Site of Documentation

Mon community, Bangkok, Thailand

Description

Saba is one of Thailand’s oldest traditional games and is played by both Thai and Mon ethnic communities. The aim of the game is for players to pick up the Saba seed and using their knees, legs or feet, flick or throw it at their opponent’s target. The game originally brought together local communities during New Year festivities and provided an opportunity for young men and women to interact with each other in a playful manner.

Who Plays?

Traditionally this game is played by both men and women, although children of all ages also like to play for fun and to improve their coordination skills. The game requires a minimum of four players. Usually, one team is comprised of all men and the other of all women. It is important that each team has an equal number of players so that each male has a female counterpart.
**Accessories/Equipment**

The most important item needed for a game of Saba is the Saba seed itself. One is required for each player and they must be of a large size (typically around 5 centimeters in diameter). The seeds can be substituted with flat circular discs of a comparable size, made from hard wood. Players will also need to have enough chairs to seat half of the participants.

**Time and Place**

This game needs to be played on a smooth, flat surface that is around 5 x 5 meters in size. Although Saba is traditionally played during the Songkran festival in April, the game can be played throughout the year at any time of day, as long as it is cool and dry. Each round of the game takes around 30 minutes to play, depending on the skill of the players.

**Skills, Strategies and Qualities of a Good player**

This game requires excellent coordination and a strong aim. Those who are good at judging distance and can aim and shoot the Saba seed with accurate speed are often the best players. Aside from technical skills, in a game of Saba, a little charisma goes a long way. Players must be able to the charm their opponent or perform light hearted activities, such as singing or dancing to gain their Saba seed back if they miss their target.

**Popularity**

In the past, Saba was a popular game to play in the afternoon after harvesting. Nowadays it is most frequently played during the Songkran festival, which takes place in April and marks the coming of a new year.

**Preparation**

1. First, players need to each find a large Saba seed.
2. Using chalk, a stick or stone players need to mark out the boundaries of the game area and divide it into two halves. Players then need to place the chairs in a row at one end of the game area, ensuring there is plenty of space between each.

How is the Game Played?

Step 1. All the players need to divide themselves into two equal sized teams. Traditionally, one team is comprised of men (Team A) and the other entirely of women (Team B). Each of the players should be holding one Saba seed.

Step 2. Each player in Team B needs to be seated on a chair in their half of the game area, while players in Team A stand facing them at a distance of approximately 3 meters. Each player from Team A must ensure they have a counterpart from Team B seated directly opposite to them. Players from Team B need to balance their Saba seed upright on the ground in front of them, presenting it as a target for their Team A counterpart.
Step 3. During the game players from Team A have to shoot their Saba seed at their counterpart's target. At most levels, players are not allowed to use their hands and instead have to handle and shoot the Saba seed using different parts of their body. The shooting techniques are as follows:

**LEVEL 1**

1. The first level requires to players from Team A to balance their Saba seed on top of their foot. Once balanced, the players must hop carefully towards their counterpart in Team B and without dropping the seed, flick it accurately and hit their target.
LEVEL 2

The second level requires players from Team A to wedge the Saba seed between their calves, hop towards their target and using only their legs, take an accurate shot.

LEVEL 3

This time players from Team A have to wedge the Saba seed between their knees. Holding it firmly, the players must once again hop towards their target and using only their legs, take their shot.
LEVEL 4

Next, players from Team A have to wedge the Saba seed between their big toe and the toe beside it. The players have to then hop towards their target, keeping the seed between their toes and take their shot.

LEVEL 5

For the fifth and final shot, players need to use their hands to roll the Saba seed towards the target.
Step 4:

1. If only one of the players from Team A fails in their first attempt of any shooting position, they are allowed a second try.

2. If a player from Team A drops their Saba seed along the way, they are allowed a second chance to try to hit the target from the fallen spot. To do this they must squat down, put the Saba seed on their knee and then use their finger to flick the seed towards the target. The player can also flick the seed directly from the ground.

3. If more than one of the players fails to hit their target in the first attempt of any shooting position, the two teams must switch sides.

Rules

If a player fails their second attempt, they will lose their Saba seed to their Team B counterpart. Here players are expected to use their wit and charm to win back their seed. It is up to the players in Team B whether to accept their flattery and return the player’s seed. Alternatively they can choose to make players work harder for its return. Team B can choose to ask their Team A counterpart to perform a song, dance or mime for the entertainment of themselves and their team mates.