

Michezo ya Mbao -- Mankala in East Africa

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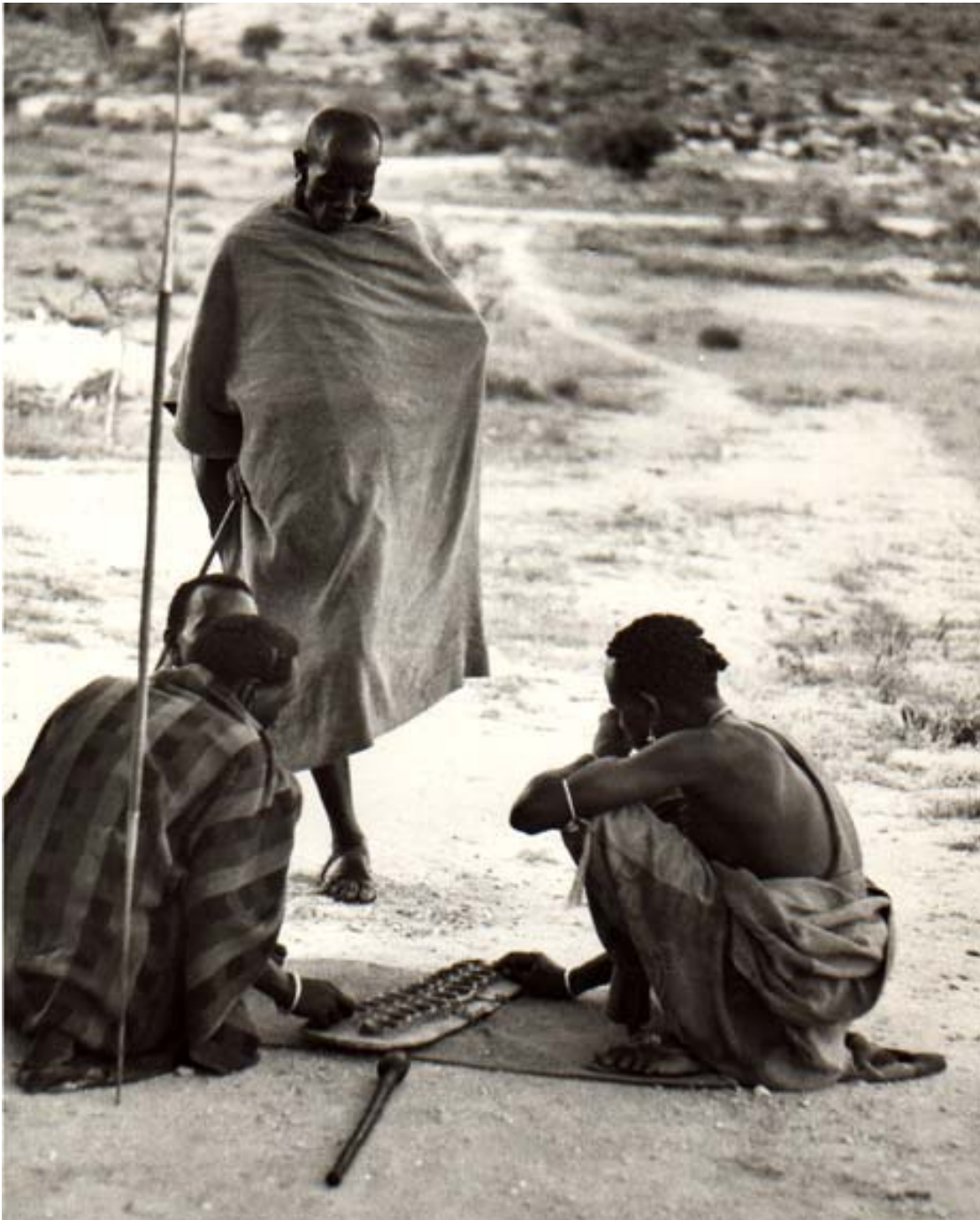


Photo 1 - Samburu playing in Illaut, about 100 km north of Maralal in Kenya

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1 - INTRODUCTION. *Mankala* is one of the many names given to any of a vast variety of basically similar games played in many widely spread parts of the world. The common feature of all these games is that they are played with pebbles, beads or large seeds on regularly patterned playing areas or boards consisting of a number of pits arranged in two or four rows. These playing areas may be actual wooden boards or they may be holes scooped in the sand or even carved into solid rock. The generalised game is played from the West Indies to Hawaii and from Turkey to South Africa. This broad belt includes all of Africa, the Middle East, India, South East Asia, Indonesia and the East Indies, and the Philippines. The similarities between all the varieties of *mankala* leads to the inescapable conclusion that, at some time in the distant past, they all originated in a single place.

A thorough understanding of the games can yield much information concerning the movement of peoples and the contacts between the different cultures. For example:

- i) The name *mankala*, or variations of it, is used in Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Mombasa, Zaire and Malawi. However, the local rules are not always the same.
- ii) The name *chanka*, or variations of it, is used in India and the Philippines.
- iii) The name *wari*, or *owari*, is used throughout Nigeria, Ghana and Niger. There is little variation in the rules. The same "West African" version of the game, with the same name, is played in the West Indies. There connection here would seem obvious. Further, the name *weri* is used by the Jopadhola of Uganda.

- iv) The Swahili phrase “*michezo ya mbao*” used in the title of this article means simply “board games”. A considerable number of names for these games have their origin in one or the other of these two words. In particular, *omweso*, *mweso* and *wezo* are names commonly found in Uganda and Tanzania.
- v) *Ambao*, *mbao* and *bao* all derive from the word “*mbao*” which simply means “board” in Swahili. These are common, but highly unspecific, names for many of the *mankala* games. In some tribes they may refer to a specific version of the game but different tribes use the same name for different versions. *Bao* is the most common name in Tanzania. Forms of this word are found as far south as Malawi and west to Angola.
- vi) *Kombe* is the name used for the game along the northern Kenya coast and in Lamu. The word has two meanings in Swahili: to hollow out by carving and to clean out, or bankrupt, an opponent. Thus “*mbao ya kombe*” means “the hollowed out board” while “*mchezo wa kombe*” means “the game of cleaning our or bankrupting”. The first meaning refers, of course, to the method used to make the board and the second to the fact that the game is played until one of the players has lost all his counters and is “cleaned out”.
- vii) *Soro* and *coro* are extremely common in northern Uganda.¹
- viii) *Aweet* is the name used by the Dinka tribe of the Sudan. This version is played on the four-by-ten board.
- ix) *Mongale* is commonly used along the coast and in Mombasa. It is related to the generic name *mankala*. *Mongola* is used in the upper Congo. However, it must never be assumed that the use of a name related to *mankala* implies a game similar to *mweso*, or an other specific game. The Egyptian *mankala* is played on a two-by-six board and is very different.

It is commonplace to credit the “Arabs” with the diffusion of the game. Though it is often assumed that the game was diffused by the Arab traders, this begs the question of which “Arabs” and by what sort of social contact the game was learned by other peoples. The game is mentioned in rather ancient Hindu mythology. It was not brought to India by the same Arabs who brought *kombe* to Lamu. It also appears that the game entered East 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, such as the people of Lamu, and those whose contacts were marginal, such as the peoples of the Rift Valley area. For example, it is unlikely that the Arabs taught the Maasai *enkeshui*.

There is a second reason for spending more effort in understanding these games. Games, to repeat a truism, are a microcosm of life. And the games played within a society are a subtle reflection of the values of that society. For example: In the game, a single ‘hole’ is a ‘cattle corral’ by the Meru and the Maasai; in India it is called a ‘shop’ in Java it is a ‘rice field’. A European usually (though not always) plays chess with slow deliberation. A Ugandan always plays *omweso* as fast as possible and the slightest hesitation is actually penalised by forfeiting the move. The

¹ In non-Bantu languages. But the ‘same word’ (e.g. *solo*, *tsolo*) is found in the Bantu area at least as far south as Zimbabwe.—*Mila* Ed.

Maasai have a unique style which gives the impression of incomprehensible confusion to any spectator insofar as several players appear to be, and actually are, playing simultaneously on the same board. In some societies the games are played only by men and are accompanied by elaborate etiquette; in others they are considered simply an amusement for old women and children.

2 - COMMON FEATURES. There are a large number of features which are common to all *mankala* games. On the other hand, almost every game is exceptional in some detail. The most common version of *mankala* in East Africa is called *mweso* or *mbao*, or some variation of these two names. This is the dominant version in Uganda and Tanzania. However, though there is great uniformity in the rules of *mweso*, the game is not typical of *mankala* in general. For purposes of explanation I will define the following terms whose meaning will become clear in the detailed expositions of the rules:

Board (n) The playing surface whether it be an actual board, a series of pits scooped into the ground, or a pattern carved into living stone.

Capture (v) To remove one or more of the opponent's seeds. They may be either removed from the game entirely or simply relocated to a holding area somewhere else on the board..

Chained move (n) A series of moves constituting a single turn.

Eat (v) To capture one's opponent's seeds.

End (v) To complete a move (not necessarily a turn). This occurs when the last of a handful is sown in a particular pit.. What happens next depends on the contents of the pit. The move may end with a sleep, a capture, or the next move of a chained move.

Handful (n) The entire contents of a pit. Once a handful is picked up it is sown into succeeding pits.

Move (n) A single step in the game consisting of sowing an entire handful of seeds.

Pit (n) The hollowed out locations on the board in which the seeds are kept when they are in play.

Seed (n) The individual counters with which the game is played. They may be pebbles, or actual seeds,.

Sleep (v) To complete a turn so that now it is the opponent's turn.

Sow (v) To place a handful of seeds one-by-one into a continuous series of pits. This is the way in which moves are carried out.

Turn (n) One or more moves (a chained move) until a player 'sleeps'. Then it is the opponent's turn.

Here follow some features which are common to almost all *mankala* games:

- i) In game theory terms they are all "two person, zero sum games of complete information". That is, there are two sides, one's gain is the other's loss, and there are no secret or random moves.
- ii) With the exception of *mweso*, all the games have from 12 to 24 pits arranged in two parallel rows. The two-by-six and two-by-seven versions are most popular in West Africa, the Middle East, Indonesia and the Philippines. Two-by-ten and two-by-twelve are most common in East Africa. It is common to carve a large storage pit at each end of the board to contain the winnings of each side. For example this is done by the Tigani, Chuka, Gusii and Luyia in Kenya.
- iii) A given number of seeds (always the same for any specific variant of the game) are distributed among the pits. This distribution may follow a fixed, non-uniform pattern, or it may be entirely at the discretion of the individual player. Uniform distribution is most common. In the case of a discretionary distribution an experienced player will probably choose one of the preferred openings, much as in chess.
- iv) A significant difference between *mankala* and the majority of Western board games, including chess, draughts (checkers), backgammon, etc. is that no distinction is made between the seeds. Firstly, all the seeds have the same value. Secondly, the distinction 'yours vs. mine' only lasts until the board frontier is crossed. That is, any seed that crosses the dividing line between one player's side of the board and his opponent's immediately changes ownership, at least temporarily. Permanent ownership resides in the 'sides of the board'. That is, one **side** is mine; the other **side** is yours.
- v) A move consists of picking up the entire contents of any pit on one's own side of the board and sowing the seeds, one in each succeeding pit, in a counter clockwise direction. The term 'sowing' used to describe this process is very apt. It is part of the game that some these seeds will go around the end of the row and over to the opponent's side. This is not a permanent loss, however, since they may be regained in a subsequent move. It may at times even be strategically desirable to do this in order to upset your opponent's arrangements. Certain pits may be omitted from the sowing process in some games.
- vi) The significance of any move is determined by the pit in which the move ends. That is, the pit in which the last seed of a handful lands. To generalize, this may result in a) the player may sleep; b) a chained move which may follow a prescribed pattern or may be at the discretion of the player; or c) the capture of some of the opponent's seeds. There are certain exceptions to the counter clockwise rule in East Africa which are not permitted in *mankala* elsewhere.
- vii) All games provide rules for capturing seeds from one's opponent's side of the board and some allow capture's from one's own side.

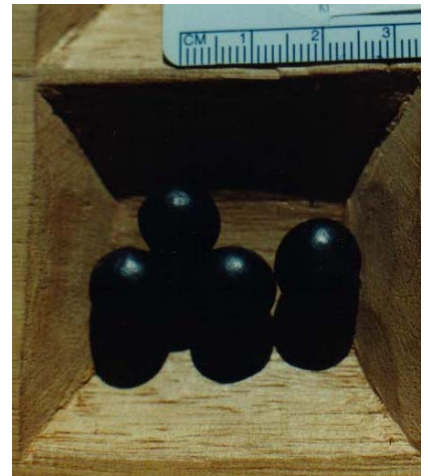
- viii) A game is over when one of the players no longer has enough seeds on his side to make any effective moves.
- ix) The winner is decided by the number of seeds each has captured.

3 - MWESO. *Mweso* is one of the many names of what is probably the best known East African version of *mankala*. It is played from Lamu southwards along the entire Swahili coast and inland throughout all the areas contacted by Arab traders. This includes the area west of Lake Victoria, all of Uganda and north into the Sudan. Further west, *mweso* is found in the western Congo and south in Malawi. Four-row boards are also found in north western Kenya. There is remarkably little variation in the rules and what variation there is consists of details such as the starting positions. A board of four rows with eight pits in each row is standard. There are exceptions, however. Four-by-seven boards are used in Zaire, four-by-ten in the Sudan. One board of four-by-thirteen has recently been found carved into solid rock on an island in Lake Baringo. It was apparently still in use. Nevertheless, four-by-eight is by far the most common. There are usually two seeds per pit, always 64 altogether. The large degree of standardisation in the rules and the fact that it is not played by any of the tribes that did not have close Arab contact suggests that its introduction into East Africa is fairly recent compared with the other, two-row, games played here. Perhaps this variety was invented by the Swahilis. It is probable that at present *mweso* is gaining in popularity. A very good description of the game as it is played in Uganda is given in *Omweso, a Game People Play in Uganda* by M. B. Msimbi, (Uganda Publishing House). It includes much detail such as the names used by the various Ugandan tribes, the Luganda terms for certain special board configurations and the various customs surrounding the game in that country. In order to avoid duplicating what Msimbi has done so well, only a brief summary of the basic rules will be given here. Rules for series of games and for special models of play are also given in his book and will not be repeated.



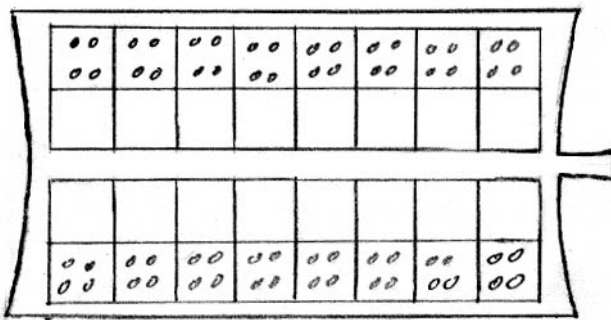
Photo 2 - Playing *omweso* in the streets of Kampala. Note the faint four-by-eight design of black dots on the wall behind the Pepsi bottle.

4 - BAGANDA, OMWESO. The Baganda play on a very carefully chiseled four-by-eight board. They are probably the most ornamental boards in common use in East Africa. A typical board is about 2 cm thick and 30 by 50 cm in area. The pits are square with sloping sides and closely adjoin each other with no gaps. Two models are in use. One type has a handle in the middle of one end, the other is split lengthwise and has two hinges so that it can be folded in half. The boards are always carved with a slight concave rounding at the ends. This makes them rather reminiscent of the Buganda dress style. The seeds are natural seeds. They are almost perfectly round ca. 1.2 cm in diameter and rather uniform in size. They are black and very hard. The scientific name is *mesoneurum welwitschianum*. Only men play the game in Uganda. In the past it was closely associated with the court of the *Kabaka*. The saying was, "If you don't play *omweso*, you don't know what is going on." That is to say, if you don't spend time at court. Today it is played on national television every day for fifteen minutes before the news.



Photos 3 and 4 - A folding *omweso* board from Kampala and a detail of *mesoneurum welwitschianum* seeds.

Diagram a - One possible starting arrangement.



Diagrams a, b, and c show different ways of setting up the initial positions. Diagram d shows that each opponent has two rows of the board. To make a move, the entire contents of any pit

in the player's own two rows are picked up and sown in the direction of the arrows. When the last seed is put down, the move is continued by picking up the entire content of the pit in which handful ended. This includes the last seed of the previous handful. A turn is over when a handful ends in an empty pit. The other player than takes his turn.

Diagram b - A second possible starting arrangement.

4	0	4	0	4	0	4	0	side two, back
0	4	0	4	0	4	0	4	side two, front
4	0	4	0	4	0	4	0	side one, front
0	4	0	4	0	4	0	4	side one, back

Diagram c - A third possible starting arrangement.

2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2

Diagram d - Normal direction of movement.

↓	←	←	←	←	←	←	←
→	→	→	→	→	→	→	↑
↓	←	←	←	←	←	←	←
→	→	→	→	→	→	→	↑

Diagram e - Special areas allowing reversal.

2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2

The key to the game is the last seed of a handful. If it lands in a previously occupied pit in the player's front row and both the front and back pits of the opponent's side in the same column are occupied, the player captures the contents of both pits on the opponent's side. He takes these captured seeds and places the first of these in the same pit where he placed the first of the previous handful. From there he continues sowing as before. This is the only circumstance in which seeds cross from one side to the other. It is not mandatory to make a capture if it is not strategically desired.

There is one exception to the counter clockwise rule: If a handful ends in one of the special outlines areas in diagram e, and there are already seeds in the pit in which the handful ends, it is allowable to continue the move in the reverse direction. This is allowed only if an immediate capture can be made. It is not permissible to loop around the left hand end during a reverse move.

It is illegal to pick up an isolated seed. Since the game is over when one player can no longer make any moves, it is over when he has only single seeds scattered across his side or will be in this position in the foreseeable future. This player then loses.

A player may at any time 'pass' or omit a move at his discretion. If his opponent also passes then the first player is forced to make a move. It is common to decide the player to make the first move with a racing start in the same way as the Maasai do when playing *enkeshui*: Both players start simultaneously from the pits outlined in black in Diagram d. The first to sleep begins the next move of the regular game. The most interesting feature of *mweso* as opposed to other versions of *mankala* is that seeds do not leave the board; rather they only change sides. This means that a game can oscillate back and forth indefinitely, particularly if neither player is very skilled. All other versions come to an eventual end no matter how poorly they are played since from time to time seeds must be captured and removed from the board.

5 - LANGO (UGANDA), CORO. The only difference between *coro* and *omweso* is that repeated captures are slightly more difficult; the contents of one's own pit opposite the captured opponent's are picked up with those of the two pits on the opponent's side.

6 - LAMU, KOMBE. The Lamu board contains one feature that is also found in Malawi: the pits with the black outline in Diagram i are carved square and are slightly larger than the others. Apparently during well-played games large numbers of seeds tend to accumulate there. There are also a number of specialized games which make use of these large pits. They might be compared to the various puzzle games based on chess. Unfortunately none of the rules are available. Both men and women play the game in Lamu.



Photo 5 - A *kombe* board from Lamu.

The board itself is generally quite large and solidly made. It consists of single slab of wood about 4 cm thick and 35 by 70 cm in area. The board may have two large pockets extending from one end. These play a role in some of the specialized games mentioned above but are not used in the regular game.

The seeds used are the seeds of the *caesalpinia bonduc* bush, a member of the pea family. They are about 2 cm across but oval and somewhat flat. They come in various shades of grayish-brown and green – rather pretty and looking a little like olives. Besides their convenient size, they have one great advantage over all other types -- the seed inside the shell is loose and rattles. This means that the seeds bounce very little when dropped and tend to fall ‘dead’. Two seeds grow together in a flat, brittle, thorny, reddish-brown pod about 4 by 7 cm. The pod grows on a bush. The Kampala seeds, by way of contrast, can be very troublesome if they bounce onto a hard floor from a table, and are very easy to lose. The seeds used in Nigeria are identical with those used in Lamu.



Photos 6 and 7 - *Caesalpinia bonduc* seeds and pods.

Diagram f - The favoured Lamu starting arrangement. The total number of seeds is still 64.

5	5	5	5	0	0	0	0	
2	2	2	6	0	0	0	0	
0	0	0	0	6	2	2	2	
0	0	0	0	5	5	5	5	

There are two differences in the rules between *kombe* and *omweso*: In *kombe*, i) Only the contents of the opponent’s front row is captured. The conditions for capture remain the same. ii) Reverse moves are permitted for indirect captures. The ruling that one may not loop around the left end remains. It is also permitted to begin a move with an indirect reverse capture.

It is desirable to distribute the seeds in as ‘tricky’ a fashion as possible. For example, if a player knows that a handful will end in a given place, he will start there and distribute the seeds backwards. This combined with the requirement that the moves be executed as fast as possible can make it difficult for an inexperienced person to follow the game.

7 - MOMBASA, MONGALE. This version differs in some details from *kombe* but they are not on record. The favoured starting position is:

Diagram g - The favoured Mombasa starting arrangement.

4	4	4	0	0	0	0	0
2	2	2	0	7	0	0	7
7	0	0	7	0	2	2	2
0	0	0	0	0	4	4	4

8 - CONGO, MONGOLA. Note that the board is only seven columns long. The starting arrangement is as shown diagram k.

Diagram h - The favoured Congolese starting arrangement.

4	0	4	0	4	0	4
0	4	0	4	0	4	0
0	4	0	4	0	4	0
4	0	4	0	4	0	4

The game differs from *omweso* in two ways: i) When a handful ends in an empty pit, or one containing only a single seed, the player sleeps. However, this last seed is not placed in that pit but in the succeeding one. ii) there must be at least two previous occupants in the pit in which a handful ends in order to make a capture. A capture cannot be made if the seed making the capture should have landed in the previous pit but did not because it contained less than two.

9 - MAASI, ENKESHUI *Enkeshui* is the mankala game played by the Maasai. The description that follows is based on observations around Narok and Maasai Mara, around the town of Ngong, and Amboseli. It also illustrates one of the main difficulties in learning the rules of a specific variety from direct observation – namely, the difficulty in distinguishing the differences between rules, strategic considerations, and movements irrelevant to the actual course of the game. The board has two rows with eight, ten or twelve pits in a row. It may be significant that only even numbers are used. Among the Maasai the even numbers have female connotations and this might subconsciously be related to the symbolism of placing seeds in pits. Women do **not** play the game among the Maasai. Twelve is the preferred number of pits for each row but eight is common because that board is much easier to carry. Eight is also used by beginners.



Photo 8 - An *enkeshui* board from Kajiado, near Nairobi.

Diagram I - A popular Maasai starting arrangement on a two-by-twelve board.

3	3	0	3	3	0	3	3	0	3	3	0
0	3	3	0	3	3	0	3	3	0	3	3

Diagram j - A popular Maasai starting arrangement on a two-by-eight board.

4	4	4	4	4	4	0	0
0	0	4	4	4	4	4	4

The two zeros may be at either end of the board as long as they are at opposite ends. Both rows together contain 48 seeds. This is of interest because the number '48' is considered to be ritually propitious. These 'beads' are traditionally stone pebbles, but in modern times may also be cast aluminium or carved plastic. The aluminium beads are hammered to make them round. The plastic ones are carved with a sharp knife and look much like dried seeds. An individual seed is called a 'cow', a cup is called a '*boma*' (cattle coral or *kraal*), and a pit containing four seeds, as described in rule 2, below, is called a 'bull'. To capture an opponent's seeds is 'to 'eat', and to complete a move and come to a stop is to 'sleep'. The latter two terms are common to all East African versions.

- Rule 1. Although there are certain formalities involved in starting a game, let us suppose that player **A** starts. All moves will be described from **A**'s point of view. **A** picks up the entire contents of any *boma* on his own side of the board and sows the cows one-by-one counter clockwise as described in the previous section. If the handful ends in an empty *boma* on **B**'s side, the move is over and **A** sleeps. If it ends in an occupied *boma* on either side, the last cow and the entire contents of that *boma* are picked up and the move continues. Once a move is begun, no distinction is made between the two sides of the board and the sowing continues right across the boundaries until the player sleeps.
- Rule 2. If the handful ends in a *boma* already containing three cows, so that it now contains four, that *boma* is termed a "bull" and belongs to the player that created it. It can no longer be moved and any cow that falls into it in passing, stays there. (This is the only version of which the author is aware in which one player can own a piece of 'property' on the opponent's side.) The seeds in a bull can at any time be removed and placed in a less crowded bull or removed to any safe place away from the board. This does not affect the status of that *boma* as a bull belonging to a specific owner. Any move ending in a bull sleeps. It is also possible to form a pair of bulls if the last two a handful form three and four in adjacent *bomas*. The three and four may be in either order.
- Rule 3. Assume **A** is playing. If a handful ends in an empty *boma* on his own side and there is at east one cow in **B**'s *boma* directly opposite, the contents of both *bomas* are captured by **A** and may be placed in any of his bulls or in a safe place away from the board. If **B**'s *boma* is empty, or is a bull, **A** sleeps.

Rule 4. If a capture is made as in Rule 3, and the *boma* in which the capture is made is followed by a continuous string of one or more empty *bomas* on **A**'s side, and each of these has cows in the opponent's *boma* (on **B**'s side), then the contents of these *bomas* are also captured. Here is an example:

Diagram k - An example of a 'continuous string' capture.

.	.	.	.	2	1	3	2
.	.	2*	1	0*	0	0	1

If the 2* is moved to the right the cows in all the *bomas* outlined in black are eaten including the cow that landed in the *boma* marked 0*. **A** sleeps after the capture.

Rule 5. Once a player has gone completely around his opponent's side of the board and returned to his own, he is allowed to continue that turn in either direction.

Rule 6. Unlike in draughts, a player is not compelled to make a capture if he does not feel it is strategically desirable to do so.

Rule 7. Games are often begun in the following 'racing start' manner: Both players start simultaneously from the far right-hand *boma* sowing the cows as fast as they can. The one who sleeps first or the one who goes farthest before sleeping, makes the first move of the regular game. The manual dexterity displayed during this procedure is highly valued. Which of the two is used to decide the beginner appears to be a local variation. The procedure is watched carefully by supporters of both sides as errors are easily made.

Rule 8. It is sometimes permitted that each player may make an advance move. This move allows a player to take the cows of any two of his *bomas* and redeploy them on his own side in any way he sees fit.

Rule 9. The game is over when one player no longer has an cows on his side with which to carry on the game. His opponent then places all the remaining cows on his side, as well as any he may have laid aside, into one of his bulls. The winner is the one with the most cows including those in the *bomas* that have become bulls on the opponent's side.

Bets may be placed on either side by placing a pebble or unused seed near the side of the board which the bettor favours. Series of games are often played and are organised in two ways: Firstly it may be agreed that the series should consist of a certain number of games and a record of wins and losses is kept with small twigs. Secondly, the cows won in one round are replaced on the board starting from the right. The player with a surplus removes them from the game while the player with the deficit must continue without them. The series continues until one player does not have enough cows to fill his right-hand *boma*. He is then the loser.

The most interesting thing about *enkeshui* is not the rules themselves but how the game is played. As with all things Maasai, it is generally a group effort with decisions made according to principles of egalitarianism and consensus. Each side consists of a 'floating' team of up to five players. This

requires some explanation! Players may join in a game already in progress and may leave during the middle of a game they have started. One difficulty in learning is that once one has started a game, others will join in and eventually take over if, in their eyes, one's own playing is not sufficiently competent. A team member may suggest a move by making a trial move which will either be allowed to stand or will be retracted and replaced by another move. Since this is occurring on both sides of the board, considerable confusion results. Cheating is common and often attempted. If it is detected by a member of the opposing team, he simply retracts the move. This may even give the impression that someone is playing on the wrong side of the board. A move may also be retracted if it is put forward by someone not sufficiently high ranking to participate other than as a spectator. This practice makes it extremely difficult for anyone attempting to learn the game. Many young Maasai today do not know how to play properly for this reason.

10 - DINKA (SUDAN), AWEET. This game is the same as the *coro* of the Lango except that it is played on a four-by-ten board.



Photos 9 and 10 - A four-by eleven (?) and a two-by-twelve board from northern Kenya.



Photos 11 and 12 - Playing on a four-by-thirteen 'board' in northern Kenya.

11 - POKOME, MBOTHE. The Pokomo tribe, along the Tana river, play *mbothe*. Although the name is similar to the *kiothi* of the Meru and the *giuthi* of the Kikuyu, there is no similarity in the rules. It is played by both sexes and all ages. The Pokomo consider it to be nothing more than an entertainment, unlike the Baganda who take *omweso* very seriously.

The usual form of the board is simply a number of shallow pits dug in the ground. There are two rows of ten pits on each side. Each pit contains two counters, usually stones.

The rules are quite simple: One picks up the contents of any pit on one's own side and sows them, one in each pit, counter clockwise around the board. When a handful ends, that stone and the entire contents of that pit are sown further. If a handful ends in an empty pit, unless there is a capture, the player sleeps. This type of move progression is identical with *mweso* and *enkeshui*. It is the most common in East Africa. Other regions have other ways of chaining moves, or none at all.

Except during the first move, all pits on the opponent's side containing two stones are omitted from the sowing. Also a move may not originate from a pit containing two stones. If no other pit exists from which to make a move, the one farthest right must be played. The opening move must, therefore, be from the right hand end.

To capture, the handful must end in an empty pit on one's own side opposite a pit containing two stones. These two are then captured and are kept off the board. A player gets a free move after every capture. In this way it is possible to build up chains of moves.

When an opponent has no stones left, his opponent is required, if possible, to make a move crossing the board thus giving him more.

The captured stones plus those remaining on one's own side, if any, are then counted and the player with the most is the winner.

12 - KIKUYU, GIUTHI. Among the Kikuyu *giuthi* is played primarily by young boys when they are herding cattle or goats. Since the game is played on a very casual basis, holes dug in the ground are the most common form of board. Wooden boards are practically nonexistent. Small stones are used as counters, or sometimes the seeds of the *mubuthi* tree. The board consists

of two rows with anywhere from five to ten pits in each. Two-by-eight is preferred. The number of stones in each pit varies from four to nine; six is preferred. At present, knowledge of the game is being lost among the Kikuyu. Even those who can play it, often make mistakes in the rules and have to be reminded by a bystander who happens to remember. One of them said, "If you haven't been herding you don't know the game." And many of the boys today have not been herding. There were special names for various pits and for certain moves, but no one seems to know them now. Diagram I shows a typical starting arrangement:

Diagram I - A typical Kikuyu starting arrangement.

6	6	6	6	6	6	6
6	6	6	6	6	6	6

The player to start the game is decided as follows: One player takes a stone or seed and hides it in one of his hands behind his back so that his opponent does not know which hand the stone is in. He may place a small wad of mud in the other hand. The two hands are then brought forward and the opponent must guess which hand holds the stone. If he guesses correctly, he begins the game. (I wonder if this practice was introduced by Europeans as it appears to be unique.)

To make a move, a player picks up the entire contents of any one pit on his own side and sows the stones, one in each succeeding pit, in **either** direction. When a handful ends, he picks up the entire contents of that pit and sows them in the **opposite** direction. Each time he picks up a new handful, he changes direction. This complete lack of a mandatory direction is unique to *giuthi*. One is not permitted to start with a single stone.

A move is not considered valid until the player has crossed the border over into the other side of the board. If he lands in an empty pit before this he gets another turn. If, after having crossed the border, he ends in an empty pit on his own side, and the pit opposite contains one or more stones, these stones are captured. The stone making the capture is also taken off. Captured stones are put in some safe place off the board. If the pit making the capture is followed by a string of one or more empty pits each of which has at least one stone in its opposing pit, these are also captured. The move is over after all captures are completed and it is the opponent's turn. In any case, the move is over once a player has landed in an empty pit on either side after having crossed the border at least once.

If a player cannot make a move because he has only single stones in any of his pits, he loses his turn until such time as he has more. If, at any time, he has none, that game is over. The stones left on the opponent's side belong to the opponent. The winner is the one with the most stones.

As with the Maasai, it is common practice to continue the game into a second phase. One proceeds like this: The person with the less beads replaces them on the board in any arrangement he chooses. Much experience is required to take maximum advantage of this opportunity. Some versions of the game do not require one to replace all the seeds that one has on the board. In addition, if the loser of the first game has less than half of his original number of seeds, he may ask that the board be shortened by two pits in each row, to a minimum of three. His opponent, the one with the most seeds, places an equal number of seeds in each pit on his side opposite to the ones placed by the loser. Some versions require that the winner place double the number in each of his pits, if the loser has less than half. The

game then continues as before until one player cannot continue. The second game is begun by the loser; after that the two take turns.

13 - KILINJE, NDOTO. *Ndoto* is played by the Kilinje. The game as recorded below is extremely simple. It may be that some of the more sophisticated minor rules are missing as what I have recorded here seems to be a stripped down version of some other game. There is, for example, only one mode of capture while most games specify two. (E.g., forward and reverse capture in *mweso*; simple capture and making bulls in *enkeshui*.)

Ndoto is played on a two-by-eight with two seeds in each pit as shown below:

Diagram m - The standard *ndoto* starting arrangement.

2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2

It is common to decide the beginner of a game by way of a racing start as in *enkeshui*:

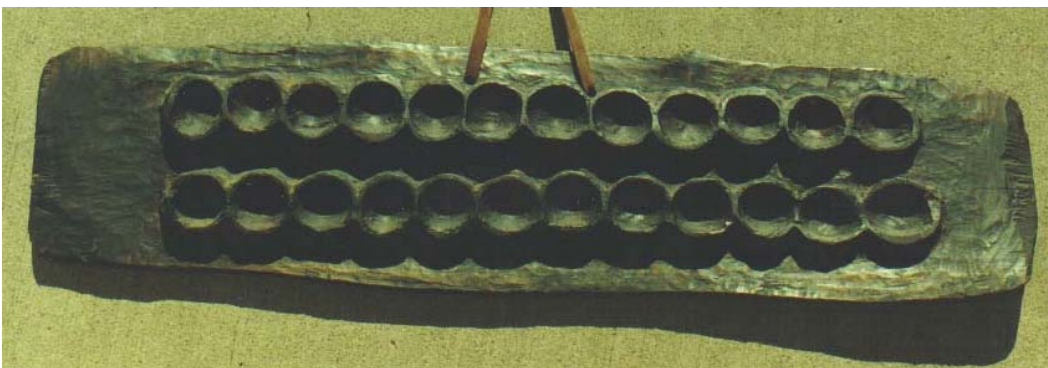
A move is made, as is usual in East Africa, by picking up the entire contents of any one pit on the player's own side and sowing them in the counter clockwise direction. When a handful ends, that seed and the entire contents of the pit are picked up to continue sowing. If a handful ends in any empty pit, the player sleeps. Then it is the opponent's turn.

If handful ends in an empty pit on one's own side, and the pit opposite contains one or more seeds, these seeds are captured. A player sleeps after a capture.

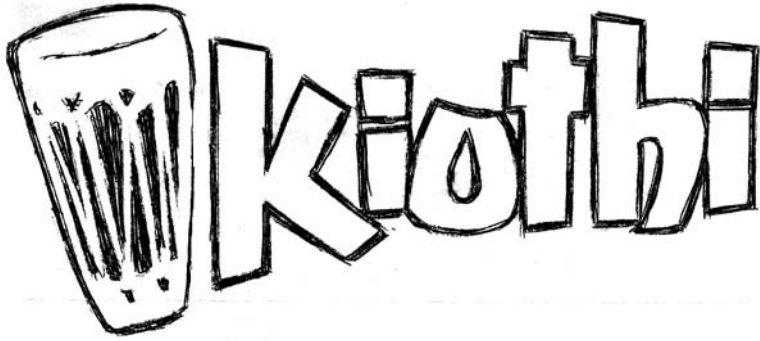
It is not permitted to move a pit containing only one seed that is not followed by an empty pit. In other words, a single seed cannot be used to begin a chained move. It can, however, be used to make a capture.

The game is over when one side has no seeds left with which to continue play. Each player then keeps the seeds left on his side. The winner is the one with the most.

14 - MERU, KIOTHI. The following section is copied, by permission, verbatim from "Kiothi, the Most ancient Game of Africa", a two page handout written prior to 1972 by Fr. Botta of the Materi Catholic Mission in Kenya.



Photos 13 and 14 - A *kiothi* board and a detail of the chocolate coloured seeds.



the Most Ancient Game of Africa

The board, seeds and rules are according to the original game of KIOTHI played by the MERU tribe of Kenya.

For any information, please write to The Kiothi Club, Box 73, Meru.

Rules: the *kiothi* board has twenty "*bomas*" (cup-like hollowed out depressions), ten on each side and some boards also have large *bomas* to be used as prisons.

The game can only be played by two people at a time. Each player is given 30 warriors (seeds that look like acorns – or stones or what have you.) They are placed in the six right hand *bomas* on each side – five warriors to a *boma*.

The objective of the game is to capture the opposition warriors and put them in prison. The player who captures the majority is the winner. The supreme victory is to win by a margin of one². Some tribes rate a one warrior victory as equivalent to two normal victories; some rate it as high as ten victories by any other margin.

To begin the game, each player is permitted to take the five men from each of two of his *bomas* and place them in any of the cups – on either side of the board. The battle to be fought is presumably between clans so that there is nothing to identify one warrior from another. (Some tribes play the game or "fight" for cattle – so the seeds represent cattle rather than warriors.) So all the warriors or cattle that are in the *bomas* on one side of the board belong to the player on that side. But as the game begins, he finds it strategically desirable to move some of them into enemy *bomas* where they are safe unless captured according to the rules of the game.

The order of play (who goes first) can be determined by various means but a toss of a coin is as good a way to decide as any. The first player may move any of the warriors in any of his *bomas*, provided he moves always to the right depositing one warrior in each of the cups beginning with the cup immediately to the right of the one from which he has taken the warriors and provided the last warrior does not land in a *boma* that is already occupied by one or more warriors. Usually at the early stages of the game, this means that he will have to select a group of warriors large enough to "go around the end"--that is, into enemy territory. Once he has gone around the end distributing one warrior in each cup, he will probably end placing the last warrior in an enemy encampment--that is in an enemy occupied *boma*. If this happens (and it usually does) he collects all the warriors in that *boma* and continues depositing them one at a time in the following

² Actually two. One's gain is the other's loss therefore the difference between any pair of scores is always an even number in all *mankala* games.-Ed.

bomas. (He does not put one in the *boma* he has just emptied.) However if he should place the last man in an empty enemy *boma*, he is finished and the opponent makes his move.

If however, he picks up enough warriors to come around the other end (back to his own side of the board) he is hoping that the last warrior in his hand will be deposited in one of his own enemy³ *bomas*. When this happens, he then has captured the warriors in the enemy *boma* opposite the one in which he has landed. He also retires the warrior he used to make the capture and puts that warrior plus the ones he has captured in his prison. They are now out of the game and cannot be used again. There is one exception to this "capture" procedure. It is unlawful to capture an enemy *boma* that has not been moved. In other words, if in the early stages of the game, a player lands (with the last warrior of the group he is moving) in an empty *boma* on his own side of the board opposite an enemy *boma* that has not been moved, he cannot claim the warriors of that *boma*-nor can he retire the warrior with which he landed in that *boma*. But in a short time all the *bomas* will have been moved and then any warriors in enemy *bomas* are vulnerable and can be captured.

Finally, the cup or *boma* on the left (extreme left) side of a player's row of *bomas* has special significance. Landing in that hole with the last warrior of a group you are moving when that hole is unoccupied, entitles you to capture all the warriors in the opposite or enemy *boma* as well as those in the three adjacent enemy *bomas*. Again, you can only do so if the enemy *bomas* have been disturbed (moved.) Also, you are only entitled to the warriors in *bomas* adjacent to the captured one provided each of the *bomas* is occupied. If the second *boma* from the enemy's right (your left) on his side is empty, then you cannot capture the men in the third *boma* and so on. Landing in this hole is rather rare. One such "coup" when the enemy *bomas* are heavily occupied can often determine the outcome of the game.

Towards the end of the game, the strategy changes to this extent. Each player will attempt to keep a number of warriors (even one to a hole) in the left hand *bomas* on his side of the board. This will allow him to make a number of moves on his side (by landing in empty *bomas*) without placing any of his men in enemy territory. Eventually, one of the players will have no moves left other than the one in which he places warriors in the enemy camp. When one player has no moves left, the game is over and all the warriors remaining on the board (they will all be on one side) go to the opposition; i.e., the man who can still make a move. Then the captured warriors are counted and the one with the greatest number wins.

The word '*kiothi*' comes from the Meru verb for putting or placing. The seeds are called *njodthie*. The racing start is sometimes used to determine the beginner. The game is often played using same seeds as described in *kombe* except that they are the colour of milk chocolate and look extremely like chocolate covered almonds. If some are left in a bowl on any table of a western household, someone is sure to try to eat one!

15 - BUKUSO, LUKHO. *Lukho* is played by the Bukuso subtribe of the Baluya on the slopes of Mount Elgon. It is played only by mature males. Herd boys or school boys are strictly forbidden from playing as it distracts them from their duties. It is played in a rather orderly fashion between two opponents, a third person serving as referee and score keeper. It is felt that the

³ I believe this word is mistaken.-Ed.

Maasai method of team playing leads to fights. The playing board is often of wood but may be a series of holes dug into the ground or, in some cases, into solid rock. The counters are generally stones. A board has two rows of eight, ten or twelve in each row. The normal complement of stones is three for each pit, however they are not distributed uniformly. As is quite common in East Africa, the counters are called “cows”. The name of the board is the same as that of the game – *lukho*.

Lukho is rather different than most games in that the entire game depends on the initial setup. One starts with three stones in each pit. Then each player removes whatever number of stones he decides from whatever holes he likes, on his own side.

Diagram n - One possible result of a *lukho* first move.

2	1	3	1	0	2	1	1
1	1	2	2	2	2	3	3

At this point each player has the remainder of the counters in his hand. Then each player places whatever number of them he decides in any one hole on his opponent’s side. This could be considered to be move two of the “opening” phase of the game. Once this has been done both players simultaneously sow the stones remaining in their hands starting from the far left hand end of the opponent’s side. (This is at each player’s right.) The sowing is done counter clockwise. The moves chain in the same way as in *mweso*. This simultaneous move may be considered as move three of the opening phase. . Captures are permitted during this move of this phase. The first player to sleep while carrying out this racing move begins the “execution” phase.

Before explaining the second phase, note that captures are made by exactly the same means as rules 3 and 4 of *enkeshui*. A move is over after a capture.

Phase two, the execution phase, has no decision points for either player. Every move **must** begin at the non-empty pit which is farthest left on one’s own side of the board. The rules for carrying out these moves are the same as those used for the simultaneous move with one addition: Once a player has made a capture and later lands, with the last of handful, in a pit containing one stone, this pit is termed a “knife”. It has exactly the same significance as a bull in *enkeshui*. That is, it can neither be moved nor captured and any move ending there sleeps. At the end of the game the contents of a knife are added to the winnings of the player to whom it belongs.

The game is over when one player has no stones, except perhaps in knives, left on his own side. The winner is the one with the most captured stones.

It can be seen that the purpose of the execution phase is only to determine the merits of the opening phase as all the moves are automatic. The game is entirely determined by the opening phase. There is one possible variation of this phase. One player may place all his stones wherever he likes on his opponent’s side. The opponent then starts his move from any pit on his side. From there the game continues in the execution phase.

Games are often played in sets of twelve using the following scoring system:

2 points - Both players have captured stones but the one with the most wins.

4 points - Only one player has made any captures at all, or one player has won by exactly two stones. The winning stone is called a "bull" and the winner taunts the loser with it making bovine noises and thrusting the bull at his face.

12 points - If the first game of a set is won by a bull.

16 – FUTURE WORK. *Mankala* games are played throughout Africa, however there are considerable differences in rules and styles of playing. Presumably these rules and styles disseminated themselves by a process of diffusion and mutation similar to that in which languages spread. Therefore the study of *mankala* games might be of value in the service of tracing the interactions of various tribes and cultures. The first step in such a study would be to develop a table of affinities in which degree of similarity between any two versions can be given some sort of guide number. The second step would be to plot a map showing the prevalence of the various versions. From the information already available it can be seen that the *mweso*, four-by-eight, type games seem to be associated with Arab contact. These are found up and down the entire Indian Ocean coast but also in the vicinity of Kampala. It was a surprise to me that they are also common in the Congo. On the other hand, the long two-by-twelve boards, of which *enkeshui* is a good example, are most common amongst the pastoral peoples of East Africa. I have not seen them in any other place. West Africans and Southeast Asians prefer the two-by-six arrangement. (Not dealt with in this article.)

Finally, a more systematic compilation of rules from a broader election of informants could then be added to this database. Inevitably insight would emerge from such an association of information. This the author concludes with a request for contributions from as broad a base as possible. His e-mail address is [walter\(at\)driedger\(dot\)ca](mailto:walter(at)driedger(dot)ca).

17 – METHODOLGY. Rules for the various *michezo ya mbao* were collected simply by asking. A typical expedition would take place on a Sunday afternoon when the author would drive out into the countryside and stop at whatever village bar struck his fancy. His motorcycle was helpful in attracting attention without distancing the local people. In the bar he would seat himself not too far from one of the patrons and order a beer. He would then light a cigarette and offer one to his neighbour, thus initiating a conversation. From this, the subject would gradually turn to *mbao*. The conversation would generally catch the attention of other patrons and a search for a suitable demonstration board was begun. Sometimes one could be found promptly; other times not at all. The author deliberately did not bring a sample board with him because there was a tendency for local people to attempt to accommodate the author by adapting *their* rules to *his* board. That would, of course, defeat the purpose of the research.

Once a board was found, or created by scooping pits in the ground, a game was begun. As explained in the section on *enkeshui*, learning the rules was not always a straightforward process. Eventually this was expedited by asking a series of structured questions:

- i) What is the name of the game?
- ii) Who (what tribes) play the game?
- iii) Who (old, young, men, women) play the game?
- iv) Does the game have any other names?
- v) How many rows in the board?
- vi) How many pits in each row? Are there other options?
- vii) Are there end pockets? Do they play an active part in the game?
- viii) How many seeds in each row?
- ix) How are they initially distributed? Are there other options?

- x) In what direction may the seeds be sown? Under what circumstances may there be a reversal?
- xi) What is the object of the game?
- xii) What are the rules?



Photo 15 - The author, at left, conducting research at Wakaba's bar in Ngong.

It was not unusual for the various patrons, informants, onlookers, etc. to start buying the author drinks before much time had passed, although in one case it was necessary for the author to bribe his informant by playing for beer. Interestingly, this produced rather suspect results as the informant seemed to be very vague about some of the rules that allowed him to win so consistently! When the author had absorbed about as much as he thought he could handle, he drove back to his flat in Nairobi and wrote down as much as he could remember in a standard form. Next he would select a suitable board from his collection, and attempt to play the game in solitaire to verify the validity of the rules he had written down. Sometimes a second trip was required.

18 - BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1 - Count and Capture, Cooperative Recreation Services, Inc., 1955
This little booklet contains descriptions of a large variety of *mankala* games. They were written by foreign students who happened to be in the United States at the time. Care must be exercise in using it, however, as there is great variety in the quality of the articles.
- 2 - Omweso, a Game People Play in Uganda, M. B. Nsimbi, Uganda Publishing House, 1969.
This is an excellent account of the game as it is played by the Baganda.

- 3 - Standard Swahili-English Dictionary, Oxford University Press, 1967
This was used in checking the apparent derivations of some of the names.
- 4 - White African, L. S. B. Leaky, Schenkman Publishing House.
An entire chapter is devoted to *giuthi*.
- 5 - Uganda Journal, Vol. 2, Mweso—The Board Game, R. S. Shackell.
Gives an early description of the game.
- 6 - Uganda Journal, Vol. 3, More About Mweso, R. S. Shackell.
Discusses various strategic considerations and various proverbs related to the game.
- 7 - Uganda Journal, Vol. 4, Notes on the Board Game Known as “Mweso” in Uganda, E. T. Wayland. This article contains a large number of random observations concerning *mankala* games throughout the world.

19 - PHOTOGRAPHY

Photos 1, 9, 10, 11 and 27. Taken by Richard Beatty in 1971

Photo 2. Taken by the author in Kampala, Christmas 1970.

Photos 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 13 and 14. Taken by the author on March 4, 2001 of materials in his personal collection

Photo 15. Taken by a bystander in 1972 under the author's direction.

20 – INTERNET RESOURCES. A large and accumulating body of information is becoming available on the World Wide Web. It is futile to attempt to catalogue them all. The ones listed have been found useful but many others can be found through the use of search engines.

<http://www.msoworld.com/mindzine/news/classic/mancala.html> The home page of the Mind Sports Olympiad has a section on *mankala* games that *includes owari, bao, conglak, omweso, kalah*, and others.

<http://www.cs.ualberta.ca/~awari> The University of Alberta has an online version of *awari*.

<http://www.gamecabinet.com/rules/Bao.html> Rob Nierse of Holland presents detailed rules and strategies for Zanzibari *bao* at this site. He also provides a lot of links to other sites with more information.

<http://members.aol.com/GBShare/awalink.htm> Edward Brisse provides a large number of links especially to downloadable shareware versions. His site includes a very long list of names for *mankala* games from throughout the world.

<http://www.geocities.com/omweso> The International Omweso society can be found here.

<http://daphne.palomar.edu/wayne/nicker.htm> Wayne Armstrong provides detailed information about *caesalpinia bonduc*, the seeds used in much of the world to play the local versions of *mankala*.