

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 organize their fundraising bouns, they called upon Thai dancers and musicians to stage the Thai ramvong ("to dance around").

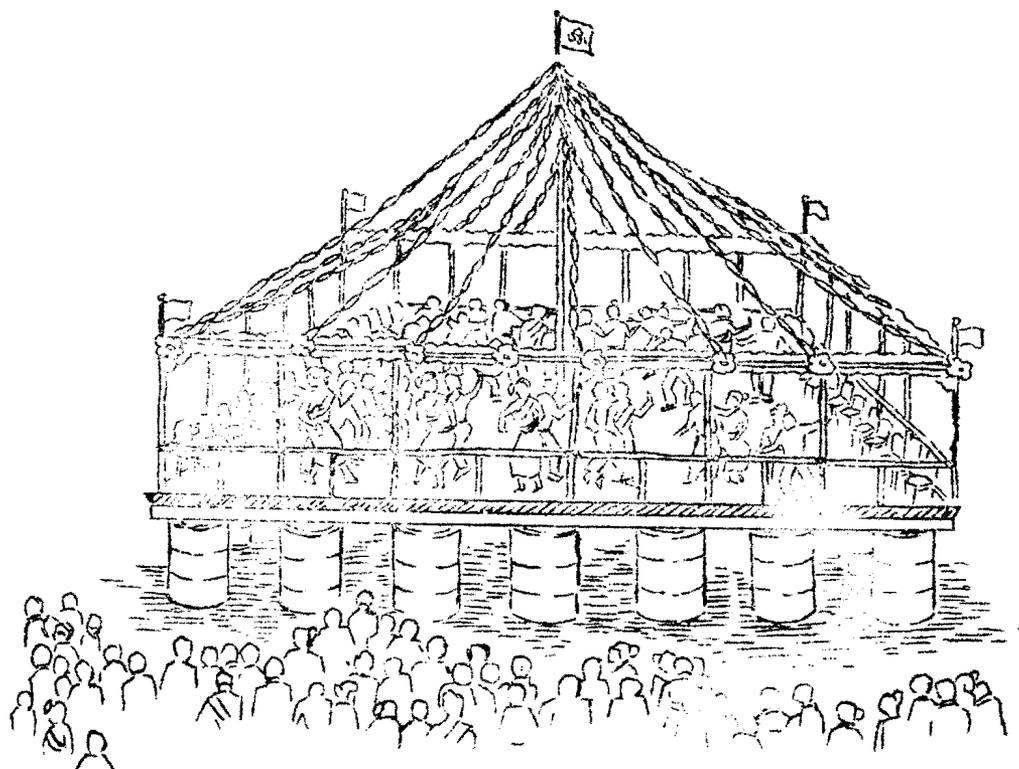
Through the years, especially with the emergence of Lao nationhood, the Lao adapted a slower version of the ramvong (and called it the lamvong, because the Lao spoken language does not contain the "r" sound.)

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 fragrance..."

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/ Heaven itself must have formed you/ The lights dim and brighten/ 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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