

THE FIFTH MONTH FESTIVAL

by

BILL SAGE

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY

IM VAN

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For more than six centuries the New Year festivities have been the major celebrations of the year for the people of Laos. While it is a deeply religious holiday, it also symbolizes the calendrical transition from the dry season to the rainy season and from the past harvest to the soon to be planting season. Although it is the fourth month of the Western calendar, it is the fifth month of the lunar calendar and usually falls between April 13-15 of each year. In fact, the first month of the lunar year corresponds to the month of December in the Western calendar. In deciding to delay by several months the opening of the official New Year, astrologers centuries ago decided that days get longer and longer to the detriment of nights in April. Thus a year beginning in April offers excellent prospects for brightness and prosperity.

On the first day, which is considered the end of the old year and the end of the long hot, dry season, houses and religious edifices are thoroughly cleaned. Inside the home, garlands of flowers decorate the interior so as to banish any evil or negative elements in the house or village.

On the second day, which is referred to as the intervening day, men and women, young and old begin their pilgrimage to the Buddhist temples bearing silver bowls of flowers, incense and candles. They enter the temples to sprinkle perfumed lustral water on the images of the Buddha. This activity symbolizes the washing away of the past

years sins as well as a cleansing of past negative elements. It is also a sign of deep religious respect. Both men and women bow before the Buddha and beseech the gods to make the new year propitious in bringing health, wealth and happiness.

On the third day, which is considered the actual first day of the New Year, there are spectacular events which include ritualistic agrarian processions, the firing of six to twelve foot homemade bamboo rockets, abundant feasting, jubilant dancing and the playing of music from the bamboo reed musical instrument called the Khene. Perhaps the most sacred ceremony of all is the "baci".

People attending the baci ceremony sit in a concentric circle around an ornately decorated flower arrangement. Following a recitation of Buddhist scriptures by an elder, special blessings are bestowed upon attendants of the ceremony. The elder will give blessings while tying cotton strings around the wrists of the recipients. The baci is celebrated to wish good health, long life, happiness and prosperity to the congregants and is a true expression of generosity and warmheartedness.

For lack of a religious gathering place and clergy, the three days of traditional festivities have been condensed into one day by the Lao living in the U.S. But in spite of this condensation, merriment and general good will and humor, dancing and singing, delicious Lao foods prevailed at the new year's celebration in San Francisco much as they have in Laos for many centuries. The festivities did reflect one outstanding reality in the transposition of the cultural ceremony. In Laos, it was customary to sprinkle and throw perfumed waters on friends and relatives as a gesture of friendship, brotherhood and symbolic of

the purification of the soul. One was usually drenched in a very short period of time from such exuberant merriment. But with the water shortage in the Bay area, the Lao were quick to refrain from this customary ritual. In spite of this reconciliation with the elements, it was hoped that the sparing of water this year, might produce more bountiful days in the new year to come.

For the some 260 Lao now living in the Bay area, it also marks the beginning of the second year in the U.S. The Lao community is scattered about the Bay area with more than half of the families living in San Francisco proper. All have arrived as the last contingent of Southeast Asians refugees to be admitted after the collapse of the three non-communist governments in 1975. Although their numbers may appear numerically small, they are part of a total 10,000 Lao now settled in the U.S. (A total of 144,000 Southeast Asians have been settled in the U.S. from April 1975 to December 1976., with 72,000 still remaining in refugee camps in Thailand.)

The majority of families as represented by the head of household, were employed by the U.S. government in one capacity or another. They were accountants, clerical workers, supply clerks, agriculture extension workers, radio operators, draftspersons, and aircraft mechanics. Their occupational and work experience is as varied as their numbers. Their skills in many stances are transferable as indicated by their employability, and is further enhanced by a good command of the English language and generally longer and more extensive contacts with American supervisors. They are also more urban orientated.

Still another segment of the Lao community has found the process of settling more complex. They are families generally more rural orientated, with little or no English background, and no particular skill that is employable in the Bay area job market. Generally they have been middle echelon civil servants in the former Lao government or have been military personnel who had no hope of integrating into the new communist society. Learning English is the greatest handicap to an immediate start on life here. " Until I have a decent command of English, I can't talk with my wife's doctor, my children's teachers or even the grocery clerk. But I will try my best" says Mr. Yang. And in fact, at least every head of household is attending English as a Second Language classes from the Berkeley Adult School to the Community College District in San Francisco. "Once I can speak English, I can get a vocational skill" says Mr. Xiong. "Right now I wash dishes every night and go to English classes every day. But soon I hope I can learn to be a carpenter. Then I will be O.K."

Maintaining a group identity is perceived as a prospective obstacle to the perpetuation of the 600 year old culture. "There are so few of us and we are so spread out geographically, it is difficult for us to socialize and maintain close contact for our culture" says one frustrated father. " My children are already forgetting Lao language and I want my children to grow up speaking both English and Lao. This New Year celebration may be the ^{only} binding event of our community and culture for generations to come."