

Mancala boards (Olinda Keliya) in the National Museums of Colombo /

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The mancala boards collection of the National Museums of Colombo is characterised by a uniformity in decorations and configuration of playing holes. All objects relating to mancala games – including moulds and a bed – show a playing board configuration of two rows of seven holes and two enlarged holes often placed in between the playing rows. Other collections of Sri Lankan mancala boards show a similar uniformity. These objects should be linked to a single period of decorative art, in this case the Kandy period, and date back to at least the 18th or early 19th century.

At present, there are at least three principally different mancala games played in Sri Lanka. It is argued that the Kandy boards cannot be linked to all of these variants. Two of these variants will be described at some length in this article to illustrate this point. They give an indication of the relevance of the design of the board and the possible popularity of the games in the Kandy period.

The first section will give a short description of the mancala collection in the National Museums of Colombo. The second section will provide an introduction to mancala and describe Sri Lankan mancala variants, which is followed by a discussion of the collection of boards in relation to the described playing rules. Each section provides ample detail of the particularities of certain designs and rules which can be used as a basis for future research.

The Olinda Keliya Collection

The boards in the National Museum are named Olinda Keliya, meaning Olinda games. They derive their name from a seed 'Olinda' which is about 5 mm in diameter, red in colour and characterised by a black spot. The seeds are so small that the minimal size holes described in the British Museum catalogue of mancala boards (de Voogt 1997: 52) can still be used for play. On the other hand, the small size of the seeds makes playing somewhat awkward and the games described in the next section are now mostly played with cowry shells and various larger seeds which can be found as mancala playing counters throughout Asia and Africa.

Part of the boards in the collection are clearly designed for other counters than Olinda. Notably the larger boards with small-size and middle-size holes are clear examples (10.122.257; 34.41.7). Even the storage hole of one of the objects decorated with copper nails (34.41.7) shows that the required number of Olinda seeds would simply drown in the space provided. The other boards in the collection clearly require small size playing counters such as Olinda. Even a rather large board (9.4.109) may have minimal size holes to play on. This indicates that in the Kandy period at least two different kinds of playing pieces were in use: the *Olinda* seeds (after which the game is named) and a second kind with the approximate size of a cowry shell.

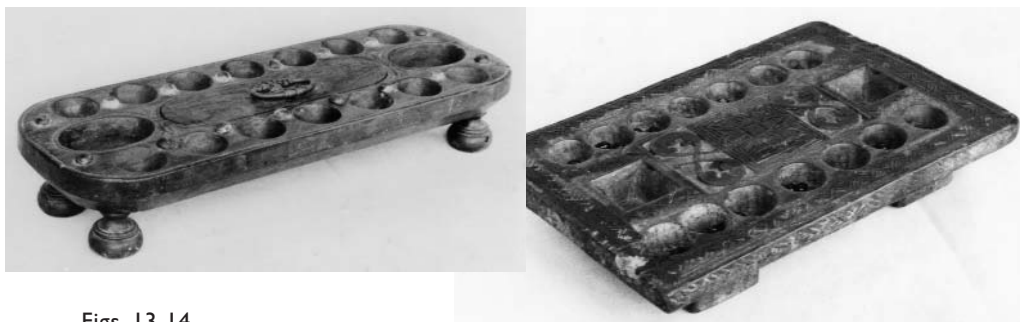
The majority of the collection consists of decorated boards. Some have sculptured



Figs. 1-6



Figs. 7-8



Figs. 13-14

legs and elaborate decorations, but most have only geometric designs carved on the playing side of the board. Lotus flowers (W.C.20.93; 47.56.203; 46.31.198; 38959.93; 1974.24.1), geese (10.122.257) and the goddess Nari Lata (40.436.161; 29.94.426) are well-known motifs in other pieces of art from the Kandy period (Coomaraswamy 1956:85-86,93,96). The board shaped as a fish (09.43.238) is a common design for mancala boards and can currently be purchased in local shops. The board in this collection is special for its unusual colouring and detailed carvings. The board featured with three geese (10.122.257) also shows particular detail since the design is almost three-dimensional in the deep relief carving which was used.

One board shows a man on horseback and a man next to the horse (46-34-199 mould), a quite unusual scene. Another shows an elephant (46.28.1.98) which is featured kneeling with another animal standing on its hind legs in front of it. This animal may represent an attacking dog-like animal, but in any case the scene is rather unusual. If a fight between an elephant and a dog is assumed, one might relate this scene to the battle between the players of the game. The relevance of these scenes remain unclear even in relation to other decorative patterns of the Kandy period. It should be noted, however, that some boards may be of a later date and merely imitate the Kandy decorative style.

There are a number of moulds in the collections with a clear mancala board design (46.34.199; 36.96.93; 07.28.207; 38.405.56; 47.6.201). The moulds were used to make a replacement for sugar, which is made from the Coconut tree and known as 'juggery'. The same configuration and decorative designs are used for moulds and for the regular boards, apart from the horsemen mentioned above. It is, however, remarkable that in this and other collections – for instance Tropenmuseum (1911-A9490) – so many moulds of this kind can be found. The process of making this replacement for sugar is time-consuming but may have been part of festivities. To the present day, mancala games in Sri Lanka are mainly played during special periods, such as Ramadhan or Sinhalese New Year. Special occasions in the Kandy period may have combined sugar making and mancala play to explain the quantity of the moulds in museum collections.

Finally, special mention should be made of a bed owned by Ehelapola (37.1.26). Hidden behind a removable top, a mancala game is carved out of the panel of the bed.

The relevance of this item is considerable. At present, there is a general conviction that mancala was played by royalty in the Kandy period. The data on boards in the museum files only indicate the date they entered the collections and do not identify the owners, former players or dates of making or using the board. The bed of Ehelapola is one of the few objects that clearly indicate an owner who apparently favoured the game so much that it was carved in his bed. This gives evidence that the game was played by royalty, by men and that it enjoyed a certain popularity. It cannot have been for pure ceremonial use since Ehelapola used it as a pastime. In addition, this bed and board give evidence of the age of the game. It is known that Ehelapola lived before 1815 which makes this object the oldest wooden mancala board in a museum collection of a confirmed date. So far, the oldest collecting date has been 1823 (de Voogt 1997: 15) and little can be said of wooden mancala boards of the Nineteenth Century in relation to the time they were made or used in play. The bed of Ehelapola gives clear evidence of the much suspected old age of mancala games and boards.

Olinda playing rules

Mancala games are games consisting of rows of holes, as described above, and playing counters usually seeds or shells. A characteristic of all mancala games is that counters are spread one by one in consecutive holes in a (counter-)clockwise direction. Mancala games have been described for all parts of Africa, the Caribbean, parts of South America, the Middle East, South and South East Asia (Deledicq & Popova 1977; Murray 1952; de Voogt 1997). Some are championship games while others are used for royal ceremony, funeral rites or just to pass the time. They appear as small as two rows of three holes and as large as four rows of thirty or more holes. Four-row mancala games have not been found in Sri Lanka, instead Sri Lankan games are characterised by a consistent two rows of seven holes design, usually accompanied by two enlarged holes. Unfortunately, this information is based on limited museum (Coomaraswamy 1956: Plates XII & XLI; de Voogt 1997: 74-76) and descriptive research (Parker 1909: 587-602; Murray 1952: 168-173; Auboyer 1955: 21-26) and extensive systematic fieldwork as to variations in boards and rules is only in its early stages.

During a brief visit to a group of players in the Colombo area, the following description of local mancala variants could be made. Russ (1984: 61) suggests that the Olinda game is a game with a particular set of rules. It must be concluded from this article, however, that various games are being played in Sri Lanka and that the game named after the seed Olinda cannot be connected to a particular set of rules. Instead, it is argued that different playing pieces have been used on the boards in the National Museums and that not all mancala games currently played in Sri Lanka are likely candidates for the Kandy period.

It is said that Asian mancala is predominantly played by women. The variants found in the Colombo area are also played by men, although their knowledge of the games appeared more limited. The evidence of the Kandy period shows that in those times, mancala was also played by men. The generalisation that mancala is played mostly by women is based on the limited data from research in Asia and is likely to be contradic-

ted by future descriptive research in the area. For reasons of convenience, players will be referred to as 'he' in the description of the rules.

Raja Pasu

Raja Pasu is a game for two players found in India and Sri Lanka; Raja meaning King and Pasu meaning Cow. The board consists of two rows of seven holes (there is possibly a 2x5 configuration used as well in India) and each hole contains seven counters. Play is in counter-clockwise direction. Each player owns one row of holes. The following description concerns the variation found in the Colombo area.

A move consists of picking up all the counters in one hole (one counter or many) and spreading them in counter-clockwise direction one-by-one in consecutive holes. When the last counter enters a hole, the counters in the next hole are picked up and spread in the same way in the same direction. This rule of sowing is so far only found in South Asia and, therefore, characteristic of South Asian mancala.

The move finishes if the next hole after a sowing contains no counters. In this case, the counters of the next hole after that are captured. If this hole also contains no counters, then no capture is made. In both cases the move comes to an end.

Captures as described above can be made on both sides of the board by the player who has the move. In addition, there is a second way of capturing. If during the sowing of counters a hole contains four counters exactly, then these 'four' are captured by the player on which row this hole is located. This capture is made during a move and may occur several times during that move.

If a player has no more counters to play with, then the counters of the opponent's side are added to the captured counters of the opponent and this opponent may start the next game.

In the next game, the players place the counters which they captured, in their own row. If the row cannot be filled then some holes may be left unoccupied on the left-hand-side of the row. These holes are now considered closed and do not enter into play during this game. (This means that the player who captured few counters also has fewer possibilities to capture 'fours' during the next game.) If a player has no counters enough to fill even one hole then the player has lost the game of Raja Pasu. One will find that such an ending will take a long time and requires many games of play. One can even state that it is unlikely that two regular players will finish such a game in a day.

This short outline of the rules of Raja Pasu show that the two enlarged extra holes found on most boards are solely used for placing captured counters. It is possible to play Raja Pasu with three players and since three-person mancala is extremely rare and not previously described in the mancala literature, this variation of Raja Pasu will be discussed here as well.

Raja Pasu Mandiri

The rules of Raja Pasu also apply to the three-person variation with the following additions. Apart from a Raja and a Pasu, there now is also a Mandiri or Minister. The board is not divided in two rows, with each player owning one row. Instead the players



Three players in Colombo playing a rare game of three-person mancala known as Raja Pasa Mandiri

divide the board in three sections. The middle three holes of both rows belong to the Raja, indeed the most important part. The Raja starts the game by spreading counters from his section in counter-clockwise direction over the two rows. According to the informants, he is also required to give one counter to each opponent after each game. A player is Raja for three games in a row.

After the Raja starts, the next player is the Mandiri who owns two holes on both rows towards the left of the Raja (or right if desired). The other side of two holes on both rows belongs to the Pasu.

The playing rules are identical to Raja Pasu; the holes possessed by the players may be started from and may be used to capture 'fours'. If a player can no longer play, the player skips a turn until no capture can be made any longer by any player. The remaining counter(s) belongs to the last player. The captured counters are re-sown as in Raja Pasu with some holes being closed. Since the players take turns in being Raja (the Mandiri becomes Raja, the Raja becomes Pasu, etc.) the captured counters vary greatly. The game is not likely to end and the informants even had a borrowing system in case a player had too few counters to play with.

In the case of three-person mancala, there is a need for three enlarged or storage holes. The British Museum has one such board of rather small size. The players featured on the photo play on a three-person board with three extra holes, the middle (for the Raja) being even larger than the other two extra holes.

Pallankuli

'Pallankuli' as the game was called by the informants in Colombo, is a name also used for another game played in Sri Lanka and India (for an overview of Indian and Sri Lankan names and rules see Russ 1984:57-61). The original name of the game described here is probably different but could not be recorded. The game is known, however, as Dakon, Conka and Sungka in Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines.

Each player owns one side of the board. The board consists of two rows of seven holes (many variations in configurations occur but have not been recorded in Sri Lanka) with seven counters in each hole (if the board consisted of two rows of eight holes there would be eight counters in each hole, etcetera). In addition, each of the players own an enlarged hole on the right far-end side of their row, a so-called end-hole or shop.

A move is played in the same way as in Raja Pasu with the important exception that the counters of a hole which receives the last counter of a sowing is picked up to continue the sowing. Therefore, the next hole at the end of the sowing has no relevance in the game. The move ends if the last counter of a sowing ends in an unoccupied hole.

In a move of a player, his right end-hole also comes into play. Counters are sown into this hole but if the last counter of a spreading enters this end-hole the end-hole will not be emptied. Instead of emptying the end-hole, the player is allowed to choose any other hole on his own side and start another sowing. This way it is possible to make multiple sowings without the opponent getting a turn. The counters in the end-hole make up the captured counters.

After the game is finished with one player owning the remaining counters and starting the next game as in Raja Pasu, the counters are planned on the board and some holes are closed, if necessary. The winner is the player who closes all the holes of the opponent.

Contrary to Raja Pasu, this game requires two holes on the far-end side of which one actually becomes part of the circle in which counters are sown during play. A board with extra holes placed in between the rows of play is not a board made for the game of Pallankuli as described here.

There is a third variation described for Sri Lanka with a similar sowing as Pallankuli but with no end-hole in which captures are made only by creating a hole with four counters. In addition, this hole can only be captured if the last counter of a sowing creates the hole with four. Other variations may occur but are not well-described in the mancala literature.

Boards and Rules

The descriptions of mancala rules in the above section explain two things about the boards from the Kandy period. First of all, a large part of the boards is unsuited for Pallankuli. The end-holes are simply not in the right position to facilitate play. Secondly, there is no variation whatsoever in the number of holes per row. This makes it again less likely that Pallankuli was a popular variant on these boards. In all countries where this game is played some if not many variations in board configurations occur.

Few mancala rules can be directly linked to a specific board. The Bao game of East

Africa and Owela in South West Africa make the identification of a board a little easier. Indeed, in the Kandy case we can only identify the main characteristics and not the small variations of the game that is played on the boards. The strong differences between Raja Pasu and Pallankuli clearly indicate that Raja Pasu has been the Kandy game rather than Pallankuli. The name of the game supports the royal image.

The moulds and the bed of Ehelapola indicate the widespread popularity of mancala in the Kandy period. The large collections in the National Museums of Colombo but also in the British Museum confirm this popularity. A short survey of the boards used among the informants indicates that many other types of mancala boards are in use. In order to get a complete overview of Sri Lankan mancala the museum collections do not suffice. On the contrary, the museum collections show the popularity of a game in a particular period which has little relevance to all the boards and rules of present mancala games in Sri Lanka.

For a contemporary perspective on Sri Lankan mancala it is necessary to collect modern boards and rules. These boards should then be added to the museum collections in order to present a complete picture of mancala in Sri Lanka. Until that day, we may at least conclude that Sri Lanka is one of the very few countries that gives ample evidence of the popularity of mancala in the Nineteenth Century. In that sense, the collection of Kandy boards is unique and provides an important piece of evidence in the history and possible distribution of the game.

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