THE LAO NEW YEAR

New year is a happy time for people all over the world, and different people celebrate their New Year at different times, and they have different kinds of festivities. There are reasons why people pick a certain time to celebrate their New Year.

Christians count their years according to the birth of Christ. They call the time before the birth of Christ, B.C. and the time after, A.D. They celebrate their New Year on the 1st of January of each year.

I think it would be useful to explain first the reason of the anomaly that we celebrate our New Year in April on the Western calendar. New Year festivities are better known to Lao people as the 5th month festival. In fact, the first month of the lunar year does not correspond to the month of April of the Western calendar, but December. "In deciding to delay by several months, the opening of the official year, the Horas' idea was to place the New Year under more favorabl e auspices. From the zodiacal sign Thanu, 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, which co rresponds to the 5th month of the lunar calendar, days get longer and longer to the detriment of nights, till the Rasi phrusop and the Methun. Thus, a year beginning in April offers excellent prospects of brightness and prosperity." We Lao people count our years by 12, this is taken from the Chinese Year Designations, which is a cycle and are represented by the names of 12 different animals; rat, cow, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, goat, monkey, chicken, dog, pig.

This is the table of the Lao Year Designation:

Rat	1900	1912	1924	1936	1948	1960
Cow	1901	1913	1925	1937	1949	1961
Tiger	1902	1914	1926	1938	1950	1962
Rabbit	1903	1915	1927	1939	1951	1963
Dragon	1904	1916	1928	1940	1952	1964
Snake	1905	1917	1929	1941	1953	1965
Horse	1906	1918	1930	1942	1954	1966
Goat	1907	1919	1931	1943	1955	1967
Monkey	1908	1920	1932	1944	1956	1968
Chicken	1909	1921	1933	1945	1957	1969
Dog	1910	1922	1934	1946	1958	1970

Pig 1911 1923 1935 1947 1959 1971

The ancient Lao genius realized the coincidence of choosing the beginning of a year in April, which is in the 5th lunar year, so they decided to celebeate New Year in April.

According to the geographical location and the weather of Laos, it is really a very fortunate coincidence to celebrate our New Year in April. It is the time of the rebirth of nature; trees, flowers and grass begin to spring up and turn green again after many months of heat and drought. Farmers begin to plow their fields which have been laid bare for a long period, and scatter rice seeds when the earth is wet enough from the rainfalls. It is therefore the general rejoicing that the ritual feasts are celebrating thoughout the Laotian countryside.

On the last day of the closing year, people all get ready to welsome the coming New Year. They get their houses thoroughly clean and put in order to drive out the evil spirits, that have hidden in the house somewhere, out of the house so that the whole family can live happily through the coming year.

On the first day of New Year, the monks in the temples take the statues of Buddha out of the temple buildings and place them on the temple ground. On this day, hundreds of people go to the temples in order to sprinkle Buddha's images. They bring with them buckets filled with clean water that has the smell of flowers dissolved in it. They bow before the images of Buddha, sprinkle them with the water, and pray that the coming year will bring them health, wealth and happiness. They they collect the water that runs down from the statues of Buddha for some purpose. They believe that it is holy water.

People like to visit their friends and relatives on this day. They drink, sing and dance. High officials take this opportunity to celebrate their remarkable successes during the past years.

The subsequent days are devoted to various forms of rejoicings. People enjoy themselves day and night. In the daytime, they stand on both sides of the streets with barrels of water in order to pour it on the passersby. Boys and girls throw water generously on each other. It is a general belief that by throwing and sprinkling water on each other on New Year's day, they will wash out the sins for each other. When people throw water on a person, it means they like him and wish him good luck, so in return he is supposed to say "Kop Chai", "thank you." But in recent years, most people just take this for fun. Some don't even know why they throw water on people on New Year's day. A number of people use trucks filled with water barrels in order to throw water on people walking in the streets and they pay little attention to the cleanliness of the water they use. This causes some traffic accidents each year. Now, it is forbidden by the government to drive a car or truck with water barrels for this purpose.

Children also have lots of fun playing with their soaked clothes on, using squirt guns to squirt water at one another. You seldom see a person walking in the street who is not soaked through.

At night, people put on their best clothes and go to parties, movies and wherever they can have fun, because they don't have to worry about getting their nice clothes all wet. It is against the law to throw water on people at night. On these few days of the New Year, most schools and institutions hold dancing parties to celebrate. So there are lots of parties people can to to and have fun//

After three days of rejoicing, as these festivities draw to an end, small mounds of sand shaped like piramids are erected both in the temple grounds and on the banks of the Mekong River. They are decorated with paper streamers, ornamented with zodiacal signs. Their builders beg gods to grant the favor of long life, of wonderful days filled with happiness and wealth as numerous as the sands they are made of.

But it is at Luang Prabang that the New Year festivities are at their brightest. Maybe it is because Luang Prabang is the home of the King. The New Year spreads over two full weeks and besides the vaious ceremonies which have been described above, they are marked by numerous festivities. People buy live animals in the market and set them free. They believe by doing this kind deed will lead them toward heaven after they die.

The King has a big party in his palace to celebrate New Year. He invites all the noble people to come and celebrate together. He visits different temples to sprinkle water on the images of Buddha. On this occasion, crowds of people mass along the route to sprinkle the King with scented water before he gets to the temples on his way home.

The comes the dance of Pou Gnew Gna Gnew, the first male and female Laotian ancestors. The two dancers wear masks and coats ornamented with bright colors. They dance and present best wishes to all the Laotians for the past, present and future. On the 9th day of the New Year, the King and Queen give their offering to the monks and entertain them at a banquet in the Royal Palace.

Lao New Year retains its deeply religious characteristics and is celebrated in an atmosphere of joy and brotherhood. On this occasion, it is the special wish of the Lao people to see everyone participate in the general rejoicing without any distinction of race or origin. If anyone does not have respect for the Lao customs and he takes offence at the shower that is kindly sprinkled on him, it would make the Lao people very sad.

We are very happy that a good many foreign people who live in Laos, participate in celebrating our New Year. They go to our New Year parties. They throw water on other people and get soaked

while walking in the streets, without getting mad. This shows that people can always get along at any time, any place, if people respect each other's customs and beliefs.

THE THAT LUANG FESTIVAL

Buddhism originated in India. According to history, there was a prince who saw the hardship of all the poor people and who gave up his comfortable life in the palace in order to live like a common citizen. He intended to take the trouble of all the poor people on himself, so that they could live a comfortable and happy life. In doing this, he tortured himself by sitting under a tree for seven whole days without having any food and finally he died of starvation. Because of his kindness and sympathy for other people, he rose to heaven and became known as Buddha.

The story goes that in India, thousands of years ago, a man called Asoka the Great completed 84,000 temples that he built for the relics of the Buddha, and celebrated his achievementin the moonlight. Since in all Buddhist countries temples are supposed to contain some relics of the Blessed One/(ashes, a hair, a nail or an eyelash). That Luang was built for this purpose.

That Luang, meaning "Royal Temple," was erected in 1566 by King Sethathirath. According to tradition, it contains a hair of the Buddha as well as fabulous treasures. Then invaders came. In 1873 That Luang was almost completely destroyed by Hannanese pirates.

In 1904, at the beginning of the French Protectorate, Mr. Morin, Government Commissioner, with the help of Sisuvanavong, Mayor of Vientiane, undertook the first repairs. Some minor buildings were restored. The holes, left by the invaders in the towers, where treasures had been taken away, were covered up.

In 1929, the French School of the Far East decided to restore the That and appointed Mr. Fombertaux to direct the work. Mr. Fombertaux took the task and completed repairing That Luang in two years. Then the people in Vientiane brought food and contributions to the That and celebrated. The festival was held once a year in December, but it was not anything like today's That Luang festival.

Today the That Luang festival is somewhat like a fair in other countries. All the countries that have foreign relations with Laos set up attractive, well-lighted pavilions to show their native products. During the one-week festival, movies are shown outdoors. The That Luang's dusty ground is crowded with thousands of people. Chinese shopkeepers in their temporary sheds sell Chinese food and many other things. Young Laotian girls are lined up behind their baskets full of fruits, roasted chickens and wine. On this occasion, lovers like to go inside the That Luang temple, kneel before the That and beg Buddha to preserve their love forever. Day and night, all kinds of games of chance are ready for the experienced and inexperienced gamblers. All this activity is carried on amid

shouts of pleasure and mumbles of disappointment.

On the last day of the festival, everything is brightest. The day is devoted to public rejoicing: football matches, horse races and the games of Ti Khi are some of the important events of the festival. On this day the crowd is so dense and the cloud of dust is so thick that sometimes it is difficult for people to breathe. This is also the only day the King visits the festival. He watches the games and gives prizes to the winners, and following that, he visits all the pavilions to encourage good relations between Laos and other nations.

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