

THE MALICIOUS GAME: Friendship, Foresight, and Philosophy at an Iraqi Teahouse in Jordan

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On a warm fall night in 2016, I passed through the dark alley that leads to the World Cup Teahouse, a popular gathering spot for Iraqi nationals living in Amman, Jordan. I was greeted by the familiar scene of about forty men, ranging in age between twenty and sixty years, playing games on small, felt-topped tables. As I approached, the click-clack sound of tiles and fruity hookah scents embraced me with a comforting familiarity. But when I arrived at our table, I saw the game had changed. Four players sat around an octagonal board with a hole in the middle, into which they threw playing cards before moving colored marbles around a circular track of small divots. Nearly every table was occupied by a similar apparatus, with only a pair of old men left dicing at backgammon.

“I call it the malicious game [*al-la'aba al-khabeetha*],”¹ explained Saad, a twenty-eight-year-old pharmacist with narrow fingers and a light beard, “because you always want to make your opponents fail.” As the beads of colored glass raced around the board, pairs of players worked to “eat” the other team’s marbles by snapping their own piece into a slot occupied by an enemy token. The retorts of palms slapped in triumph and fists pounded in rage amplified each one of these coups, drumming out a counterpoint to the pop songs playing over the PA system. To keep this rapid rhythm from lagging, participants screamed “Play! Play!” in the

ears of anyone who took too long to make their move. “This game is like rush-hour traffic,” I told Saad, recalling the sonic surround of honks and curses from Ammani drivers who seemed more worried about cutting you off than getting home. My friend laughed, then added a crucial caveat: “In America, you don’t play games like we do. I know people who migrated there, and they say that if you want to socialize, you go to the bar on the weekends. But here, we don’t drink alcohol. We play games at the teahouse, and we play every night if we can.”

How does a malicious game become the cornerstone of friendship? Anthropologists working with precarious migrants often administer the concept of hope as an antidote to their subjects’ anxieties (Khosravi 2017; Parla 2019; Turner 2020, to name a few). As a discursive strategy, the uncertainty-and-hope narrative re-evaluates the activities of displaced people as evidence for their persistent agency, very much like older discourses of “resistance” that defined agency in relation to the constraints it appeared to exceed (Mahmood 2011, 5–10; Kleist and Jansen 2016, 378). But the hope trope proves ill suited for a case that finds refugees of imperial war putting their own worst impulses into play. The malicious game challenges depictions of the displaced as figures of innocence—an innocence that, as Miriam Ticktin (2017, 579) argues, would imply their “absence of knowledge or experience.” Of course, like most people enduring displacement, my companions experienced uncertainty about what might become of them in a year or a month. Yet even people who cannot formulate long-term projects must attain insight into what Jane Guyer (2007, 409) calls “the temporal frame of the ‘near-future’ . . . the process of implicating oneself in the ongoing life of the social and material world.” A future that stands just beyond the present seems to be absent from the horizon of hope, “a method of radical temporal reorientation of knowledge” (Miyazaki 2004, 5). Likewise, the concept of uncertainty aims at more remote possibilities, “before the nature of the actual event is known” (Samimiam-Darash and Rabinow 2015, 5). An account of refuge without innocence, on the other hand, would address forms of knowledge that displaced people rely on to navigate their ongoing situation. Evading detection by officials, tolerating harassment by locals, and working under exploitative employers all sculpt a hard-earned sensitivity to “the forthcoming of the game,” to use Pierre Bourdieu’s analogy (2000, 207). As I aim to show, playing *jaakaaroo* demands a practiced attunement to the immediately forthcoming dimension of social and material processes. And so, too, do the lives of Iraqi refugees in Jordan. This essay therefore takes the malicious game as an opportunity to “clear the way for alternative ontological starting points” that can “open up political, moral, and affective grammars” (Ticktin 2017, 578) for writing

displacement. Ultimately, this grammar helps us articulate how ordinary practices of conviviality revitalize social life in the wake of devastation.

Let me begin by noting that neglect of the near future reflects our culturally specific epistemology. Whereas Ticktin (2017, 579) claims that an insistence on innocence is “overdetermined by its conceptual history within Christian discourse,” Guyer (2007, 414) shows that displacing the future into the distant realm of “prophetic time” reflects the distinct inheritance of Protestant eschatology. The concepts of secular social science were born of a religious genealogy (Asad 1993). Consequently, Western thinkers have “been compelled to exclude certain claims of awareness from the domain of human knowledge, and to brand them as mere expressions of fervor or as leaps of imagination” (Yazdi 1992, 5). Thinkers from the region where I conduct my fieldwork, on the other hand, see no issue with examining insights that leap one step ahead of the present. Over the past few years, I have explored this other tradition through “fieldwork in theory” (Bardawil 2020), which began during conversations with my gaming companions. How did you know that the person who walked into your workplace was an inspector? Why do you think that the dreams you had last night will sink the boat on which you booked passage? And what tipped you off that I had another jack in my hand? Several people alerted me to the work of Ali Al-Wardi, the twentieth-century Iraqi author whose oeuvre straddles historical sociology, philosophical logic, and parapsychology. Then, during the COVID-19 pandemic, which marked the first year in a decade during which I was not able to travel to Jordan, I turned to his works, tracing the genealogy of his concepts through other works of Arabic philosophy.²

Approaching this tradition from an anthropological perspective, I am struck by how it bridges questions of knowing and being that our discipline places under the separate keywords of *subjectivity* and *ontology*. The world and the self are mirrors for one another; tarnished mirrors that, through practice, can be polished to reflect reality (Ibn al-'Arabi 1980, 50). As such, this essay begins from the side of the subject, discussing the lives of my interlocutors, before turning to the game in itself. The first concept I introduce is *estimation* (*al-wahm*)—a distinct sensitivity to the forthcoming acts of other beings, both human and non-human, that we call their intentions. Estimation is essential to the everyday struggles of those who must stay one step ahead in a hostile city. And estimation comes into play at the *jaakaaroo* table as a prehensive knowledge of an ongoing process unfolding through a rapid-fire whirl of tightly coordinated actions. Then, shifting to a more object-oriented register, I ask how a game, an inanimate technological device, can remake the feelings and relationships of its users. Introducing a second,

closely related concept from Arabic philosophy, I raise the possibility that *jaakaaroo* incarnates an *agent intellect* (*al-'aql al-faa'il*)—a mathematical-material form that recalibrates our anticipations according to its unfolding patterns. This leads me to suggest that *jaakaaroo's* alterity, a borrowed device coordinating relationships on its own terms, empowers players to revitalize a threatened form of life. Finally, the conclusion addresses the politics of play, pointing to how gaming became an object of controversy during the 2019 uprisings in Iraq.

This study contributes to a larger anthropological conversation about how alternative ontologies can help us understand the persistence of shared life on unstable grounds. “The Middle East is a good place to consider what happens when the ground dissolves under our feet,” Julia Elyachar reminds us, not only because imperialism and climate change have hit this part of the world particularly hard but also because the region’s intellectual traditions explicitly thematize the “channel[s] through which information, signals, and value flow” (Elyachar 2022, 7, 3). For Elyachar (2022, 5), the concept of *barzakh*, the gap between the known and the unknown across which insight must leap, anticipates Western studies of proprioception, the extended awareness that enables collective movement on unstable ground. Amira Mittermaier (2019, 20) has drawn on popular discourses of *al-ghayb*, “that which evades attempts to capture or describe it,” to name the immanent presence of the unknown in urban spaces of popular politics and has used visions seen in dreams to model the repetitive household visits that bind individuals in routines of obligation (Mittermaier 2010, 153–58). Finally, Hussein Agrama (2020, 18) shows how interreligious fasting aligns Muslim and Christian neighbors to “the time of shared practice,” crafting solidarities that transcend sectarian distinctions. These authors address Egypt, but attention to popular solidarities is perhaps even more urgent in the case of Iraq, where the U.S. invaders systematically demolished the social and material infrastructures on which public life once stood (Al-Mohammad, 2007; Dewachi 2013; Rubaii 2019). Meanwhile, Amman can be experienced as a uniquely alienating city, with streets laid out to funnel different social classes to their proper destinations (Parker 2009) and with access to “cosmopolitan” spaces roped off by metal detectors and entrance fees (Schwedler 2010). Lastly, Egypt, Iraq, and Jordan have all been subject to a U.S. imperial project that attempted to integrate the region within a global system of exploitable labor and free trade. Everyday acts of conviviality invite us to glimpse how U.S. imperialism is lived and contested in the present.

The fact that gaming, dreaming, or fasting can align experiences across differences makes these practices relevant to cultural anthropology in the broadest

sense. [Émile Durkheim \(1995, 39–40\)](#), when confronted with the fact of rituals that circulated beyond institutions, declared these footloose forms as “magic,” confining the topic to a digression from the proper object of social science. The concepts of estimation and the agent intellect, on the other hand, unlock an intellectual barrier that has long gated off a significant dimension of culture. As the essay progresses, I note parallels between the mechanisms of the game and other devices poetic, comedic, magical, and mechanical. These ethnographic comparisons evoke the radical sense of possibility posed by anthropology’s ontological turn, which can remake our understanding of human nature, so long as we do not try to keep “our science” separate from “their beliefs” ([Graeber 2015, 7](#)). And working in the “significant overlap” between Middle Eastern and European perspectives, we can better “consider different groundings of collective movement” ([Elyachar 2022, 4](#)).³ Moving from theory to method, the way this perspective brings together questions of knowing and of being could help restore appreciation for ethnographic research as a spirited act of presence that promises insight into other lives (see [Furani 2019](#)). As this article moves from my interlocutors’ accounts to my own experiences playing the malicious game, I ask readers to remember that practices like gaming ([Boellstorff 2008](#)), dancing ([Sklar 1991](#)), or boxing ([Wacquant 2004](#)) will, by imposing common routines, enable different people to experience a shared reality. This simple truth of our method was clouded by a pandemic that turned contact with other beings into a source of anxiety. But for readers ready to be affected by the presence of others—to experience “passion” in the original sense of the term ([Asad 2003, 68](#))—I invite you to follow me into the unknown, a leap that every *jaakaaroo* player must take each time they make a move and that my interlocutors make every day of their lives.

THE IRAQIS OF JORDAN: Refuge without Innocence

Younis was the best *jaakaaroo* player I met. Every time one of his marbles swooped in to capture an enemy piece, he would squeal with laughter, his bright eyes narrowing behind reddening cheeks, while an opponent screamed curses inches from his face. His friends called him lucky, but I think Younis’s secret lay in his ability to keep multiple marbles in play at the same time. In *jaakaaroo*, you are often forced to choose between either advancing a marble that is already on the board or putting a new piece into the play. Having more marbles in play is the more taxing strategy: each piece is vulnerable to being sent back to the beginning of the track by an opponent. But it can also serve as a weapon, and the difference often comes down to the player’s ability to keep track of all their positions at once.

Younis knew how to operate with divided attentions. Educated as an accountant, he made a reliable hustle couriering documents between Iraqi investors and Jordanian bureaucrats. Strangers often approached our table to hand him loose piles of paper, which he would stack next to one of his three cell phones on the black felt tabletop. Of his past three jobs, Younis had left two because the businesses were raided by the Ministry of Labor, and one because his boss kept calling him a “stupid donkey.” To avoid detection, he mastered the local dialect of Arabic and created a Jordanian alter ego, complete with a fake family history, that he put on when bringing tax receipts to the local police station. “The salaries are low here,” he explained, “and the boss can treat you however he wants because you’re afraid you’ll never find another job if you quit.” Still, he kept at it. “If you don’t have some money and the guys call you to come out to the teahouse, you have to say, ‘Sorry, I’m sitting at home tonight.’” On most nights, Younis would arrive late, with dark circles under his eyes, yawning and complaining about how much crap he had taken that day. Then he would start to play the malicious game and his tired face would transform into a familiar mask of gleeful cunning. As much as his double life exhausted him, Younis came back, again and again, to practice malice on his closest friends.

Younis’s status is increasingly common among global refugees. Like nearly 80 percent of refugees, he and his friends are not encamped, inhabiting what the United Nations terms a “protracted situation”: a long-lasting limbo without clear plans for resolution. Contemporary anthropology recognizes that refugees are not exceptional subjects, and instead labor under the same structures of capitalist exploitation that pervade the world system (Ramsay 2020). And the postcolonial states that host protracted refugees exercise a sovereignty heavily “compromised” by their dependency on foreign aid, security, and investment (Arar 2017). The approximately 150,000 Iraqi nationals who reside in a kingdom of about 9 million (more than half of them also displaced people and guest workers) are subject to an overlapping set of nonbinding international agreements, regulations on foreign investment, local labor laws, and covert political deals. Scandal and graft characterized responses to the Iraqi refugee crisis, including doctored population surveys used to funnel humanitarian aid into local municipal budgets (Chatelard 2008) and a passport-selling scheme that contributed to the imprisonment of the director of Jordan’s national intelligence agency (El-Shamayleh, 2012). If mass-media depictions of the Middle Eastern refugee crisis present refugees as paragons of an “innocence [that] promises a space of purity” free from political and economic interests (Ticktin 2017, 578), the case of Iraqis in Jordan puts these ambiguities into focus.

Since 2012, I have conducted fieldwork with a broad section of this population, ranging from the affluent ex-Baathists who own the best hotels and restaurants in the city to the rural Christian villagers who cook the meals and clean the beds. My playing companions are better off than many, but far from worry free. And they experience the stakes of their ambiguous status in a particularly acute way. As couriers, shop clerks, construction contractors, and commercial agents, they spend their days traversing a city of strangers and, in their words, “dealing with all kinds of people.” Amman is home to “all kinds,” from generations of Palestinian refugees and more recent Syrian arrivals to pleasure-seeking tourists from the Gulf monarchies to large numbers of Egyptian, Filipino, and Sri Lankan guest workers, not to mention Euro-American academics, humanitarians, and spies. As in other climates of “generalized suspicion,” people adopt new techniques for screening potential threats (Bonhomme 2012, 226). Intentions could be gleaned from gestures, postures, styles of dress and coiffure, or even the license plate on their car—this last technique also practiced within Iraq’s zones of sectarian suspicion (Rubaii 2019, 133). Acceptable topics of conversation and even decisions about which name to use were determined by these cues. “It can be even worse when Iraqis meet one another,” one woman explained, “because you don’t know one another’s politics. It won’t be violent, but it can be unpleasant.” And these decisions are made very quickly, collapsing a broad knowledge of history, politics, and theology into a lightning-quick response to threat.

EXILE AND AMBIVALENCE: Estimation and the Divided Personality

What do we call this anticipatory orientation to another’s intentions, whether we find it on the street or at the gaming table? Consider the concept of *estimation* (*al-wahm*), introduced by the medieval physician and philosopher Avicenna (b. 980 AD). Estimation provides us with knowledge about the immediately forthcoming intentions of other beings, which is necessary for “the self to conduct itself properly and circumspectively amidst beings in the world” (El-Bizri 2003, 84). Younis’s everyday struggles resonate with Avicenna’s own exemplary case of estimation, in which a sheep perceives the hostile intentions of a wolf. Although “the sheep cannot literally be said to ‘smell danger’ in the scent of the wolf” or ‘see hostility’ in the wolf’s eyes,” it nevertheless “perceives these ‘intentions’ of hostility and danger directly through another faculty,” which collates discrete sensibilia into the form of a threat (Black 2000, 60; see also Avicenna 1959, 183–85). Similarly, Younis described how he avoided inspectors from the Ministry of Labor when he saw a

group of men in suits entering his workplace as he was returning from a cigarette break. “I just knew I shouldn’t follow them inside,” he told us one night at the teahouse. “So I left, and I didn’t look back.” Saad and his colleagues at the pharmacy also relied on the arts of estimation to deal with the strangers who entered their store. “I could tell right away he was Iraqi,” one said of a customer, “even before he started talking. From the way he stood, the way he leaned on the counter.” In these examples, estimation appears as a quick-and-dirty, fight-or-flight reaction, an impression of the whole too quick to consider the details of the parts.

Although estimation is pitched toward the future, it also draws from past memory (El-Bizri 2003, 83). And this means that estimation can become warped by events that set it sprinting on the wrong course. Avicenna recognized that even the most trivial provocations could misdirect our estimative faculty. If you remark to someone that honey resembles intestinal bile, for example, they will feel disgust when reaching for the honey jar, even if their conscious mind knows the difference (Avicenna 1959, 182–83; see also Black 2000, 61). For those who rely on the arts of dealing, rapidly reading strangers’ intentions could put one on the path to error. One of Saad’s colleagues described how a customer threatened to call the police when she overheard his name, Jaafar, which he shared with an important figure in Shia Islam.

She heard my name and started saying I didn’t like Saddam [Hussein] and I let the Iranians into my country. She made three decisions about me. First, she heard my name and decided I was Shi’i. Then, because she thought I was Shi’i, that I hate Saddam. Then, because of that, I let the Iranians into the country. I wasn’t even alive during that [Iran-Iraq] war [of 1980-1988]! So, I even told her, ‘No, I even love Saddam!’ *Because it all happened so fast.*

The moment of judgment, when the near future bursts into the present in the form of an angry customer, permits no deliberation. These threats inevitably recalled the conflicts that drove displacement in the first place. And while people sometimes talked about their ability to deal with strangers with pride, they more often spoke in terms of headaches, ulcers, weight loss, and “pressure in the nerves.” The colloquial term *dhaayij*, a reactive disposition prone to lashing out at perceived slights, captures the enervating consequences of overactive estimation. Indeed, everyday life made demands that directly conflicted with an “ordinary ethics . . . deeply embedded in the categories and functions of languages and ways of speaking, in the commonsense ways we distinguish among various kinds of actors

or characters, kinds of actions and manners of acting” (Lambek 2010, 2). Younis, Saad, and their companions often attributed the collapse of Iraq and the difficulties of life in Jordan to the *nifaaq* (hypocrisy) of *maslahchiin* (self-interested people) and *rijaal as-siyaasa* (men of politics). Some players told poignant stories of former companions who, after losing a loved one to violence in Iraq, became consumed with prejudice. “We used to play with him,” one story went, “but then his cousin was killed. It started with a few posts on Facebook. And soon enough, he couldn’t shut up about the Shia. We couldn’t sit with him anymore.”

How should one get by in a city of strangers? Listen to how Younis explains that upright behavior also manifests in the temporal frame of the near future:

You see how it is with me. I’m always helping people. Just the other day, Nidal,” one of his closest friends and playing partners, “asked me to give him one of my phone cards. And I did! Most people wouldn’t go out of their way to do this.” I asked him if he thought these friends would do him a good turn in the future, to which he replied, “God only knows [*allah y’allim*]! It’s natural, it’s humane [*insaani*] to help people. If you see someone thirsty in the desert, you give him water. If I help you, it’s because we’re friends [*asdiqaa*]. And if you see me in need, you will help me. It’s not self-interest [*maslaha*].

Although our sense of the immediately forthcoming dimension of social processes can be a source of alienation, it is also the temporal frame in which ethical relationships emerge. The idea that morally correct action bears no long-term intentions is captured in a popular Iraqi saying that admonishes to “do good and throw it in the river [*sowii khair wa thibeh bish-shatt*].” Like the refugee siblings [Suad Joseph \(1994, 60\)](#) describes, my companions idealized an ongoing, uncalculated intimacy in which “constant connectivity was taken to be an expression of love.” A sense of constant connectivity is realized over multiple, repeated interactions that make up an urban “social infrastructure”—the shared semiotic habits used to open and maintain connections with other people ([Elyachar 2010](#)). Linguistic anthropologists reserve a special category for this type of “phatic” talk that establishes and maintains channels of communication ([Zuckerman 2016](#)). But the everyday dialogues of my interlocutors suggest that no talk was too small to avoid betraying one’s identity and origins. “Did you hear those questions he was asking me about where I grew up,” one person asked me after meeting a stranger at a party; “he’s trying to figure out if I’m Sunni or Shia.” Another explained, “If you see a long

beard, talk about God. If you see a goatee, talk about soccer.” And so, despite their disavowals, my companions’ reality left few alternatives to corrosive behaviors.

Al-Wardi, the twentieth-century Iraqi author, paid attention to the internal contradictions that arise when one’s social milieu incentivizes unethical acts. Al-Wardi, like Avicenna, recognized that human consciousness is not unitary, that our souls are a meeting ground for multiple modes of awareness, and that these inner capacities can be shaped by experience. Writing a few years before Iraq’s 1958 revolution, he associated these circumstances with the hypocrisy that characterized his present (Al-Wardi 2013, 17). Under these conditions, our “hidden mind” (*al-‘aql al-baatin*) perceives patterns of behavior that lead other people to achieve success, whether these behaviors are moral or immoral. “The hidden mind does not understand anything from our exhortations or our advice,” writes Al-Wardi, “For it is preoccupied with that which social habits dictate to it . . . this is the latent incentive within the depths of the soul and human beings cannot even slightly rid themselves of it” (Al-Wardi 2013, 25). Despite this, we continue to aspire toward standards of conduct made explicit in authoritative discourse. Individuals experience the wrenching feeling that the stated values of their society no longer correspond with the acts required to prosper. The distance between what our manifest reason advocates and what our hidden faculties perceive produces a “doubled personality” (*izdiwaaj ash-shakhsiyya*) that brings about anxiety, depression, and anger (Al-Wardi 2013, 24). Some interlocutors suggested that Al-Wardi, still widely read today, put his finger on the ambiguities of their lives. Even those who did not read him arrived at similar conclusions. “I’d love to do the right thing,” explained a factory machinist after being sold faulty parts by a local supplier, “but how can I be honest in a place like this?” This question cannot be answered, only endured. And that is where play can help.

PUTTING FORESIGHT INTO PLAY: The Well-Timed Taunt

One night, I sat with five men around the *jaakaaroo* table and listened to a debate about God. It all started when Abdulhadi, who was scrolling on his phone, shared a news story claiming that a grave containing gigantic skeletons had been unearthed. Faris insisted that giants were real. “There are giant footprints in the Kaaba,” he explained, referring to the center of the Meccan pilgrimage. Seated across from him, Faris’s playing partner, Jasim, pressed for more evidence: “Where are the bones? Can you show them to me?” Soon, the conversation turned to an all-out debate over religion. I knew Jasim was an avowed atheist who, like many non-believers, enjoyed being provocative: as a teenager, he would go out in Baghdad

wearing the coiffured hair and dark clothes associated with Iraq's "emo" subculture, something that could get you harassed or killed. And I knew Faris prayed regularly, abstained from alcohol, and that his faith had only strengthened after a near-death experience in a car accident. Where was this going? Faris plucked one of Jasim's marbles off the board and held it in the air. "Why would you not want to get a perspective from outside your life," he asked, indicating the board, "in order to better take charge of your behavior?" In response, Jasim grabbed the marble back and returned it to its place. "I prefer to stay on the ground." The game resumed, and the conversation moved on to other topics.

When it came to playing *jaakaaroo*, nothing was off the table. The provocations that flew across the board touched on themes that, arising elsewhere, might have ended friendships. Anthropologists have long recognized that customary conduct is suspended when action takes place within the frame of play (Bateson 1972). And, elsewhere in the region, card games conjure an interactional frame that enables social contact across sectarian divisions (Levy 1999). But the theory of frames presumes what needs to be explained, which is how a shared orientation to unfolding experience can be constructed, broken, and repaired.⁴ Context is not a ready-to-hand container for activity, but a product of the interactions it enframes, dynamically emerging and transforming across each speaker's turn in an ongoing dialogue (Duranti and Goodwin 1992). And so, instead of taking play as given, I want to ask how a game can act on our orientation to the next move in an ongoing process.

So far, we have treated estimation as a captive of custom, the unwitting mirror of an unjust society. But elsewhere, in his writings on paranormal phenomena, Al-Wardi (1996, 128) described how our hidden faculties can be therapeutically altered through techniques of "suggestion and repetition" that touch the soul at a more obscure level (see also Pursley 2018, 341). Leaving aside the question of whether *jaakaaroo* is a paranormal phenomenon, consider how the play of repetitive patterns in the malicious game commands a suggestive power over its players. Faris and Jasim were headed for conflict, but their momentum was interrupted, or perhaps redirected, when they restored their attentions to the board. A board game is not the same as a fight, but the way this game plays out might serve as a compelling substitute. Thomas Malaby has argued that players' preference for one game over another reflects the way that each game simulates a specific manifestation of contingency. In his terms, the game of *jaakaaroo*, like the encounters it mirrors, incarnates a specifically "social contingency," where the ability to read and respond to interpersonal contact becomes "what is at stake" in play (Malaby

2003, 80). And by instantiating risky stakes “virtually”—that is, through technologies that generate the effect of something without needing that something to be present—games provide new spaces for shared forms of life (Boellstorff 2008, 33). Unlike everyday conversations, *jaakaaroo* gives players room to make the wrong move or infer the wrong intention. Then the marbles return to the beginning, to travel their circuit again and again, night after night.

To understand *jaakaaroo*'s patterns of interaction, we need to take a closer look at how it is played. Before we do, I want to make clear that watching how a game is played is not the same as reading its rules, any more than attending a symphony is the same as reading sheet music (Boellstorff 2008, 67).⁵ As such, I will be discussing “the played game, the experience of play in the game, the temporal and phenomenological totality of what game designers call ‘game dynamics’” (Burnett 2012, 67). Saad, who introduced us to *jaakaaroo*, has given me an example: “Someone could be right about to enter their home and you can throw down a five to make him lose his position and start over.” Right away, an experienced player is telling us that the game’s provocations intervene into our sense of what is about to happen in an ongoing process. And Saad’s specific example of throwing a five-card is especially infuriating. The setup involves the anticipation that arises as players watch their marbles creeping up on their destination, promising the satisfying *click* of slotting the ambitious token into its destination. But as the marble inches closer to home, it becomes a target. And this leads us to the punch line. Most cards allow players to move *their own marbles* a number of spaces equal to the card’s value (a three moves you three spaces, a six moves you six, etc.). The five, however, lets you move *anyone else’s marble*. In most cases, the five was used to help a partner out of a dangerous position or to capture an enemy token. However, the five could also be used to force an opponent’s marble to travel past the 90-degree turn into its “home,” effectively placing it back at the beginning of its journey around the circular track. The maneuver turns an opponent’s own momentum against them, giving their marble an extra push at the exact moment it does not need one. It is a provocation stated in the grammar of the game.

If you were there, in the teahouse, you would hear the impact of Saad’s play. There is a strong correspondence between a game’s mechanics for contriving contingency and the patterns of noisemaking that accompany play (Malaby 2003, 60–62). Here, teasing always came on the heels of decisive maneuvers. The sting of frustration was echoed in the audible *click* players make with their marbles when slamming them onto an opponent’s piece, echoed again in the high-five *slap* that passes between victorious partners, and reiterated once more in the *slam* of

the loser's palm pounding the table. As players' utterances align with the percussive slapstick of the game, complex combinations of acts and words settled into patterns. These routines play out across multiple turns, giving each participant an opportunity to echo the game's provocative cadence (cf. Bialostok and Watson 2022). Like bridge, *jaakaaroo* is played in teams of two against two. Turns alternate between teams, meaning that every time you make a move, an opponent has a chance to counter it. The most dizzying and delightful moments came when we were caught up in repeatedly reversing one another's moves. For example, a player could use a jack to swap an opponent's marble with a partner's. This transforms a good position into a bad one in the blink of an eye. But the move can be countered if the next player to take a turn has another jack in hand. So long as players have the correct cards, they can continue to reverse one another's interventions, the very desire to frustrate becoming frustrated. Each turn at play tends to be accompanied by a brief taunt, which moves from mouth to mouth around the table:

1. *A. plays a jack on D.'s marble.*

D.: "Al-hasad!" [the "evil eye" of envy]

2. *B., D.'s partner, undoes A.'s move with his jack.*

A.: "Al-hasad!"

3. *C. plays a four, moving his marble to "eat" B.'s.*

B.: "Al-hasad!"

4. *D. hesitates, surveying the board*

. . . **A., B. & C.:** "Thibeh!" ["Throw it!" i.e., play a card]

This example arose after a Shi'i player, who was also a *sayyid*, or descendent in the lineage of the prophet Mohammad, displayed exceptional good luck. It is said that the *sayyids* possess the power to inflict the evil eye of envy (*al-hasad*). The taunt played on prejudices about Shia religious practices that equate them with non-modern or pre-Islamic superstition. As the game attained its dizzying rhythm of reversals, this single word—*al-hasad*—began to circulate from mouth to mouth, including from the original target, all in time with the action taking place on the board. The specific term matters less than we might think. On other nights, the word or phrase that moved from mouth to mouth might be a political slogan, the name of a player's aunt, or just good old-fashioned profanity. As with poetic techniques of repetition and parallelism, the word's signifying function is placed in tension with its sonic materiality, which marks out rhythmic meters immanent to the act of communication itself (see Jakobson 1960). If jokes permit

the speaker to say the unsayable because they shape expression according to borrowed, hackneyed forms (Seizer 1997), then the malicious game is a mean joke told in cards and marbles. Keeping this semiotic centrifuge spinning demanded a heightened sensitivity to the near future as it revealed itself amid a whirl of activity. Hands fly alongside words, grasping across the board, seeking (or taking) space through which to move. And subjective orientations to this process are transformed through repetitive engagement with the device. Game mechanics recruit their players into “distinctive procedural and phenomenological routines” by providing “a unique ‘cycle of energy and concentration’ and a corresponding cycle of affective peaks and dips” (Schüll 2012, 18). Here, players internalize the board and pieces as extensions of the self, never looking before they leap, moving their marbles in broad sweeps and landing them exactly where they intend.

Any hesitation would be met with screamed injunctions to hurry up. As I learned with difficulty, no one tolerates a player who counts their moves one space at a time. Injunctions to keep up the pace recall acts of “conversational repair”—moments in an interaction that call back to the perceptual frame in which that interaction is unfolding (Sicoli 2020, 101). Here, as in the argument between Faris and Jasim, repairing the frame reoriented attentions to the ongoing process of the game. As in blitz chess, players choose to experience the ecstatic, intuitive rhythms of rapid play (Desjarlais 2011, 18–19). In Western epistemology, this willed suggestibility invites terms like *trance* or *flow*. Instead, I would argue it is an achievement of “knowledge by presence” (*ilm al-hudhuri*): a state of absorption so intense that “the individual reality of the self as knowing subject [is] united with the reality of the object known” (Yazdi 1992, 176). Knowledge by presence emerges when estimation is oriented toward the objectively forthcoming dimension of another being (El-Bizri 2003, 82–86). And when that presence is experienced across individual subjects, each experiences their own being as it emanates from the same affordances of the same reality, much like the anthropological concept of intersubjectivity (Duranti 2010). Maintaining this state requires a kinesthetic and cognitive realignment to a choreography emerging from statistically determined situations. The game’s formal properties determine the relationship between acts and intentions on behalf of the players, automating the production of malice. All this suggests that agency can consist of a cultivated openness to receiving even painful and upsetting impulses from other beings (Asad 2003, 79). Still, we are left asking what those beings are.

AGENT INTELLECT: The Ingenious Device of the Cross-and-Circle

Jaakaaroo manipulates relationships by orchestrating social processes according to its own routines. Remarkably, the trick becomes more effective when players do not dwell on its mechanisms. But if knowledge by presence entails the absorption of the knowing subject by the object of knowledge, what is that object? In Arabic philosophy, human cognition became possible when we heightened our attunement to the world's immanent patterns and connections, "natural forms appearing in matter" (Davidson 1992, 76). The relations between these natural forms suggest the presence of "active intellect" (*al-'aql al-faa'il*), emanating fields of movement, growth, and attraction that encompass discrete objects, animals, or people within higher unities (Davidson 1992, 85). And when the subject interiorizes these forms as "acquired intellect," our intuitively prescient sense of estimation begins to evolve into a fuller, more sophisticated consciousness of reality (Davidson 1992, 92). Union with the agent intellect anticipates the sci-fi imagery of "cyborg" consciousness distributed across high-tech devices (Haraway 1991) and back-to-the-land metaphors of ecological "assemblages" (Tsing 2015). But no one genre grasps Arabic philosophy's emphasis on the unity of existence over the diversity of essences (El-Bizri 2000, 7). Whether we are dealing with other people or playing a game (or having a multispecies encounter, as in Avicenna's example of wolves and sheep), we are apprehending the presence of an intentional agent disclosing its forthcoming being. Now, is it too weird to theorize a board game as the incarnation of a cosmic intellect?

I would have said so, once. But that was before I investigated the genealogy of *jaakaaroo*. The first clue came from a story in *Al-Ghad*, one of Jordan's major papers, which described how the *jaakaaroo* phenomenon began among teenage girls, who taught the game to their café-going brothers (Mahbooba 2016). One young woman described how she enjoyed *jaakaaroo* because it gave her the opportunity to "harass [*taharrosh*] your closest friends." I was struck by the term *taharrosh*, which often describes misogynistic street harassment. Apparently, my companions were not the only ones who used *jaakaaroo* to manifest the threatening limits of their world at the center of their friendships.⁶ Digging deeper, I found that the game's distinctive "cross and circle" (Culin 1895) architecture, consisting of a ring of spaces divided into quadrants around which players race, has inspired discord across continents and through the ages. The oldest known example, *yut* (or *nyout*), still inspires good-natured arguments in Korean households today. The South Asian cross-and-circle game, *pacisi-chaupar*, links cosmic oppositions to affective entanglements in early Mughal visual depictions of the *Mahābhārata*, which

see the game frustrating the otherwise imperturbable Shiva into separating from his wife and playing partner, Pāvartī (Handelman and Shulman 1997, 32). And in the early twentieth century, the German board game designer Joseph Friedrich Schmidt revised *pacisi* to create an aggravating entertainment he called *Mensch ärgere Dich nicht* (“Man, Don’t Get Angry!”). In other words, the malicious game conveys a millennia-old geometry to deliver a consistent effect.⁷

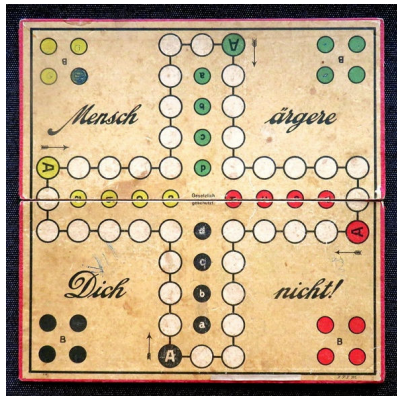
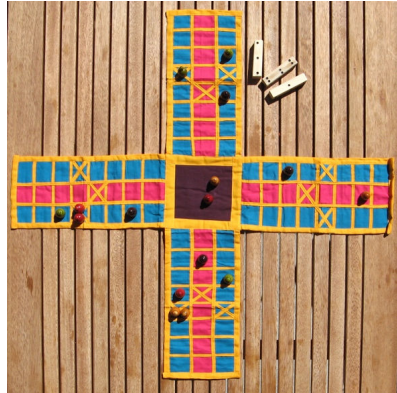
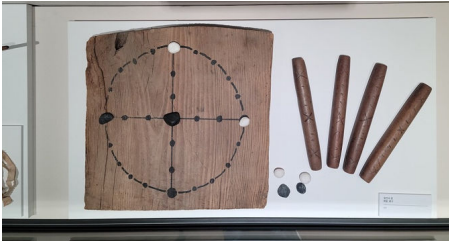


Figure 1 (upper left). Joseon Dynasty *yuppan* and *yut*. Photo by Goryeo, 고려 .
 Figure 2 (upper right). “A game of *pacisi* on a cloth board.” Photo by Micha L. Rieser
 Figure 3 (lower left). A game of *jaakaaroo* on a café table. Photo by Zachary Sheldon.
 Figure 4 (lower right). *Mensch ärgere Dich nicht!* Photo by Antonsusi.
 Readers may recognize similarities to the North American *Sorry!* and the British *Ludo*.
Jaakaaroo is, however, unique in that it uses playing cards rather than dice.

The cross-and-circle is like a magic ring that after years of dormancy now awakens to deliver its enchantments into new hands. Yet its magic can be explained by recognizing how the game orchestrates cognitive shifts along paths determined by mathematical principles not themselves available to awareness. A better comparison would be to the magician’s mechanical gimmick (Ngai 2020),

itself an evolution of the ingenious devices devised by the engineer-entertainers of ninth-century Baghdad (Hill 1979). These devices use hidden mechanisms to produce sensible effects, delighting all the more for our ignorance of their operating principles. Similarly, Islamic philosophers used the concept of the agent intellect to understand the efficacy of the talisman (*tilasm*), a ritual object that appeared to be capable of impossible “action at a distance” by showing how items of joint attention reorient our estimative faculty to induce behaviors “contrary to the habitual pattern of terrestrial events” (Noble 2017, 79). All this is to say that although the agent intellect is not readily sensible, it can only be present to the human estimative faculty insofar as it manifests in the material world (El-Bizri 2000, 84). And, in the teahouse, the game’s sensuous affordances mix with other affecting forms to create higher orders of experience.

BACK TO THE TEAHOUSE: Harmonizing Malice

Having considered the antinomies of refugee life and the logic of the malicious game separately, I want to close by suggesting that the play of *jaakaaroo* sees my companions absorbing new and troubling moods into a comforting routine. This act of incorporation instantiates, in real and sensuous form, a layering of past and present, suspending the new game within an older practice associated with life before the U.S. invasion. Socializing in restaurants, teahouses, and living rooms once formed a repeating rhythm of visits with friends that cut across geographical and sectarian distinctions. This came to an end with the 2003 invasion of Iraq, which destroyed the urban infrastructures that facilitated visits and replaced them with the checkpoints and walls that divided one ethno-sectarian enclave from the next. Many migrants orchestrate combinations of multiple tastes and smells within a “synesthetic experience” that enable “the reconstruction of wholeness” evocative of home (Sutton 2000, 121). In her study of Iraqi media consumption in Jordan, Mirjam Twigt (2018, 5–6) describes the living room as a “polymedia” milieu, where each person’s attention wanders across multiple different devices, each with a distinct affective affordance. Shifting venues to the teahouse, we find an analogous synesthesia. Tea (*chai*) should be dark, hot, heavily sweetened, and drunk from an *istikaan*, a small hourglass-shaped vessel filled to the brim, so that drinkers must either ignore the intense heat that seeps through the thin glass or delicately grasp the cup by its brim. The menu offers immobilizing quantities of animal fat (*dism*) that leave the body feeling warm from the inside out. Nicotine plays a prominent role: A single “head” (*ras*) of the water pipe delivers as much as a whole pack of cigarettes. But one element has shifted. Older games were swapped

out for a new and malicious presence. At the teahouse, you are never just playing. The game's sonic pulse of upset unfolds in a space redolent with other values and qualities. The teahouse is very much a "soundscape" generated through "rhythmic gestures," a site where players are "awash with pulsations and reflexes through which the body registers its involvement in its sensory surroundings" (Hirschkind 2006, 77). So listen, if you will, to the play of *jaakaaroo* pounding out its rapid pulse of irritation, like the buzzing trills of the *zamboor* (wasp) drum in Iraqi folk music. This rapid motif rises and falls against the slacker, more enduring routines of nightly gatherings, which flood the senses with familiar flavors, smells, and faces over the course of an evening, and from one night to the next.

By suspending the rapid tempo of the malicious game within the longer-term series of contact with friends, my interlocutors have syncopated new and troubling feelings within a threatened form of life. Playing with harsher notes is characteristic of the contemporary artistic culture of Iraq, which injects arts and literature with a "dark, fragmented aesthetic" (Bahooora 2015, 187). Music focuses on themes of war, death, and violence to reflect a harsh reality (Abbas 2013). And television programs have shifted toward ironically playing with bitter themes, drawing influence from the tradition of Baghdad's comedic theater and the format of U.S. political satire programs (Hamdi and Ali 2018). If "generic discourses on 'loss' and social crisis . . . empty the neo-colonial site of all internal content," ethnographic attentions can turn to "the semantic and historical resources" that persist within "the unacknowledged depths of everyday life and language" (Seremetakis 1994, ix). The world has changed. Those who must go on living in it cannot fall into nihilism any more than they can remain optimistic. Their creativity ceaselessly encompasses new realities as they emerge into the present.

CONCLUSION

Arabic philosophy can open the temporal frame of the near future for anthropological inquiry. Estimation, an attunement to the intentions of other beings, gives name to a form of knowledge on which displaced people rely. Moreover, because estimation combines elements of both an epistemological standpoint and an ethical subjectivity, it helps us recognize the moral anxieties that arise when ethical precepts clash with the demands of existence. If the contradictions of displacement cannot be surmounted, the malicious game offers grounds for recalibrating players' orientation to social processes. *Jaakaaroo's* design contrives consistent patterns of conflict, permitting players to lose themselves in a whirl of provocations. Remarkably, this formula does not need to be understood for it to prove effective.

It has its own itinerary and can be conceptualized as an agent intellect, absorbed by different audiences while always retaining its self-same soul. And although this device emerges from elsewhere, it was incorporated into existing patterns of conviviality, where it vitalized a vanishing form of life. Collective agency is, in this account, a cultivated willingness to be moved by that which arrives from just beyond a still unfolding present. This makes the play of the malicious game relevant for understanding how shared forms of life can persist in the wake of devastation.

In concluding this investigation, I want to gesture toward the political possibilities it engenders. For [Ali Al-Wardi \(2013\)](#), the perspective I have identified with Arabic philosophy did not map onto the division between Islam and the West. Instead, it corresponded to a class conflict internal to both sides of that imagined geography, with popular consciousness of social contradictions agitating against officials who insist on the unlimited power of their own discursive authority. Al-Wardi's framing was on my mind during the 2019 uprisings in Iraq, which sought to abolish the political machine of sectarian appointments (*muhasasa ta'ifiyy*) through which government jobs, along with lucrative contracts, are distributed according to ethno-religious affinities ([Dodge and Mansour 2020](#)). Protestors' demands for universal goods like employment and electricity were countered by a cross-sect alliance of Iraq's political elites, who used violence to restore the status quo ([Khoury 2021](#)). Meanwhile, pro-government media attempted to recast demonstrations as the fervor of young minds warped by digital games, and the parliament passed a motion in favor of banning online play ([Ussakli 2020](#)). I would not go so far as to say that playing games turns people into revolutionaries. Still, officials who rely on the authority of categorical differences are often scandalized by the existence of forces that slip their grasp. Perhaps this explains a tendency common to both secular and religious authorities that treats games, along with other talismanic devices, as the embarrassing foibles of an archaic folk culture, mere phantoms of undisciplined minds. Instead, I have tried to depict the incorporation of malice into play as a sensitive index of historical contradictions still in the process of unfolding. In the future, cultural anthropologists can examine the ideological and military struggles through which popular technologies of mediation have been given or withdrawn, constructed or demolished, celebrated or condemned.

ABSTRACT

In the late-night cafés of Amman, Jordan, Iraqi refugees have adopted a new game, called jaakaaroo, that they say is more “malicious” than familiar favorites like dominoes or backgammon. Meanwhile, they decry the cruelty, greed, and suspicion that

have eroded social bonds in their home and host countries. Borrowing concepts from Arabic philosophy, I argue that the formal routines of the game act on the same faculty of estimation (al-wahm) that migrants use to read strangers' intentions while disguising their own. When this sense of suspicion emanates from the ingenious device of the game itself, which I theorize as a form of agent intellect (al-'aql al-faa'il), new and troubling feelings come to be absorbed within the broader aesthetic assemblage of teahouse sociality. In these spaces, the harshness of the present becomes enfolded within nostalgic routines—a creative act of solidarity that exceeds binary tropes of hope and uncertainty. [displacement; Middle East; games; temporality; sociality, agency]

NOTES

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1. For verbal statements, I have directly transliterated from the Baghdadi dialect of Arabic, which includes consonants like <ch> that are not present in Modern Standard Arabic. For citations from texts, I transliterate from Modern Standard Arabic.
2. Arabic philosophy is a multiethnic, interfaith conversation that has been unfolding for centuries primarily through the vocabulary and grammar of the Arabic language. It is not reflective of an essential Arabness, includes thinkers from Iberia to Uzbekistan, and has influenced Christianity and Judaism as well as Islam.
3. Some readers will detect the resonance between Arabic philosophy and semiotic or phenomenological anthropologies. This is not an accident. Charles Sanders Peirce derived his image of semiotic processes as autonomous, evolving beings under the influence of the Lurianic Kabbalah, an intellectual system authored by exiled Iberian Jews living in Ottoman Syria (Franks 2015). And Martin Heidegger's braggadocious claim to originality seems less convincing when we recognize elements of his thought anticipated in Avicenna (El-Bizri 2000). As Henry Corbin (1978, 5), the first French translator of both Heidegger and many Arabic and Persian works, explains, the German philosopher was acquainted with the Arabic tradition via his dissertation on Duns Scotus, a medieval Franciscan whose writings built directly on Avicenna.
4. Nor should we assume that *jaakaaroo* is a contest of masculine values (cf. Geertz 1972). Women also enjoy the game. And hanging out with friends at the teahouse drew away resources that could otherwise be used to cultivate the "nurturing masculinity" of family-oriented providers who embody male authority (Naguib 2015). When one player quit the table for good, he said that all the taunting reminded him of what he characterized as "women's talk." Before *jaakaaroo*, another *parisi* variant called *barjis* was played in the Levant; it was associated with women, domesticity, and the chest of bridal goods

5. Every table enforced “house rules” that dictated special functions for certain cards. Because the same group of friends played together each night, fluency in that table’s special rules became a shibboleth for participation.
6. One reviewer indicated that *jaakaaroo* is also played among Francophone Lebanese migrants in Canada.
7. This finding is genuinely uncanny for a discipline that explains the effectiveness of cultural forms in relation to historical and geographic specificities. Writing on the possibility of “uncanny science,” Hussein Agrama (2021, 400, 410) argues that surprising “*synchronicities*, whereby our senses of future and past are brought together in striking ways . . . [require] new analytics . . . beyond our current categories” to discuss “techniques and protocols that reshape the sensorium, enable and enhance our sensitivities, and shift our awareness.” And he asks if these techniques may be “the product of interactions between two different intelligences, one human and the other, *other?*” (Agrama 2021, 411).

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