

LAO / THAM CUSTOMS

NEW YEAR FESTIVITIES

(5th month Festival)

by

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New Year festivities, better known in Laos as the (5th month Festival) is the cause of manifold rejoicings which take place during the month of April.

I believe it would be useful to digress somewhat, to explain the reasons of an anomaly which, although not the result of arbitrariness, may appear somewhat surprising.

In fact, the first month of the lunar year does not correspond to the month of April of the Western calendar, but rather to December. In deciding to delay by several months, the opening of the official year, the Horas's (astrologers) idea was to place the New Year under more favourable auspices. From the zodiacal sign Thamu (Sagittarius), nights become longer to the detriment of days and consequently lead the world towards darkness, and symbolically to unhappiness. On the contrary from the Rasi Met (Aries) which correspond to the 5th month of the lunar calendar, days get longer and longer to the detriment of nights, till the Rasi phrusop (Taurus) and the Methun (Gemini). Thus, a year beginning in April offers excellent prospects of brightness and prosperity.

The present year, or Year of the Dog (Capricorn), to be succeeded by the Year of the Pig is to end on the 13th of April or day of the Song Karn Pay (which marks the departure of the Genius of the year) (1). The following day the Munao which is an intercalary day, during which all work is forbidden.

It follows that the New Year (2502 of the Buddhist era) begins on the 15th April which corresponds to the 6th day of the waxing moon (2). It is called Song Karn Khan (or return of the Genius). It varies from year to year and is determined in accordance with a method adopted by the ancient Horas, whose knowledge must have been quite extensive, since the laws on universal gravitation they formulated at the time are still now confirmed by the works of scientists having much more important means at their disposal (1).

Thus, the 1st day of the Laotian New Year is situated between the 6th day of the waning moon in the 5th month and the 6th day of the waning moon in the 5th month and the 6th day of the waxing moon of the 6th month. Certain years include two (neutral) days (Munao), which are determined by astronomical computations.

We should, however, observe the fortunate coincidence of the date thus obtained with the rebirth of nature: trees and flowers are once again springing up, the earth, lifeless and barren by many months of heat and drought, is reborn and turns green again under the first showers.

It is therefor, amidst general rejoicings that the ritual feasts are celebrated throughout the Laotian country-side.

On the last day of the closing year, each house is carefully cleaned and put in order, so as to banish disasters and evil geni.

On New Year's day, all the population makes for the Wats, in order to sprinkle the images of the Buddha with lustral water. Both men and women bow before them and beseech the gods to make the new year propitious in bringing them health, wealth and happiness.

It is on that day that visits are paid to relatives and friends. In the case of high officials, this is taken as an opportunity to celebrate, what we call a baci, ceremony which is unknown in other parts of the world (2).

The subsequent days are devoted to various forms of rejoicings: in the streets, phubace and phusace sprinkle one another generously with water on the commendable pretext of purification... no doubt, that is why they pay so little attention as to the cleanliness of the water they use for the purpose!

As these festivals draw to a close, small mounds of sand shaped like thats are erected both in Wats and on the banks of the Mekong; they are topped with paper streamers, ornamented with zodiacal signs. Their builders beg the gods to grant them the favour of a long life, of wonderful days filled with happiness and wealth as numerous as the sands they are made of.

The relatively recent Children Festival—which in fact was first celebrated in 1941—is held at Vientiane on the day of the Munao, either at Wat Ong-Tu on certain occasions or generally at the municipal Stadium. It consists of a general distribution of cakes and toys to the Dek Nois lined up in front of the Phagna Song Karn (Genius of the Year) who, in a long speech, advice them to be good, to work hard and to obey their parents and their masters, etc.

Little does it matter, since the children are much too interested in the gifts which are being distributed to pay the least attention to the sound advice of the wise Genius.

But it is at Luang Prabang that the 5th month festivities are at their brightest. They spread over two full weeks and besides the various ceremonies which have been described above, they are marked by numerous festivities.

Among the more spectacular ones are the purchasing, at about the Great Market, of various offerings and mainly of live animals with the intend of setting them free (1), the procession of Royal elephants, the Baci at the Royal Palace and the stately visit of the King and his retinue to the Wats of Visoun, Kieng Thong, Vat Mai and Sangkhalok (2) for the aspersion of the images of the Buddha. The crowd massed all along the route sprinkles the King and his suite with scented water.

These ritual processions take place amidst general excitement and enjoyment of the populace thronging along the route, especially at Wat Mai for the aspersion of the Phra Bang which, on this occasion, is removed from its pedestal and placed under a dais in the courtyard of the Wat. The aspersion is carried out by mean of a Mang Lin or wooden tube carved in the shape of a dragon, the faithful pouring the lustral water in a small gutter cut in the dragon's tail which conveys it out of the dragon's mouth onto the images of the Buddha which have been placed under it.

Preceding the Song Phra Bang (aspersion of Phra Bang) comes the dance of the Pou Gneu Gna Gneu, i.e. the first male and female Laotian ancestors: wearing a mask and a coat of coarse flax they dance with allion (3); all three of them, at a given moment, kowtow to the Sovereign and present him with the best wishes of all the Laotians past, present and to come.

On the 9th day of the New Year and on the 15th of the festival, the King and Queen give their offerings to the monks and entertain them to a banquet at the Royal Palace during which the latter are also sprinkled with lustral water.

With the exception of the Pou Gneu Gna Gneu dance which is performed in the North only, similar demonstrations of religious fervour take place in Southern Laos (4).

Merriment and general good humour prevail over all Laos during these festivals, where the sacred aspersions extend joyfully to all and sundry. Although at home, the New Year retains its deeply religious character it is nonetheless celebrated in an atmosphere of joy and brotherhood. On this occasion, it is the special wish of the good people of Laos to see everyone participate in the general rejoicing without any distinction of race or origin. Woe to those whom, ignoring its customs, take offence at the shower which is so kindly bestowed upon them!... Their anger will make them all the more the target for new aspersions...