

Retschitzki, J. (1986). Fundamental research as a contribution to the survival of the awele game. In I. Ivic & A. Marjanovic (Eds.), *Traditional games and children of today* (pp. 121-128). Belgrade: OMEP.

Fundamental research as a contribution to the survival of the awele game

Jean Retschitzki
University of Fribourg (Switzerland)

The awele game

The awele game belongs to the class of sowing games, little known in the West, but quite widespread along the African continent as well as in certain parts of Asia and South America. There are many variations, existing under different names: Kalah, Serata, Palankuli, Wari, Solo, etc.

Their common characteristic is that they are played with seeds placed in partitions usually carved out in a wooden board. These partitions are arranged in several rows and there is a fixed direction in which the sowing takes place. The goal of the game is to collect the most part of these seeds, according to rules pertaining to a numerical distribution of the seeds along the partitions. Sometimes the players simply dig holes in the ground, and the seeds are replaced with pebbles or small shells.

In the variant we have studied, the game is played by two players with a board composed of two rows of six partitions each; each partition contains four seeds at the beginning of the game; the players take turns; one turn consists in the player choosing a partition on his side of the board, taking its contents and sowing these counterclockwise, leaving one seed per box. At the end of his turn, if the player finishes his sowing with one of the opponent's partitions, and this partition contains 2 or 3 seeds, these are collected by the player as well as all the seeds in the preceding partitions belonging to the opponent that also contain 2 or 3 seeds.

The first description of the awele game in the literature was given by Béart (1955); further works have dealt specifically with this game and supplied interesting additional details about it (Raabe, 1972; Deledicq & Popova, 1977; Ballou, 1978). We were led by these works to give a brief description of the rules of the game, which is given in the appendix.

It is a very simple game, as the rules can be learned in a few minutes. Still, only sufficiently long experience allows one to reach a satisfactory level of mastery of the game and to play it well. The best players are usually the old people in a village, mostly illiterate. This could seem paradoxical, as the rules of collection are based on numerical criteria, the manipulation of which could be facilitated by school learning.

We can also stress that the game is interesting for all ages. It already attracts children who have just learned its rules, and it remains fascinating for adults as well. We have encountered many Ivorean intellectuals who devote a great deal of their free time to discussions of the interminable tournaments in the game.

Traditional aspects of the awele game

Although the ethnologists cannot explain with certainty the origin of the awele game, which thus represents a sort of enigma, the game is deeply rooted in the tradition, as is witnessed by numerous indicators. It has left many traces in the customs and objects.

In relation to customs, several authors report that the game was reserved for dignitaries (Zaslavsky, 1973; Raabe, 1972). It seems, thus, that the game was used in the process of appointing the new village chief among the Alladians, a people who live in the south of Ivory Coast. Many other examples could be given.

As for the objects, one can find, in the markets, weights for measuring gold which represent awele boards, as well as numerous carved boards the wear of which bespeaks antiquity. Besides, the game is officially recognized as a part of the national heritage. It was chosen as the symbol of Ivory Coast national lottery and is depicted on each of its tickets. A national championship was organized and large excerpts were broadcast by the national TV. Finally, a recent movie, which was awarded first prize at the Festival in Cannes, shows the game of awele.

A disappearing game

It is becoming relatively rare to see awele being played in the villages. When we were going to organize our research, it seemed that it was almost impossible to find a board in the village of Kpouébo. We ourselves had to provide the boards which we had acquired at the markets of Abidjan, boards built for tourists.

We may, therefore, have certain dreads about the survival of the game and suppose that it may be in danger of disappearing. Actually, it is submitted to the competition by numerous other less traditional games, which we have seen appearing in the villages (checkers, for example).

There are, besides, several indications that many parents forbid their children to play the game.

What's more, the wave of modernism, which has affected Ivory Coast like many other countries, may have the effect of devaluing the awele game, which would be considered as overly connected to traditional customs.

It can be saved

Even though we may consider the awele game to be threatened by extinction, we shouldn't overestimate the gravity of this plight. Actually, there also are favorable factors which act in the opposite direction.

Paradoxally, while the game has almost disappeared in villages, the revival of its vigor may originate in the cities, where we have seen groups of workers amusing themselves at the midday break by playing awele. There also exist clubs which gather amateur players of this game. They can also be found in some number of marketplaces.

Besides, we may note that the Ivory Coast, like many other similar countries, has become aware of the importance of preserving a certain number of traditional values, and that the government has taken measures to this end. We may believe that a game like awele could also benefit from this type of measures if that became necessary.

Besides, it is necessary to note that most people still know the rules of the game, and that it is already appreciated to an extent, at least by certain milieus, as demonstrated by the national television broadcast of the finals of a disputed national championship in Abidjan.

The most valuable support for the survival of the awele game could come from outside the country. Namely, on the one hand, educational circles could be sensitized to the educational value of the game, and on the other, the game could make a full come-back thanks to micro-informatics.

In the educational domain, Deledicq and Popova (1977) have shown that the rules of the awele game could be used in a mathematics course as an interesting way to work through various concepts, such as combinational analysis, the reduction of relational graphs, determination of the winning strategy, or probability calculation (Deledicq & Popova, 1977, ch. 3).

Those are quite difficult examples, reserved for advanced students. We can already use situations from the awele at the primary level in exercising more elementary concepts, such as correspondence, the decomposition of whole numbers, elementary addition and subtraction, and various examples of conservation (Zaslavsky, 1973, ch. 11).

Fundamental research can contribute to the salvation of the game

In terms of the central preoccupation of the OMEP Project, namely the revival of traditional games, we can ask ourselves what it would be possible to do in the particular case of the awele game.

It is possible to imagine various means of action, to begin with – a campaign directed at educators, meaning parents and teachers. Inasmuch as the latter are concerned, it would be adequate to alert them to the profit they could draw from the situations of the game in their teaching (cf. the previous section).

As far as parents are concerned, it is necessary to be able to persuade them not to forbid their children to play the game, as seems often to be the case. This endeavour is certainly not an easy one, considering that the appreciation of children's play activities in these regions has only recently made way in the light of psychological works.

Having this difficulty in mind, it is also possible to judge such an enterprise unrealistic. We were told by the winner of the Ivory Coast national championship how he was initiated in the game and perfected it during his childhood secretly from his parents (Angoua Kouadio, personal communication). As that has not prevented him from becoming the excellent player that he is, we may ask ourselves whether the parents' prohibition isn't in certain cases actually beneficial, conferring on the game the attraction of forbidden fruit.

Another type of campaign, less direct but perhaps more efficient, would consist in indirect attempts at the modification of the image which the people have of the awele game.

Instead of insisting on the traditional character of the game, we might on the contrary demonstrate its richness, complexity and modernism.

The richness of the game may be demonstrated on the basis of theoretical analyses of the same type as those by Deledicq and Popova (1977) or Ballou (1978).

In the same manner, using psychological work about the players' strategies (Retschitzki, N'Guessan Assandé & Loesch-Berger, 1985) we may demonstrate all their complexity and the intellectual value of this activity.

Finally, we may demonstrate the modernism of the game thanks to the interest it arouses in Western countries and to its implementation in various micro-processors. Thus, a variation is currently circulating in one of the most recent machines, the Macintosh (Spinelli, 1985).

It is in this type of indirect campaigns that fundamental research initiated for achieving totally different objectives can prove to be efficient. Through publications and the stimulation of discussions in various circles, the impact of this work may be significant.

References

- Ballou, K. (1978). Règles et stratégies du jeu d'awalé. Abidjan: Nouvelles éditions africaines.
- Béart, C. (1955). Jeux et jouets de l'Ouest Africain. Dakar: IFAN.
- Deledicq, A., & Popova, A. (1977). *Wari et solo. Le jeu de calculs africain*. Paris: Cedic.
- Raabe, J. (1972). *L'awélé*. Paris: Ed. de la Courtille.
- Retschitzki, J., N'Guessan Assandé, G., & Loesch-Berger, M.-C. (1986). Etude cognitive et génétique des styles de jeu et des stratégies des joueurs d'awélé. *Archives de Psychologie*, 54, 307-340.
- Spinelli, O. (1985). Awélé: la perle noire des jeux de réflexion. *Icones*, 2, 22.
- Zaslavsky, C. (1973). *Africa counts. Number and pattern in african culture*. Boston: Prindle, Weber & Schmidt.

APPENDIX: Rules of the awele game

1. Beginning of the game:

Seeds are placed on the board, four per partition.

Players draw lots (or decide) on who is to begin.

The first player chooses one partition in his range, gathers all the seeds found there and sows them.

4	4	4	4	4	4
4	4	4	4	4	4

The situation at the outset.

2. Rules of sowing:

One seed per partition is sown, moving counter-clockwise.

When the player has finished sowing the seed from his chosen partition, he may collect the seeds to which he now has right.

It is, then, his opponents turn to play. He chooses a partition within his range, gathers up the seed and sows.

4	4	4	4	4	5
4	4	0	5	5	5

5	5	5	0	4	5
5	4	0	5	5	5

5	5	5	0	4	5
5	0	1	6	6	6

Example: A has played from the 3rd partition, then B has played from the 9th, and finally A from the 2nd.

3. Rules of collection:

When the sowing finishes in the opponent's range, bringing the content of the last partition to 2 or 3 seeds, the player takes these, adding them to his gains.

Example: Continuing from the last presented situation, player B can collect 2 seeds by playing the 4th partition.

6	6	0	0	4	5
6	1	2	6	6	6

B finishes his sowing in the 3rd partition, bringing its content up to 2 seeds. He collects the two seeds. The resulting situation is:

6	6	0	0	4	5
6	1	0	6	6	6

If the partitions preceding the one from which seed has been collected also contain 2 or 3 seeds, their contents are also collected, right down to the end of the opponent's range.

Example:

3	2	1	2	1	0
1	3	0	6	0	1

In this situation, player A can collect 7 seeds by playing from the 4th partition.

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

After the collection :

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

4. End of the game:

The game thus continues in alternating moves until one of the following outcomes:

1. the total remaining number of seeds does not permit collection any more
2. one of the players cannot make a move
3. the players decide to interrupt the game, the outcome being obvious.

The player who has collected more seed is the winner of the game.

5. Important specifications:

- If, in a single sowing movement, a complete circle around the board is made (more than 11 seeds in the initial partition), the player does not have to place any more seed in the initial partition.
- In case that the opponent has no seed left, the player is obliged to play a move that will regain him some, as long as such a move exists.
- It is forbidden to collect all the opponent's seed. If the move which would result in this is the only one open to the player, he will make no collection and the game will continue.

Belgrade-OMEP
Traditional Games Project

Traditional Games and Children of Today

Belgrade 1986.

Editors:

Prof. Dr. Ivan Ivic

Prof. Dr. Aleksandra Marjanovic

Publishers:

OMEP (World Organization for Early Childhood Education)

in collaboration with:

Yugoslav National Committee of OMEP

Institute of Psychology,
University of Belgrade