

# MANCALA IN SURINAMESE MAROON COMMUNITIES: THE EXPEDITION OF MELVILLE J. HERSKOVITS

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## Abstract

The American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) has three mancala game boards in their collection that are connected with Suriname, formerly Dutch Guyana. One of these samples is exhibited in the AMNH African Peoples Hall as part of a section on African Slavery and Diaspora. The games of Suriname were described by Melville J. Herskovits in an article dating to 1929, but the relation of these three boards with Herskovits has remained unclear. With the help of the Herskovits archives, the archival records of AMNH and recent research on Surinamese Maroon communities, the history of these three boards is shown to be intimately linked with Herskovits' broader intellectual project.

## The expedition

Herskovits' work on the Maroon communities in Suriname was part of an anthropological expedition. In 1928, Morton C. Khan (AMNH/Myron I. Granger Expedition), Francis Herskovits and Melville J. Herskovits (Northwestern University and Columbia University Research Council in the Social Sciences) traveled to Suriname for the purpose of investigating "the extent to which elements of European culture" had influenced Afro-Surinamese communities in urban and rural settings with particular attention to rural Maroon groups, descendants of enslaved people who lived in autonomous societies at the time (Herskovits 1928).

Francis Herskovits, the spouse and co-researcher of Melville, gathered information in Paramaribo to investigate how European and African culture had been retained and refracted through material culture among urban and rural communities in Suriname and throughout the West Indies and North America (ibid.).

AMNH representative Morton C. Khan continued his mission from the preceding year and compiled objects from the Middle and Upper Suriname river. He gathered everyday objects from the Saamaka (Saramacca) as well as Aukaners (Djuka/Njuka) of the Sarakreek. With the help of Alexander Wolff, whose affiliation with the Trading Post of the Suriname Balata Company granted Khan local access and mobility, he obtained stools, combs, paddles, trays in addition to religious-ceremonial objects such as charms, drums as well as board games, which were categorized as religious-ceremonial material. One of these boards made it into the AMNH collections (see Figure 1), while the other two were acquired in 1944 from James Lawton, former American council of Suriname (Price and Price 2003, p. 81) (see Figure 2 & 3). In addition to obtaining a comprehensive collection for the American Museum of Natural History, Khan sought to compare styles of wood carvings between the Saamaka and the Aukaners. In total, Khan procured 346 Saamaka and 10 Amerindian (indigenous Carib) specimens in the summer of 1928 (Herskovits n.d.). Moreover, Herskovits and Khan made a 16 mm film and took still photographs of daily village life, among the Maroon communities, material which is preserved in the Smithsonian's Human Studies Film Archives (Herskovits and Kahn 1928). It shows less than two minutes of footage of two village men sitting across a playing board placed on the ground in a large open space. They glance at the camera while they play the game, one of them using his left hand. The footage includes a closer shot of the board, revealing the depressions of the upper part of the game board and two rows of holes but it does not show the complete board to determine the number of holes per row.

As noted by Herskovits 1932, p. 26, the Djuka game board has six cups in each of two rows while the Saamaka board has only five. Also, the Djuka play with four counters in each cup instead of ten as he reported for the Saamaka. The Djuka refer to the game as *adji-pre* and the board as *awali-bangi*, while the Saamaka people use *adji-boto* in both cases. *Awali* is a cognate of similar names for this game in West Africa and the Caribbean.

## Recent research

M.J. Herskovits' research focused on the Saamaka of the Middle and Upper Suriname; delving into the diverse aspects of socio-political life, linguistics, economics, and material culture. Not long after their expedition AMNH hosted a special temporary exhibit of the objects acquired from the Suriname expedition that was titled "The Morton C. Khan Collection" (Khan 1928).



**Figure 1:** Saamaka (Saramacca) mancala board on display in the American Museum of Natural History, New York. Catalog # 26/234 Courtesy, AMNH Anthropology

Subsequent research has brought new vantage points on Maroon cultural history. In stark contrast to Herskovits, who saw the isolation of Maroon communities as a barometer to establish the “Africanness” of Maroon cul-



**Figure 2:** Djuka board. Catalog # 26/831 Courtesy, AMNH Anthropology



**Figure 3:** Djuka board. Catalog # 26/836 Courtesy, AMNH Anthropology

ture in comparison to their urban counter parts, Richard Price has argued that enslaved people working on plantations had more direct contact with African cultures until Emancipation in 1863—whereas Maroon communities had continued to live as independent societies and were approaching the third generation of Suriname-born Maroons (St-Hilaire 2000). More

recent accounts of Afro-Surinamese culture have posited that spiritual systems, known as *winti*, are not as syncretic as other former slave societies due to the distance enslaved persons had from European culture (Cairo 2012).

In 1932 Herskovits published a second article on mancala games that included research on most of the Caribbean islands as his expedition ship had visited many of its ports. He had a similar research question in mind but here the game is shown in urban parts of locales such as Barbados and Antigua. Recent historical studies of the game in Barbados (de Voogt 2005) confirms the urban popularity of the game. Also there is a continuity in the tradition of play, nowadays especially in Antigua where players have become part of research in cognitive psychology (Gobet, Retschitzki, and de Voogt 2004). In contrast, recent studies on Maroon communities in Suriname did not include any description or mention of board games.

## Djuka and Saamaka History

With game boards from both the Saamaka and the Djuka, the American Museum of Natural History is one of few museums featuring mancala games from the South American continent. Proper appreciation of the distinctive aspects of these game boards (see Figure 1, 2, 3) requires a brief historical overview of the relevant communities. Although Herskovits mentions these groups in his 1929 article, our understanding and perception of these communities have changed in the last ninety years.

The Saamaka and the Djuka are one of six communities of Maroon descent. Their West and Central African ancestors fled European plantations in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, establishing societies and maintaining territorial autonomy through organized resistance. Historians estimate that between 1650 and 1830, 220,000 individuals were taken to Suriname (Hoefte 2001). Enslaved individuals accounted for ninety percent of Suriname's population until the early nineteenth century. Records indicate that as early as the 1670s Dutch citizens organized the militia to eliminate the Maroon villages, which were perceived as a military and economic threat to the survival of plantations.

Organized Maroon resistance severely drained colonial resources, leading directly to peace treaties between three Maroon groups: the Djuka in 1760, the Saamaka in 1762 and the Matawi in 1767 (Hoefte 2001). The Djuka and Saamaka population are estimated to have been between 2,000 and 3,000. The treaties recognized Maroons as independent societies; however, marronage persisted, and runaway slaves continued to pose military

threats. Settlers created the Redi Musu (Red Caps) in 1772, to address the persistence of Maroon campaigns in what is presently referred to as the Boni wars of 1765–1793.

The historical legacy of Maroon societies forms a significant part of the collective memory of their descendants (White 2009). The ancestral history of the Saamaka and Djuka are firmly associated with land. The names of landmarks in Maroon regions are drawn from historical events, migrations, and pivotal battles against colonial powers, oftentimes transmitted through oral accounts. The use of a wooden frame (*azanpow*) at the entrance of Saamakan villages signifies a community's adherence to traditional spiritual practices. Maroon societies have maintained diplomatic relations with the coastal Surinamese, retaining a significant degree of sovereignty over internal matters (St-Hilaire 2000). After the emancipation of Suriname in 1975 from the Dutch, the Surinamese government made unsuccessful attempts to assimilate Maroons into the Surinamese polity. However, forced migration catalyzed by the construction of a hydroelectric dam, the depletion of natural resources, economic pressure and the civil war of the interior moved Maroon communities to the coast and sparked the emergence of Maroon slums on the outskirts of Paramaribo (ibid.; White 2009). Heritage management and the recognition of Maroon cultural lifeways by the government of Suriname has remained a problematic issue.

## Conclusion

The three mancala boards from Suriname, former Dutch Guyana, located in AMNH are intricately linked to the research efforts of Melville Herskovits, who wrote two articles documenting mancala games in the Caribbean and South America. The interpretation of mancala games as evidence of “Africanness” is no longer operative but his descriptions are nevertheless valuable for discussions of cultural transmission of games across the Atlantic as well as within the Caribbean. It is unclear whether the games survive in contemporary Suriname, but pockets of players still exist throughout the Caribbean. With a better understanding of Herskovits' agenda when documenting these remnants of slave trade and migration, the ongoing practice of mancala games in that part of the world confirms its status of a relevant and enduring local cultural practice.

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