



Lao Culture

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People

Laos

Laos lies between Thailand, Myanmar, China, Vietnam and Cambodia. The country's western border is formed by the Mekong River, offering amazing boat trips to discover the marvellous landscape of Laos.

With a history stretching back 10,000 years ago, Laos is a magical land of untamed natural beauty. Among its jewels, the city of Luang Prabang is known to be the paradise of romantics. This charming place wakes up every day to the sound of bells gongs and drums from the local temples which send the monks and novices on their morning rounds. Luang Prabang has very nice French style 'rueelles' and colonial style houses and streets.

Laos is a predominantly rural country.

The most recent government census of 2005 reveals a total population as 5,609,997, and although a detailed breakdown of this figure is not available at the time of writing, the previous census of 1995 showed that approximately 85 per cent of the total population live in rural areas.

According to the 2005 census, the largest centres of population are Vientiane Prefecture (695,473) and the provinces of Savannakhet (824,662), Champassak (603,880), Luang Prabang (405,949), Vientiane (386,558) and Khammouane (336,935).

The population of Laos has been significantly depleted over the past half century by warfare and mass exodus of refugees, and the current population density of some 25 people per square kilometre is one of the lowest in Asia. Another legacy of the country's turbulent history is that females still outnumber males by c 2:1. The Lao government is currently encouraging repopulation, and a large proportion of its population is currently made up of children.

One of South East Asia's most ethnically diverse countries, Laos has long defied the best efforts of anthropologists and linguists to classify its complex array of ethnicities and sub-ethnicities, many of which utilise several different names and synonyms given to them by the government or by other ethnic groups. In the 1970s the Lao government began to classify its ethnic minorities according to the simple threefold designations Lao Loum ('Lowland Lao', corresponding to Lao, Lu, Phuan and other Tai-speaking Austro-Thai language family peoples), Lao Theung ('Upland Lao', embracing all Austro-Asiatic language family peoples) and Lao Soung ('Highland Lao', comprising Hmong-Mien peoples of the Austro-Thai language family and all Sino-Tibetan language family peoples). However, although this classification system is still quoted widely by civil servants and in many books on Laos, it is no longer given official credence; a more universally accepted method of organisation classifies Lao ethnic groups according to the three great language families - Austro-Thai, Austro-Asiatic and Sino-Tibetan.

According to the government census of 1995, the so-called Lao Loum or 'Lowland Lao' made up just over 3.1 million or 68 per cent of the then total population of 4.58 million. Of these just under 2.4 million (52 per cent of the total population) could strictly be designated as ethnic Lao; the remaining 700,000 (15 per cent of the total population) comprised various other Northern, South Western and as yet Unclassified Tay-Tai

speaking peoples. Of the remaining 1.48 million Lao citizens, just over 1 million (22 per cent of the total population) comprised Austro-Asiatic Mon-Khmer peoples (designated by the government as Lao Thueng or 'Upland Lao'), just over 400,000 (9 per cent of the total population) were Lao Soung or 'Highland Lao' (Hmong, Yao, Haw, Akha, Ha Nhi, Kado, Kongsat, La Hu, Lolo, Phanna, Phunoi, Poussang and Si La) and around 45,000 (1 per cent of the total population) ethnic Vietnamese and Chinese.

More recent estimates suggest that out of a total population of 5.6 million (2005) there are now over 3 million ethnic Lao and around 2.6 million other cultural distinct ethnic people, including other Tay-Tai speakers. The most numerically significant of the non-Lao ethnic groups in Laos are the Khmu (500,957, 1995), Hmong (315,465, 1995), Lu (119,191, 1995), Phuan (115,000, J Schliesinger estimate 2001), So (102,000, SIL estimate 1993), Katang (95,440, 1995), Akha (66,108, 1995), Tai Dam (65,000, J Schliesinger estimate 2000) and Bru (64,000, SIL estimate 1993).

Food

Lao cuisine is the cuisine of the Lao ethnic group of Laos and Northeast Thailand (Isan). Lao food is distinct from other Southeast Asian cuisines. The staple food of the Lao is sticky rice. Galangal and fish sauce are important ingredients. The Lao national dish is laap (sometimes also spelled larb), a spicy mixture of marinated meat and/or fish that is sometimes raw (prepared like ceviche) with a variable combination of greens, herbs, and spices. Another characteristic dish is tam mak houn (related to som tam in Thai and bok l'hong in Khmer), a spicy green papaya salad.

Lao cuisine has many regional variations, according in part to the fresh foods local to each region. A French influence is also apparent in the capital city, Vientiane, such that baguettes are sold on the street, and French restaurants (often with a naturally Lao, Asian-fusion touch) are common and popular. Vietnamese cuisine is also popular in Laos.

Kitchen utensils

The typical Lao stove, or brazier, is called a tao-lo and is fueled by charcoal. It is shaped like a bucket, with room for a single pot or pan to sit on top. The wok, maw khang in Lao, is used for frying and stir frying. Sticky rice is steamed inside of a bamboo basket, a huad, which sits on top of a pot, which is called the maw nung.

A large, deep mortar called a khok is used for pounding tam mak hung and other foods, and is indispensable in the Lao kitchen.

Ingredients

Galangal: typically used in soups, mixed dishes and marinades

kaffir lime: typically used in soups and stews

shallots

shredded papaya: used in spicy papaya salad.

lemon grass: used in soups, stews and marinades

tamarind: used in soups

tamarind leaf: used in soups

cha-om (acacia): used in soups, curries, omelettes, and stir-fries

coriander (cilantro)

hot pepper: seven popular types

Lao basil: eaten raw with pho

mint: used in goy/laap, and eaten raw

dill: used in stews and eaten raw

lemon basil: used in soups and stews

garlic

ginger

banana flower: typically eaten raw in vermicelli soups

ginger flower

bamboo shoot: used in stews or boiled as a side dish

rattan shoot: typically in stews (bitter)

shiitake mushroom: used in soups

wood ear mushroom (called "cat ear" in Vietnamese): used in egg rolls and soups

yanang leaf : used to color (green) and flavor stews

mak kheua poy: green and white striped eggplant, used in stews or eaten raw
 mak kheng: "pea eggplant," typically used in stews
 yard long beans: eaten raw, in stews, and can be made into a spicy bean salad (tam mak thoua)
 phak kadao: (neem), a bitter green, eaten raw
 phak lin may: a bitter green, eaten raw
 phak ileut: a green, eaten raw (this is probably betel leaf)
 dok khae: flower of *Sesbania grandiflora* (bitter)
 phak bong: *ipomoea aquatica*, stir fried or eaten raw
 nam pa: clear fish sauce
 padek: Lao-style fish paste.
 "three-layer pork": pork belly
 dried water buffalo skin: used in jaew bong and stews
 sa khan: stem of *Piper ribesiodides*, used in stews
 kaipen: river algae sheets
 limes
 tomato: eaten as a garnish item or in papaya salad.

Cooking methods

Grilling, boiling, stewing, steaming, searing and mixing (as in salads) are all traditional cooking methods. Stir-frying is now common, but considered to be a Chinese influence. Stews are often green in color, because of the large proportion of vegetables used as well as ya nang leaf. Soups are categorized as follows, tom, tom cheut, keng, and keng soua. Keng is soup that contains ginger and padek, and keng soua is keng that contains both galangal and ginger. In effect it is similar to the Siamese tom yum. Tom cheut is mild soup that isn't flavored with strong spices.

"Ping" means grilled. It is a favorite cooking method. Ping kai is grilled chicken, ping sin is grilled meat, and ping pa is grilled fish. Before grilling, the meat is typically seasoned with minced garlic, minced coriander (cilantro) root, minced galangal, salt, soy sauce, and fish sauce, each in varying quantities, if at all, according to preference. The Lao seem to prefer a longer grilling at lower heat. The result is grilled meat that is typically drier than what Westerners are accustomed to. The Lao probably prefer their food this way, because they wish to keep their hands dry and clean for handling sticky rice. They also typically eat the grilled food with a hot sauce (chaew) of some sort, which takes away the dryness.

Characteristics

Lao food differs from neighboring cuisines in multiple respects. One is that the Lao meal almost always includes a large quantity of fresh raw greens, vegetables and herbs served undressed on the side. Another is that savory dishes are never sweet. "Sweet and sour" is generally considered bizarre and foreign in Laos. Yet another is that some dishes are bitter. There is a saying in Lao cuisine, "van pen lom; khom pen ya," which can be translated as, "sweet makes you dizzy; bitter makes you healthy." A couple of the green herbs favored in Lao cuisine but generally ignored by their neighbors are mint and dill, both of paramount importance. Galangal is a cooking herb that is heavily favored in Laos, unlike in neighboring countries. It appears in probably the majority of Lao dishes, along with the conventional herbs: garlic, shallots, lemongrass, etc. Another distinctive characteristic of Lao food or more properly, Lao eating habits, is that food is frequently eaten at room temperature. This may be attributable to the fact that Lao food served with sticky rice is traditionally handled by hand.

Eating customs

The traditional manner of eating was communal, with diners sitting on a reed mat on the wooden floor around a raised platform woven out of rattan called a ka toke. Dishes are arranged on the ka toke, which is of a standard size. Where there are many diners, multiple ka tokes will be prepared. Each ka toke will have one or more baskets of sticky rice, which is shared by all the diners at the ka toke.

In recent times, eating at a ka toke is the exception rather than the rule. The custom is maintained, however, at temples, where each monk is served his meal on a ka toke. Once food is placed on the "ka toke" it becomes a "pha kao." In modern homes, the term for preparing the table for a meal is still taeng pha kao, or prepare the phah kao.

Traditionally, spoons were used only for soups and white rice, and chopsticks were used only for noodles. Most food was handled by hand. The reason this custom evolved is probably due to the fact that sticky rice can only be easily handled by hand.

Lao meals typically consist of a soup dish, a grilled dish, a sauce, greens, and a stew or mixed dish (koy or laap). The greens are usually fresh raw greens, herbs and other vegetables, though depending on the dish they accompany, they could also be steamed or more typically, parboiled. Dishes are not eaten in sequence; the soup is sipped throughout the meal. Beverages, including water, are not typically a part of the meal. When guests are present, the meal is always a feast, with food made in quantities sufficient for twice the number of diners. For a host, not having enough food for guests would be humiliating.

The custom is to close the rice basket when one is finished eating.

Representative dishes

This dessert, khao tom, can be either savory or sweet. This one, with a pork fat and mung bean filling, is savory.

laap: a spicy meat salad
 tam mak hung: green papaya salad
 soup noh may: green bamboo stew
 soup phak: vegetable salad
 nam khao: fried rice ball salad and lettuce wraps
 keng noh mai som: sour bamboo shoot soup
 ping sin: dry grilled beef
 ping kai: grilled chicken
 sai oua: sausage
 sin savane: sweet crisp fried beef
 som moo: pickled pork ("ham")
 som pa: pickled fish
 som khai pa: pickled fish roe
 som phak kad: pickled greens
 mok pa: fish steamed in banana leaf
 mok kai: chicken steamed in banana leaf
 or: green vegetable stew
 or lam: Luang Prabang style green vegetable stew
 tom padek: fish stewed in padek
 tom tin moo: pig's trotter soup
 tom mak ha: bitter melon soup
 keng som kai: sour chicken soup
 khao poon nam jaew: rice vermicelli soup
 khai khuam: stuffed eggs "upside down"
 pon: spicy puree of cooked fish
 khao nom maw keng: coconut custard cake
 khoua mee: fried rice noodles

Beverages

Lao coffee is often called Pakxong coffee (cafe pakxong in Lao), which is grown on the Bolovens Plateau around the town of Pakxong. This area is sometimes said to be the best place in Southeast Asia for coffee cultivation. Both robusta and arabica are grown in Laos, and if you ask for arabica, there is a very good chance the proprietor will know what you are talking about. Most of the arabica in Laos is consumed locally and most of the robusta is exported to Thailand, where it goes into Nescafe. The custom in Laos is to drink coffee in glasses, with condensed milk in the bottom, followed by a chaser of green tea. The highly-regarded tea is also grown on the Bolovens Plateau.

There are two general types of traditional alcoholic beverages, both produced from rice: lao hai and lao lao. Lao hai means jar alcohol and is served from an earthen jar. It is communally and competitively drunk through straws at festive occasions. It can be likened to sake in appearance and flavor. Lao lao or Lao alcohol is more like a whiskey. It is also called lao khao or, in English, white alcohol. However, there is also a popular variant of lao lao made from purple rice, which has a pinkish hue.

In more recent times, the Laotian state-owned brewery's Beerlao has become ubiquitous in Laos and is highly regarded by expatriates and residents alike. The Bangkok Post has described it as the Dom Perignon of Asian beers. In 2004, Time magazine described it as Asia's best beer. In June 2005, it beat 40 other brews to take the silver prize at Russia's Osiris Beer Festival, which it had entered for the first time.

Leisure Time

In addition to the many traditional festivals celebrated on a nationwide basis, there are also a number of important regional festivals, linked mainly to religious ceremonial and often involving traditional performances, sports and games.

There follows a list of the more important national and regional festivals:

Boun Khoun Khao (Boun Khoun Lan)

January-February, two days

This nationwide rice harvest festival is held in villages around the country. A baci ceremony is performed in order to give thanks to the land.

Lunar New Year

January-February, one week

Lunar New Year is celebrated around the country by the Chinese and Vietnamese communities in Laos. Firecrackers explode throughout this holiday and mouthwatering cakes and sweetmeats are made especially for the occasion.

Boun Wat Phu, Champassak Province

February, one week

Commencing on the full moon of the third lunar month (usually in early February), the residents of Champassak celebrate the traditional Wat Phu festival in the grounds of the Wat Phu Champassak temple complex. The festivities include elephant races water buffalo fighting, cock fighting and many traditional performances. A trade fair showcasing products from the southern provinces of Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Việt Nam is also held.

Boun Khao Chi

February, two days

Held on the third full moon of the lunar calendar, this nationwide festival involves a morning ceremony at the wat in which a special type of bread made of sticky rice is offered.

Boun That Phon, Savannakhet Province

February, one day

According to local legend, That Phon was originally built in 236 BCE by Sondeth Phaphouthavongsa of the order of Phaya Sithammakrath and is one of the most sacred stupas in Savannakhet Province. Each February at full moon the That Phon Festival is held here.

Boun Phrawetsandone

March, three days

This nationwide three-day and three-night festival is a religious occasion celebrated to commemorate the virtue and charity of Prince Vessantara. During the festival monks recite the jataka tale Phrawetsandone. The festival is also an occasion for senior abbots to ordain new monks.

Boun Phimai Lao

Mid April, three days

Culturally related to songkran in neighbouring Thailand, Lao New Year is celebrated nationwide at the same time each year. On 13 April Buddha images are taken out of the wats to be cleansed with scented water by devotees and placed on temporary altars within the wat compounds. Devotees gather the scented water falling off the images to take home and use it to pour on friends and relatives as an act of cleansing and purification before the New Year. On the evening of 15 April the images are returned to their proper shrines within the wats. In Luang Prabang the festival also features a beauty contest with the crowning of Nang Sangkhan (Miss Phimai).

Boun Bangfai

Mid May, one day

Held at the eve of the planting season, the nationwide Rocket Festival is held to coax rain and fertility back to the earth. The festival commences with a morning ceremony praying for rain at the wat. Then in the afternoon people gather in fields on the outskirts of the villages and towns to launch home-made rockets amidst scenes of great revelry. Villages compete for the 'best decorated' and 'highest travelling' rocket. Men disguised as women perform a ritual dance involving wooden phalluses in order to anger the gods; as revenge, the gods are expected to send thunderstorms. Performances of lam are often featured. Beginning in around mid May, the festival is staggered from place in order to ensure greater participation.

Boun Visakhabousa

Mid May, one day

This nationwide festival celebrates the day of Buddha's birth, enlightenment and passing away. Held during the sixth full moon of the lunar calendar, it involves chanting, sermons and a candlelit procession to the wats.

Boun Khao Pansa

Mid July, two days

Held during the eighth full moon of the lunar calendar, the countrywide Khao Pansa Festival marks the beginning of the Buddhist Lent, a time of austerity when monks are confined to their own wat where they fast and spend most of their time in prayer and meditation. At dawn on the first day, hundreds of worshippers flock to the wats carrying silver bowls full of offerings and gifts for the monks, mostly women wearing vividly coloured silks. They then perform the rituals of tak baat (offering gifts to the monks) and yaat nam (pouring water into the ground to ensure that the offerings benefit one's ancestors).

Boun Phrabat, Borikhamxai Province

July, two days

This full moon festival, held at Wat Phrabat Phonesane in Paksan, Borikhamxai Province, marks the start of Buddhist Lent.

Boun Haw Khao Padabdin

August-September, two days

Starting on the 15th day of the ninth lunar month, in the middle of the rainy season when the land is lush with greenery and fruits, the nationwide Khao Padabdin Festival is held in commemoration of dead ancestors. Over two days Buddhist devotees flock to the wats carrying silver trays of offerings for monks and deceased ancestors. Music is traditionally performed in the grounds of the wat while people make their donations. In Luang Prabang the festival also features long boat racing competitions (see Boun Souang Heua, Luang Prabang Province below).

Boun Souang Heua, Luang Prabang Province

Mid-late August, two days coinciding with Boun Haw Khao Padabdin

Held to coincide with the nationwide Khao Padabdin Festival, this local festival features boat racing on the Nam Khan River and a trade fair in the centre of Luang Prabang.

Boun Haw Khao Salak

Mid September, one day

Held during the tenth full moon of the lunar calendar, this nationwide festival involves offerings to dead ancestors in order to gain merit. In many provinces long boat racing competitions are also held, the largest being that in Khammouane Province (see Boun Souang Heua, Khammouane Province below).

Boun Souang Heua, Khammouane Province

Mid September, one day coinciding with Boun Haw Khao Salak

Held to coincide with the nationwide Khao Salak Festival, this local festival involves long boat racing on the Sebangfai River, a trade fair of agricultural products, local handicrafts, and traditional music and dance performances. Local people donate offerings to dead ancestors in order to gain merit.

Boun Ok Pansa and Boun Souang Heua (Boat Racing Festival)

Mid October, two days

Held to celebrate the end of Buddhist Lent, the nationwide Ok Pansa Festival starts at dawn on the first day with donations and offerings made at wats around the city. Then in the evening candlelight processions are held at wats, and in a ceremony known as boun lay heua fai (equivalent to loi krathong which the Thai people celebrate in December) hundreds of colourful paper boats decorated with flowers, incense and candles are set adrift on the Mekong River to pay respect to the river spirit and eradicate bad luck, bad deeds and disease. On the following day in Vientiane, Savannakhet and Champassak Province, boat races are held on the Mekong River.

Boun Kathin

October-November, one month

This nationwide festival begins immediately after the last day of Lent and lasts until the next full moon, and features the ceremonial offering of robes and other items to monks. The word kathin describes the wooden device used for keeping the robes taut while they are being made.

Boun Phra That Luang

November, three days

This national religious festival is held in and around the sacred That Luang Stupa in Vientiane, where hundreds of monks gather to accept alms and floral offerings from the people. In the daytime the festival features an international trade fair, showcasing tourism in Laos and other ASEAN countries.

Boun That Muang Sing (Boun That Chieng Theum), Luang Namtha Province

October-November, two days

Held at the That Chieng Theum stupa, just south of the provincial capital of Muang Sing, this festival finds devoted worshippers paying their respects with offerings of candles, flowers and incense.

Nor Chia (Hmong New Year)

November, one week

Celebrated in all Hmong communities around the country commencing with the full moon in November, this festival is celebrated particularly in Oudomxai, Xieng Khouang, Luang Prabang and Vientiane Provinces, where special celebrations are held involving colourful displays of traditional costumes, music from traditional Hmong instruments, the mak khon (cotton ball) throwing ceremony, crossbow ceremonies and traditional games such as ox fighting and spinning top races.

Lao National Day

2 December

Lao National Day commemorates the founding of the People's Democratic Republic of Laos on 2 December 1975.

Boun That Inhang, Savannakhet Province

Early December, four days

This local festival is held annually in the grounds of That Inhang, which is located 12 kilometres north of the provincial capital of Savannakhet. The festival includes performances of traditional Lao music and dance as well as a sports competition featuring football, boxing, tennis and local traditions including a drumming competition. In recent years an international trade fair has been organised to coincide with the event, featuring exhibitions of products from Laos, Thailand and Việt Nam.

Arts Festivals

Arts festivals in the western sense are a fairly recent development in Laos and the few which do exist mainly take the form of competitions or fairs.

Established in 1995, the annual National Lam Festival is preceded by week-long regional competitions in Vientiane, Luang Prabang and Champassak, and culminates in performances by selected groups, leading to the award of prizes. The National Khene Competition, staged annually by the Foundation for Cultural Promotion, is similar in format.

Though they could not strictly be defined as festivals, the Sinxay National Writing Competition, run by Vannasin Magazine, and the National Short Story Writing Competition, run by the Department of Publishing, Printing, Distribution and Libraries of the Ministry of Information and Culture, are the closest thing to literature festivals in Laos.

Handicrafts are showcased at the Lao Handicraft Festival, the Lao Industry and Handicrafts Products Trade Fair, the Lao National Textile Festival and the Lao Northern Handicraft Exhibition. For useful information on the logistics of presenting overseas work in Laos please see the International cultural exchange section.

Transportation

Road Travel in Laos

Road travel in Laos is rewarding and gives visitors a great feel for the country. The road infrastructure, however, is underdeveloped. In rural areas roads tend to be of variable quality. The major road is "Route 13" linking the north to the south. The southern section, from Vientiane to Pakse, is in reasonable condition but the road from Vientiane to Luang Prabang and northbound to China is quite rundown. Away from Route 13, roads tend to be a mix of asphalt, potholes, gravel and sand. Add in cyclists, oxcarts, chicken and dogs and you have a fair idea of what to expect. During the rainy season (May to October), rock and mud crumbling is common and can interrupt the traffic, particularly in remote and mountainous areas.

From Vientiane, Viethoteltravel recommends domestic flights to reach the main destinations such as Luang Prabang, Xieng Khouang, and Pakse. If you want to have a scenic drive in Laos, we recommend the section of Route 13 between Vientiane and Luang Prabang. This journey takes two days and passes stunning scenery including paddy fields, mountain ranges and rural villages.

All cars come with a driver and no self-drive is possible in Laos. Very few drivers speak English so we strongly recommend that you always have an English speaking tour guide with you.

Traveling by Train to Laos

There is no railway in Laos. However, it is possible to travel by train from Thailand to Vientiane. Stop at Nong Khai train station in Thailand, and go by road across the Friendship Bridge (over the Mekong River) that connects Thailand and Laos. Cross the Thai and Lao immigrations and you're only a short taxi drive or bus ride into Vientiane.

Air Travel in Laos

There is only one airline operating domestic flights in Laos: Lao Airlines. Lao Airlines operates French-Italian made ATR aircrafts and Y-12 aircrafts. ATR planes are propeller planes with a capacity of 70 seats and are mainly operate

Laos Airlines

Operates between Bangkok, Chiang Mai (Thailand), Kunming (China), Phnom Penh, Siem Reap (Cambodia), Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City (Vietnam), Vientiane, Luang Prabang and Pakse (Laos).

For some of the remote regions of Laos, the only viable links with the main centres are by air. Mountainous locations are served only by short landing strips. For these operations, Lao Airlines operates a fleet of Y-12 aircraft, which can seat up to 17 passengers.

Please note that it is advisable to check-in all pieces of luggage and keep only a small bag in the cabin due to limited storage space. Please be aware that flight schedules are often subject to change without prior notice.

Boat Travel in Laos

One of the best ways to get to know Laos is by boat cruises on the Mekong River. The Mekong River is vital to the Lao people. More than half of the Mekong River runs through this rugged country. Up north, you can take a 2 day cruise from Luang Prabang to Houey Xay and then onto Thailand, in the Golden Triangle. Around Pakse in the south, you can take a 3 day cruise to the World Heritage site of Vat Phou in the region of Champassak and the “4,000 Islands” area on the Cambodian border.

Education System

Traditional temple schools, established during the 17th century to give young boys a Buddhist education, brought basic literacy to the Lao territories.

During the French colonial period the 1917 Law on Education passed by the French colonial government introduced a common education system for its Indochina territories modelled loosely on that of France. However, relatively few elementary schools and just one secondary school (the Lycée Pavie) were subsequently constructed by the French administration in Laos, and most of the country's elite were trained in Hà Nội, Sài Gòn or France.

For the great majority of the population during this period, the wat schools provided the only opportunity for schooling.

After 1955, with American aid, the Royal Lao Government began constructing elementary and secondary schools in major centres of population. Higher education came to Laos in 1958, when Sisavangvong University was established in Vientiane. By 1969 that university comprised three constituent colleges - the Institut supérieur pédagogique, the Royal Medical Institute and the Royal Laws and Administration Institute. Regional technical colleges were also set up in Luang Prabang, Pakse (Champassak) and Savannakhet.

Formal arts training began in 1959 with the establishment of the National School of Fine Arts (now the National Faculty of Fine Arts) and the National School of Music and Dance) under the Ministry of Education, Sport and Religious Affairs.

However, by 1975 the Lao education system remained inherently weak.

Considerable efforts were made after 1975 to extend elementary education to all ethnic groups, and an adult literacy campaign was launched, but these efforts were seriously undermined by the exodus of qualified teachers. In 1987 educational objectives were redesigned in the context of overall economic development and in harmony with the New Economic Mechanism, recognising education as the driving force in socio-economic development and giving priority to the development of an education system which could provide the skilled workforce required by a modern economy. Since that time improvements have taken place in the education system at all levels, although across the country the sector continues to be hampered by shortage of human resources, under-qualified teaching staff, inadequate curricula, dilapidated facilities and lack of teaching equipment.

Literacy is currently estimated at around 50 per cent, and only 71 per cent of primary school aged children are in school. Net enrolment rates drop to 15 per cent at lower secondary level, and two per cent at upper secondary level. Another serious issue is the wide difference of enrolment rates between boys and girls, and between the different ethnic groups. The higher the level of schooling, the relatively worse the attendance of girls and ethnic minorities.

The general education system in Laos comprises pre-school education (creche and kindergarten), primary education (five years), lower secondary education (three years) and upper secondary education (three years). Private schools and colleges have been encouraged since 1990.

Following the exodus of teaching staff in 1975, Sisavangvong University was dissolved and carved up into separate colleges, leaving the country with no degree-awarding institution. In the 1970s and 1980s large numbers of graduates from upper secondary schools were able to pursue a higher education in East European countries and the USSR, but by 1990 this option was no longer available. However, in 1996 the National University of Laos (NUOL) was established, grouping together the former Vientiane Teacher Training College, National Polytechnic Institute, College of Medical Science, College of Electronics and Electrotechnology, Vientiane School of Transport and Communications, Vientiane School of Architecture, Tad Thong School of Irrigation, Dongdok College of Forestry, Nabong College of Agriculture and Veunkham Agriculture Centre.

NUOL now comprises 11 Faculties - the Faculty of Science (FOS), the Faculty of Education (FOE), the Faculty of Social Sciences (FSS), the Faculty of Economics and Management (FEM), the Faculty of

Engineering (FOE), the Faculty of Medical Sciences (FMS), the Faculty of Agriculture (FOAG), the Faculty of Forestry (FOF), the Faculty of Law and Political Sciences (FLP), the Faculty of Letters (FOL) and the Faculty of Architecture (FOAR) - and a School of Foundation Studies (SFS). Further development of the National University is being funded by a loan from the Asian Development Bank.

Language

The official language of Laos is Lao (pasaa Lao), a tonal Tai-Kadai language which is spoken by an estimated 15 million people in Laos and North East Thailand (Isaan), as well as in numerous diaspora communities around the world. Since the Lao language is closely related to Thai, most Lao and Thai people can understand each other relatively easily.

The Lao language may be divided into five main dialects: Vientiane Lao, Northern Lao (Luang Prabang), North Eastern Lao (Xieng Khouang), Central Lao (Khammouane) and Southern Lao (Champassak); the Lao script is based on Vientiane Lao, a dialect which is widely understood throughout the country. There is no official Latin transliteration system for the Lao script, and although French-based transliteration is generally used there are many inconsistencies of spelling, particularly of vowels.

Lao speakers (including Lao Isaan and Lao Ngaew) are believed to make up just 52 per cent of the total population; another 15 per cent of the population is made up of other Tai-Kadai speakers, while the remaining 33 per cent comprise over 90 culturally distinct ethnic groups, many of which have their own language.

French and Vietnamese are spoken widely, particularly amongst the older generation, but English has become the language of business and tourism and is increasingly promoted at government level in the context of Lao membership of ASEAN.

Employment and the Economy

According to the World Bank, Laos remains the poorest and least developed country in East Asia and one of the ten poorest countries in the world, with a per capita income of around US\$320. Infant mortality remains high, and in remoter regions inadequate diet, poor sanitation and limited healthcare still give rise to debilitating and fatal diseases.

In the decade after 1975 the economy grew at just 2.9 per cent each year, barely enough to feed the population, and an abortive attempt to collectivise agriculture during the late 1970s seriously disrupted production. Reform was initiated in 1986 when, like its neighbour Việt Nam, the Lao government adopted a programme of structural reform known as the New Economic Mechanism (NEM), the main objective of which was to bring about the transition from a centrally-planned economy to a market-oriented one. Because of the country's land-locked location and underdeveloped communications infrastructure, the reformist economic policies of the 1980s have taken longer to take root in Laos than they did in Việt Nam, but from 1991 until 1997 growth averaged 6 per cent, and Laos succeeded in attracting substantial foreign investment in mining, food processing and the textile industry. Heavily reliant on Thailand for both imports and exports, the country was hit badly by the Asian crisis of 1997, but since 1999 annual growth has recovered, averaging 5 per cent per annum. Private enterprise has developed considerably since receiving official encouragement in 1987, although the government still subsidises a number of loss-making state enterprises.

More than three quarters of the country's population are still engaged in subsistence farming, although it has been estimated that as much as 40 per cent of arable land remains barren as a result of decades of warfare.

Agriculture accounts for around 53 per cent of GDP and includes the farming of glutinous rice, coffee, corn, sugar cane, vegetables, sweet potatoes, ginger, tea, peanuts, tobacco and cotton, and the raising of water buffalo, pigs, cattle and poultry. Industry accounts for 23 per cent of GDP and includes garment manufacturing, hydroelectricity production and sales, gypsum and tin mining, wood processing, cement manufacturing and agricultural processing. The remaining 24 per cent of GDP is based on the services sector, which includes tourism and communications.

After a comparatively late start in the mid 1990s, tourism emerged by 2000 as one of the country's top foreign income earners. In 2004 tourism visitor numbers showed a 22 per cent increase over 2002's previous high to reach a total of 894,806, generating US\$118,947,707 in revenue. By 2010 the Lao National

Tourism Administration aims to attract 1.2 million visitors each year, with attendant revenue of over US\$189 million per annum.

Although Laos has in recent years experienced an increase in export earnings, it still faces an annual trade deficit. Lao exports generated total revenues of c US\$332 million in 2003, and included garments, electricity, wood and wood products, coffee, cardamom, rattan and tin, primary markets being Thailand, Việt Nam, France, and Germany; imports amounted to US\$492 million in 2003 and included fuel, food, consumer goods, machinery and equipment, vehicles and spare parts, mainly from Thailand, Việt Nam, China and Singapore.

Religion

According to Prime Ministerial Decree No 92 of 5 July 2002 on the Administration and Protection of Religious Activities in Lao PDR, 'Lao citizens, foreign residents, people without citizenship and foreigners in Lao PDR have the right to carry out religious activities and participate in religious ceremonies in their places of worship at the temple or their own established churches or mosques' (Section 1, Article 4). Predating Buddhism, the worship of animist spirits (phi) in Laos represents some of the region's most ancient religious practice. Animist shrines may be found in many parts the country.

The origins of Luang Prabang (Muang Sua) are deeply bound up with the legend of Khun Borom's loyal servants Phou Nheu and Nha Nheu, who to this day are revered as the settlement's devata luang or guardian deities at a shrine in the grounds of Wat Aham. Similarly, many residents of Vientiane still venerate the lak muang or district pillar at Wat Simuang, which is believed to contain the guardian spirit of the city. Animism continues to permeate many aspects of Lao Buddhist ritual, and even the traditional Lao baci ceremony, commonly held to bestow good luck by the tying of white strings around the wrist when people receive promotion, move house, start a new job, marry or have a new baby, is derived from the worship of guardian spirits known as khuan.

Buddhism was introduced into the region as early as the first millennium CE, but was not widely practised amongst the Tai principalities until the late 13th or early 14th centuries. Fa Ngum (1353-1371), founder of Lane Xang, established Buddhism as the state religion, but it is clear that the worship of animist spirits continued to predominate for centuries after this, prompting the devout Buddhist King Photisarath in 1527 to promulgate an edict banning the worship of spirits and construct Luang Prabang's Wat Aham and Vientiane's Wat Simuang on the sites of the afore-mentioned animist shrines.

After moving the capital to Vientiane, Phothisarath's son King Sai Setthathirat I (1550-1571) made strenuous efforts to make Vientiane a regional Buddhist centre. However, Buddhism only gained a firm foothold in Lao society during the 17th century, when it began to be taught in schools.

Today some 60 per cent of the Lao population (predominantly lowland Lao and some other Tai-speaking groups) follow Theravada (Hinayana or 'small vehicle') Buddhism, which was based on the earliest teachings of the Buddha and was preserved in Sri Lanka after Mahayana Buddhism branched off in the second century CE; Theravada Buddhism is also the dominant school in Thailand, Cambodia and Myanmar. Buddhism is an inherent feature of daily life in Laos and an important influence on Lao society and culture. Almost every Lao Buddhist male becomes a monk for a short period of time, usually before marrying, and many young boys spend long periods as novices in temples, earning their families 'merit'. Most Lao Buddhists try to gain 'merit' for a better next life by giving donations to their local wat and through regular worship.

Tha Lao Buddhist sangha has been organised into the Lao Buddhist Fellowship Organisation, a mass organisation established in 1976 with the aim of managing, developing and educating its members and ensuring that they observe the laws of the country.

Most of the ethnic minority communities practise a combination of animism and ancestor worship, but some Mon-Khmer, Hmong and Yao communities hold Christian beliefs.

Vientiane's tiny Islamic Cham community worships at the Alaishad Mosque in Ban Pounsawat Tai (known locally as Wat Khmer). The Vientiane Jamia Masjid near Nam Phu Square in the centre of the city is used primarily by Islamic settlers from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Music

Laos is dominated by the Lao but includes minorities of Hmong, Mien, Kmhmu, among many others. The most distinctive Lao musical instrument is a bamboo mouth organ called a khene. The instrument was supposedly invented by a woman trying to imitate the calls of the garawek bird. The woman took the new instrument to her king, and he told her it was fair, but that he wanted more. She modified the instrument and he replied "Tia nee khaen dee" (this time it was better). Traditional Lao music can be divided into classical and folk forms.

Khene

Khene is what makes Lao people which the Lao people makes the khene. The national proverb is, "A person living under a stilted house, eat sticky rice, listen to any music related to Lam or Morlam, and play the Khene is likely to be Lao or associated with Lao people."

The Khene is made from a special kind of bamboo. It looks slightly Andean in appearance with its sets of bamboo and reed pipes of various lengths, which are strapped together, and then blow into by the player. It can be played solo as in traditional Lao music or in combination with other musical instruments to accompany modern songs.

Music today

Rock bands popular with the younger generation include The Cell, Smile Black Dog, Dao Kha Chai, Awake, Khem Tid, Eighteen and Black Burn, Aluna, Overdance and LOG. LOG was recently connected to the controversial movie Mak Tae (Lucky loser) that created a riot between Laos and Thailand, which needed diplomatic intervention.

Lao music today comes in a wide variety of styles and from different national origins. Outside of Laos, Lao music is mainly created in the United States, France and Canada. An increasing amount of transnational Lao (alternative) rock, pop and hip hop created a new 'oeuvre' next to the traditional Lao music like morlam.

In the United States, rock bands Sarky Mekmorakoth, SDN, Chitpanya and Black Flame found a growing fan base for their music. Most popular Lao pop music in the US is made by three female singers: Phone Phoummithone the young pop princess Birdie and Ketsana Vilaylack. Birdie is quickly on the rise as she balances between mainstream and traditional country Lao music. Most notable Lao hip hop artists from the US are Supasang aka Buc Supa and 'gangsta rapper' Gumby. Both rappers made music videos and both rap in Lao language.

The most famous Lao artist from France is Willy Denzey. In July 2001 R&B singer Willy Denzey released his first single called Que vous dire? In 2003 his second single Le mur du son (the wall of sound) was released which sold 300,000 copies leading to his first golden record. That same year his first album "number one" was released.

Willy's big break through arrived when he contributed to the movie soundtrack album of "Taxi 3" with the song L'allumage. He became known as the new prince of French-speaking R&B. His latest album Acte II was released in 2004 and also became a success.

Lao music is becoming so popular these days that you even got "Falangs" or White Guys like Jonny Olsen singing Lao Folk songs otherwise known as "Morlum." His story is so crazy weird that even the L.A. Weekly Newspaper wrote an article about him.

Classical music

The classical form is closely related to that of the Siamese. The Lao classical orchestra can be divided into two categories, Sep Nyai (or Mahori) and Sep Noi. The Sep Nyai is ceremonial and formal music and includes: two sets of gongs (kong vong), a xylophone (lanat), an oboe (pei or salai), two large kettle drums and two sets of cymbals (xing). The Sep Noi, capable of playing popular tunes, includes two bowed string instruments, the So U and the So I, also known to the Indians. These instruments have a long neck or fingerboard and a small sound box; this sound box is made of bamboo in the So U and from a coconut in the So I. Both instruments have two strings, and the bow is slid between these two strings, which are tuned at a fifth apart and always played together. Furthermore this mahori or sep noi ensemble (the sep nyai is strictly percussion and oboe) may include several khene. In this respect, it differs markedly from the mahori orchestras of Cambodia and Siam.

Some ethnomusicologists believe that Laos is a country where the ancient art music of the Khmer people has been best preserved -- as well as diverse forms of folk music related to the oldest types of Indian music, music that has largely disappeared in India itself. They claim to find in Laos a scale which the ancient Hindus called the "celestial scale," the Gandhara grama, which is a tempered heptatonic scale, or a division of the octave into seven equal parts.

The Royal Lao Orchestra, consisting of musicians of the former court of the king of Laos, who fled Laos following the communist takeover in 1975, now reside in Knoxville and Nashville, Tennessee, United States.

Folk Music

Lao folk music, known as Lam, is extemporaneous singing accompanied by the khene. It is popular both in Laos and Thailand, where there is a large ethnic Lao population.

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