

Kolokpa: A Game of Skill and Strategy



Gomchen playing kolokpa
Photographer: Sherig Dhentshog

Kolokpa (ཀོ་ལོ་ཀཔ) is a game long played by Bhutanese, especially amongst cow herders to pass their time while their animals graze. This game can be played between two players, or between two teams if there are more players. It is even played by lay monks (*gomchen*) to pass their free time in the intervals between festival rituals.

There are no sources for who introduced kolokpa game or when, but this game is more frequently encountered in eastern Bhutan. Kolokpa refers to the dry round seed extracted from the pod of a wild creeping plant; these are collected and used to play the game, thus giving it its name.

The Kolokpa game requires a number of dry round seeds, enough to constitute a stack. The number of stacked kolokpa seeds depends on the players; the larger the stack, the longer the game. Each player or team puts their stack of seeds on the ground in a straight line. The game begins by spinning a kolokpa seed on the ground, with the aim of hitting and disrupting the other team's stack of seeds. The distance between the kolokpa seed and its target is usually between three and four meters. The spinning kolokpa must touch or hit as many of the opponent's seeds as possible. Any of the opponent's seeds that are disrupted or moved are taken by the shooter and added to his stack. The one who has the most seeds at the end is the winner.

A Kolokpa seed can also be used in musical instrument today as a *yangkali*, which can produce amazing rhythm sounds by vigorously shaking the pod. Once dried, the seeds have a hard shell.

Today, far fewer Bhutanese are engaged in these traditional types of merrymaking.

Sonam Chopel is a researcher at Shejun Agency for Bhutan's Cultural Documentation and Research.