THE COMOROS: A CONFLUENCE OF BOARD GAME HISTORIES

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Board games are found to be resistant to change (de Voogt, Dunn-Vaturi, Eerkens 2013) and provide evidence of intercultural contact in several parts of the world (Crist, de Voogt, Dunn-Vaturi 2016). The attestation of multiple board games from different cultural origins in one location has mostly taken place in archaeological contexts where Egyptian, Roman, Ottoman and other game boards have appeared together on incised rock or stone (see, e.g., Crist et al. 2017). Such a confluence of games in a contemporary setting where game rules may be collected in addition to game boards is still relatively rare (e.g., de Voogt, Hassanat, Al-Hassanat 2013). The Comoros provide a useful case study as it is located within the complex history of East Africa and the Indian Ocean and still features an active gaming community.

De Villeneuve (2003) published an overview of board games played on Mayotte, an overseas territory (Département) of France, adjacent to the Comoros islands. He lists several games of the Indian Ocean but also games, such as *Awélé* from West Africa, that are not played near the Comoros. The main games particular to Mayotte that he mentioned are *Mraha wa tso*, elsewhere also known as *Bao*, and *Mraha wa bwe*, a form of *Siga*. In addition, Alexey Lobashev (pers. comm. 2018) noted *Dama*, or *Checkers* played on one hundred fields. He noted the same set of board games for the neighboring Comoros but an additional game, also known as *Dama*, that is similar to *Turkish Draughts*.

During fieldwork in June 2018, this combination of board games was studied on Grande Comore, the largest island of the Comoros. The results include rules specific for *Mraha wa tso* and that have not been attested for *Bao* in other regions. Also, certain unlikely playing rules in de Villeneuve's description for *Mraha wa bwe* were found to be used differently, at least on Grande Comore. Finally, three different games were attested that were referred to with the name *Dama*: one known elsewhere as *Alquerque*, one as *Turkish Draughts*, and one as *Checkers*. This series of board games point to at least three historical connections of the Comoros with other regions:

Europe (i.e., France), East Africa (i.e., Tanzania), and the Ottoman Empire (i.e., Turkey).

After a description of the individual games in as far as they are different from those found elsewhere in the board games literature as well as a characterization of their playing context, the historical implications are discussed with an emphasis on the possible connections with the Ottoman Empire.

Board games of Grande Comore

Mraha wa tso (Bao)

Mraha wa tso translates as “game of *tso*” in Comorian (Shikomore). *Tso* is the name of the seed with which it is played. *Bao*, the name for the game in Swahili, exclusively refers to a board in Comorian; only in Swahili does it also refer to the game itself and even to a goal in soccer (de Voogt 1995). Spelo (2018) notes various other terms that are sometimes cognate with Swahili as Comorian is close to Swahili, for instance: *kotso* “kichwa (Swa.); hole on the far end of the board”, *nyumba* “nyumba (Swa.); house; the central hole that is often square and contains six seeds at the opening of the game”, *ndrazi* “mtaji (Swa.); a group of seeds in a hole with which one can make a capture”.

Mraha wa tso is a popular game on Grande Comore, Mayotte (de Villeneuve 2004) and Anjouan (Ian Tattersall, pers.comm. 2019). Contrary to the other regions in which *Bao* is found, it is absent or at least uncommon in the main city, in this case Moroni. Instead, many villages were seen to have a board owned by the community. The board was often found near the local mosque or central square (see Photo 1a). On late afternoons, players would gather to play and take turns, the loser of a game usually giving up his seat. Teenage boys would only play when the men were absent. No women were seen to play and privately-owned boards were rare. In one village, Foubouni, it was considered inappropriate to play on the public square during Ramadhan but some players of this village who happened to have a privately-owned board were happy to demonstrate a few games on a bench near their house (see Photo 1b). The wooden boards always showed four rows of holes but the characteristic square holes in the center of the board were not always present. Also, storage holes were only optionally found on the far end of the board (see Photo 1c). The players used *Caesalpinia bonduc* seeds like the ones used by players of *Bao* elsewhere on the East African coast.

The rules of the game have been described in detail by de Villeneuve

Figure 1: *Mraha wa tso* in three different village on Grande Comore.

(2003:8–19) but they are notoriously complex to describe in full (see Townshend 1986; de Voogt 1995:35–43). The rules on Grande Comore did not differ significantly from those attested, for instance, on Madagascar, Zanzibar, or those known for Tanzania and Kenya. Some specific variations can be attested that often have to do with the level of the player or the circumstances of play. For instance, the complex rule known in Swahili as *takasia* (Townshend 1986:118, de Voogt 1995:41–43) was only vaguely familiar to most and did not have a name. Only one expert player was able to give some details about its application in the game. Endless moves (see Kronenburg, Donkers & de Voogt 2006) were a loss for the player who started one, according to one player, but this would be a difficult rule to enforce. In another instance, a player allowed the return of a *takasa* move (a move without capture) if a player still had one seed in hand, but only in friendly matches.

One specific opening move involving a special rule was demonstrated in different locations, e.g., in Hambu and Itsinkoudi, and seemed generally accepted. In Dar es Salaam, the play of a particular opening was named *kutoboa* but in the Comoros no name was given to their example. Using the notation as developed for Bao in Zanzibar, the first move A6L is followed by a6L. However, a6L is played by taking the seed in one's hand (from the store), the one seed from the opponent's row (A3) and the two seeds from a6 and distributing them one-by-one to the left starting with a5. This sequence at the start of the game, A6L-a6l, is the only time this way of moving is allowed. It leads to a situation in which the opponent cannot play A5R as it allows an immediate win on the part of the opponent. (See Figure 1.)

Mraha wa bwe

According to de Villeneuve, *Mraha wa bwe* is the “game of pebbles” also known as *Mraha wa votsi* “game on the ground”. Unlike *Mraha wa tso*, the materials for this game are commonly gathered ad hoc, using depressions

Figure 2: *Mraha wa bwe* in Moroni, Grande Comore.

in the ground and pebbles or any other similarly small materials of two different colors and/or sizes. On Grande Comore, the game was found in the city center of Moroni next to a small market where women were selling fish straight from the moored fishing boats. Players were present mostly in the afternoon with one to five games going on at the same time (see Photo 2). Sometimes, card (gambling) games were being played nearby as well. Only men were taking part and although only two people play there may be several bystanders interfering with the game and, sometimes, loudly discussing the strategies.

The board consists of a grid of five by five holes, usually depressions made in the ground. Each player has twelve pieces, each a different color and/or size. With each move a player places two of his own on the board. They take turns until all pieces are placed on the board with the central playing space left open. After this, a player may move a piece orthogonally or capture an adjacent opponent's piece by jumping to an empty space behind it. Capturing is not mandatory. If, after a capture, it is possible to continue with another jump by the same piece across another adjacent opponent's piece then the player may keep doing so, however, this is again not mandatory. It is allowed to revisit the same space during such a multiple capture. A player loses the game if he can no longer move or lost all his pieces. De Villeneuve (2003) mentions that players may move and capture diagonally but according to players in Grande Comore only orthogonal moves are allowed. It is unclear if these are two variations of the same game or if there has been a misunderstanding in the description of de Villeneuve.

Figure 3: *Dama* (Checkers).

Videos made of *Mraha wa bwe* games in Grande Comore did not show any diagonal moves.

The rules described here do not differ significantly from *Siga*, also written *Seega* or *Seeja*, as it is found in Northern Africa and the Near East. Commonly captures are made by enclosure (or custodianship, see Parlett 2018:238) but the orthogonal leap capture has also been attested, although in Parlett's (2018:246) description captures are mandatory.

Dama

Dama refers to a series of games on Grande Comore. Children were seen playing *Checkers* (in English also known as *Draughts*) on a partially preserved 100-square Western checkerboard (see Photo 3) playing what seems to be rules of *International Draughts*. When other people were asked about the game, they instead would draw a board with chalk on the pavement and gathered game pieces to make a gaming set.

The first pattern they would draw is a board of 64 fields. The board is unchecked and pieces are placed as in *Turkish Draughts* (see Photo 4) or *Graeco-Turkish Draughts* according to Parlett (2018:263–264). There is promotion to a long king and there are only orthogonal captures with no backward captures for unpromoted pieces. It is the southernmost attestation of *Turkish Draughts* in the literature so far. The rules of the game were already described by Falkener when he visited Asia Minor in 1845 (Falkener 1892:237–238) but its history and relation to other *Checkers* variations requires further research.

Figure 4: *Dama* (Turkish Draughts).

The second pattern they associate with *Dama* is played on an *Alquerque*-12 board (see Photo 5) with pieces on all but the central intersection, similar to what is known from the literature (Parlett 2018:Fig. 15.1a). The rules include promotion to a long king, while regular pieces cannot capture backwards. Capturing is mandatory under penalty of huffing. The promotion to a long king is a rare occurrence in *Alquerque* games but not entirely unknown (e.g., Jansen 1990). Similar games in South-East and South Asia have a triangle attached to each end of the board that holds additional pieces. Such boards have been attested for the Seychelles and the Maldives as well, but both regions, although geographically somewhat close to the Comoros, have no historical relation with the Comoros.

A confluence of histories

The game of *Mraha wa tso*, or *Bao*, is well-attested for the entire Swahili coast, which includes western Madagascar, Tanzania and Kenya. These areas have been in close contact with each other and have strong linguistic and religious affinities. The language of the Comoros is close to the Swahili language, a lingua franca for much of this region. Also, most Comorians are Muslim as are the Bao players on Zanzibar, Pemba, and the Sakalava people in western Madagascar.

The game of *Checkers* as played on 100 squares is well-known in French-speaking Africa and its presence, although limited, is not surprising on the Comoros. The Comoros were a French colony until 1975 and Grande Comore

Figure 5: *Dama* (Alquerque).

was under French rule since 1886.

The other games, *Turkish Draughts*, *Alquerque* and *Mraha wa bwe* (*Siga*), may each have different connections or could possibly be grouped as belonging to one Ottoman gaming context. The evidence for games played by the Ottomans consists of texts and archaeological finds. The Comorian games add contemporary evidence of their influence on the distribution of board games in the regions they frequented.

Ottoman game references

The understanding of Ottoman board games has so far not benefited from many Ottoman sources. Instead, the earliest sources are Western accounts of visits to the region that mention game names, an occasional Turkish art historical depiction of people at play, and archaeological descriptions of game boards.

An early reference that lists a series of board games of the Ottomans was recorded by de Bruyn (1698:136) in the accounts of his travels. The passage is in Dutch and the original as well as a full translation of the relevant passage is provided here:

“Doch als hen deze leedigheid begint te verdrieten, en dat zy eenig tydverdrijf ter hand willen nemen, word het Schaakspel voor den dag gebracht, daar zy zeer wel in ervaren zyn, gelyk ook in het dammen, en negenstukken. Maar zy speelen nooit om geld, alzo zy het zonde achten. Niet te min, hoe wel zy met groote

koelheid speelen, en datter noch blydschap noch droefheid, over winst of verlies, getoond word, hebben zy ‘er zodanig een vermaak in, da zy ‘er dikwils gantsche dagen mee toebrengen.

De *Mankala* of Hoornbord is ‘er ook zeer gemeen, en by allerhande slag, ryken en armen, gebruikelijk; zulks dat ‘er geen spel zo zeer in zwang gaat. Nooit, zeggen sommige Reizigers, speelen zy met steenen, of eenig spel, daar ‘t geluk, en ‘t geval de heerschappy in voeren. Meer als eenmaal heb ik het tegendeel gezien: want het Verkeersbord is ‘er ook in gebruik, doch echter zo gemeen niet. De manier van speelen is dezelve als by ons, maar met dit onderscheid, dat men zyn party niet geheel uit het bord kan slaan, maar altyd plaats moet laten om te kunnen aangaan. ‘t Bord is ook maar van eenerley kleur.”

The translation in English, here given by the author, leaves the names of games untranslated as they are discussed later:

Yet if this emptiness starts to sadden them, and they wish to partake in some pastime, the *Schaakspel* is brought in, since they are very experienced in it, similarly in *Dammen*, and *negenstukken*. But they never play for money, as they find it a sin. Nevertheless, although they play with great calmness, and there is neither happiness nor sadness displayed about winning or losing, they enjoy it to such an extent that they often spent entire days with it.

The *Mankala* or *Hoornbord* is also very common there, and with all kinds of people, rich and poor; so that there is no game that is more popular. Never, say some travelers, do they play with stones, of any game, in which luck or happenstance dominate. More than once have I seen the opposite: because the *Verkeersbord* is also in use there, although not as commonly. The way of play is the same as with us, but with this difference, that one cannot capture all the pieces of his opponent off the board, but one should always leave room to continue. The board is also only of one color.

The six untranslated words refer to specific board games. *Schaakspel* is the common Dutch word for the game of *Chess*, *Dammen* is the game of *Draughts* or *Checkers*. *Negenstukken* translates as “nine pieces” and refers

most likely to *Nine-Men's-Morris* or *Merels*. *Mankala* is known also in English and *Hoornbord* or “board of horn” is said to derive from the cowrie shells, known as little horns, with which the Indonesian *Mancala* version was known in the Netherlands. The French translation of de Bruyn published in 1700, speaks of *jeu des coquilles*, or *game of shells*. *Verkeersbord* is known as the Dutch term for a *Tables* or *Backgammon* board. In short, five board games are mentioned in this early record.

This list is similar in other records of travelers in the Levant around this time. For instance, de Thévenot (1664:65) mentions *Eschecs (Chess)*, *Dames poussées*, *Merelle* and *Mancala*. The latter is specified as having a board of two rows of six holes with six counters in each hole at the start of the game. Other board games are not mentioned.

In art historical sources, there is a banquet scene found in a sixteenth or seventeenth century Turkish album of miniatures and calligraphy that shows men drinking coffee, playing backgammon and mancala (Chester Beatty Library/Bridgeman Art Library CBL71659, Ms 439 f.9r). The mancala game is a wooden board of two rows of six holes. This depiction affirms only two games, *Mancala* and *Backgammon* as found in de Bruyn.

In previous archaeological studies, the historical presence of Ottomans has been associated with the presence of board games carved in rock faces (e.g., de Voogt 2010, 2012; Charpentier et al. 2014). The games associated with Ottomans in these archaeological contexts include *Mancala*, *Siga* and *Ṭāb*. *Mancala* is again played on two rows of six holes and sometimes longer rows are attested as well. *Merels* is rarely attested but at least one such board is suspected (de Voogt 2012). However, *Backgammon*, *Chess* and *Checkers* are absent.

In this amalgam of board game references for the Ottomans, only *Mancala* seems consistently reported and seems associated “with all kinds of people, rich and poor; so that there is no game that is more popular”. If we compare the games attested in the Comoros, it is clear that *Mancala* is the one that *cannot* be associated with the Ottomans due to its clear associations with East Africa and the different configuration of the board.

Ottoman games in the Comoros

Thomas Hyde (1694 II, 232) provides us with an early account of the game of *Sitta*, known elsewhere as *Ṭāb* (see Depaulis 2001), a description taken from Abdallah Shah, the son of the king of Anjouan. Even if this game is no longer attested, it adds to a set of games that can now be associated with Ottomans. The main reason for making the Ottoman connection is

the presence of *Turkish Draughts*. The peculiarities of the game are such that any other connection is particularly unlikely. In addition, the game of *Siga*, or *Mraha wa bwe*, is found frequently in the presence of other Ottoman games. In short, the Comoros show a combination of *Siga*, *Ṭāb* and *Turkish Draughts*.

This combination is especially useful for our understanding of Ottoman games. In the Comoros, *Siga* and *Turkish Draughts* are played in the sand or drawn on the pavement, respectively. They would not appear in the archaeological record. While *Siga* is found carved in rock faces elsewhere, the game of *Draughts* is consistently absent. The use of textile for game boards or the use of chalk may explain this absence in archaeology, but the Comoros now show that this game is nevertheless part of the games successfully introduced by the Ottomans. Finally, the game of *Chess* and *Backgammon* may be difficult to introduce; the first for the requirement of different figurative pieces, the second for its association with gambling as already mentioned by de Bruyn, especially in the Muslim world where the Arab version known as *Nard* is consistently disparaged in the Arabic sources (Wieber 1972).

Merels and Alquerque

While the Comoros add to our understanding of the distribution of games by the Ottomans, the game of *Alquerque* remains a curious presence and *Merels* an equally curious absence. It is possible that the Ottomans played *Alquerque*, which would add an interesting board games chapter to their influence. It seems to compete with *Turkish Draughts* and even carries the same name *Dama*. This latter situation suggests that they are imports of different time periods, just as the 100 square *Checkers* game was added after French influence on the islands. There is an unpublished *Alquerque* board associated with Ottomans attested in Silsila, Egypt (Maria Nilsson, pers. comm.) but additional examples would need to be recorded to make this introduction an obvious one. The rules of *Alquerque* in Grande Comore are relatively rare and our understanding of the distribution of *Alquerque* in the world is still wanting so that it may serve as a data-point in future analyses but not as evidence of Ottoman influence at this stage.

The game of *Merels* as mentioned by de Bruyn based on the mention of nine pieces and is specifically mentioned in other travel accounts such as the one by de Thévenot. *Alquerque* on Grande Comore is played with twelve pieces each and should not be confused. The few attestations of *Merels* in archaeological sites with Ottoman connections suggest that this may not

be a particularly popular game in comparison. At this point, this is only conjecture and further studies of both contemporary gaming practices and archaeological graffiti games may resolve any confusion or connection.

Conclusion

The board games played on Grande Comore today reflect three spheres of influence in the history of the island. East African, French and Ottoman introductions can be determined by observing both the rules and the game board designs. At least three games associated with Ottoman influence have been attested on Grande Comore and add to a broader understanding of Ottoman gaming practices for which a broad but scarcely overlapping set of sources exist.

The description of Comoros board games highlights the importance of contemporary board game descriptions as they provide useful insight in the complex and particularly widespread distribution of board games in this part of the world.

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