

Sáhkku, The “Devil’s Game” / Alan Borvo

Until recently, the Sámit from Lapland – those we previously called “Lapps”⁽¹⁾ – used to play a board game that seems to be strangely connected with the family of the *táb* race games, particularly widespread over the whole Arab-Muslim area.⁽²⁾ Usually known under the name *sáhkku*⁽³⁾, this game has the reputation as the “Devil’s game” because it was banned by the Laestadianists, a rigorist Lutheran church with a strong influence upon the Sámi people.

As Peter Michaelsen has already pointed out,⁽⁴⁾ it is evident that the Sámi *sáhkku* and the Danish *daldos* (like its south-Norwegian counterpart called *daldosa*) have a strong relationship – a relationship still reinforced by their relative geographical proximity. However, the Sámi game shows two main special features which make it different from the other two: first, the fact that the opponents are called ‘men’ and ‘women’; second, the existence of a ‘king’ which may change owners during play, and, sometimes, the further addition of two ‘king’s sons’.

General principle of the game

Basically, the game consists of two armies, each with the same number of pieces, moving forwards to fight each other. The board is a long shaped wooden plank with only three rows breadthwise, each army occupying one of the two outside rows at the beginning of play (fig. 1). There are generally three dice.

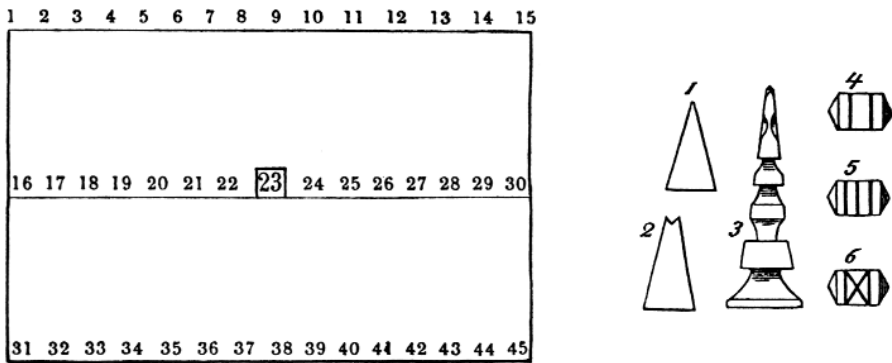


Fig. 1. *Sáhkku* from Norwegian Finnmark as described by Friis in 1871. There are 15 ‘men’ called *olbmak* (1), 15 ‘women’ called *galgok* (2), one king called *gonagas* (3) and three 4-sided dice (4, 5 and 6). In this game the cross sign on the dice (*sáhkku*) gives 5 points. The numbers on the board have been added for a better understanding of the circuit the pieces must follow. Usually the places are materialized by lines carved into the wood – a middle one lengthwise and from 8 to 15 parallel ones breadthwise.

The pieces move according to the values given by the dice, but none is allowed to start before it has been “activated” by the throw of one *sáhkku*, the side marked with a cross. Then they follow their own track: on Friis’s figure from point 1 to 16, 16 to 30,

30 to 45, 45 to 31, 31 to 16, 16 to 30 and 30 to 1 for the 1-15 based camp. The opponents do the same but in symmetrical order: point 45 to 30, 30 to 16, 16 to 1, etc. ⁽⁵⁾

Each player uses the value given by the dice for moving one, two or three pieces, but the move of each piece must correspond to the exact values of one, two or three dice. It is possible to put several pieces on the same point, but, on the next turns, he may not move them all together with the value of the same die. When one piece arrives at a place occupied by one or several enemies, this or these are killed and removed from the board. The winner is the player who has killed all his enemies.

Although the pieces must follow their track, the king may go in all four directions. Placed at the start in the middle of the central row (point 23), it belongs to the first player who reaches its place. But it may be captured by the opponent who puts one of his pieces on the point on which it stands. In that case, the king is not killed, but belongs to the player who has captured it. The player who owns the king may move it on his turn by using the throws given by the dice, in place of or together with one or two pieces. But the possession of the king does not allow any extra throw.

When an opponent's piece or king reaches the point just on the right of one's non-activated pieces, all of these are "frozen" until the opposite man or king goes away. But a non-activated piece may never be killed.

In some local variants, as already remarked, two extra 'king's sons' were used, the initial places of which were marked with crosses on various old boards, on both sides of the king's point in the central row (points 19 and 27). Unfortunately, we know nothing of their role.

Another interesting item of information which we got from Edmund Johansen (a Sea Sámi said to be the one who knows best the rules since he frequently played *sáhkku* when he was a child) is that the two players may decide not to play "against" but "together" – apparently a much more tricky affair. In that variant, used only by wise elders, the two armies had their pieces displayed at the beginning on the same side of the board. The target of the game was the same, but nobody remembers how it was played (Johansen 2000-2001).

A challenge for the ethnologist

The interest of such a game is manifold, for it raises questions whose answers may help to clarify certain points in our knowledge of the Sámit. Where does this game come from, and what outside influence does it show? Do its geographical dispersion and the distribution of its local variants bring anything new concerning the relationships between the various communities? Is what the Samit added of their own to the game related to their specific thoughts, social life organization and former religious beliefs?

Solving such questions is a real challenge. The sources are scarce and the game has already almost died out entirely, even if people like Edmund Johansen and his wife Eli strive to make it come to life again, organizing occasional tournaments in their small village of Kunes. In Nesseby, too, a coastal city of eastern Norwegian Finnmark on the north bank of the Varangerfjord, a few old men have made a copy of a 1906 set on exhibition at the nearby Varanger Samiske Museum, but they had to reconstruct the rules

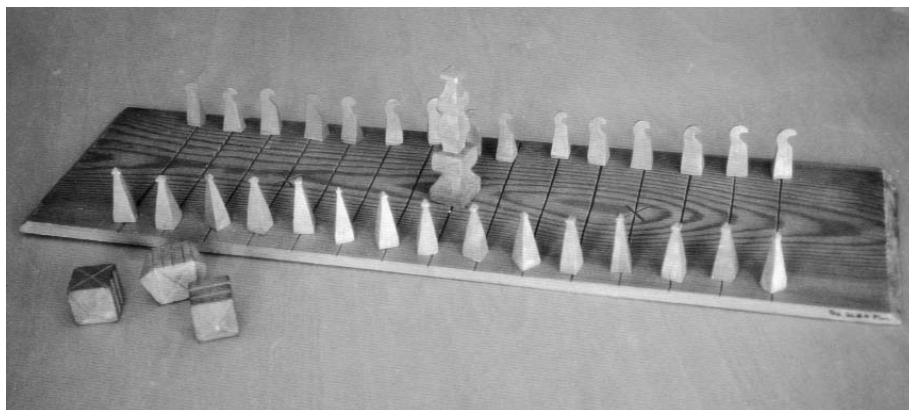


Fig. 2. Old *sáhkku* set exhibited at the Varanger Samiske Museum (eastern Norwegian Finnmark), on long-term loan from the Ethnografisk Museum in Oslo. This set seems to be the one which Isak Saba, the first Sámi to be a Member of the Norwegian Parliament, offered to the Sámi Collections of the Ethnografisk Museum in 1906. The game is played with 15 pieces in each camp, one king and three 4-sided dice with three sides marked II, III, X and one blank (= 0). The board shows 15 short lines but no long central one. Two crosses on lines 4 and 12 suggest that there might have been originally two more 'king's sons' as in the Petsamo and Utsjoki sets. April 2001 (Photo Angéline Vinciguerra, Paris).

from what they could remember from their own youth. Roger Persson, a friend from that museum, told me that he and his colleagues sometimes used at lunch-break another reproduction of the same 1906 set for playing a game, confessing that they were often obliged to make up some of the rules. ⁽⁶⁾

Besides such 'field interviews', one may draw on museum collections, literature and vocabulary concerning the game. But, as most of the information collected does not concern the same place, the same groups or the same aspects of the game, one cannot even compare them, so that a lot of blank spaces still remain.

The number of *sáhkku* sets now kept in museums is rather limited. ⁽⁷⁾ At the Norsk Folkemuseum in Oslo two series of pieces and two apparently complete sets are catalogued. However, one of these latter two is composed of pieces acquired in 1851 (NFSA.0063) and a board (NFSA.0139) purchased in 1873! The other complete set has been exhibited since 1987 at the Varanger Samiske Museum in Varangerbotn as a long-term loan (fig. 2). This game seems to be the one which was presented to the Sámi Collections of the Oslo Ethnografisk Museum in 1906 by Isak Saba from Nesseby, the first Sámi to be a Member of the Norwegian Parliament. ⁽⁸⁾

The Tromsø Museum keeps one Russian Skolt Sámi set from Boris Gleb acquired in 1951 (L.500) (fig. 3) and a series of 30 pieces for "*sakkospill*" of unknown origin (L.1171).

At the National Museum of Finland, in Helsinki, we find some more material:

- A wooden box containing the pieces of a *pirccu* game, said to have been collected in Inari or Kitilä (SU 1826:6). This set more accurately seems to be the one made by

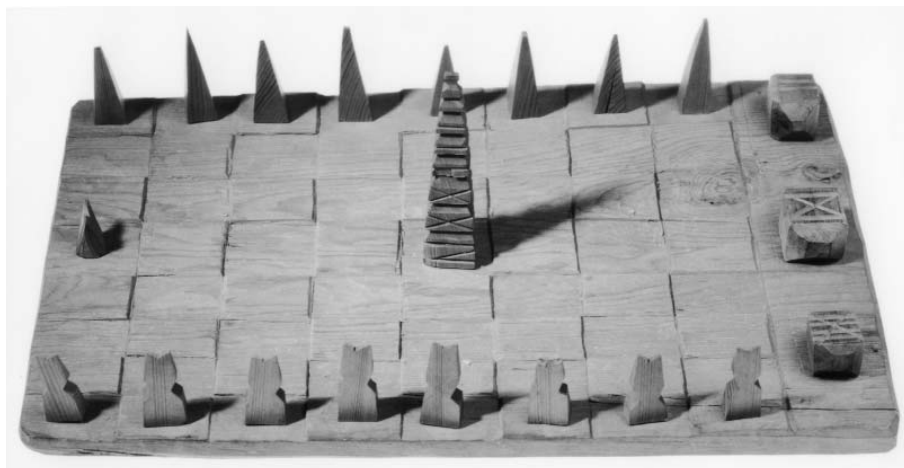


Fig. 3. *Sáhkku* game collected by Qvigstad at Boris-Gleb, in the coastal Skolt community of Paatsjoki (Petsamo territory, Russia). The board is much more compact (23 x 37 cm) and its surface is carved so to make squares of different depths. There are here two series of 8 men each, plus an extra short one, in the middle on the left, which could perhaps be one of the two “king’s sons” (Tromsø Museum).

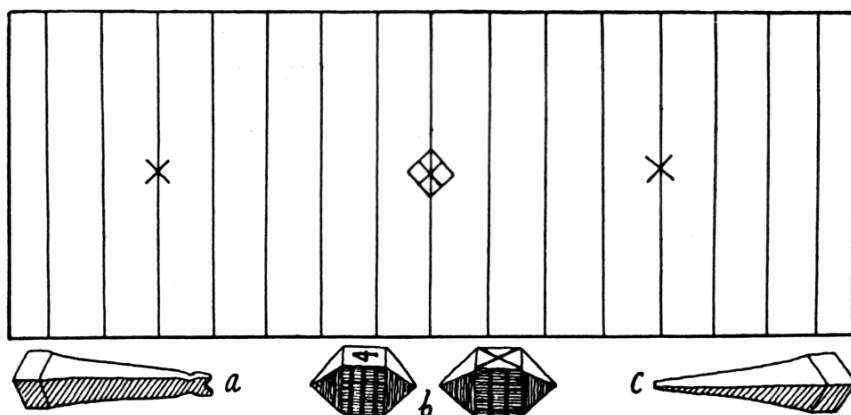


Fig. 4. Gameboard, pieces and dice made by an Inari Sámi in 1876. The board measures 36.5 x 13.5 cm and shows 15 transverse lines. The pieces are: 15 ‘women’ (a) and 15 ‘men’ (c). There are crosses on the board marking the places of the king and the two ‘king’s sons’. Three 4-sided dice were used, marked II, III, 4 and X (National Museum of Finland, SU 1826:6, in Itkonen 1941).

an Inari Sámi in 1876 and reproduced in Itkonen 1941 (fig. 4). The inside face of the lid may have been used as a gameboard,

- A compact sized gameboard with 9 x 9 alternated black and white squares, coming from the Skolt forest community of Suenjel and curiously catalogued as *pertsaloudi* – literally “dice game” (SU 4922:189) (fig. 8).

- One set wrongly catalogued as *sahmatloudi* (from *shahmaty*, Russian for “chess”) and said to have been collected among the Suenjel Skolt. It is a typical *sáhkku* game with a 75 cm long narrow board, three four-sided dice, 2 x 14 pieces, one king and two king’s sons (SU 4922:190) (fig. 7).

- A series of 2 x 14 pieces of a *pirccu* game from Utsjoki, with one king, one king’s son (?) and three four-sided dice. ⁽⁹⁾ A hand-written illustrated note dated 1928 is joined to this series which was sold to the Museum in 1931 by Eliel Lagercrantz (SU 5126:14) (fig. 5).

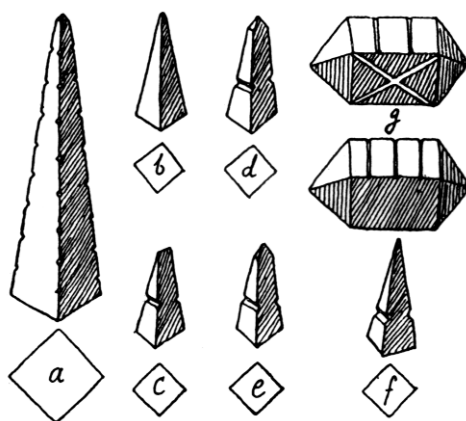


Fig. 5. *Sáhkku* pieces and dice collected at Utsjoki, Finland. The 30 pieces are from six different types: 1 of type a (king), 14 of type b (men), 3 of type c, 4 of type d, 7 of type e (=d, but black), 1 of type f. The 14 ones of types c, d and e might be ‘women’. A hand-written note joined to this set says however that the game is played with 15 pieces in each camp. The three dice (g) have four sides: one blank (=0), the three others respectively marked II, III and X (National Museum of Finland, SU 5126:14, in Itkonen 1941).

Even if Ernst Manker has quoted the game in several of his books (Manker 1954; Manker 1975), the Nordiska Museet in Stockholm, which he directed, does not keep any set in its rich Sámi collections. Neither the Karasjok Museum (Norway), nor the Ajtte Museum in Jokkmokk (Sweden) nor the Inari Siida Museum (Finland) have got any examples.

Turning now to the literature, the earliest account we have dates from 1871 with the three pages the Norwegian Friis wrote on *sáhkku* in his book about Sámi mythology and folktales (Friis 1871: 164-167). ⁽¹⁰⁾ He gives the rules of the game as it was played in

Finnmark, with illustrations showing the various game pieces and how they move (fig. 1). Three years later, the game was mentioned, with simple rules, in the catalogue of a Sámi exhibition in Göteborg (Sweden).

Then we must wait for some 70 years to find something substantial in Lagercrantz's and, moreover, Itkonen's publications (Lagercrantz 1939; Itkonen 1941; Itkonen 1948). We discover there that the same game, with sometimes two more 'king's sons', is not only known in Inari and Utsjoki, under the name of *pirccu*, but in the Skolt Sámi communities of the Russian border where it is called *pertsaloudi*.

In 1953, a four-page article from Yngvar Mejland tells us that *sáhkku* was actively played in Nord-Troms too, giving a short presentation of the game as it was played there (Mejland 1953). However, the major modern contribution to the knowledge of the game was given in 1999 by Peter Michælsen when he demonstrated the striking resemblance between the Sámi *sáhkku* and the Danish *daldøs* (Michaelsen 1999).

The vocabulary used for naming the game and the various events it induces might certainly reveal some interesting information. Unfortunately, we have had no time until now for investigating it. What we know from the existing literature is that most of the words used when playing *sáhkku* are pure Sámi ones, which seems to indicate that the game belongs to an already old tradition.

Geographical extension

Before recording the various places where the *sáhkku* game has been played, we must say a few words about the Sámit. True aboriginal people of Lappland and fully differentiated from their Scandinavian and Finnish neighbours, they have until now maintained the strong original and rather monolithic culture which permitted their ancestors to survive in a severe arctic environment. This is all the more surprising because of their small number (about 70,000 now), dispersed over a vast territory (equivalent to about 60% of France), itself cut by several borders and subject to the uses and laws of four countries (Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia).

When looking back over their history, one is struck by their surprising flexibility which enabled them to face, however hard they might have been, the new conditions of life caused by the colonization of Lappland: the extinction of wild reindeer, taxes to be paid simultaneously to several states, borders moved or even closed, newcomers settling on their grazing lands, etc. Organized in small communities gathering a few families for mutual aid, they adapted themselves to what nature could provide them with: sea-fishing and light farming for the groups disseminated on the Norwegian coast (Sea Sámit), reindeer-breeding for most of the inland ones (Mountain Sámit), lake and river-fishing in the northern Finnish Utsjoki-Inari area (Fishing Sámit), and mixed small reindeer-breeding and river-fishing in the forest zones (Forest Sámit). The Russian Skolt Sámit, of Orthodox persuasion unlike the others who are Lutherans, form a separate group including both coastal and forest communities.

Keeping that in mind, it can be said that *sáhkku* was mainly known in a narrow coastal fringe all along the Arctic shore from Nord-Troms (Tromsø area) in the west to the Russian Petsamo Peninsula in the east, in other words into Sea Sámi and Skolt communities.

With regard to Nord-Troms, Yngvar Mejland (Mejland 1953) writes that the game had been in use “until recent times” in various places. His great-grandfather, Nils Olsen, from the tiny Haukøya island at the mouth of the Kvænangenfjord, knew it since he was a child. He adds that *sáhkku* was known also in Nordreisa, between Lyngen and Kvænangen. This is confirmed by Edmund Johansen (Johansen 2000-2001), who says that it had been played in the Lyngenfjord area until the 1950s.

As for Finnmark, the northernmost province of Norway, Edmund Johansen says that the game was the same in Sørøya Island west of Hammerfest. One of the sets kept by the Norsk Folkesmuseum in Oslo comes from Komagfjord, a small seaside place opposite the nearby island of Seiland. East of Cape North, one finds the *sáhkku* again in Laksefjord

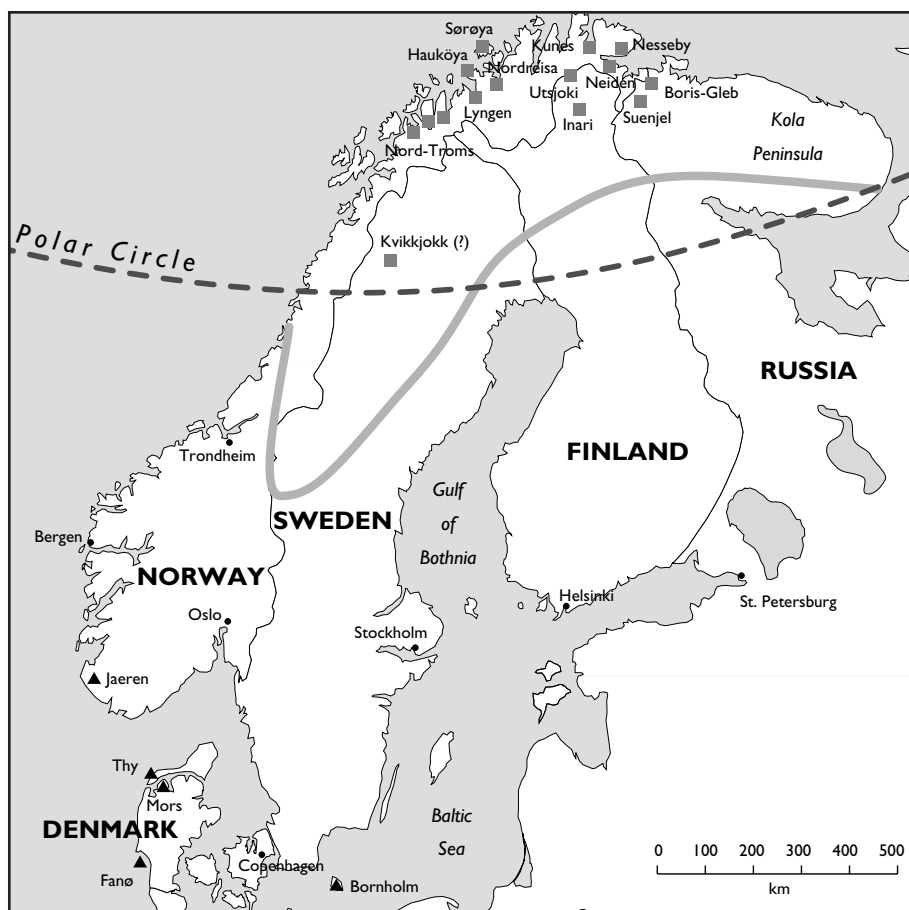


Fig. 6. Geographical expansion of the game. The thick gray line is the southern limit of the territory where the Sámit live. The gray squares are the places where *sáhkku* is known to have been played. The black triangles show the places where the Norwegian *daldøsa* and the Danish *daldøs* have been observed. (Map: Thierry Depaulis)

where Edmund lives. “In the beginning of the 50s and until 1966, he tells, the game was still played actively in Kunes, Bekkarfjord and Skjötningberg, three Sea Sámi villages in the fjord. Prior to 1975, the only road coming from Børselv was cut off for the whole winter, totally isolating the Nordkinn peninsula on the coast of which these villages are located. So, playing *sáhkku* helped people to fill in the long winter nights. The game was known on the coast among Sea Sámit but not among Mountain Sámit, who came up here with their reindeer for their summer camp.”⁽¹¹⁾

Continuing our way eastward, we reach the Varanger peninsula, on the west coast of which we know *sáhkku* to have been played in Trollfjord still in 1903.⁽¹²⁾ On the south coast of that peninsula, Nesseby too has been an active center where the game was played. The set exhibited at the Varanger Samiske Museum in Varangerbotn (fig. 2) might come from there.

Still following the Arctic coast on the southern bank of the Varangerfjord, we reach the Skolt Sámi area in Neiden, where some people remember the game still being played at the beginning of the 20th century. In a letter to the Varanger Samiske Museum dated April 25, 1996, Aud Mathisen said that her mother, Maila Mathisen, then 82 years old, recalled that, when she was still a child in Neiden, the game was called *pirttisa* and people said it was a Finnish game.

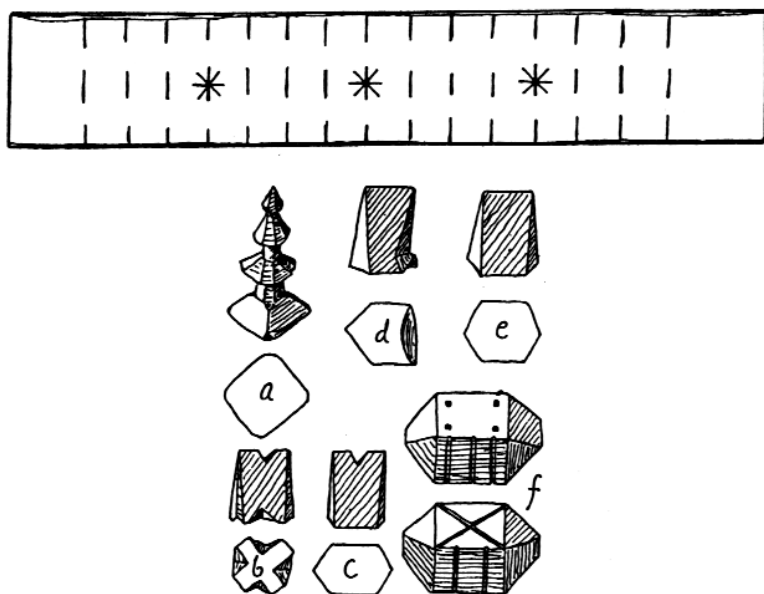


Fig. 7. Gameboard, pieces and dice from the same coastal Skolt community of Paatsjoki (Petsamo territory, Russia) as in fig. 3. The board measures 75 x 14 cm and shows 15 transverse lines. The pieces are of five types: 1 of type a (king), 1 of type b, 14 of type c ('women'), 1 of type d and 14 of type e ('men'). Types b and d seem to correspond to the 'king's sons'. The three 4-sided dice (f) are marked II, III, :: (=4) and X (National Museum of Finland, SU 4922:190, in Itkonen 1941).

From farther east over the Russian border, from the Petsamo territory which used to belong to Finland between the two world wars, we know three sets. One, in the Helsinki Museum (SU 4922:190), is a pure *sáhkku* game on a long plank (75 x 14 cm) (fig. 7). It is misleadingly catalogued as *sahmatloudi* (from *shahmaty*, Russian name for “chess”) and said to have been collected in Suenjel, a forest community broken up by the last war. The second example, in the Tromsø Museum (L 500), comes from Boris-Gleb, the main village of the coastal Pasvik community. Here the board is much more compact (23 x 37 cm) and its surface is cut out to make up squares of different depths. But the king, the dice and the pieces (2 x 8) show it is a real *sáhkku* set (fig. 3).⁽¹³⁾ The third specimen is just a gameboard kept in the collections of the Helsinki Museum (SU 4922:189) and catalogued as *pertsaloudi*. It too has a compact form, showing 81 squares (9 x 9), alternately black and white, and comes from Suenjel (fig. 8).

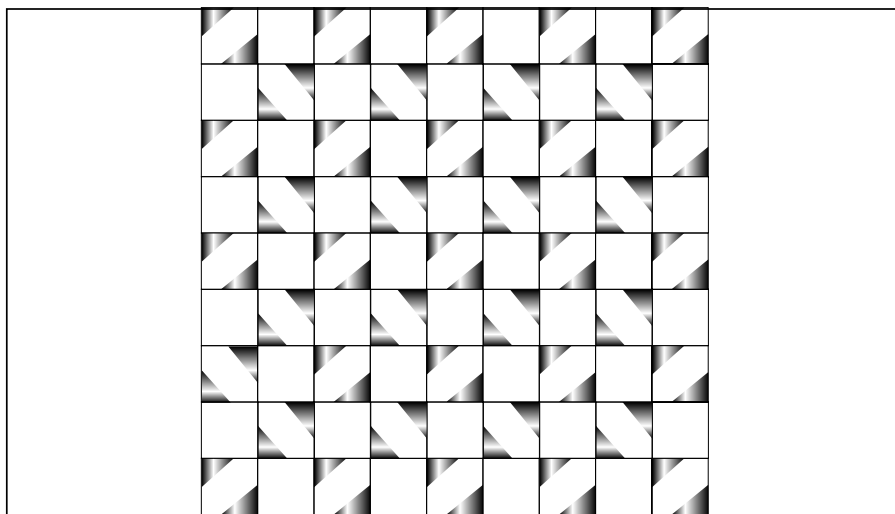


Fig. 8. Gameboard collected in the Skolt inland community of Suenjel and catalogued as *pertsaloudi* (i.e. “dice game”) although it is more likely a *shahmatloudi*, i.e. a “chess game”. Note the basket pattern formed by the black squares (National Museum of Finland, SU 4922:189). (CAD drawing: Thierry Depaulis)

Even if it seems that there has been an inversion about the names (SU 4922.190 is a *pertsaloudi* and SU 4922.189 is a *shahmatloudi*, the Skolt version of chess with black and white squares),⁽¹⁴⁾ this third board is interesting because, with its compact shape and squares, it resembles the second board which has its *sáhkku* king, three dice and two series of eight *sáhkku* pieces. One may imagine that perhaps some of the Skolt could have used the same board for playing both games, a supposition which has to be confirmed.

If we except the Suenjel games, all the places quoted until now are located directly on the coast, and, as we have said earlier, even the Karasjok Mountain Sámit, who

camped near Kunes on their summer migration, did not play *sáhkku*. In Kautokeino, the other important community of Norwegian Mountain Sámit, the game is also completely unknown. It is obvious that it is mainly a seamen's game, but it has been in use in some few places inland too. In Kvikkjokk, in Swedish Lappland, the word *sáhkku* used to be known, referring to some kind of board for playing. From Finland, we have two of the sets kept by the National Museum in Helsinki. One was made by an Inari Sami in 1876, the other collected in Utsjoki in 1928 by Eliel Lagercrantz. In these two places, the game is called *birccu* or *birccut* – which means “die” or “dice”. It may be noticed that Inari and Utsjoki are both located in areas where, beside a few families of Mountain Sámit, most of the population is composed of Fishing Sámit.

Let us come back to the sea and end up our survey at Spitzberg, where it seems that the *sáhkku* game might have been known too. In 1890 a Swedish archaeologist excavating in that island found a piece which he thought was a chess king. But any Russian piece who was there would have corrected this, saying that it was a *sáhkku* king. This story is by no means nonsense, for the Sea Sámit may perfectly well have frequented the archipelago. As the *sáhkku* king was generally carved in reindeer horn or cast from metal, it could have been the only piece that survived from a full set.

Permanent features and local variants

From the literature we understand there has been a certain number of local variants of the game, but we cannot describe each one in detail.⁽¹⁵⁾ Our purpose here is just to try to distinguish between what is common and what is different in the various rules.

• The dice

Three dice are generally used, except in Nord-Troms where Mejland said they were only two. According to old people from Nesseby, who remembered the game, dice used to be cast into a bowl, not on a flat surface. Such dice were carved in wood like teetotums (26 x 26 x 42 mm in the Varanger / Nesseby set), with two of their end sides shaped like pyramids. All have four marked faces, and one of these always shows an “X” (*sáhkku*). The value of that “X” varies from place to place, either 1 or 5. In the Kunes (eastern Finnmark) rules, its value is 1, just like the “X” in the Norwegian *daldosa* game from Jaeren and like the “A” in the Danish *daldos*. In Friis's description from Finnmark, it is worth 5 and it seems to have been the same in the game from Utsjoki.

The values of the other marked faces vary too. In Friis's version one is plain (=0) and the others are marked II (=2), III (=3), IIII (=4) and X (=5), the latter being coloured black. We find the same values in Kunes, Varanger and Utsjoki.⁽¹⁶⁾ In Nord-Troms, however, they are 1-2-3-X; in Boris-Gleb and Inari, 2-3-4-X.

In Kunes, as in Friis's account, values of the dice could be used separately for moving several pieces and the king if it is owned. But they could also be accumulated for moving just one piece or the king. This was not allowed in Nord-Troms where each piece had to move according to the value of one die.

In Nord-Troms and in Utsjoki, extra throws were granted to the player who threw one or several consecutive *sáhkku*, an advantage which does not exist in the Kunes rules.

- **The pieces**

The two series of gamepieces are generally called *olbmát* (men) and *gálgut* (women), even if Mejland calls them “soldiers” in Nord-Troms. Carved in wood, they are differentiated by their shapes. In the Varanger Samiske Museum set (fig. 2), the pyramids of the ‘men’ are topped with a small sphere while the ‘women’ have a crook-shaped form. Both might represent old-fashioned traditional Sámi hats: the cone-shaped bobble-topped one of the men and the women’s *laggjo* which had been forbidden by Laestadianists for it would have symbolized the “Devil’s horn”! Everywhere else they are much simpler, the ‘men’ usually are shaped as sharp-pointed four-sided pyramids, and the ‘women’ like steep-roofed houses, with a notch on the top.

The size of the pieces does not vary so much. In Kunes, both ‘men’ and ‘women’ measure *ca* 25 mm. In the Varanger set which we had in our hands, the ‘men’ are 38 mm high and the ‘women’ 33 mm. In comparison the king is 94 mm on a square base of 26 mm width.

In Inari as well as in Finnmark (Friis’s description, Kunes and Nesseby-Varanger), the pieces are 15 in each camp. However, Lagercrantz says that in 1928 in the Finnmark fisheries people used to play with 20 men and 20 women. In Nord-Troms, according to Mejland, there were only 12 of each. In the Skolt Paatsjoki set they were 14, and only 8 in the Skolt Boris-Gleb example.⁽¹⁷⁾ As far as the Utsjoki set is concerned, even if only 2x14 gamepieces have been preserved, the hand-written note – be it by Lagercrantz or by Itkonen – joined to it does mention 15 in each side.

- **The board**

The standard board consists of a long narrow wooden plank on which 15 parallel lines are cut widthwise and sometimes one perpendicular middle line lengthwise. At the intersection of the long middle line with the eighth short line, i.e. at the center of the board, a cross is engraved: this is where the king stands at the beginning of the game. The size of the board varies from about 30 x 15 cm (Kunes and Inari) up to 56 x 15 cm (Varanger) and even 75 x 14 cm (Paatsjoki).

Besides this type, which is the most common, the Skolt area shows two other models where the shape is much more compact (37 x 23 cm for the Boris-Gleb set at the Tromsø Museum). These two boards have no carved lines but they have squares (9 x 9) that are differentiated either by their depth or by a black-and-white pattern. Even if the Boris-Gleb set is displayed with *sáhkku* pieces which seem to be of the same origin as the board, it is evident that these two boards were originally made for an other type of game more similar to draughts or chess.

When comparing the various real *sáhkku* sets, one notices that in some of them (Nord-Troms and perhaps Utsjoki) the number of pieces per player is the same as the number of lines less one. Maybe it is this feature which led Itkonen to think the pieces were placed between the lines at the beginning of the game and not on the lines. Since the place of the king was marked at an intersection of the middle line and not between two lines he thought that, once arrived on this middle line, the men had to move from line to line. We saw that it was not the case in Kunes, where, wherever they are, the

pieces always move from line to line. In Nord-Troms, however, where there are 12 men for 13 squares, we know from Mejlund that, at the beginning, the place at the right of each player was empty: it was used for “activating” and playing the first piece.

- **The king**

The tallest and the most powerful of the pieces is the *sáhkku* king (*gonagas*), a pure Sámi addition to the *daldos(a)*-type games. At the start of the play, it is placed in the center of the board which is marked with a crossed square called the “castle”. It has roughly the shape of a sharp 4-sided pyramid, either with simple notches on its ridges or showing several superposed tiers, some of them decorated with crosses – the *sáhkku* sign. An exception to this general type is the piece shown in Mejlund’s article for Nord-Troms where the king is topped with a kind of bishop’s crook, a sign which could refer to the times when the Catholic church of Trondheim was still very influential there.

Except in the Utsjoki variant where it may be killed, the king is a powerful piece, able to move in all four directions. So it is important to capture it. In Nord-Troms, Kunes and Utsjoki the king belongs to the first player who reaches the point where it is situated. According to Friis, in Finnmark, the player who first threw a *sáhkku* not only won the king, but was allowed an extra throw with the three dice.

- **The ‘king’s sons’**

We know that king’s sons did exist from the two crosses which appear on several *sáhkku* boards (Varanger, Utsjoki, Inari and Paatsjoki), four lines on each side of the king’s place, but we have no idea about how they were used. From the differentiated shape of the only pieces kept in a museum (fig. 7), each one higher but apparently related in shape to the pieces of the two armies, we may guess that each player had his own. According to Itkonen, these would correspond to the ‘king’s sons’ of the Sámi *tablut* game from Frostviken (Swedish Lapland).

The *sáhkku* king: god or devil?

The social organization of the Sámi never had a king. There is one, however, in the Sámi game *tablut*, and moreover there are two ‘king’s sons’ in the Frostviken variants from Swedish Jämtland, just like in *sáhkku*. It has to be noted that this *tablut* king is called “king of the Swedes” and not “Sámi king”, which may find an explanation into the fact that *tablut* is not a genuine Sámi game but derives from the old Viking game *hnefatafl*.

The *sáhkku* king and king’s sons are obviously connected with the *tablut* pieces, a proposition further reinforced by the fact that the pieces in the two games often have similar forms. As far as the king is concerned, it seems that the *sáhkku* king had a specific status. It could be in wood but more frequently in a harder material, such as reindeer horn, lead or walrus ivory, that kept it from decaying. It was decorated with several “Xs”, the *sáhkku* sign. In Kunes, it was topped with a four-pointed cap as the one that Finnmarks and Finnish Sámi wear, derived from the square chapka of the Russian Pomor merchants who traded along the coast.

Edmund Johansen (Johansen 2000-2001) remembers that, when he was still a child in Kunes, it was considered “bad” to play *sáhkku*. The children could play cards but *sáhkku* was strictly forbidden for it was said to be the “Devil’s game”. As a matter of fact, it seems that followers of Lars Levi Læstadius, the very rigorous Lutheran pastor who evangelized the Sámit in the 19th century, pronounced a kind of ban on this game.

For Edmund Johansen the reason for such a ban was that the game of *sáhkku* alluded to old Sámi shamanic beliefs, against which Laestadianists fought actively. The crosses (*sáhkku* signs) with which the *sáhkku* king is decorated were symbols of the sun, which the old Sámit worshipped as the center of the world. “Our ancestors,” Johansen explains, “called it *gonagas* from the Norwegian word (*konge*, “king”) simply because, as they had no king, they had no word in their language for calling it. But this king may perfectly well have meant god with the signification the Sámit give to that word, *i.e.* a natural power, neither good nor bad, which whom one has to deal anyway by making offerings. In our language *sáhkku* means ‘penalty’. You may know the Sámit often give things new names just to avoid the minister’s wrath, so they could say penalty while they really thought of offering.”

In confirmation of such a theory there is at the Nordiska Museet in Stockholm the reconstruction of an old Sámi offering-place with a cross-marked wooden idol the general shape of which strangely resembles the *sáhkku* king (fig. 9).

However pertinent our informant may be, it is obvious that the game of *sáhkku* has more than a smack of heresy. “One day,” tells Edmund Johansen, “a man found a leaden *sáhkku* king which he decided to use as a sinker for fishing. He said he knew it was the Devil, but he added that such a devil could make him lucky when fishing”.



Fig. 9. Reconstruction of an old Sámi offering place with a cross-marked wooden idol the general shape of which looks like some *sáhkku* kings (Nordiska Museet, Stockholm).

A still mysterious origin

At the present stage of our research, it would be hazardous to formulate any theory about the origins of *sáhkku*. The only statement which makes sense is that the game is definitely not a true Sámi creation. The Sámi culture is so homogeneous that, if it had been so, the game would have been known in the whole Sámi area and not be limited to the fringes of the Arctic shores. As a matter of fact it seems that some Sámi groups invented a new game by introducing a king (and even two king's sons) to a *daldos(a)*-type game, both being evidently closely related. Such additions make the game much more tactical and attractive. But the concept of "king" has nothing to do with the Sámi tradition. As previously stated, when it appears in *tablut*, another Sámi board game from Sweden, sometimes also with two king's sons, it is called "King of the Swedes" – not a Sámi king, and it fights the "Moscovites". *Tablut* is thought to be one of the only survivors of the old Viking *hnefatafl* game. So the Sámi Arctic coastal groups to whom we seem to owe *sáhkku* would also have known *tablut*, although *tablut* was played in southern Swedish Lappland only; or they may have adopted the king and its sons directly from *hnefatafl*.

So there are still a lot of questions to answer. As for how the original *daldos(a)*-type game was introduced to Lappland, we offer here three possibilities, all each taking into account the remarkable present geographical concentration of the game in the Arctic shores of Troms and Finnmark:

- **The Viking track.** This is of course the most satisfactory hypothesis since *daldos(a)* has survived until now in western Denmark and southern Norway. The presence of the king and king's sons in *sáhkku*, in relationship to the old Viking *hnefatafl* ones, seems to be another favourable argument. For centuries, but mainly around the 10th century, the western Viking ships made frequent sea raids up to the North where they might have taught local populations some kind of *daldos(a)* game. If so, why is there – as far as we know – no survival of such a game on the 1,300 km-long coast between Jæren and Tromsø, even among the southern Sámi living there? And why would only the Sea Sámi from Troms and Finnmark have maintained its tradition? Is that just because they invented a mixture of *hnefatafl* and *daldos(a)* which made the game much more exciting?

- **The Pomor track.** From ca 1740 until the beginning of the 20th century, Russian merchants from Archangel called Pomors used to come every year to the coast of Northern Scandinavia on board heavily-laden sailing ships carrying flour, timber and hardware. They exchanged their freight for dried fish and other local productions with the Sea Sámi who had no other source for supplies. Trading was done in "Pomor", a kind of Nordic Creole made of Russian, Norwegian and Sámi words, which was perfectly understood from Tromsø to Murmansk. Such a regular trade induced the Sea Sámi to adopt several cultural features from their yearly visitors, among other things their curious four-pointed caps. The *daldos(a)*-type game could have been one of those, but, as far as we know, there is no evidence that such a game has ever been played in Northern Russia.

• **The Kvaen track.** If *sáhkku* did not come by sea then it could have been brought by the Kvaen, Finnish emigrants who, around the year 1800, came in large numbers to settle in the ends of the fjords of Nord-Troms and Finnmark. In 1913, they numbered no less than 7,000 people in these two provinces. In several areas of eastern Finnmark, they even formed the majority of the population. Among the main places where they concentrated are Skibotn, east of Tromsø, Nordreisa, Inari, Utsjoki, Vadsö, Bugøyfjord and Neiden, the latter three on the Varangerfjord, all precisely spots where we know *sáhkku* was played. Besides such geographical agreement, we know from a Neiden woman's testimony that, at the beginning of the 20th century, the game was said to be a Finnish one. The fact that, in the Finnish language, the word *sakko* has the same “penalty” meaning as its Sámi equivalent would also support the idea of a Finnish origin. But, just as with the Russian track, we have so far never heard that this kind of game was known anywhere in central or southern Finland.

This short analysis shows how difficult it is to explain the presence of such a ‘*ráb*’ game such a long way from its original area. Even if *sáhkku* appears to be derived from a *daldøs(a)*-type model, it remains to be demonstrated how this model reached the Fenno-Scandic area.

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Notes

1. The word Lapp is a nickname given by the first Scandinavian settlers who met the Sámit. In the old northern dialects, it meant something like “rags”. Sometimes still called *Finner* in Norway – Finner for “Finnish”, although these two populations differ quite a lot – the Sámit

(Sámi in the singular) have now recovered, at least in the Fenno-Scandic area, the name they have always given to themselves.

2. See Thierry Depaulis, “Jeux de parcours du monde arabo-musulman”, this volume.
3. In Sámeǵiella, the Fenno-Ugrian language of the Sámit, the “á” is pronounced like *a* in the English “sad”, and the “u” is pronounced <o(u)>. So, the word *sáhkkku* (meaning “penalty”) must be pronounced <sah’ko(u)>. The letter “c” being the equivalent of “ts”, *bircu* (die) and *birccut* (dice) – two other names given to the game in the Utsjoki-Inari Finnish area, have to be articulated <birr’tso(u)> and <birr’tso(u)t’>, which sound rather like the word *percc’* (die), pronounced <perr’ts’>, used by the Skolt Sámit for naming the game.
4. Michaelsen 1999 and this volume.
5. Of course, these numbers do not appear on the board. They are simply given here to explain how the pieces move.
6. In April 2001 Roger Persson told us that the rules they used were in fact those published by Friis 130 years ago. When playing a real game, these rules appeared rather incomplete.
7. We want to specially thank here Mrs. Nina Puurunen, Curator of the National Museum of Finland in Helsinki; Mrs. Elisabeth Brundin, Curator of the Nordiska Museet in Stockholm; Mr. Leif Pareli, Curator of the Sámi Collection at the Norsk Folkemuseum in Oslo; Mr. Terje Brantenberg, from the Tromsø Museum; Mr. Roger Persson, from the Varanger Sámiske Museum in Varangerbotn – all of whom provided co-operative and efficient help.
8. According to curator Leif Pareli, from Oslo, there is an irregularity in the numbers in the catalogue so that set could belong to another collection acquired in 1906. However, he says, “I find it more likely that this game was actually acquired through Isak Saba”.
9. Peter Michaelsen thinks that the so-called king’s son in fact is the missing king of the Utsjoki game (SU 128:14), for it is identical with the drawing in Itkonen 1941: fig. 34. It would have been misplaced by the museum.
10. Two centuries earlier, Schefferus wrote that similar dice were used by the so-called Lapps, but he did not mention any board game related to them.
11. Such a strictly coastal distribution looks very similar to the one we observed for the French *aluette*, an old seamen’s card game played from Cherbourg to Bordeaux on a narrow strip all along the coast and the banks of the Loire river up to Orléans (see Alan Borvo, *Anatomie d’un jeu de cartes: l’aluette ou le jeu de la vache*, Nantes, 1977).
12. Konrad Nielsen, *Lapp Dictionnary* (s.v. “*Sáhkkku*”).
13. However, one cannot dismiss the idea that the Tromsø Museum photograph shows an arrangement made out of an incomplete *sáhkkku* set (9 ‘women’, 8 ‘men’, 1 king, 3 dice) “artistically” set up on a draughtsboard! (Editor)
14. Such an inversion is confirmed by the fact that the real Skolt *sáhkkku* game wrongly named *sah-matloudi* in the catalog of the Museum (SU 4922:190) is said to come from Suenjel, although Itkonen, who himself collected these games in 1913, presents this one as coming from Patsjoki (Itkonen 1941).
15. The only rules we are sure of are the ones of the Kunes variant which we give hereafter.
16. In Utsjoki too, the X-marked side was coloured black.
17. The latest set seems to be a shorter version of *sáhkkku* played on a board made for an other game. (But see Editor’s remark note 13.)

Appendix

Rules of *sáhkku*

(Kunes variant, eastern Norwegian Finnmark)

The rules we give here have been collected directly from Edmund Johansen, a Sea Sámi from Kunes who had been actively playing the game there until the 1950s. They have been written down after we played several games together in April 2001. As we wanted to provide scholars and players with a complete useful account, some parts of this text necessarily repeat what has been said earlier in the main article. We apologize for it.

Material

- One gameboard made of a small wooden plank (30 x 15 x 1 cm) on which are carved 15 parallel lines widthwise and one perpendicular central line lengthwise. Just at the center, at the intersection of the long central line with the eighth short line a cross is engraved: it is where the king stands at the beginning of the game.
- Fifteen ‘men’ (*olbmát* in Sámi), ca 25 mm high square wooden pieces, cut in the shape of long 4-sided pyramids.
- Fifteen ‘women’ (*gálgut* in Sámi), square wooden pieces of the same size as the previous ones, but cut in the shape of steep-roofed houses with a notch on the top.



Fig. 10. *Sáhkku* lesson given to the author by Edmund Johansen in Kunes (eastern Norwegian Finnmark) in April 2001. Edmund is considered the best expert on the rules of the game (Photo Angéline Vinciguerra, Paris).

- One king (*gonagas* in Sámi), a ca 45 mm high square piece made of wood, reindeer horn or cast tin. It shows four superposed tiers, the second ornamented with four crosses (the *sáhkku* sign), and the fourth cut as a four-pointed cap.

- Three dice (*birccut* in Sámi), cut from wood and longer than the usual ones. They have only four scoring sides, the two ends forming 4-sided pyramids. The values marked on the sides are: X (*sáhkku* = 1), II (=2) and III (=3). The last side is blank (=0). Usually the dice are thrown into a wooden bowl.

Object

The game is for two players. The aim is to “kill” all the opponent’s pieces or to prevent him from “activating” whatever pieces he has left.

Beginning

The board is placed between the two players with its long sides in front of them. Each chooses the side with which he will play – the ‘men’ or the ‘women’. He puts them in line on the side of the board in front of him, each man on the end of one of the fifteen parallel lines. The king is placed on the central cross.

In order to determine who begins, each player throws a single die. The first to get a *sáhkku* (the X-marked side) plays first.

At the beginning, the pieces are considered as locked in their places. To “activate” any one of them, a player must get three *sáhkku* in three successive throws using the three dice. After each throw the one or two *sáhkku* points obtained are put aside and the remaining die or dice are thrown again. Each player tries in turn. As soon as he has got three *sáhkku*, the player may “activate” some of his pieces: either (1) the first three on his right, moving each one jump, or (2) only the first, moving it three jumps, or (3) the two first moving one one jump and the other two jumps.

Moving the pieces

Throughout the game, no piece may leave its original place without being activated by a *sáhkku*, which will allow it to move one point (or line). The pieces must follow a track which leads them to meet the opponents, without any possibility of moving backward. The figure below will help the reader understand how they have to move. The pieces initially located from 01 to 15 move from the left to the right of their owner, then from 15 to 16, from 16 to 30, from 30 to 31, from 31 to 45, from 45 to 16, from 16 to 30, and from 30 to 01. The opponents move similarly, but in the opposite direction: from 45 to 31, from 31 to 30, from 30 to 16, from 16 to 15, from 15 to 01, etc.

Each player throws the three dice in turn. He may use the values given by them either for activating or moving one, two or three of his pieces. But the move of each piece must correspond to the exact numbers given by one, two or three dice. For example, a throw of X-III-blank (total = 4) does not allow to move two men two lines each: the player must move one man one line (for the X) and another one three lines (for the III).

It is possible for a player to put one or several pieces in a place already occupied by one or several of his own pieces, with the risk of having them all killed if the opponent comes to this very place. Pieces may also jump over one or several pieces, of either side.

31	32	33	34	35	36	37	38	39	40	41	42	43	44	45
30	29	28	27	26	25	24	23	22	21	20	19	18	17	16
01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12	13	14	15

Killing the opponent's pieces

When a piece comes to a place already occupied by one or several of the opponent's pieces, the latter is or are killed and permanently removed from the board. Only already activated pieces may be killed. Killed pieces cannot be re-entered.

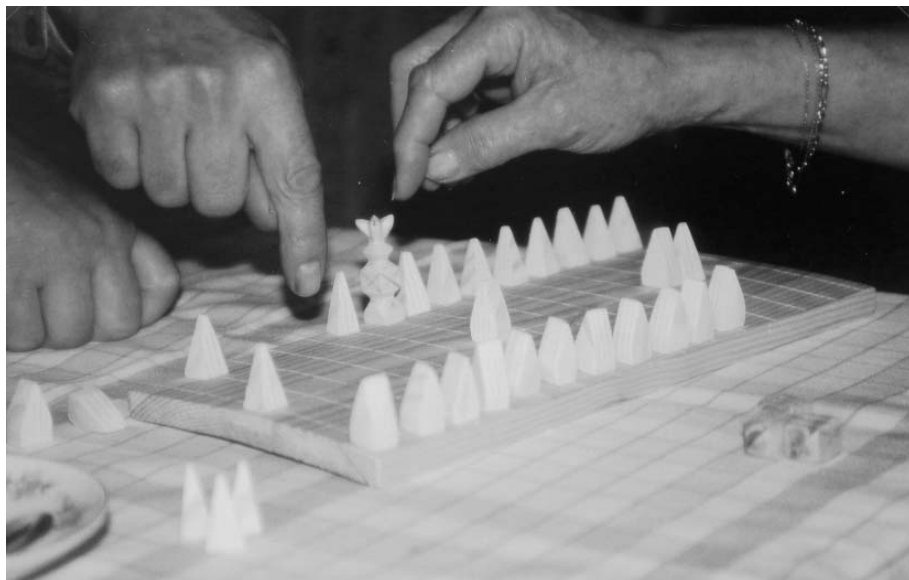


Fig. 11. The set used by Edmund Johansen is a modern copy of those with which Kunes Sea Sámit used to play until the 1950s. The board is 30 x 14.3 cm, engraved with one central and 15 transverse lines. The pieces are 15 'men' (background), 15 'women' (foreground) and one king. Three 4-sided dice are used. April 2001 (Photo Angéline Vinciguerra, Paris).

The king's part

Although the ordinary pieces are obliged to follow their own track forward, the king can move in all four directions. Set at the beginning of the game in the middle of the long central line (point 23), it will belong to the first player who will reach that place. However, throughout the game, it may be captured by an opponent's piece which arrives where it stands. In that case, the king is not removed from the board but then plays with the player who captured it.

The player who owns the king may use it, on his turn, with the values given by the dice. He may choose not to move it and move some of his pieces, or to move it alone using the total of the three dice, or to move it simultaneously with one or two of his other pieces. The ownership of the king does not allow any extra throw of the dice.

The king kills the opponent's pieces just like the ordinary pieces do. As it may move forward, backward and sideways, it is a very powerful and dangerous piece. Its moves, however, must be in straight line. If it stands on the long central line, for example, the player who owns it will need a *sábkku* ($X = 1$) for killing an opponent's piece located just in front on the side of the board. With a II ($= 2$), the king cannot make a right angle to kill a piece located on the side of the board but on the next line.

Jamming on non-activated pieces

When an opponent's piece or, more frequently, the opponent-owned king comes to a place situated just on the right of a player's non-activated pieces, these are jammed in. They will remain so as long as this piece or the king stay there. In that case, if all the activated pieces are killed, that player loses the game.