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Maldivian card games: rules, language and history

The Republic of the Maldivian Islands is located South West of the Indian Subcontinent and influenced both culturally, linguistically and genetically by its northeasterly neighbours (Auboyer 1955, Bell 1940, Maloney 1978, Vitharana 1997). From 1887 until 1965, the Maldives were a protectorate of the United Kingdom with a permanent airbase on Addhoo atoll, the southernmost island of the archipelago, which created a late nineteenth and early twentieth century influence on the island population. This influence is limited since the British and the later tourist population was restricted to a few islands.

The games and sports of the Maldivian Islands have Asian rather than African or European influences (Maloney 1978, de Voogt 2000) and card games appear to be no exception. The playing cards in use are common in the UK, with English lettering KQJA and French suits, and a number of terms used in the game also point to a European, more specifically a British, influence. There is one card game developed locally, known as Akuru Thaasbe, that is based on word games such as Scrabble, but is otherwise Maldivian using the local Thaana script and the official Dhivehi language of the Maldives.

A brief outline of the different card games including a limited description of Akuru Thaasbe is followed by a comparison to existing card games in the literature and a discussion of the local terminology used in play.

Background and card game descriptions

The card game rules were collected from Ali Misbah, a taxi driver, and some of his friends during a four week expedition to the Maldivian Islands in January 2003, in which all types of games were recorded together with other religious, natural and cultural aspects of the islands described by other members of the expedition. The game Akuru Thaasbe was purchased and its history was recorded after an interview with its inventor. It is noted that local or individual variations of card games were not recorded and that neither the descriptions nor the total number of card games are thought to be complete. Rather they are a first exploratory but representative description of Maldivian card games played in the years before 2003.

The transcription of Dhivehi into Roman letters has had a number of variations. The spelling used here was provided by the informant and has not been altered.

Digu

one deck, 52 cards, no jokers

4 players playing in 2 pairs or individually

The cards are valued as follows:

A	15
K	10
Q	10
J	10
10	10
9	9

etc.

Each player is dealt 10 cards but the fourth person receives 11. There remain 11 in a closed stock. The player with 11 cards discards one card face up. The next player may take the open faced card or one from the stock. The purpose of the game is to create combinations in hand, either a sequence of cards of the same suit or a set with the same value. A player may make sequences or sets of three cards but may have a maximum of one consisting of four cards in hand unless the cards form one long sequence of cards.

When a card is discarded and all cards in hand form sequences and sets, the player is out. That player receives 100 points. The cards in the hand of other players are minus points if they do not make a series of three. The player may compose the most favorable series of three. Series of four cannot be formed for that purpose.

A sequence of Ace, 2, 3 to 10 of the same suit is 1000 points

A sequence of Ace, King, Queen etc. is also 1000 point.

A sequence of 2 to Jack is out but is without bonus.

If played in pairs, the cards may be combined with the ones of the partner in the final scoring.

Thaas

one deck, 52 cards, no jokers

4 players playing in 2 pairs

Each player is dealt five cards, then trump is called by the first player being dealt by the dealer after which the remainder of the cards are dealt. The game is won by the first who makes seven tricks, which is called 'koatey', a word they associate with English 'coat'. Much signaling by gestures or facial expressions is common during this game.

Dihaeh

one deck, 52 cards, no jokers

4 players playing in 2 pairs

Each player is dealt 13 cards, the last card given is trump (i.e. the card dealt by the dealer to him/herself). Following suit is mandatory, also if this suit is

a trump card, and playing a trump is necessary when you cannot follow suit. You win if you capture 3 tens or 7 tricks. If players capture all 4 tens, it is called 'baga' and if all cards are taken it is called 'hukunbunye'.

Joker

one deck, 52 cards plus one joker

4 or 5 players

All cards are dealt (there are no clear rules when the 52 cards cannot be distributed evenly). With each turn a player discards two cards (except the joker) and draws one from his neighbour. The last to have the joker in hand is the joker.

Lucky Seven

one deck, 52 cards, no jokers

2 or more players, the number of cards dealt is not fixed but there is a closed stock (much individual variation is expected)

The players alternately play a card and need to follow suit or play a card with the same number. If the player plays a seven the opponent needs to draw 4 cards from the stock. When playing a jack the opponent draws 2. A card that is played with the same number changes the direction of play.

Juice

one deck, 52 cards, no jokers

3 or more players

All cards are dealt and kept concealed in the hands of each player. One card is drawn and placed exposed on the table.

On each turn, a player exposes one of the cards in his hand and places it face up on the table. If the card follows the number of the central card already on the table, then this card is put on top of the central card. Otherwise the card is placed face up in front of the player. The next player does the same but if the card follows the central card or the exposed card of any of the opponents, the card is placed on top of that exposed card. If a player omits to do so, this player is given a card from each of the other players as a punishment. The opponents call out 'juice' when finding out the mistake.

Cards are numbered continuously so after queen and king, the count continues with ace and two. Cards can be put on the central card, the opponent's exposed card or if this is not possible on one's own stack.

The first central card is placed in such a way that its number remains visible. The central card can be joined by a second central card if a card with the same number is being played. Also, a card can first be placed from one's own open stack to the central stack before drawing a new card.

Once the cards in hand are finished the player picks up the open stack and continues play until one of the players is out and thereby wins the game.

Dhashundhama

one deck, 52 cards, no jokers

mostly two players

court cards are separated into black cards and red cards and serve as money

Ace = 15 cards or less from the stock; only if there is nothing in stock you take them from your opponent; King gives 13, Queen 12 and Jack 11

The numerals are shuffled and split in two stacks. Each player keeps one stack concealed in hand. With each turn one card is taken from the bottom of the stack and placed face up on the table. The next player does the same and puts the next card on top. If the numbers match (e.g. 6 on a 6) then all cards are added to the stack of the player who played the second card. If you have no more cards to play, you buy cards with money. The bought cards are taken from the bottom of the stock or if there is no stock left, then they are taken from the top of the stack of the opponent. In the first case the money card is left on the bottom of the stock and in the second it is taken by the opponent. Whoever wins the next stock, also wins the money card. The player who owns all money cards is the winner.

Bondi

one deck, 52 cards, no jokers

2-7 players, 3 or more players is preferred

court cards count for 10, the A is usually 15, numerals have their number as value

All cards are divided evenly. The first player plays a card face up on the table, the others need to play the same suit. The trick is then put aside. If not all players can follow suit, the trick is interrupted and all cards are placed in the hand of the player who had the highest card.

The player who has no cards anymore wins the game. The other players continue. The remaining cards of the last player in the game are counted and written down. The number of rounds or points is agreed upon before the start of the game.

Ranga bondi

one deck, 52 cards, no jokers

2-7 players, 3 or more players is preferred

court cards count for 10, the A is usually 15, numerals have their number as value

Rules are those of Bondi but if you cannot follow suit you may give the loser as many cards as you like from another suit (e.g. a series of spades if diamonds were asked)

Neelan (auction) and **Chance** are also played but no full description was collected. Both were characterized as gambling games.

Akuru Thaasbe

This language game is based on Scrabble and was developed by Abdulla Sadiq. He had this idea in the 1970s and developed it in the 1980s while he introduced it on high schools where he was a teacher. A thousand games were printed in 2002 and it is now readily available in stationary stores. The game has nearly each possible syllable in the language printed on a playing card. The script consists of consonant signs with vocalization marks for which most combinations were put in the game (DeSilva 1969). A number of possible but highly unusual syllables were excluded. Although Thaana, the writing system used for the Dhivehi language, is not formally a syllabary, the use of syllable cards showed to be the most convenient.

The game is published without playing rules. It has 291 cards that apart from four red cards have a specific value attached. The value cards are distributed as follows:

Frequency	Value
36	2
65	5
21	6
26	7
52	8
39	10
48	15
4	red cards

Both the value on a syllable card and the number of cards with that syllable sign refer to the frequency of that syllable in the language. Most syllables have only one card but a few syllables have up to five cards in the game. An understanding of the distribution of cards requires extensive knowledge of the Thaana script and the Dhivehi language. Also, Akuru Thaasbe provides little historical clues for the history of card games. It suffices to state that the popularity of card games in the Maldives brought Sadiq to developing a game using cards.

Comparison of game rules

Apart from Akuru Thaasbe, the rules of Maldivian card games are known for other European card games or card games already popular in (South) Asia. At the same time, some rules point at a local variation.

Digu means 'Gin' and is a 10-card Rummy game. The bonus point and the restriction of three-card combinations for the losers deviate from what is known about British Rummy. Thaas is a local variation of Whist where the choice of trumps is based on the first five cards. This rule is not known for British games but is attested for other parts of Asia (McLeod, pers. comm.). Bondi resembles Rolling Stone (Parlett 2000:463) almost exactly.

Less clearly, Joker is similar to the British game Old Maid (Parlett 2000:482) but the Maldivian variation has not been attested. Lucky Seven is attested in many countries, related to Crazy Eights or Switch (Parlett 2000:446,448) but the local values of the cards differ widely. Juice has similarities to Muggins (Parlett 2000:444) but this game is not commonly found elsewhere.

But, Dihaeh has no immediate equivalent and although Dhashundhama has characteristics in common with Pishti (Parlett 2000:416) and perhaps other games from the Eastern Mediterranean, there appears no British equivalent.

In light of the above, the rules of Maldivian card games are likely to have been transmitted from Britain, directly or indirectly, but this has not been the only source of card game rules. The close contacts with Arab countries and the local adaptations have complicated the picture of the Maldives but also show that the Maldivians were active agents in the appropriation of card games.

Terminology

The local words used in card games are partly loanwords taken from English and Indian languages and have partly lost their possible original meaning. The loanwords are particularly prominent for the names of the games. Joker, Chance, Lucky Seven and Juice were never translated and Digu appears a local adaptation of the word Gin.

Some words are a translation, such as Akuru Thaasbe for letter cards, but most are meaningful words but not a translation of English equivalents. Jack is Gulaam, which means slave and Diamonds are known as handkerchiefs. Most of these names have cognates in Hindi (von Leyden 1982). A number of these words have lost their alternative meaning to the players, indicating that the words have become an independent part of card game terminology. The word for Clubs, Chilhiyaa, and the Ace, Manna, are the more convincing examples in this respect although at least one of these seems to have a Hindi cognate.

Finally, there are terms particular to one game only. They are English ('juice'), an adapted loanword ('koatey' means 'coat' but equivalent to Indian 'kôt' that is also used in other card games where it means taking the first seven or all tricks in the game; Depaulis, pers. comm.), and Dhivehi ('baga' or capturing 4 tens).

<i>Card game</i>	<i>Literal translation</i>
Akuru thaas	letter- cards
Bondi	cheating
Bondi	donkey; to make someone suffer (bondi dihu)
Dhashundhama	taking under
Digu	gin
Dihaeh	ten
Neelan	bid(ding)
Rangabondi	color cheating

Thaas	cards; cooking pot (?)
Chance	idem
Joker	idem
Juice	idem
Lucky seven	idem

<i>English/Hindi card name</i>	<i>Dhivehi language equivalent (known meaning)</i>
Ace	manna
King/Baisa	baisa (boasting)
Queen/Bibi	bibi (queen)
Jack/Ghulam	gulaam (slave)
Clubs/Chiriya	chilhiyaa
Diamonds	rumaa (handkerchief)
Hearts/Lâl	laalu
Spades/Kali padam	kaalaa (something eaten)

<i>Special terms (Hindi)</i>	<i>Dhivehi language [used in particular game]</i>
trumps (hukum)	hukun'
capturing seven tricks (kôt)	koatey (coat) [Thaas]
capturing 4 tens	baga [Dihaeh]
capturing all	hukunbunye [Dihaeh]
the one who lost	bondibui [Bondi; Rangabondi]

The linguistic comparison and analysis are incomplete and are based on the terms provided by von Leyden (1972). They show that both Indian and English terms have entered the language on Maldivian card games. The terminology can only be explained if loanwords from English and from Hindi are assumed, the first possibly entering the language via India. In both cases the words may have changed over time so that their linguistic background is not immediately apparent.

Apart from von Leyden's list of terms it is also possible to compare the terms used in the Maldives to those used elsewhere in the Indian Ocean. This will undoubtedly reveal many similarities that point to an Indian, British and perhaps partly Arabic transmission of card games into the region and, therefore, largely similar terminology across the region. Arabic, English and Indian language terminology is easily accepted in the Maldivian context due to Islam and the close connection between Dhivehi and South Asian languages. The English had a significant presence, too, so that even English words transmitted through India may not have lost their meaning in the Maldivian context. Unfortunately, these connections largely preclude a conclusion on the route of transmission of terms and game rules in Maldivian card games, but makes the indirect transmission of British card games through India nevertheless a reasonable explanation for the majority of its games.

Context and historical implications

It is noted that nearly all games described use 52 cards. Games with two decks or games with a partial deck are absent or rare. Trumps, tens, suits, jokers and court cards each appear with a special function in at least one of the games.

The games are meant for two but more often for more than two people. Although this may be generally true for card games, it suggests that cards have been introduced as a group game. There are no patience games known and although some games may be played by two people, most games prefer more than two for an optimal game. Pairs of players are necessary in some of the more popular variations. It is noted that board games such as Ohvalhu (a mancala variation), Thinamma (nine-men's-morris), Wagu Thinamma (a draughts variation) and Raazuvaa (a chess variation) are only possible with two players. The popular game of Carrom, a dexterity game related to billiards but popular in the same venues as card and board games, is played with two to four people and is also played in competition. Only the first three board games mentioned here are regularly played by women at home or in public during festivals. Card games and the other board games are mostly played year round in public places by men.

From the rules and the context in which Maldivian card games are played, it is reasonable to assume that they have a British origin but were first introduced via India or Sri Lanka. The diversity of card game rules suggests that the exposure to card game variations was not momentary but a prolonged period. In particular, the understanding of trump cards, playing in pairs, playing tricks and giving a special status to tens points at a European influence rather than a local development.

Local developments cannot be ruled out, although the variations of card games are largely familiar in the history of card games with the exception of Akuru Thaasbe. This latter game is an invented game that relates to word games and is one of few games in which syllables are the unit of play. This characteristic is facilitated by the Maldivian script. Where the use of cards for play is a clear European introduction, the game of Akuru Thaasbe exemplifies the versatility of local inventors and players in developing games that are unknown and unlikely in the European context.

The rules of Maldivian card games are not related to traditional Indian card games, also known as Ganjifa. Instead, the rules have a clear European background including many of the names of the games and some special terms. At the same time, part of the terminology is clearly Indian, more specifically Hindi, and cannot be explained as a local translation of an English term. Indian terminology may have entered the language through frequent contact with India and Sri Lanka. Merchants may have appropriated Indian terms, but such a process does not explain the division between English terms for the names of the games and Hindi terms for the suits. It is more likely that card games were

introduced with Indian terminology prior to the arrival of the British. The Indian games, whether already using European or Ganjifa rules, were subsequently displaced or amended. In either case, Maldivian card games add to the complex history and distribution of games in the Indian Ocean.

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