Is Sungka a Wargame? An Investigation into Conflict and Strategy within Pre-Colonial Philippine Ludic Culture

Micah Jeiel R. Perez

This paper intends to analyze the Philippine folk game known as *sungka* within the context of an indigenous culture of conflict encountered by the Spaniards in the 16th century. It explores parallelisms between a unique Philippine discourse on war and the game's ludic dimension, primarily focused on its in-game lexicon and its rules of play. The paper argues that sungka reflected—if not reinforced—specific attitudes and approaches towards competitive activities, including conflict, due to several unique elements of the game: a) a focus on resource acquisition and circulation, b) relatively weak spatial considerations, and c) an ability to reverse prior setbacks in what is usually a drawn-out competition between two individuals. A correlation thus seems to exist between the strategic thinking extant in *sungka* and the indigenous methods of waging war.

The paper is inspired by a gap in the works of Isabelo de los Reyes. His planned multi-volume work on Filipino folklore included a tome on what he referred to as "folk wit." This volume would have included children's games—such as *sungka*—but the currents of history swept Don Belong's plans aside. This paper contributes to the legacy of his unfinished work by building on Mellie Leandicho Lopez's studies of Filipino folk games and thus takes a tentative step towards connecting Philippine leisure culture to Philippine warfare.

Keywords: *sungka, folk game, wargame, warfare, strategy*

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1. Introduction

Often, work unfinished is work entrusted.

Such is the case with Isabelo de los Reyes and *El Folk-Lore Filipino*, a two-volume work that stands testament to the efforts of Philippine folklore's greatest champion in the 19th century. Don Belong, as Isabelo was called by some, initially planned *El Folk-Lore* to be a multi-volume work that would cover a vast array of folklore material across the Philippine archipelago's multitude of provinces. His original vision saw him as only one of many contributors, and he went about asking his peers—ilustrados in the Philippines and abroad—to send him folklore materials from their home province. Yet his relative isolation in this herculean effort can be observed in the tome's incomplete nature. Its contents are limited to the provinces of Ilocos, Malabon, and Zambales, with the majority of its pages being filled with examples from its Ilocano author's home province. Furthermore, Don Belong's extensive coverage of Ilocano folklore pales in comparison with his vision of publishing volumes of work on Ilocos alone, with each volume covering a different category from folk medicine to popular wit. One such unexplored category was folk games.

Don Belong's mention of children's games as folklore belies his sensitivity to patterns of play and the space they occupy within communities. Yet mentions of play in *El Folk-Lore Filipino* are few and far between, usually mentioned in connection to merrymaking activities during celebratory occasions like weddings (De los Reyes, 1889/1994). This gap has since been filled by other folklorists, most prominent of whom is Mellie Leandicho Lopez—her *A Study of Philippine Games* (2001) was shortly followed by *A Handbook of Philippine Folklore* (2007), both of which analyzed and systemically classified Filipino folk games commonly played by children. One such game is *sungka*, which Lopez classified as a formula game, and might barely count as a "board" game today.

In her *Handbook*, Landicho describes how the Tagalog *palaro* encapsulated the form of play found in folk games, which was different from non-competitive play with no ludic dimensions (like the childlike playing in the rain) and from the more competitive and controlled characteristics of modern sports (such as the rule-oriented institution of basketball). It was Johan Huizinga (1938) who first argued that the play-element (*spel-element*) of culture was a fundamental part of human nature, and the natural development of such games in the communal lore of a particular people fills this need in human societies. Children are especially important in the preservation of gaming culture in society, serving as "keepers"

of game culture—everyone was once a child, after all, and an inseparable aspect of childhood is playing games (Arcangel, 2010). Games thus serve as an important vehicle for attitudes, behaviors, and lifestyles that shape communities as the children that play them grow into adulthood.

An interesting aspect of games is their ability to adapt certain characteristics of the culture; incorporating them into local leisure activities and thereby creating new ludic cultures. Even competitive sports like basketball—already artificially designed—still generate sub-cultures with vast vocabularies and norms of play. The Filipino tendency to drive to the basket, colloquially known as *salaksak,* is but one example. The same is true for all sorts of other games. From gambling games to board games, how a community chooses to adapt rules and modes of play tends to reflect their historical and cultural contexts.

This study thus builds on earlier works by exploring how a Filipino folk game—*sungka*—reflects a particular aspect of indigenous culture. In this case, that aspect is warfare. The study does this by making two important presuppositions. First, that the lowland, coastal communities across the Philippines shared common cultural characteristics with the greater region of insular Southeast Asia. Second, that sungka entered the Philippine archipelago via the vast maritime trade networks stretching from Eastern Africa and the Arabian Peninsula to the Indian Subcontinent and, finally, Southeast Asia. Thus, it would have been these same lowland, coastal communities that adopted the game as a form of leisure. It follows that similarities shall be traced between the cultural referencing of the game's variants in Southeast Asia and its same referencing of the shared cultural discourse on war among Philippine communities.

The broader theme binding all aspects of the paper together would be Don Belong's assertions that folklore is best understood within the contexts of the communities they inhabit, intimately entwined with the pulse of daily local life. The paper thus embarks on this exploration by asking a simple question: is *sungka* a wargame?

2. The Cultural Diffusion of *Sungka* in the Philippines

Sungka is a derivative of the game known as *mancala*, which originated in Africa. Its existence has been documented as early as 1500 B.C. According to Anthula Natsoulas (1995), common elements of the game can be observed even

among geographically diverse peoples, even as distinct variations in the rules of play adopted by neighboring communities belie the cultural diversity of the folk game. De Voogt (2001) even makes the claim that *mancala* and its derivative games are "perhaps the most widely played board game in the world," having observed it played "from West Africa to the Caribbean and South America, from North to South Africa, from the Middle East to South Asia to Southeast Asia" (De Voogt, 2001, p. 38).

Mancala is a two-player game played on boards containing rows of holes, most commonly referred to as "houses." Each player distributes counters—small pieces that can range from small stones to shells—into each of their holes and the "ultimate goal of the game is for one player to render his/her opponent incapable of continuing play by capturing his/her counters" (Natsoulas, 1995, p. 8). The number of rows may vary, and so do the ways in which counters are captured, but three universal aspects remain: the board format and its single direction of play; the need to capture counters; and the two-player system of play. The capture of the counters is the single most important aspect of the game, while the elimination of the opponents' houses facilitates the goal of capturing counters. As de Voogt writes:

> Mancala games are played on rows of holes and with a number of playing counters, usually seeds, shells, or stone. In all mancala games moves are made by taking up the counters contained in one hole and spreading (sowing) these counters one by one in consecutive holes around the rows of holes. In most cases the object of the game is to capture the majority of the counters. Captures are made by reaching a certain part of the board or accumulating a certain number of counters in a particular hole. The ways of capturing and moving counters around the board seem endless and new variations on this theme are still being found in the world (De Voogt, 2001, p. 44).

From Africa, *mancala* games traveled eastward to Southeast Asia, where they have been recorded to exist since the seventeenth century. It came to be known as *congka* or *dakon* in Indonesia and Malaysia, *ohvalhu* in the Maldives, and *sungka* in the Philippines (De Voogt, 2010, pp. 334-335). In each region, divergences in game rules developed in terms of the number of holes, the number of rows, the number of shells, the rules of capture, and the game's win condition. However, some commonalities remained.

One commonality between *mancala* games in Africa is the practice of playing

it during long festivities, such as wedding ceremonies. Another commonality is the game's association with death. On the Ivory Coast, the game is thought to influence the sex of a child at birth. Some groups play the game as part of a ritual to determine the next chief, with the belief that the spirits of the ancestors will seal their approval by assuring victory for their chosen candidate. ("Mancala," n.d.)

Associations with death is one aspect that seems to have carried over when the game spread across the Indian Ocean maritime trade networks and into Southeast Asia. In Kedang, Indonesia, R.H. Barnes makes the connection between *motiq*—the colloquial term for the game—and beliefs about the afterlife. The game was popular "during the night of vigilance when guarding a corpse," and certain game terms (e.g., *eu leu*) were homonyms for the stage and the clothing in a funerary ceremony (Barnes, 1975, pp. 79-80). In the Philippines, Lopez also takes note of a belief that sungka is associated with death given the involvement of terms like *mamamatay* (will die), *masusunog* (will burn), and *butas* (hole) reminiscent of "a grave in the ground" (Lopez, 2001, p. 534).

Such connections reveal how the cultural genealogy of the Philippine *sungka* is rooted in African *mancala* games. That the game was played widely in the Philippines is also supported by the number of languages which use the word to indicate a game played on wooden boards with holes and using shells as game pieces, as seen in Table 1. The words and definitions listed here can be separated into two categories. First, those words found in Spanish language dictionaries, scoured from various digital archives online and dating back to the 19th century. Second, the words from the Austronesian Comparative Dictionary website (2023) by Robert Blust, Stephen Trussel, Alexander D. Smith, and Robert Forkel (shortened as ACD), coming mostly from sources published in the 20th century.

The oldest of the Spanish dictionaries surveyed is Fray Diego Bergaño's 1732 Kapampangan dictionary. According to De Voogt (2010), however, some scholars claim that the earliest mention of *sungka* can be found in the manuscript of the *Bisaya Diccionario* by Jesuit missionary priest Father Jose Sanchez, whose work remained unpublished after his death in 1692. In this dictionary, he "mentioned a game called *kunggit* in which players scooped and distributed seashells across a row of bins on a wooden, boat-like board" (De Voogt, 2010, p. 335). The manuscript exists, listed as it is in several comprehensive bibliographies of Philippine language dictionaries, but a digital copy has yet to be accessible as of this article's writing. Still, Sanchez' 17th century observation is supported by the Aklanon word *congit*, which appears in Father Juan Felix de la Encarnacion's

TABLE 1. *Sungka and Kunggit in Various Dictionaries*

Language	Word	Definition	Sources
Agutaynen	*soŋka*	'A native shell game, played with a board with scooped-out holes in it referred to as, 'houses', and using small cowry shells called as tokens'	*ACD* [Entry based on Marilyn A. Caabay and Josenita L. Edep, and Gail R. Hendrickson, and Melissa S. Melvin, *Agutaynen-English dictionary* (2014)]
Aklanon	*súŋka?*	'Game played with stones or marbles, attempting to get all the pieces of one's opponent'	*ACD* [Entry based on R. David Zorc, *A study of the Aklanon dialect* (1969)]
Bikol	*súŋka?*	'Game in which shells or stones are dropped in consecutive order into holes in a game board'	*ACD* [Entry based on Malcolm W. Mintz and Jose del Rosario Britanico, *Bikol-English dictionary* (1985)]
Bisayan (Cebu, Bohol, Negros, Mindanao, and other islands)	*conğit*	'Game played using shellfish'	Juan Felix de la Encarnación, *Diccionario bisaya-español* (1885)
Bisayan (Cebu)	*súŋka?*	'A game for two played with a board and pieces, the object of which is to get as many pieces as possible'	*ACD* [Entry based on John U. Wolff, *A dictionary of Cebuano Visayan* (1972)]
Bisayan (Leyte-Samar)	*sungcá*	'To play or have fun with the game called *sungcaan*'	Antonio Sánchez de la Rosa, *Diccionario Bisaya-Español* (1895)
	sungcáan	'A game played on a rectangular piece of wood, about three hand spans long, with two rows of seven holes each, and a hole at either end in which are placed pebbles or snails, and from there they are placed one by one in the remaining fourteen holes'	
Bisaya (Panay)	*cunguit*	'A game of shells'	Alonso de Mentrida, *Diccionario de la lengua bisaya, hiligueina y haraya de*
	songca	'A manner of joining pieces of wood together end-to-end, such as on a stage'	
	tongca		

			las Isla de Panay (1841)
Kapampangan	*sungcá*	'A game of shells, played on a piece of wood with seven holes; played either on the board or via betting'	Diego Bergaño, *Vocabulario de la lengua pampanga en romance* (1732/1860)
Ilokano	*songca / chonca*	'A children's game'	Andrés Carro, *Vocabulario de la lengua ilocana* (1849)
	songca	'A calculation game between two players, played on a piece of wood with fourteen holes, seven facing each side, and one on each end called the mother. Seven shells are placed on each of the fourteen holes and, taking from the holes at the end, are distributed one by one in the seven empty holes, depositing a shell upon each pass and making sure there are no shells opposite when reaching an empty hole, because then you lose the game. At the end of the game, they count the shells deposited in the mothers, and the excess of one player represents their winnings.'	Andrés Carro, *Vocabulario iloco-español* (1888)
	suŋká	'Kind of native game played with small butiti shells and a board with twelve holes'	*ACD* [Entry based on Andrés Carro, *Iloko-English dictionary* (1956), and Carl Ralph Galvez Rubino, *Ilocano dictionary and grammar: Ilocano-English, English-Ilocano* (2000)]
Tagalog	*suŋká*	'A native game played (in some areas) by two people using something like a small, flat wooden boat with scooped-out	*ACD* [Entry based on Jose Villa Panganiban, *Talahuluganang Pilipino-Ingles* (1966), and Leo James

		holes in the deck containing small shells used in the game'	English, *Tagalog-English dictionary* (1986)]
Tausug	*suŋka?*	'An indoor game usually played by two people on a wooden block shaped like a boat, and having shallow holes along the sides where shells, pebbles, or any counters are dropped by each player'	*ACD* [Entry based on Irene U. Hassan, Seymour A. Ashley, and Mary L. Ashley, *Tausug-English dictionary: Kabtangan Iban Maana* (1994)]

1885 dictionary, and the word *cunguit*, found in Alonso de Mentrida's 1841 dictionary. It was also noted by Scott (1994) when he mentioned "a children's game called *kunggit* played with *kigay* or *buskay* shells—probably modern sungka" (p. 111). This term seems to have been fully replaced by *sungka* in the 20th century, a term that, according to Mentrida, had meant a woodworking technique on Panay Island up to the 1800s. Ultimately, the word *kunggit/congit/cunguit* lends credence to the fact that some form of *mancala* game already existed in the Philippine islands at the time of Spanish advent.

Aside from the dates, Table 1 also shows the wide use of *sungka* across the Philippines to refer to a game played 1) on a wooden board with holes and 2) using shells as game pieces. From the Ilocanos of Northern Luzon to the Tausug of Mindanao and across the major islands of the Visayan group in the middle, the game's cultural diffusion cannot be contested, regardless how opaque the timeline of its spreading remains. That several of the Spanish dictionaries refer to the game as one played using the Tagalog *sigay* (shell)—as in *"juego de sigay"* and *"juego de sigueyes"*—also reinforces the folk nature of the game—it was one played by the locals, described by Spanish observers using local words.

3. A Game and Its Folk

With the geographic diffusion of this cultural artefact, a unique gameplay mechanic arose: the inclusion of an enlarged hole at opposite ends of the game board, which were optional in other regions (De Voogt, 2010, p. 334). In Africa, these larger holes are called "banks." (Natsoulas, 1995, p. 8). In Southeast Asia,

they're commonly referred to as some type of store or storage space (De Voogt, 2010, p. 334). There also tends to be less rows of holes in the games of Southeast Asia. De Voogt (2010, p. 335) notes that "one particular set of rules is shared by players in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Maldives, and the Philippines" and that the Philippine variant is almost always played using two rows of seven holes each. Philippine boards, called the *sungkaan* or *sungkahan*, can also vary widely in the elaborateness of their designs, though it seems to have been common for them to be carved into the shape of a boat.

Lopez (2001; 2007) categorized *sungka* under "folk custom" together with festivals, superstitions, gestures, and medicines. As a folk game, *sungka* is repeatedly transmitted within a particular group, exists in different versions at different places, can no longer be traced to an original "inventor," and exhibits both stability and malleability across its many variations across spatial and temporal geographies (Lopez, 2007, pp. 36-39). Lopez makes a special note of the game, writing:

> In the Philippines, as elsewhere in the world, folklore materials have the capability to adapt to historical changes…The same can be said of Philippine folk games. The Tagalog game sungka for example, a variant of the African mancala, has adjusted to the encroachment of modern technology. Filipino children in urban areas are now seen substituting egg cartons for the traditional wooden game board and marbles for the cowrie shells or stones used by children of rural towns and villages. But despite the change of game props or artifacts, the sequential movement or structure of the game remains the same (Lopez, 2007, p. 40).

The difference between *mancala* games and *sungka* games shows both the variation and constancy when modes of play are geographically diffused over time. Barnes (1975) writes that "it would not be surprising for a game, even one which has been recently borrowed, to be reinterpreted during play in terms of local principles…[and] as play is often an imaginative fantasy on ordinary life, we should expect their co-optation by collective traditions" (p. 81). In this respect, variations in the common play of *sungka* can be best understood as reflective of indigenous aspects of the local cultural communities who adopted the game. After all, how better to learn a new form of leisure activity than to utilize what is already known—what is lore—as reference for its rules?

Such malleability explains the unique agricultural slant of some versions of *sungka* Lopez described. She noted that in Nueva Ecija, "especially in rich

agricultural areas," the larger "Mother Hole" is referred to as *kamalig*—a granary or storehouse of agricultural products (Lopez, 2001, p. 529). Her analysis of this variant coincides with the realities of life in the province:

> The symbolic meaning of the Nueva Ecija game becomes obvious when one takes into account the fact that before action starts in the game, the player distributes the tokens from his own "granary" to the "tenants" [little holes] in the same manner that the landlord, who owns the rice fields or plantation as well as the granary, distributes seedlings and money for the year's crop to his sharecroppers or tenants. All through the game, each player tries to bring as many tokens as possible back to his "granary." In real life, the landlord tries to collect as much as he can from the rice harvest of all his tenants and deposit the grains in his granary. Thus, *sungka* reflects the feudal agricultural system prevalent not only in Central Luzon but also in the entire Philippines (Lopez, 2001, p. 537).

Despite these agricultural references, a lasting characteristic of *sungka* boards are their boat-like shapes. While *sungka* boards can vary widely in their decorations, including the carving of all sorts of animal motifs for the board's base or on the board itself (De Voogt, 2010, pp. 338-340), locally made *sungka* boards tend to be shaped like boats, their slight curvature creating a distinct silhouette easily recognizable to any player. These are most likely traces of the maritime influence of pre-colonial Southeast Asian culture on the mancala game. It is this maritime characteristic that also permeates native warfare in the Philippines at the time of Spanish contact. However, for parallels to be drawn between the game and armed conflict, one must first understand how it is played.

4. Rules of the Game

Lopez categorized *sungka* under "formula games"—that is, games "in which the whole game is the sum-total of all its parts, and each part is related to and derives its ultimate significance from the entire whole. A formula game is governed by precise contingency rules" (Lopez, 2001, p. 449). She described it as a "board distribution game," played on a board that usually takes the shape of a boat, although others can also take the shape of animals or intricately carved art pieces with no obvious physical world reference (Lopez, 2001, pp. 528-529). The game's rules are as follows:

1. A player must drop only one shell at a time into every small hole

("house") and into his own "Mother Hole."

2. He must not drop any shell into his opponent's "Mother Hole" or in any "burnt house" (*sunog*, i.e., a "house" left empty due to lack of enough tokens accumulated by a player in his "Mother Hole").

    a. The opponent is entitled to any shell which his rival drops carelessly in any "burnt house."

    b. A "burnt house" can only be refilled in the next game after a complete set of seven (or whatever number fills a hole) tokens are accumulated in the owner's "Mother Hole."

3. Four things can happen to the last shell in a player's hand:

    a. It is dropped in an empty hole in the opponent's row and the player and his move are declared "*dead*" (patay) and he stops playing.

    b. It is dropped in a filled hole and all the contents are scooped out and distributed around.

    c. It is dropped in an empty hole in the player's own row of "houses"; if the opposite hole belonging to the opponent contains shells, he "eats" (*kain*) them up, i.e., he scoops them and deposits them, plus his last shell, in his "Mother Hole."

    d. If the last shell winds up in the player's own "Mother Hole," he is entitled to continue by picking up any lone shell in his first "house" [a player's leftmost hole]… and dropping it into his "Mother Hole" before he starts the next move. This move is called *sampa* (to climb) or *subi* or *subida* ("made to advance"). He continues playing by picking up the contents of anyone of his own "houses" and distributing them in the same manner as before.

Objective – Each player should try to accumulate more tokens in his Mother Hole than his opponent (Lopez, 2001, p. 531).

While Southeast Asia is known for the variety of *mancala* games played across its cultures, *sungka* also maintains similarities with some of its peers. To focus the discussion, Indonesian *mancala* serves as a good example, where the game is more well-known as *congklak, congkak*, or *conkak*, though variants also exist in some islands—the game is known as *dakon* in Java, *kungkulan* in Sumatra, and *motiq* on Kedang. *Motiq* is also notable for having two variants: *ka ia* and *eu/keu leu*

(Nugroho, Anna, & Jarusawat, 2023; Barnes, 1975).

In *congkak*, players may play simultaneously instead of turn-by-turn. The usual direction of play is clockwise for *congkak* and *sungka* while it is counterclockwise in *motiq*. While the traditional way of playing all games is on the floor, *motiq* can also be played by simply digging holes in the ground. Meanwhile, *congkak* retains some shells in "dead" holes that are skipped by either player, based on the results of the previous match, while *motiq* and *sungka* both keep these skipped holes empty of shells. The *ka ia* variant of *motiq* proves the most divergent, since it has no large hole or "storage" at either end of the board, which was the unique evolution in Southeast Asian *mancala* games. However, the *eu leu* variant does, where it is called the "village" and the gathering of counters into the whole was known as "entering the village."

While rulesets may differ from place to place, more variety can be observed in the shape of the boards, even those used for the same game. De Voogt (2001) observes that the boat-like shape is indicative of the coastal provenance of such boards, whether they were found in Africa or Asia. He also notes that the number of holes seems to be fixed in West African boards, while Southeast Asian boards have a wider variety. In fact, the number of holes can be an easy indication of the local rules of the game as, for instance, in Southeast Asian variants "a board with two rows of nine holes will usually have nine counters per hole, and a board with two rows of seven holes will have seven counters per hole." (De Voogt, 2001, p. 44). Along with the variation of board shapes and designs comes a variety of terms used to describe parts of the board, the moves a player makes, and the current state of play. Arranging these terms side by side for easy comparison also reveals some interesting similarities, as seen in Table 2.

In the table above, we see multiple overlapping terms that refer to holes as houses or villages. In the game, the player's interaction with holes is qualified only in reference to what they do against their opponent—they enter their villages, burn their holes, and continue doing so in a steady advance until they die, i.e., their turn ends. Once burned, these houses can be refilled, with the exception of a match ending. Henceforth, in variants wherein the previous game state carries over to the next, a hole is left out of play and is thus ruined, reminding one of a grave. Counters are usually referred to by their type, from cowry shells to tamarind seeds, and were therefore too many to list above, but it is also interesting to note that there exists in *congkak* a reference to the shells as a child.

Interestingly, in the Kapampangan version of *sungka*, the very first hole in a player's row (first from the left) is distinguished by calling it *asbuc* or "mouth"

TABLE 2. *Comparison of Game Terms in Sungka, Congkak, and Motiq*[1]

Game Element	Term in ***sungka***	Term in ***congkak***	Term in ***motiq***
Game board	*sungkaan*	*papan congkak*	-
Small holes	*bahay* (house)	*kampong (*village)	-
	bale (house)	*lubang anak* (hole/crater child)	-
Large holes	*buntuc* (head)	*lubang rumah* (hole/crater house)	*leu* (village)
	ulo (head)	-	-
	ina (mother)		
Ending turn on large hole	-	*naik rumah* (enter the house)	*seu leu* (enter the village)
Empty hole (still in play)	*cutcut* (grave)	-	-
Skipped hole (empty or with less shells)	*sunog* (burnt)	*telega burok* (ruined well)	-
	duluc (burnt)		
Capture of opponent's counters	*kain* (eat)	*tembak* (shoot)	*ka ia* (eat fish)
		mati bela (sacrifice)	*paq mo leu* (burn your village)
Continuation of player's turn	*sampa* (to climb)	-	-
	subi (to advance)		
End of turn	*patay* (dead)	*mati* (dead)	*mate* (dead)
Victory	-	*menang biji* (win the seeds)	-
		menang jalan (win the journey)	
Defeat	-	*mati kena abu* (utterly destroyed)	-

(Henson, 1965, p. 4), like how *motiq* is played in Kedang. There, the holes are named after parts of the body—from left to right, they are the foot, shin, knee,

[1]For Table 2, sungka terms were pulled from the work of Lopez (2001; 2007), Mariano Henson's How to Play Sungka (1965), and Table 1 of this paper. Terms for congkak come from several sources: Iida, et al. (2012), which looks at the Malaysian variant; notes from M. Heller (1907) and H. Overbeck (1915) published in the Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society; and a website maintained by Indonesian expatriates called Living in Indonesia, A Site for Expatriates (last updated 2022) that has an instructions page oft cited by many other webpages for congklak rules. Terms for motiq come from Barnes (1975), whose in-depth observations of the game in Kedang, Indonesia provides a unique example with high variance.

stomach, chest, throat, and head (Barnes, 1975, pp. 78-79). In fact, it was these labels that helped Barnes argue for the connection between *motiq* and armed conflict:

> In a different way, the game is a war between the inhabitants of the two territories; and one occasionally burns an opponent village, taking all captured souls to one's own store. The taking of heads…is another element of this culture which finds expression here. Finally, in both *ka ia* and *eu leu*, the holes in one row correspond to the parts of a body; just as the original hamlet of a Kedang village is symbolically divided into sections corresponding to parts of a body. In both versions, final victory in the game comes when a player reduces his opponent's holes progressively to the point where he captures the final, head, hole" (Barnes, 1975, pp. 79).

What can these games reveal about those who played them? What states of mind are required to play effectively? Ultimately, the objective of these game creates an emphasis on collecting or capturing game pieces. The regulated placement of shells encourages skills that involve not only layers of counting but also a type of strategic planning that simulates moves and counter moves into the immediate future. The ability to count shells, count holes, and count one's revolutions around the board helps a player determine where they must start to end their turn where they want. It is therefore not surprising that many of the literature on *sungka* comes from the field of mathematics (Lee-Chua, 2001; Dimzon, 2009; Vistro-Yu, 2010; Abay & Parola, 2024), especially those espousing the use of boardgames to push pedagogical boundaries by integrating play into the education of children. However, in the socio-cultural context of the native societies encountered by the Spaniards, a folk game like *sungka* may have had other uses—not that there is evidence of conscious utilization of the game to train specific skills, but that the skills involved in its play reflect similar skills necessary to perform and excel in other aspects of indigenous culture.

Other aspects such as warfare.

5. Parallels between Play and War

Central to understanding a society's attitude towards armed conflict is the idea that distinct discourses on war exist within each cultural tradition. Borrowing from other military historiographies, J.A. Angeles (2007, p. 8) described a

society's discourse on war as "its comprehensive image of ideal war as influenced by its larger body of culture. This image of 'ideal' war affects the way a society wages war and, therefore, determines the ensuing reality of war." Such a discourse effects how people fight, what they value in a fight, how many casualties they are willing to sustain, etc. As a cultural artefact with a long history in the country, any investigation of *sungka*'s possible value as a game of military strategy will entail an investigation of the ways it references indigenous society's attitude towards armed conflict—its discourse on war.

Today's idea of "conventional" warfare is rooted deeply in the Western tradition. There normally exists a state of peace between polities, a breakdown of diplomacy causes war to be declared, armies march on the battlefield, and the side that loses its will to fight first surrenders. Thus are the central tenets of strategic thinkers like Carl von Clausewitz and Sir B. H. Lidell Hart. Meanwhile, victory is viewed differently in the Eastern traditions. Restraint in war, moderate and balanced attitudes towards the use of force, and the attainment of legitimacy through just practice are recurring themes in the classic works of Kautilya and Sun Tzu (Cordova, et al., 2022). Since conflict between polities exists as a spectrum, with open warfare as the destructive extreme, the two Asian intellectuals also had a unique understanding of the costs of war—the devastation of a prolonged conflict of attrition would be just as undesirable as never having gone to war at all.

The waging of war changes further as one travels to insular Southeast Asia, especially in the Philippines. At the advent of Iberian influence in the 16th century, the region was a fragmented landscape of smaller polities in endless competition with each other (Junker, 2000; Rodriguez, 2003; and Angeles, 2007). Like the larger established polities in the mainland, conflict across the islands existed as a continuous spectrum of positioning and influence among rival chieftains. While some have argued that Southeast Asia was no stranger to massive battles and prolonged sieges with high casualty rates, Angeles (2007) countered that these were not the norm. Instead, what dominated was a type of warfare fought mainly via raiding of rival coastal settlements, with belligerents seeking loot in the form of material wealth, human labor, and individual prestige.

According to Angeles, warfare among the coastal peoples of the Philippine islands revolved around the displays of spiritual potency—what he called "soul stuff"—as part of power rivalries in which local chieftains engaged each other. In a culture that had yet to experience the formation of any large and lasting polities with leadership passing via direct blood relation, leaders would ensure the service

of people via personal loyalty to themselves. Without an inherited legacy of leadership from their parents, leadership was won by proving themselves capable in warfare, trade, knowledge, and other acts that directly implied the potency of their spiritual might. Angeles further explained that:

> *Datu* did not have the need, willingness, or the means for sustained campaigns of annihilation or conquest. In this context warfare had a tendency to be indirect, avoiding direct confrontations even in the field of battle, and there was a general unwillingness to sustain heavy casualties. Even headhunting had served to limit casualties and display prestige, or spiritual potency. The weapons, tactics, and strategies employed by the indigenous warriors reflected their concerns and cultural mores…True victory lay in the incorporation of more people into a ruler's alliance network. Flight was not necessarily the reaction of a defeated party, but a proactive endeavor meant to create a 'victory' for the fleeting datu by denying the attacking datu any new slaves or followers (Angeles 2007, pp. 24-25).

Ultimately, Angeles showed that native warfare was different from Spanish warfare by dint of their values during a state of war. The Spanish waged war to occupy territory, sought to bring native forces to battle, and inflict as much damage to them while keeping their own cohesion intact. Meanwhile, the natives cared not for territory, valued life more than the Iberians, and saw conflict as opportunities for individual displays of prowess instead. The potential consequence of annihilation was alien to them but was a real possibility for the Spanish *conquistadores*.

It is within this context that skills honed by a game like *sungka* begin to parallel skills necessary to thrive within the native discourse of war, and it does so in at least four interesting ways. First is the emphasis on resource management. In *mancala* games, the objective is to end the game as the player with the greater number of game pieces. The *sungka* variants in the Philippines have the players collect these pieces in their "Mother Hole." The total number of shells serve as a finite number of resources on the board that each player is fighting over, with a shell possibly changing hands multiple times during play until it finally lands in a "Mother Hole." The skill of knowing which hole to begin a turn for maximum shell collection is of utmost importance, since once a player starts, they do not stop until they no longer have shells in their hands. *Sungka* is also a zero-sum game due to the finite number of shells, and the pattern of play is cyclical—not only because turns go around the board but because its turn-based nature ensures

that each player gets a chance to take and lose resources at regular intervals, especially when they are of similar skill.

The same patterns can be observed in the native discourse on war. War was normally associated with the prestige or social standing of a chieftain or *datu*, so a martial leader waged war not only to vanquish his foes but also to retain the loyalty of his followers. Economic motivations for slave raids, piracy, and the storming of ports entail economic motivations, but all of that remains subordinate to the primary goal of increasing or maintaining prestige. This means the accumulation and redistribution of wealth, which includes human resources in the form of slaves, is an important skill to develop in any martially inclined leader, which would involve mathematics and the ability to predict responses of friends and foes alike once redistribution had been accomplished. Such resource management occurs in what Junker calls "political cycling" in a region of perpetual competition, as any chieftain who succeeded in creating alliance networks and increasing power can lose all of his gains and sink in importance if he failed to maintain his power base (Junker, 2000, p. 88). Sungka paralleled this reality by making the collection of resources (i.e., the counters) its primary goal, the development of mathematical insights in its veteran players, and the circular direction of play.

The second parallelism can be seen in the role of territory—that is, in the way that territory (in the form of land) is a mostly inconsequential resource in the Philippines. In *sungka* each player has a set number of holes (each called a "*bahay*" or "house") on their side of the board, symbolizing the extent of any territorial significance. These symbolic houses are never occupied by an opposing player. Instead, they are simply spaces where one's resources (shells) are placed. While an opponent can add or subtract resources from houses, hand stretching out across the board to do so, they ultimately withdraw to their side of the board and are mostly concerned with their own row of houses. Defeat in a match may end with the burning (*sunog*) of a house, but the burnt status leaves the house ultimately unusable by either side. It is a heavy blow to the losing player, but the winning player also cannot do anything with the hole that is eliminated from play.

In a similar way, land is an inconsequential resource in Philippine indigenous warfare because its potential use pales in comparison to the material loot and the slaves used in the raiding, trading, and feasting that form the foundation of a chieftain's power (Junker, 2000). In the fragmented landscape of small polities in Southeast Asia, alliances can stretch vast distances, connected by sea lanes, and rivalries can be nurtured and fought by chieftains inhabiting the same island.

Sungka references these things in the absence of most spatial considerations during play—unlike chess, the pieces do not maneuver across a battlefield, the opponent's holes can't be occupied and claimed as one's own, all direction is uniform, and distance is only felt in the counting of the pieces as they are distributed. Battlefield maneuvering is non-existent, but competition remains symbolically deadly as a player "dies" when their resource distribution—their turn—ends.

Third, there is no specialization of roles among the pieces or the spaces on the *sungka* board. One hole is no different from the other. So too is one shell no different from all the rest. The "Mother Holes" are larger in size, but they share the same purpose for each player. The sungka board is symmetrical in all meaningful ways and it is only via the players' actions that the spread of resources may differ from round to round—the shells are ultimately just resources to be gathered and distributed from and into equally sized holes.

Similarly, only the *datu* and his immediate retinue would have stood out on the field of battle, and then only due to the status exuded in the quality of their attire and equipment. All warriors were expected to possess similar skills and the division of forces into unique units with different roles was unheard of (Angeles, 2007). There was no distinction in task and purpose among native warriors, no units of dedicated archers that stood apart from massed heavy infantry or lances of armored cavalry. There was only the *datu* and those who followed him into battle, all shells brought out of their homes to capture other uniformly attired shells on the opposing side.

Fourth, *sungka* references indigenous notions of defeat through its rules on how play ends. In connection with the political cycling mentioned earlier, there is always a potential to bounce back from a disadvantageous position. In one of the *mancala* variants observed by Barnes in Indonesia, the defeated player in each round covers one of their holes until, at the end of several rounds, the person who first loses their "head" hole (the last in their row last) ends up losing the game. In Philippine *sungka*, the game ends when all shells are in each opposing player's store, with no more ability to place and collect them in each other's houses. In both cases, empty holes are considered burnt houses and cannot be used. However, what is important to note is that the game does not need to end upon the loss of a player. They can continue into another match while carrying over a consequence of the loss: a burnt house on the loser's side. In this case, a player may be handicapped by having less houses on his side, but it remains possible for them to win the next match and similarly handicap their opponent. Loss of

territory is a minor setback as long as you remain able to manage your resources intelligently with the houses you have left.

Within the context of indigenous warfare, entire villages are usually burnt not by the attackers but by their inhabitants—the people being raided tended to flee deeper inland and, upon returning from their hideouts or fortified positions in the woods, if they deem their coastal village too devastated or vulnerable to repair and inhabit again, then they will opt to burn it all down and move elsewhere (Rodriguez, 2003; Angeles, 2007). A single destroyed house, or even a burnt-out minor settlement, means nothing to a strong *datu*. Raiding and trading can continue, resources can still be gathered, and prestige gained, even if territory is lost. Only after the complete destruction of all houses does the game end in truth—both in the sense of *sungka* and the ambitions of an indigenous chieftain—and this can even occur by one's own hand. More importantly, it is not the loss of one's houses that determines ultimate defeat in the Philippine context, but rather the ability to collect more resources than the opponent.

Given these similarities, it is not outside the realm of possibility that norms of warfare in indigenous Philippine culture influenced the *mancala* game that pre-colonial Philippine societies assimilated before (or even during) Spanish advent. These, in turn, could have encouraged specific attitudes and modes of thinking that matched the reality of armed conflict waged by competing island chieftains.

One rebuttal to the argument being posited is the fact that multiple scholars have noted how *sungka* was usually played only by women and children in Southeast Asia (Heller, 1907; Overbeck, 1915; Barnes, 1975; and De Voogt, 2010). How then, could such a game have been used to teach certain types of strategic thinking necessary for success as a *datu* in constant conflict with his peers?

Yet what is being argued here is *sungka*'s role as a folk game, first and foremost. True, there remains no known evidence that *sungka* was played by a particular class of people in pre-colonial society as a form of training. However, as a folk game, it remains part of a broader cultural life that references other aspects of a society's patterns of behavior—including warfare. If its play was as widespread as other scholars believe it to be, then the skills honed through years of gameplay, even as a child, would undoubtedly permeate across broader native society. In so doing, it would have reinforced certain values and lessons useful in native warfare, and those values would in turn diffuse into the region and across communities not just from *sungka* but from other cultural artifacts as well. Ultimately, *sungka* remains the artifact most likely to carry the cultural baggage

related to warfare because it is a game—it is competitive by nature and competition is the foundation of any type of conflict.

6. Can a Folk Game be a Wargame?

Still, the question remains: is *sungka* a wargame? Do the abovementioned parallelisms with a native discourse on war allow us to consider it as a wargame within the context of precolonial Philippine society?

There has been a resurgence lately in the study and use of wargames due to the potential geopolitical flashpoints of the 21st century. For example, the Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS) published a report on January 2023 that detailed what a Chinese invasion of Taiwan might look like. To predict possible outcomes, they simulated different scenarios using a tabletop game they custom-built in-house called the "Taiwan Operational Wargame." Such wargames are multi-sided abstract representations of combat where the decisions of human players affect the flow of events. An experiment in human interaction, they are best used when trying to simulate how effective long-prepared plans and resources will work in a possible future conflict scenario—that is, they test set strategies over and over again with minor adjustments to different variables in each iteration of potential future conflict. (Perez, 2023, pp. 53-54). Military plans for operations have to be tested somehow outside of actual conflict since all the research and modeling in the world will mean nothing if plans do not survive first contact with a human opponent. A wargame can provide a simulation that is as close to the real thing as military planners can get.

This type of gamification of military preparation can be traced back historically to the German *kriegspiel* (literally "wargame") invented by Prussian Officer Georg Leopold von Reisswitz in 1812 (Caffrey, 2000, p. 34). Yet even that can be traced further back to boardgames such as *rithmomachia*, a math-heavy variant of chess; *kartenspiel*, a card game depicting military units and leaders; and chess itself, which is referenced heavily in the literature of medieval and renaissance Europe (Mason, 2018, pp. 78-79). All of these were played by European nobility in the belief that they taught a distinct martial class of society the mental agility required to eventually plan and execute a military campaign. Similar games can be found in the military cultures of Asian civilizations: Indian *chaturanga*, Chinese *go*, and Japanese *shogi* are all examples.

As stated earlier, there currently exists no hard evidence that directly links sungka to a distinct martial class of natives in the Philippine archipelago at the

time of Spanish advent. It is therefore doubtful if *sungka* can be classified as a wargame insofar as it trains an elite class of leaders and/or warriors in the type of strategic thinking necessary for their particular culture of war. What is known is that the game was played in many parts of the archipelago, having entered the area by the time the Spaniards arrived and remaining widespread until the 19th and 20th centuries.

There exists a belief, propagated in the 20th century by some anthropologists, that so-called "simple societies" were incapable of widespread appreciation for strategic games and would have resisted borrowing them. The idea here connected the complexity of strategic thinking to the existence of complex hierarchical societies. However, since then, scholars have proven that *mancala* games "in all their complexity have been connected with non-hierarchical communities and societies, dispelling the idea that the complexity of a state is somehow connected to the possibility of conceiving of complex games" (De Voogt, 2021, p. 7). This means that even societies of fragmented warring chieftains, lacking the social institutions commonly ascribed to larger and more intricately organized polities, could and would have adopted games of such strategic complexity.

So, two things remain clear. First, much like modern wargames, sungka teaches its players "down-board" thinking—the ability to anticipate the consequences of one's possible actions and an opponent's possible responses to those actions. Second, it does so while referencing the reality of conflict as experienced by a given culture. Thus, the parallels made in this paper show a possible connection between the board game and the native discourse on war. Such a connection can perhaps be a line of inquiry worth pursuing for those willing to do more archival work for research into Philippine cultures of leisure and conflict.

7. Conclusion

Is *sungka*, therefore, a wargame? Taken at face value, no, it is not. Assuming that wargames must be accurate simulations of specific conflict scenarios, then sungka does not fit the bill. However, games are cultural artifacts that would be hard to adopt if they did not make sense within the broader world of the communities who play them. There is much in *sungka* that would make it palatable to the communities native to the Philippines in terms of logic and strategy.

Sungka and native warfare share similarities in several aspects. They emphasize resource management. They understate the value of territory. There are no distinguishing features between the resources at one's command, and notions of defeat do not involve the complete annihilation of the opponent, with losses being only temporary setbacks in the immediate short-term of any competition. The cyclical pattern of play in *sungka* also parallels the cyclical pattern of raids and counterraids, as well as the ever-constant rise and fall of individual prestige, that was emblematic of conflict between rival chieftains in the islands.

Such similarities are even more glaring when contrasted with the strategic boardgames of mainland cultures with large polities and standing armies. Unlike chess, go, or *chatarunga*, victory in *sungka* is not tied to one's positioning of unique pieces on a board. The lack of emphasis on such spatiality is also reflected in the lack of value found in seizing and holding territory in the conflicts between rival *datu*, which are instead focused on capturing and distributing resources (either material wealth or manpower). There are no special units or unique formations: pieces had no delineating purposes on the board meaning that the only pattern of movement to consider was the player's own. Furthermore, each match in board games of large continental cultures is self-contained, with the board reset after a player wins, signifying the complete loss of the opponent and a need to create a new scenario. This is different from *sungka*'s long-term game mechanic of leaving a house "burnt" after every match. This runs contrary to the wars of conquest and/or annihilation of other places but finds many similarities in the discourse on war found in the Philippines. In *sungka*, as in *datu* conflict, the contest only ended when any and all capability to acquire counters/shells had been lost and, even then, victory was still a possibility if enough counters had been stored in the storage or "Mother" hole.

Sungka is a game that can teach its players much about the indigenous maritime warfare of the precolonial Philippines, providing insights into the native discourse on war even today. Perhaps this is one of the reasons behind its wide geographic adaptation across the archipelago. It may not be a wargame in the modern sense of the word, but it is a game that could easily be about war.

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