³⁴*Ibid.*, 9. Driedger (p. 13) reports that "one board of four-by-thirteen has recently been found carved into solid rock on an island in Lake Baringo" that was apparently still in use.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 11..

³⁶*A Count and Capture Game* (Delaware, Ohio, 1956), 12.

urban milieu. Obviously, the game itself could serve as a key litmus test on the basis of which to accept, shun, or ridicule the outsider or the recent town migrant.³⁷

From this point — the late precolonial period— onward, the style of play in the literature and traveller accounts took on a meaning of some substance. Play became stylized and forced to fit many constraints of a wage-driven day and an urban hurly-burly. While remarkably little variation developed in the actual rules of the game, Mankala became embedded with an implicit challenge to dexterity, calculation, cunning, anticipation, and verbal artistry: almost a metaphor for the "New Man," modern, urban, supremely confident, ruthless. Tanzania's Maasai have been reported having a unique play style which gives the impression to alien eyes of utter confusion inasmuch as several players appear to be (and indeed sometimes are) playing simultaneously on the same board.³⁸ Another variant, played with 98 cowrie shells or pebbles — reported by Culin in the late 19th century — is called the Crazy Game because of its frantic pace and apparent disorder.

Many variables of Mankala seem linked historically to the ambient environment in which play takes place. One difficulty in learning the game is that once one has started a game others push in and eventually take over if, in their eyes, one's own playing is uncertain or insufficiently competent. A member of this floating team of supporters and detractors may suggest a move by making a trial move which will either be allowed to stand or will be restricted and replaced by another.

The great commotion typically surrounding the game also facilitates sharp play or a bending of the rules. Indeed, cheating is common and is often attempted. Should a violation be detected by the opposing player or players, the culprit simply retracts the move; no stigma attaches to the attempt, although detection of an opponent's ploy garners vocal commendation and respect from spectators and players alike for the detective and hoots for the would-be perpetrator. A move may also be retracted if it is put forward by someone not sufficiently high ranking to participate (except as spectator).

Each of these factors (the variable rules, speed of the game, and spectator participation/interference) yields extreme difficulty for beginners (especially aliens from beyond the culture) attempting to comprehend the game, not to mention comprehending its contextual meaning.

Other restrictions on the game of Mankala include who could play freely (that is, publicly), when, and under what circumstances. For example, women of ordinary status were not usually free to play the game. In Uganda, wives of the kabaka and wives of the senior chiefs had status privileges that included publicly playing Omweso.

³⁷See M.B. Nsimbi, *Omweso, A Game People Play in Uganda*, African Studies Center, UCLA Occasional Paper No. 6 (1968), 12.

³⁸Driedger, "The Game of Bao," 8.

Women of ordinary status in Uganda were warned by regional custom that if they put their hands into the holes of Omweso, "their crops would not grow." This was an important matter since women were solely responsible for growing food. Meantime, young girls were warned that "their breasts would not develop" and they "would never marry" if they played. Similarly, assuming young boys to be as irresponsible as young girls, Ugandan custom prohibited them from playing the game in their homes, presumably because it would keep them distracted from their chores (herding goats and cattle, etc.) and hidden from the view of grownups. Also, tradition ruled against playing Mankala/omweso after sunset. If a jackal or owl or hyena happened to cry out while play was going on, the players would have to wash each counter one by one in the river to avoid calamity.

That Mankala has performed a didactic or socializing function over time is also clear from the reports. Anthropological interest in play, particularly that of the neophyte, in different cultures has traditionally centered on its relationship to "real life."³⁹ One of the most common explanations in the literature about the social meaning of games played by children is the idea that children's play has the important function of serving as practice or rehearsal for adult or "serious," real-life activities.⁴⁰ Or as a penalty-free arena for children or the less powerful openly to comment upon or ridicule the behavior of their superiors. How valid is the rehearsal or shielded aggression theory of play?

Folkloristic and linguistic evidence suggests that the game is very old among the Baganda of Uganda. In Uganda, where the regional variant of Mankala is known as Omweso, the game is played on a board of four rows with eight squares or holes. It is played with small brown seeds (called *empiki*) from a tree known as Omuyiki which are used as counters or game pieces. Indeed, references to Omweso have entered everyday language in proverbial or idiomatic references that serve as easily recognized heuristic devices. For example, an individual's short stature might be commented upon by referring to the person as an *empiki*. Thus, the expression *mumpi ng' empiki*, means "she is as short as an *empiki*." And if a person knows something especially well or is particularly skillful at a task, Omweso again might be used as the standard of comparison, as in: "He knows it as the game of Omweso." This expression compares closely with the American idiom "like the palm of his hand." Or in a situation in which a person finds something suddenly missing from its expected place, it is compared to a

³⁹See, for example, Bessie Jones and Bess Lomax Hawes, *Step It Down: Games, Plays, Songs, and Stories from the Afro-American Heritage* (1972), who define play in addition to exercise as "a drama, a composition, portraying life or character by means of dialog and action." "Both games and plays deal with realistic situations: getting food, quarreling with your mother, finding a 'partner,' working. . . ." Jones and Hawes, *Step it Down*, xiv.

⁴⁰See the discussion in H.B. Schwartzman, ed., *Play and Culture: 1978* (West Point, 1980); and the interesting reservations expressed by Gregory Bateson, in "Play and Paradigm," in M.A. Salter, ed., *In Play: Anthropological Perspectives* (West Point, 1978).

player of Omweso who finds an empty pit where he had hoped to capture pieces. "He puts his hand in an empty [Omweso] hole," possibly akin to the early American hunter's "barking up the wrong tree." Omweso is also used to express sentiments about wisdom and a spirit of sportsmanship, as in *Gw'oyigiriza okwesa akugobyalnkaaga* (i.e. "A person you teach to play Omweso may beat you with a collection of sixteen counters").⁴¹

Third, play can serve as a facilitator or stimulator for social change: What does the game accomplish apart from the winning or losing of the game itself? First, during the course of the game, in all of the reports of collectors and researchers, ambient noise and collateral activity were frequent, continuing aspects of the play event, and carried on at full cry. The important collateral point, however, is that players or spectators could simultaneously talk over different topics, thereby gathering information about what was going on out in the country. Also, on the basis of observations conducted during Omweso play, the Kabaka, for example, could choose trusted lieutenants to undertake difficult assignments. Nsimbi reports that "administrative chiefs and clan elders throughout the country had *emyeso* in their enclosures. Their subordinate chiefs and their subjects played the game nearly all day in the halls only to be interrupted by the chiefs' meals to which they were all welcome. The game provided chiefs with the opportunity to meet their people socially and to know them personally." Moreover, it was reported that:

As they played the game they could talk about different topics, thereby getting to know what was going on in the country. If people brought any dispute the chiefs and their people assembled to play the game would listen to the complaints and all the people would hear the chief's judgment and advice.⁴²

Proverbs sprang from these informal assemblies open to everybody and centered on the playing of Omweso, such as the following: *Akiika embuga amanya ensonga* ("He who frequents a chief's place becomes well informed"). On the other hand, however, *Nnamtakuka nti 'Eby'embuga birubwa baganzi'* ("He who does not call on the chief, or attend his court, complains that only the chief's favourites are welcome to his bounty."). In short, from these gatherings of sub-chiefs and subjects assembled to play Omweso, the Kabaka or chief could screen individuals for possible national and private assignments and errands, such as collecting taxes. Conversely, these assemblages served as a talent depot in which players could showcase their abilities and social acumen and, thus, achieve recognition as knowledgeable, talented, and loyal subjects.

⁴¹See Nsimbi, *Omweso*, passim.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 3.

Additionally, the game facilitated the coming together persons of unequal rank or those newly acquainted under conditions where they could easily become more familiar with one another and size up the other. In other words, the game acted as a filtration system at all levels of society for future social, political, or commercial relationships in cases of games with authority figures and a social adhesive in cases of persons of equal rank but non-acquaintance, a vehicle of community *esprit* or solidarity; and potentially a source of change via socially accepted critiques of authority or mobilization against authority. It served as an "ice-breaker" in which strangers might introduce themselves to the new community, provided they were familiar with the language of the game, which was quite likely given its widespread distribution.

Finally, there is much to be learned by viewing Mankala as an historical text or cultural artifact to be "read." It permits us to peep anew into the history of human migration as well as urbanization and African cultural diffusion. Similarly, one gets the chance to break open the process of creolization or syncretization of cultures at those moments of collision between African, European, and Asian cultures, and through looking at the same "leisure" event or activity in far-flung climes, in successor or derivative cultures to comprehend those parent institutions at a more profound level. Moreover, changes in the game itself may be noted during various moments during the colonial period in Africa and throughout the Americas.

The distribution or dispersal of the Mankala-type game (called Wari and Adji, for example) has been observed and collected widely in all of the Americas touched by transatlantic slavery: Dutch Guiana or Suriname (Saramacca, Djuka, and South American Coastal Peoples), British Guiana, Trinidad, Grenada, Barbados, St. Lucia, Martinique, Dominica, Antigua, St. Christopher, St. Kitts, Haiti, and Louisiana. Melville J. Herskovits, pioneer anthropologist of African "retentions" in the Americas, reports that during field work in Dutch Guiana, it had been discovered that "a certain African game, named variously *adji boto* and *wari*, was played by the Negroes of the bush and coastal region there."⁴³ Because it was an important item in the list of so-called New World African survivals, Herskovits made attempts over the next quarter-century to discern its further distribution in the Caribbean islands.

For example, Herskovits's research among the Afro-Guianese of Suriname, among the so-called "Bush-Negroes" rather quickly but carefully revealed that Owari, as it was locally known, was not merely a game. Rather, it reflected many of the multiple functions mentioned above. In addition, the game maintained many of the customary patterns and much of the social etiquette associated with it in Africa. For example, (1) it was never played at night; (2) the game's own vocabulary seemed to refer symbolically to contemporary issues in the society at large, from war and

⁴³Melville J. Herskovits, "Adjiboto, an African Game of the Bush-Negroes of Dutch Guiana," *Man*, 29 (1929), 122-27; M. J. Herskovits, "Warri in the New World," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 62 (1932), 23-37; and "Brazilians Adopt Yoruba Game," *West Africa* (March 30, 1963), 352.

conquest to the quite mundane; and (3) pre-game patterns of social status or rank were observed, permitting senior men, for example, to play whomever they chose, whereas others — men of lesser rank, age, and women and children — had to await an invitation. The varieties of the game collected within Suriname illustrate the great cultural range and diversity in migration history in that one society. Confirming its democratically elastic nature, Herskovits found that the game might be used as an occasion to discuss or formulate village or community policy, to pick or scrutinize subordinates. Owari was essentially a game for men although there was no actual bar (e.g., supernatural belief) to allowing women to play the game. But in practice Herskovits never saw men and women play together (i.e. at the same board and at the same time).⁴⁴ And in terms of hoopla, when a player possessed a large number of seeds to sow, he might shake them in his closed fist, as s/he considered the best move. Meanwhile, in Barbados and Trinidad, the game was often played as part of wakes for the dead. Indeed, Herskovits maintained that the game in the Americas as in West Africa possessed a "sacred character" and was generally associated with the cult of the dead.⁴⁵

Regarding nomenclature and the etiquette of play, Herskovits found several interesting phenomena: a seed was referred to as a child; to capture meant to eat the children of one's opponent; and when the game was won, the loser was thought of as killed.⁴⁶ As far as cheating is concerned, Herskovits found that in the Caribbean it was considered blasphemous and inappropriate deliberately to break the rules of the game. While it was considered unfair and unsporting, however, cheating was often attempted anyway.

Change Over Time

How has the game changed over time — particularly during the colonial period, and as a result of its contact with or adoption by other cultures? According to Townshend, "once implanted a game may become modified to accord with local values or respond to "values implicit in the game or by social processes set in motion by its being played. For example, "where for instance Mankala was only played on the chief's board it reflected or reinforced an acknowledgment of his authority. Conversely, any attempt or tendency "to popularise possession of boards, and even more by the introduction of new games which have had no chance to dovetail into the system of control by chief and/or elders and which thus provide a focus of the social activity outside the sphere of this control. . . ."47

⁴⁴Herskovits, "Warri," 22-23.

⁴⁵M.J. Herskovits, *The New World Negro: Selected Papers in AfroAmerican Studies* (Bloomington, Ind., 1966), 20.

⁴⁶Herskovits, "Wari," 33.

⁴⁷Townshend, "Games of Strategy," 220.

What was the interaction between Mankala/warri or Mankala/mweso and the history of African communities during the onset of the colonial period? Several factors operated to affect the play of the game. In turn, Mankala affected some of the details of the history of colonial expansion in the following areas: the introduction of cotton, the coming of insect vectors or body lice, the introduction of Western schools, the introduction of wage labor, changes in transportation, and urbanization.

When colonial populations were becoming more urbanized and the African labor market was being converted increasingly into a wage-driven one, such factors as these subtly changed the patterns of African social life. Because colonial economies tended to drive colonial subjects away from their former dependence on clientelistic services and economic opportunities usually provided by traditional headmen, the aggregation of persons in and around the headman's quarters playing Mankala/mweso was substantially diminished. Indeed, men and women of adventure engaged in entrepreneurial activities (such as retail trading) now available in the towns.⁴⁸ Moreover, to avoid the impressment of African male labor onto capricious and sometimes trivial but burdensome tasks by the district commissioners following the imposition of a British Protectorate in 1894, able-bodied Ugandans began routinely avoiding identified congregation spots around the chief's quarters.⁴⁹

Cotton was introduced into Uganda territory in 1904. This event had two effects: Baganda men for the first time cultivated the soil to enable them to pay poll-tax. Cotton-cultivation exhausted both time and energies of peasants who might formerly have found time to play Omweso. Ironically, the colonial *zeitgeist* created a circumstance whereby game play of a traditionally vital sort came to be regarded as "an occupation for the lazy." In other words, the introduction of cotton constituted a cultural set-back for Omweso.⁵⁰

Another serious set back for the game had come through a public health concern attached to the coming of *envunza* or jigger-fleas from Tanzania. *Envunza* buried themselves in the bare feet of Baganda ivory traders who penetrated into Wanyamwezi country and had their eggs scattered to hatch wherever these tradesmen went — into the markets, or into the houses of Omweso players. The fleas became a scourge in Buganda and came to be associated with Omweso play. To minimize the danger of flea bites people kept away increasingly from public play of Omweso. These insect vectors or lice thus, demoralized play and caused the game to undergo further decline.

Meanwhile, the inauguration of Western schools in the first decade of the twentieth century — accompanied by a complement of customary schoolyard and indoor games (e.g. draughts, ludo, snakes-and-ladders) had the indirect effect of

⁴⁸See Nsimbi, *Omweso*, 4.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, passim.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 50.

discouraging or displacing traditional leisure pursuits such as Omweso. Although some boarding schools continued to provide playing time and cultural space for Mankala/mweso and while traditionalists no doubt continued private play, the hegemonic momentum against the game in the early days of colonialism was apparently consistent if not uniform.

Nsimbi describes yet another possible obstacle that stood in the way of continued interest in the game among the Baganda. The issue was one of negotiating distances (that might be considerable — up to fifteen miles) from village to jobs and the like in the urban areas, by bicycle or on foot.⁵¹ Arguably, the fatigue and expenditure of time of the long, round-trip journey left many disinclined to play the game at home.

In East and in West Africa (and perhaps in the Caribbean basin), a number of factors seem to have played a role in the late colonial period in creating a new burst of interest in the game. For Uganda, indigenous consciousness triggered by the Bataka Movement in the late 1940s, the return of Sir Edward Mutesa II from exile in London in 1955 seem pertinent. In West Africa, *negritude* and "the Gospel of African Personality" preached, particularly from the 1930s onward, by francophone poets such as Leopold Senghor and others compelled a defiant allegiance to traditional customs and behaviors. Meanwhile, the improvement of town and urban-suburban transportation (e.g. regular service town buses and taxis that reached outside the towns, and a rising standard of living that permitted acquisition of light motorized cycles by individual migrants) in many areas contributed to an ongoing renewal of the pool of potential players. Finally, the actual relocation of scores of African villagers all over the continent from the countryside to the towns brought with it a continual influx of new Mankala/mweso and Mankala/owari adherents.

Like the fast-paced, no-shuffle rubbers of bridge played by railway riders, or five-minute clock-driven chess matches, or "tie-break" tennis schemes in the post-war United States, urban and industrial and unitized work behaviors have tended to modify some of the traditional aspects of Mankala. For example, observers mention that the time of play was cut short in the late colonial period, going from unlimited playtime, to an intermediate phase when games were completed in perhaps thirty minutes, to games that in recent years characteristically lasted no more than three to seven minutes! Nsimbi, a player and a scholar of the Omweso version of Mankala, expresses nostalgia and wonder about the endurance of the grand old African game:

The wonder of it all is that this game which has suffered so many setbacks should survive to withstand the onslaught of its many adversaries. Time has proved its worth. Let anyone who says that it is an uncultured game learn to play it and see for himself that the intricacies

⁵¹*Ibid.*

involved in mastering and enjoying it compare very favourably with the best indoor games the world over.⁵²

In this brief essay, one could hardly hope to show what overall significance games in general or Mankala in particular⁵³ have furnished in symbolic or in concrete terms in the everyday life of Africans and African-descended populations in the Americas over time. Suffice to say that it begins to help our understanding of mass and elite culture and approaches to leisure and to work, if we begin to take seriously those events, activities, institutions, artifacts that we perceive to be utterly foreign or utterly inconsequential, those totally trivial pursuits. Such study promises rewards in our comprehension of the total society or time period that interests us, if we examine systematically the mundane texts and symbolic world of "everyday people" in societies of "others" or in past times. I would propose that we discard such *a priori* Durkheimian sacred and profane categories altogether and substitute instead a more productive, subject-perspective standard; and that we throw out our notions of "child's play" with the bath water and stand ready, instead, to read between the lines of leisure activities to tease out from candid, unposed moments all that a culture is prepared to tell us.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 6.

⁵³See the broad description of Mankala within the world of board games in Laurence Russ, *Mancala Games—The Folk Games Series: No. 1* (Algonac, Mich., 1984).