

Jama Musse Jama



Shax

*The Preferred game of our camel-herders
and other traditional African entertainments*



Sun Moon Lake

日月潭

Lago del sole e della luna

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Note: In the singular 3rd person, the masculine personal pronoun and adjective *he* and *his* are used instead of the feminine *she* and *her*, as, traditionally, *Shax* and similar games were predominately played by men.

Chapter I. *SHAX*: THE GAME

1.1 *Introduction and background*

Board games are played on a specially arranged surface with pieces, whose powers of move and capture are defined by the rules of each game. The surface on which the game is played is commonly known as the 'board', although it is not necessarily made of wood or other material, and is in fact, in many parts of the world, more often marked out on a level piece of ground whenever a game is about to be played. The pieces are sometimes specifically fabricated for the purpose of playing, but, in many cases, seeds, nuts and other easily available elements are used.

John Jackson described "Abstract Board Games" in his book "A player's Guide to Table Games", as they are "... simple to learn (but often hard to master) and exceedingly narrow (but often deep) ... Abstract games are for those who like their strategy and tactics pure and unsullied by dice or chance cards, who find complicated directions unnecessary, a variety of equipment distracting, and realism irrelevant". He included his list of *Abstract Board Games* like *Chess*, *Mancalà*, *Go*, etc.

Shax (pronounced Shahh), the game here presented, is an abstract game according to the above description, and it is a wholly mathematical game which has as much scope as *Chess*.

Shax is one of the most popular strategy-thinking games played in the Horn of Africa, particularly in areas inhabited by Somalis. This game is known by various names in the different regions, but *Shax* is the most common and popular name. The *Shax* game belongs to the three-in-a-row family, which are well known and played throughout Africa as well as in other parts of the world. *Shax* is known also as *Jare* (meaning "cut") in some regions.

In Somaliland, in order to play *Shax*, one needs to have only two sets of pebbles, each set consisting of 12 pieces. The game board is formed through lines (or rings) traced on the sand. The simple and readily available game pieces has, perhaps, contributed to the

game's survival for centuries.

Games similar to *Shax* are played in other African regions. In Lesotho, for example, a *Shax*-like game called *Morabaraba* is played (see Zaslavsky's *Africa Counts* [14]). The difference between *Shax* and *Morabaraba* is basically in the ending rules of the game. The Ashan people of Guinea play a game similar to *Shax*, a 3 X 3, three-in-row game called *Achi*. Also in Asia, games similar to *Shax* are played. For example in Afghanistan, they used a *Shax*-like game, called *Kitar*.

Though a little different, *Shax* can be assimilated to with some strategy games played in Europe such as *Nine Men's Morris* [U.K.], *Mühle* [Germany], *Filetto* or *Linea* [Italy]. All these European games share with *Shax* the design of the board, but they have different rules. This difference is sometimes based on the number of pebbles used at the beginning of the game (e.g. *Filetto*) or at the end of a game (e.g. *Mühle*). See, for example, [3] for the difference between *Shax* and *Mühle*.

The Italian *Filetto* is a game with many variants. It is played with different kinds of boards. One of its variants, *Tria*, has a board design similar to that of *Shax*. The name *Tria* has probably a Greek origin [6]. The difference between *Shax* and *Tria* is that a *Tria* game is played with only three pebbles for each player, and the game ends whenever a player computes a three-in-a-row. When *Shax* is played with 12 pebbles for each player, different rules apply and the game will have a different conclusion.

In Europe, the game has similar names in different languages, for example: *Nine Men's - Mill* or *Morris* games in English, *Mérelles* in French, *Morels* in Spanish, *Mühle* in German, and *Mølle* in Norwegian. Although some scholars indicated that the name of the game may have derived from an old French word "*mere*" (counter), it seems that the term is a linguistic adaptation of the word "Moor" - the name of the Arabic people from North Africa who may have introduced the game into southern Europe. These games reached their peak of popularity in Europe during the 14th century.

According to some authors (for example Thomas Hyde 1908), the Chinese played games similar to *Shax* some time c. 500 BC.

The most ancient documentation of *Shax*-like games, however, is a game board found in a grave at Kurna, Egypt. The board was made in c. 1440 BC. Although it might have been made some time later, this board testifies to the existence of the game in Africa before that period.

Alfonso X, King of Castille, known also as El Sabio (*The Learned*), 1221-1248, supervised a group of artists and writers in the production of *The Book of Games*. The pictures shown in Figure 1 are photographs of *Shax*-like game details from that book.

The origin of the game is probably not precisely known, but its African roots are testified by the widespread presence of the game and its variants on the Continent. The group supervised by King Alfonso X in the 13th Century was formed by Jewish and Morish artists. The society of Somaliland, which is based on orality, lacks written records of the history of *Shax*, and this fact makes it difficult to ascertain when the game first originated in Somaliland.

The first Europeans who visited Somaliland documented that the local people used to play *Shax* in many parts of the country. Sir Richard Burton, in his book *First footsteps in East Africa*, published in 1849, indicated the *Shax* game as one of the favorite hobbies of the herdsmen in Somaliland.

Burton wrote "The herdsmen wander about, watching the cattle and tasting nothing but the pure element or a pinch of coarse tobacco. Sometimes they play at Shahh, Shantrah, and other games, of which they are passionately fond: with a board formed of lines traced in the sand, and bits of dry wood or camel's earth acting pieces, they spend hour after hour, every looker-on vocifareting his opinion, and catching at the men, till apparently the two players are those least interested in the game." [2]

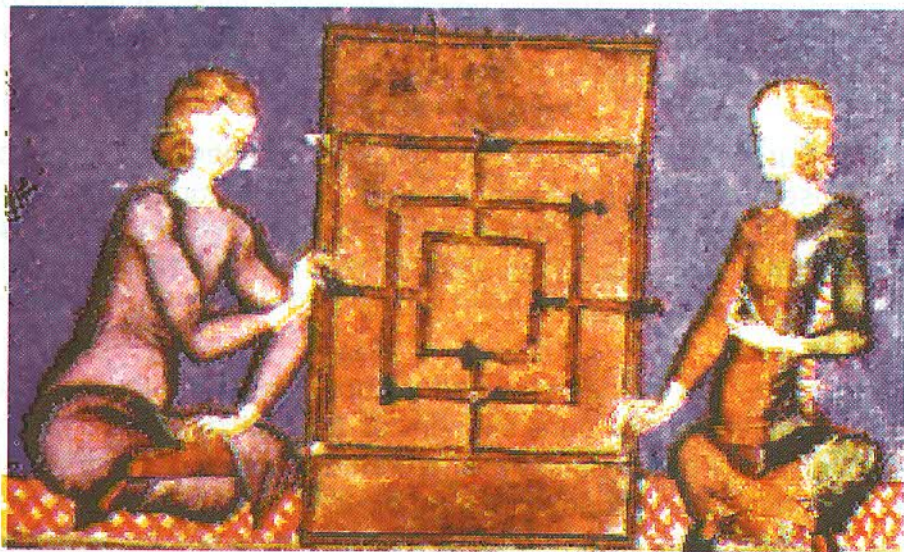
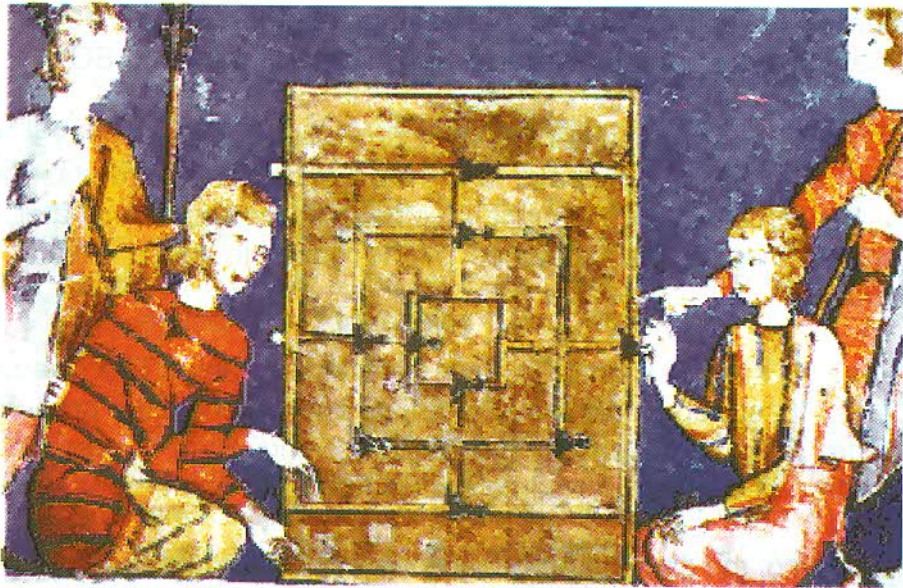


Figure 1. Photographs from The Book of Games produced in the 13th Century under the direction of Alfonso X, King of Castile in Spain. (Reprinted with Courtesy of "The Museum & Archive of Board Games, University of Waterloo, Canada")

There are also some other board games played in the nomadic areas of Somaliland. *Layli Goobaley* (known as *Layli*) is, after *Shax*, the most widespread one. *Layli* is a variant of the *Mancalà* game, which is sometimes referred to as "the African National Game."

When two players decide to play a *Layli Goobaley* or *Shax* game, one of them starts by digging holes or tracing lines on the sand, while the other one gathers the required number of pebbles. At times the players use beans, nuts, seashells or seeds.

At the beginning of a game and while designing the board on the sand, the players recite special verses. The same happens also when a player computes a good move and therefore captures more pebbles (in the case of *Layli*).

The following lines imply that *Layli* is played only by the most intelligent men, and are usually cited during the "warming up before a race" for a new game. A rough translation is here provided:

<i>Layli Goobaley</i>	Oh! <i>Layli Goobaley</i>
<i>Nin garaadliyo</i>	a man with intelligence ...
<i>Geelu kugu yuus!</i>	and the camels prefer you!

While in other games, such as *Mancalà*, the game board is different, (made with metal or curved trunk), the shepherd of Somaliland does not usually have his own board to play *Shax*, *Layli* or other games, because this kind of possession does not belong to his nomadic life style. A nomad carries with himself only the essential paraphernalia. These are often the bare minimum such a *wayso* (water bottle), a *toorey* (digger) and a *godin* (an axe) to cut the trees in order to construct the animal pen.

Shax is a wholly mathematical game, and has, at times, much the same scope as *Chess*.

1.2 *Shax Game - Rules*

Shax is a two-player game with a total of 24 pebbles. Each player receives 12 pebbles at the beginning of the game. Although other games can be played on the *Shax* board game, each game has its own rules. The two players sit facing each other under an acacia tree and draw on the sand a *Shax* board, the position of pebbles on the board is called "Holes" (*Godad* in Somali) and the set of holes occupied by a player is called "family" (*Reer* in Somali).

The game consists of three phases:

First, choice of an initial disposition of the "family".

Second, opening of the game that consists of only two turns (one for each player) aiming at the removal of two pieces from the board; each player removes one piece of the other player.

and finally the third phase that is moving the "family". The two players alternate turns. In each turn, a player computes one move of his pieces with the scope of putting three of them in a row. In this case he removes one of the other player's pieces.

Sometimes there are supporters for each player but they are not allowed to give suggestions to the players during the game, unless this was established at the commencement of the game.

The board consists of three concentric rectangles with four segments, perpendicular to the four sides of each rectangle, and inter-lobed in the middle points of the sides. Once the board design is completed, it has 24 holes. (Figure 2)

While playing the two players alternate turns and must make a move on each turn. On the first turn, unofficial traditional rules apply. For example, the least experienced player, or the younger of the two players, carries out the logistics of gathering the pebbles and has as well the responsibility of drawing the board on the sand. The expert, or the elder player, recites appropriate classic poems during the preparation of the game. In return for his work, the less experienced

or the youngest player, is given the opportunity to have the first turn of the game. However, in subsequent games, the winner has always the right to begin the first turn of a new game. Sometimes this continuation of "having the first turn", called with other words "detention of the cup", goes on for a long time, may even be years. In fact, two players use *hebelow wali igamaad jabin*, which literally means "My fellow my opponent, you could not break my winning streak".

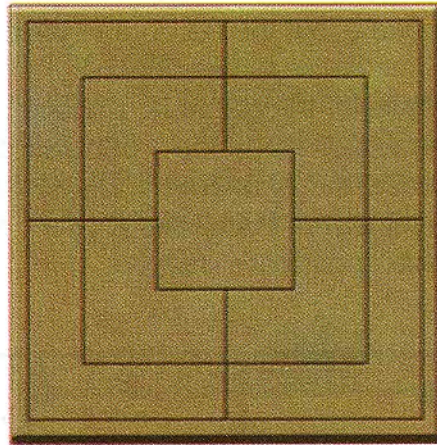


Figure 2. The *Shax* Board.

The first phase is that of choosing positions and a first disposition of the "family". During this phase, each player must select his 12 positions. Each player selects one hole by placing one of his pebbles in it. This phase is very important for the foregoing of the game. A player considers the following three points while choosing a hole:

- a. Placing for the first three-in-a-row of his pebbles. This challenge is important only for the first round, because the player who makes the first three-in-a-row, will have the first turn upon starting the second and third phase of the game.
- b. Constructing "a good positioning" game. There are different strategies that can secure a player's victory. These strategies are known as "good positions" or sometimes "good family". An expert

player of *Shax* understands during or soon after the choosing phase if he has to renounce the game or if he is sure to win.

c. To prevent an opponent's "good positioning".

The second phase consists of only two movements, one for each player. The first turn is for the player who gets the first three-in-a-row during the first phase. If no one made a three-in-a-row, then the first turn is for the player who had the second turn at the beginning of the game. Each of these two turns consists of "destroying" one pebble of the opponent in order to allow the rest of the pebbles to move.

The third and last phase of the game is "moving". Again each player computes the movement of his holes - pebbles can move one step adjacently with respect to the *Shax* board. Diagonal and jumps are not allowed. When a player computes a *Jare* (*cutter*), a three-in-a-row, then he takes out one of his opponent's pebbles.

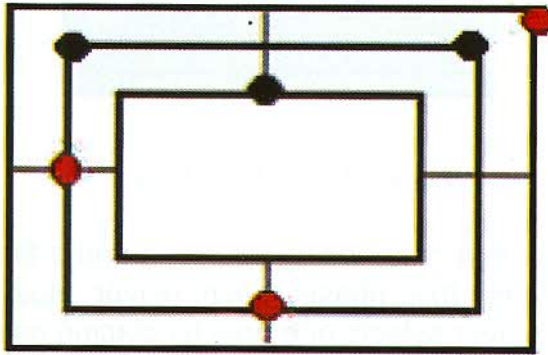


Figure 3. A simple active *Jare* (*cutter*) for the black.
If computed, the black has three-in-a-row.

An unusual move rule applies when a player cannot, on his turn, move his pebbles. In this case, the opponent must compute a movement of his pebbles so as to give a chance to the other player; but in this movement, the player who is giving the chance must not score a *Jare* nor construct a new *Jare*. The Somali phrase used by the player who cannot move his pebbles in his turn, is *jid isii aan jare*

lahayn (give me access without *Jare* (cutter)).

If this unusual move happens to result in scoring a *Jare*, that player is not allowed to exercise his normal right to remove one of his opponent's pieces from the board. The Somali term used to describe this situation is *oodan* (closed).

1.3 Winning the game

A player wins a game if he reduces the family of his opponent only to two pieces, or if the opponent gives up. In contrast to Nine Men's Morris if the pebbles of a player are blocked so that he may not move, the opponent player must compute an additional move of his family in order to give a way to the other player's pieces as indicated in the previous paragraph.

1.4 Playing Shax Against the Computer

The first computer program program to play this game was *Shax* for DOS released in 1997. *Shax* is a simple freeware computer program for PC-Dos and Compatibles (Dos 3.3 +). It runs on a Personal Computer with at least 286 processor and CGI adapter, and it occupies circa 500 Kb on the Hard Disk, but it can be run also from a Floppy disk. The program is designed only for demonstration purposes. See section 3.1 for details.

Shax for Windows, the software presented here in chapter 3, is the same program with a more friendly graphical user interface that runs on the Windows platform.

Additional software on the East African traditional games is being developed by a group of programmers. Check out for updates at <http://www.redsea-online.com/games>.

1.5 Shax-some strategies

There are some common strategies used by *Shax* players. Each of these strategies consists in constructing, while selecting in the first phase or while moving the pebbles in the third phase, a particular disposition of the “family” which may favor the winning of the game.

For example, a simple *Irmaan* disposition -- shown here in figure 4 -- guarantees the player with black pebbles an active *Jare* in each turn.

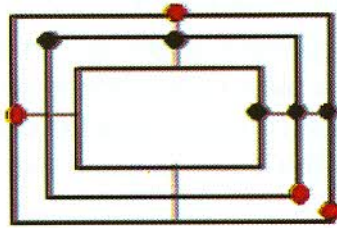


Figure 4. Irmaan

Figure 5 shows a disposition known as *isa-sudhan* (*chain*) for it allows the player to have two consecutive active *Jare*-s. Computing the current active *Jare* will result in the creation of a new *Jare*.

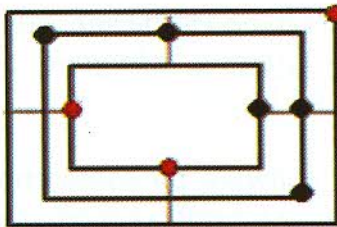


Figure 5. Isa-sudhan (chain)

Figure 6 shows an *Irmaan Oodan* (closed *Irmaan*). This disposition is one of the most important *families*. The black has an *Irmaan* that his opponent cannot himself defend. In this case, the opponent gives up the game.

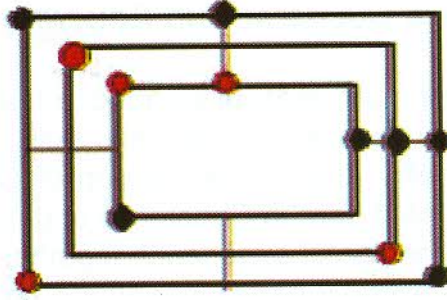


Figure 6. *Irmaan Oodan* (closed *Irmaan*)

Figure 7 shows *Affray* (four) disposition. When you have a four pebbles in this disposition, you have at least one *Jare* guaranteed whatever move your opponent takes.

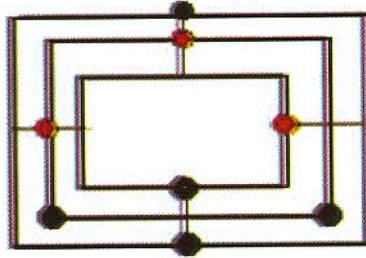


Figure 7. *Affray* (four) for the black

Figure 8 shows *Affray iyo Irmaan* (Four with *Irmaan*). This is another important disposition that gives you, at the same time, both *Affarey* and *Irmaan*. The black is quite sure to win the game if he succeeds in building this disposition.

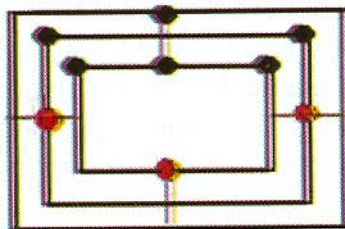


Figure 8. *Affray iyo Irmaan* (Four with *Irmaan*) for the black

Chapter II. *Shax* a CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL TOY

In the early stages of mathematical learning, a teacher may give the students, as practical exercise of arithmetic skills, the use of games such as *Layli Goobaley* (the Somali version of *Count and Capture* game families presented here in Chapter 4) and in general *Mançalà*. The children will gain useful experience together with the pleasure and excitement of playing, for instance, on the computer. *Shax* may be helpful where the child's analytical skills and planning ability are in the process of being developed.

The use of African Traditional games in the multi-ethnic classes will create a very comfortable educational environment. Games such as *Shax*, *Layli Goobaley* and *Kor-kabood* will also make huge cultural resources in mono-cultural classes where the students are learning within their own culture (i.e. African students in Africa). Recently some cultural inappropriate examples, used to introduce mathematical notions, were pointed out in Somali mathematical textbooks. In their place the introduction of local and cultural games was suggested. [8].

The main aim of this booklet, however, is to be a resource book for *Shax* and other East African traditional games presented in it. For the Somali speaking children born in the Diaspora, the historical events and poems included in this chapter can be a chance to recapture at least a tiny page of their own culture.

2.1 *Shax* and Poems & Historical Events

There are many historical events related to the *Shax* game. Some of them are riddles used by wise men to lead the nomadic life of their clansmen. Others are related to the resolution of war between the different tribes, or passing on a message of threat. The story here reported is an unusual communication between a chief leader and one of his nephews.

Once upon a time, *Wiilwaal*, a great leader of Somali-Ethiopian origin who ruled the eastern province of Somaliland suspected that his wife (a very beautiful woman who was much younger than her husband)

had a particular feeling towards a youngster of the village, who happened to be one of Willwaal's nephews.

Wiilwaal invited the young man to play a *Shax* game with him. The clansmen understood that something unusual was to happen, and that the young man would have to solve a great enigma. If he failed, he ran a risk of losing his life.

Following the pattern of traditional communication, Wiilwaal engaged his nephew into a poetic riddle and before choosing the first piece on the board, he recited the following lines:

Sac wahaab oo wayl watoo wiilasha eryooda;

...

*Inaadan wali naaskiisa qaban ii mar wacad eebe!
Kanaan degay.*

“(if) there is a mad cow with a female calf near a well;
and this crazy cow chases the boy;
swear by God that you never touched its teat!
I put my piece there”

The young man understood that the invitation on the part of his uncle did not precisely aim at playing a *Shax* game, and before choosing his piece, he responded with the following lines:

*Waanaad i siisaye, adeer hal aan ku waydiiyo,
Hal waraabe cunay, oo haddana waran xalaaleeyey
Inaadan weel u soo qaadateen, ii mar wacad eebe.*

“Oh, my uncle, you gave me an advice, let me ask you a question.
(if) a she camel is killed by a hyena and slaughtered by the owner;
if you are told to take a quarter for free;
swear by God that you do not bring a vessel for it!
I put my piece here”

Other sayings or poems related to *shax* are:

Shaxdaan degay ba maad garan, wayna kaa shishaysaa.

(You did not understand my *Shax* (strategy) at all, and it is very far from you!)

*Shaxda jeexanayo jaalkayow jare haddaan yeesho;
Marna inaanan kuu jixinjixayn jiri calooshaada.*

(Oh my friend that now we have drawn the *Shax* board;
if I score a *jare*, let it be known to you that I will never be lenient to you at all)

....

*Waxay hibanayso, ninkay la hadlayso, hagaag ma u sheegtay!
Inay handideeda nafteeda hurayso, Hubaal ma caddaysay!
Allay leh waa hog, Shax aan la halmaamin!*

....

Has not she made clear what she wanted, and to whom she needed to talk? Has not she clearly said that she is giving up her life and money for her dignity? This is a hole (good move, good *Jare*), in a *Shax* game that will never be forgotten!

Shaxdii baan hayaanka u raray iyo shaambis geediga e!

(I thought deeply about this long transfer of the village, engaging in an appropriate *Shax* (plan).)

Chapter III. SHAX - THE PROGRAM

3.1 *Shax for DOS - Ver. 1.0*

This program is a freeware software for Dos 3.0 +. The binary files of the program can be freely downloaded from the *Shax* web site. See below in the "more information section".

The version (ver. 1.0) included here is the first release, and no one tested its functionality. No one is currently maintaining the software. The program was designed with the only purpose of demonstrating the game. The author would however, appreciate any comments and suggestions for improvement in the next versions. Many of the functions in the Menu are not yet activated -- this is not due to copyright restrictions, but to the present lack of implementation.

Two human players can play with this program, as well as computer vs human or computer vs computer. For the Computer player only the first level of the three "thinking levels" (novice, intermediate, expert) is implemented so far, therefore, if you are expert in playing the game, you have to install the Windows version of the software.

Shax for Dos - The Package: You will usually get the archive of the files in 'zip' format with the name "*shax_m-n.zip*" where 'm' and 'n' make together the version number of the current files (i.e ver. 1.0). The author encourages anyone who wants to redistribute this program, to use this convention.

The zipped archive file contains:

```
shax.exe    (***)
shax.ovr    (***)
shax.hlp    (*)
today.shx   (*)
updates.txt [not in the firstly released version]
readme.txt
readme.htm
shax.gif
```

In order to check the integrity of the package, run the "dir" command, and following should be your output:

```
Il volume nell'unit... C non ha etichetta
Numero di serie del volume: 1C6A-08FE
Directory di C:\Development\wshax\dosversion
```

```

.<DIR>      12/11/99  14.24 .
..<DIR>     12/11/99  14.24 ..
SHAX       EXE       435.358  18/09/97  0.49 SHAX.EXE
SHAX       HLP         467  18/09/97  0.55 SHAX.HLP
SHAX       OVR       1.347  08/09/97  4.39 SHAX.OVR
TODAY      SHX       2.849  14/09/97  22.44 TODAY.SHX
README     HTM       8.344  18/09/97  13.40 readme.htm
README     TXT       7.796  18/09/97  13.40 readme.txt
SHAX       GIF       1.905  15/09/97  14.02 shax.gif
UPDATES    TXT         0  18/09/97  13.41 updates.txt
      8 file      458.066 byte
      2 dir      106.463.232 byte disponibili
```

In order to run the program, you must have the two files signed with (***) in a same directory (otherwise the *Shax* program cannot be run). The files signed with (*), instead, are additional files which improve the quality of the program (help on line and additional messages), but the *Shax* program can run without them. Anyway, all the files must be copied in a same directory.

Shax for Dos - System Requirements A Personal Computer with a Processor 286 or better, DOS 3.0 or later, a 500 Kb of hard disk space (it can be run also from a floppy disk), mouse driver installed (this version requires a mouse), a colour monitor is preferred. We would all like to live in a world where different colours make it more beautiful!

Shax for Dos - Installation: If you get this program in its "zip" format, you will need one of the programs "unzip, winzip or pkunzip" to extract files from the archive. Copy all the files extracted from the archive in a same directory. Run shax.exe program in a dos shell prompt.

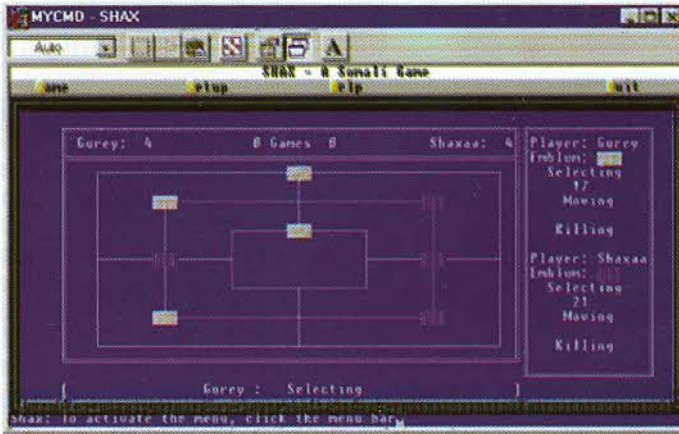


Figure 9. Shax for Dos

3.2 Shax for WINDOWS (version - Ver. 1.0)

This version of the *Shax* software runs on WIN32 platforms (Microsoft Windows 95/98/NT operating systems). It has better graphical user interface, and a different "thinking level" than that of the *Shax* Dos program.

3.2.1 The Package

The package of *Shax* comes in a self-extracting zip file that contains all the files necessary to install and run the *Shax* game. If downloaded from the internet web site, you may receive a zipped file. In this case you need to have *pkunzip*, *unzip* or *winzip* software to extract the files from the archive.

When extracted, the list of files shown in figure 10 should be found in your target directory.

3.2.2 System Requirements

This version of *Shax* runs on Microsoft* Windows* 95/98/NT4.0.

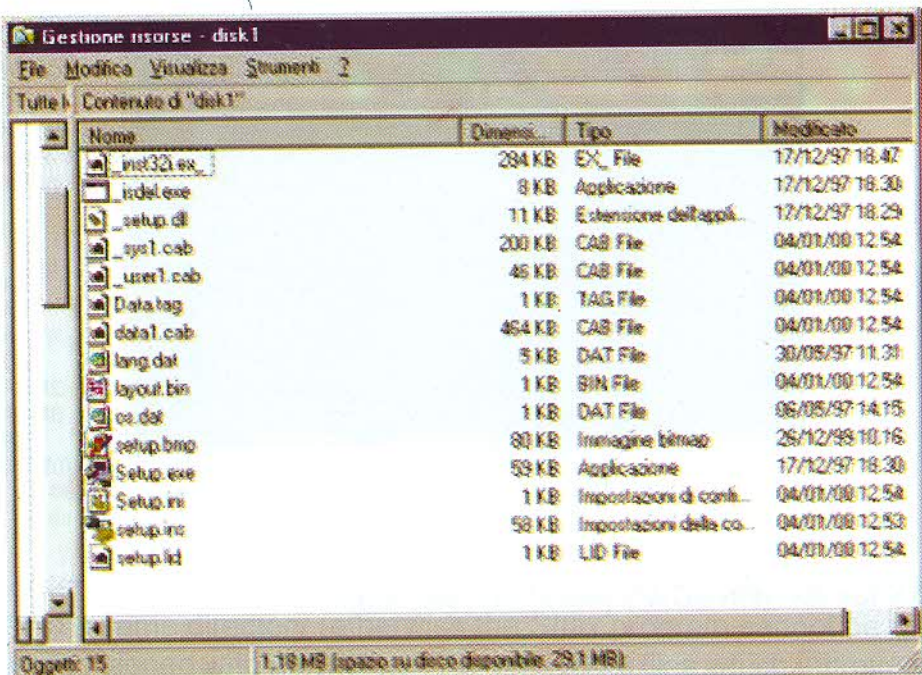


Figure 10. List of files in the package

Minimum system:

Intel* Pentium 75* or 100% compatible

8 MB RAM

1 MB of disk space.

Windows 95 compatible sound card (optional)

Floppy disk unit 3.5 ' or CD Rom drive, for installation if you received the package along with this book.

It is recommended the use of SVGA graphic slot at 256 colours or better.

3.2.3 Installation & Running the Game

Installing Shax Game

Extract *Shax* distributed files to any directory. For example in to c:\temp.

Double click on **SETUP.EXE** (or in the command line, type **SETUP.EXE** and press **Enter**.) Otherwise choose from the

application bar **START** -> **RUN** and insert c:\temp\setup.exe and press **Enter**.

Follow onscreen prompts to set up. Accept the defaults or change them.

When the setup is complete, a prompt appears. Click **OK** to return to the desktop and launch the game.

Launching

To run *Shax* from the Windows **Start** Menu after setup:

Click **Start, Programs, Shax Game**. Choose *Shax* to play the Game. The Main Menu appears. Click **Game** -> **Open Game** to start the game.

Playing the game

A new dialog asking you which player should start the first move of the game will appear. The choice of the *Human Player* as the first player only expects the player to choose the first hole, while choosing the *Computer Player* as the first player, the game will directly start.

The players alternatively choose their moves. A dialog box message will inform the players when the first phase (choosing) and second phase (opening) will end up. In the bottom bar, you can see the last movement or action of the current player.

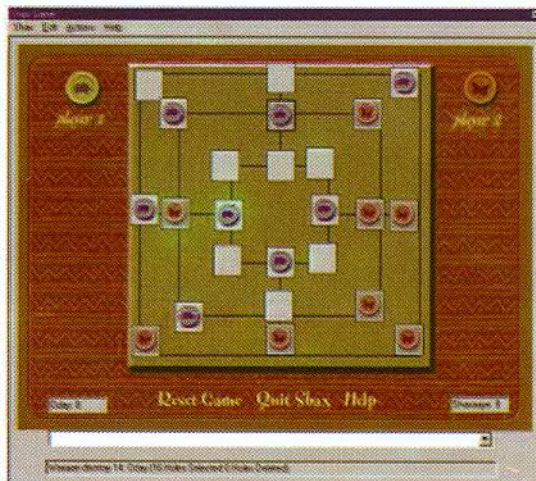


Figure 11. The Game Board

The number of positions owned by each player is displayed near to the name of each player.

Exiting

To exit the *Shax* Game:

1. From the Main Menu click Quit.

Customizing *Shax*

Shax has many options for customizing how to play the game and how the board should to look like. These are called **preferences** (**edit** Menu), and you can control preferences for your *Shax* copy (**Application Preferences**), for individual game (**Game Preferences**) and for individual player (**Player Preferences**). All these specifications are created and modified through the **edit** Menu. In addition to these general preferences, you can add an additional database for the **Ongoing Commentary** (see below).

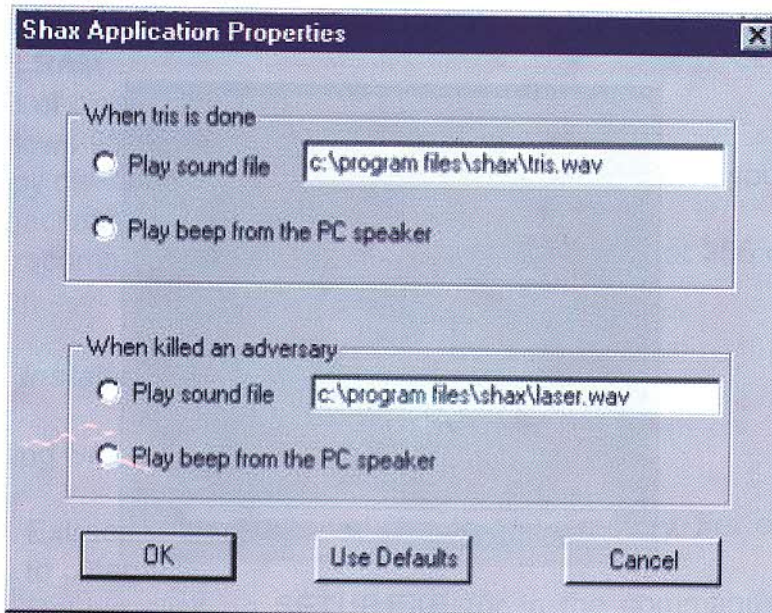


Figure 12.

Sound

If you have a sound card, use this to set options. Press cursor keys or use mouse to select the Main Menu. Choose **Edit -> Application Preferences -> Sound**. Choose one of the options available for each action.

Players and their ability

Two human players, as well as computer vs human players can play a game. In order to set the ability of these players, choose from the **Game Menu -> Edit -> Properties**

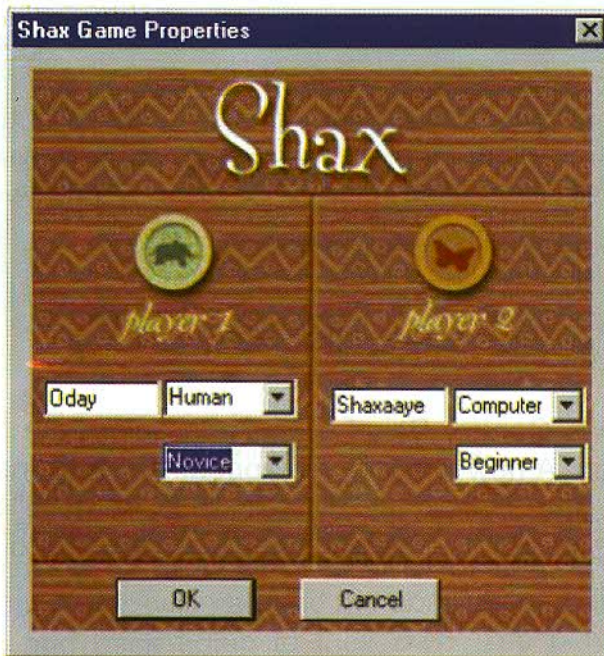


Figure 13.

The first edit box in each column contains the name of the player. On the first drop down Menu, you can choose the player (*Computer* or *Human*), while on the second drop down Menu in each column, you can select the players' ability (beginner, novice, expert)

Ongoing Commentary

In the traditional way of playing the Game, elders recite appropriate

verses, poems and sayings to mark their achievements and success in the game. This option simulates this fact. It randomly displays pieces from the Somali literature relating to *Shax*. If the sound option is ON, the pronunciation of the lines of these poems and sayings can be listened to. An additional window is opened to display these messages. Use the Main Menu and choose **Edit-> Application Preferences -> Commentary**. Use *enter* or click to switch options on/off button.

View log moves

With this option you can display in a drop-down box window the movements for each player during the game. It was first devised for debugging purposes, but it seemed equally important to learn the game from the moves chosen by the Computer player. To set this options go to Main Menu and choose **Edit -> Game Preferences -> Logging**. Use *enter* or click to switch options on/off button.

Uninstalling the *Shax* Game

Go to Windows Control Panel Menu and select the "Add/Remove Programs" icon. A new window will appear. On the "Install/Uninstall" Menu, select "*Shax* Game" and click the "Add/Remove" button to start the uninstallation .Follow the on-screen instructions to complete the uninstallation.

Chapter IV. OTHER BOARD Games.

4.1 *Layli Goobaley*

The Somaliland version of the *Mancalà* game -- known also as the African National Game -- is called *Layli² Goobaley* (literally meaning exercise with circles). The game board is 12 holes dug in the ground in 2 parallel rows. *Layli* is played by two players, each of which owns six holes in a row on one side of the game board. At the beginning of the game, each hole contains 4 pebbles as shown in Figure 15.

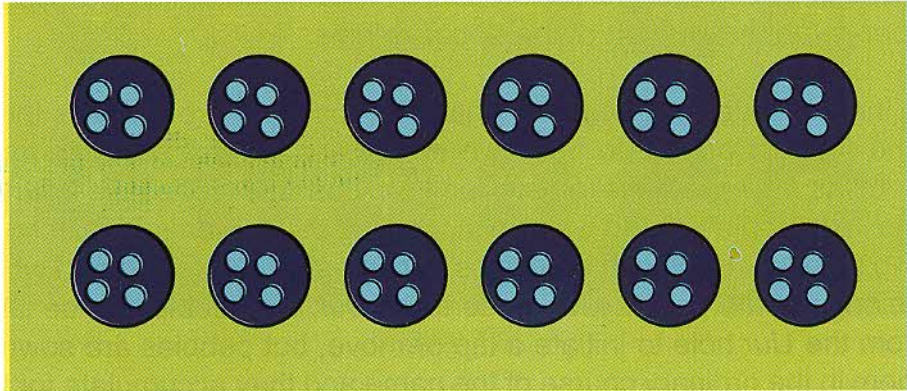


Figure 15.
Layli Goobaley Board

The pieces are all similar. The players redistribute the pebbles into the holes by picking up all the pebbles in a cell in their own row and moving counter-clockwise around the board from their own row to the opponent's and back again to their own. The player deposits the pebbles, one at a time, in each hole that he passes over without skipping any of them, until the pieces are used up.

If the last piece is dropped into a hole with pebbles, then the player picks up again all the pieces in this hole and continues redistributing them. A player is not allowed to count the pebbles before deciding to pick up in his turn. A lap ends when the last pebble in hand is sown in an empty hole. If this hole is on the opponent's row, the move ends,

² The word *layli* which means exercise in the modern school language, is derived from the verb *layli* which in the somali nomadic culture means "to tame and train young camels and horses".

and no capture is made. If this hole is on the player's side, but the opposite whole is empty, again the move ends, and no capture is made.

The object of the game is to capture more pieces than those of the opponent. Like many *Mancalà* Near East variants, a capture is made if the last piece falls in an empty hole on the player's own side, whereupon the pieces in the opposite hole are captured.

However, in contrast with many other *Mancalà* variants, the capture depends on the content of the opposite hole:

If the opposite hole contains one, two, four or more pebbles these and the last pebble to be sown are taken; but if it contains three pebbles, one pebble is transferred from this hole to the hole in which the last pebble in hand was sown, making the contents of both holes two pebbles. Each of these holes becomes an *Uur* (pregnant) which belongs to the player who made them *Uur*. No pebble can be lifted from the *Uur* hole to initiate a lap or move, but pebbles are sown in them in the ordinary course of the game and they accumulate for the benefit of the player who owns the *Uur*.

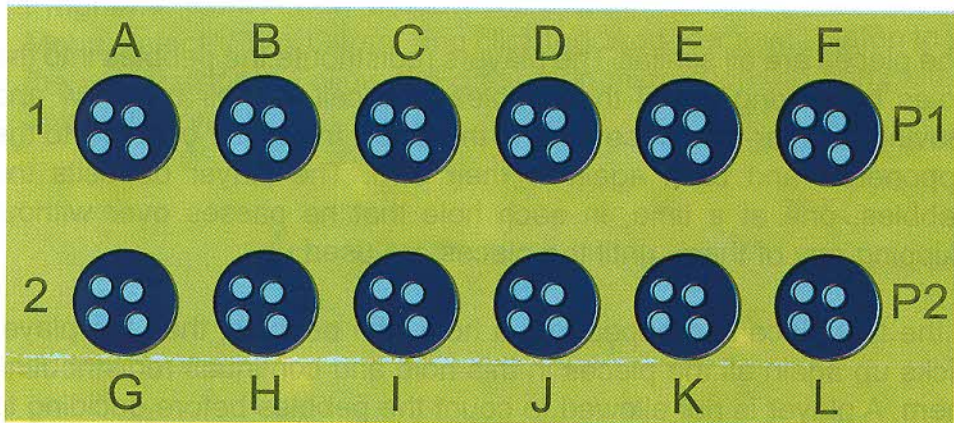


Figure 16

Suppose that the rows are numbered 1 and 2 as shown above, and player one (P1) owns row 1 and player two (P2) owns row 2. Suppose

that the holes are indicated from A to L, so player P1 is the owner of the holes from A to F, while holes from G to L belong to P2. Each hole at the starting of the game contains 4 pebbles.

Consider that player P2 starts the game by picking up the four pebbles in his hole number K and redistributes them until he drops the last pebble into hole number D. This is the new situation of the game board.

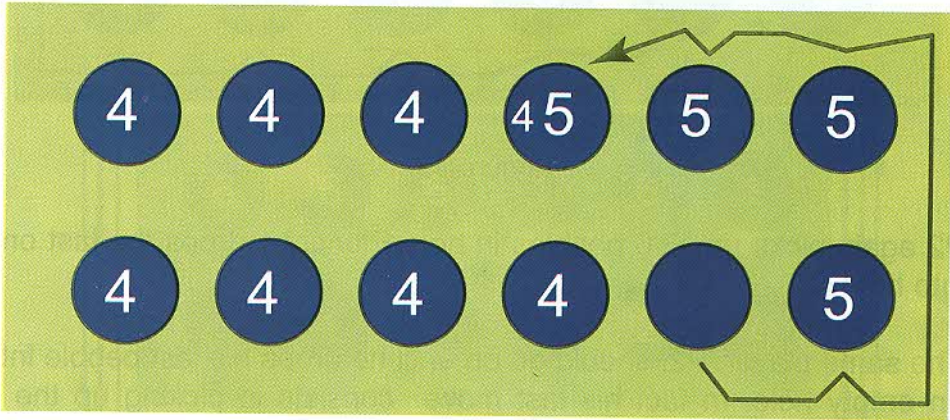


Figure 17.

Since the hole D is not empty, player P2 should continue by picking up all 5 pebbles in home D and redistribute them until he drops the last one into hole H.

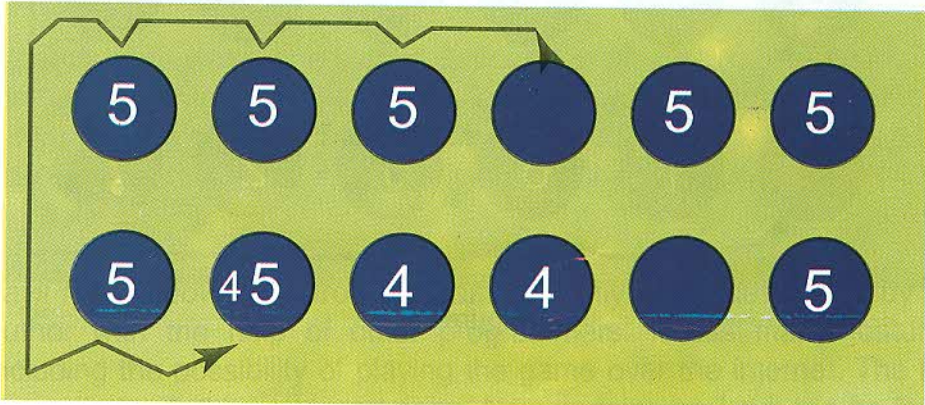


Figure 18.

P2 again picks up all the 5 pebbles in home H and redistributes them until he drops the last one into hole F. The new scenario will be as follows.

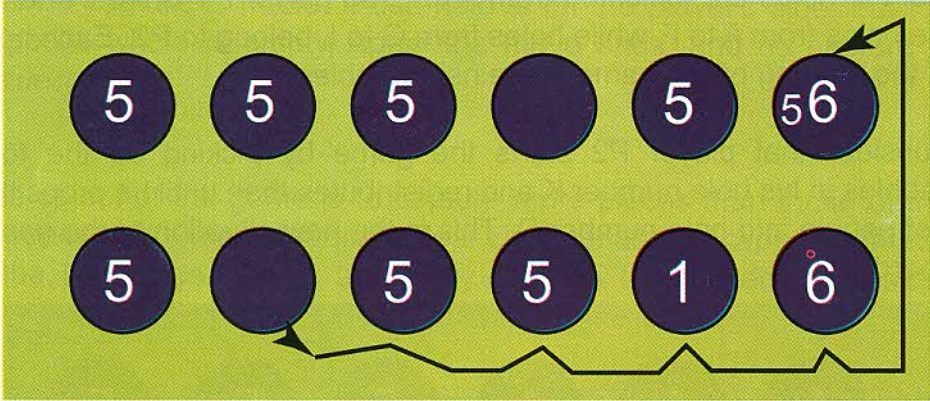


Figure 19.

P2 again picks up all 6 pebbles in hole F until he drops the last one into hole G.

The same player, P2, should go on until he drops his last pebble into an empty hole. In fact his last move consists in picking up the 6 pebbles in hole G and redistribute them until he reaches the hole F which is an empty hole.

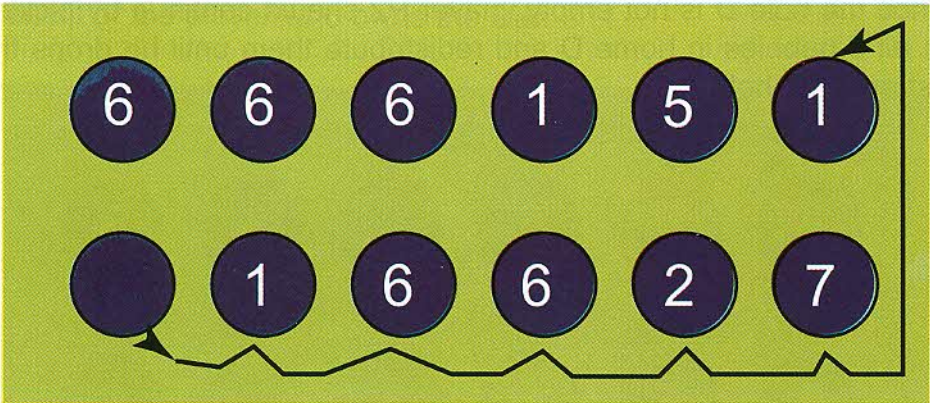


Figure 20

Since hole F belongs to P1, player P2 does not score and does not take any pebbles. The move is now for player P1.

If, for example, P1 picks up the pebbles in hole E, which currently contains 6 pieces, he drops the last one into hole H. Then he picks up the 2 pebbles in hole H and distributes them until the last one ends into hole E. He will continue in this way until he ends into hole F which will be empty in the third loop, and as this hole belongs to him, he will capture the 10 pieces in the opposite hole (namely L) as well as the piece in hole F. This movement is shown in the next figure.

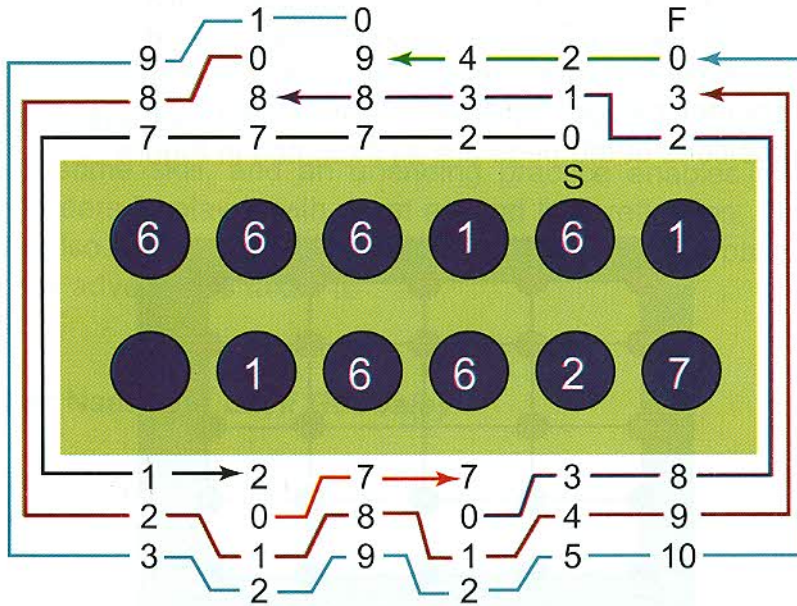


Figure 21 (S=Starting point F=Ending point)

A game ends when one side is deprived of pieces (except eventually the "Uur"s - pregnant holes), therefore his owner is unable to compute a move in his turn. Each player then collects the contents of his *Uur* and other holes on his row. The winner is the player with the majority of captives.

Layli for Windows is a free program currently being developed by the author with the help of other programmers. It has many features, including the possibility of playing the game over the internet. The first Beta version will be released soon. New updates on *Layli* can be found at the official web site of *Layli*: <http://www.redsea-online.com/games/layli>.

There are several free software to play other major features of the *Mancalà* games on the computer. *Oware* by Sapiient Software is the most popular of them.

4.2 *Korkabood*

The *Shantarah* or *Korkabood* board is made of five rows and five columns, with twenty-five points technically called houses. Each player has twelve counter pieces. The board is drawn on the sand, and as counter pieces, pebbles, seeds or charcoal are used. The starting positions of the pegs are as indicated in Figure 22.

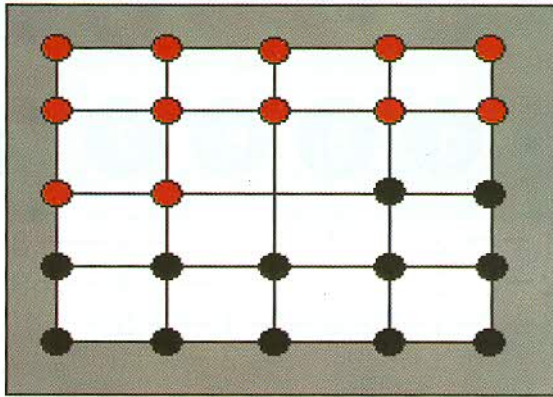


Figure 22
Korkabood Board.

Each player takes position on the two rows on his side and two houses on the middle row. The 25th house, situated in the middle of the board remains empty so that the pegs can be moved.

The objective of each player is to pass one of his adversary's between the hole where he is moving from and the hole to which he is eining; in which case he removes it, and is entitled to continue moving till he can no longer take.

Players take alternate turns to move. Each peg can be moved either horizontally or vertically one step forward or backward. Diagonal

moves and jumps on the same players' pegs are not allowed. The second player is allowed to refuse to kill the first player's peg for the first time though he "jumped over" the opponent's first moved peg. This refusal is permitted only once.

A player wins either if all the opponent's pegs die or if they are all blocked. In some cases, the player who blocked the opponent's pegs can make an additional unusual move to give more chance to his opponent.

Richard Burton described the game with the following words: "it is a game of some skill, and an unending practice enables the young camel-herders to play it with great art and little reflection. The game is called also Kurkabod behind the action that the piece passing over one of the adversary's takes it."

4.3 Other Names of *Layli Goobaley*

The *Mancalâ* game is spread in many parts of the African Continent; the following are some names and geographical locations, as well as the language of the people who use to play this game. The list of the names of this game is very far from being complete as this is an African National Game.

Name	Language and or place
Dabude	Afar Ethiopia
Lemmi	Kulu-Konta, Ethiopia
Hèesa & Kasé	Afar & Ethiopia
Gabata	Eriteria & West Eriteria
Qelat	West Eriteria
Gabata	Amharic Ethiopia
Mankala	Arab countries
Sadeqa	Afan Oromo & Ethiopia
Gamache	Hadiya: South-West Ethiopia
Anywoli Anuak	Sudan-Ethiopia frontier
Benchi	Kunama people-West Eriteria
Alemungula	Beni Shaigur -Nilo-Saharan

Luuth	Nuer people & Sudan
Laylo	Somaliland & Somalia
Laylo goobaley	Somaliland
Riyo ka dhalis	Somaliland
Fergan gobatè	Somalia/Ethiopia
Oware/wari	Asente people of Ghana
Adi	Southern Ghana
Geshe	Kenya, (Sawahikli)
Kiuthi	Kenya, (Sawahikli)
Omweso	Ugandha

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Further information and contact address

The Internet official web site of the *Shax* program is <http://www.redsea-online.com/games/shax.html>. Check out upgrades and the latest version of the software at that site. Another internet resource web site, where to get more information about the Game is the *Shax* Dedicated Home Page, at <http://www.dm.unipi.it/~jama/ethno/shax.html>. In this site, there is an updated list of links on the *Shax* and other African traditional games. For additional information shax@redsea-online.com

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Glossary of some Somali words/phrases used in this book

Shax: pronounced SHAHH is the name of the game

Jare: (cutter) occurs when a player succeeds in placing a tree-in-a-row of his pebbles.

Jid: street, way

Jid is sii aan jare laayn: give me access without *Jare* (cutter)

God: Hole (*Godad*, holes) means the positions in the board game

Reer: (family) the disposition of the player's acquired positions.

Hebelow: (*ehi'*) calling the attention of you adversary.

Wali Igamaad Jabin: you could not yet break (could not interrupt my ongoing winning).

Oodan: closed

Iraamaan: Particular disposition of the game.

Irmaan oodan: closed irmaan

Afarrey: four

Laba jare: Two consecutive *jare*'s

Isa sudhan: chain

Layli: the name of the Somali version of the Mancala' game. Also means exercise.

Layli gobalay: Somali version of the Mancla game. Laterally exercise with circules.

Uur. Pregnant.

Kor ka bood: Passing over.

shantarah: anm other name of Korkabood game.

riyo-ka.dhalis: an other name of the Lali goobalay game.

Shax (pronounced shahh) used to be played in the Sub-Saharan countries prior to the foreigners' arrival in Africa. It is presented here, recreated through the magical world of informatics, not only with the intent of documenting African cultural games or of teaching how to play them, but also of presenting the literature — the poems and sayings — they embody. *Shax* is both a board game and the best means of social and artistic expression.