

Maldivian Game Board

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A Maldivian *dhoni* (wooden sailing ship) brought us to the lagoon of Laamu and its main island of Laamu Gan. The ship had been modified to accommodate an engine, which cut our travel time down to only a day and a half. I was accompanied by a Maldivian taxi driver, my friend and translator, and we were passengers on our way to find the game of *ohvalhu*. Laamu Gan felt calm and quiet compared to the activity in Malé and the noise of the ship's engine. Laamu is one of the southern atolls of the Maldivian Islands, which extend like a garland from the southwest of India and Sri Lanka toward the equator in the middle of the Indian Ocean.

We reached Laamu Gan in the middle of the night and stayed with my friend's relatives for two days. The morning after our arrival, we found a piece of driftwood laying outside the family house. It had been carved into an *ohvalhu gonde*, a board for the Maldivian game of *ohvalhu*. It is a game mostly played by women and the woman in charge of this household was puzzled by my interest in this particular example. It was made out of an eroded piece of driftwood with additional wear from years of play and showed makeshift metal repairs. As the item had been retired from use, she deemed it only suitable as firewood and asked if there was perhaps something more beautiful that she could offer as a gift from their island. But, to me, this board was perfect.¹

Ohvalhu is a mancala game, characterized by rows of holes and using a proportionate number of gaming counters such as seeds or shells. The Maldivian *oh-valhu* means "eight holes" as there are eight holes in each of the two rows.² Both seeds and shells are locally sourced using eight counters in each hole. At the time of this trip to Laamu, plastic versions of the board were sold in the capital. Those versions were imported from Malaysia, consisting of two rows of seven holes, the preferred configuration there, and came with seven black cowrie-shaped plastic counters in each hole. The Maldivians also play *dihe-valhu*, meaning ten holes with ten counters in each hole as well as at least one other configuration.

The game of *ohvalhu* may also be played in the sand or on a temporarily marked surface, but most Maldivians play on wooden boards. The *ohvalhu* board found on Laamu Gan is rounded at the bottom and has two legs or stands attached to it to prevent rocking on a flat surface. Although the people of Laamu Gan have beaches and backyards on which to play a game without the practical need of a wooden board, many encounters of an in-progress game of *ohvalhu* include two women, young or old, sitting on a bench with a board between them. Sometimes they play on a porch or at a table but the playing surface is rarely, if ever, scooped out from the beach or dug elsewhere in the coral that makes up most of the island's surface.

The coral on atolls does not sustain trees that render hardwood or regular timber other than that of palm trees. Yet, driftwood is not an unusual source material for a game board in the region. Maldivians have elaborate woodworking traditions using foreign timber.³ Their *dhoni*, such as the one on which we arrived in Laamu, are made on wharfs found on several of their

atolls.⁴ The colorful dhoni that ferry tourists from the airport to the capital city Malé are featured on tourist materials and locally produced lacquered wooden boxes are sold in the many tourist shops on the main island.

Mancala games have been studied as prestige gifts, especially in West Africa.⁵ Elaborate carvings on the stand of the game board or carvings between the rows give meaning to the board as well as a clear provenance to any careful observer. The same set of rules used for ohvalhu is also found in the game of *congka* in Malaysia and Indonesia, where several elaborately carved game boards have been collected for museums in Europe, taken from the households of sultans and other people of importance.⁶ Maldivian game boards were on display for the first time at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. Stewart Culin (1858–1929) became one of the first anthropologists to discuss these mancala games, which he had collected from around the world.⁷ The British Museum in London also owns two boards that are in pristine condition, delicately carved and decorated.⁸ The holes of those two examples have flat bottoms, which makes them awkward for play. Additionally, the flower and lace motifs painted on their exteriors suggest that it is not the holes but the aesthetic of the board as a whole that should capture our attention. These boards indicate that the Maldives are also part of a broad tradition where game boards take on a role as prestige objects.

The absence of documentation surrounding game rules inspired my trip to the Maldives, as neither Culin nor the British Museum had any such information about playing practices or varieties of game boards. At the time, I assumed that the rules would be identical to those found in neighboring Sri Lanka and India. But when I got to play games in different houses on the island of Laamu Gan, I found that the rules were those found in Indonesia and Malaysia, suggesting a cultural connection that had not been attested before in the literature on the history of the Maldivian Islands.

When I received the game board from Laamu, the host said that it was not a worthy gift and that she no longer considered it valuable. Although the women in the Laamu household must have used it extensively, there was no sentiment toward a board of which the basic metal repairs made it no longer usable as a playing board. In the weeks after, I would buy at least three more boards with different configurations. They were sold to me by men. Some of them were shop owners and only one told me that he would have to make a new one for his wife. The board from Laamu was rescued from the fire rather than gifted or bought. After a life at sea and another as a playing tool, the board was recycled once more as an object of interest to a board game researcher.

The board from Laamu Gan has minimal decorative carvings, but they are particular to the Maldives. It is the only region where the shape of the end holes often, although not always, takes on a heart-shaped form. Usually, rows of holes give little to no indication where a board was made, but the Maldives are a rare exception with these hearts. I did not meet the carvers of these boards and the one man who told me that he needed to make a new board for his wife sold me a board without heart-shaped end holes. Women players identified the shape as that

of a heart, but gave no particular explanation. Quite often, boards are part of a family for decades and information about the boards' makers is lost. The overall shape of the board is rectangular and not particularly diagnostic. The boat- or fish-shaped designs common in Indonesia and nearby India and Sri Lanka are largely absent. Although the boards in the British Museum are painted, the driftwood example from Laamu Gan and the others that I encountered did not show evidence of decorative paint.

Other than the prestige of collecting and curating a beautifully carved and decorated board, there is also the pleasure of playing with such a board. Game boards used by master players, who are mainly present in East Africa and the Caribbean, display a patina on the playing holes from extensive use.⁹ This smoothing of the surface gives off a particular shine but also shapes the playing cups to the players' hands.¹⁰ When the playing holes are worn through, the board is subsequently discarded as it no longer serves its purpose. But just before the board's destruction, its holes often reach their optimal size and smoothness. Master players are also found on the Maldives and playing expertise is primarily exhibited by women, who dominate the game. The remarkable depth of their calculations even attracted the attention of computer scientists, who programmed the workings of the game and assessed their accomplishments.¹¹ The holes of the Laamu Gan board show the wear expected from protracted play. The sharp edges of each hole are blunted by thumbs and fingers, creating an oily surface. Such wear is unlikely to be found with any ornately carved example. But on this board, it is not the regular playing holes that are worn through, it is the enlarged outer hole that was patched with a large metal piece to extend the life of the board. It is a damaged and repaired board, extensively used and then abandoned. The driftwood board was both handsomely carved and expertly played. Its material attests to its environment and its carvers illustrate some of their woodworking skills particular to the islands. Play has made it smooth, repairs have made it rough, and its heart shapes are still visible, but its life as a playing board has ended.

When I took the board with me, I knew that it would no longer be played by Maldivians and that few New Yorkers would know the workings of the game. It is not what most would consider a museum example of woodworking skill or playing expertise, but it can still come alive in the right context. The natural erosion, carvings, and human wear and repair breathe life into this board with hearts beating at either end. While its last breath is suspended, curators in a new environment or participants in an exhibition can decide to play some more, study its wear and tear, or compare its appearance with similar boards in museum collections.

¹ I was assured that taking this board would not take away an opportunity for play as this board was no longer considered usable.

² Alex de Voogt, "Mancala Rules and Cultural Changes in Maldivian History," *Journal of Indian Ocean Studies* 7, nos. 2–3 (2000): 174–82.

³ Clarence Maloney, *People of the Maldive Islands* (Bombay: Orient Longman Ltd., 1980).

⁴ Ahmed Shafeeq, *Odi dhoni faharu banun* (Malé, Maldives, n. d.)

⁵ Roslyn A. Walker, *Sculptured Mankala Gameboards of Sub-Saharan Africa* (PhD diss., Indiana University, 1990).

⁶ Alex de Voogt and Jeroen Donkers, *Mancala, a Digital Catalogue* (Amsterdam: Co-production Tropenmuseum, ICAS and IIAS, 2002), CD-ROM, with text, photographs, and software from the exhibit *Mancala, a Worldwide Game*.

⁷ Stewart Culin, "Exhibit of Games in the Columbian Exposition," *Journal of American Folklore* 6, no. 22 (July–Sept. 1893): 205–27.

⁸ Alex de Voogt, *Mancala Board Games* (London: British Museum Press, 1997).

⁹ Alex de Voogt, *A Question of Excellence: A Century of African Masters* (Trenton, NJ: African World Press, 2005).

¹⁰ Alex de Voogt, "Changing Objects: Aesthetic Qualities of Mancala Boards," *Museum Anthropology* 20, no. 3 (1996): 150–53; de Voogt, *Mancala Board Games*.

¹¹ Jeroen Donkers, Jos Uiterwijk, and Alex de Voogt, "Mancala Games: Topics in Mathematics and Artificial Intelligence," in *Step by Step: Proceedings of the 4th Colloquium Board Games in Academia*, ed. Jean Retschitzki and Rosita Haddad-Zubel (Fribourg, Switzerland: Editions Universitaires, 2002), 135–48.