

Kalah

Kalah is very popular in the United States, where it is often just called Mancala. In Germany, it is known as Kalaha.

Kalah was invented by William Julius Champion Jr., a graduate of Yale University, in 1940. In 1905, he came across an article about a Mancala game, and it appears that he read many more ethnological works on African and Asian Mancala games in later years. W. J. Champion started to sell his game in 1944, patented it in 1952 (design) and 1955 (rules) and then founded in 1958 the Kalah Game Company in Holbrook, Massachusetts (USA). Kalah was produced by them well into the 1970s, and the name of the game was a registered trademark from 1970-2002. Champion promoted the game for educational purposes.

The game has no African origins despite many claims to the contrary, even by its inventor, because there is no such game in the whole of Africa. However, Kalah suspiciously resembles games played by the Malay people and could be described as single-lap Dakon (Dakon is a Javanese Mancala game). Kalah means in Timorese "to defeat". All modern Mancala variants, which were commercialized in western countries before 1960, are minor modifications of traditional games. Although they often claim to be ancient, it can be shown that they are, in fact, of rather recent origin. Kalah is for sure not a Sumerian invention, 7,000 years old, as stated by W. J. Champion.

Number of Players

Two people can play.

Equipment

Kalah is played on a board of two rows, each consisting of six round pits that have a large store at either end called Kalah. A player owns the six pits closest to him and the Kalah on his right side.

Preparation

Beginners may start with three seeds in each pit, but the game becomes more and more challenging by starting with 4, 5, or up to 6 seeds in each pit. Today, four seeds per pit has become the most common variant, but Champion recommended 6 seeds per pit.

Objective

The object of the game is to capture more seeds than one's opponent. Draws are possible.

The Play

Randomly determine the first player. The first player begins sowing.

Sowing

Players take turns moving the seeds. On a turn, a player chooses one of the six pits under their control. The player removes all seeds from that pit. The player distributes them one in each pit counter-clockwise from this pit in a process called sowing. Seeds are never distributed into the opponent's Kalah, though they are distributed into the player's own Kalah.

Knowing the number of seeds in each pit is, of course, important to game play. Players are not allowed to pick up seeds in a pit to count them. If the seeds in a pit are touched, they must be played.

Capturing

If the last seed is dropped into the player's Kalah, he must move again.

If the last seed is dropped into an opponent's pit or a non-empty pit of the player, the move ends without anything being captured and play passes to the opponent.

If the last seed is put into an empty pit owned by the player, he captures all contents of the opposite pit together with the capturing piece and puts them in his Kalah. If the opposite pit is empty, nothing is captured. Play then passes to the opponent.

Game End

The game ends when one player no longer has any seeds in any of his holes. The remaining pieces are captured by his adversary. The player who has captured most pieces is declared the winner.

Variations

Many house rules exist as there is no governing body which defines the official rules:

- The first player has a big advantage. Therefore, some play with the Pie Rule to make the game fair. After the first turn, the second player decides either to take a normal turn or switch sides. If the decision is to switch, the second player becomes the first player and the first player becomes the second player. The game then proceeds as normal.
- The “Empty Capture” variant permits capturing the last seed when landing in an empty hole on the player's own side even when the opposite hole of the adversary is empty.
- An alternate rule does not count the remaining seeds as part of the score at the end of the game.
- Cross-Kalah is a variant with one rule change: The contents of a hole with an odd number of stones are distributed clockwise, while those with an even number continue to be sown anti-clockwise. The first player has no longer a large advantage as in standard Kalah, and the endgames are more complicated.