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Lao New Year - Pi Mai Lao The Significance of Boun Pi Mai

On behalf of the Lao American Coalition, we would like to welcome you to the “Boun Songkan 2555,” a celebration of the 2555 Lao New Year. The term “Boun” means “celebration” or a “holy day.” The term “Sankhan” or “Songkanh” means that “something has passed or moved on.”

As we’re closing the year 2554 and beginning the New Year 2555 (2012), we believe it is appropriate to reflect upon our rich cultural tradition that begins with Boun Pi Mai, a celebration of an ending and a beginning. Boun Pi Mai occurs when “Rasi-Min” is ending and “Rasi-Med” is beginning and between the 13th and 15th day on the fifth month of Lao Lunar year. There are a total of 12 Rasies that coincide with the 12 months of a year. This event signals the end of the dry season and the beginning of the monsoon season. It is seen as a day of rebirth and rejuvenation.

The 12 Rasies are as follow: Rasi-Mungkone (Mokara-January), Rasi-Kome (Kumepa-February), Rasi-Min (Mina-March), Rasi-Med (Mesa-April), Rasi-Peut-soap (Peut-sa-pha-May), Rasi-Metuna (Metuna-June), Rasi-Korakot (Korakada-July), Rasi-Sing (Singha-August), Rasi-Kun (Kunya-September), Rasi-Toun (Tula-October), Rasi-Peusajik (Peutsajika-November) and Rasi-Thun (Thunvar-December).

The history of the Lao New year can be traced back to India, the birth place of Buddhism. As you are aware, Buddhism is born out of the Hinduism and the animistic beliefs in nature spirits. Many Buddhist traditions and religious activities intertwined with Hinduism and animistic beliefs. In this New Year myth, Buddhist concepts such as the “cool hearts” or calm nature is the guide, Hindu gods and a tree spirit are combined into one captivating story.

According to a Lao legend, Boun Pi Mai began in a peaceful and harmonious village where there lived a couple that worked very hard to build themselves a future. In time they became regarded as the wealthiest couple in the village. Their neighbors on the other hand did little to plan for the future as they lived day to day with pleasures, parties and intoxications. When food was needed they would hunt and fish and share their bounty with friends in a joyous celebration.

One day the wealthy man became upset by the neighbors’ noisy jubilations and decided to speak his mind by saying, “Excuse me my friends. I am worried about you and your families’ future. Your drunkenness and frivolous lifestyle do not set a good example for your children and our village.”

“On the contrary my friend,” replied the one intoxicated neighbor, “We are not bad people as we have much more to offer the village than you do with your wealth, your big house and servants. You are the ones that need to think about your future.”

The wealthy neighbor replied, “And why should my wife and I worry about our future when we have everything we could possibly need and we make major financial contributions to the village.”

“Perhaps, but even with all of your gold and silver you do not have children to carry your family name. Without children, your bloodline ends with you. What will happen when you die? You can’t take any of your wealth with you? We are the successful ones because we have children to carry our family names into the future.”

Listening carefully, the wealthy man came to realize that his neighbor’s words were true; that he has no one to carry on his family name, as he and his wife were unable to conceive a child. The wealthy couple continued on with their lives by praying and working even harder at sharing their goodness in hopes of conceiving a child, but to no avail.

Meanwhile in the village, there was an annual celebration of “forgiveness” (no stress and no anger) where people gather along the riverbank next to the village Sai (si) tree, which is a type of fig tree. The villagers believed that “Rukka-Tayvada (rooka-tayvada), a tree deity, a guardian angel or nature spirit, dwelt in the tree. In front of the sacred Sai tree, villagers thanked one another for all acts of kindness and generosity. One of those acts was a plea for self-forgiveness by releasing birds, fish, frogs, or snails from captivity back into the wild. Hope abounded that their good deeds would erase any bad ones that might have been committed during the previous year.



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As the neighbors reflected upon their act of forgiveness, they felt sorry for the wealthy couple for their hard work and generosity, yet unable to conceive a child. One neighbor suggested to the couple that they pray for a child at the village sacred Sai tree, and so they did. The Sai tree resident, Tayvada, heard the couple's prayer. Tayvada took the couple's message to Pra In (Pra-In), the Hindu god Indra, the King of Heaven. No problems of the human world, large or small, go undetected by Pra In, whose Throne serves as a barometer that senses the problems. Pra In's feather soft Throne transforms into a rock solid chair whenever a problem is detected, prompting Pra In to look down on the human world to see what problems need solving. After sensing the couple's problem and hearing the plea from Tayvada to grant the couple a child, Pra In sent Thammaban (Tam-ma-ban) to be born to the couple. Thammaban, a holy creature lower than gods, but above humans, is comparable to the Buddhist Pouttisattava (Put-tee-sat-ta-var) or an individual who has attained enlightenment and is able to help others. Thammaban as the son of Pra In has been known for descending from heavenly home to help those in needs.

The wealthy couple named their child Thammaban Khuman (Ku-man), which means son of Thammaban. As a human being, Thammaban Khuman possessed knowledge and wisdoms superior to all humans, including an ability to speak the language of birds. Thammaban Khuman's reputation of a superior human being became a subject of interest to Thao Kabinlaprom, which resulted in Thao Kabinlaprom challenging Thammaban Khuman to solve a three part riddle.

Like Thammaban Khuman, Thao Kabinlaprom descended from the 16th heaven where he ruled as a Brahma. According to the Hindu heaven, the 16th heaven is the highest of all heavens and Pra Pom rules each of the 16 heavens. In addition, Thao Kabinlaprom is known for his constant mediation and always keeping his words. His head is said to be extremely hot as the core of the sun or a nuclear explosion.

In his young life as a human being, Thammaban Khuman has faced many challenges and adversities. However, there was nothing more difficult than the life and death challenge to solve a three-part riddle by Thao Kabinlaprom (Tao Ka-bin-laa-prom).

In the riddle, Thao Kabinlaprom asked, "In morning where is one's rasi located, at noon where is one's rasi located, and in the evening where is one's rasi located."

Based on his superior knowledge and wisdom and help from some talkative birds who had heard the answer to the riddle, Thammaban Khuman easily won the challenge. He told Thao Kabinlaprom that in the morning, rasi resides in one's face as the person's inner glow, beauty, glory, and grace shine; at noon, rasi resides in one's abdomen as the person eats to maintain the inner glow, beauty, glory and grace; and in the evening, rasi resides in one's feet as the person rests and sleeps to maintain the inner glow, beauty, glory and grace. Thao Kabinlaprom was utterly astonished that Thammaban khuman correctly answered the riddle.

Thao Kabinlaphrom kept his part of the bargain by allowing his head to be severed as agreed. Prior to meeting his fate, Thao Kabinlaphrom requested his seven daughters, who were god Indra's ladies-in-waiting, to take great care not to let his severed head touch the ground, the sky, or the ocean, or there would be fire, drought, and emptied ocean due to his head being as hot as the core of the sun or a nuclear explosion. To avoid this cataclysmic event from occurring, Thao Kabinlaphrom's head was safely secured at Mount Sumeru. At the fifth month of the Lunar year, one of his seven daughters (who were also represent each day of the week, Monday thru Sunday), depending on which day of the week the 13th day fell on, would cleanse Thao Kabinlaphrom's head and pay respect for his thoughtful deed.

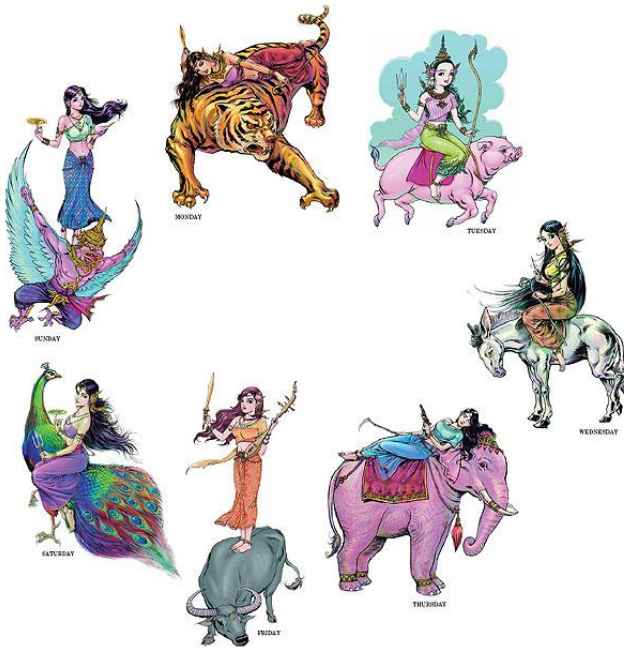


Figure 1: The Seven Nang Sungkhaan

If Boun Pi Mai falls on a Monday, Khorak (Ko-Rak) is honored. Indian cork tree flower and pearl are her ornaments. Oil is her food. Her weapons are a small short sword in her right hand and a wooden walking cane for the left. Her mode of transportation is the tiger.

If Boun Pi Mai falls on a Tuesday, Raksot (Rak-sat) is honored. A sacred lotus is her flower; her ornament is jasper stone. Blood is her food. She carries a trident in her right hand, and a bow in her left. She rides a hog.

If Boun Pi Mai falls on a Wednesday, Montha (Montar) is honored. She wears Dork Champa (Plumeria) flower on her ear. Her ornament is chrysoberyl precious stone. Her foods are cheese and butter. She carries a needle in her right hand, and a wooden walking cane in her left. She rides a donkey.

When Boun Pi Mai falls on a Thursday, Kirini (Kee-Ree-Nee) is honored. A magnolia flower is worn on her ear. Her ornament is an emerald precious stone. Her

foods are beans and sesame seeds. She carries a hook in her right hand, and a cross bow in her left. She rides an elephant.

When Boun Pi Mai falls on a Friday, Kimitha (Kee-mee-ta) is honored. Her flower is the white water lily. Her ornament is the yellow topaz. Her food is banana. Her weapons are a small sword in her right hand and a harp in her left hand. She rides the water buffalo.

When Boun Pi Mai falls on Saturday, Mahothon (Ma-ho-ton) is honored. She wears a water hyacinth on her ear. Her ornament is the black sapphire. Her food is venison. In her right hand she holds a chak or discuss, and in her left a trident as her weapons. She rides the peacock.

When Boun Pi Mai falls on Sunday, Tungsa (Tung-sar) is honored. She wears a pomegranate flower on her ear. Her ornament is the ruby. Her food is fig. In her right hand she holds a chak or discuss, and in her left a conch shell as her weapons. She rides the garuda, mythical creature who is half man and half bird.

Through the hands of these seven maidens, the fiery head of Thao Kabinlaprom is guarded and passed on from year to year.

Throughout the millennia the legend of Thao Kabinlaphrom continues to be reenacted during the Lao New Year celebration. The community chooses one young female to represent one of the seven daughters as Nang Sungkhaan, to lead a procession to cleanse Thao Kabinlaphrom by holding a replica of his head in a ceremonial tray called "Khun."

Boun Pi Mai culminates in a three-day celebration, which begins with Sungkharn-Luang, then Sungkharn-Nao, and ends with Sungkharn-Kheun.

Sungkharn-Luang is an end of the current year and a day for all Buddhists to gather during the afternoon to perform an invitational ritual for the Buddha to enshrine his holiness within statuettes of his likeness in each of our homes and temples. Each Buddha statuette must be cleaned before being bathed with floral laden and scented water, just as Nang Sungkharn's care for Thao Kabinlaprom. The purpose of such ritual is to welcome the rain to replenish streams, wells, rivers, and falls to sustain life for all Lao people, and to wish everyone peace and prosperity.



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Figure 2: Thao Kabinlaprom's severed head

Sungkharn-Nao is a day of rest to reflect and appreciate all of our loved ones who passed on before us, father, mother, husband, wife, children and grandchildren. Alms-giving or donations are made in their honor within one's home. It is customary that everyone engages in fun activities such as visiting relatives and friends, and throwing water on one another in cleansing of one's soul. The festivities continue into the night with feasting and dancing.

Sungkharn-Kheun is the beginning of the New Year, where everyone gathers at the Buddhist Temple for almsgiving or donations made in honor of our loved ones, and to earn merits and blessing for our hereafter lives. A sand stupa or spiritual monument is created to symbolize a path to enlightened mind or universal divinity. Buddhist Statuettes, Buddhist Monks, elders, friends and family are showered with floral laden and scented water for the purpose of washing away all bad deeds and diseases and to make room for all things good.

To conclude Songkarn Keun ceremony, "Morpon" or a ceremonial leader calls upon our wandering "Kuan", or souls, to return to its rightful body during a Baci ceremony or Suekuan. Fai Pouk Khan or a ceremonial string is used to secure the soul. Captive animals are rescued and released to symbolize our eternal quest for freedom and as an act of kindness and absolution for our mistreatment of animals throughout the year. And finally, the Buddha statuettes are returned to Hor Pra or the Buddha altar.

We hope the legend of Kabinlaphrom has enlightened you to the significance of our three-day Boun Pi Mai's tradition. We sincerely appreciate your presence at the 2555 Lao New Year celebration.

**May You and Your Family Find Peace, Happiness,
Great Health and Prosperity Throughout the New Year.**

Written by "Nong" or Khamp K. Thongrivong with adaptation and reference from a Cultural and Religion Handbook for Lao Refugee (1978), by Pra Khamsouk Souvannabouroukyrykanajarn (Ranh Thitsavangso), former secretary to the late Ong Somdet Pra Sungkarat Bounthanh Thammayanamahaitayra, "Pii May Lao" article (2010) written by Doctor Vinya Sysamouth, Ph. D., "The Birth of Songkran and Thammaban Tape Pra Boot, aka Thammaban Khuman," (2010) article contributed by Houmpheang Manisouk, Vatthana Andrew Manisouk, and Terry Ernest Kovarik, and Thai tales: folktales of Thailand by Vathanaprida, S., MacDonald, M., & Rohitasuke, B. (1994). My sincere gratitude to these individuals for their visions and works in preserving the Lao tradition.

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