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LAO

Laos, known as the "Land of a Million Elephants," is a landlocked country in Southeast Asia about the size of Kansas. The elephant symbolizes the ancient kingdom of Lan Xang, and is sacred to the Lao people, who believe it will bring prosperity to their country. Bordered by China to the north, Vietnam to the east, Cambodia to the south, Thailand to the west, and Myanmar (formerly Burma) to the northwest, Laos is a rough and mountainous land interwoven with forests and plateaus. The Mekong River, which runs through the length of Laos and supplies water to the fertile plains of the river basin, is both symbolically and practically, the lifeline of the Lao people, who number nearly 6 million. According to Wayne Johnson, Chief for the Iowa Bureau of Refugee Services, and a former Peace Corps Volunteer, "the river has deep meaning for the ethnic Lao who are Buddhist because of the intrinsic connection of water with the Buddhist religion, a connection that does not exist for the portion of the population who are non-ethnically Lao and who are animists."

Formally known as the Kingdom of Laos, and now known as Lao People's Democratic Republic, Laos was, in previous centuries, periodically independent and periodically part of the Khmer (Cambodian), Mongol, Vietnamese, and Thai (Siamese) empires. Lao, Thai, and Khmer (but not Vietnamese) share a common heritage evident today in similar religion, music, food, and dance traditions as well as language and dress. In 1893, Laos became part of French Indochina and was granted full independence in 1953. After the French departure, the country, involved in its own civil war, was also drawn into the Vietnam War (1959-1975). In 1975, the Pathet Lao (Communists) took control, and several hundred thousand Lao fled to Thailand to escape re-education and persecution for supporting the Royal Lao Government and American foreign policy interests. Technically, there were no American troops in Laos except those allowed by the Geneva Accords, although there were American civilians, including paramilitary personnel. Many Lao, which include Hmong and Tai Dam as well as lowland Lao groups, were eventually resettled in France, Canada, Australia, Argentina, and the United States.

Being Lao means belonging to one or more of over 100 ethnic groups, which have been divided into three categories: the Lao Lum (the majority lowland Lao), Lao Thoeng (from the mountain slopes), and the Lao Sung (from the mountain tops). The Lao Lum include the ethnic Lao, the Leu, and the Phu-tai, Tai Dam (Black Tai), and Red Tai (colors refer to traditional dress). The Lao Thoeng, most closely related to the Khmer, include the Khamu, Lamet, Laven, Sedang, and Nyaheun. The Lao Sung include the Hmong, Mien, Akha, and Phu Noi. Most Lao in the United States are Lowland Lao, Hmong, and Tai Dam, with the greatest concentration of those groups residing in California, Minnesota, and Iowa, respectively. The largest populations of Lao in the US are in California, Texas, Washington, New York, Minnesota, Illinois, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and Virginia.

Ethnicity, language, religion, and folk art are integrally related for Lao peoples. The official language of the country is Lao, though there are four major linguistic groups among native Lao. Most of those, including the official language, are tonal; meaning derives the tone or pitch of each syllable as well as from the actual words.

Despite their native country's Communist government, most ethnic Lao practice Theravada Buddhism, the form found also in Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, and Sri Lanka. While the Tai Dam and Hmong as well as other non-ethnic Lao groups adhere to forms of animism, Buddhist practices tend to permeate even the customs of Christian Lao. Lao communities in the United States, as elsewhere, frequently revolve around the *Wat* or Buddhist temple, which serves as a religious and cultural center. According to Don Phommachakr, former president of the *Wat Lao Buddhavas* (Lao Buddhist Temple) in Des Moines, "The monks [living in the monastery] are here just like the mail carrier. They carry the ideas to those that have passed." Members from the community deliver daily feasts of sticky rice in bamboo baskets, eggrolls, *kaeng* (soup), mangos, and occasionally a Big Mac from the local MacDonalds. The food provides the resident monks with lunch, their second and final meal of the day.

Many Lao in the US, like other refugees, were sponsored by church groups; they feel a profound sense of loyalty to those churches and their local members, often to the extent of attending church services and celebrating Christmas. For Buddhists, there is no conflict in practicing both traditions. For example, Christians, animists, Buddhists and others observe *Baci* or *Sukhuan*, a blessing ceremony performed when one is leaving on a trip, before a wedding, and before a major holiday or event. During the *Baci*, women decorate a flower bowl with delicacies: cookies, candy, eggs, chicken, sticky rice, fruits, wine, water, a candle, and white cotton threads. They string the threads among the flowers and then place a candle atop the arrangement. People celebrate and wish each other good luck by tying cotton threads around each other's wrists. A *Mor Pone* or soul chanter chants the formula to call lost souls back home to the body. As soon as he is finished with the chanting, someone in the ceremony ties the threads from the tray to his wrist. In return, he ties threads on the wrists of others. Those present continue this reciprocal tying of threads to wish each other good health, happiness, and power. The string remains on the wrist until it falls off by itself. [illustration—photo]

Festivals or *boon*, which commemorate stages of Buddha's life, are important community events, the most important of which are the Lao New Year (mid-April) and the Ascension of Buddha (the first week in July). Community members come to *wats* (temples) with traditional foods or offerings to the monks in order to earn merit for the life hereafter and to share with family and friends. Holidays also involve the *Baci* ceremony as well as a mixture of group prayer, processions, collection of donations, ritual offerings, and communal meals. Although there are specific dates in the Lao lunar calendar for annual holidays, many Lao in the US tend to celebrate on the nearest weekend, with the main festival activities on Saturday so that members do not have to be absent from weekday jobs. Also, many communities are careful to schedule their celebrations so that they do not conflict with those of neighboring groups. For example, in Des Moines, Iowa, Lao

New Year, which is celebrated the second weekend in April, may be held the week before or after to accommodate local Cambodian celebrations or Lao communities in neighboring states.

Not all Lao ethnic groups celebrate the same New Year, however. American Tai Dam, for instance, celebrate at the same time as the Chinese and Vietnamese New Year, usually at the end of January. While the occasion is observed in August in their home country, to do so in the US has incurred bad luck for community members. Again, as with the Lowland Lao mid-April event, the date is somewhat moveable to accommodate the other Southeast Asian groups also celebrating. In fact, it is customary for different national and ethnic groups to attend one another's celebrations.

For all Lao groups, the Saturday evening of major holidays usually brings a community-wide social event for which Lao women prepare huge quantities of homemade foods such as eggs rolls, fried rice, a sweetened beef jerky, noodle dishes like pho lad na, coconut gelatin squares, and more. And no Lao event would be complete without huge bamboo baskets of sticky rice, made with a short grain sweet rice that is soaked for at least 4 hours and then steamed. Besides the food and socializing, Lao New Year usually includes a performance of traditional Lao dance and live traditional music, followed by social dancing to a more popular and generally younger Lao band, which includes non-Asian instruments and a quicker tempo.

Regardless of the style, however, music in Laos is ubiquitous. It is heard at Buddhist Temple functions, at rituals and festivals, and for social events to accompany sung poetry, dance, and religious rituals. Influenced by Asian Indian, Chinese, Khmer, Thai, Hindu, and Buddhist traditions, Lao instruments fall into four categories: plucked, bowed, beaten, and blown. Those used to accompany and compliment classical dance include the *lanath* (curved wooden xylophone), *lanath oum* (bass xylophone), *khongvong* (gong circle), *khouy* (flute), gong (drum), *khene* (mouth organ made of bamboo reeds and the favorite instrument for the circle social dances) and *ching* (small hand cymbals).

As in other Southeast Asian cultures, music and dance in Laos can be divided into classical and folk traditions, but the division rests more in the performance context (temple or court vs. village) rather than in the social class of the artists or in the repertoire. Traditional Lao music and dance likely originated in Cambodia; the Khmer, who ruled the region for nearly 1000 years, brought this tradition to Laos in 1353. The Natasinh style refers specifically to the performing arts at the National School of Fine Arts. That genre includes court music for royal ceremonies and the classical ritual dancedrama based on the *Phra Lak Phra Lam*, the Lao version of the Ramayana, the Hindu epic that depicts the life and struggles of Buddha. Music and dance performed for more social occasions generally refer to everyday life. Poetry, stories, sculpture, and woodcarving are also deeply reflective of a Buddhist worldview.

One of the best-known efforts to preserve traditional dance and music in Laos resulted in the foundation of the Natasinh School, established in 1956 in part with U.S. Agency for International Development funds. In the early 1980s, the Natasinh Dancers and Musicians resettled in Des Moines, Iowa, thanks to Iowa's Refugee Resettlement Program. A grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, Folk Arts enabled the group to tour the region and the US for some years. Recently, the dancers and musicians have performed at several events in the Midwest.

Originally based at the Ecole National de Musique et Danse Laötien in Vientiane, Laos, the Natasinh dancers reflect the influences of Asian Indian, Thai, Khmer, and Lao folk and court dance traditions, a result of hundreds of years of migration and cultural interchange in Southeast Asia. Typical of this style of dancing are carefully and outwardly curved hands and fingers, exaggerated flat feet, and outwardly bent knees. The dancers, usually all women, perform occasionally for various community events and for Lao New Year festivities in mid-April. The Natasinh musicians, generally men, are integral members of the dance troupe.

Besides the more universal classical court dance traditions, there are folk songs and dances that are particular to a specific Lao ethnic group. For example, before the Tai Dam left North Vietnam to settle in Laos, there were 36 dances, which had originated 1000 years ago while the group was still in China. Even in the refugee camps, individuals organized and taught traditional dances to the children. From time to time, dancers compose new dances and songs, especially at the traditional New Year, which the Tai Dam celebrate in August in their homeland and in the United States at the Lunar New Year in January or February.

Costume as well as music is an integral part of classical dance and theatre as well as folk performance. Different ethnic groups from Laos are renowned for intricately woven and embroidered garments that dancers and musicians wear, as well as the often handworked silver buttons, breastplates, necklaces, bracelets, and other ornaments. The Tai Dam, for example, are known as fine silversmiths. Lowland Lao are known for their fine weaving, which involves a very precise tie-dye process for which the thread is wound around a wooden "spider" and dyed different colors. That pre-dyed warp thread is then woven in and out of the woof, both of which are precisely calibrated to produce a design. National Heritage Fellow Bounxou Chanthraphone of Minneapolis, MN uses linen, cotton, silk and colorful metallic thread to create the meaningful symbols and geometric motifs of her native land in woven skirts, dresses, shawls and wall hangings.

Probably the best known textile tradition from Laos are the Hmong *paj ntaub* (literally flower cloth), the story cloths first created in Thai refugee camps and now produced as fundraisers and general income-producers by Hmong throughout the world. Those stylized, colorful, and intricately stitched murals depict a range of activities, from traditional tales, agricultural work, the Lao War, and the flight of the refugees from Laos to Thailand and the US. Interestingly, the men and boys, who have attended school and are literate, produce the stylized pencil designs for the story cloths, while the women, expert in needlework, do the embroidery. Hmong textiles make use of several techniques, including batik, counted cross-stitch, and reverse applique. Some common design motifs of the reverse applique are *ning tsu* (elephant foot), *guh* (snail), *dua naa'* (worm), *dua*

(wind), and *croi-nu* (ox yoke). Before the Hmong made paj ntaub, however, they created and still make quilts, tablecloths, baby carriers, pillowcases, wall hangings, and traditional outfits for family members. A traditional, fully pleated skirt takes two months of full-time work to make.

Despite the importance of folk culture to the survival of Lao identity, refugees often find it difficult to sustain their traditions. Cultural survival can depend on just a few dedicated individuals who can remember and teach the dances, play the musical instruments, cook the foods, or weave the fabrics. It is in the process of passing on and taking part in these traditions, however, that community is created and reinforced.

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