

Bawo

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Bawo (from Swahili "bao": board) is a variant of Bao la Kiswahili played by the Yao in Malawi as a tournament sport.

The oldest Bawo board was made in 1896 in Malawi and is kept today in the British Museum in London.

Regular championships are held at district, regional and national levels in numerous places in Malawi such as Blantyre, Chirimba, and Mzuzu City. Leading players are Philmon Kossa, Isaac Masauli, Bright Mkanda, Isaac Selemani, and Gilos Chitsulo. The winner of the national Bawo League, which sponsored by Lorex Kapanga receives 35 000K (about 230 US Dollars) and a trophy, which is a lot in a country with a per capita income of 69.5 US Dollars per month (in 2009). According to Paul Smith there had already been a national Bawo league sponsored by South African Airways in the 1990s. Tournaments outside of Africa were held 2002-2004 at the *Mindsports Olympiad (MSO)* in Cambridge (England) and in 2010 at the University of Alberta in Edmonton (Canada).

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Rules

The Bawo rules are similar to Bao la Kiswahili except for a few differences.

General differences

- According to Mark Chikoko (Game Cabinet), there are initially eight seeds in each *nyumba* called *kuu* in Malawi (not six as in Zanzibar) and only 20 seeds are kept in reserve, while **Tommy Chibaka** (*bawogame.com*) starts the *kuu* with 10 seeds and plays with 18 seeds in reserve. The *kuu* must have at least as many seeds as it had initially (i.e. 8 or 10) to be considered a functioning *kuu*. Sanderson observed in 1913 that the *kuu* had six seeds and it seems that the number of reserve seeds has diminished in Bawo over the years to shorten the *nemo* stage of the game.
- If a player feels that a *takata* move isn't going to end naturally, he may announce that it might be a never-ending move and stop after the current lap.
- It is permitted to sow the contents of the *kichwa* to the back row, even if it is the only occupied hole of the front row, but it would result in immediate defeat.
- A hole containing 16 seeds or more can never capture.



Initial Position (Mark Chikoko)

Differences related to the first stage of the game

- Before the first stage begins, there is a special opening gambit played by each player in their first turn: The first player empties his holes containing two seeds, adds another seed to them from his reserve (called *nemo* in Bawo), and then places these five as desired in any of the 16 holes on his side without sowing them. The second player does the same to get five seeds for the gambit, but also adds to them all the opponent's seeds, which are opposite to his occupied holes in the opponent's front row and are thus captured.
- Nemo* may only be added to singletons in a *takata* (non-capturing) move, if all holes of the front row outside the *kuu* contain at most a single seed.
- If the only occupied hole in the front row is the *kuu*, the *kuu* has exactly eight seeds (Tommy Chibaka: nine) and nothing can be captured, a seed is put into the *kuu*, then its contents (i.e. all nine seeds -- Tommy Chibaka: eleven) are lifted and sown in either direction.
- The contents of the opponent's *kuu* can only be captured by placing a *nemo* in the opposite hole, if the own *kuu* is not threatened (i.e. the hole opposite to the own *kuu* must be empty).

Differences related to the second stage of the game

- If there is still a (functional) *kuu*, it must be moved on the player's first non-capturing move.
- The contents of a *takasiaed* hole must be captured even if other holes have become also menaced.

Bawo Poem

A Game of Bawo

Take your cue from a game of Bawo
where sides at the edge of doom
are best conceded as losses
and easy withdrawal
leads to stunning victories

Springs hot and cold, dry up;
flowers bloom and fade
and trees at times shed their leaves and their barks
neither recall the bloom
nor visit springs that once gushed waters -
memories are sweetest unruffled by daylight and
forced ceremonies stink worst than rudeness

This meticulous insouciance
these decoys made in heaven
follow a standard design
with familiar specifications

Take you cue from a game of Bawo;
neither recall the bloom of flowers
nor the showers of spring.

Felix Mnthali (1933-)

External Links

- A Malawian site about Bawo (Tommy Chibaka) [ⓘ]
- Bawo rules at Game Cabinet (Mark Chikoko) [ⓘ]
- People playing Bawo [ⓘ]
- Chirimba bawo players celebrating with James Banda (video) [ⓘ]

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