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Gizzard Stones, Wari in the New World, and Slave Ships:
Some Research Questions

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Gizzard Stones

An article by Charles Goode in the March 2009 issue of this newsletter addressed the interpretation of a category of artifact that appears in various contexts in African descendant sites (sometimes including both African American and European American components) in the Eastern and Midwestern United States. Goode describes these objects as small "smoothly worn ceramic, stone, and glass items," whose shape can vary considerably although they are "typically triangular." These artifacts have often been interpreted as "gaming pieces" by investigators who associate these items with "wari," a game found widely throughout Africa. Other investigators interpret them as "gizzard stones," small objects worn smooth by the grinding actions in the gizzards of birds such as chickens, turkeys, and guinea fowl. Goode rejects the former interpretation and makes a lengthy case for the latter (Goode 2009). [1]

I agree with Goode that it is unlikely that these so-called "gizzard stones" were associated with wari for two major reasons: 1) all over the world, including West Africa, wari pieces are spheroid or rounded, not of the shape reported for gizzard stones; 2) there is extremely limited, indeed tenuous, evidence for the presence of wari among Africans and their descendants in the United States. [2]

Wari

Wari, sometimes referred to as mancala (although the latter is a general term for a class of board games which include wary), is an ancient game of skill that was (and is) widely distributed throughout Africa and other world areas and has many regional or cultural variants (there are many more names for the game in local languages). Wari can be played in holes dug or scooped out the earth or, more generally, in cups/holes carved out of a generally rectangular block of wood (although other materials are occasionally used) (see Figure 1). In West Africa and many other world regions, the cups or holes are arranged in two rows, but all variants of the

game rely on counters or pieces which are moved rapidly from hole to hole in the process of play. These counters include any number of more or less spherical or rounded objects, such as beans, beads, seeds, pebbles or small stones, cowry shells, and marbles. [3] As far as I can tell, the literature provides no evidence that smoothly worn stone or pottery sherds (the shapes of gizzard stones) are/were used in any African culture or in areas of the New World where the game has been reported (Culin 1896; Herskovits 1929, 1932; Cruickshank 1929; Collier 1935; Simmons 1958; Townshend 1979; Russ 1984: 14-18; Cheska 1987: 44-46; de Voogt 1997; de Voogt 2001; Parlett 1999: 207-209). [4]
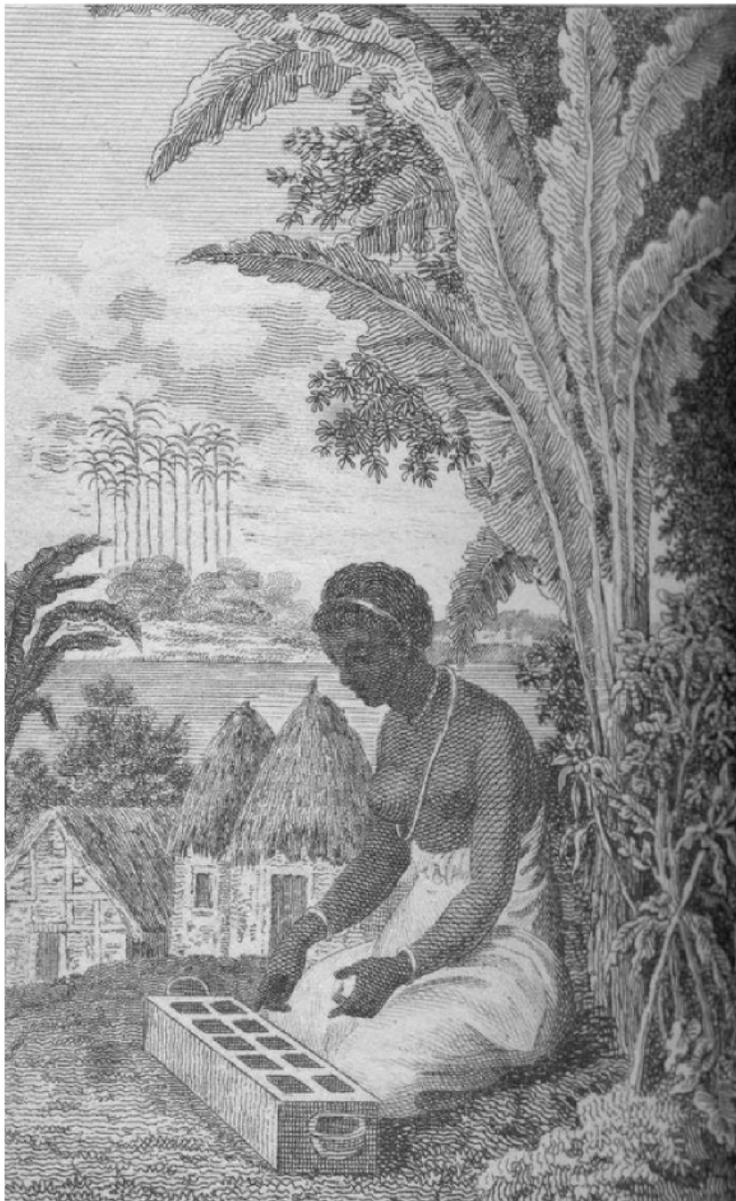

Figure 1. Woman Playing Wari, West Africa, 1780s.

Source: Sylvain-Meinrad-Xavier de Golbéry, Travels in Africa, . . . 1785, 1786, and 1787 . . . translated from the French . . . (London, 1802), Vol. 2, facing p. 423. (Courtesy, Library Company of Philadelphia).

The author describes this scene as: "A young Negress, studying the game of ouri [sic] . . . . The young Foulha, Manding, and Jolof Negresses are passionately fond of a game, which they call ouri; it is a complex game, which they study attentively, and pride themselves on playing with propriety." The author finds the game "more complex than that of draughts" (pp. 422-424).

Regardless of the specific counters used in any particular area, another major "characteristic of mankala games," Townshend (1979: 794) has observed, "is that all of the pieces . . . used in any one game are identical." If so, a mixture of different associated objects in a site would not suggest a mancala-type game. In addition, because wari usually involves a rapid picking up or scooping of the counters from the earthen holes or wooden cups, the flat, smoothly worn objects recovered archaeologically and identified as "gaming pieces" would have impeded the rapid movements involved in picking up the pieces. As archaeologist Ken Kelly (pers. comm. 5 Feb. 2009) has pointed out, "having worked sherds as the game pieces would be counterproductive, as the game [wari] is based on rapid picking up and counting out of markers, something that the disc shaped game pieces would not facilitate."

Also arguing against the interpretation of "gizzard stones" as wari-playing counters is the extremely limited, if not problematical, documentary evidence for the game's presence among enslaved peoples and their descendants in the United States. In his classic 1932 article on wari, Melville Herskovits briefly cites a 1919 German anthropological publication that the game was "played in New Orleans and other parts of Louisiana" (Herskovits 1932: 31; citing this same source, Goode refers to the author as an Austrian ethnographer who "saw the game numerous times in Mississippi" and possibly New Orleans [2009: 10-11]). This is the only reference to wari in the United States of which I am aware. Townshend's more recent and rather comprehensive literature review emphasizes the wide geographical distribution of the game, including the Caribbean, sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and Asia, but any reference to the United States is singularly absent (Townshend 1979; cf. de Voogt 2001). Although I cannot claim an exhaustive review of the mountains of primary and secondary published literature on African American life during and after slavery in the United States, a survey of a number of standard published and on-line sources has yielded no references to wari or board games in African American culture.[5] Even Herskovits (1958: 155) in his classic *Myth of the Negro Past,* that very consciously addressed the issue of Africanisms in American culture, only refers to the game in the context of several Caribbean areas.

In an undated and unpublished report cited by Goode (2009: 11, 14), one M. Parsons explains this absence of references to wari by speculating that the game was concealed because "American slave-owners discouraged slaves from maintaining African traditions." Parsons may have been following Larry Russ's (1984: 14) conjecture that the game "is

conspicuously absent from the United States . . . probably because the slave owners in America . . . sought to remove all traces of African culture -- language, religion, and customs -- by strictly forbidding their practice by the arriving slaves." Russ provides no evidence for this assertion and his explanation is also uncritically accepted by the *Oxford History of Board Games* (Parlett 1999: 208). The present paper is not the place to discuss this complex issue and the practices of American slave owners, but suffice it to say that such simplistic "explanations" suggest to me an extraordinarily naïve and superficial understanding of American slavery and of the development of African American culture.

Whatever the case, the apparent absence of references to wari in the U.S. is even the more puzzling since several versions of the game have been reported from various Caribbean islands and Caribbean-related cultures in the Guianas of northern South America.

In his 1932 article on wari, Herskovits described the game as he witnessed it in two brief field trips in the late 1920s among Maroon groups and coastal peoples in Dutch Guiana (now, Suriname; Herskovits 1932; also ibid. 1929). During this same period, he reported on the game, and its local variations, in several Caribbean territories: Antigua, Barbados, Dominica, Grenada, St. Kitts (St. Christopher), and St. Lucia. Although he did not observe wari in Trinidad he was "satisfied" that it was present, and in his *Myth of the Negro Past,* Herskovits (1958: 155) confirmed the game's presence in Trinidad and also suggested it was played in St. Vincent. [6] Herskovits had not witnessed the game in British Guiana (now, Guyana), but J. Graham Cruickshank (1929), who was intimately acquainted with the colony, published an account of the game as it was played "by native Africans yet alive in British Guiana" as well as some of their descendants. In the late 19th century, wari was reported in San Domingo (the Dominican Republic), Martinique, Barbados, and the island of St. Lucia, then a British colony (Culin 1896). In the early 1930s, Collier independently observed the game in Barbados, British Guiana, and St. Kitts (Collier 1935), and in more recent times de Voogt witnessed it in Antigua and Barbados and reported it for the Bahamas (de Voogt 1997: 18, 25-26; ibid. 2001). In sum, there is no doubt that the game was present in the Caribbean, particularly the eastern Caribbean and in various British colonies, by the late 19th or early 20th century. In no case, however, can it be shown when the game was first introduced or played in each territory. Jamaica is singularly missing from the list of British Caribbean territories whose cultures bear a strong African legacy,

and the absence of wari on that island is just as puzzling as the very limited and tenuous evidence for its existence in the United States during and after the period of slavery.[7]

As far as I am aware there have been no intensive historical or ethnographic studies addressing the complex issue of how wari became established in the specific New World areas where it has been reported, and whether it was independently introduced during or after slavery and/or whether it diffused from one area to another during or after slavery. The commonly accepted and very broad explanation for its presence in the New World is that it arrived with captive Africans during the course of the Atlantic slave trade. Herskovits (1932: 35, 37), in fact, was convinced that the version played in various Caribbean areas "with slight variations" ultimately derived from one form of the game found among the Ashanti of the Gold Coast. It remains to be established whether detailed historical research among enslaved peoples in the Caribbean during the era of the slave trade would sustain the conclusion of Herskovits and other writers who follow him. [8]

Yet, without discarding the likelihood that captive Africans introduced wari during the slave trade, it is also possible that the game was introduced after 1807, when Britain abolished the slave trade. Variations on the game in the Caribbean region suggest that wari could have been introduced separately at various times by different peoples during the era of the slave trade as well as after the abolition of the slave trade; moreover, the game also could have been diffused from one location to another during the post-slave trade era.

After Britain abolished the slave trade, ships of the British Navy cruised Atlantic and Caribbean waters for what Britain defined as illegal slaving ships. For about 60 years, the Royal Navy captured about 500 ships and rescued more than 100, 000 Africans. More than half of these "liberated Africans," as they were called, were taken to Sierra Leone while more than 40,000 were deposited in various territories of the British West Indies, primarily British Guiana, followed by Jamaica, Trinidad, and the Bahamas (see Adderley 2006: 2-3, 8). Between 1808 and 1842, economic historian David Eltis and his collaborators estimate that 28, 427 West and West Central Africans were landed in the British Caribbean, including British Guiana, and many others were taken to other areas of the Caribbean (David Eltis et al. 2009). In the case of British Guiana, as an example, Cruikshank (1929) reported that wari was introduced to that colony by "liberated Africans" of a variety of ethnic backgrounds, who had been taken by British ships

from slaving vessels bound for Cuba or Brazil, and "with their consent, were brought to British Guiana (as to some of the other British colonies in the West Indies), under a term of indenture."

Slave Ships

Although captive Africans could transport virtually nothing of their material culture on the slave ships, occasionally the ships distributed material goods during the Middle Passage. These distributions included, for example, European-manufactured clay pipes, tobacco, glass beads, and musical instruments. In addition, documentary evidence from the British slave trade indicates that captives were not only allowed to play African games on board the ships, but also that gaming boards were occasionally distributed (Handler 2009). Of course, enslaved Africans did not require the material accoutrements of board games in order to recreate these games in the New World. For purposes of this article, however, I draw attention to the possibility that wari boards or other gaming materials occasionally made their way across the Atlantic on the slave ships themselves, and that they may have been deposited in New World areas by either captive Africans or their European captors -- the latter are known to have occasionally acquired African manufactured objects as souvenirs.

In his well-known history of the British West Indies, Bryan Edwards (1793; 2: 120), the Jamaican planter and slave owner who derived his information from slave traders, reported on the Middle Passage in somewhat idyllic terms, as follows: "In the intervals between their meals they are encouraged to divert themselves with music and dancing; for which purpose such rude and uncouth instruments as are used in Africa, are collected before their departure [from Africa]; and they are also permitted to amuse themselves with games of chance, for which they are likewise furnished with implements of African invention." Edwards neither describes these games nor their associated "implements," but in referring to "implements of African invention," he is clearly pointing to material objects, which might have included wari boards. "Games of chance" played by Africans after meals are also very briefly mentioned, without any details, by British slave traders in several testimonies before British Parliamentary committees investigating the slave trade in the late 1780s and early 1790s (Matthews, in Lambert 1975a: 19; Penny and |Norris in Lambert 1975b: 117, 118-119). These "games of chance" are not described, but a clue to their identity is found in the very brief comments of James Fraser, who had captained slaving vessels for about 20 years in the 1770s and 1780s. "They have frequent amusements," he

reported, "peculiar to their own country such as some little games with stones or shells" (Fraser, in Lambert 1975c: 28). Fraser could have been referring to wari, but it bears emphasizing that in West Africa a number of traditional games utilized spheroid counters or tokens of one kind or another, including, but not exclusively, board games (e.g., Simmons 1958; Cheska 1987: passim). In any case, although the sources agree that Europeans brought the necessary materials, e.g., the boards for play, onto the slave ships, the sources are silent on whether Africans could on occasion disembark with them.

In all, the history of wari and related African board games in the New World and their probable multiple introductions and diffusion through various areas, has yet to be written. This history will require much more detailed ethnographic and ethnohistorical research than has been devoted to the game thus far in studies of "Africanisms" in the New World.

Notes

1. Flat, disk-shaped or rounded, intentionally modified ceramic sherds have been recovered archaeologically in several areas of the Caribbean, e.g., Jamaica, Montserrat, Guadeloupe, Barbados. Although some of these were probably used as counters in various games, investigators do not associate them with wari (Matthew Reeves, Jean Howson, Ken Kelly, Frederick Smith, pers. comms. Feb., June 2009; cf. Armstrong (1990:137)).

2. Such "gizzard stones" could have alternatively played some role in the spiritual life of African Americans (for citations, see Goode 2009: 17-19).

3. Detailed descriptions of the rules of wari are found in many sources; see, for example, Herskovits 1932; Muller 1930; Collier 1935; Cheska 1987:44-46; Russ 1984:15-18; de Voogt 1997: 21-27.

4. Cruickshank's 1929 report on wari in British Guiana is the one New World exception I could find. Although various types of seeds were the most common pieces, he reports in passing that years earlier he had observed "black children . . . playing wari out in the yard, holes being made in the ground, and little stones, or bits of burnt earth or *broken ware,* used" (Cruickshank 1929; my italics).

5. E.g., Berlin 1998; Blassingame 1977,1979; Frazier 1957; Genovese 1974; Georgia Writers' Project 1986; Guttman 1976; Herskovits 1958; Joyner 1984; Morgan 1998; Phillips 1929; Puckett 1975; Stampp 1956; Szwed and Abrahams 1978; Wood 1974; cf. Documenting the American South: North American Slave Narratives (http://docsouth.unc.edu).

6. A West Indian friend of mine recalls he saw the game being played in St. Vincent (where it was called "wari-wari"), roughly around 1949-1952, when he lived on the island (Ernest Wiltshire, pers. comm.). Herskovits did not visit Guadeloupe and Martinique and his identification of wari with those islands is problematical as it is for Haiti (Herskovits 1932: 31 n.2). In more recent times Kenneth Bilby (pers. comm.) has observed wari among the Aluku Maroons of French Guiana.

7. A survey of published secondary and primary sources on Jamaica, which for the sake of brevity I do not cite, as well as correspondence with scholars who are very well acquainted with the island, suggest the game was not played in Jamaica either during or after the slave period; thanks to Kenneth Bilby, Jean Besson, Barry Higman, and Jeanette Gayle (pers. comms.).

8. For example, in Barbados, the Caribbean society with which I am the most familiar, there is ample documentary evidence that enslaved people played games of one kind or another. The sources clearly indicate these games were of African derivation, but they are never identified or described. Wari may have been one of these games, as some modern Barbadian writers have suggested, but there is no explicit historical evidence identifying wari with slave life in Barbados.

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