

MARRIAGE IN LAOS

by

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The Code of the Kingdom of Laos, with the kind, docile people, respectful of traditions, does not accept the validity of th marriage without conditions of age and the consent of the partners and their parents.

The boys and girls meet at the various activities of the rice-fields and the buns and ceremonies and the numerous festivals and festivities which form the very warf and woof of the people of Laos.

In the village, tradition allows the young girls (pusaos) to work at night on the verandah of their houses on stilts turning, their creaking spinning wheels to drive away the phis(evil spittits) who may be lurking about in the shadows untouched by the bright moonlight. The young boys (pubaos) come to the bottom of the ladder of their houses and exchange with the girls "quips and cranks and wanton wiles"; humorous banterings and practical-sometimes malicious--jokes are all a part of the game: it is all mirth and jollity. The pubaos sing to the accompaniment of the Kene, serenades recalling the valour and exfolits of their ancestors and composed by the ancient minstrels of the land;

"I am the valiant pubao, the dreamed son-in-law,
If the young sister loves me, I would be her husband.

....."

The night passes unnotices; and when the dawn surprises these young people in this amorous play, they part carrying in their hearts the hope of being the chosen knight of the lady-love.

After the harvest, when the granary and the pocket are full, big buns (nocturnal fairs) are arranged in the villages, where the pusaos and the pubaos meet and dance and make marry to the tune of the Kene, the traditional oboe. In towns, these buns are arranged at the Vats(Buddhist temples) where the elite of the town mix with the common folk and dance the graceful lamvong(dancing in a circle). These meeting-places provide the ground for courtship, leading in many cases to matrimonial alliances.

In Laos, they marry in even months, the preferred month being the sixth month (May-June, called nithuna) and the last month in the year for celebratin marriages. The Rocket Festival falls in this month, when amidst popular rejoicings, rockets are fired in the air, ordinarily under well-decorated awnings on the bordeys of the Mekong River and under the partonage of the King himself or of other high dignitaries. In th eight month (July-August, called korakada), intending partners would not dare to disturb the work of the fields; and they will have to wait up to the twelfth month (November-December, called thanva) because of the Buddhist Lent, observed by the bhikshus in commemoration of Mahatma Buddha's entering a cave for three months during the rainy season to do meditation.

The dowries given to the girls or their parents and not to the boys as in India and incertain European countries and the propitiation of the family spirits for a long and prosperous life of the couple, and the kha-dong (marriage fee) given to the girl. The first one is fixed by tradition and varies from village to village, while the latter depends on the status and the vanity of the families concerned.

Marriage overtures are made by the mother of the boy who goes accompanied by some near relatives and friends to the girl's house and casually asks if her daughter is of marriageable age. If the girl is not yet 'booked', her mother would say that she is too ugly and that nobody has yet come to ask for her hand; but if she has been already asked and promised, the mother will tell it out frankly. In case the girl's party has an inclination to give away their daughter to a certain person, the latter's envoys would come and discuss about the modalities and the material requisites of the marriage. When everything has been settled, the mother of the boy comes one day, accompanied as before, to make a formal request. The girl's mother, of course, agrees invariably. That same night, after dinner, the boy comes to the girl's house and attends a special prayer conducted by bonzes, who bless the water placed in bowls and used for sprinkling over the partners by the friends assembled. The couple go and change their wet clothes and come and offer their national aims to the bonzes who bless them again.

Then some auspicious day is fixed by the horasat (astrologer) after minute study of the horoscopes of the would-be-couple. On that day, after a sukhvan (propitiatory ceremony) in his house, the bridegroom goes to the house of the girl, accompanied by his relatives and friends, two of whom protect him with a multicolour sunshade each. The marriage procession moves slowly towards the girl's house, amidst cries of joy, the ringing of gongs, the tunes of the khene and songs and dances: "Hyo-hoho-hyu". The bridegroom holds some flowers in the lefthand and lighted candles in his right hand. He is followed by people carrying two pakvans (silver bowls decorated with flowers and serving as altars for the marriage ceremony) and the other material requisites for the ceremony and for the sojourn in the girl's place of his 'camp-followers'.

As soon as the sound of the approaching procession is heard by the girl's party, they immediately close the gates and entrances to their household. When the boys arrive they lay a 'siege' to the house. Then a regular battle of banter follows.

"The bridegroom is an accomplished youngman of a noble family. Oh! you don't want him! You are wrong and you will repent it! Well, friends, let's go back".

"O, that's the pretender! Hyu, how ugly he is by the side of our daughter who is as beautiful as Aurora! Your man will not have her, I'm sure!"
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At the same time, the boy's party push and push against the gate and it cracks open. And flood is in, amidst shouts of triumph! And the bridegroom is already standing at the foot of the ladder of the house! A daughter of the house comes to wash his feet. A woman, traditionally dressed, comes to him and takes him up by the hand.

But who is this lady? She is the most prolific mother who has given birth to the greatest number of children. She is the most virtuous woman who has had the most unruffled married life. She is womanhood incarnate, the foundation of maternal perenniality. The young man has to pay in cash this service of formal introduction before he goes and sits in front of the two ritual pakvans, where his bride is already sitting and waiting for him for the ceremony proper.

The ceremony now begins with the chanting of the sacramental formulae by two officiating monks. After the ceremony, having themselves several evil-spirit-dispelling and luck-bringing cotton threads tied around their wrists by the officiating priests and the guests, the couple go and prostrate in reverence before the elders present, who, in turn, bless them. This formality over, they are led to their room by the chastest and most virtuous lady in the assembly.

After the sukhvan, the guests start for their homes after congratulating the new family and wishing them a long and prosperous life. The near ones who remain chat, laugh and sing, interrupted only by some gulping of alcohol and sweets and other eats.

The next day, the phubao takes his new bride to his parental home for the girl to pay her homage to his parents by prostrating before them.

Respectful of his traditions, the Lao holds married life sacred and lives in the house of his wife before he builds one for his own.

The Lao tradition recognises no divorce. Cases of incompatibility are put up before the Council of Elders, who invariably patch up and reconcile the partners, the belief being that man and woman are "like sand and water" and that they can always accommodate each other. But in cases- and rare they are - where no reconciliation is possible, the husband leaves or is made to leave his in-law's family as well as the children, if any. If the wife asks for the separation, she gives back what she had got as dowry. I am told that a similar system of married life and customs exist in the South of India, the source and bed-rock of Lactian culture which is based on Buddhism, the State religion of the country.

There are of course, some divorce cases among the frenchified and sophisticated townsmen. But they do not represent the true Lactians, who will die for their customs and traditions rather than leave them or commit a breach of them.

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