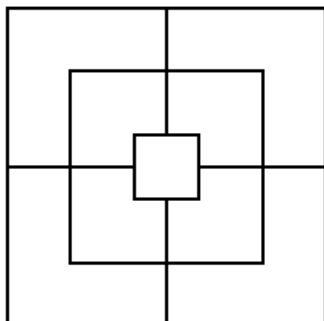


# AN INTRODUCTION TO SHAX

## A SOMALI GAME



---

Originally prepared in December 1988 by [Rick Davies](#), in consultation with Ibrahim Awad, Abdidahir Ali Hirsi, Axmed Ismacil Jamac, Axmed Liban Axmed and others in Mogadishu. Contributions by others to this paper would be welcome, and acknowledged. Write to [rick.davies@gmail.com](mailto:rick.davies@gmail.com)

---

*"Shaxda jeexannaye jaalkayoow, jare haddaan yeesho  
marna inaan ku jixinjixeyn, jiri calooshaada..." - suugan bulsho*

*"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.*

---

## BACKGROUND

Shax is one popular name for a game played throughout much of the Somali inhabited regions of the Horn of Africa. While in the northern regions of Somalia it is known as shax, in the central and southern regions it is called jar (literally meaning "cut").

In the nomadic areas it is played mainly by the older men with few day to day responsibilities. In the city it is played by older men but also by younger men who are unemployed. One public notice in central Mogadishu exhorts such people saying "jaraystoow jinkaa ku dhaaf" - you players of jare, your generation has left you (i.e get moving and do something). Shax is played exclusively by men. One Somali male player of shax has offered the following explanation:

*"First, women keep aloof from playing it perhaps because, like chess, it stands for war and thus calls for a quick and sharp mind to conduct tactical and strategic planning.*

Secondly, this may be so because, like all games, it is a time killer and women hardly afford, at least in the good old traditions, the luxury to let time pass-by unutilised."

In Mogadishu people can be seen playing shax on the ground in a number of places: around Yoobsan, down from the Dhagax Tuur Monument, on the edges of Suuqa Bakhaaraha, Suuqa Medina, behind the Xamar Weyne meat and vegetable market, and under the trees near the entrance to the port.

Usually it is played on the ground. Holes are marked on the ground to represent the spaces where the pieces can be placed. Stones, shells, broken glass, charcoal, camel dung, and date seeds are often used. More recently in urban areas the tops from Coca Cola bottles are being used.

Although it is only a two person game, in practice it often involves many more. Observers usually hover nearby, offering advice and often even making moves for the players, sometimes even without consulting them. The games are played very quickly by "professionals" and more slowly by "amateurs".

References to shax occur in many stories about people famous in Somali history and folklore (Garaad Xirsi Garaad Faarax better known as Wiilwaal, Sayid Maxamed Abdulle Xasan and Suldaan Yusuf Ali of Obbiyo). Often one player will talk about the movement of the pieces using them as a metaphor for a larger plan of action which he wants to communicate to the other player. The other player will then reply.. *"in the same fashion of subtle dialogue or debate. This could be in the case of a player threatening his arch enemy or that of a player searching the inner soul of a beloved kinsman for information"*(1)

Two well known examples are recounted below:

1. *"When Suldaan Yuusuf Cali from Bargale traveled all the way to Hobbiyo to establish and consolidate his grip over clansmen there late last century he was quoted as saying the following poem in the shax he played with one of the prominent elders in the area. "Kanaan degay kanaan degahayaa, kanina ii laaban ku kaloo an kuu qarinyaa, kayd qotoma weeye"*

*" I have put (my piece) there  
I shall put it here  
and here is yet to be filled.  
Another secret move  
is reserved for you"*

*The implication of this poem is that Suldaan Yuusuf Cali was actually referring to his subtle intention of dominating these clansmen. However, whether or not his wisdom was perceived by his opponents is not clear from the story....This can be classified as a case of passing on a message of threat.*

2. *Another story recounts how Wiilwaal was fond of conducting business with enigmatic wits and riddles. Suspecting that his nephew might be had an affair with his wife; he invited him to a shax and then engaged him into poetic riddles as follows:*

*(If) there is a nice cow with a female calf near a well  
and this crazy cow chases the boys  
that you never touched its teat,  
swear by God!*

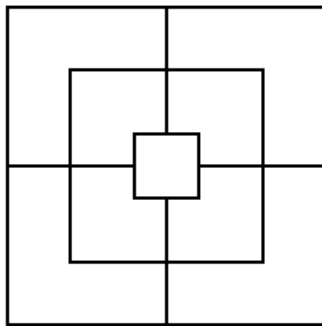
*The nephew answered:*

*Oh uncle you gave me an advice,  
let me ask you a question  
(if) a she-camel is killed by hyena, and slaughtered by the owner  
if you are told to take a quarter free  
that you won't bring a vessel for it, swear by God!*

This is a case of soul searching.."(1)

## **THE RULES OF THE GAME**

Each player has twelve pieces which he has to place on the "board" (shown below). In the first phase of the game each player takes a turn in placing a piece on any of the corners or intersections on the board. At this stage players try to locate their pieces in a way that will be to their strategic advantage in the second phase of the game. This is usually done very quickly.



While placing their pieces each player also aims to be the first to place three in a row, on any part of the board. This is called a jare. In doing so players have to be very careful not to score a jare at the expense of poor deployment of pieces, thus badly affecting the future outcome of the game.

The second phase then begins:

When both have placed all their pieces on the board the player who first made a jare has the right to remove one piece belonging to the other player, from anywhere on the board.

Then the other player has the same right.

The player who first made a jare then takes the first turn to move one of his pieces to any adjacent empty space that has now been created.

If no jare was created in the first half of the game then the player who did not make the first move of the game now makes the first move.

Each player then tries by such moves, in turn, to establish new jare.

Each time a new jare is established the maker has the right at that time to remove one of the other players pieces from anywhere on the board.

If one player by his moves happens to block all possible moves for the other player, the other player can cry out "jid i sii aan jar aheyn" (give me a way without jare). The besieger is bound to open up a

space to move by moving one of his pieces without scoring a jare. If such a move happens to result in the besieger scoring a jare, that player is not allowed to exercise his normal right to remove one of his opponents pieces from the board. Oodan (closed) is the term used to describe this situation.

The players continue until one player has removed all but two pieces of the other player off the board (three pieces are needed to make a jare). Alternately a player may decide to forfeit the game before then.

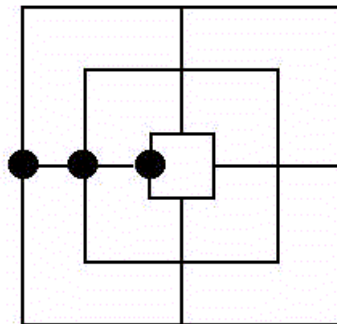
## POSITIONS

There are a number of significant patterns of deployment which frequently occur in games of shax and which have distinct technical names familiar to many people, including those who do not play shax. Some of these names are often used in daily life where people find themselves in social or economic circumstances which have a parallel to events in shax.

Some of the technical names for the positions in shax are given below:

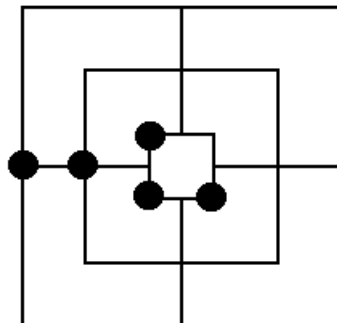
### 1. Jare

(meaning that which cuts)



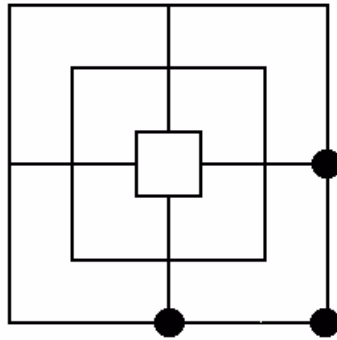
### 2. Laba-qaad/laba-jaraale

(having two jare)



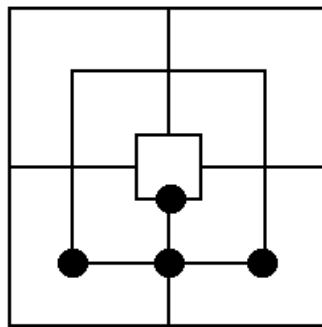
### 3. Suran

(hanging)



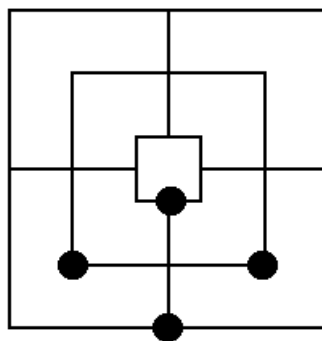
### 4. Afarey duuban

(having folded four)



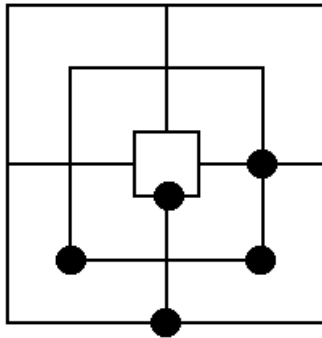
### 5. Afarey

(having four)



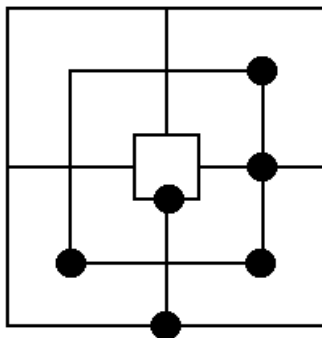
### 6. Afarey duuban

(second type - having four protected with two jare)



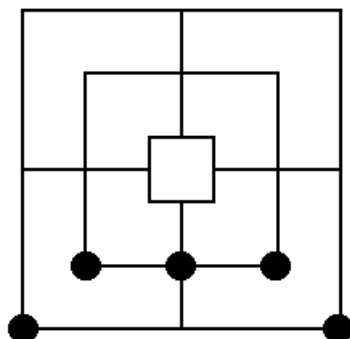
### 7. Afarey kataan leh

(having four with kataan, (possibly related to kataan/kutaan meaning blood sucking bug !))



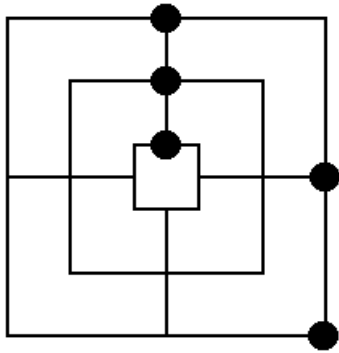
### 8. Irmaan dhereran

(straight irmaan (literally meaning a camel/goat/sheep that has given birth and from which it is possible to collect milk))



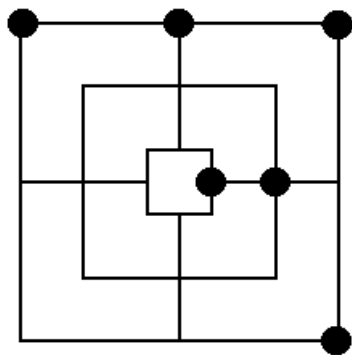
**9. Irmaan gudban**

(cross irmaan)



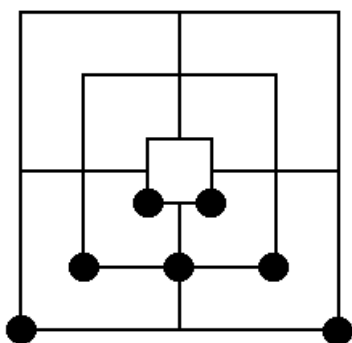
**10. Irmaan oodan**

(closed irmaan)



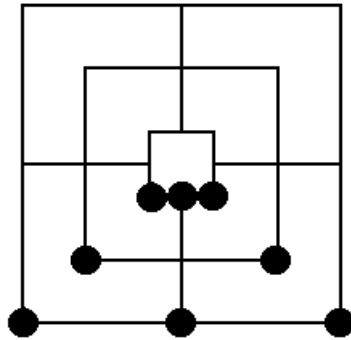
**11. Irmaan oodan iyo lixley**

(closed irmaan with six)



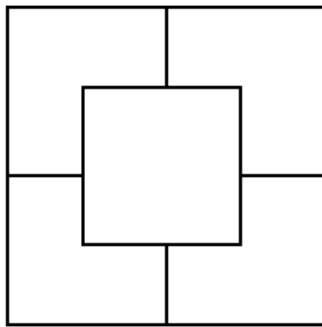
## 12. Irmaan oodan iyo afarrey

(closed irmaan with four)

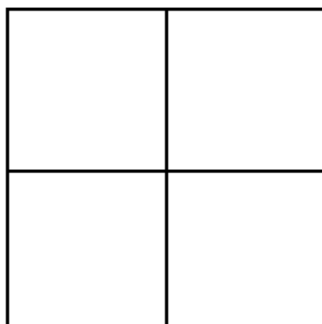


## VARIETIES OF SHAX

A simpler version of shax played with eight pieces.



Some children on the streets of Mogadishu play a version of shax using this layout.



They call this game jar. It is played using three pieces per player, in the same basic way as with shax. However there is no middle stage where each can take off one piece belonging to the other, regardless of whether they have initially formed a jare or not. It is a much simpler game to play. The children call the more complex form of shax "jar duqeed" ("jar of the old men").



## Other countries other versions

In Lesotho a similar game called Morabaraba is played by shepherds high in the Maloti mountains, and in the shebeens (cheap bars) in the small towns and rural areas, and less so in the capital Maseru. See "A GAME FOR TWO: MORABARABA", by Chris Dunton, Bernard Ntaote and Nthatsi Bulane, in Sethlala, March /April 1990 p30-31, Lesotho.

In Europe there are games using the same "board" as shax, but having slightly different rules. In England the game is called Nine Men's Morris. In Germany the game is called Muhle (meaning "mill").

Muhle differs from shax in three respects. Firstly, it is played with two sets of nine pieces rather than twelve. This leaves the players with more choice of where to move at the beginning of the second phase of the game than exists in shax, Secondly, in the first half of the game when the pieces are being set up the player who makes the first jare (known as muhle) takes an opponent's piece off the board as soon as the jare is made, not after all the pieces have been placed on the board. This reduces the strategic value of obtaining a jare at this stage of the game at this stage since the opponent can simply place another piece in the same position, with the next move. The opponent is simply disadvantaged by having one less piece on the board. Thirdly, in the last stage of the game when one players pieces have been reduced to three, that player then has the right to move any piece, not simply to any adjacent empty space, but to any empty space anywhere on the board. This gives an interesting "last chance" to a player who would otherwise, in the case of shax, very likely be defeated.

In contrast to shax, there are only two positions in muhle which are given names: muhle itself, when three pieces have been placed in a row, and zwickmuhle (meaning "in a pinch"), for the position known as irmaan in shax.

## OTHER SOURCES

Written references to shax are few and hard to find. Two are listed below:

Marin, G. "Somali Games," J. Royal Anthropological Institute, vol. 61, 1931, pp. 499-512

Drake-Brockman, Ralph E. British Somaliland. London: Hurst and Blackett, 1912, pp. 129-133

I have recently started to track down related materials on the WWW.

- See [Nine Men's Morris by Stephen of the Grove](#) for a description of Nine Men's Morris as a game played in medieval times.
- A 20th century Windows version of Nine Men's Morris can be found at <http://www.gamesdomain.co.uk/directd/pc/windows/board/nmmw08.html>
- [Jama Muse Jama](#), has developed a DOS version of Shax, and is now developing a Windows version. This can be downloaded from his web page [Dedicated to Shax - The Preferred Game of Somali Nomads](#)),

Information on other sources would be welcomed. Write to me at [rick.davies@gmail.com](mailto:rick.davies@gmail.com)

---

This document was originally written in Mogadishu in 1988

A web page version was available from 1996

This MS Word version was formatted in 2013, and provided with an updated email address