

# BAO GAME – RULES

A resource for travellers from [www.deanstarnes.com](http://www.deanstarnes.com) and *Roam: the Art of Travel*

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## Bao

Bao is the Swahili for 'wood' and is very popular in Africa. One of the characteristics of Bao is that the situation on the board can change dramatically with each move. So it is hard to say which player has the advantage just by looking at a position on the board. The rapid changes also make it difficult to plan ahead. The rules of bao has many variations, these are those used by people living in Zanzibar and are used for tournaments.

### The objective:

In order to win you must either deplete the front row of your opponent or deprive him of all legal moves.

### The pieces:

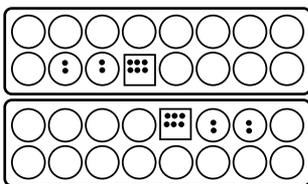
The game is played on a board that has four rows of eight holes. The top row contains the seeds of one player and the bottom two rows contain the seeds of the other. There are two holes that are square and they are called the nyumba. The other holes are all circular. Each player has 32 seeds. To explain these rules imagine that you have the top rows and your opponent the bottom.

## The rules

Frequently in Bao several rules are applied at the same time. In those situations, it is important to apply the rules in the correct order. The hierarchy of the rules is of extreme importance. In this leaflet the rules are in as logical order as possible.

### Starting

The game begins with each player having ten seeds (called kete in Africa) already placed, as shown, in some holes.



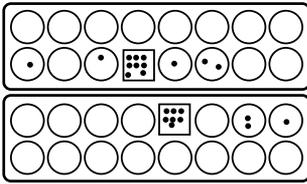
The process of introducing the additional kete divides a Bao game into two stages. During the first stage each player brings one seed into play each turn. This is called the Namua stage. If you win during the namua, you win mkononi ('in hand') because there are still seeds left in hand to bring into play.

If there is no winner during the first stage, players keep on playing with the seeds on the board until there is a winner. This is called the Mtaji stage.

# Namua Stage

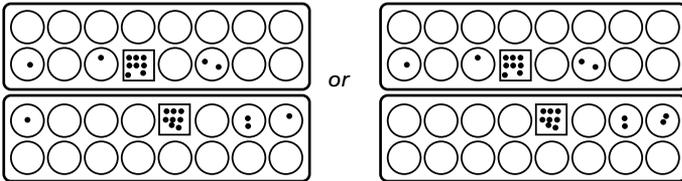
To start your move you have to look for a hole on your front row that already contains one or more seeds and whose opposing hole also contains one or more seeds.

Take a seed from your stock of unplayed seeds and put it in the hole you have selected. Take the seeds in the opposing hole. Now you have captured these seeds.



You Must Capture If You Can. In the above diagram the bottom player must place his seed into hole that already contains seven seeds and capture one of his opponent's seeds. Although he has other holes with seeds, none of them have seeds in the opposite holes.

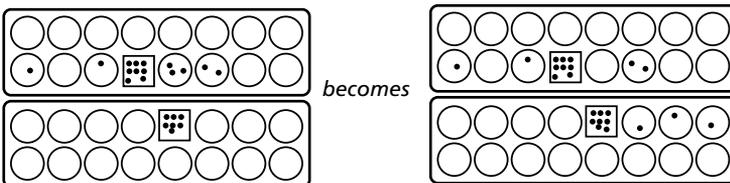
In Chess or Checkers the opposing pieces that are captured are removed from play; in Bao the captured pieces (seeds) are brought back into play immediately. Put the captured seed in the extreme left or right hole of your front row. These holes are called kichwa (literally 'head'). The board would now look like either of these two examples.



*The seed is entered in the left kichwa. Because it landed in an empty hole, the move ends here.*

*The seed is entered in the right kichwa. Because it landed in a hole, the move continues (see capturing with captured seeds) but before we do so lets explain what happens if multiple seeds are captured.*

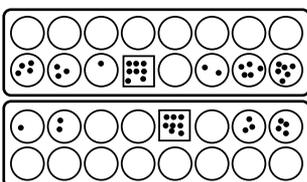
If you capture a hole with more than one seed take all the seeds and sow them in your front row, beginning in the left or right kichwa. You must sow into each consecutive hole starting with either the left or right kichwa. Always sow one seed a time and never skip a hole.



*In the diagram above, three seeds are captured and sowed from the right kichwa*

# Kichwa and Kimbi

Until now I presented situations where you could choose whether to enter the seeds from the left or the right. But there are situations in which you can not choose. You cannot choose if you capture seeds from the two holes on either end of the board. In that case, you must enter the captured seeds on the same side where you captured them. These two holes on the extreme left and right have special names. The outer ones we already know as kichwa. The second holes from left and right we call kimbi



If you capture by placing the seed from your stock in the hole with one seed, you capture four seeds. These four seeds have to be sown from the left; you are not allowed to sow them from the right. If you capture the three seeds opposing your two, you also must sow them beginning in hole one. If you capture the five seeds opposing your three, you must start sowing from hole

eight (the kichwa from the right). If you capture the six seeds opposing your four, you also must enter them starting from the right side.

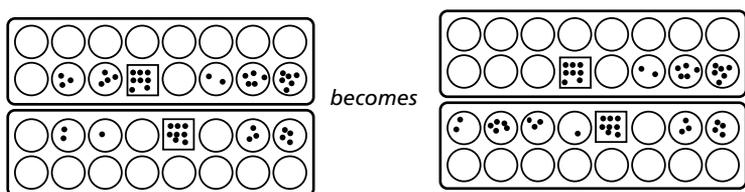
## Capturing with Captured Seeds

If you capture seeds, they immediately change sides and can capture even more opposing seeds! If the last seed to be sown falls in a hole already containing seeds you can capture the seeds in the opposing hole. Of course, this can only happen if there are seeds in the opposing hole. If there are none, then take all the seeds from this last hole and sow them again. Keep sowing in the same direction.

If you captured a kichwa or kimbi, the direction of sowing can change according to the kichwa and kimbi rule presented above.

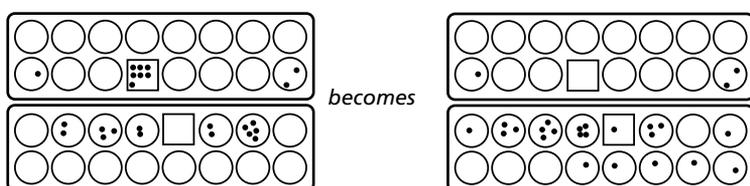
Remember that you always keep on sowing or capturing. Your turn can only end when your last seed falls in an empty hole. By capturing with captured seeds, multiple captures are possible.

To explain this multiple capturing, see the pictures below.



*Enter a seed in the hole that contains two seeds and capture the opposing three. Because it is a kimbi hole, you must start sowing from the left kichwa. Take these then and start sowing from the left. You have to start on the left, because you were already sowing in that direction. The last of those seeds falls in the fourth hole. Because the fourth was empty, the move ends.*

In some situations the last seed won't fall in an occupied hole having seeds in the opposite hole. Take a look at the picture below.



You capture the seven seeds from your opponent. If you start sowing from the left, you will end with your last seed in the seventh hole. It is not empty, so your move doesn't end, but there's nothing to capture either. In that case take all of the seeds from that hole (there are now six) and start sowing again, not changing direction and starting with the very next hole. In this case you will end up in the back row. You can see this result above. In the situations above there were more seeds to sow than there were holes. In that case, you keep on sowing in the back row. It is even possible to return to the front row, again, if you have enough seeds.

## Takasa

In some situations, you can not start a move by capturing opposing seeds. Moves where you cannot start with a capture we call takasa.

If you can't start with a capture, just put a seed in one of your holes with one or more seeds, take all seeds and start sowing them. Keep on sowing until your last seed encounters an empty hole. During the move, no captures are allowed! This is because you didn't start with a capture.

## Rules of the House – Nyumba

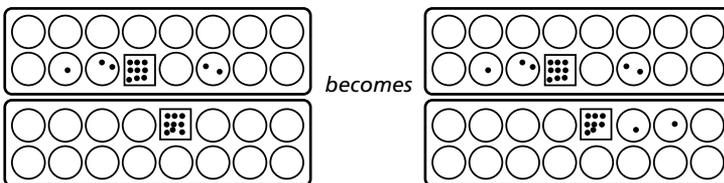
The nyumba (Swahili for 'house') is the hole marked with a rectangle. This is always the fifth hole from the left on the front row. The nyumba ceases to be a nyumba as soon as the seeds it contains are sown. After that it is an ordinary hole.

The nyumba has some special rules that add flavor to the game. These rules concern, amongst others, keeping on sowing and emptying the nyumba in takasa situations. These special rules do not apply if you have fewer than six seeds in your nyumba.

**1.** I told you that you have to continue sowing if your last seed falls in an occupied hole with a hole opposite with no seeds. The nyumba is an exception to this rule. If the last seed falls in the nyumba and the opposing hole is empty, the player may end his turn if he wishes. The opponent then starts his move.

Why Stop sowing? Sometimes it is advantageous to wait for better times. If you sow the seeds from your nyumba at the right time, the result can be devastating. Sowing the seeds from your nyumba at the right time is very tricky to do. It is like a climax and is one of the focal points of the Bao game.

**2.** A Takasa Situation with Only Your Nyumba Remaining. This is the second special rule concerning the nyumba. Take a look at diagram below. In this situation you cannot make a capture.



If the nyumba is the only hole left and you can't capture, place a seed in your nyumba then take out two seeds and sow them to the left or to the right.

Always remember that these special rules do not apply if there are less than six seeds in your nyumba.

## Mtaji Stage

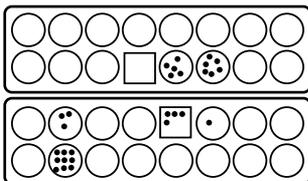
The mtaji stage begins when the namua stage ends. That means that you start the mtaji stage when all seeds in the stocks have been brought into play. The mtaji stage is not very different from the namua stage.

In the mtaji stage you must capture if you can. Because no more seeds can be brought into play, you must take a hole that, after sowing the contents of it, ends with the last seed falling in a hole having a hole with seeds opposing it. The opposing hole is called mtaji.

The hole that you use to start sowing from may be a from either the front or back row. The last seed from that hole must end in a hole in the front row having one or more seeds and there must be one or more seeds in the opposing hole (mtaji) to capture. Playing holes with only one seed in it is not allowed.

If there is no mtaji, you play takasa (which will be explained later).

In the diagram below you have two possible mitaji. You can play your three seeds to the right and capture five, or you can play your nine seeds to the right (sowing around the corner) and capture six.



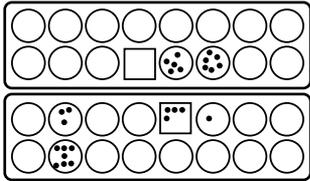
# Takasa

In the mtaji stage it is not uncommon to have situations in which no captures are possible. This can be because there are no occupied holes with occupied holes on the opposite side (mtaji), or because there are no holes that when sown would end opposite mtaji. These situations are called takasa. In that case, a player must take a hole from the front row and sow it to the left or right. During the move captures are not allowed, just as in the namua stage.

If there are no occupied holes in the front row, you may sow a hole from the back row.

Take notice: you may never start by sowing a hole with only one seed.

If there is a hole that is the only mtaji left for your opponent (mtaji moja), than this hole may not be sown in a takasa situation. In the diagram below the top player must sow his five seeds and not his six seeds because the bottom player has only one mtaji left (the hole with four seeds).



Remember if you cannot make a move or you have no seeds in your front row you have lost.