

# MALDIVIAN CHESS (RAAZUVAA)

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**Abstract.** Traditional Maldivian chess rules are presented and their similarity to pre-19th century Turkish chess is discussed, with musings on the potential role of Ottomans in spreading the “new game” invented in Europe – but played in their own manner – throughout the Muslim world and beyond.

**Keywords:** Chess history; chess variants; raazuvaa; Maldives; Ottomans

## Introduction

Raazuvaa, the traditional chess game of the Maldives, remains largely unknown to chess history and variants aficionados, and has rarely been mentioned in the literature. H. C. P. Bell’s *The Maldive Islands* only says “Chess (from the names of the pieces probably the Indian game) is commonly played by men and boys” (Bell 1882 p. 62)<sup>1</sup>. Culin’s *Chess and Playing-Cards* describes – doubly inaccurately – Maldivian chess as “[i]dentical with the Hindu game, which is played in the same manner as the English” and provides the names of the pieces “in the Indian game” (Culin 1898 p. 860). H. J. R. Murray misinterpreted Culin’s list as referring to the Maldivian names (Murray 1913 p. 79); thus his observation on “the usual nomenclature in Northern India and in the Maldive Islands” (*ibid.*, p. 60) is erroneous. Several more recent papers briefly mention the Maldivian chess game, providing its original Dhivehi name, *raazuvaa* (de Voogt 2009a), presuming it was “introduced via the Indian subcontinent” (de Voogt 2009b), and suggesting it was played with “Islamic chess rules” (de Voogt 2016).

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<sup>1</sup> Bell provided names on p. 75, Note 8.

A short article by a native author (Zahir 2017) lists the following differences from the international game: pawns move one square only (i.e. no initial double move), there is no castling, stalemated player loses the game<sup>2</sup>. According to further information kindly provided by Alex de Voogt (pers. comm. 2019), baring the opponent's K is a win as well, and Q is always to the K's right for both players (i.e. Ks on d1/e8). More details were obtained thanks to Felayla Sports who had uploaded games from the Felayla Raazuvaa Challenge 2020 on their Facebook page and kindly responded to my questions on the Maldivian rules (pers. comm. 2020). Analysis of the uploaded videos, together with the aforementioned article by Zahir (2017) and personal communication from de Voogt and Felayla Sports permit the following description of the game: While raazuvaa can be – and often is – played with a common “western” chess set, the traditional Maldivian pieces are stylized and painted in various colours – red, black, green, blue, yellow, orange and even pink; colour of the pieces is not related to which player takes the first move. Chequered boards are often used (Figure 1) but the traditional ones are unchequered (Figure 2); see Carswell (2017, pl. 24) as well<sup>3</sup>.

Setup (for both players) RNBKQBNR, pieces move and capture as in the international game (orthochess) except no double initial pawn move and no castling – or any other privileged K move. Pawns are flipped when queening on the last rank, number of Qs unrestricted. Win by checkmate, stalemate, or baring the opponent's K – unless the bare K can capture the opponent's last piece on the next move, resulting in a draw (the latter rule was the norm in shatranj: Murray 1913). In fact, raazuvaa could be described as classical shatranj with modern B and Q moves and Ks crosswise.

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<sup>2</sup> The “hissing sound” made when checking the king mentioned by Zahir (2017) seems to be related to *kish* (*kisht*, *qish*), “the ordinary expression at the present time in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Urdū” (Murray 1913, p. 225). See Murray (1950) for a very similar description from Nigeria.

<sup>3</sup> When a chequered board is used, it can be positioned in any way regarding the colour of the right-hand corner. This is also known from Indian variants, and for the same reason: Ks crosswise, colour of pieces not related to first move, and traditional board unchequered.



**Figure 2:** A game of raazuvaa played outdoors. Photo by Alex de Voogt, 2003.



**Figure 1:** A game of raazuvaa played indoors using an unchequered board. Photo by Alex de Voogt, 2003.

### Discussion

The above rules differ from Indian ones in a number of aspects, and the assumption made by Bell (1882) and Culin (1898) that Maldivian chess was a form of the Indian game seems to be without foundation. Any similarities in the names of the pieces – by no means as significant as Murray (1913) mistakenly believed – could be best explained by the fact that Dhivehi is an Indo-Aryan language. In fact, the closest set of rules known from the literature is the one described by Stamma (1745) for the game as played by “the Orientals” (i.e. Ottoman chess): no castling, promotion to Q only, win by checkmate, stalemate or by baring the opponent’s king. Indeed, Stamma does not mention a crosswise position of the kings but, according to Murray (1915), this must have been the rule in Turkish chess at least as early as 1671. Thus, raazuvaa seems to be descended from, or a relict of, Turkish chess, and probably one of the last surviving<sup>4</sup>. Since in the 19th century Turkish chess had already adopted features absent from raazuvaa such as castling, king’s privileged move (or both), an ‘initial phase’ of simultaneous movement, etc. (see Murray 1913)<sup>5</sup>, the game was probably brought to the Maldives earlier. Further, Turkish chess underwent a phase in the late 18th century during which the queen also had a N move<sup>6</sup>, and if this ever became a universal rule in all the lands where Ottoman chess was played, introduction of the game to the Maldives must have predated it – but not before the late 16th century, if the date provided by Murray for the emergence of “the new game” in Turkey, before 1586 but after 1567 (Murray 1915, p. 159) is indeed correct.

Finding a game similar or identical to Turkish chess in the Maldives is less surprising than it might seem at first glance: recently, Turkish draughts

<sup>4</sup> A later form of Turkish chess, with no initial double pawn move, no castling, and promotion to captured piece only was still played until the mid-1970s in Smolyan, south Bulgaria (St. Dechev, pers. comm. 2019); Smolyan was in the Ottoman Empire until 1912.

<sup>5</sup> A late 19th century game from the Levant (Murray 1913, p. 360) has both castling and a N move; a game from Algiers published in the 1901 *Rivista Scacchistica Italiana* (Cornetz 1901) allows only a N move if K not yet checked, and no castling. Murray quotes the game but erroneously states that K must not have moved and omits win by bare K; there are also some typos in the game as given by him (Murray 1913, pp. 360-361): Black’s fifth and sixth moves should be Pg6 and Bg7 and White’s 28th Pf3.

<sup>6</sup> While often repeated in the literature, this statement seems to be based on two pieces of evidence only, both quoted by Murray’s *A History of Chess*: an anecdotal match played by Philidor and the Turkish ambassador in London (Murray 1913, p. 356) and a manuscript dated “probably 18th century” from present-day Iraq (Murray 1913, pp. 354-355).

(*dama*) was reported from the Comoros, “the southernmost attestation of *Turkish Draughts* in the literature so far” (de Voogt 2019, p. 5); thus, on at least one occasion, a game played in the Ottoman Empire had reached an Indian Ocean archipelago.

Worth mentioning in this context is Lieut. A. Schmidt’s brief report on chess in German Wituland (now in Kenya): chess rules were “the same as with us” (and while this statement should be taken with caution, it seems to indicate that the moves of Q and B were the modern ones, and not those of shatranj), pieces names are roch (R), ferass (N), fil (B), sultan (K), wezir (Q) and askari (pawns) (Schmidt 1888, p. 133). It would be interesting to know what were the rules of the game in Zanzibar as well: Murray (1950) assumed it was “Muslim chess” (i.e. shatranj), but his source, Steere (1870) (Murray quotes the third 1884 edition) only lists the name of the game and those of the pieces – rather different from those in Wituland incidentally, and fil corresponding to rook. (Note that the same source mentions dama being played in Zanzibar).

The potential role of Ottomans in spreading the new form of chess invented in Europe, with long B and Q, but played in their own manner, with Ks crosswise and no double pawn move, throughout the Muslim world – and beyond – seems to have not yet received the attention it deserves. Most traditional regional chess<sup>7</sup> variants outside Europe reported in the literature share the crosswise arrangement of Ks (a synapomorphy), and the only exceptions, “the Persian game with a queen” (on which see Markov 2017) and Mongolian chess (with related forms) feature an obligatory symmetrical first double move of one pawn (Q pawn in the “Persian game”, Q or K pawn in different Mongolian subvariants), obviously impossible unless Ks are opposite. Both Persian and Mongolian chess could be played with Ks crosswise (and no obligatory initial pawn move) though – see e.g. Markov (2017) and references therein on Persian, and Cazaux & Knowlton (2017) on Mongolian chess; thus, the opposite arrangement of Ks in the two examples above seems to represent a reversal. While (secondary) European influence is of course possible, and in cases such as e.g. Malay chess almost certain, it seems plausible that “the new game” was taken – and further developed in different areas – from the Ottomans, together with the crosswise arrangement of Ks, rather than directly from Europeans. Under

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<sup>7</sup> That is, played with modern B and Q (or further modifications of the Q move), as opposed to shatranj variants.

this hypothetical scenario, the “new game”, once adopted by the Ottomans, would gradually spread outside the empire, undergoing further changes in the process and giving birth to more regional variants along the way<sup>8</sup>. The Ottoman Empire had become the largest Muslim realm in the world, extending its prestige beyond its own territories (Özcan 1997 p. 4); together with the Safavid and Mughal empires, and smaller polities, it was part, and an influential part, of a cultural continuum where ideas, manuscripts and individuals including merchants, scholars, artisans, and preachers circulated (Necipoğlu 2021). Even in the Maldives, where the “pure” Turkish game seems to have been preserved, no postulated presence of significant Ottoman groups is necessary. Indian Ocean expeditions (see e.g. Casale 2010) apparently predate the appearance of the “new game” in Constantinople by decades but movement of people certainly continued afterwards, and chess in its present form could have been introduced by travellers or locals having spent some time in the Hejaz (e.g. Peacock 2018<sup>9</sup>, 2020), including pilgrims on a hajj. In fact, chess (again, the “new game” is meant, regardless if shatranj was already played in the Maldives or not) could have been introduced by people of any ethnicity and not even directly from Ottoman lands but any area where that form of the game was played<sup>10</sup>.

The geographically farthest regional variant played with kings crosswise, and sharing the apomorphic trait of “short” Q (as R+K, crowned rook or Shogi Dragon King), with Mongolian chess and its related forms, is Aleut chess: I. Veniaminov (later known as Innocent of Alaska) observed that “their game is slightly different from the usual chess game, and especially in that the queen does not walk as a bishop, but in that case it acts as a pawn capturing the enemy. But not only forward but in all directions” (Veniaminov 1840, p. 308), explaining those differences with the game being adopted from Siberian Russians (a fascinating glimpse into the influence Mongolian chess seems to have had in Siberia). Almost a century later, another source (Redko 1927, p. 90) said that “game differs from the usual one, first, in the setup, and second, in that, diagonally, Q can only move to the next square”. Redko’s laconic description confirms the queen’s

<sup>8</sup> Including beyond the Muslim world, with Mongolian chess and related forms.

<sup>9</sup> Map illustrating the travels of a Syrian Sufi (Peacock 2018, p. 64) in the late 17th century would also illustrate some of the ideas here.

<sup>10</sup> cf. R. F. Burton’s note on games in the Somali town of Zayla / Zeila, “None but the travelled know chess, and the Damal [sic] (draughts) and Tavola (backgammon) of the Turks.” (Burton 1856, p. 42).

R+K move; as for the different setup, it is supported by a 1980s source, saying “I found that in all cases the queen had to be on the left of the king” (Laughlin 1980, p. 131)<sup>11</sup>. Unfortunately, rules regarding pawn promotion, stalemate, bare K, or any restrictions on checkmate such as those in Mongolian chess, are unknown. If Aleut chess had inherited the “short” queen of the Mongolian game together with its pawn promotion to Q only (and no restriction on Q number), win by stalemate and draw by bare king but not the checkmate restrictions (which might not yet have been introduced in Mongolian chess by the time chess was brought to the Aleutian Islands, or simply ignored by the Siberian Russian players), the resulting game would differ from raazuvaa only in the restricted Q move, and bare king being a draw rather than a win (and the insignificant detail of K being on Q’s right rather than left) – but sadly, this information seems to be irrevocably lost.

Raazuvaa is thus important in several aspects – apart from its obvious value as a good game on its own merits, or the historical value of being a possible relict of pre-19th century Turkish chess, it is one of the very few traditional chess variants played on an orthochess board with pieces equivalent or similar to orthochess pieces that is still extant. It is precisely this close similarity to orthochess that makes this kind of traditional games particularly vulnerable: too often, with the best of intentions of teaching the locals play “by proper rules”, or training internationally competitive players, orthochess has eradicated or seriously threatened local traditions. A number of traditional variants from Central and North Asia and the Caucasus disappeared in Soviet times, and Mongolian chess was under severe pressure in Mongolia (it seems to have fared better in Inner Mongolia apparently because Chinese chess is an entirely different game; recent “unified” rules adopted in Inner Mongolia bring the game closer to orthochess though). Traditional variants, while pushed into the background, seem to be still surviving in India, Pakistan and Afghanistan (with recent events in that country, future of any chess form seems bleak enough however); Buryat and Tuvan chess have been recently revived (with

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<sup>11</sup> Significantly at odds with the three sources quoted above (and complementing each other) is W. Jochelson’s report (Jochelson 1933, pp. 65-66): game played on a 7x8 board, with different starting positions. This is either a mistake (board dimensions are not mentioned in the text, only shown on Fig. 24), or some entirely different game. A photo of “native chess, Atka” (Jaggard 1908) clearly shows a square board, apparently 8x8 and unchequered.

historical inaccuracies, due to broken tradition and misinterpretation of literature)<sup>12</sup>; Aleut chess seems to have gone extinct in the late 20th century, and so did Turkish chess in Smolyan (Bulgaria) in the late 1970s. Raazuvaa, while in a much better position, “is fast falling out of fashion. And our generation may be the last to play this game” (Zahir 2017, p. 45). Humanity, or part of it at least, has started to understand the importance of preserving endangered species, or languages, or cultures. Preserving traditional chess variants and the diversity of chess heritage might be a good idea too.

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<sup>12</sup> Videos on the Internet show modern Buryat players starting the game with e.g. 1. e4 d5; historically, the obligatory first move by either the K or Q pawn should be symmetrical, i.e. either 1. e4 e5 or 1. d4 d5. Revived Tuvan chess has Q moving as shatranj F, one square diagonally, instead of R+F.



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