

THE ROCKET FESTIVAL

Ten year old Somsak and his little brother Khamphone, who is seven, live in Vientiane. Vientiane is the capital of a country in southeast Asia called Laos.

Today is a very special day for Somsak and Khamphone because they are to go with their father to the Rocket Festival. Both the boys can and both boys have twenty kip to spend at the festival. That is about four cents.

At last their father says it is time to go. They say good-bye to their mother and two little sisters. Then they walk up a little lane leading to the main street.

The father of the boys calls to the driver of a samlor. He and the driver discuss the price of a ride to the festival. There are regular taxis in Vientiane, but for short distances most people use a samlor. A samlor is like a large tricycle with a seat at the back. The driver sits in front and pushes it like a bicycle. The samlor has a canvas top to keep the rays of the hot sun off the passengers. It also has side and back curtains which may be dropped down in case of rain.

The two boys and their father all squeeze into the bright-blue plastic-covered seat. The samlor takes them swiftly down the street toward the banks of the Mekong River, where the celebration will be held. The streets are crowded with taxis, bicycles, and motorcycles. People are laughing and excited as they hurry to the festival.

At last they come to the street at the edge of the river. Somsak's father pays the driver, and they get out. They walk along the river's edge with the crowd. There are men selling balloons and still others with their little carts selling cold drinks and ices. Khamphone decides to buy a cold orange drink. The drink is in a plastic bag with a straw through the top. It costs ten kip.

The boun Bang Fai, or Rocket Festival, is held in early May just before the rainy season begins. At this time the Mekong River generally has very little water.

The people gather on the dry, sandy riverbed to watch the rockets being fired. At the bottom of the river bank a large scaffold made of bamboo has been erected to hold the rockets before they are fired. Bamboo is a tall tree-like grass that grows in warm lands.

"May we go down to the place where the rockets will be fired," asks Somsak.

"No," replies his father, "it might be dangerous. Anyway I think you will be able to see much better from up here."

You can see the rockets very well and can watch how they are fired."

Religious men, called monks, live in wats. The monks are experts in making the rockets. They use long hollow bamboo poles which they fill with a special mixture of gunpowder. When the fuse is attached and lighted, the gunpowder blows up, sending the rocket high into the air. The people from the different villages like to make bets as to which rocket will go the farthest. They want their rocket to be both powerful and beautiful.

"Look!" cries Somak, "here is a rocket."

Sure enough, driving slowly up the street is a truck filled with shouting, singing men and children. Tied down in the back of the truck is a rocket.

"Oh!" exclaimed Somsak, "that looks like the rocket from our wat. For days I have been watching the men making it."

"Yes," replies his father, "I believe it is. See, there are our neighbors!"

Slowly the truck backs into a position on the bank of the river just where there is a steep drop in the dry riverbed.

Somsak and all the other people from his wat are very proud of their rocket. It is more than 20 feet long. It is wrapped in red and gold paper and decorated with many colored streamers and gold dragons.

"Here comes a parade!" shouts Khamphone. The music sounds loudly. Yes, it is a parade but not a marching parade. A group of about ten young men with painted faces, strange hats, large spectacles, false noses, and mustaches or beards move forward. They are dancing to the sound of drums and bamboo flutes. The dancers who are not playing instruments are singing and clapping their hands in rhythm. The spectators laugh at the words of the songs. Some join the singers and dancers. Everyone is gay and happy.

This festival will be one of the last celebrations of the year because soon the rains will come. Then everyone will be busy from sunup to sundown tending the rice fields. They will have no time for such gaiety. Further down the street another group of dancers is coming. The street is now so full of people that no cars or samlors can drive through.

As soon as the first truck is in position, the men on the truck jump down and unfasten the rocket. They remove some of the decorations and check the fuse. Then with a ramrod they push more gunpowder into the hollow bamboo poles. There is much laughing and joking, but it is a serious job. The pride of the wat and village is a stake.

The men have worked for nearly half an hour getting the rocket ready for firing. At last it is ready.

Somsak steps to the edge of the river bank. From here he can watch the rocket as it is placed in position for firing.

"Look, Father," he calls, "there is a rocket ready to go."

From the distance it seems to be about the same size as the rocket from their wat. It is blue and gold and looks very gay in the bright sunlight. Fifteen men, crawling up and down over the bamboo poles, place the rocket in position. Soon the signal is given, and all the men leave the scaffold.

The crowd becomes silent as the fuse is lighted. A loud hiss and clouds of smoke follow. Every eye is on the rocket. The--with a great rush--the rocket leaves the scaffold and shoots skyward. There is a great shout from the crowd, then silence, because suddenly the rocket wavers and falls to the ground. Some people sigh in disappointment. Others laugh and boo. But it is soon forgotten because another rocket is being carried with singing and shouting to the scaffold. It will be followed by many others, for there are at least twenty trucks lined up along the bank with rockets ready to be fired.

As the afternoon wears on, the crowd becomes more and more excited. One rocket misfires, only to explode high in the air. Another never leaves the ground. It only sizzles and sputters in a thick screen of black smoke.

At last it is time for the rocket from Somsak's wat to be fired. His father holds up little Khamphone on his shoulder so that he can see better. All the people are anxious, but they laugh and joke anyway. After a moment or two with a great swoosh, the rocket leaves the scaffold. It goes very high, leaving behind a trail of smoke. Then it begins gently to arch and start down toward the shore. There is a great shout from the crowd, but the rocket doesn't hit the shore. Instead, it lands with a great splash in the Mekong River. Everyone cheers loudly.

Somsak turns to his father and says proudly, "I think that was the best shot of all. Don't you, Father?"

"It certainly was fine," his father replies. "The monks from our wat have always been clever at making rockets."

After all the rockets have been fired, Somsak's father speaks. "We should remember," he says, "that on the morning of the Rocket Festival an important religious ceremony is held. This ceremony marks the birth and death of our great religious leader Buddha. On this day new monks are taken into the wat. It is also a day when the people give offerings to the monks."

"The Rocket Festival," Somsak's father continued, "shows that the people of Laos are both religious and fun loving. It began as a religious festival. Some persons believe that the rocket festival goes back to a time when people believed in many gods. The rockets were fired as an offering to the gods. The hope was that the gods would soon send rain which would bring a good rice harvest.

It was six o'clock before Somsak, his father, and brother finally got a samlor and started home. They had spent the whole afternoon at the festival in Vientiane. Many people remained to dance and sing together far into the night.

Boun Bang Fai is one of the many festivals which the Lao enjoy so much. Nearly all holidays in Laos are religious. The visitor soon realizes that religion is one of the most important parts of life in Laos.