

## THE LAMVONG

In the din of festive  
sounds that engulf the pagoda  
grounds of a Lao boun,  
3 sounds fusing into one  
are at once the loudest  
and most insistent—the throbbing beat  
of a drum, the shrill ring  
of small brass cups,  
and the clicking of 2 sticks, all  
accompanying a song.

To the Lao, this is the  
unmistakable tempo of their  
beloved lamvong whose origins  
they trace as far back  
as the 14th century when  
the kingdom of Lane Xang  
encompassed Korat in Thailand,  
a great part of Burma, Vietnam and Cambodia. At that time  
of all the many kingdoms which reigned over this continent,  
Lane Xang's power and glory ruled supreme. But its power  
waned, its frontiers shrunk to its present borders, although  
many of its people still live on the western side of the Mekong  
river, in what is known today as Northeast Thailand.

The Thais of this region still maintain close cultural links with  
their kin across the river for their ties with each other spring  
from the same ancestral blood. Thus, when the Lao used to or-  
ganize their fundraising bouns, they called upon Thai dancers  
and musicians to stage the Thai ramvong ("to dance around").

Through the years, especially with the emergence of Lao nationhood  
the Lao adapted a slower version of the ramvong (and called it  
the lamvong, because the Lao spoken language does not contain  
the "r" sound.)

The lamvong, perhaps the least intricate dance there is, by  
its very simplicity and charm, complements the Lao character.  
Its movements are languid, man and woman shuffling unhurriedly  
in a wide circle, their arms and hands tracing slow, sinuous  
circles in the air. It is a courting dance, the man moving in  
with the hint of an embrace for the woman, the woman daintily

stepping back, then both resume the slow circular march, moving in and back, while the lyrics moan: "...sweet smiling flower of my soul. You are lovely, you enchant me blossom, you and your fra grance...

To some, the lamvong looks less like a dance than a stylized stroll of 2 lovers down a meadow lane, while a singer vocalises the boy's love-struck thought. The more popular of the lamvong songs (Sawatdi Nong Sao) goes: "How are you my love./ How so beautiful and fair/ To make me swoon and dream.

Of the more than 108 dances in Laos (not counting those of the minority groups), the lamvong has been recognized as the national dance for the very same reason that the champa is the national flower: both are found everywhere. Even as a child, the village girl has sat numberless times on the temple grounds in front of the lamvong stage during bouns, a wide-eyed spectator of elder sisters and cousins shuffling daintily and prettily round and round the stage, knowing she too will later trace those steps and sway delicate hands to the melody of the lamvong.

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