Koom Kook Koom Kuee / Guessing Who Holds the Rock

Site of Documentation
Ban Nayang Tai, Luang Prabang, Lao PDR

Description
Koom Kook Koom Kuee is a traditional game that is widely enjoyed by children living in the village of Ban Nayang Tai near Luang Prabang. A simple guessing game that requires only a small stone, Koom Kook Koom Kuee is played for fun by groups of girls, almost every week.

Who Plays?
This game can be played by all children, but is best suited to girls aged under 10 years old. A small group of five or six players is ideal.

Accessories/Equipment
To play the game, children need to find a small stone, but this can also be substituted with a coin or bottle top. It doesn’t really matter what the object is, as long as it’s small enough to hide in the palm of a child’s hand.
Time and Place

*Koom Kook Koom Kuee* is a very quick to play, with each round of the game lasting only 2-3 minutes. It can be played indoors or outdoors throughout the year, although many girls prefer to play it indoors to save their clothes from getting dirty. Children tend to play it with friends during their lunch break at school or whenever they have free time.

Skills, Strategies and Qualities of a Good Player

Players need to be able to guess which of their opponents is hiding the small object in their hand. To be a good player, children need to carefully read the faces and movement of others while those hiding the stone, need to be able keep a straight face or bluff convincingly. These skills can be developed through frequent practice and experience of the game.

Popularity

This game is most popular with girls under 10 years of age. Older girls also still enjoy playing the game but do so less frequently than the younger ones. Played for fun, most children were taught the game by their peers, older siblings or parents.

History of the Game

This game was played by many older generations, although in times gone by, the song was sung quite differently. Many years ago, as the small stone was being passed around, the players would sing:

“*Koom Kook Koom Kuee,*

*Aunt Mui says,*

*She went to see if the pumpkin was ripe,*

*And she found that the eggplant flower had blossomed.*”

In traditional Lao culture, the blooming of the eggplant flower is highly symbolic for Lao mothers, as it is said to be a sign that a new daughter-in-law will soon become part of her family.

It is thought that perhaps the original words of the song have been forgotten and replaced with the simple version that is sung today. No one knows what the words “*Koom Kook Koom Kuee*” really mean, but some believe that they are used to call spirits into the house.

In the past, the game was also played quite differently. Players would sit in a circle with both fists in front of them. When they sang, a volunteer (Player A) would put a small stone on their fists. At the end of the song, the last player to receive the stone would be the ‘guesser’. Player A would then hide the small object in one of their hands and place their fists in front of the guesser, who would decide which hand the stone was in. They would say, “Something in *this* hand and nothing in *that* hand,” while pointing to A’s closed fists. If Player B guessed correctly, they would get to pass the stones around in the next round.

How is the Game Played?
Step 1: Before the game begins the children have to choose one player to be the ‘guesser’ (Player A). Player A will curl up on the ground, face down, so that each of the other players can put one of their hands (with their palms facing up) on the flat of their back.

Step 2: Next, one of the players (Player B) will pass a small object (usually a stone) around, pressing it into the palm of each of the other players, while they all (except for Player A) sing “Koom Kook Koom Kuee, Koom Kook Koom Kuee”.

Step 3: At the end of the song, Player B will leave the object in one of the players’ hands.
Step 4: Next, Player A is allowed to sit up while the other players sitting around her sing “Koom Kook Koom Kuee, Koom Kook Koom Kuee” again. While they sing, the players all shake their closed fists at Player A, each pretending to hold the stone to confuse them.

Step 5: Once the song is over, Player A must guess which player really has the object in their hand. If Player A guesses correctly, they will have won the game. If they guess incorrectly, they will have lost the game and Player B will be the winner.
Rules

1. The player that 'guesses' is not allowed to look at the other players while the stone is being passed around the circle.