

MANCALA

Mancala is a name given to a large family of “*Pit and Seeds*” or “*Count, Sow and Capture*” games -- one of the oldest games known! *Mancala* games have been played the longest and most popular in Africa, though various versions are played all over the world. Boards have been found dating back to 1400 B.C in Egypt. By 600 A.D. the game had spread to the Middle East and Asia. Surprisingly, the game was little known in Europe until the 19th Century. In some parts of Africa. *Mancala* was reserved for royalty and people of rank, and play was limited to the men, or to particular seasons of the year, or to day time. Women had more important chores to do! The name, “*Mancala*,” comes from the Arabic word meaning “*to move*.” Names of various games may refer to the board, or the seeds, or manners of play in native languages. Depending on the culture, pieces are “seeds” or “cows.”

These two player games are played with a board, usually consisting of two or four equal rows of cup-shaped **Pits** that may be carved out of wood or stone, or even just dug out of the dirt. The row or rows on each player’s side belong to that player. Sometimes there is also a larger cup-shaped **Storehouse** for each player on his right side of the board. Several three row games have been found in Northeastern Africa, and modern inventors have even created a one row board with simultaneous play.

The playing pieces may be large **seeds, pebbles, or marbles**, and they belong to a player only when they are in his row of pits. The game starts with three or four **seeds** in each **Pit**. The game is played by scooping the **seeds** out of one of your **pits** and sowing them one seed at a time around the board. There are a variety of ways that **seeds** are captured depending on the game. Winning may be a matter of making the most captures, disabling your opponent, or by “going empty.” Games may be played singly, or in rounds, or matches – where sometimes the next game will begin with each player using the seeds that were captured the previous game. Matches may be decided by capturing the most seeds, or by winning the most games.



There are over 300 documented names for *Mancala* games and a variety of variations in how they are played. Some versions like *Kalah* or *Oware* are fairly simple; others like *Omweso* or *Bao* are much more complicated. These last two are played on a board consisting of four rows of eight pits, and play sometimes reverses direction as well.

Glossary of several types of Captures and Play

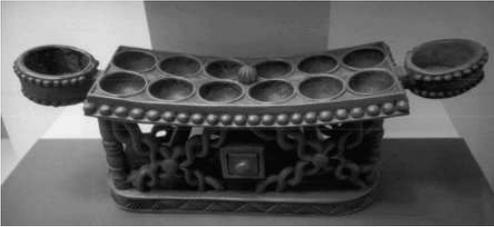
Cross Capture – Seeds are captured when a last seed falls in an empty pit opposite an opponent’s loaded pit.

Specific Count – Seeds are captured when a last seed fall in an opponent’s pit with a specific number of seeds in it.

Series Capture – When the seeds of a pit are captured, any immediate pits with a specified number of seeds are also taken.

Pull Across– Seeds captured are then sown on the capturing player’s board, using Continuous Play.

Continuous Play – When a player’s last seed falls in a loaded pit, he scoops it up and continues sowing until either his last seed lands in an empty pit or he makes a capture, either or both of which end his turn.



TWO ROW GAMES

KALAH is commonly found in commercial Mancala sets, but these rules are not really African. It is played on a two by six board with either 36 or 48 seeds. The number of the **seeds** used will affect the strategy, and some luck is involved. **Seeds** are sowed counter-clockwise around the board, including dropping a **seed** in the player's **storehouse** as it is passed, but not in his opponent's **storehouse**. If the last **seed** is sown in, it is placed in the storehouse. **Cross Captures** are made when the last **seed** is sown into an empty **pit** on the player's side opposite a loaded **pit** on the opponents' side of the board – those seeds are taken to the **storehouse** as well the capturing **seed**. If the last **seed** sown lands in a player's **storehouse**, he gets a **go-again** play. The game is won by capturing the most **seeds**.

OWARE (AKA *Awari*, *Wari*, *Awele*, etc) is played on a two by six board with 48 seeds. **Seeds** are sown counterclockwise around the board, but not into either **storehouse**. If **seeds** are sown all the way around the board, the pit from which they originated is skipped, sowing continuing in the next. **Specific Count captures** are made when the last **seed** sown falls on the opponent's side of the board in a pit with one or two seeds in it. The captured pit is emptied into the **storehouse**, along with a **Series Capture** of any two seeded **pits** immediately preceding that captured **pit**. If in doing so, the opponent's side is emptied of **seeds** – it is a **Grand Capture** and all capturing player's pieces are also taken to his **storehouse**, ending the game. A player must not allow his opponent's side to *go empty*. It is often played in tournaments around the world, and has a couple of Associations promoting its play. The game is won by making the most captures.

AYO is a variation of *Oware* played by the Yoruba people of Nigeria, using a two by six board and 48 seeds where if a piece lands in any occupied **pit** that can't be captured, then those pieces are used for **Continued Sowing** until the last seed lands in either an empty pit, or a pit with one or two seeds where it makes a **Specific Count Capture**. Continued Play is not allowed if it would empty the opponent's side of the board. The game ends only when the entire board is cleared of seeds.

JODU, another variation also played by the Yoruba, uses only 36 seeds. **Specific Count Cross Captures** are made when the last **seed** lands in an empty **pit** on a player's side opposite a **pit** with one or two seeds. Those **seeds** as well as any **seeds** in **pits** preceding in the counter-clockwise order with just two **seeds** are taken to the **storehouse**.

ADI is played in Western and Northern Africa. It uses **Specific Count Captures** of pits containing three seeds on either side of the board and has **Continued Sowing** in play as well. The game ends when there are only eight **seeds** remaining on the board.



BA-AWA is played by children in Ghana on a two by six board with 48 seeds using **Continuous Sowing**. If at any time during sowing, a **pit** has exactly four **seeds** these are immediately captured by the player who owns the pit. Turns end when either the last **seed** is sown into a **pit** which then has four **seeds**, which are captured by the moving player, or it falls into an empty **pit**. When there are just eight **seeds** left on the board, the player who began the game takes these and the game ends. Won by most captures.



FOUR ROW GAMES

In Four Row *Mancala* games, each player controls the two rows of **pits** on his side of the row, and plays his **seeds** by sowing around those two rows, rather than in his opponent's rows of **pits**. Four Row games are found in Eastern and Southern Africa.

MORUBA played in Southern Africa is one of the simpler four row games using an four by eight board and 64 seeds. A similar game, *Mefuvha*, may have some of the largest boards -- boards of six, eight or twelve pits per row are common, but boards with twenty-eight rows are sometimes used!. Played with two **seeds** in each pit to start, there is **Continued Sowing** when a last **seed** lands in a loaded **pit**. **Cross Captures** are made when the last **seed** lands in an empty **pit** on the player's first row opposite a loaded **pit** on the opponent's front row -- any **seeds** in that **pit** and the **pit** behind it are captured. The game is won when a player has lost all his **seeds**.

HUS is another simpler four row game played by the Hottentot in South Africa on a four by eight board with 48 seeds. The board is set up with two **seeds** in each pit in the back row and the four **pits** on the player's right of the front row. **Pits** with only one **seed** in them cannot be played. **Seeds** are captured back and forth across the board by **Pull Across Capture** and are not removed from the board. When a player's last seed lands in a loaded pit in his front row, and the **pit** opposite it is also loaded, then he takes the **seeds** from it and the **pit** behind it, if any, and leaving the capturing **seed** in place, he **Continues Sowing** with the captured **seeds** beginning with his next **pit**, playing and capturing until finally he lands in a empty **pit** and his turn ends. The game ends when one player has only empty or single **seed pits**, and cannot make a play.

OMWESO is the royal game of Uganda. The king, or his chiefs, would play with their people while conversing with them about topics of concern and what was going on, or listening to and making judgment in suits. *Omweso* is played on a four by eight board with 64 seeds -- players may start with four **seeds** in each of the **pits** in their back row, or using one of a number of conventional groupings, or the player's own arrangement. Pits containing only one **seed** cannot be played. While *Omweso* uses **Continued Sowing** with **Pull Across Capture** when both the opponent's opposite **pits** contain seeds; it also has **Backup Capture**, where a play that originates or continues from one of the player's four leftmost **pits** (that pit must contain nine or less seeds) can reverse the direction of sowing to clockwise to make a capture. Captured **seeds** can be used to make another **Backup capture** starting from the **pit** which precedes the **pit** of the initial Backup play (If there are less than nine **seeds**, and a capture is possible); or they are continued to be sown in the original counter-clockwise direction, play continuing until finally a **seed** drops into an empty **pit** and the turn ends. The game is won when the opponent has only empty or single **seed pits** and is unable to play.

BAO (Southeast Africa: Tanzania, Malawi, and Zimbabwe) is the most complex version of *Mancala* both in terms of rules and in terms of strategies. Played on a four by eight board with one square hole in the front row right of center on each side and with sixty-four seeds, the players start with only 10 **seeds** on the board, the rest are brought in one by one making captures as they are placed in a loaded **pit** opposite an opponent's loaded **pit**. The **pulled across seeds** are sown beginning in either the extreme left or right **pits** of a player's front row so direction of play varies. Once all the reserved **seeds** are in play, the game continues by choosing any **pit** with more than one **seed** and sowing its **seeds**. Sowing can be in either direction -- captures must be made if possible. There are special rules for the square hole, one allows for a grand slam play! Winning is by disabling the opponent.

RESOURCES FOR MANCALA GAMES

- *All About Mancala: Its History and How to Play* by Sue and Jon Hanson
- *The Complete Mancala Games Book: How to Play the World's Oldest Board Games* by Larry Russ
- *Africa Counts: Number and Pattern in African Culture* by Claudia Zaslavsky This fascinating study of mathematical thinking among African peoples covers counting in words and in gestures; measuring time, distance, weight, and other quantities; number systems; patterns in music, poetry, art, and architecture; number magic and taboos, games like Mancala and much more.

Online Books:

Mankala in East Africa by Walter Driedger

Omweso: The Royal game of Uganda by Brian Wernham

How to play Warri. By David Chamberlin

The Wonderful Oware Book!



Online Resources:

Mancala World Portal

http://mancala.wikia.com/wiki/Mancala_Portal

The largest collection of articles related to mancala games on the internet. so far. The list numbers more than 400 articles. Rules for both Traditional and Modern Games.

Wiki ManQala.org http://www.wikimanqala.org/wiki/Main_Page

A Free On Line Resource on Mancala Games with over 240 Articles – Rules for both Traditional and Modern Games.

The Oware Society <http://www.oware.org/>

The Omweso Society <http://www.geocities.com/omweso/>

Mind Sports Mancala <http://www.msoworld.com/mindzine/news/classic/mancala.html>

Computer Versions of Mancala Games:

Awale <http://www.myriad-online.com/en/products/awale.htm>

Rocket Snail <http://www.rocketnail.com/mancala/classic.htm> A online Kalah game

Oware Wizard <http://oware.ivorycity.com/>

A List of More Computer Mancala Games: <http://people.cs.uu.nl/hansb/d.gam/mancala.html>

Links for these can be found on Eldrbarry's Mancala Page:

<http://www.eldrbarry.net/hatr/mankala.htm>