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LAO CUSTOMS

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## OUTLINE

- I. Most of the Lao culture and customs ~~are~~ originated from Buddhism
- II. Marriage in Laos
  - A. The parents' role in a marriage
    1. They pick the girl for the son
    2. They make all kinds of decisions and arrange the wedding
      - a. Kha khun phi for the preliminary proposal
      - b. Kha song for the formal proposal
  - B. The young man has to retreat in a temple as a monk for a short period of time before he gets married
    1. to reward his parents
    2. to redeem his parents' sins
  - C. The Formal Proposal
  - D. Purifying the water to become holy water
  - E. The procession of the bride-groom to the last ceremony
    1. Payment for going through the entrance to the bride's house
    2. washing his feet before he is allowed to go into the house
  - D. Wedding Sukhuan
- III. Funeral Rites
  - A. To die, in Laos, is not a dreadful event
    1. he is now free from this troublesome world
    2. his soul goes up to heaven
  - B. Things to be done right after a person is dead
    1. wash the body with warm, scented water
    2. tie cotton thread around his neck, wrists, and feet
    3. Dress him in a shroud
    4. Put him in a coffin
  - C. Funeral vigil "Happy house"
    1. Relatives, friends come to express their joys toward the death with night games, feasts
    2. A place for the youth to get acquainted
  - D. The day before the cremation ceremony
    1. fixing the catafalque
    2. younger male relatives shave their heads and eye-brows and dress in long, white robes, as the sign of mourning
  - E. The Cremation Ceremony
    1. The catafalque is brought to the local temple
    2. The monks set a fire at the pyre while they are praying

r. The end of this long rejoicing period

1. Collecting the ashes of the bones

2. Erecting a lasting memory at the temple

Custom is a habitual practice; a long-continued habit which is so established that it has the force of Law.

Every nation has its own culture and customs, and so does Laos. Most of the Lao culture and customs ~~are~~ originated from Buddhism, for Buddhism has been the state religion of the country for many centuries. Lao people are very religious; they have been carrying on the Buddhist practices since then. It is impossible to talk about Lao people without mentioning Buddhism. Therefore, Lao customs are very different from the ones in the western world.

In Laos, the parents are the ones who make all kinds of decisions and arrange everything in a marriage for their child.

If there is a young man who has reached ~~the~~ marriage<sup>able</sup> age in the house, the mother ~~would go~~ around the village and <sup>to</sup> hunt for the girl that she thinks would best fit her son, then she ~~would go~~ to see the girl's parents ~~and~~ <sup>to</sup> talk about the subject, and <sup>to</sup> ask their opinions. If they are agreeable, then they would go into further business, Kha Khum Phi, the compulsory hand over for the preliminary proposal (tribute paid to the guardian gods, which is fixed by the code, according to a progressive scale, going from 10 piastres, the old Lao currency, for a girl of lower condition to 150 piastres for the daughter of a high official, covering all the ranks of the social ladder.) They also have to be agreeable to the Nha Dong (it is paid by the future husband to his future wife or to her parents. From the legal point of view, it is optional, yet it is compulsory in practice; as its amount is not determined by law, it affords human pride an excellent opportunity to run free... Thus, we have heard of Nha Dongs going from 30 piastres — which is a bare minimum — to thousands of piastres, to which several bats, gold unit of 15 gra., of gold were added...) <sup>2</sup> Now everything is settled, and they are ready to arrange the wedding. In Laos, it is customary to get married during the even months: second, fourth and twelfth, especially.

However, according to the custom ~~that when~~ a young man has to get his head and eye-brows shaven, and retreat in a temple for at least one week before he gets married. His ordination will redeem sins and collect goodness for his parents. It also has another significance<sup>w</sup> that it shows now he is a grown-up; he is now able to take care <sup>of</sup> a family, and be independent.

In many cases, the result of this kind of marriage <sup>is the</sup> turns out to be a tragedy, for many of these young people don't know each other until their big day comes; they know nothing about each other's interests or personality. After ~~being lived~~ <sup>living</sup> together for a while, they find out that there <sup>they have</sup> is nothing in common ~~within them~~, or <sup>that</sup> they don't like each other, yet they still have to go along with it, and live miserably for the rest of their lives. Today, however, the youngsters are better off; they have better chances to be together; they can find out and choose the one that <sup>they</sup> really loves <sup>themselves?</sup> by himself, and then have the parents to arrange the wedding.

Now we come to the formal Proposal which is made on the very eve of the Wedding Sukhuan, the Lao ceremony which is celebrated to wish happiness and long-life for the newly weds.

Along with the kha Dong which has been agreed upon previously, offerings of all sorts, betel nuts, cigarettes, cakes and many kinds of food, are sent to the fiancée's home by the young man's parents. The procession of gifts bearers proceeds slowly towards the girl's house with thundering shouts, applause, and music.

At home, accompanied by some of her friends of her own age, the bride is waiting in her wedding dress, as though she is ready for the wedding. She will receive the offerings in person, and make a small gift to each female bearer. Then the people who are sent by the man's side would pretend and bring their master's proposal, and the girls would answer for the bride and try to cause difficulty for the other team such as asking for piles of gold and silver, etc. Actually, everything is settled.

On the same day, after dinner, the young man goes to his fiancée's house to attend the prayers to the water contained in alms bowls with the monks. The couple, monks and the alms bowls are connected all together by a white cotton thread.

The holy water in the alms bowls is closely watched during the night and preserved for the next day's purposes. Early in the following morning, the monks, the parents, and friends will sprinkle that holy water abundantly onto the couple for blessing. After changing their damp clothes, they will return together to distribute the morning alms to the monks and receive further blessing.

After an informal Sukhuan at his own home, the bride-groom, escorted by two of his friends with two sun-shades, goes to the bride's home for the last ceremony. There is his retinue following him with bed-

dings, mattings, mattresses, and cushions.

As they approach the bride's house, they see a group of people waiting at the entrance of the house <sup>to</sup> keep them from going through unless they are willing to pay a small amount of money or some alcohol. The bride-groom is now at the stair-case to the house, but he is not allowed to go up into the house unless he has put his feet on a piece of stone covered with banana leaf, and let the bride's younger sisters or servants to wash them clean. He is led to the front of two formal Phakhuans (trays, or 'Repast for the soul'), and to sit by the bride who has already taken her place. Now the wedding Sukhuan is being taken place; the wedding is performed by two attendants who recite together the traditional formulas. After everyone has given his blessing and twisted lucky cotton threads around the wrists of the newly married couple, these two gay, happy young couple are led to the wedding chamber by a lady, who is to ensure the happiness of the couple, is the most virtuous woman in the village and she can't be either a widow or a divorcee.

In the meantime, the guests go on feasting and enjoying themselves. Nowadays, they usually have a party or a banquet to entertain the guests <sup>in</sup> the very evening.

From then on, the son-in-law will live in his wife's home and have the responsibility for taking care <sup>of</sup> the whole family for a period of time, or he may live with them for good.

Now, we come to the end of one's journey "death". To die in Laos is not considered an awful event; in fact, it is a happy event; it is the most important event of one's life+time; it means he is going into a new and better world. However, <sup>the</sup> ~~human~~ <sup>man</sup> is still human; he has ~~the~~ feeling, compassion and love toward others. He has love toward the death, his beloved one; he feels sorry and pitiful the death as well as for himself, yet he does not dare to show his grief and regret too loud or openly which might hold back the soul of the departed, and keep it from flying to the wonderful land.

After a person dies, his relatives would wash him with warm, scented water, then twist a white cotton thread around his neck, his wrists, and feet to show that how fragile are the bonds holding man to the earth, and now he is free from the material interests, affection and love. They dress him with a spotless shroud, and put him in a coffin, which is made of six wooden boards as a temporary one; there will be a specially made coffin to be used for the cremation.

The coffin will be placed either in the house or in the local temple.

the funeral vigil, the happy house, is held that very night ~~at~~ where the coffin is located. The monks come to pray for the death and recite the words of Buddha: "The body is nothing once the soul has left it. Soon it will be as worthless on the earth as the trunk of a dead tree. Life is fleeting. The recurrence of birth and death is an endless and normal process. Once you are born, you must die. It is a blessing to enter into the nothingness of death. All animals die, have died and will die. We too, must die; there is no uncertainty about death."<sup>3</sup>

In the meantime, all the friends, and relatives get together at the happy house but no one would pay any attention to the deceased; they enjoy themselves with games, gambling, visiting, and feasting. It is also a place for the young people to get acquainted. "Many marriage will be followed ~~by~~ <sup>by</sup> a funeral."<sup>4</sup> This will go on for days and nights, with laughters and shouts to express their joys toward the death; in a rich family, it may go on for two or three weeks.

The day before it comes to the date fixed for the cremation ceremony, they have the catafalque mounted on two giant birds on a cart, which is being pulled symbolically with a white cotton string, but it is actually pulled by a team of men; now, a motormobile<sup>7</sup> or a truck is used for the purpose.

By this time, the deceased's younger male close relatives already have their heads and eye-brows shaven clean, and dress in long white robes, as a sign of mourning. Once again, they will remain and serve in the temple for one hundred days in order to redeem the sins of the deceased and collect the goodness of the world for him.

The following day, the fixed date for the cremation, the catafalque, containing the corpse, is brought to a local temple, and is placed where the cremation will be taken place.

Now, comes the most supreme moment; the monks set a fire at the funeral pyre while they're repeating their incantations: "The body is nothing once the soul has left it..., life is fleeting..."<sup>5</sup> Everyone at the funeral follows the monks and sets a fire respectively at the pyre; it is a ~~significance~~ <sup>signifies</sup> of farewell and helping the soul of the death to arise to heaven. From the funeral pyre, a huge flame is now rising straight up into the sky just like a blissful soul. Then a trayful of money is scattered in the air, and given away to the children to show the charity of the death, which will help to send his soul up to heaven.

Everything they've done so far is trying to help the soul of the death to reach the happy land "heaven".

In the early morning of the following day, after feasting the monks, the family, accompanied with relatives, friends, goes to the site of the cremation and pick up the ashes of the bones ~~which is~~ left over <sup>from</sup> the flames, and put <sup>them</sup> in a small urn, which will be deposited at the wat, temple, and they will erect a lasting memory for this virtuous man who has left nothing but these insignificant remains.

It is said in the funeral hymns of the Rig Veda: "Leave behind what could be blamed in you, and return home. Enter into a world of glory. Let your soul go to the wind." The rite of cremation answers ~~to~~ this last wish since it is a complete physical destruction in the presence of which any Buddhist must feel the samvejhana, this unfa--  
thomable bliss arising from knowledge.<sup>6</sup>

### Footnotes

- 1 Thao Nhouy Abhay, "Marriage Rites," Kingdom of Laos,  
Trans. Mrs. Tessier du Cros, Messrs. Alexander Allan, John W. Fisher  
and E.R. Pratt. (France, 1959) P. 138
- 2 "Marriage Rites," Kingdom of Laos,  
Trans. Mrs. Tessier du Cros, Messrs. Alexander Allan, John W. Fisher  
and E.R. Pratt. (France, 1959) P. 138
- 3 Abhay, P. 146
- 4 Maha Chieng Kham, interview.
- 5 Abhay, p. 148
- 6 Abhay, p. 148

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