

Appendix II

**The Application of a Structural
Anthropological Interpretation of the
Yao Myths
to
Dr. Wim van Binsbergen's Analysis
of the History of
Board Games and Divination
from the Marxian Point of View of
the Shift in Food Production from the
Paleolithic to the Neolithic Periods.**

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*(Only slight editing changes have been made
since the October 2006 revisions)*

This article is adapted from a paper delivered to the 2nd International Conference on Go sponsored by the Department of Baduk Studies, Myongji University at the 2003 European Go Congress in St. Petersburg, Russia. It is an addition to a larger body of my work which offers arguments as to why go did not necessarily evolve from divination practices—a long-standing theory of go historians and of anthropologists.

This question seems to involve more than just being historically accurate. As illustrated in my works on go history, and in my article on Go and Cognitive Psychology, all in the AGA e-library, it seems to touch on fundamental issues raised by the Daoist soldier-philosophers of the School of Strategy, c. 500-300 BC, and by Western academia only towards the end of the last century. These 'philosophies of action' conceptualized a relativistic, game-playing, probability-oriented ecstatic core of human life (and the universe, for that matter) that curiously both extends beyond our usual concepts of 'rationality,' and yet seems to lie within it. With people, this playful yet calculating, independent core seems to have expressed itself in the invention or discovery of strategic board games and defines an important part of our humanity.

Dr. Wim van Binsbergen is a Dutch, Marxist-oriented, eclectic anthropologist who argues (without page notation) at http://www.shikanda.net/ancient_models/gen3/mankala/mankala1.htm that the game of mancala and mancala-used-as-a-divination-tool enjoyed a *parallel* development from ritual and that the former activity did not evolve from the latter practice. Instead, he demonstrates that they—and board games in general—were a necessary response to shifts in early food production.

van Binsbergen cautions that he is only speculating and was often moving outside his field of expertise, but that those interested in the history of games ‘would understand’ (as I hope they do also about my own work!). Facts are few about early board games, but examining them carefully, he feels, can lead to a greater understanding of those vast social changes that occurred so long ago.

His remarks about the change from Paleolithic to Neolithic as fostering the development of board games can easily be extended to the myth of King Yao in China descending from the Heavens with his go board, divinatory equipment, calendars, and agricultural and animal husbandry techniques. Not only that, but perhaps they can also shed light on a fuller meaning of what happened afterwards.

There are many versions of the Yao myth, which first seems to have been written down in the *Shi Ben*, a lost book of the Warring States period. As discussed in the main text, these versions appeared at different times, but it is reasonable to assume that they represented regional differences. In the best-known, his first-born son by his first earthly wife, Dan Zhu, became the ‘best’ player of the court. However, Dan Zhu was ‘rebellious’ and ‘quarrelsome,’ so his father ‘tired of him.’ When Yao abdicated the throne and passed it on to his friend and advisor, the common farmer Shun, Dan Zhu fled, allied himself with a primitive tribe who lived along the Yellow River, and was killed fighting Yao and Shun. Shun then went on to found the Xia dynasty, one that is now known to have actually existed. It is important to note, however, that in other versions, Dan Zhu was portrayed as rightfully fighting Shun for his inheritance, because it was Shun who had usurped the throne by tricking Yao.

It should be emphasized that I am only concentrating on what is related in the myth of Yao, and not on the reality of the time of the changeover from Paleolithic to Neolithic to the Bronze Age in China. One estimate for the end of the Neolithic in China is c. 1900 BC, and Yao

dates to 2100 BC, so the myth may have been formed before this, or perhaps it summed up events from a much earlier time.

It does not seem important to this argument that go and mancala developed in different ways. Aside from the use of two differing names—*yi* in the north and *qi* in the south—there is little to indicate that go emerged independently in different regions as mancala did.

Also, although Chinese civilization is now known to have developed in a number of regions outside the Yellow River basin, other than the superficial resemblance of go to Daoist divination that was noted in Appendix I, no parallel system of divination seems to have developed using go equipment as it did with mancala. Instead, the emphasis in this article is how, from the structural anthropological point of view described in my essay, the Yao myth might be interpreted as a memorial of the changes wrought in China by the shift in food production and how the presence of go in the story might interrelate to them.

Because a book that was going to include his article was not published, van Binsbergen's *Board-games and Divination in Global Cultural History: A Theoretical, Comparative and Historical Perspective on Mankala and Geomancy in Africa and Asia* is only available at his website, which is, as mentioned, at

http://www.shikanda.net/ancient_models/gen3/mankala/mankala1.htm

Like my own articles, it should be read for further details, and for footnoting and bibliography that are not provided here. It should also be noted that I quote him extensively in order to more accurately portray his thought.

It should be emphasized that in this article, I am only concentrating on the myth of Yao and not the reality of the changeover from Paleolithic to Neolithic culture, an event that has only recently been shown to have occurred also in a number of outlying areas.

It should also be noted that where possible, I quote Dr. Van Binsbergen to avoid distortion as much as possible, because he was able to discuss, with an insight uncommon in anthropology, the problem of the origins of divination and board games and how these developments interrelate. This is probably because he was, for a number of decades, a practicing 'shaman' in Africa, where he presumably became a skilled mancala player like a number of other anthropologists who have studied the game.

He writes:

In ways which create ample room for the display of cosmological and mythical elements, divination and board-games constitute a manageable miniature version of the world, where space is transformed space: bounded, restricted, parceled up, thoroughly regulated; and where time is no longer . . . 'real time' . . . [This] is clearest when divination makes pronouncements about the past and the future. Utterly magical, board-games and divination systems are space-shrinking time-machines.

. . . [Moreover,] divination is meaningful because it actively and explicitly reconstitutes the person in relation to the social and natural environment. And much as theoreticians of play would tend to emphasise the escapist or deliberately non-utilitarian, purpose-free nature of play, in board-games too there is this element of reconstitution, of learning from vicarious experience which, if nothing else, conveys the message that basic configurations of man's confrontation with the natural and social environment (including competition and conflict) be represented, schematised, played out, and thus be rendered more transparent and manageable.

There is also a similarity between board games and divination if one looks at the narrative qualities of the two activities.

[It is clear] . . . that the temporal structure of the game is complex, ambiguous, dynamic, opaque. It cannot be readily reduced to only one of the three popular formulae of linearity, circularity and punctuality which have haunted the philosophical and anthropological literature on time . . . In fact, all three forms of temporality occur at the same time, in an admixture which may well constitute one of the basic characteristics of the mankala family of games, as well as the main reason for their virtually ubiquitous distribution and appeal . . . The game is not only a time machine, it is a time symphony, and it amounts to a practical philosophy of time.

A similar case could be made with regard to the divination session. . . Against the diffuse and unbounded structure of everyday life is offset the session's structured temporal format, with a clear beginning and end, and with a sequential temporal structure where question-throw-verbal interpretation-question-throw etc. succeed each other . . . the temporal structure of the divinatory session consists in a subtle combination of all three major modes of conceptualising time as can be distinguished

analytically. This is why the divination session constitutes the minimal ritual par excellence, . . . in fact, much of what I have said about divination applies to ritual in general, and suggests that ritual, much like the music that often accompanies it, is a form of time art.

The argument so far suggests that the board-game and the divination session are not just alternative, parallel ways of dealing with time. They are not merely complementary to whatever may exist in the way of a conceptualisation of time in everyday life; alongside the latter they are the opposite of being unnecessary, playful, virtual. On the contrary, I submit that as implicit models of time the conceptual effects of these formal systems and the 'virtual' experience they engender, shades over onto everyday life. Here they provide some of the few available conceptualisations of time within the local culture. Starting out as models of everyday temporarily, they turn around and breed a more structured sense of temporarily in their own right. Thus they seem to provide the experimental grounds upon which a structured time sense is tested out and from which it may be extended so as to temporally restructure experiences in everyday life.

The formal nature of divination and board-games lies not merely in the existence of formal rules, but in the saturation of these rules with fundamental structural themes (e.g. such basic oppositions as odd/even, male/female, life/death, high/low, white/black), which form the basis for a rich imagery and inform the dynamics of the session. . . . their articulation would seem to be related to man's most fundamental formalism, the one with the highest survival value: early forms of counting, arithmetic, representation and manipulation of numbers.

For van Binsbergen, the one difference between game playing and divination is that, in seeking knowledge, the client and diviner are confronting an unknown force greater than themselves. This is true for games, he wrote, only if the game is one of chance, using for example, dice, to generate the moves. However, his argument could be easily extended to games of strategy (like mancala) if the old Chinese view about go is inserted: the opponent is symbolic of unpredictable Nature, particularly of the Flood (due to its association with Yao as Flood-tamer). In a strategy game, one can never be sure of what the opponent is going to do.

van Binsbergen continues that both divination and gaming produce a narrative between two people (the two players or the client and the

diviner) that unfolds as the action proceeds. This story could concern the future of an individual, but it also could symbolize the handling of cattle, the handling of women, the hoarding of kings, and so on, as the pieces (usually seeds) move around the mancala board and accumulate or are taken off the board. It is after the game/session that the knowledge gained is returned to the real world in the form of strategies, changes in worldview, etc.

In conclusion, he suggests that there might have been a parallel and not a sequential development—divination did not necessarily engender the game of mancala, but both were concerned with the same things and probably developed side by side using the same implements. In the case of mancala, as mentioned, he proposes that they sprang from earlier ritual—the placing of offerings to the dead in multi-holed receptacles of various patterns. These offerings would have been products such as food and liquid that sprang from the earth, which the ancestors who lived there gave to the living.

The reason that divination and game playing developed from ritual was because they were part of a 'protean package' which included new political structures, roles and personal outlooks resulting from the shift in the modes of food production from late Paleolithic hunting/gathering to Neolithic agriculture and animal husbandry. This caused the greatest changes in the concepts of Time and Space in the history of humankind

Early agricultural space, van Binsbergen suggests, was separated from the wildness of nature by not only fences, but by geometry (which later developed into geomancy). In the process of developing the agricultural potential, (ideally square) fields would be tilled in straight lines or would be molded into a grid system of dykes or irrigation ditches that could hold, charge or discharge water. This geometry is what is incorporated into the symbolism of early games and divination, he contended, along with the symbolism of the action of the game, such as the aforementioned Neolithic-styled hoarding and/or distribution principles in mancala. In fact, some early clay mancala boards resembled narrow go boards, with square, raised intersections forming a grid, within whose spaces the mancala playing or divining pieces would be placed.

It is interesting to contrast the facts that mancala play takes place inside the square depressions, while go takes place on the intersections. The Chinese have, since the times of the oracle bones, held the basic philosophical view that the flow of *qi* acts much like water and can be controlled. If the stones in go were placed inside the squares, it would not

make sense with the Chinese idea of *qi* running along protrusions in the landscape, such as along the square dyke ridges or along the courses of water, as outlined in the main body of my Origins essay and in Appendix I.

However, in mancala, the placing of seeds in the depressions would fit into the African/Mideast conceptions that the ancestors provided food for the living that would grow up from the centers of their fields, and there is also an analogy to animal corrals.

The word 'recreation' not being an idle word, it is easy to extend van Binsbergen's thesis to a game like go, whose central principle not only recreates the Paleolithic hunting styles with its capture-by-surrounding principle, but then naturally evolves into the new Neolithic-style acquisition of arable land as a marker of wealth, with the idea of 'territories' on the board naturally forming out of the process of making internal eyes and controlling 'inner' space.

As for the origins of the game, especially, as mentioned in the preliminary remarks, because there is no evidence that it derived from any form of Chinese divination, it is likely that the game would have accidentally been 'discovered' as an idle pastime—or, more likely, as a primitive form of gambling—by trying to surround and capture stones, seeds or shells with differently colored stones on a grid. This would naturally develop into one-eyed go, which would quickly develop into the two-eyed form, which then would morph into a game of acquiring territory.

An example of how this process might have worked is the way I taught go in my two books from Tuttle Publishing: *Go Basics and Go! More Than a Game*. The first uses only 9x9 professional tournament games, the most likely size of the original boards. The second uses 9x9, 13x13 and finally, 19x19 boards, which also probably follows the historical process. A third of it is devoted to a summary of my articles written up to 2003 along with a complete history of the development of the game and its incredible involvement with Eastern and Western sciences, arts, philosophies, etc.

As for the boards, the first games could have been played on shards of 3-5,000 year-old Yangshuo 'net' pottery (see Appendix III for an illustration), or perhaps just drawn on the ground. This grid form would also recall the former economic-generating patterns of nets and traps, a symbol which appears abundantly not only in China but throughout the world. And, as I developed in the main Origins article, there is also the

symbolism in go playing of water/*qi* being controlled in the fields by a series of dams, as is done in rice paddies.

Indeed, as van Binsbergen points out, according to the Sinologist Wang Hongyan, the prototype of the Chinese sign for 'field' may have originally represented the footprints of game. How the two activities were even further symbolically related was commented on, too.

. . . let us not close our eyes for the temporal and spatial dimension of hunting as an earlier form of food production, and once perhaps just as much of a revolution as compared to simple food gathering, as the Neolithic revolution was as compared to hunting. Especially when using traps, hunting also involves the transformation of the natural environment in the form of bounded space (the trap as against its surroundings) and articulated time (the rhythm of inspecting, emptying and re-charging the traps; and especially the cultivation of the right infinitesimal moment, for the trap to spring or for the hunter to make the kill . . . [or for the agriculturist to make the harvest]).

The presence of hunting imagery in board-games and divination systems . . . is probably not merely a playful, nostalgic reminder of obsolete, once dominant, forms of food production. [Several authors have argued that] . . . abstraction was already taking place in the Upper Paleolithic. In other words, the Neolithic is not a total break, a total innovation, and certain features of hunting . . . must have helped to prepare Man for board-games and divination, for formal systems in general, perhaps for religion in the stricter sense of the word, and possibly even, to some extent, for agriculture and animal husbandry. . . .

The revolutionary changes in the use of Space then necessitated a change in the concept of Time. It was altered from the built-in seasonality of the previous Paleolithic hunting period to a more rigorous need for knowing the critical moments of when to plant, cultivate and be rewarded with a harvest. This generated a need for thinking about and trying to divine the 'right moment' for taking action. (In early China, this concept, explored by Michael Lowe, was called *kan yu*). Since board games, particularly strategic board games, demanded the same mental efforts, both activities would have been useful in preparing people's minds for the new kind of thinking that was needed in the new environment.

Noting that the representation of the character for 'field' is also the basis for 'male' in both the Mideast and in China (where it is its radical), van Binsbergen adds to his analysis:

Finally, the redefinition of space and time could only mean the redefinition (or the creation, in the first place?) of the notion of person, situated in new time and new space, and represented (both in board-games and in the divinatory apparatus) by external tangible, often anthropomorphic material objects moving, in his or her stead, through time and space—usually interacting with other persons so represented. Board-games and divination externalise, and offer new models of a redefined relationship between man and his physical environment, as well as between man and his social environment—with major roles of confrontation and competition being externalised in the apparatus and redefined as opponents in a schematised exchange dominated by explicit rules (board-games), or as likely partners, enemies and witches (divination).

Next, as kings and their courts and diviners replaced the traditional local authority based on status and cosmology, the need to control their new water-based agricultural systems created needs for men who could construct the formal and abstract proto-sciences of calendars, astronomy, geometry, arithmetic, and writing, and a top-down centralized, political organization that could administer and protect their subjects from floods, wild beasts and other dangers.

Once order was established, playing board games and having the time to play them well was, in the case of mancala (and sometimes still is), an important signifier of royalty, along with such other objects as musical instruments. (One recalls the importance of the possession of bronze and musical instruments in ancient China.) In some areas of Africa, there are inaugural rituals that take place involving the king's mancala game set or the creation of an auspicious new one.

van Binsbergen again cautions about the extreme speculative nature of his proposals and adds:

Granted this, we should not fall into the trap . . . of assuming that between the structure of a production form, and the cultural forms associated with such a production form, a clear-cut one-to-one relationship should exist. Games emerging under conditions of Neolithic

production may borrow—not only their underlying, tacit assumptions about space, time and the person but also—their symbolism and imagery from agriculture and animal husbandry. But it is equally likely that, while necessarily set within an implicit framework defined by these underlying assumptions, their explicit iconography is not excessively or even mainly taken from topical Neolithic referents but rather from other, earlier forms of production. The latter were once dominant and have subsequently been relegated to the periphery of the overall production system, where they then yield additional delicacies instead of staples, allowing producers to engage in exciting pastimes and specialisms (such as hunting and fishing) instead of day-to-day routines shared by everyone (such as tilling and herding). After all, we are dealing here with games, which are about fun and escape, not with manuals about how to be a good farmer or herdsman. Free variation, departure from everyday forms, norms and routines, and a measure of unpredictability, are the hall mark of recreation as indeed they are of art and religion.

He continues:

. . . many board-games can be construed to have, among others, an astronomical or astrological reference. The grid, whose iconographic connotations with hunting and agriculture we have explored, and which is the basic pattern for the kind of structuration of space effected by the layout of the board-game, appears in Late Babylonian magic as the cuneiform representation of the constellations . . .

Taking on these astronomical elements, board-games certainly reflect a Neolithic concern with time reckoning and determining the correct time for planting, but the imagery is no longer agricultural. . . . A conceptual link can be surmised between the field and the stars: for the field is not exclusively a useful patch of soil, it also stands out as the most conspicuous way in which man imposes his imprint on nature and thus creates order, culture, out of chaos . . .

It is possible to add several more thoughts about the application of the Chinese context to van Binsbergen's theses.

Since playing a strategy game as opposed to a game of chance requires a constant flexibility of judgment in weighing present advantage against a future benefit, one conceivable interpretation of the Yao myth by

a Chinese audience would have been that a virtuous king was teaching go in order to improve his son's ability to deal strategically with hostile forces, such as other sons by other wives, or the commoner Shun.

Since confrontations on strategic game boards mean there will be winners and losers—and 'yes' and 'no' answers on the diviner's board will be tested for their truth or falseness—the idea of gambling about the outcomes of predicting the future should probably also be included in the protean package that Yao was recorded as having brought down from the Heavens to China. In this way, another link between board game playing and divination—and their possible parallel development—can be demonstrated.

As I wrote in my essay:

[The] historical association of gambling and go leads to a further analysis of the game's presence in the Yao myth. In traditional societies, betting on games is a very 'sacred' activity—one which takes the participants in their passion close to a state of divine transcendence. In China, for example, the gods would bet their immortality playing at liu bo; in India the very universe is fueled by a never-ending strip game of parcheesi played between Shiva and Shakti.

Seen in this vein, the Yao myth can be considered as a gambling myth similar to those told by the North American Indians (which may have even originated in Asia). Like Yao, some of the Indians' gods came down to earth to gamble and created chaos [by winning the wives, children and finally the freedom of the men], a situation which was only remedied by extreme measures [of both men and other gods]. (p. 17)

. . . [In addition,] anthropologists have noted that, like playing fields, game boards began as altars to the sacred. Within the silent confines of these temple-like precincts consisting of marked-off spaces, nothing seemed fortuitous and everything was significant. It was there [where duality is inherent and reflects the opposites in nature] that magicians, priests, and gamesters could commence their work.

Thus, if the idea that go was a sacred activity because of, and not in spite of, its association with gambling, then its presence in the Yao myth could, in a single cultural artifact, be seen as an artful way of combining and symbolizing not only the highest rational qualities of humankind, but also those of its most irrational. (pp. 26-7)

Looking at the Yao myth from a structural anthropological point of view, as outlined more fully in my essay, adds even more to the depth and strange beauty of the Yao story. Despite the many variations (in which no studies have been made of the differing role of the elements of go), there is general agreement that the original form of the Yao myth was a story of the 'Taming of the Waters,' or 'Control of the Floods.' Dan Zhu—who is described in the same terms as the raging Yellow River—represents Water, Yao—whose name means 'mountain' also represents the Sky, while Shun symbolizes the earth.

In the traditional Chinese scheme of things, this was the 'First Great Division' between Earth and Water, because other parts of the Yao myth show how he controlled the floods for the first time—not by the brute force of dams, which burst, but by siphoning off the water with a series of ditches, much like the pattern of rice paddies and go boards.

Thus, the way van Binsbergen looked at mancala adds to this scenario an image of a male sky god-become-king coming down from the heavens to protect and fertilize the Great Mother Earth, abode of the ancestors, with his calendars, divination tools and implements for developing agriculture and the keeping of animals. He also has his Badge of Kingship and a sign of Her approval tucked under his arm—a square, earth-shaped go board with bags of stones (or seeds or shells) to try to teach his first son how to think in conscious terms and survive in this brave, new world.

As Yao took his first piece from the 'world pool' in his bowl and placed it on the board, giving it 'life' as it absorbed the *qi* running along the lines, would he have seen this as a reenactment of his act of 'coming down' onto Mother Earth? And when he made his first group with two eyes, was he showing his son how this act corresponded to the ancient Chinese idea that to be a complete personality, humans needed two souls? Was his go board also a 'textbook' for success in the new economy—the more land one accumulated in the new agricultural milieu, the better off one would be?

As for Dan Zhu, a beginner, when he began putting his stones down, would he be at first thrilled to be playing a 'surrounding game' (cf. the 'modern' term *wei qi*) that was re-creating the excitement of the hunting, trapping and warfare that came from the time of his mother and ancestors? Would he, however, have been able to see how that act of capturing would lead to even greater riches, not only because the

principles of surrounding would lead to the idea of making internal territory, but because he would be learning clever strategies, (later to become incorporated into the wisdom of the Dark School of Daoism) to acquire even more?

van Binsbergen, following many other Marxist thinkers, argues that playing board games also prepared humans symbolically, and in a more gentle fashion, with the idea that, in the new order, they had to accept the fact that there were going to be those on top and those on the bottom of the social fabric. Instead of the old Paleolithic village where everyone was equal and related, and decisions were made in unison or by local authorities, the idea of kingship went hand in hand with the idea of oppression. Were the 'Dan Zhu-friendly' versions of the Yao myth trying to say that it was these realizations that ultimately drove him to rebel, flee, link up with his more 'primitive' tribal allies and then try to destroy the system?