

Congkak, a game that connects us with the world



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Social scientists regard games as important items of evidence that tell us of the histories of the culture of a community. Edward B. Tylor, who is regarded as the 'father of anthropology', noted that important knowledge might be obtained from an analysis of daily life. He mentioned in particular, the importance of games as items of anthropological evidence. Games such as 'police and thief' are likely to be spontaneous developments, since it is instinctive for children to play a game of running and catching with friends. However when games have a complex nature and are found in different geographical locations, this is evidence of cultural links between the sites, since the complexity of the games argue against their having sprung up independently. With Tylor's suggestion in mind, let us do some detective work with the Malay game of *congkak*.

Many of us have grown up with this game. I first played it around the age of six or seven. I was on holiday in Penang. We were staying in the home of an uncle, and his children taught my brother, sister and I how to play congkak. We used a wooden board in which two rows of cup-shaped depressions had been dug out. Two people play the game at one time. Cowrie shells are placed into the cups, then collected and re-distributed among other cups, in this way we try to 'capture' as many of our opponent's shells into our 'home'. I know this description does not tell those who do not know congkak how they might play the game, and I can only recommend that these readers ask friends who can teach them the game. It is worth learning congkak for the game is such fun, and there is a homely feeling about congkak which you cannot experience with computer games. When it was time for me to teach my children the traditions I had learnt, I bought them a congkak board, and for congkak 'seeds', I cannibalized a lamp made with shells that I had bought from a junk shop. Nowadays many people play congkak with glass marbles, but I think that somehow the marbles do not feel right.

Because I learnt how to play congkak in Malaysia, I automatically thought that it was a traditional Malay game, besides I also read this claim on several websites. However when I researched on congkak, I found to my surprise that the more well-known version of the game is *mancala*, and that this is an African game. Apparently mancala is played all over Sub-Saharan Africa to such an extent it has been described as the 'national game of Africa'. Mancala is also played in the New World, the Middle-East, India, and in Southeast Asia. Thus I found that the game of congkak connects our region with many continents. Even more astonishingly, I found that the game of congkak had perhaps been played in Egypt about three thousand years ago. New scholarship suggests that the game was possibly played even earlier, in Mesopotamia (ancient Iraq) four thousand years ago, and if we were to trace the root idea of the game, we might go even further back to Neolithic times about 12,000 years ago!

The last suggestion comes from Dutch anthropologist Wim van Binsbergen. He proposed that the model for mancala and other congkak-like games was invented in parallel with divination systems in the Neolithic period.

This was the time when people moved from hunting and gathering for food to farming and raising domesticated animals. The shift to cultivation meant that people began a new relationship with space and time. People stayed at one spot instead of wandering around in search of food. They marked out spaces that they wished to own using boundaries such as fences. The land was criss-crossed by ploughed furrows and irrigation ditches, so that the ancient Sumerian writing (3000 BCE) for agricultural field was simply represented by a rectangle divided by vertical lines , and the Chinese character for field, developed 4000 years ago and still used today, is *tian* .

This design and people's new relationship to the planting seasons began to find expression in geomantic divination, a method of forecasting the success of harvests or other outcomes by using a system of lines and dots often connected with geography and astronomy. In essence, the grid was a microcosm that represented the macrocosm of the universe in time and space. People also began to use the grid pattern in board games where they could act out roles of confrontation and competition. For example, a game of chess represents in miniature a battlefield on which opposing armies contest each other. In this same way, van Binsbergen suggests that in the game of mancala where shells are distributed and captured, a player enacts the raiding of cattle from the opponent's fenced-up corals or, on a more peaceable note, the picking up and dropping off of shells along the rows of cups might suggest the sharing of resources in pastoral societies for example as marriage gifts.

Van Binsbergen suggests that the root idea for mancala possibly derived from the *I Ching* [易经 Yi Jing], the Chinese geomantic divination system of the first millennium BCE. From this source, the notion moved in time to loci in Northwest Africa, South Mesopotamia, Madagascar and West Africa by the second millennium CE and from these points, geomantic divination spread to various parts of the world including the Middle East, Europe, India and the New World. Some scholars believe that mancala originated in the Middle East and was spread with Islam because the earliest documentation of the game of mancala is found in the Arabic text *Kitab al-Aghani* (*The Book of Songs*) by Abu'l Faradj (897-967 CE). For this reason, the English historian Harold Murray, who wrote the most important treatises on board-games, named the congkak genre of games mancala, after the Arabic *manqala* or *minqala* which comes from the verb '*naqala*', meaning 'to move'. An alternative proposition is that the game was invented in Northeast Africa, and from there it spread out to several continents. But in Africa the game is known by many names including *ayo*, *bao*, *gabata*, *soro* and *wari*. In other words, the name is not a clue to the birthplace of the game. If Murray had discovered the game in Malaysia, it might have become generally known the world-over as congkak.

And so what can this research mean for us? For one thing we could be saddened to learn that a game that we thought traditionally belonged to our Malay community is after all not ours. Recently there has been a tremendous furore over 'stolen' heritage, but apparently human inventiveness can never be isolated. Batik has been recognised by UNESCO as part of the Indonesian

cultural heritage, but wax-resist textile decoration is considered as possibly the oldest method of dyeing, with examples found in Greece of Hellenic cloths from the mid 5th and early 4th century BCE. *Wayang* as story-telling using images, whether painted, as in *wayang beber*, or as shadow puppetry, is derived from Indian arts. This suggests that an alternative attitude might be called for. Instead of being upset, we might be filled with happy wonder how people have historically bonded together. Two thousand five hundred years ago, Confucius wrote, "Across the Four Seas, All Men are Brothers" - globalization is not a new phenomena after all.

Anthropologists study the origin and distribution of cultural items less to mark out what belongs to whom, but to study how communities have come together to share ideas. They then study how borrowed ideas become localized by absorbing the symbolism and values of the host society to such an extent that a new cultural product is formed. In other words, even if an idea has been borrowed from abroad, we can make it inimitably our own. Batik is batik and Indonesian even though in ancient Greece people also used wax-dyeing to decorate cloth.

I have read that the term 'congak' is derived from 'congkak' which apparently is a word in an old Malay Language that means 'count'. I cannot verify the authority of this proposition since I read it on the Internet; but according to this source it is said that the game of congkak originated in Malacca from where it spread to rest of Southeast Asia. How would we read this suggestion against all the knowledge that scholars present?

I do not see why we should nitpick about who owns what. Usually the people who make loud claims do so from a sense of chauvinism, where a nation's wealth is defined against another's lack. This is a politicized stand, whereas on the ground and in daily life, culture is about unselfconscious and unpoliticised sharing among communities. We play congkak and are not concerned if it is Indonesian *congklak* or Arabic *manqala* or African *wari*. Besides, a Malaysian, Ahmad Idham, made two horror movies with congkak as its theme; *Congkak* in 2008 where a girl plays the game with an invisible friend and *Jangan Pandang Belakang Congkak (Don't Look Behind the Congkak)* this year. I hear that this latest movie is more of a comedy, possibly a take-off of his 2007 film *Jangan Pandang Belakang* which was the top local film of all time in the year of its release. I am only guessing for I have not seen any of Idham's movies, but brought up on a diet of *Pontianak* and *Hantu Jerangkung*, I think that the fact that the congkak made it as a star of horror movies certainly confirms the game, at least for me, as Malay.

Writing this last sentence, it has occurred to me that I have been discussing congkak as a part of my cultural heritage even though I am Chinese. This was an instinctive attitude since I learnt the game and was fed a whole lot of Malay cultural ideas as a child. My family is Peranakan on my mother's side and I certainly have been enriched by cross-cultural sharing. It would be just too sad if someone told me that I might not think of congkak, *gasing* (top), *hatam bola* (game where you chase and hit people with a ball) or *nasi lemak* (rice with cooked with coconut milk) as a part of my cultural heritage. Anyway, whatever

they tell me, I will still say “*coos semangat*” when I bathe my grand-daughter, for my mother told me that this would soothe the spirit so that it would not be shocked into leaving the body when the bath water is first poured over the child. I hear that the idea is Javanese. See how rich I am from the cultures of the world.

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