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## Fanorona



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### History

Fanorona is a really **intriguing** board game. It has a long history, but it doesn't belong to a family of similar games like chess, draughts or mancala. Like Go it is a real one-off, with a unique method of capturing. And the way the game develops from a violent confrontation in the opening to a relatively peaceful later stage is quite unlike any other traditional boardgame I have seen.

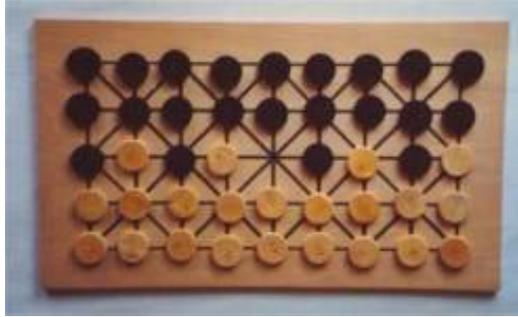
#### Fanorona

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Fanorona is the national game of **Madagascar**, and it is believed to have been derived from the game of *Alquerque*. Alquerque is a game played in Arab countries, and archeological finds in Egypt suggest that it may date back more than 3,000 years. Alquerque could have been brought to Madagascar by traders and developed into Fanorona in the 17th century or even earlier.

There are **three varieties** of Fanorona. The simplest, played on a three-by-three board, appears to be identical to the game of *Three Men's Morris*. In Madagascar it is called *Fanoron-Telo*. The second variant, *Fanoron-Dimy*, is played on a five-by-five grid which is identical to an Alquerque board. The largest and most well-known type of the game is called *Fanoron-Tsivy*. This is the version which I refer to in the rest of this article, and which I will simply call Fanorona.

This picture shows a modern wooden Fanorona board from Spain with the pieces set up in the initial position. The game starts with the board almost full, but usually many pieces are quickly captured!

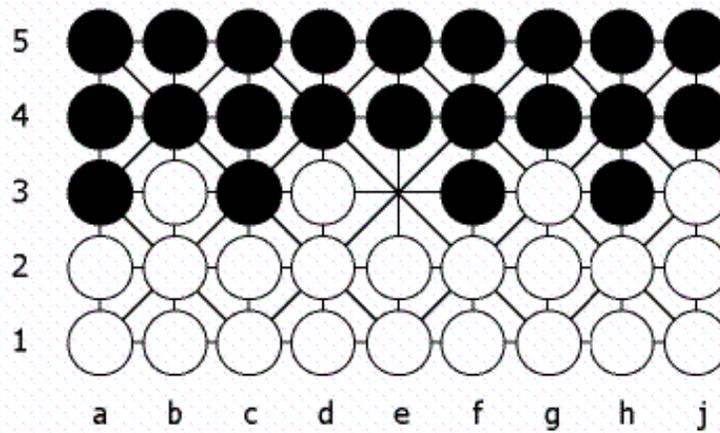


There are many **legendary stories** associated with Fanorona. One of the most famous relates to a fiendish tactical manoeuvre which you can sometimes use to win when you only have three pieces and your opponent has five. This situation is called *telo noho dimy*. The legend is about **King Ralambo** (1575-1610) who had become ill and was deciding what should happen to his kingdom after his death. He thought that it would be best not to divide his kingdom up, so he would have to decide which of his two sons should inherit it. He sent for them both, with the idea that whoever arrived first was obviously the more devoted son and should inherit the throne. The elder son was busy playing Fanorona and was in the situation *telo noho dimy*. He was studying the position carefully to try to see how to win, so he told his father's envoy not to disturb him. He was so absorbed in the difficult position in the game that he did not set out until the next day, by which time his younger brother had taken his place as heir to the throne.

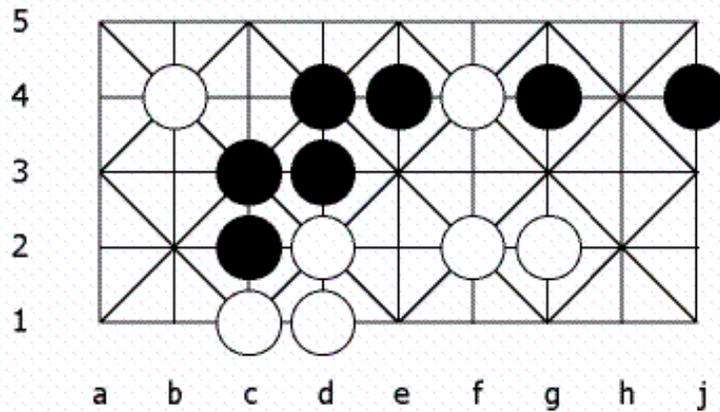
Fanorona in Madagascar nowadays is organised by the *Komity Nasionaly Mpandrindra ny Fanorona* - the national committee for coordination of Fanorona. There is also an **International Fanorona Society** which can be contacted at PO Box 729, Bryn Athyn, PA 19009, USA.

The late **Manfred Wimmer**, who was the first European to become a professional Go player, travelled to Madagascar in the early 1990s. As well as teaching Go in the country, he was said to be writing a book about Fanorona. However, if this book was ever written I have been able to find no trace of it. The best book available in English about the game is said to be *Fanorona, the Classic Game of Tactical Skill* by **Ernest Rabeony**, one of the greatest masters of the game.

## Rules



- The **board** and starting position are as shown in the diagram above. One player has the black pieces and the other has white. They move alternately, with White moving first.
- The **object** of the game is to take all your opponent's pieces, or to leave a position where they have no moves. If neither player can do this, then the game is a draw.
- A normal (capturing) **move** consists of one or more steps. Each step involves moving a piece along one of the lines of the board to an adjacent empty point. This step must capture some opposing pieces, either by *approach* or by *withdrawal*.



- If a piece moves towards an opposing piece, so that after it has moved it is adjacent to the opposing piece, then that piece is captured by *approach*. Any other enemy pieces in a continuous line with the captured piece, in the direction of movement of the attacker, are also **captured**. This does not apply to pieces further away on the same line separated by spaces or by hostile pieces. So in the second diagram shown above, a step from *b4* to *c4* would capture the pieces at *d4* and *e4* only.

- If a piece which is adjacent to an enemy piece moves in the direction directly away from that piece, then the piece is captured by *withdrawal*. Any other enemy pieces in a continuous line with the captured piece, in the direction the attacker is moving from, are also **captured**. This does not apply to pieces further away on the same line separated by spaces or by hostile pieces. So once again in the second diagram a step from *c2* to *b2* would capture the piece at *d2* only.
- If the same step could capture pieces by approach or by withdrawal, the capturing player must **choose** which of the two sets of pieces to take. They cannot both be taken.
- A capturing move consists of one or more steps, all by the same piece, each step making a capture. The pieces captured at each step must be **removed** before the next step of the move is played.
- A player is not compelled to make as many steps as possible in one move. The moving piece may **stop** after any particular step even though further steps would have been possible.
- No two consecutive steps in a move may be in the **same direction**.
- In the course of a move, the moving piece may not visit the **same point** twice.
- Only if no captures are possible may a player make a different sort of move. The player who **cannot capture** must then play what is called a *paika* move. This consists of simply moving one piece along a line to an adjacent point.

The tactics of Fanorona can be very complicated. A common theme is the **sacrifice** of one or more pieces to weaken the opponent's position.

## Vela

The game is not usually played for money. Instead the incentive is to avoid a punishment called the *vela*. This is what happens if a player loses the game. A second game is played with **different rules**, the loser of the previous game playing first. The rules for the first part of this vela game are as follows:

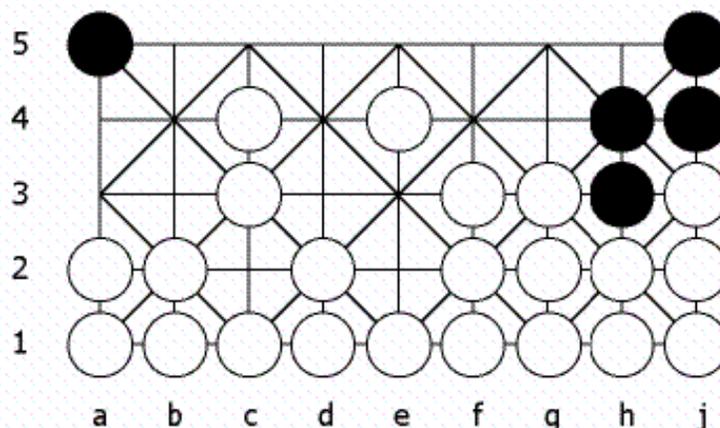
- Each move consists of moving a piece to an adjacent empty point along the lines of the board.
- On each move made by the loser of the previous game, only **one piece** may be taken. This is still done using the approach or

*withdrawal* techniques, but now only the piece nearest to the moving piece is affected. There is only one step per move, and a paika move is not allowed.

- The winner of the previous game moves without making any captures. The move made may be a paika move; or else a move which would normally be a single-step capturing move, but without taking any pieces off. Each move by this player must leave the opponent with the opportunity to make a capture, otherwise the game is **forfeited**.

These rules are used until the winner of the previous game has only **five pieces** left. The game then reverts to the normal rules. So the player who lost the last game has to avoid the humiliation of losing an unequal contest with 22 pieces pitted against five! If this is achieved, the player is said to have *eaten* the vela, and lifted the punishment. The next game then reverts to the **normal rules**. Otherwise the hapless loser must try again to eat the vela.

It is not so unlikely as it sounds for five pieces to win against 22. In the position below, Black to move has a **forced win** where all the white pieces are captured in two moves! Can you see how?



A championship match consists of ten ordinary games, plus vela games. Two normal games are played with each of the five possible **opening moves** - so that each player has the chance to play both White and Black in each opening. There is no vela after a draw, so there will be a variable number of games in a match. **Points** are scored for both normal and vela games won.

Traditionally a player who was unable to lift the vela punishment by winning a game was forced either to lick the *lakabe*, the centre point of the board - or else to get down on his knees and bleat like a **sheep**!

## Links

This Madagascan [Fanorona site](#) has the rules of **all three** varieties of the game, and other Fanorona information, in French.

Here is the Fanorona page of [Gamerz.net](#), where there have been **play-by-email** tournaments. Another place where you can play Fanorona is [Eppstein's Fanorona site](#) where you can play against a Java applet **program**. This program appears to be **very strong**, and I have only managed to beat it once out of very many attempts.

Fanorona has been an important part of the **culture** of Madagascar for many years. One example of this is the famous picture by Malagasy artist **Emile Ralambo**, called [Men Playing Fanorona](#).

If you are interested in buying a **Fanorona set**, then this site of [Das Spiel](#) in Hamburg has one that you can order. Or you could try this French site belonging to [la Mèche Rebelle](#).

## References

- *Le Fanorona - Jeu National Malgache*, J & S Chauvicourt
- *Fanorona - History, Rules & Strategy*, Leonard Fox
- *How to Play Fanorona*, Komity Nasionaly Mpandrindra ny Fanorona
- *Board & Table Games of Many Civilisations vol 2*, R C Bell

- [Paul Smith](#)



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