

# Bawo: Malawi's National Game

*Zangaphee Chimombo*

*23 September, 2009*

Hardly a Malawian passes through childhood, graduating to adolescence at the joyous *cinamwali* ceremony without having learnt *bawo*. Even the urbanized youth more familiar with reggae or hip-hop culture has at some point in his life been exposed to this “count-and-capture” board game of skill and strategy dubbed “Simple-Perplexity” at <http://bawo.sourceforge.net>.

Bawo – or the phonetically equivalent *bao* – is played on a flat surface (frequently a carved piece of wood or sometimes, in the case of children especially: the ground) upon which 32 pits have been scooped in an array of 4 ranks by 8 files. 64 pebbles or seeds form the tokens whose positioning determines the victor. One or two larger “stock” pits are sometimes positioned at the left and/ or right or both extremes of the board. Little wonder then, that this family of games was termed “Pits and Pebbles” in a 1963 Time magazine article on this ancient African game.



**Figure 1** A popular pastime across Malawi, played by young and old (Picture courtesy of Prof Steve Chimombo).

Elsewhere in Africa and the African diaspora the pattern of pits is a familiar sight, be it the two-rank variations of West African *oware* or the four-rank versions common across Southern Africa, variously termed *nsolo*, *mwambulula*, *mfiwa*, etc. With as many names as there are variants it is quite a task to choose a generic one for this family of games.

## **Name**

*Ncombwa* is the generic term used to describe “count-and-capture” board games in an article from 1913 by Meredith G Sanderson who served as a medical officer in the then Nyasaland (Malawi). Pronounced “n-chom-bwa”, the word is retained as *njomba* today in CiNyanja (CiCewa) the Malawian lingua franca, meaning dribble or out-skill. The word has similar meaning in neighbouring Bantu languages.

Other contenders for use as a generic family name tend to be ethnocentric. *Bawo/ bao* is also used by CiYao and KiSwahili speakers of Eastern and Central Africa. *Mcuwa/ Mfuwa* and *Nsolo/ Isolo* are similarly specific to particular CiBantu languages.

Down the coast of West Africa, variants have names that are similar to each other, e.g. Oware (Ghana), Awele (Ivory Coast) and Owela (Namibia) but all refer to the two-rank versions.

In Europe, the generic term is *mancala* (from Arabic meaning “to move”) which entered the English lexicon in the 17<sup>th</sup> century from studies in Latin of board games.

*Ncombwa*, then, is a fitting generic name for this African family of games: not being tied to a specific variant of the game but also because it has equivalent words across several languages.

## **Rules**

The complete rules of *Bawo* warrant a book and several of those exist including ones which are freely-available online. It will suffice here to briefly outline the rules and comment on similarities and differences amongst *Ncombwa* variants. *Bawo* has two possible starting positions. The basic one is shown in Figure 2 and the advanced starting position is shown in Figure 3. The difference is that the advanced starting position leads to a more fluid and less predictable development of the game and hence more enjoyable for those proficient at it.

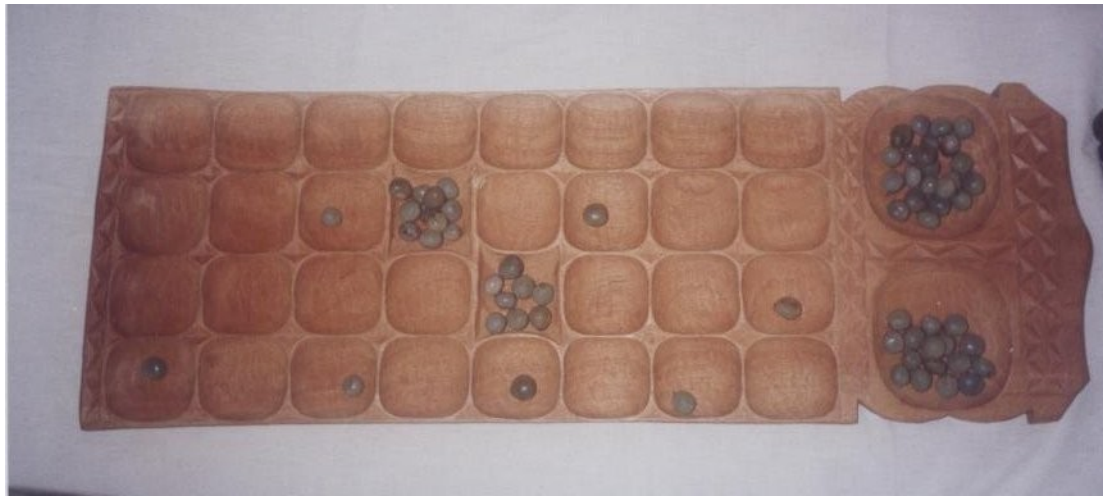


**Figure 2 An elaborately-decorated board of Mwanga (teak) with Citimbe seeds showing the basic starting position.**

The rules of *Ncombwa* games have the following in common: two players take turns picking the tokens from a bowl on their side of the board. These tokens are then sowed clockwise or anti-clockwise by placing a single token in each successively adjacent bowl until the tokens that were picked are finished. The bowl in which the last token was placed may determine whether the move is a capture or not. In *Bawo*, the move does not end until the last token is placed in an empty bowl: thus, when not capturing, the bowl in which the last token was placed becomes the source of the tokens for the next relay of sowing.

Some variants such as Oware restrict sowing to one direction only: anti-clockwise and allow a player to sow on the opponent’s side of the board as well. Four-rank variants such as *Bawo*

and the Ugandan Omweso have no restriction on the direction, but players may only pick (but not sow) from the opponent's side of the board during captures. Omweso allows capture from both front and rear ranks but in Bawo only the bowls in the front row are at risk. Captured tokens are sowed on the player's own side of the board.



**Figure 3** A M'bawa (mahogany) board with Lunguzi seeds showing the advanced starting position.

The undisputed king of Ncombwa games, Bawo has an additional “special” bowl called *nyumba* which means house in CiNyanja. This bowl has significance in the advanced mode of playing.

### **Notation**

Chess has a well known notation for transcribing moves. Pursuant to the author's development of an online computer version of the bawo game (<http://bawo.sourceforge.net>), a notation was developed that is compatible with the clockwise and anti-clockwise nature of the flow of Bawo moves.

Figure 4 shows how each bowl is numbered in such a manner that the clockwise or anti-clockwise flow of the game is reflected with the minimum of discontinuities. The danger with using a chess-like notation for Ncombwa games is that a move may begin as going in one direction (e.g. “Left”) but change once sowing has reached the edge of the board and progressed to the next row. This scheme never has a discontinuity in direction.

The numbering may be counter-intuitive at first, especially for those exposed to other notations, however, it becomes sensible considering that when the edge of a row is reached (e.g. bowl number 8 while sowing clockwise) the next bowl to be sown in is numbered only an increment of one different from the current bowl. It is only at the left edge of the board (bowls number 16 and 32) where discontinuities in this numbering scheme occur. In contrast, a chess-like notation scheme would have discontinuities in both direction and numbering at each row.

Variations of this notation include using the letters of the alphabet “a” to “p”: small letters for one side of the board and capitals for the other. Another variation, due to computing, is to start the numbering at zero and finish at 31 (instead of 1 to 32). Direction can be transcribed using left and right arrows “<” and “>”. Some bawo moves allow a “stop” or “continue” decision if they are capture moves that terminate in the *nyumba*; such “continuing” moves can be represented by a double arrow such as “<<” or “>>”.

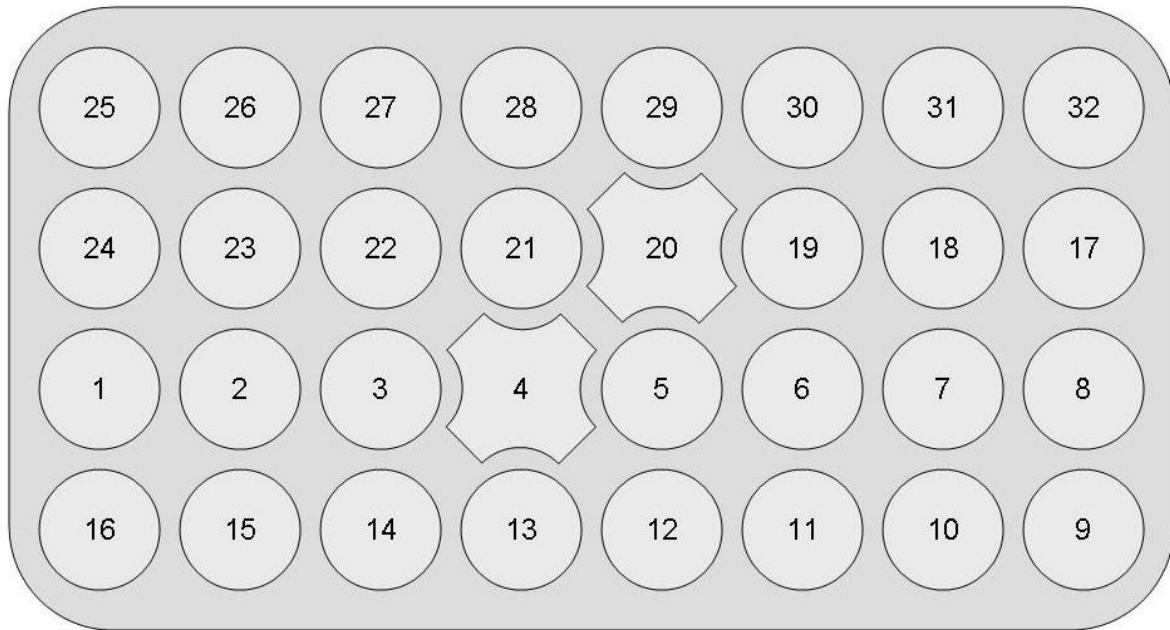


Figure 4 Numbering of Bawo bowls

### ***The Oldest Game in the World?***

A Zambian myth recounts how, in the distant past, chiefs Munyama and Malumbwe settled a dispute by playing Ncombwa but the history of the game traces further back than the more recent Bantu migrations.

Wilbur Smith's later Ancient Egyptian novels hint at the game's genealogy by describing a game called *baō*. Although Ncombwa did exist according to evidence that includes carvings and paintings in temples and tombs, it is perhaps the more popular game of Senet which is referred to. Senet playing pieces were even known as *ibau* "dancers" according to Joyce Tyldesley in *Egyptian Games and Sports*. But the game also involved casting rods like dice which dissociates it from the family of Ncombwa games.



Figure 5 Hieroglyphs for âbau



Figure 6 Hieroglyphs for senât

Figure 5 and Figure 6 show hieroglyphs for *âbau* and *senât* according to E A Wallis Budge's *An Egyptian Hieroglyphic Dictionary*.

Whereas two-rank ncombwa has been carried as far afield as Indonesia and the Caribbean by the African diaspora, four-rank ncombwa variants originate in Central and Southern Africa and are still mostly only found there. Three-rank ncombwa is even more localised to Ethiopia and parts of Sudan alone. The Swahili acquired the game in their journeys into the interior and seem to have been responsible for the more recent popularization of the game down the south-eastern coast of the continent including Zanzibar island.

An interesting historical question is whether two-rank ncombwa is a simplification of the four-rank variation. In other words, was the original ncombwa four-rank from which simpler two-rank variants were derived? It would be equally valid to guess however, taking into

account the dynamics of play, that four-rank ncombwa is a clever fusion of two two-rank boards.

Gobeta presents a unique case of being a three-rank ncombwa game. Identified with the Copts of Ethiopia it seems to be a fusion of the Central African Omweso and other neighbouring two-rank variants of Oware. When it is considered that the now-extinct game of Senet also consisted of a three-rank board (three-by-ten) it is acceptable to hypothesise that the ancient Copts, on encountering four-rank and two-rank ncombwa games from their southern and western neighbours, moulded the game into a more familiar three-rank board.

### **Computational Study**

From the continent that sprung mathematics and philosophy, however, it should hardly be of surprise that what may be the oldest board game in the world lends itself gracefully to mathematical inquiry.

A cursory examination reveals that the board can usefully serve as a counting apparatus. No evidence is available as yet as to the board being put to this purpose, but it would be superior to the abacus in a number of respects.

Of mathematical interest are “non-stopping” moves. This is applicable in the two-rank versions or the move known as *kutakata* in four-rank bawo where the move seems to go on forever without stopping. What are the initial starting positions necessary for such a move to go on forever? Another interesting mathematical question is the solving of the simpler two-rank variants of the game: i.e. is it possible to guarantee a win by playing in a certain manner?

The information age has not left this ancient game by the way-side. In addition to <http://bawo.sourceforge.net> many other computer versions of Ncombwa games exist such as at [www.kiela-game.com](http://www.kiela-game.com) from Angola.

### **National Game?**

In Malawi bawo has been played at district, regional and national levels. However, the game is not yet recognized as Malawi’s official national game. With its cultural ties to many identities in the country, the game is surely deserving of such recognition. Omweso, the Ugandan variant of Ncombwa, is recognized as the Ugandan national game.

Ncombwa should even be the pan-African national game! It is a great focal point for exploring the neglected cultural unity perhaps through national and pan-African national tournaments and olympiads.

(Edited versions of this article appeared in New African magazine of June 2009 and Ulendo Air Malawi in flight magazine issue 16, December 2009).

### **About the Author**

The author is an Information Technology professional living and working in Kabula, Malawi. He may be contacted by email: [z.chimombo@gmail.com](mailto:z.chimombo@gmail.com).