



INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTARY SERVICES, INC.

1555 connecticut ave., n.w.
washington, d.c. 20036

Larry Woodson
Luang Prabang, Laos
May 31, 1965

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INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTARY SERVICES, INC.

1555 connecticut ave., n.w.
washington, d.c. 20036Larry Woodson
Luang Prabang, Laos
May 31, 1965

Dear Friends,

Last month found everybody in Laos celebrating Pimay Lao, (Lao New Year's Festival). The festivities here in Luang Prabang lasted almost two weeks and each day was full of excitement and Gaiety.

The Lao New Year Festival, better known in Laos as the "Fifth Month Festival," is the official opening of the new year and a time for rejoicing. The first month of the lunar year does not correspond to the month of April of the Western calendar, but to December. In deciding to delay the opening of the new year by several months, the "Horas" (astrologers) idea was to place the new year under more favorable auspices. The chosen date for the beginning of the Lao New Year coincides with the rebirth of Nature, after months of heat and drought, flowers and trees turn green under the first showers.

New Years Day fell on April 15th but the activities started long before then and lasted several days later. One of the earlier parties was given by our school on the 11th. We had a large party with everybody invited. The students provided the entertainment which consisted of various songs and dances. After the program everybody joined in the dancing. The next afternoon the students were dismissed for the holidays. Monday, I picked up several of the students and visited their homes along with other students that lived in Luang Prabang. From here we decided to drive out to a small village a few miles outside of town where two of the girls lived that also attended the school. Upon arriving at the village, we were invited into the house and given hot tea. After talking for several minutes our faces were blackened with charcoal and upon leaving the house, we were soaked with water. From here we went to the other girl's house where the same thing happened. Later, we returned to our jeep to find that the villagers had filled it full of ants and while we were trying to get them out of the jeep, the villagers continued throwing water on us. By the time we emptied the jeep of most of the ants, we were completely soaked. Since this all seems strange to most of you, I will explain the water throwing later on in this letter.

Early the next morning was the "Great Market" which was located on the main street. Here everybody set up their little shop along the street and all of the people gathered to buy live animals

to set free and to purchase offerings for the monks. After the market, there were various religious festivals at all of the wats along with two basketball games at the stadium.

In the afternoon, the people took boats across the river to build Thats out of sand. The Thats were constructed on the sand banks of the Mekong and were topped with paper streamers, ornamented with zodiacal signs. Their builders beg the gods to grant them long life, wonderful days filled with happiness and wealth as numerous as the sands they are made of. Following the construction of the sand Thats, there was drinking and dancing during which everybody was throwing water and the women smearing charcoal and tearing shirts. Later in the evening, the ones remaining were invited to the Chao Khueng for drinks and more dancing.

April 14.... Several of the VSO's (English organization similar to IVS) and IVS'ers including myself were invited to go on a picnic with the Director of the school in Vientiane. We drove about three miles out into the country to a small cabin located in the center of a beautiful garden. Here the group enjoyed a fine Lao meal. Later in the afternoon we returned to Luang Prabang for the procession to Wat Xieng Thong, one of the big wats in Luang Prabang. At the wat, they had a very colorful ceremony in which the people all came to throw water on the Buddhas. They also had the dancing of Pou Gneu-Gna Gneu i.e., the first male and female Laotian ancestors each wearing a mask and a coat of coarse flax. They danced around with a Lion...all three at a given moment Kowtow to the sovereign and presented him with the best wishes of all of the Laotians, past, present and future.

In the evening, as every evening during the two weeks of celebrating, there was a large party somewhere that everybody attended.

April 15... Lao New Years Day... In the morning of the 15th the Traditional Bacci was held at the palace for the King and Queen. The King's Council, the shopkeepers, functionairs and the rest of the population met at the palace for the event.

Since I have not described a Bacci before I will take time now to do so....

The place where the Bacci is to be held prepares a Phakuan, which consist of a tray covered with bowls and of Khans, (smaller trays) which are dressed with cupped banana leaves filled with flowers. On the top, as a symbol of happiness, a bigger bouquet of champa flowers are stuck on small bamboo sticks. The Phakuan also contains alcohol, eggs, cakes, rice, silver, candles and cotten threads. All of this is spread over a red carpet. The multi-colored Phakuans and burning incense give the ceremony the oriental flavor. The ceremony is usually performed by a white-haired old man, dressed in white, and preferably, by an unfrocked monk of the thit or chane rank.

He sits in the appropriate place, i.e., facing the guest of honor who in this case is the King and Queen. The candles and incense in the Phakuan are lit and while a light mist of perfume and incense arises, the old man addresses the guardian gods.

He then calls for the soul, for the soul drown in the river or lost in the fog, for the soul fallen into a hole or for the stray souls wandering in the rivers, streams, ponds, or lakes, and among the frogs. According to tradition, each of the thirty-two parts of the body has a soul. He then calls the soul belonging to the head to return from the Akalita Heavens, should it have gone there; he calls for the souls of the legs which might have gone to the Honepa or the Hos; calling for the souls which might have gone over to the little village of never ending dew, where the cock do not crow and the sun does not shine.

When these incantations and prayers have been said, it is believed that the divinities are presiding over the ceremony and that all of the souls have gone back into the body. After the wishes have been recited everybody takes turns fastening a cotten thread around the celebrants wrist who in turn does the same to whom the Sukhuan is offered. Each in turn receives a lucky thread,

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