

CAMBODIAN CHESS

Almost the first thing Peter Blommers did on receiving the new edition of the *Encyclopedia* was to tell me that the authority for the form of **Cambodian Chess** reported by P. A. Hill does *not* reduce to “a single informant whose statements are at variance with all other known testimony”. He himself has a photograph of a set, and the Japanese games collector Okano Shin possesses one which was on display at an exhibition “Chess Games of the World” at the Shogi Forum in Tokyo in 2002. Peter has since sent me extracts from three books in Japanese in which the game is described, with translations of the relevant passages: page 98 of *Chess Games of the World* by Umebayashi and Okano, page 90 of a Makruk booklet by Okano, and page 182 of *The Traditional Chess Variants in the East Asia* by Okano (ISBN 978-4-902567-15-1, published in 2007). These descriptions agree with Hill’s in almost everything apart from nomenclature.

Specifically, the game is played on the intersections of a 9x9 lattice, which is crossed by two diagonal lines in the manner of a Burmese chess board (a detail not mentioned by Hill). The 18 men are Kwon (royal piece, moves as chess king), 2 x Neamahn (official, moves one step diagonally, cannot capture backwards), Kwos (elephant, moves as chess king, cannot capture backwards or sideways), Seh (horse, as chess knight), Tuuk (boat, as chess rook), and 9 x Trai (fish, moves and captures one step forward until it enters the enemy camp, when it adopts the king’s move); baseline

Tu S Ks N Kn N Ks S Tu

with 9 x Tr on rank 4. The diagonal lines appear to play no role apart perhaps from conveniently identifying the centre of the board.

As can be seen, this bears out Hill’s description in everything apart from the elephant’s capturing move (Okano prohibits sideways captures, Hill allows them) and the names of some of the men. Okano calls the game Shattrong, but this is the result of a double transliteration (from Cambodian phonetics into Japanese characters, and thence into English) and Peter prefers “Chatrong”. Okano’s piece names are similarly the result of a double transliteration.

The set shown by Okano features attractively turned men, all of circular cross-section apart from the horses, and they are generally similar to those shown in plate 120 of *Chess* by Hans and Siegfried Wichmann (Hamlyn, 1960). The Wichmann text gives the number of men in their set as 32, which would suggest that it was a makruk set, but no doubt similar men were used for both games.

As for the apparent absence of the game from the streets of Phnom Penh in 2003, Peter suggests that this may have been a minor consequence of the mass killings of the Pol Pot era. At any rate, the game definitely existed, and perhaps there are places where it is still played; and I owe David and various other people an apology.