

## "S H A H" A SOMALI GAME

Ahmed Mohamed.

In the more quiet parts of our big towns, where there is little or no traffic at all, one may often notice little groups of elderly people, sitting or squatting close together on the ground under a big tree. One may then cast a short and indifferent look at them and pass away. But, on the other hand, he may be interested, and at once go to one group only to find that two men are playing a game called "Shah", while all the rest are watching and playing it with their eyes, deeply interested.

"Shah" is, like Chess, an indoor popular game known in every part of Somaliland. It is generally the favourite game of all elderly people, who are not active enough to participate in out of door games. In fact, the game can never possibly be played by more than two people, but it always attracts a number of spectators who sit or stand all round the two players watching the game for long hours and forget or intentionally neglect all their personal affairs. These watchers continually interfere in the game by telling one of the two players what to do, and thus cause a lot of argument to arise between the two.

Just to know, what the game is like and how it is handled, this is how the whole thing starts:

- (1) Each of the two players (for there can never be more than two) collects twelve identical pieces of some material different in colour or form, from those of the other. These are the playing pieces of the game.
- (2) They choose a proper spot in the shade of a tree and take their seats on the ground facing each other.
- (3) One of the players draws three unequal squares (of appropriate size) one inside the other on the ground. The shape then looks like this:

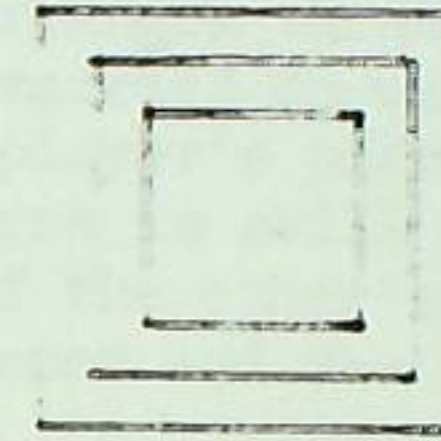


FIG "1"

(4) Four straight lines are drawn from the mid-points of the four sides of the innermost square, to the mid-points of the four sides of the outermost square, like this:

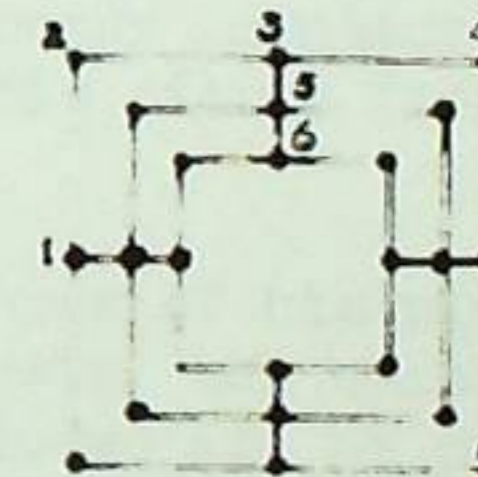


FIG "2"

Now the form of the game is complete, and the only remaining step is the actual playing of the game and its rules; but before going into that, there is one important thing to be explained and understood, and it is this, in the last figure - or naturally in any figure - whenever two lines cross or meet, there is a point of contact. In the "Shah" game these points correspond to the squares of the Ludo or Chess; that is to say, they are the proper positions where the playing pieces are placed in the actual playing of the game. We call each of these in our language a "hog" which literally means a "hole" but obviously it is nothing like a hole and I see no reason why it should not as well be called a "house" or anything. Anyhow, in this description of the game I shall always refer to each of these points as a "hog" (and "hogs" for the plural). Therefore, in the "Shah" form, (Fig. 2) these are 24 such "hogs" - a number equal

to the total number of play-pieces collected by the two players. It should also be noticed that on every straight line - vertical or horizontal -line exactly three "hogs".

(5) When the form is completed, the actual playing of the game embodying its own rules, starts: one of the players places one of his pieces on any "hog" and the other in turn does the same. They continue with this, until each of them has disposed of his dozen pieces and the twenty four "hogs" are occupied by the twenty four pieces. Whoever, in the course of placing those pieces in the "hogs", is the first to have three of his pieces on those "hogs" lying on any drawn straight line, will also have the privilege to take the next step which is this: he will pick up any one piece from those of his opponent and cast it aside that is discarded. Then the other player will in turn do the same thing to one of the other's pieces. Thus, two "hogs" become vacant, and the two players begin to move the pieces from one "hog" to another in turns, just like Chess; and within the following rules:

(a) A piece being moved from one "hog", should always be placed on the one immediately next to it. For instance in Fig. 2 a piece on the "hog" can only be moved to either No. 1 or 3 and nowhere else.

(b) No piece can either be put on a "hog" where there is one already, or carried over it to the next even if it is vacant. For example (Fig. 2) a piece on No. 6 should not be placed on "hog" No. 5 if there is already one, and should not pass over it to "hog" No. 3 either.

(c) Whenever one player arranges three of his pieces in a straight line on three "hogs" next to each other, he will discard any one piece from those of his opponent. For example if a player has three of pieces on Nos. 3, 5, 6 or 2, 3, 4 or on any similar ones, he will cast one of the other player's pieces aside.

(d) Pieces should always be moved along the lines,

for instance in Fig. 2 the pieces can follow only along the lines 4 - 5 or 3 - 6 or any similar lines.

This process of discarding one of the player's pieces whenever his opponent arranges three of his pieces in a straight line, is carried on until it eventually happens that one player's pieces get under three in number while there is still remaining a number more than three of the other's pieces. The latter is therefore the winner and the game is restarted from the beginning.

During the game a player always aims at two things:-

1. He will prevent his opponent as far as possible from getting three of his pieces in a straight line in the way already mentioned. By doing this, the player saves his pieces from being discarded.

2. He will try to arrange three of his pieces in a straight line whenever he gets the chance, so that he can discard as many pieces as he can from those of his opponent.

There is another game sometimes referred to as the "Small Shaq", but it is comparatively unpopular and is a very short and uninteresting game. It consists of only one square with two lines crossing inside it, each joining the midpoints of two opposite sides.

Each player has four playing pieces and the principle of placing them on the "hogs" and the playing of the game, is the same as that of the other "Shaq" except in this one, the game is either won or lost as soon as one player gets three of his pieces on three "hogs" in a straight line. The game is then immediately restarted from the beginning.

(First Prize: Senior Schools).