

KINGDOM OF LAOS

Excerpts from

The Boun Bang-Fay

by

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The most dichotomous, lively, colourful and gay of the festivals of Vientiane, is the one which is celebrated on the 15th day of the waxing moon of the 6th month (full moon of May) and which is known as the Boun Bang-Fay, which literally means (Rockets Festival).

Maybe the peculiar origin of this boun may be found in an old legend concerning the birth of the rockets. This is how a monk told it to us:

" Once a certain King Khat-Thanam made a tour of his Kingdom which was inhabited by Nhaks. Wishing to be agreeable and to reserve the King an unforgettable reception, his subjects planned to give him amidst the rejoicings, a grand surprise. They made rockets out of long bamboos, decorated with multicoloured papers and loaded with a powerful powder..."

The legend goes on saying that these rockets fell at the four corners of the Kingdom, thus giving rise to mountains, forming plains, digging wells and caves... and that the multicoloured papers, getting caught on trees, gave birth to orchids.

This could be the explanation as to why the rockets are considered by many, as offerings to the Guardian Genii of the Earth, so that they may send abundant rain in order to fertilise the rice-fields, and also why the boun Bang-Fay is also called the "Fecundity Festival".

But this would tend to prove the existence of a third festival, one of Fecundity which was gradually eclipsed through the centuries by the two festivals we have just been studying. And we feel all the more inclined to agree with this version, when we consider the lustful shows, the very lewd songs and the unreserved gestures of puppets, all hinting at sexual intercourses intending to bring on the fertility of the land through magical sympathy.

It cannot be denied that it is a religious festival, since its foremost object is to glorify the Buddha, His Birth, His Doctrine and His Death (Parinibana) - and for this reason it includes both a procession of the whole of the Buddhist Clergy, piously followed by the crowd, and by a public Buddhist ordination ceremony conducted in order to elevate to higher office (1), monks already ordained.

The actual festival begins from the afternoon of the 14th day with the arrival of the rockets. Each one of them is the work of the monks of a Wat. No doubt that all the parishioners, with the intention of making a pious offering, have done their best to provide the necessary materials or contributed to its construction. But the very difficult task of artificers is always reserved to the monks who, according to tradition, are masters in pyrotechnics.

Each rocket, attached to a light support, is carried by its team of constructors. It is made of a long and strong bamboo, the lower part is pointed forward and is used as a muzzle loaded with the precious nitre, while the thinner part swings gracefully. The whole thing is decorated with ribbons, garlands and multicoloured paper, cut into geometrical shapes, glued or pinned pennon fashion. The name of the Wat responsible for its construction is inscribed on a piece of silk of rectangular or triangular shape, which is placed in evidence and carefully unfurled.

As soon as they arrive, the rockets are placed in good order on the square before the sheds; they will be kept under constant supervision and given the most careful attention, since on the following day, the good name of the Wat and the popularity of the village will depend on its rocket's colourful aspect and the height of its trajectory.

At this moment the phrasos have taken to the road to come to the festival. They come in graceful groups or in laughing parties, each one of them wearing her prettiest sin, her brightest scarf and all her jewelry. Each one of them carries a silvercup or a small basket in which, under some flowers, are stored the betel leaves, the areca-nuts, the lime and the sisiet, the tobacco and cigarettes which she will offer to merry young men or consume themselves during the ngan.

They are accompanied by the village elders and some of the mothers, the latter carrying gifts for the monks,

The most important of the gifts are those for the monks about to be ordained. These are offered by their parents, their friends and neighbours; it consist of a complete outfit: new robes and sandal, hat (1) and talabat (2), a pilgrim's staff, mattress, blankets and pillows, rice basket, gurglet (water cooling vessel), bowl, spoon and knife, in short, all the things which are indispensable in the daily life of the Wat.

But in the circumstance, the ritual gift which is never forgotten, consist in a freshly cut bamboo, cleared of its leaves except at one end and to one extremity of which one or more sheets of gold or silver, weighing one tical are attached, while the other extremity is decorated with cotton skeins of different colours.

The smaller gifts, of which all the monks present at the feast will get their share, consist of baskets of rice or paddy, of rustic cups containing fruits, candles, josticks and cotton threads, or some other pieces of their outfit. The parents of the monks to be promoted to higher office and most of the women who have brought valuable gifts, stay in the sheds so much to keep an eye on the presents as to increase their merits by listening to the prayers of the monks lined up around the Head of the diocese before the procession.

The other donors, and above all the young people, only pay attention to the rockets which are carried with pride from hut to hut and in the adjoining streets.

Escorting the rockets, are groups of phyaacs; disguised, made-up, accompanied with khemes, cymbals, drums and gongs, some singing, others dancing, all making noises, their carnival like procession surrounds the fire-work pieces and give them a rousing welcome. They burst with joy and admiration at the prettiest ones, whilst their music becomes louder, their dances quickening the pace of their motions. But around the smaller and less decorated ones, the scoffing and ironical comments fuse from all parts: the bearers never miss an opportunity to fire back with sharp, cutting remarks....

After walking at a slow pace three times around the old Wat, the head of the procession comes abreast of the ring surrounding the improvised chapel for the ordination; the palanquins are lowered and the clergy, preceded by its Head, enters the chapel.

At man-level, on light bamboo poles, wooden tubes have been installed; they are ornamented with dragon heads and pierced at each extremity. Under the hang-lins, duckboards have been placed for the postulants to kneel on.

The Head of the diocese then pours in the middle of each tube, a cup filled with scented water handed over by his coadjutor. The water runs, shimmering in the sun and falls onto the bowed head of the monk. Immediately after the Head of the diocese, the same rite is performed by the abbots (heads of Wats) who in turn are followed by parents, friends, neighbours, and the whole crowd of the faithful, each one bringing along his cup of lustral water and pouring it devotedly.

After such a generous baptism, which symbolizes a complete purification, the newly ordained monk who has been surrounded by his parents and the Head of his Wat, casts off his wet robe and puts on a new one handed to him by the donor. Henceforth, his status will have changed and he will have the right to the higher title in the Order which has just been bestowed upon him.

As soon as he has donned his new robe, he takes in one hand his new talabat (fan) and in the other the pilgrim's staff which have been given to him. The Head of his Wat then takes hold of the other end of the staff and leads the new dignitary out of the enclosure.

Both, one leading the other, walk pass in front of the kneeling women, who, whilst inwardly praying, place flowers, candles and josticks on the talabat (fan) of the newly promoted monk who is holding it out as a begging plate. This slow progress leads the clergy to the grand stand where all the other gifts are then presented to the new dignitary.

The end of these manifestations brings the religious rites to a close.

About 2 p.m., after the meal, the rockets once again become the center of attraction and dancing is resumed in their honour.

The monks too have returned and under the watchful eyes of their team mates, each artificer puts a final touch to his preparation.

For the job is of consequence!

First a thorough check must be made of the powder to see if it has remained properly tamped and if the firing bore - a kind of tunnel dug in the middle of the charge - has not become obstructed.

Then comes the trickiest part of the job, the one on which final success depends: the soaking with water along the greatest part of the edges of the tunnel so as to render it fire-proof against the advancing flame of the fuse which is running through it. But it is essential to keep the bottom perfectly dry, so as to allow the flame, which is quickening the powder, to spread from the bottom to the top of the charge.

The fuse should then be threaded through the tunnel, without getting it damp and making sure that it is in good contact with the dry powder at the bottom of the lead.

It is during these final preparations that the monk's mastery must reveal itself. It is, so to speak, his signature which he sets on the rocket. And that will be all for him. Presently, his team will take charge of the piece and he will then hand over his command to his "right-hand man" (the most experienced of his parishioners), since as he cannot mingle with the crowd, he will have to remain in the grand stand with the other members of the clergy.

During all this prologue to the launching, chief attraction of the festival, the crowd has deserted the sheds and left the square. It has massed itself on the higher bank of the Mekong, on either side of the ancient tree, leaning naturally over the river, which will serve as a launching site. A primitive ladder with widely spaced rungs has been tied on the old tree trunk. The more agile among the playboys will soon have the opportunity of displaying their mastery in setting the rockets to the admiring eyes of their girl friends.

Each rocket is brought along as soon as it is ready. Its team carries it with utmost care, protecting it against the over enthusiastic gesticulations of the turbulent dancers, who are escorting and cheering it. The rocket's name, the name of "its" Wat is on everyone's lips.

The rocket bearers dust it, pat it, flatter it and inwardly make the most ardent wishes so that the Buddha, to whom it is offered, gives it a flying start and make it flash higher and higher.

They then get it near the ladder. Phubace from "its" village, get hold of it, climb the steps and pull it up to the very top of the tree, slowly, lovingly and without the least jerk.

The rocket having been set on its launching site and aimed at the sky, becomes the target of all eyes. As graceful, slim and adorned like a phusao, it is awaiting the firing...

It is the thrilling moment when the crowd becomes almost silent. The monk's "right-hand man" draws the flame near to the long hanging fuse... the crackling noise of the flame running up to the powder can be heard. It's inside now... let's hope that the tunnel is still smooth and damp! and that the powder is quite dry!... Yes! it is... the rocket is moving, its long tail shivers; hardly noticeable at first, the ascent is more pronounced; roaring the rocket slides on its launching site; it is freeing itself head first, it shoots up, fast, straight, triumphant, cheered by the immense roar of the crowd, whose enthusiasm has reached its climax.

It has scored a triumph for the Wat, for the village... The team is literally hopping wild with joy, the phubacs are dancing madly, and on the square where, lost amidst other yellow robes, he was anxiously waiting, the monk artificer from now on famous, is giving thanks to the Buddha.

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