

## Slings and Stones

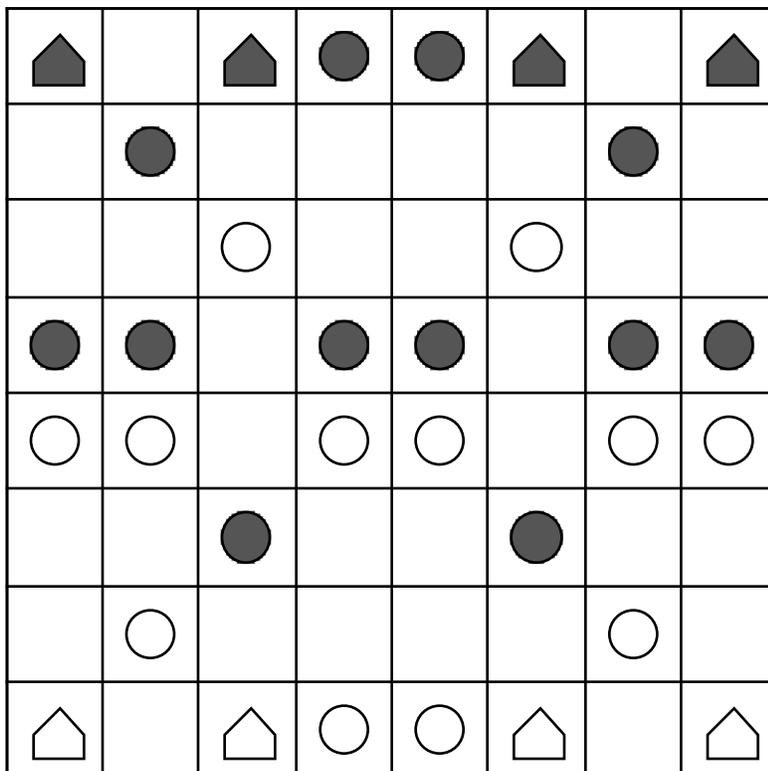
“...The Muighar Tribesmen of the mountains of Northern Bazikistan live predominantly on yak herding, and yaks are revered as sacred beasts of the gods to these heathen folk. They use the yaks for milk, meat, wool, and leather. Hence, the survival of the herd is crucial to the Muighar people...”

“...The Muighar have to fend off the wolves that would feed upon their sacred herds. The yakherders carry slings with which to pelt the wolves with stones from afar...”

“...The Muighar play an intriguing game they call *Usera ba Talki*, loosely translated as ‘Slings and Stones’. Similar to chess or checkers, I found this game and its strategies to be surprisingly sophisticated for such a simple and crude people...”

- excerpts from ‘Anthropologie de Muighar’, Wilhelm von Kardon III, 1906.

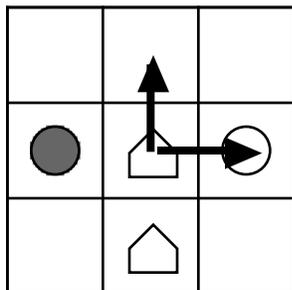
I stumbled upon this game while skimming through some old journals I found in my grandfather’s attic. The rules were gleaned from Kardon’s writings on the Muighar tribes, and I’ve tried my best to keep them authentic. However, as Kardon’s description of the rules are not very clear, this version may vary slightly from that of antiquity.



As most of you probably don’t have access to authentic Muighar Slings and Stones pieces or boards, I’ve taken the liberty of finding some substitutions. This game can be played using a chess board, with 4 pawns and 12 checkers. Pawns represent the slings, and checkers represent the stones. The diagram on the left details the starting board setup.

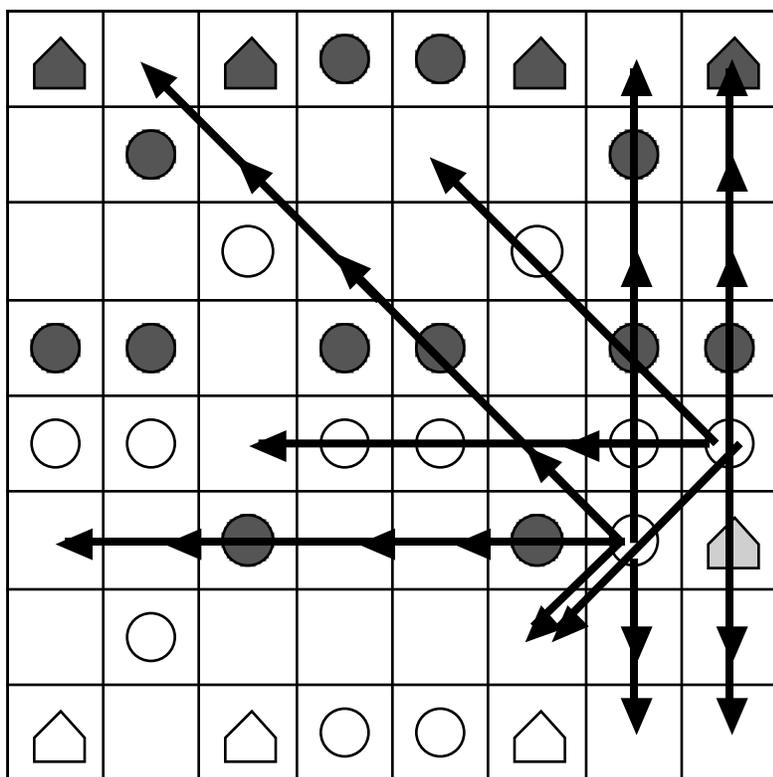
In Muighar culture, the man who owned the most yaks always had the first move (women weren’t allowed to play for reasons not mentioned, but which certainly must have appeared sensible to the old-fashioned Kardon). A more sensible and modern method

would be to determine the player with the first move randomly, or to switch for each game.



During a player's move, the player *must* move a sling one square in any cardinal direction (up, down, left, right). A sling may not move into a space occupied by a stone of the opposing player's, or another sling. However, if a sling moves into a space containing a stone of his own color, then he must *immediately* throw that stone. As an example, the movement options for the white sling in the center of the figure at left are shown.

A stone may be thrown in any direction (the cardinal plus any diagonal - 8 directions total). The stone may be thrown any number of spaces into an unoccupied space, or into a space occupied by an opposing player's sling - which removes that sling from the board. A stone can be thrown over other stones and slings. *A stone can only*



*move if thrown by a sling located within the same space.*

The figure at left illustrates all of the potential spaces into which the sling can throw the stone (ie. spaces that are either unoccupied or occupied by an opposing sling). Because a player can move and throw in one turn, there may be many firing options available, as seen for the dotted white sling in the figure to the left, who can throw either of two stones into any of the spaces shown. In this situation, the white player can remove a black sling with a straight throw.

A player loses if all of his slings have been removed, or if he

cannot move (ie. his slings have been blocked by the opposing player's stones). If both players can still move but have been completely blocked from accessing their stones, then the game is a draw.

The general strategy for removing the opposing player's stones is to use your stones to corral and block the escape routes of your opponent's slings - setting up a throw from one of your slings - or to set up a shot where you can hit either of two of his slings, allowing him to move only one to safety.

“...On the night of the spring equinox, the Muighar hold a sacred celebration of fertility, with dancing, drinking, and the haunting music of the *Urhu*. The Muighar women dress in their finest clothes, and rub their bodies with curdled yak’s milk - a scent considered attractive to these filthy people...”

This last quote doesn’t really have any relation to the game, but I couldn’t resist putting it in! For those of you wondering where the Muighar are today, I am sad to say that the last record of the Muighar I could find was in some documents describing Stalin’s efforts to ‘populate’ the Siberian wastes. The Muighar were forcefully moved to the tundra, and there I assume they’ve either died out or intermarried with other transplanted peoples. It is unknown how many of the unique Muighar traditions are still practiced today...