

Lao New Year History¹

Lao people have celebrated Lao New Year for thousands of years. This festive occasion is held each year from April 13 to 15. In Laos, this is the hottest month of the year and the rainy season is just around the corner. It is the time when people ask for and give each other forgiveness and receive wishes. Lao new years is considered a national holiday in Laos. Government offices are closed for three days to observe the Lao New Year.

The first day is the day that people organize the celebration. It includes cleaning the house, preparing food and offerings to the Buddhist monks. At the temple, the monks take Buddha statues from “Ceem,” “Salahongtham,” and the other buildings and place them in a small, colorful house for the Buddha statues to undergo “Song Pha” Ceremony in which the people and the monks pour water mixed with perfumes and flowers onto the statues for blessing and good wishes. The scented water from the ceremony, now a holy water, is taken home to wash away bad luck from the house and family members.

On the second day, family members, relatives, and friends gather together for a “baci” ceremony to welcome the New Year, and all the souls, which represent different parts of a human body, are asked to come back. At the “baci” ceremony, Lao people tie white thread around the each other’s wrist and wish one another love, peace, prosperity, longevity, good health, and happiness. At home, Lao people also hold a ceremony in which they offer food and offerings to the Buddhist monks as a mean of paying homage to ancestors, relatives, and loved ones. It is also a time when youngsters pay respect to the elders and, in return, they receive wishes for peace, health, and prosperity. In the evening, there is a community celebration where people can watch beautiful classical and folk dances, and enjoy a social dance, “Lamvong.”

On the third day, Lao people go to the temple to give offering to the monks. It is a time to free animals (birds and/or fishes) from the cages and tanks. Lao people believe that by freeing the animals they casting away sickness and bad luck from their bodies. On this day, Nang-Sang-Kan (the Lao New Year Princess) is chosen to sit on the back of her personal animal of the year. Then a beautiful, organized procession, with Nang-Sang-Khan as the key figure of the event, parades around the town or city. Dances from different school and town were performed in the procession.

During the full three days, Lao people stand along the roads with water ready on hand to splash it on travelers. Groups of people splash water on each other for good luck, well wishes, and fun.

¹ Maha Bounhouane Douangpangna. Lao New Year History; Maha Bounthanh Souphanthavong. Lao New Year History; Kheua Yath Association. Lao New Year History- *Translated into English, Written, Printed and Promoted by: Lao Advancement Organization of America (LAOA). 2648 West Broadway Avenue. Minneapolis, MN 55411-USA; Tel: 612.302.9154; Fax: 612.522.2431; E-mail: laoa@laoamerica.org. Updated 2nd Release. 2002*

Why do People Celebrate Lao New Year?

Lao people celebrate Lao New Year because of the following legend. Long, long ago, there was a rich man who married a very kind and beautiful woman in a small town in a far away land. Although they had been husband and wife for about four years, his wife did not bear him a child. So, one beautiful day, the rich man held a sacred ceremony, begging for a child from a big, tall tree called, "Toll Hi." At the toll Hi tree lived a "Tavarbood." "Tavarbood" is a male angel who lives at the bottom of heaven. After hearing the request, Tavarbood brought it to "Phra-Ya-In." Phra-Ya-In is also a deity, but has higher nobility and title and lives at a higher level of heaven.

As a result, Phra-Ya-In granted one deity named, "Tham-Ma-Barn" (Buddha in a previous Yuka), to incarnate as a son to the couple. Then the wife of the rich man had a baby boy name, "Tham-Ma-Barn." Since childhood, Tham-Ma-Barn had received special training and education, which allowed him to know and do everything. Tham-Ma-Barn could answer any question when asked. He was clever and knowledgeable. Tham-Ma-Barn was a great teacher and conducted many ceremonies for the people.

Hearing about the extraordinary reputation of Tham-Ma-Barn, "Ca-Bin-Ra-Pom," who was a deity and lived at the highest level of Heaven, came down to the world to test Tham-Ma-Barn's knowledge and wisdom. Before Ca-Bin-Ra-Pom asked Tham-Ma-Barn any questions, he asked Tham-Ma-Barn to agree on his proposal. Ca-Bin-Ra-Pom suggested, "I will ask you three questions. If you cannot answer them, I will cut off your head as sacrifice to the teaching of Buddha. On the other hand, if you can answer all three questions, I will cut off my head out of my respect for your knowledge.

Tham-Ma-Barn agreed on the suggestion and the three questions given to him were; One, where is the virtue of a person in the morning? Two, where is the virtue of a person at noon? Three, where is the virtue of a person in the evening?

Ca-Bin-Ra-Pom gave Tham-Ma-Barn seven days to supply him with answer. Day one, day two, day three, day four, and day five went by quickly and Tham-Ma-barn did not find answer to even one question of Ca-Bin-Ra-Pom. When six days arrived, Tham-Ma-Barn still could not find the answers. He was so tired of thinking and searching for the right answers. He was so exhausted that when he came upon a big tree in the forest, he took a rest at its foot. As he closed his eyes, he heard two excited voices from afar above branch of the tree. At the time, two eagles on the branch, husband and wife were discussing the contest of Ca-Bin_Ra-Pom and Tham-Ma-Barn. Tham-Ma-Barn, who was resting quietly at the bottom of the tree, still had his eyes closed, but he continued to listen in on the two eagle's conversation.

The husband eagles told his wife that Tham-Ma-Barn would lose the bet for sure, because the questions were very hard and no one on this world knew the answer except the questioner and him. The wife eagle was curious to know the answers to the questions and she begged her husband to tell her. Without any

hesitation, the husband explained the answers to his wife and Tham-Ma-Barn now knew the answers and went home happily.

On the following day, the seventh day, Tham-Ma-Barn and Ca-Bin-Ra-Pom came face-to-face and Ca-Bin-Ra-Pom asked for the answer. Tham-Ma-Barn answered, “In the morning, the person’s virtue is on the face, because when a person wakes up he or she washes his/her face.” At noon, the virtue of a person is on the chest and the body, because he/she puts water on the chest and takes a bath. In the evening, the virtue of a person is on the feet, because he/she washes his/her feet before going to bed.”

Ca-Bin-Ra-Pom was very surprised that Tham-Ma-Barn answered all the questions correctly, but he gracefully acknowledged his defeat by agreeing to cut off his own head, as he had promised.

Because Ca-Bin-Ra-Pom’s head was so holy that if it dropped onto the ground, it would cause fire and burn down the whole world; if his head rose into the air, the land would become arid and parched and people would die’ if his head fell into the ocean, the ocean would dry up. Therefore, before cutting off his head, he asked his seven daughters to gather around to receive his instruction.

“My daughters,” he stated, “After I cut off my head, take my head and parade it around the earth axis 60 times, and then take it to “Kay_Rad” Mountain. Each year, one of you has to take turns to parade my head around the earth axis and bathe it with holy and perfumed water to show your respect, loyalty, and thankfulness to your father in order to give rain and prosperity to the earth.” When Ca-Bin-Ra-Pom finished speaking, he cut off his own head and the seven princesses conducted the procession of their father’s head as instructed, and then they went back to heaven.

This is the birth of the Lao New Year celebration and the parade of Nang-Sang-Khan. The seven daughters of Ca-Bin-Ra-Pom were born on each of the seven days, so each year the daughter whose birthday falls on the first day of the New Year will hold her father’s head and lead the grand parade.

In Lao language, Lao New Year is called, “Boun-Pee-Mai,” “Boun-Hod-Nam” (Water Festival), or “Boun-Kout-Song-Karn.”

A family ceremony is held, as well as a visit to the temple to do the merit offering, offering food to Buddhist monks as a way to paying homage to ancestors and depositing wealth for the next birth, and conducting the ritual of “Song Phra.” Family members and friends get together to do the Baci. At the Baci Ceremony, the Brahman, and everyone, asks all the souls, which represent all parts of the body, to come back. This is the time that youngsters pay respect to the elders and, in return, receive the elders’ wishes of good luck and prosperity, and success in life. This is also the time when people ask for and five forgiveness for the past year’s wrong doings, those done intentionally and unintentionally. All the

bad luck, sickness, sorrow, and poverty are banished from the house, the human body, and the clothes. From now on, everyone receives good blessings of longevity, health, prosperity, and success.

So, for this Lao New Year Days many more days that follow, may you have love, peace, prosperity, longevity, good health, and happiness. “Happy New Year!” or “Sa-By-Dee-Pee-Mai!”

REFERENCES: *Maha Bounhouan DouangPangna, Maha Bounthanh Souphanthavong*. "Lao New Year: *Kheua Yat Association*," Translated into English, Written, Printed and Promoted by: Lao Advancement Organization of America (LAOA). 2648 West Broadway Avenue. Minneapolis, MN 55411-USA; Tel: 612.302.9154; Fax: 612.522.2431; E-mail: laoa@laoamerica.org. Updated **3rd Release. 2014.**