THE BACI

On the verandah's floor, or on the living room's floor, the host has laid out multi-colored straw mats (the aristocracy and well-to-do of Vientiane use rugs) on which you sit, barefooted or socked, not crosslegged, but with both legs tucked to one side, rather uncomfortably paralyzing for awhile, but it is the way it should be done.

At arm's length in front of you is a phakuan, an elaborate bouquet of champa and other flowers sticking out from a cone made out of banana leaves, whose base rests on a silver, intricately carved urn (a khan),which in turn rests on a broad, tin tray surrounded with bottles of Laollao (rice wine), boiled chicken, kahnom(cakes), bananas, hard-boiled eggs, kaotom(steamed rice with a slice of banana all wrapped in small packages of banana leaves). It is the loving handiwork of the host's mother, or his wife, assisted by other elderly female neighbors.

You will note that there are thin white cotton strings dangling limply from the flowers. There are also quite a number of people sitting around you and the phakuan in a manner thatputs you in the center of things, for you are the celebrant. There is murmur of small talk, perhaps about how such a good-looking person can be so young, or perhaps about the lost look in your eyes.

The mohpohn arrive, an elderly man, a white silk-like scarf worn like a sash across his front. He sits on the opposite side of the phakuan, facing you. The mohpohn is no ordinary man of the village; he has spent quite a number of his years as a monk and is therefore highly respected for his piety, his wisdom, his his unblemished reputation, He lights the finger-thin candles peeking among the champa blossoms, clears his throat, joins his hands in prayer, and in a fast, solemn monologue, addresses the gods in a mixture of Pali and Lao:

" Sakke who dwells in the paradise of the 16 regions;

Kame who dwells in the Kamaphob,

Charoupe who dwells in the Roupaphob and in the divine spheres.

Khirisi who dwells in the inanimate things, the mountains and the rivers,

You, divinities of the mountains and the rivers, be favorable to us; listen all of you;

Silent ones, lend a kindly ear to the invitation
which I send to you;
Come and gather the gifts offered to you on this day."

As celebrant, you touch 3 or 4 fingers of one extended hand to the rim of the khan as the prayers are chanted, while the others join their hands in prayer. The invitation is now extended to your soul or souls, for you have 32 of them (one each for every part of your body) which are " vagabond in nature", ever eager to break a away and roam the fields:

"Come back, oh soul, come along the path which
has been cleaned and is now open to you;

Come home;

Wade through the river if it only comes up to
your chest;

Swim if the river is deep;

When you arrive at the ray, don't hide in the huts;

When you come up to the tree stump, do not rest your head on it.

Do not fear when you come near.

Have no fear of ghosts or geniuses.

Come, oh soul, if you have eaten with the evil spirits,
vomit it,

If you have been chewing with the evil spirits,
spit it out

You must come back on an empty stomach, and eat rice with
your uncle, and eat fish with your ancestors."

If the prayers don't beckon them back, the flowers and the food are present to tempt them right back into your innards. When these souls are nowsafely tucked in, the blessings of the mohpohn are pronounced over you, specifically for the occasion for which the baci is being performed. Thus, if you're a newcomer there is a wish that no calamity befall you while in Laos if you've just recovered from sickness, may you "be as strong as the antlers of a stag, as the jaws of a wild boar, as the tusks of an elephant"; if the occasion is marriage, "may you have a dozen children, an obedient wife..."The crowd agrees with a distinct "Sa" (sob be it).

Join your hands in thanks; then raise your left hand as if to shield your left cheek, extend your right upon which an egg or a chicken leg, and a flower or a piece of cake, are placed; the mohpohn reaches to tie the whites trings around your wrists, while murmuring more blessings and wishes. You will feel the tou of many fingers on your elbow, your thigh, back, arm, leg, as those sitting closest to you partake of the blessings by touch. The touch is at the same time their gesture with which they invo

the same blessings on you. If you will look back, you will note that everybody in touching each other in the same manner, so that the blessings are infused into one and all.

The host now takes your wrists, twines his strings around it, says his blessings, knots the string, pushes and rubs it into your pulse (to inbue the blessings with more efficacy and strength) and finally blows onto your wrists (to signify he's through Soon everybody is tying the white strings around both your wrists, the giggling ripples because some of the wishes are asking too much, jiggers of the Lao-lao are being passed around, most of them coming your way. Lunch follows.

Although performad by Buddhists, the baci is not a Buddhist religious ceremony; it predates Buddhism's arrival in the kingdom and is the Lao's most unique way of expressing his good will, sincere in its simplicity, warm in its blessings, generous in its gifts, It is the all-purpose ceramony which greets the nowborn body, sets him off on a journey, welcomes his return, honors his achievements, weds him to his wife, bids him goodbye, celebrates his escape from injury, his triumph over sickness.

It is traditional to keep t hose strings sround your wrists for 3 days, your protection against the hordes of evil spirits that lurk in the forests and along the pathways, not only of Laos, but of life itself.

The cotton thread, although fragile and soft and common, is a symbol of continuity and permanence because centuries of Lao ancestors have been spinning it and it is still being spun under many village homes where time has not moved much through the seasons. It is white, the Lao color for warmth and honesty and peace.

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