

A Register of Record and Inference

A paper this short moves between watching, being told and reading, sometimes inside one sentence.

The Syrian games

WHAT CULIN WATCHED

Culin watched them played in Washington Street, New York, and had the rules explained by a lad from Damascus. He gives the board — two rows of seven holes — the count of ninety-eight shells or pebbles, the Arabic names for the holes and the pieces, and complete rules for both games.

WHAT HE WAS TOLD

That there are two principal ways of playing, “which depend upon the manner in which the pieces are distributed at the commencement of the game”. That is his informant’s classification, not his own — and it does not survive Culin’s own description. He then gives a second difference the classification says nothing about: in the rational game a player “may select any hole on their side of the board as a starting place”, which is the only choice anywhere in either game and is therefore the whole of the skill.

WHAT HE CONCLUDES

That the crazy game requires no skill and its outcome is a mathematical certainty fixed by the opening layout — which is Culin’s own judgement about a game he has just learned.

HOW TO READ IT

The rules are first-hand and are the most reliable thing in the paper. The verdict on the crazy game is an inference and is worth testing: it is true that the game is deterministic once the layout is set, and that is an unusually sharp observation for 1894. The classification, though, is worth reading against the rules underneath it — a classification by opening layout, sitting on top of a description in which the layouts differ and so does the freedom to choose where to start, is a good example of an informant’s own scheme being carried into print intact.

The literature

WHAT CULIN WATCHED

Nothing. This section is entirely reading.

WHAT HE WAS TOLD

Hyde’s account of 1694, a reference to “Mancal” in the narrative of the Portuguese embassy of Alvarez to Abyssinia between 1520 and 1527, Lane on Egypt, Andree, Schweinfurth on the Nubians.

WHAT HE CONCLUDES

That the distribution of the game marks the limits of Arab culture.

HOW TO READ IT

The citations are accurate and are the paper’s bibliography; the conclusion is the paper’s thesis. Culin states it as an observation about a map rather than as a route of transmission, which is the careful version and is why it has aged well.

The African games

WHAT CULIN WATCHED

Little at first hand. The Fan game of the Gaboon comes from a missionary’s account which Culin quotes at length in a footnote, and names: the Rev. A. C. Good.

WHAT HE WAS TOLD

The Vai game, described to Culin directly by Prince Momolu Massaquoi, son of a king of the Vai, then studying in the United States. That is a named informant speaking about his own people’s game, which is the best kind of source in the paper after Culin’s own eyes.

WHAT HE CONCLUDES

That the game travelled with Arab influence into Africa rather than out of it — an inference Culin attributes partly to Schweinfurth and does not insist on.

HOW TO READ IT

Note who is speaking in each paragraph. Culin names his informants, which was not universal practice, and the names are the reason a modern reader can weigh what is said.

Chuba, the American game

WHAT CULIN WATCHED

A commercial game published in the United States in 1891, with a printed rule sheet Culin reproduces in full.

WHAT HE WAS TOLD

The manufacturer’s claim that Chuba “is an adaptation from a rude game of eastern Africa”.

WHAT HE CONCLUDES

Nothing. Culin simply prints it, having just predicted that the game might one day reach American firesides and then discovered it already had.

HOW TO READ IT

The rules here are the manufacturer's words, not Culin's and not any African player's, and this edition keeps them marked as such. They describe a four-row game, which is a real African form and not an invention — but the wording is a Victorian toy company's.