

*To live in community on the banks of the Nile.
This was the surprising idea of several men
and women in the fourth century, in Egypt.*

*Following the inspiration of the young
Pachomius, they made their home in a
deserted village, which little by little came to
life again. Their example inspired others to
begin to do the same thing.*

*Thus the first koinobia came into being:
places where people left everything behind in
order to live out the Gospel together.*

*But all these different characters living on top
of each other – could it ever work?*

*The seasons come and go. Moods change.
Neighbours become difficult to get on with.*

*Would the desire of everyone for harmony
be enough? The loss of one person would be
failure for all.*

*Would it turn out to be a joyful adventure,
or lead to certain disaster?*

*We are grateful to everyone at Taizé, at our fraternity
in Alagoinhas in Brazil, and elsewhere,
who helped us to try out
versions of Koinobia!*

KOINOBIA LIFE
TOGETHER



INTRODUCTION

Koinobion (plural *koinobia*). An ancient Greek word meaning “life in common”. It is the name used in the fourth century, in Upper Egypt, by groups of men and women to describe their project: to share everything they possessed, all their activities, all their searching... in fact, their whole lives.

In this game, the players take on the role of a group of people who began to live in a village on the banks of the Nile, called Tabennesi, to pursue their quest for God together.

But as the seasons come and go, their individual needs change, come into contradiction, and bring up surprises. To keep going in the long term, they will need flexibility, inner life, and a strong trust in one of them: the *abba* or *amma**.

This is how one of the first attempts at Christian monastic community life came into being, a mixture of wounds and of deep solidarity.

* *Abba* means “father” and *amma* means “mother”. These names were given to those who bore the responsibility for a *koinobion*. For simplicity, during the rest of these rules, we will refer only to the *abba*. But players should not hesitate to talk about the *amma* and to read the information about this role in the feminine, since there was also an *amma* at Tabennesi.

MATERIAL

6 wooden
playing tokens



wooden
cubes



an *amma's* or
abba's staff



16 **season**
cards



10 **needs**
cards



6 **player's**
tiles



wounds

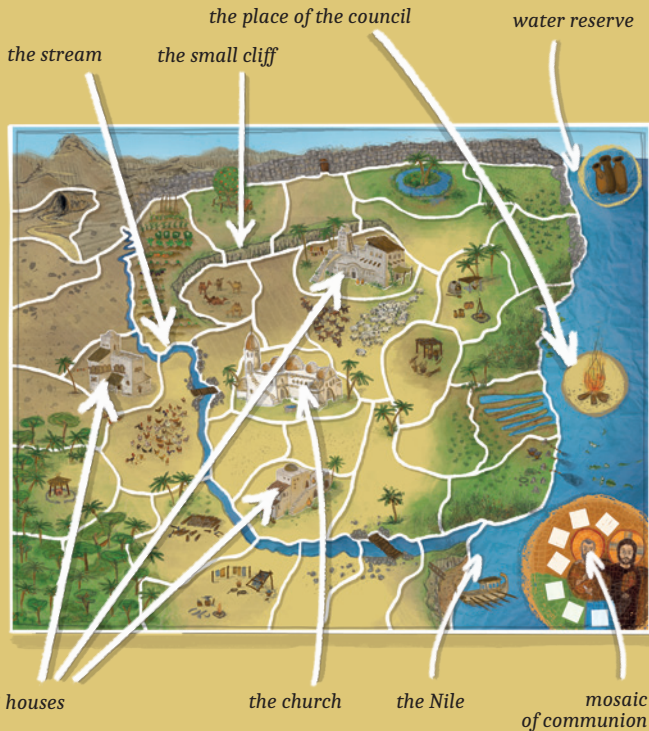
basket for collecting cubes

a board

6 numbered screens



6 mini-plans



MEANING OF THE CUBES

The game is played with cubes of different colours:



Food cubes



Water cubes



cubes connected to **Work**, to earning one's living, and to creativity



cubes connected to the **Contemplation** of nature and to silence



Inner Life cubes

The brown cubes are used to indicate the player's **moves** and their **wounds**.



OBJECT OF THE GAME

This is a cooperative game. The players either win all together or lose all together (see *The end of the game*, p. 9).



SETTING UP THE GAME

- 1 | Place the board on a table.
- 2 | Take the 4 season cards according to the number of players.



For a game with 6 players, take the four cards with a "6".

Shuffle these cards, and lay them face down in a pile beside the board.

- 3 | Shuffle the 10 needs cards, and put them in a second pile, also face down.
- 4 | Each player takes a playing token, a player's tile of the same colour, and a mini-plan.
- 5 | The players choose an *abba* from among them, who receives the staff.

*For their very first game, the players place a **Water** cube in the water reserve.*

HOW TO PLAY

The game lasts four rounds (at most). Each round represents a season.

The events in each round are as follows:

NEW SEASON

NEEDS

THE ABBA

- order of play
- time of listening

PLANNING

MOVES

RESOLUTION

COUNCIL

- sharing of cubes

- three decisions to be taken:

- › To whom should the **Work** cubes be given?
- › Should we give up placing 2 cubes and heal a wound?
- › Should we choose a new abba?

NEW SEASON

The players draw a season card from the pile. They place the cubes on the spaces of the board as indicated on the card. This represents where things are in the village and in the natural environment at the moment.



*During this season, there is plenty of **water** near the bank of the Nile; there is a lot of **work** to be done in the basket workshop; the south of the stream is particularly beautiful to **contemplate**...*

As soon as the season card is visible, the players keep silence and cannot communicate with each other.

NEEDS

In the project of the koinobion, attention to everyone's needs is important.

Each player draws, at random, a needs card. This shows what he or she needs at this point in their life. Each player looks at their own card and keeps it for themselves. They cannot show it or communicate what is on it to the other players.

THE ABBA

The abba is at the service of harmony among all. Like all the players, he has to follow the common rule, and must listen to everyone.

To keep harmony in the village, the *abba* does two things:

First, he chooses the **order of play**. To do this, he gives a numbered screen to each player. He must always give himself the last screen (he always plays last).

Then he listens. During the **time of listening**, the first player shows the *abba* his or her needs card (sharing what they need). In return, the *abba* places the player's token on **one of the 3 houses**.

The *abba* does the same with the 2nd player, then with the 3rd, and so on. He finishes by listening to himself and places his own token on one of the houses.

For a game with 3 players, the house on the left of the stream cannot be used.



PLANNING

“Let no-one watch a brother as he weaves a rope or prays, but let the eyes of each one be fixed on their own work.”

Rule of Saint Pachomius

In secret, each player plans 5 moves which he or she will make, starting from the house where they were placed.

For that, he or she places 5 **marker** cubes on the spaces of their mini-plan. A move can be made only from one space to an adjacent one: it is not possible to jump over spaces.

Each player keeps their mini-plan hidden behind their screen.



It is also possible to make less than 5 moves, and also to retrace one's steps, but each move has to be indicated by a cube. The stream can be crossed at any point.

Every player should note that:

- they should try to find what they need
- they should also take account of the others
- the 1st player will play out their moves collecting **all the cubes** that are on the spaces they cross, without being able to leave any behind. Then the other players do the same, in order.
- Any surplus that has been collected may sometimes be useful later (see p. 8)
- An important detail: an **Inner Life** cube can fulfil the need for something else (**Food**, **Water** etc.)

MOVES

From this moment, players can talk to each other again.

One after another, in order, each one reveals the itinerary that they have planned, plays out the movements with their token, and collects the cubes on the way. These cubes are placed on the basket on the player's tile.



RESOLUTION

Each player reveals their needs card to the others:

- Each cube that the player needed and which they succeeded in obtaining is discarded (taking into account any **Inner Life** cubes)
- For each missing cube, the player receives a wound, by placing a **marker** cube on one of the three places on their player's tile.

*The cubes indicating wounds are not taken from the 5 movement cubes. Note also that cubes collected for needs **must** be discarded. It is not possible to receive a wound if it can be avoided.*

*Nevertheless, a player who does not have enough **Water** can take what is needed from the reserve in order to avoid one or more wounds. This is possible even if he or she has already collected an **Inner Life** cube. If several players want to draw water from the reserve, the players decide together who receives it.*



- Excess cubes remain in the basket of the player's tile.

If at this point any player has three wounds, the game is over and everyone has lost.

THE COUNCIL


At the end of each season, it is the council: a time for sitting together, listening to each other, making decisions, and also for giving each other.





At the council, all the players place their tokens at the place of the council.

All the cubes are removed from the board (except those in the water reserve and the mosaic).

The excess cubes that players have collected are gathered beside the place of the council.

 Any **Food** cubes are discarded (conserving food is not possible).

 **Water** cubes are put into the reserve.

 The players share any **Work** cubes among them. Each of these cubes will allow the player who has one to make an extra movement the following season.

*For example, one **Work** cube could be given to one player, and the rest to another. These cubes are placed, for one round only, with the **mouvement** cubes on the player's mini-plans.*



The **Contemplation** and **Inner Life** cubes are placed on one of the 7 places on the mosaic of communion.



The players win the game if they complete the mosaic of communion at this stage.



In addition, the players can decide two things:

– they can decide not to place **two** cubes on the mosaic in order to heal a total of **three** wounds.

For example, two wounds of one player, and one of another. This can be done only once per round at the most. It is not possible to use a cube that has already been placed on the mosaic for healing wounds. It is not possible to heal a player who has three wounds (the game is already lost).

– they can also choose, if they want, to designate a new *abba*, passing the staff to him.

After the council:

- The season card is put to one side.
- The needs cards are placed back in the pile and shuffled again.

And a new season begins.

THE END OF THE GAME

The game is finished when the players lose (see *Resolution*, p. 7) or when the players win (see *The Council*, p. 8).

If at the end of the fourth and last season, the players have not finished the mosaic of communion, the game also ends and the players have lost.

Lost your first game? Don't worry. The first attempt of Pachomius was not a success either. It is told that he had to send away from Tabennesi nearly 50 men who were particularly undisciplined!

To describe what they aspired to, the inhabitants of the koinobia sometimes spoke of koinonia, a word which means "sharing", "participating in a common venture", "fellowship", "communion", or "community". It expressed their desire to remain united... even when their cooperation was weak.

LEVELS OF DIFFICULTY

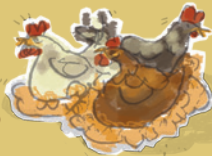
For more varied games, experienced players can use the four season cards with different numbers. It is suggested that you alternate more and less rigorous seasons in the order indicated:

6 players	Medium: 6-5-6-6 Difficult: 6-5-6-5, 6-4-6-6 Very difficult: 5-6-4-6
5 players	Medium: 5-4-5-5 Difficult: 4-5-4-5, 5-3-5-5 Very difficult: 4-5-3-5
4 players	Medium: 4-3-4-4 Difficult: 3-4-3-4

For a more difficult game with 3 players, only the cubes to the right of the stream are placed on the board.



VARIANTS : NEW FOUNDATIONS



Later, new koinobias were founded on the banks of the Nile, following the model of Tabennesi. Each of these monastic villages had its own characteristics.

1 | PBOW – ALTERNATING MANDATES

The orange part of the mosaic (4 cubes) can only be built when the orange player is *abba*. The green part (2 cubes) can only be built when the green player is *abba*, and the blue part (1 cube) only when the *abba* is the blue player. If there are excess **Contemplation** or **Inner Life** cubes which cannot be placed, they must be discarded or used for healing wounds.

2 | TSMÎN – CHALLENGING TERRAIN

During moves, the small cliff cannot be crossed, and the stream can be crossed only at the two bridges.

3 | THBÊW – A DIFFICULT PAST

Three of the players begin the game with already one wound each.

4 | TABENNESI II – COLLEGIALITY

The order of play and the time of listening take place as follows: The *abba* chooses the first player and listens to them in the normal way (showing the needs card,

placing the token on one of the houses). Then, it is the first player who chooses the second player, and listens to them in the same way. This continues until the last player but one, who finishes by listening to the *abba*.

5 | PHNOUM – TRANSPARENCY

The players live all together in the church and know each others' needs. At each season, the tokens of all the players are placed in the church which counts as a single space. The cubes normally placed in the church are not placed, but an **Inner Life** cube is placed in each of the two houses on the right of the stream. Each player places their needs card in front of them, visible to everyone. There is no listening time; all the *abba* does is to choose the order of play. (With 5 or 6 players, an **Inner Life** cube is also placed on the third house.)

6 | ŠMIN – CONTEMPLATIVE ASCETICS

The four cards which have no **Contemplation** symbol are removed from the packet of needs cards.

7 | THMOUŠONS – GOING SLOW

The 5 **movement** cubes are used also to indicate wounds. So each wound means that the player makes one move less.

8 | TSÊ – ARID GROUND

The **Water** cubes indicated by the season cards are not placed on the board. At the beginning of each season, the players refill the water reserve so that it contains one **Water** cube (or two **Water** cubes if there are 5 or 6 players).

9 | TSMÎN II – COMMUNITY DISCERNMENT

Each player is unaware of their own needs. For the time of listening, the first player closes her eyes, and all the others look at her needs card (so she is the only one who does not know what it indicates). In silence, the *abba* points to a space where the player's token is to be placed: this must be a house or a space without a cube beside a house. The other players give a sign to show whether they approve the decision or not. The *abba* may propose up to 3 spaces this way before deciding finally where the token is placed. Each player is listened to in the same way, as the process is repeated. To finish, it is the *abba*'s turn to close his eyes and have his token placed by the others, following the suggestions of the first player.

10 | ŠENESËT – UNCHANGEABLE STRUCTURES

The *abba* chosen at the beginning remains the same for the whole game. Before the first season, he chooses an order of play, and a distribution by houses which also stays the same. The time of individual listening is replaced by a time of listening to one another: one by one, following the order of play, each player tells the others the type and the number of cubes that she wants to take. For example: "I want two **Inner Life** cubes." The number can be zero ("I don't want any **Water** cubes.") Desires can also be expressed in a subtler way ("I'm hungry!" "I feel like contemplating a lot today." "I don't think I can work...")

www.taize.fr/koinobia



THE ICON OF FRIENDSHIP

The mosaic of communion is inspired by an image that was discovered in the ruins of a monastery named Baouit, on the banks of the Nile about 250 km downstream from Tabennesi. Dating from about the 6th century, it is the most ancient Coptic icon known. On the left, it shows a man named Menas, who was probably *abba* of Baouit a few years earlier. In his hand he holds a scroll which could be the rule of his monastery. On the right, with his arm around his shoulder, is the figure of Jesus Christ. Baouit was not one of Pachomius's *koinobia*, but this icon still reflects all the projects of common life which flourished at this period on the banks of the Nile.



THE TAIZÉ COMMUNITY

This game was created by the brothers of the Taizé Community, which was founded in 1940 by Brother Roger and today is made up of eighty or so brothers, from different churches and from 25 nationalities. Committed to a simple lifestyle and to celibacy, they live by their own work. Every year, thousands of young adults come to Taizé to pray, to seek a meaning for their lives, and to prepare to be creators of trust and reconciliation in the places where they live.



KOINOBIA?



Everything began with Pachomius at Tabennesi, in the fourth century. When he settled in this ruined village, it was to live as a hermit. But his way of life attracted others, who came to join him. With them, he imagined a project: all of them would leave behind their land, their families, their property, to share everything and form a *koinobion*.

Very soon, the project expanded. Other men arrived. Maria, his sister, came to live there too, and other women came to join her. In total, nine monastic villages of men and two of women came into existence during his lifetime. It is estimated that each contained several hundred people! All these *koinobia*, places of common life, would form a big family, seeking unity within each village, but also between the villages.

All of them were subject to a number of rules, worked out as time went on, that later came to be known as the "Rule of Saint Pachomius". This rule could be very strict, but it had a certain amount of flexibility so as to be adaptable for each person: the weakest, those who needed to eat more, or those who needed a clearer framework for their life. Work, prayer, the service of others, and availability for the common project were the basis of their life.

In practice, everyone was assigned to different houses, according to their work, with an *abba* or *amma* at the head of each village. Twice a year, everyone met together to sort out the accounts, and for a celebration of mutual forgiveness.

What motivated them? Above all, a deep thirst for friendship with God. But the place they chose for this was not above all the desert or a church – as it was for the hermits of the time – but life in common, day by day, over the long term, with brothers or sisters that they had not chosen, but whom they strove to love. For all of them, the *koinobion* was both a stimulating support and a practical way of living out the Gospel.

Sometimes it was terribly difficult. One of Pachomius's first attempts ended in failure, and he had to send 50 men home. After his death, it was not evident who would succeed him. Divisions ensued, and two centuries later, these *koinobia* had practically disappeared.

But their story left its heritage in the monastic experiences of the following centuries. Perhaps today it could inspire more widely everyone who is dreaming of a form of community life?

*Far to the north-west of the koinobia, there were also the kellia!
Still in Egypt, and still in the fourth century,
discover the cooperative game of life in the desert: www.taize.fr/kellia*

KELLIA